

Howling Mad  
Peter David

PROLOGUE

I can't be one hundred percent sure of this, mind you, because naturally you never really know everything there is to know about somebody you meet. For example, when there's a guy who climbs up on top of a building and picks off people with a high-powered rifle, there's always going to be the neighbors who say, "But gee, he was always such a nice guy," and that kind of stuff.

So, like I said, I can't be absolutely certain. But I am ninety-nine percent certain that Josh was the very first supernatural being I'd ever met.

When Darlene told me about him, and that she'd arrange for us to meet, he wasn't at all what I expected. I really don't know what I expected. No, actually I do. I thought he'd be slaving, and looking around, scared that somebody was going to attack him. I didn't think he'd be able to put two words together, and I was certain he wouldn't know how to use a bathroom or a piece of cutlery.

But I was wrong. I'll be the first to admit it. I mean, considering that the guy was capable of ripping your throat out with his teeth most days of the month, he was really okay.

He had a real nice smile—he showed his teeth a lot, now that I think about it. When I'd speak—let me rephrase that. Usually when I talk to somebody, they'll just sit there and nod their head politely. Now Josh, he'd angle his head just slightly, prick up his ears a little, concentrate on everything I was saying.

It was only later, when I heard him use one of my pet phrases (in this case it was "Well, that's all there is to say about that.") that I realized he was learning, and continuing to learn, constantly. From me, from Darlene, from anybody. That's probably how he learned to express himself so well.

I realize that I've mentioned Darlene a couple of times. She and I go way back. We met in the ecology club back in high school. Darlene was what we used to call "hyper." She was always involved in something, could barely ever sit still. At about 5-foot-nothing or maybe a little more, she was always the smallest one in the group. And still everything always seemed to center around her. Her straight black hair reached down to her butt, which always irritated the teachers, and her nose was a little long. We always figured that's how she scented out problems.

She had this incredible knack for always zeroing in on somebody with a problem. One day I came into algebra pissed about something or other, I don't even remember what. And she was immediately over there, asking me what was on my mind.

Incredible.

We stayed in touch when we got older. She wound up working for one of her favorite causes, an animal-rights group. One of those outfits that takes care of dogs and finds homes for them instead of turning them into dog pate or whatever pounds do.

Me, I became a comic book writer. It was a lot of fun, but when I wanted to get out of it, I made the unpleasant discovery that my mind had turned into the creative equivalent of tapioca pudding. I wanted to write about something else—anything else—and found I couldn't. I had what is politely called in my profession "writer's block."

And while I was going through this, Darlene called me to chat and immediately figured out something was wrong. She wouldn't shut up until I told her.

"I don't know what to write about," I told her.

"How about nonfiction?" she asked. "You don't have to make that up, right?"

Now I'd considered that, but the problem was that not only was I blocked, I was also the laziest son of a bitch you could find. I hated the idea of having to do a lot of research and all that junk. But I didn't want to say that, so I just said "Nah. I'd rather stick with fiction. Something wild, something weird... something commercial. Maybe something they can make into a movie."

She was quiet for a real long time and then she said, "Let me get back to you," and hung up.

She didn't get back to me for a few weeks, and I'd almost forgotten about it when she called me. She sounded real weird and told me she was going to introduce me to someone who was fiction and nonfiction all rolled into one. "And he looks like that Arnold Shwartznokker guy," she said, "so there you got your movie all set."

And then she told me a little about him, and I really have to tell you, I thought she was jerking me around.

But she arranged the meeting, or maybe I should say meetings. And I have to tell you, after talking with Josh, and doing as little research as I could, I'm prepared to say that, as far as I'm concerned, it's real. The story, that is.

Now of course, Josh could only tell me his view of what happened. There's stuff that he didn't know, couldn't know. Stuff that nobody could know for sure. So I've done my damndest to fill in the gaps where there are gaps. I admit it—some of the things I made up out of whole cloth, based on nothing more than my guessing that this was probably what was going on. I like to think of those parts of the story as apocryphal—that is, if they didn't happen, then they really should have.

Of course, the really great thing about all this is that the stuff which I know to be factual and true is the most bizarre stuff of all—the stuff that you'd read and go, "Oh, no way in hell is that the truth." And if you don't think truth is stranger than fiction, then you haven't been reading the newspapers lately.

So here's the story. I happen to hate books where the narrator keeps sticking his nose into the story all the time, so I'm going to try and just keep out of the way. However, every now and then I may jump in to quote something that Josh himself said to me, because he really did have a way of turning a phrase that I couldn't help but admire. And his perspective was, to put it mildly, unique. When I do jump in with one of those, I'll kind of draw your attention to it and put it into italics, that fancy type that looks like this . And it seems to me that the best way to start off this whole crazy story is to tell you, right here and up front, what Josh first said to me:

"I never much believed in werewolves, and even to this day I'm not entirely certain I accept all the various aspects of the legends. I feel this way despite the fact that I met a werewolf, was bitten by a

werewolf, and had my life permanently changed by a werewolf.

"Not only did I not believe in werewolves, I didn't believe in vampires, ghouls, goblins, zombies and all the other nasty creatures that humans have conjured up for themselves over the years.

"Probably the reason for this is that all these... things, I guess you would say... manifest themselves in the nighttime hours. Humans probably manufactured these creatures for themselves out of their own overactive imaginations when faced with the darkness.

"But I have spent much of my five years on this earth in that selfsame darkness. The night holds no terrors for me. It is the time when I, and the pack, can be at our stealthiest, noiselessly travelling through the brush, darting between protecting trees, staying upwind of our prey until it's too late for the prey to escape.

"When humans huddled around the protective fire, looked out into the night forest and saw glowing eyes staring at them"—and Josh grinned that toothy grin I mentioned earlier—"that was where the superstitions about what lurks in the woods first began. But you see... it was my ancestors the humans were staring at. And whereas humans couldn't see us, and so conjured up all manners of hideous things, we could very easily see them. White and shivering and clustered around their fires for warmth, they were hardly in a position to induce terror in us. My ancestors felt pity for them, nothing more."

"I should feel flattered, I suppose, that we were endowed with such forbidding powers in the minds of those early humans. But it ultimately backfired. Humans became so afraid of wolves that in addition to becoming the basis for superstitions, we became the targets for weapons from the moment that humans realized we could die as readily as any other animal."

"The point of all this, as I was saying, is that I did not share the superstitions of humans, what with my not being a human myself. Certainly, even if I had been aware of the various legends, the story of the werewolf would have held no interest for me."

"Think of it: A human gets bitten by a werewolf, or is born with a particular birthmark, or eats some wrong kind of plant, or has a curse put on him. Any of these results in his being transformed into a wolf during the three days each month of the full moon".

"Big deal,' I would have thought. 'Let them get shot at by hunters, slaughtered wholesale. Fine by me.'"

"The odd thing is, nowhere in all those legends does it say what happens if a wolf gets bitten by a werewolf."

"Werewolf means 'man-wolf.' If you're a man, you become a wolf. If you're a wolf, well..."

'Let me tell you about it."

1

Byron Keller was a disenchanting American.

He had become disenchanting while crammed into the 5:20 Port Washington train on the Long Island Railroad, with other commuters mashing his toes and some old phlegmatic man coughing hoarsely into Byron's face.

Byron had been on his way home to his colorless apartment after spending another colorless day working as a stockman at Barnes & Noble. His day had ended on a somewhat down note when his boss chewed him out for lingering too long near the Travel Section. But Byron had been unable to help himself. The books that had particularly fascinated him were the ones about Canada, especially the more remote sections of the country where there were still forests and breathable air, and everybody knew everybody else.

That sounded simply superb, and it was with great reluctance that he had torn himself away from lingering in front of them.

Two rows over had been books on the occult and the supernatural. But Byron never bothered with those titles, which was kind of a shame considering what eventually happened to him. He might have been better prepared, or at the very least able to understand.

At any rate, Byron stood on the 5:20 dreaming of better places and better things, and the 5:20 sat there and sat there until everybody realized that there was a problem. This realization was belatedly confirmed by the conductor, who ordered everyone off the train and told them to wait for the 5:54. The 5:54 was then, of course, twice as crowded as usual, and Byron was not only unable to board it but didn't get out of the city until well after 7:00. By that time Byron had decided that enough was enough.

When he got home Byron went straight to, of all things, the nearest bookstore. It was just closing but, like a man obsessed, he convinced the clerk to keep the store open long enough for him to buy a book on Canada. After skimming through it he settled on a small town called McKeeville as being absolutely ideal. A couple of thousand people lived there (Christ, he thought, I have a couple of thousand people living in my apartment building,) and yet it was surrounded by wilderness so unspoiled that wild animals such as deer and wolves roamed free through it. Byron couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a forest, much less deer and wolves running around.

So Byron made his preparations (quickly, before he lost his nerve), filled out all the appropriate paperwork, and moved to McKeeville.

He got a job in the local diner bussing tables. It wasn't much of a job, but Byron hadn't moved out there for the job possibilities. He'd gone there because he wanted to get the hell out of New York, out of the United States.

He'd been there for about two weeks the night that he worked a double shift to make some additional money. The rent was due on the furnished sublet he was living in. (He still couldn't believe the rent. For what he was paying in McKeeville, he would not have been able to get so much as a closet back in New York.)

Now bone tired, but happily exhausted, Byron left the cheerful confines of the all-night diner and started home.

It was a few minutes after midnight, the air crisp and clean and tingling his nostrils. If he'd been in New York he would have been terrified at the very suggestion of walking around this late at night in a deserted area of the city. But the terrors of New York had been left far behind, were already a bad dream fading away.

Now there was only clean air, clean thoughts, a new life for him. As he turned the corner and started down a side street, he realized the thing he had come to value most was the quiet. In New York there was always something—ambulances, police cars, children screaming—something disruptive. Here, though, a

man could hear himself think. He could revel in the utter, blissful silence.

Then Byron heard something.

He wasn't certain what it was at first. It sounded like a car engine running softly, a kind of dull, steady, grinding noise. But there were no cars on the street, not parked and not moving. Just him, and a sound.

He stopped and turned, but just as he stopped the sound stopped as well.

There was plenty of light around him, both from street lamps and from the full moon that smiled down at him. A cloud wafted across it, obscuring it momentarily, but then it was visible again.

It was cold, a brisk Canadian March night, and yet for some reason Byron suddenly felt warm. Underneath his blue goosedown jacket he was starting to sweat profusely, his checked shirt sticking to his chest. He scratched for a moment at his week-old beard and tried to make out what the source of the noise was.

Nothing. And now the noise had stopped, and he was beginning to feel a little foolish standing there in the cold for no apparent reason.

So he started to walk again. His old New York instincts were kicking in, however, and he picked up the pace a bit.

Thirty seconds later he heard it again.

This time there was no mistake. It was much louder, and it was much closer, and it sounded much, much nastier. And he heard something else: the soft clicking of long nails on the pavement. That meant he was being followed either by an animal, or by somebody who never, ever cut his toenails.

Part of him wanted to look back and see exactly what was pursuing him, and the other part didn't want to know. It just wanted to wake up, (in the vain hope he was sleeping), just wanted to get the hell away. Click your heels together three times, he told himself in giddy desperation. He was walking faster now, and whatever was following him was walking faster as well. And the growling was louder.

All right, he thought. It's a dog. And if I keep my back to it, it could just leap on me and rip my throat out. He forced back panic at this particular realization. But if I stop, turn, face it in a nonthreatening but firm manner... maybe I can show it who's boss.

He took a deep breath—his last—and turned.

It was standing only ten feet away. It roared, and its fetid breath was overwhelming. Byron gasped, paralyzed.

The creature leaped the distance as if it were nothing. Its jaws clamped down, cutting off Byron's scream and coincidentally, Byron's head. Blood spurted, matting down the creature's coarse dark fur.

The sounds of ripping and crunching did not stop for some time. And when they did, there followed a loud, ungodly howl that seemed to freeze the world for a moment. Seemed to reverse time and send it spiralling back to the days of the primitive. It was as though something had crept out of the primeval jungle to unleash itself upon the modern world.

The howl hung there for a moment and then dissipated. The creature turned away from its hideous accomplishments and crept off into the night, swaying slightly as if in drunken delight. It left no tracks, left no trace of where it had come from or where it was now going. All it left was the gutted body of one disenchanted, and now disemboweled, American.

"Ah, Doctor Parsons. I thought you might want to take a look personally. Don't see many like this."

It was not the way Parsons liked to start off his mornings. He far preferred a hot cup of tea and a croissant as he sat back at his desk in his third-floor office. Running a hospital was a day-in, day-out demanding job that rarely gave any respite during his working hours (which seemed endless). So the mornings were what he liked to think of as his quiet, contemplative time.

Parsons was of medium build, with slicked-back brown hair punctuated on either side of his temples by bands of silver. He was of an indeterminate age between forty and sixty. When he'd shown up in town about six months ago to become the hospital administrator, he had positively radiated confidence. And since this hospital served at least four towns that he knew of, the administrator of McKeeville General Hospital could not be someone daunted by responsibility.

Parsons was, however, daunted by the joviality of Doctor DeFalco, who had left the urgent summons on Parsons' desk that he should hasten immediately down to the morgue the moment he came in. He did not relish the visit, but was heedful of the air of importance in the message.

DeFalco, Parsons decided, had been working in the morgue for far too long. He seemed to be most cheerful when investigating a death that was particularly gruesome. It was becoming an unhealthy occupation for him, Parsons thought.

DeFalco was Parsons' physical opposite—hefty compared to Parsons' gauntness, an excessively jovial face next to Parsons' "graveside manner." DeFalco pushed his glasses back on his large red nose and said, "This one is really something else."

He gestured Parsons over to a table where a body was covered with a cloth. He pulled it aside and Parsons, veteran medical man that he was, blanched nevertheless.

"Easiest autopsy I ever did," said DeFalco happily. "Everything was sliced open, from crotch to sternum. Two cops were losing their breakfast when they were bringing this guy in."

Parsons looked at the maimed corpse in front of him and said, "Cause of death?"

DeFalco looked at the body clinically. "I'd have to say being gutted is what caused it."

"Doctor," said Parsons stiffly. "I hardly think this is an appropriate time for levity."

"Why not? Afraid we're going to offend the patient?" DeFalco harrumphed to himself.

"What caused this... this hideousness? Some sort of accident?"

"Accident, my ass," replied DeFalco. "Something very deliberately ripped this poor bastard apart. Consumed part of him, including..." and he read off a quick list he'd jotted down of missing or partially devoured organs and limbs. Then with his rubber-gloved hands he picked up a bone. "Thigh bone," he

said. "Used to be connected to the hip bone. And the hip bone's con—"

"DeFalco, you'll be pleased to know that I have every intention of sending you on a lengthy vacation after this. What's the point of this recitation? I want you to answer my—"

"I am answering it," said DeFalco patiently. He pointed to the lower half of the bone. "Teeth marks."

"Human?"

DeFalco's face twisted in disgust. "Now you're making me ill. No, of course not human. Canine. Lupine, if I'm not mistaken."

"A wolf did this?" Parsons frowned. "That's very unusual. I don't recall instances of wolves just coming into the city and attacking someone. Perhaps it was rabid?"

"Maybe. I'll try running blood tests or see if I can find some trace of the animal's saliva, but I wouldn't bet the farm on it." He adjusted his glasses once more. "But the thing I really wanted to call your attention to—"

"There's more?" said Parsons with marked unenthusiasm.

"Oh, yeah. What, you thought I just wanted to gross you out?"

Parsons leaned back and drummed his fingers on a gurney. "It crossed my mind."

"I found something that scares the crap out of me. I took measurements on the teeth marks. As near as I can tell, judging from the width, estimating the size of the head of the creature that did the biting—I'd say we're dealing with a wolf that's at least eight feet long."

Parsons stared at him for a moment and then started to laugh. "You're joking, of course."

"I wish. You wish."

"Why don't you just say he was eaten by a great white shark? It's certainly about as believable. What kind of wolf grows to be eight feet long?"

DeFalco waved the thigh bone. "The kind who can do this. Without breaking a sweat."

Parsons stopped drumming his fingers. "Doctor... who else have you told about this? The police? Anybody?"

"The police know he was killed by a wild animal, obviously. But they don't know about the size of it. They figured a bear, not a giant wolf."

"Good. So let's keep this between ourselves, all right? No sense in alarming the city. The press hasn't picked up on this yet, so let's see if we can keep things quiet."

"Sounds like a great idea to me."

Parsons started to turn away and then paused. "Two things... first off, try to stay out of Cholly's Pub. You have a tendency to have a few too many and become very loose-lipped."

DeFalco tossed a salute. "Gotcha, boss."

"Second, do we know who this is?"

"Yeah. Whoever... sorry, whatever... attacked him wasn't remotely interested in his wallet. Name's Byron Keller. An American, apparently."

"American. Hmph. Came a long way to die, didn't he?"

"Sure did. Out here in the boonies, you never know what's in the woods." DeFalco looked at the ruined mess once more and then covered it up. "He should've stayed in the big city where's it's safe."

DeFalco knocked off work early, since the longer the day went on, the more concerned he became about what he had seen. It was a little after 3:00 when he left the hospital, walked across the street and saw the doors of Cholly's beckoning to him.

He thought about what Parsons had said to him, about how the last thing he wanted to do was become loose-tongued. But what the hell—he had self-control. One drink certainly wouldn't hurt things.

The bartender greeted him warmly when he came in as he bellied up to the bar.

Shoving over a beer, the bartender said, "You're a little early today, aren't you, Doc?"

"Had a really rough day, Bobby," replied DeFalco. "But I can't tell you about it." He took a sip.

By the end of the day the whole city knew.

2

Josh smiled at me with that toothy way he had, and said, "Now, you have to understand. The way a wolf thinks—it's not the way humans think. Your heads are cluttered with thoughts of tonight's TV schedule and if you can get reservations at the local eatery. We wolves are far more tactile. We think with our noses, our hearing... our senses. So if you're going to try to write things from my perspective, you'll just have to interpret the best you can. Because I don't think I could put it into words." Thanks loads, Josh.

(Others?

Sniff. Scent. Something different. Something new in the territory, in the hunting place.

Like self?

No. Like, but different. Similar, but strange. Not... natural. Not of the woods. Of someplace else.



Scent the bushes. Scent the branches, the roots. Protective trees stretch high overhead, out of sight. Thin rays of sunlight filtering through the trees. Stand up against tree, scratch claws against bark and love the sun. Love the light.

Scent the tree. Something strange brushed up against it. Left a scent like self, but different. Like self rotting, decaying. Like self filled with festering insects.

Drop to all fours and scent the ground. It was here, but now it is gone.)

"When was never a question," said Josh. "Wolves have no concept of time as you and I do. Season to season, yes, but precisely how many days had passed since the creature had come through the hunting territory... there was simply no frame of reference for me. This I can tell you... it was March. My main concern at that point was the safety of the pack. There were eight of us in all, including my mate. We had recently conceived young."

("Oh. Uh... congratulations," I said.)

"Thank you. The pups were due to be born in two months. Keeping the meat supply in abundance for my mate was another major concern... which was why I was particularly alarmed to discover something roaming the territory that hadn't been there before. At the time that was the only way I viewed the creature—as something that could pose a threat to my mate's food."

(I shifted in my chair, pushing my tape recorder a little closer to him. 'Did your mate have a name?')

'Nothing you could pronounce.'

("Can you?")

He paused a moment, giving it some thought. Then he tilted back his head and uttered a bizarre agglomeration of sounds, kind of like a cross between a hacking cough and a hiccup. He shook his head and rubbed his throat. 'Not very well,' he admitted. 'It would be pointless anyway, because I didn't think of her by name the way you would. Generally I simply thought of her as 'She.'

("She?" I thought how that would look on a bookflap and wasn't thrilled. 'How about if we call her Ayesha?')

"Why?"

("Ever read anything by H. Rider Haggard?")

"No. "

("It's from a book of his. ")

'Oh. " He rolled the name around in his mouth. 'Sounds good. Quite mournful, actually. All right, then. Ayesha'.

The wolf paused, considered the possibilities. Tell the pack. Or hunt creature by self. Of those two, keeping in the pack seemed the better idea. Self was large, powerful. But self had an instinctive feeling that, whatever creature was roaming through the woods, it was far too powerful for a single wolf.

Besides, safety in numbers.

Suddenly the wolf heard something. Many somethings, all at same time. Many large feet crackling through brush. Sounds of dogs barking, many of them. Fur stood erect on the nape of his neck as the wolf realized immediately the massive danger to self.

Why? Why were humans smashing through the woods?

Human voices, those flat, inelegant nasal tones, echoed through the protecting forest. The dogs, those distant relatives, sounded closer, louder, more furious.

The wolf ran.

Strange, incomprehensible sounds came from the humans behind him, but the intent was clear. The tone was unmistakable. Triumph. The humans were on the scent of self.

Self had better get the hell out of there.

The wolf ran faster. Blood pumped through his veins, the sounds of yapping and shouting and barking all jumbling together through the haze of instinctive fear that had descended on the wolf's mind.

Escape. Escape. Had to escape.

But not toward the pack, the wolf realized quickly, and immediately veered his course away. To lead humans to pack would be height of betrayal. Even safety in numbers would not save self from hideous humans with their strange sticks that spat death.

The wolf came upon a small brook and splashed through it, determined to throw off the scent. He slid a bit, his paws now thoroughly wet, but he caught himself and plunged onward. Faster. More desperate. Ahead of him was solid rock, a sheet of it placed there as if from providence, with only a few shrubs fighting up between the cracks. The wolf charged across it, claws clicking merrily on the craggy surface. Then the wolf was gone, leaping high into the air and crashing through the brush.

The wolf was so preoccupied with his flight for life that he didn't detect the scent of a human ahead of him before it was too late.

He leaped the brush into a small clearing, and caught the scent while still in midair. His legs pinwheeled as if, through clawing at the air, he could redirect his trajectory. It was impossible, of course, and the wolf thudded to the ground a mere two feet away from the overpowering human smell.

Fortunately for the wolf the human was already dead.

The wolf stood there for a moment, regarding the human closely. The wolf had rarely had an opportunity to study one this closely before, for the pack's rule was to give humans as wide a berth as possible. Keep self away from humans was the general order of things, a rule that the wolves obeyed religiously.

This human, however, was no threat. This human lay there with arms outstretched and a contorted

expression on its face. The wolf padded softly towards the human, noting dispassionately that the human had been ripped apart. Death and carcasses were hardly a novelty to the wolf.

What caught the wolf's attention was the other scent, mixed in with the human's. It was the scent that he had noticed earlier. The self-death scent that had ranged through the bushes and trees. Whatever the creature was who was stalking through the territory, it had killed this human.

Then the wolf saw the death stick lying next to the human and jumped several feet away. His tail stood straight out, and he snarled at the stick, almost daring it to try something. But the stick lay there, uselessly, and slowly the wolf perceived that the stick was no threat to self. Nevertheless, taking no chances, the wolf padded carefully around the death stick, giving it a very suspicious look and growling low in his throat.

The wolf heard the distant sounds of pursuit and realized he could waste no more time. He bolted further away, and ran at breakneck speed. Filtered sunlight played across his path as he picked up the pace, determined to leave the humans far behind self.

And slowly the sounds of the dogs barking and the men shouting vanished in the distance. For good measure the wolf kept going a few more minutes before discovering a rocky embankment with natural caves in them. The wolf trotted up the embankment and stood at the mouth of one of the caves, sniffing carefully, not wishing to arouse any larger animals that might have already taken up residence. Self had had enough problems for one day. But there was no trace, and the wolf slowly entered the cave, barking once in challenge. No response.

The wolf curled up deep in the darkness of the cave, listening carefully for any sounds of intruders. None, however, came.

He had escaped, apparently. And the wolf could not help but wonder what the humans had done when they found the remains of their fellow.

"Good Christ."

Abe was the self-appointed leader of the half-dozen hunters. It was his dogs, after all, who had been leading them in their pursuit of (presumably) the wolf and (hopefully) the specific wolf that had ripped that American guy to shreds.

But now his hunting dogs were huddled together, whimpering slightly and glancing at the human remains on the ground. Abe whistled softly, and one of the other members of the party crossed himself silently.

"Is that who I think it is?" asked the man to Abe's right. Abe nodded silently. "Dick Morton."

"Uh-huh. Disappeared about a month ago." Abe scratched his head. "His wife thought he'd lit out for Toronto, like he did a few years ago. You remember... when he found out she was having a fling with Pierre Lacroix down at the butcher."

"Oh, yeah. She always got the best cuts."

"How in hell can we be standing around discussing this?" said another man in the group. "This guy's lying here dead as a doornail and we're talking about who his wife was sacking around with!"

"Got a point there. Okay," said Abe. "Three of you kind of scrape him up and get him back to town. Me and—" He glanced around quickly. "Me and Winston and Reuben will keep looking for the wolf."

But Winston and Reuben looked at each other, each thinking the same thing, and Winston cleared his throat. "Look, Abe... I don't wanna sound gutless or anything, but if you're thinking that whatever ripped up Dick is the same thing that trashed that American guy, what's his name, Burton or something... is that what you're thinking?"

Abe nodded.

"Okay. And if that's what we're tracking, and it's running around in the woods, then no offense... but I think I wanna wait until we're in full force again. Dick here, he was a hunter—one of the best—and I don't wanna face what killed him with anything less than a half-dozen guys behind me. Maybe even a whole platoon."

Abe snorted disdainfully. "Good Christ, you men are lame. Tell you what. You go back to town if you want. I got my dogs, I got my gun... I'm set. I'll stay out here the rest of the day, all night if I have to. No mealy mouthed, flea-bitten wolf is going to scare me, and I don't care if it's as big as a goddamn Buick. Now, I'm not saying that any of you has to stay out here with me." He shifted his stance slightly, leaning on the end of his rifle. "But I'm real interested to see which of you is man enough to stay out here and find out what it's really like to be a hunter. Any moron can go out with rifles and infrared night scopes, armed to the teeth. That's not hunting. That's just slaughter. Which of you wants to stay with me and find out what it's like to really go one-on-one? To find out what it feels like when not only can you kill the prey—but there's a chance that the prey can kill you?" He stepped forward and eyed each of the men challengingly. "Well? Who's with me?"

Inside of a minute Abe found himself alone in the woods, except for the confused dogs. The dogs looked up at him in a way which, to his mind, said "Would you mind terribly if we went with the other guys?"

"Wimps," he snorted. "All of you."

"

The wolf, taking as much care as possible to make sure there was no pursuit, made his way back to the place that served as home to the pack. Near the outskirts of the pack's place, the wolf paused and urinated against a tree to reinforce just whose territory this was. Here, closer to the pack's place, there was no scent of the self-death. That was good.

"We had found a truly excellent place for our pack home," Josh told me. "A lot of rocky terrain nearby, and a small river, both of which helped in getting rid of scents. The rocky terrain gradually angled upward and contained a number of caves that my pack used as shelter. They were splendid caves. Emergency exits out the back. Cool in summer, warm in winter."

("Everything except cable?" I asked.)

He nodded. "You could pretty much say that."

The wolf crept into his cave and called out for Ayesha. He paused a moment, and then a soft bark came from the back of the cave. The wolf glided towards the sound, moving so quietly that he seemed to be a shadow melted into the cave wall. There, in the rear of the cave, he found his mate and nuzzled her gently. She seemed tired, a little sluggish. But nevertheless she looked up at her mate with affection and returned the touch, her tongue sliding softly across his muzzle.

('How did you talk to each other?' I asked. 'Do you have a language?')

"We would communicate through a combination of sounds and body movements," he replied.

("Well, how the hell am I supposed to get that across?")

"I don't know. Why don't I just tell you the basics of what we discussed and you just put it into dialogue form?"

"What is wrong, my mate?" she asked.

He stepped back and tilted his head slightly. "I have found something very strange. Something that could affect the entire pack."

"What? What is it?"

"Perhaps, before I tell you, we should call the pack together."

Ayesha was silent a moment and then agreed. The wolf went to the front of the cave, tilted his head back and howled. The sound cut through the air, the most forboding and lonely of all the sounds that are heard in the woods. Smaller creatures who heard it quickly scurried under bushes or inside trees, frightened that, within moments, they might wind up as someone's lunch.

Sometimes the howls were intended for just such creatures, but this time it was for the wolves themselves. From near or far, the wolves of the pack were roused from their slumber or their hunting, were prompted to return to the place of the pack. Their leader was summoning them, and it was not wise to keep the leader waiting.

He waited until they were all gathered, looking at him expectantly. Then, quickly and succinctly, he told them everything that he had encountered that afternoon. Ayesha gasped slightly when he described his headlong flight from capture. And when he finally concluded his narrative, he paused, clearly inviting comments from the others.

It was the youngest member of the pack who made the mental leap and realized what was happening. "The humans in the human packplace nearby usually keep away from us, and we from them," he said. "But you say there is a creature with the scent of self-death in the woods. And this creature killed a human. Perhaps this creature has killed even more humans, and the humans think we are doing the killing."

The gray pack leader nodded. "That would make sense. Humans make no use of their pathetic noses, so they would not be able to detect difference in the smells. To them, all are same." He paused. "We must be cautious, my pack-mates. If we can find this creature and kill it, it will solve the humans' problem in addition to our own. Tonight, when we hunt as a pack, we shall see if we can find the creature. Even if creature does have self-death smell, pack can kill creature easily."

Night had fallen, the full moon above giving light to the forest below.

Noiselessly the pack made its way through the forest, pausing only here and there to try to pick up the scent of the intruder with the smell of self-death.

The gray wolf paused near a bush and found the scent, much stronger than it had been early in the afternoon. The wolf turned to the rest of the pack. "It has been through here."

Ayesha padded over to her mate. "Are you certain?"

"Yes." He paused, regarding her thoughtfully. "Perhaps you should have waited back at the packplace. Why risk future cubs?"

"Self is more safe with pack than by self," replied Ayesha, and her mate was forced to agree. This was not unusual.

When Ayesha made up her mind about something, it was very rare that anything could dissuade her from it.

That was when the howl cut through the air.

The pack froze. It was a howl as loud as all the pack combined, but it issued from a single throat. All the other noises in the forest seemed to disappear, consumed by this one sound.

The wolves glanced at each other, and then the gray leader said, "This way." Yet the pack hesitated. The leader turned briefly to Ayesha, and with utter confidence his mate charged forward. The leader immediately followed her, and behind them came the rest of the pack. The wolves' momentary doubts and fears were gone, replaced with fierceness and aggression. Not to mention the fact that, were this creature as big as it sounded, it would provide sufficient meat for the entire pack.

("I thought wolves usually hunted smaller animals, or lame animals who couldn't get away.")

'You make us sound like nature's bullies," said Josh goodhumoredly. "To a large extent you are correct. But you forget, this was an intruder to our land. Wolves are very, very territorial. We deal quickly and harshly with any who invades our hunting ground. "

There were sounds of ripping and tearing just ahead, and the pack charged through the brush to confront its enemy.

And stopped short.

The other wolves collided with the gray leader and his mate. They piled up, one on another, and quickly disentangled themselves to witness something that, in all their short memory, they had never seen before.

A huge moose had been brought down. Not some sick old stray, but a big one, in its prime. The kind that it would have taken the entire pack to bring down, and maybe not even then.

The moose lay there on the ground, its dead eyes open and staring at the wolves. Its midsection was already gutted and the creature that had killed it was already busy with the moose's hindquarters when it paused, suddenly aware of its audience.

Slowly it turned its massive head towards the wolves, and the leader could hear a low whimpering from the youngest member of the pack.

The creature had incredibly dark fur, almost as dark as the night sky. Its body was half again as long as the largest of the wolves, and in its huge head were two eyes that glowed as they overlooked the pack.

And then the creature spoke in a low, seductive voice. "Leave, little brothers. Leave my hunting ground, before it's too late."

The gray wolf growled low in its throat. "This is our territory. You are the intruder."

"Perhaps," replied the creature. "But the world is my territory. I kill in the forest. I kill in the city of men. Where and what I kill is of little importance to me. Now leave... before I kill you."

The gray wolf hesitated only a moment and then barked a fierce, unmistakable command to his pack. As one they leaped towards the creature, the scent of self-death almost overwhelming. And the creature let out a roar, the kind of roar designed to terrify prey, freeze it in its tracks and make it easy pickings for slaughter.

The roar worked perfectly. The pack froze, and with a second roar the creature leaped over the prostrate body of the moose and into the center of the pack.

It spun quickly and, with one swipe of its massive paw, crushed the skull of the youngest pack member. The others leaped forward, all teeth and claws, trying to rip at the creature and bring it down.

The creature made a sound the wolves had never heard. It was called laughter.

It stood up on its hind legs and shook the wolves off it in the manner that a wolf would shake off a flea. Several of the wolves crashed out of sight behind some bushes. The creature grabbed up another wolf by the scruff of its neck. The yapping wolf snarled and hissed in the creature's face, and the creature's great jaws clamped down on the back of the wolf's neck and pulled. The wolf uttered one truncated howl of anguish before its head parted from its shoulders. Blood geysered, splashing against the creature as it tossed down the second wolf to have died in as many minutes. It turned, and there was Ayesha, hissing and snarling, tail between her legs but not retreating. It started towards her, with a growl that sounded like a rock slide.

The large gray wolf, the pack leader, the mate of Ayesha, leaped onto the creature's back, driving it down. "Run, Ayesha!" he barked. "That's an order! Run!"

Ayesha reluctantly obeyed her mate's orders. That she might never see her mate again never even occurred to her.

Fiercely the gray wolf clamped its jaws onto the back of the creature's neck and hung on, furiously. The creature howled in fury, tried to shake off the gray wolf. But the pack leader held on, digging in more furiously. He felt the creature's blood oozing between his teeth and began to realize that, at the very least, the creature should be starting to slow down.

Instead the creature was only getting angrier. It threw itself onto the ground and rolled onto its back. Now the gray wolf's spine was creaking under the pressure of the creature's far greater weight. The wolf pulled with all the strength it had, and a piece of the creature's thick, bristly hide came loose in its jaws.

The creature shrieked with a sound that was most unwolf-like. It sounded almost human. It rolled away and the gray wolf, now without his grip, scrambled to his feet and tried to find some quick way to retreat.

But now the creature, with unbelievable speed, pivoted and leaped. With a thud that seemed to echo through the forest, it landed on top of the gray wolf and bit down on the wolf's foreleg. The gray wolf howled in anguish as the creature said, "The rest of your pack has run off or is dead. And you I will kill slowly."

It bit him again, and the gray wolf struggled furiously in the grip of the creature. It was useless. The creature was much heavier, much more powerful, and the scent of self-death was everywhere. Distantly the gray wolf thought, "I'll never see my cubs..."

Something exploded.

The air was filled with the sound that the gray wolf had come to know as certain death—the sound of the human's death sticks.

And abruptly, the creature was gone.

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Abe's dogs had suddenly started to go wild around the campfire, and he realized that they had scented something major. Then he heard that massive howling and knew that whatever he was seeking, it wasn't very far off. Quickly gathering up the dog's leashes, he grabbed his rifles and had the dogs lead him towards the sight of the disturbance.

The moment he got there he knew he'd found what he had been looking for.

It was the biggest goddamn wolf he'd ever seen. At the moment it seemed preoccupied with chewing up another animal. Abe realized with some surprise that it was another wolf. Now what in hell were they fighting about? Weren't all wolves on the same side? Maybe it was a lone wolf...

Even as these thoughts crossed his mind he'd unslung his larger rifle—a Remington Riot Shotgun. He was going to take no chances with this monster. He chambered a round and, from barely seven feet away, fired.

He hit the creature dead on. The impact lifted it off the smaller wolf and knocked it back. It sat there a moment, as if confused, and Abe quickly chambered another round.



"You're history, you bastard," he said and fired again. This blast caught the creature in the upper chest and spun it completely around.

The smaller wolf was still alive, surprisingly. It was starting to limp towards the safety of the forest, and Abe paid it no mind. He wasn't interested in some dinky normal wolf. The big one was what he wanted. It was going to make a hell of a hunting trophy.

The creature turned and stared with fury and hatred at Abe. Abe gasped. Its eyes were burning bright red, as if two coals had been rammed in there.

The dogs were barking furiously, and Abe unleashed them. They charged towards the creature, which was already covered with blood. Certainly it was on its last legs. It had to be.

The creature stood. Not like a dog, leaning up against something. More like a human being. Abe gasped as the creature, towering about eight feet tall, glowered down at him and growled.

The dogs leaped, snapping and barking, and were all over it. The creature looked down at them as if it were looking at bugs, and then began to rip them apart. Its claws sliced through them, and angry barks turned to howls of pain. Within seconds the ground was littered with assorted dog parts.

Abe fired two more times. Both of them hit the creature dead center, and then the creature did the same thing that had so unnerved the wolves. It laughed.

Abe blanched and then, for some reason, he thought about that great-looking redhead who worked down at the market, and why the hell hadn't he ever asked her out.

And then the creature was upon him.

The gray wolf staggered through the forest, bleeding from several places. It let out a low bark but nothing replied. The pack had scattered, panic-stricken. The wolf couldn't blame them. Flight had seemed to him to be one of the preferable options too, until the thing had almost attacked Ayesha.

The woods blurred around him but he kept going, determined to put as much distance between himself and the creature as possible. He needed time to recuperate, time to figure out...

He staggered dizzily and didn't notice the embankment before it was too late.

The wolf tumbled down, out of control, the world spinning around him dizzily. Dirt got into his eyes, in his snout.

Then he hit the bushes and felt thorns ripping at him, but he was too tired to let out so much as a whimper. And when he stopped rolling he found himself inside a thicket. The thorns, which had only moments before been clawing at him, were now his protection.

He slumped to the ground, determined to rest for only a few moments until he had his strength back, and then fell asleep.

It didn't take them all that long, the following day, to find Abe's remains. Two of the mighty hunters promptly tossed their lunches. After they did, they determined that they were going to need reinforcements. A lot of men, as many as they could get together. With enough weaponry to take over a South American nation.

"It's only coming out at night," said one of the hunters coldly. He had naming red hair and a large handlebar moustache, which had earned him the nickname of Yosemite Sam. "I'm sure of it. If we want to find this bugger, we'll have to be here at night, too."

"Like Abe was?" said another. "And we'll all wind up just like him."

"No we won't, y'idjit," replied Yosemite Sam testily. "Abe was all by himself... Mr. 'Hey-I-can-handle-it.' Us, we'll have a shitload of men, and unless the wolf that's doing this is wearing armor, we'll have his hide nailed in no time."

The gray wolf lay inside the thicket, thinking of his pack and breathing slowly. He heard the sounds of the forest as if they were coming from a great distance. Usually he felt as one with nature, inseparable from the great forest that was his home. The trees shaded him, the cool water nourished him, birds fluttered overhead, reminding him that there was some prey that was out of his reach. The air always smelled sweet, and he could always sense the life that teemed in the soil beneath his paws.

Now, though, he felt strangely cut off. As if the forest had turned away from him, disowned him.

He let out a low whine, more as an experiment than out of any real distress. He pricked up his ears to see if there was any response, but none was forthcoming. He tried to stand up, but the world spun around him and slowly, reluctantly, he sank back to the ground.

Is self... dying? he thought. He tried to give out a howl in hopes of summoning whoever was left of the pack, but he simply did not have the strength. He turned his head and nuzzled where his hide had been ripped and abraded. The bleeding had long since stopped, and his fur was covered with dried blood. He licked at it experimentally. Then his head dropped back to the ground, and he closed his eyes.

'I had never dreamt before," said Josh slowly. 'But I did that day, for the first time. Strange, bizarre things that didn't make any sense at the time. Things that I had no concepts for, because you see, animals don't have any grasp of good and evil. Life and death, yes, but good and evil are purely moral concepts. To an animal, something isn't either good or evil, but simply 'is.' Still... the memories of that dream were so strong that, to this day, I still recall many aspects of it." He paused, and his mouth twisted in disgust. 'I dreamt of darkness. I dreamt of thoughts that weren't mine. They seemed... very old. An old, almost ancient evil. I tried, even then, to translate it into concepts that were within my grasp. I dreamt of dead, rotting animals, of heavy thunderstorms knocking down trees, of fires ripping through the forest and destroying everything that was important to me. And I dreamt of laughter. That same, hideous laughter that I'd heard from the creature earlier .

'And then I started to realize that I was actually in great danger. Because the blackness that I was

dreaming of was trying to take me over. "

("You mean like being seduced by the dark side of the Force ?")

Josh stared at me blankly. 'If you say so.' He pondered this a moment but, not coming up with further usable explanation, shrugged it off. "This... dark side, if you will... that was filling my mind. It offered me all manner of things. Power. Immortality. Riches. It practically said to me, 'Become like me, and you can have the kind of life you've always dreamed of. You can terrorize humans, never have to answer to anyone except yourself. Be unkillable.'

('And none of this stuff was of any interest to you?") For the first time he actually looked at me a little disdainfully. "Don't be absurd. I mean, power? Riches? Those are meaningless concepts to an animal. Immortality? Humans may have fear of death, may not understand that the life cycle is just that—a cycle. Birth and death. Animals understand that. We live with that every single day. We're used to the idea that when our time comes, we will die. And our bodies will go back into the food chain. Nor did I have any interest in terrorizing anyone. That's a singularly human predisposition. " He shook his head. 'I think I understand why humans walk on two legs. It's so you can look down on all other species.

"At any rate, my dreams continued for some time, and I continued to fight them off. Time had quite literally lost all meaning. Finally, I started to come around, and when I lifted up my head I saw that the sun was almost down."

The bushes rustled noisily as the wolf pushed his way through. He had lost almost an entire day, but it had been well spent. Already he felt more of his old vigor flowing into him. The places where he had been bitten were no longer throbbing, but he felt some degree of unhappiness about the current state of his fur.

Also, as he walked he felt a twinge of pain as the abused muscles tried to stretch themselves. He whined softly. Self was definitely in less than perfect shape. Then he let out a long, mournful howl and paused, waiting to see if the call would be returned. But there was nothing.

He moved through the forest, but now there was something different. Nothing he could exactly pinpoint, but something was not quite... right.

The muscles were starting to hurt even more and he picked up the pace, hoping to return to the packplace before he be-came unable to move at all. His breath started to come in more ragged, painful gasps, and he felt a sharp pain in his chest.

Then a spasm of pain gripped his entire body, and he almost tumbled. It was incredibly frustrating. Here he had spent all of his life moving sleekly, silently, with utter confidence. And now he was stumbling about with less grace than a cub.

He stopped by a brook and lowered his snout to the water, hoping that a drink would somehow remove this puzzling lack of coordination.

In the water he saw the reflected light of the full moon, which had just come out from behind the clouds.

And then there was a scream, a human scream, from very, very near. The gray wolf wondered where it had come from, and, in the same instant that he realized the sound had been torn from his own throat, the

pain hit him.

A second scream, and the wolf pitched forward into the water, his body writhing in agony. He flipped over onto his back, his paws stretching up towards the moon as if in prayer.

' 'And I watched in horror as my paws began to grow," said Josh.

' "They started to stretch, turn. I felt my forelegs twisting completely around, accompanied by the sounds of muscles stretching and bones snapping. My fur, my beautiful gray fur, blackened and crispened. My claws began to shrink and something completely alien began growing out of the fronts of my paws. Fingers!

"Hysterical from the pain, I actually tried to gnaw off my forearms. Then all of a sudden... it was as if someone had taken a knife heated in a campfire, stuck it into the nape of my neck, and begun to slowly draw it downward. My entire spine..." He hesitated, groping for the word. "...split, and it felt like I was being burned alive. My back, my hindquarters, started to contort, to straighten out. Fur was falling out in huge amounts from all over me, leaving me with hideous pink skin .

"All I wanted to do was escape. Somehow, frantically, I thought that whatever was happening, it was connected with that place at that moment, and that if somehow I could get away, then whatever massive sickness had hit me would disappear.

' I tried to climb up, away from the water. I shoved with my hind legs, and howled—they had begun to swell up like balloons. My body felt like a bundle of twigs being mashed into the ground. I clawed at the dirt with my hind legs, and then they were no longer my hind legs. They were these huge, useless things sticking out behind me. My tail disappeared... I still don't know where it went. I tried to open my mouth again to howl, even though by this time the pain was so overwhelming that I was beyond feeling it. But my mouth locked on me. I couldn't open it.

Instinctively, even though it was something I had never done before, I reached around towards my jaw. And I looked in horror as a human hand touched my mouth. I was terrified beyond any ability to move, certain that some human had come up behind me. My mind still could not comprehend what was happening.

' "Then my muzzle started to shrink. My ears, too, although I didn't realize it. The world spun around me as my entire jaw, my teeth, my gums, were all shoved inward, made smaller. Imagine all the ache of a root canal job happening in one instant. My nose shriveled, came towards my eyes and stopped there.

' 'And the forest abandoned me.

' "Suddenly all the major and minor noises of the woods that I heard as a matter of course simply ceased to be.

And the smells too. The life smell of the dirt, the fragrance of the trees, the clear, pure aroma from water that humans couldn't even begin to detect... the scent of the deer that had passed by not two hours ago, and the faint lingering trace of the baby rabbit that had strayed from its home before being brought back by its parent—all of them, gone. As if someone had thrown a bag over my head.

' "But for all the awful loss I suffered at that moment, I found something I had never even dreamt of

before. Suddenly the forest was alive with colors. The shadings of green, the gradations of brown, the shimmering textures of the brook as it bubbled and foamed. It all came to me at once, like a man blind from birth gaining his vision.

"Was it a fair trade-off? No, of course not. But the revelation of color to one who had only seen black and white his entire existence helped to divert my mind, if only for a moment, from what had happened to me.

The wolf lay there for some minutes, afraid to move. Afraid that any attempt to walk would bring on another onslaught of suffering. But there was nothing further.

He inhaled deeply but could smell nothing. No, that wasn't quite true. He could smell very little; the faintest of aromas, bare tantalizing traces of what had previously been easily detectable by his sensitive wolfen nose.

He strained his hearing to the utmost and heard nothing.

And then, abruptly, he did hear something. Crashing through the woods like a herd of moose, shouting at the tops of their lungs. Humans.

If they caught him now, ill and sick and furless, he would be dead within seconds.

He turned quickly, tried to run on all fours as usual, and succeeded only in falling face-first into the mud of the brook. He floundered there for a moment and pulled his head out of the water.

His forelegs were crippled. That's all there was to it. He stared at them, watched them bend in the wrong direction when he put weight on them (although there was no pain, at least).

Something, some instinct, prompted him to rear back on his hind legs. Suddenly the ground vanished. No, not vanished: receded. He looked down and, to his shock, the ground was now very far away.

And when he looked down he saw something even more terrifying than the ground's distance. As insane as it sounded, someone had taken his head and stuck it on top of a human being's body. He wobbled slightly, unsteady, unbelieving.

He was also cold, he just started to realize. The chill night air was cutting sharply through him. With his fur gone, he had no protection at all.

And the humans were after him. If his hearing and his sense of smell had not suddenly been cut off he would have detected them much sooner.

He had to run. He took an unsteady step, a second, a third, and then fell forward. He caught himself with his forelegs. Even though they were misshapen, they still served some purpose.

And suddenly the humans were upon him.

First they had heard the howling, and even as the hunters had started in the direction of the wolf sound—pulled by the ever-eager dogs—the howling had become mingled with human screams.

"We got him this time," said Yosemite Sam tightly, with a confidence shared by none of his fellows. One of the hunters started to shout out to the clearly distressed victim that help was on the way, but Sam cut him off with an angry gesture. "Don't do that, y'idjit! Don't let the damned thing know we're on the way. Screaming won't help whoever's getting killed—it'll just warn the varmint doing it."

"Sorry," muttered the other hunter.

The howling had stopped entirely, and now they heard only low moans. Fully expecting to find the giant wolf feasting on living prey, Yosemite Sam took the point and leaped through the brush into the open, rifle pointed and ready to fire.

His eyes opened wide.

"I'll be damned," he said.

Writhing on the ground, trying with all his might to stand up, was a naked man. Not just any naked man. This guy was huge, muscular as all get out. He was standing slowly now and turning towards Sam. The other hunters crowded up behind him now and were gaping from over Sam's shoulder in undisguised astonishment.

The man faced them, crouching, fingers flexing. His hair was strewn and wild, hanging to just below his ears, and was gray with a few streaks of black. His face was square, his jaw sculpted from marble. Still not standing upright, he took a crouching, retreating step from them, watching them with unmasked terror in his eyes. Sam took a step towards him and was caught by the bizarreness of his eye coloring: his right eye was green, his left was actually... yellow?

Maybe he was wearing those kinds of contact lenses that change your eye color, and one of them had fallen out.

Sam took another step forward, and the man's lips drew back in an unmistakable snarl. One of the hunters murmured, "What the hell's the matter with him?"

"Whattaya think?" Sam snapped back. "He just narrowly escaped being ripped apart by some giant wolf. Damned thing must've ripped his clothes off. No wonder he's skittish." Turning towards the man Sam said steadily, "Don't worry. We won't hurt you."

"Got no scratches on him," another of them observed.

Yosemite Sam squinted. "Damned if you're not right. Okay, mister," he said, suddenly suspicious. "What the hell is going on? Who are you? Speak up."

But the man wasn't paying any attention. He was staring at his arms as if he'd never seen them before. Slowly he drew his fist up to his shoulder, watching the flex and play of muscles beneath his skin. His hand passed in front of his face and he kept it there, staring at it wide-eyed. He turned the hand slowly around, fascinated by his thumb and how far around his hand would turn before the natural limits of his musculature prevented it from turning further. He closed his hand slowly, then opened it. Then he licked it.

A hunter muttered to Yosemite Sam, 'Y'know, I know you said he's probably still kind of shaky and everything. But y'ask me, I think he's some kind of imbecile."

By now sharing that opinion, and becoming somewhat frustrated at the delay in their progress, Sam walked right up to the man and, looking down at the squatting stranger, said, "Look, fella, we don't have time for this bullshit. Now what the hell is going on with you?"

The man looked up at Sam's unsmiling face and then, slowly, stood up. His legs wavered slightly, as if unaccustomed to carrying his weight. He stood over Sam, towering well over six feet, and now he studied Sam with open curiosity.

"Jesus," Sam said. "You're a big one." He glanced down. "Literally." He paused. "You must be real popular with the ladies. You got a name, fella?"

The man just stared at him.

"Look," said Sam impatiently. "You wanna go traipsing around the woods buck naked, that's your lookout. Us, we got some wolves to kill."

That was the first inkling that the hunters got that the man understood what they were saying. For those words definitely set him off.

He roared at them, a barely human sound torn from his throat, and then his arm swung around and caught Sam across the face. There was no art to the punch, no style or science in the techniques of pugilism. The man might as well have been swinging a two-by-four, but it had just as much effect. It knocked Sam clear off his feet, hurling him back into the other men. They caught him and Sam felt blood spurting from his nose. Sam, who had had much experience in such matters, cried out, "He broke my nose!" and tried ineffectually to staunch the flow of dark red liquid.

The naked man drew back his arms, his fingers flexing and curving. He crouched again, his eyes darting ferally, and he said with inhuman fury, "No killing wolves!"

His voice was thick and low and, if his expression was any indicator, completely unexpected. He hesitated, surprised.

But Sam did not hesitate at all. Instead he shouted, "Get that son of a bitch!"

Obediently the hunters charged.

The naked man started to run, but then he stopped and seemed to strengthen his resolve. He turned back and leaped at the onrushing hunters.

The leap did not take him very far. It was as if he was still getting used to the way his body moved, and he landed hard and flat on the ground, face down. He started to scramble to his feet, but now the hunters were piling on him, trying to bring him down.

Like a drunken man he lurched to his feet, the others battering him futilely. They were all cursing, shouting furiously, but since that initial growl their opponent had lapsed into grim silence. A twist of his muscled torso and he hurled three of them off him. A kick of his leg shoved off two more, and then a rifle swung like a baseball bat caught him across the back of the knees. Reflexively his legs folded and he

went down.

Yosemite Sam, the red in his moustache now matched by the furious tint of his face, swung down his rifle hard and cracked it across the back of the man's skull. The naked man had a thick bull neck that seemed impervious to harm. Nevertheless the impact fazed him, and Sam struck again and again. The others joined in, swinging their weapons around and down and pounding their massive opponent with all their strength.

"Keep on him!" shouted Sam. "He's going down!"

Moments later, after one final, convulsive twitch, the man lay unmoving on the ground. The men backed away slowly, and Sam checked him over for some sign of broken bones, bruises, cuts—something. He did indeed find a few marks here and there, but overall there was almost no sign of damage.

"Now that's the damnedest thing," muttered Sam. "You'd think we'd've knocked all his teeth out, blackened him up. I mean, we were cracking him up one side and down't' other with the rifle stocks. But y' know"—and he glanced around—"we look in worse shape than this guy is."

"Yeah, but we're conscious," one man observed tersely.

Yosemite Sam nodded. "We are that. C'mon, let's get him back to town."

"Why don't we just leave him here?"

Sam looked at the speaker incredulously. "Just leave him here? For what? For when the wolf that's been roamin' around shows up and tries to take a piece out of him? 'Sides, it took all of you clowns just to take this guy down, and he wasn't even trying to kill us. I don't want to think what an eight-foot slaving wolf would do to you."

"I don't know if I agree with you, Sam," said another man slowly.

"About being able to handle a wolf?"

"No, about this guy not trying to kill us. The SOB tried to go for my throat."

Sam looked from the unconscious form to the hunter and back again. And another hunter said, "Maybe he's some kind of wild man. Like Tarzan."

"This isn't Africa, shit-fer-brains. This is Canada. Come on." He slung his rifle and, slipping his hands under the man's shoulders, lifted. He grunted under the weight. "Some of you mama's boys help me, will ya?"

Moments later they had the man trussed up and they carted him the half-mile to Sam's parked 4X4. "One, two, three," gasped Sam, and they hurled him roughly into the back. He had just been starting to come around, but luckily for the hunters he landed on his head and went back to dreamland again. One of them shook his head. "So what the hell do we do with him? Have him stuffed and mounted?"

"Only thing should be stuffed around here is you," said Sam in irritation. "We'll bring him to the hospital, to the psycho ward. That's the only real place for him."

"Think we can get any money for him?"



Sam gave him a withering glance. "Yeah, sure. And maybe they pay by the pound, y'idjit." He shook his head in disgust as he climbed into the cab of the 4x 4.

Within moments he was leading a small procession back to town. Truth to tell, most of the men were actually glad that this had happened. Any excuse to get out of those godawful woods was an excuse that they grabbed at very happily.

Within the hour they were pulling up at the hospital. The full moon looked down at the clean white building and seemed to be saying, "Boy, you don't know what you're getting yourselves into."

"You found a what?" the nurse at receiving said.

Sam huffed impatiently. "Look, lady," he said to the rather beefy woman. "I got lots of other things to be taking care of. I'm bringing this guy into you folks, then he'll be your problem. My men are bringing him in now—wrapping him up in a blanket, just so he won't shock any biddies getting over a heart condition."

The nurse's face darkened at the casual insult to the patients. "If there's some exhibitionist running around, you should bring him to the police. Not here."

"The police?" He snorted in disdain. "Listen, sweets, if they were capable of doing any kind of job at all, they'd have caught the thing that's going around and ripping the citizens to shreds. And furthermore—"

The furthermore was never said, because Sam was interrupted by a shout of alarm. He turned quickly, already knowing what he was going to see.

Sure enough, here came the bruiser down the hallway. He had obviously come around while the others were trying to cart him into the hospital. "Can't y'idjits do anything right?" shouted Sam, but by this point it was already way too late for recriminations.

The naked man was charging down the hallway, frantically looking left and right, presumably for an exit. Trailing ends of rope dangled from his wrists. Obviously he had snapped his bonds, and Sam made a mental note of astonishment. He'd used rope to tie the man up that had once served in good stead for mountain climbing. Just how strong was he, anyway?

What they were getting now was a replay of the scene in the forest, except this time the man was moving faster and with greater certainty. He had tossed the blanket aside, unconcerned about his nudity, and somewhere along the way he had learned the advantages of clenching a fist. He slammed one hunter across the face with enough impact that a tooth flew out of the victim's mouth and scooted across the polished floor. Others were jumping on him, trying to drag him down, but he kept his balance much better this time and wasn't about to be knocked over again.

The nurse was frantically shouting for help into the intercom. Sam, his now-bandaged nose still aching, felt no particular desire to throw himself headlong into this particular brouhaha, and was more than content to watch the others get themselves massacred. Better them than me, he thought reasonably.

"Kick 'im in the nuts!" Sam called out helpfully. "Y' got a big enough target there!"

"You kiddin'?" called back Mac Lebartoux, clutching desperately onto the naked man's back. "You

wanna make him mad?"

The man reached around, grabbed Mac by the scruff of the neck and hurled him against the water fountain. It knocked the water cooler over, ripping out the old, rusting pipe, and within seconds water was gushing from the wall. People started sliding all over as the hallway began to flood.

The naked man turned, surprised as cold water ran around his bare feet, and then he caught his reflection in the highly polished metal of the overturned water cooler.

The hunters started to regroup themselves, then paused as they watched their erstwhile captive slowly approach the fountain. The water, pouring merrily from the wall pipe, once would have been enough to catch his interest, but it was seeing his face in the metal of the fountain that now had caused him to pull all other interests aside.

He crouched down, his mouth open, as he stared at his face.

One of the hunters muttered, "What the hell is wrong with that guy?"

He turned his head very slightly from side to side, never removing his gaze from his own reflection. He brought his hand up, touched the end of his nose and then extended his hand past that, as though expecting it to continue. Then, slowly, he reached up and back and touched his ears. He felt the odd curve of them, pulled lightly on the lobe.

Then, with both hands, he felt his face, like a bearded man who had just been shaved. He whimpered slightly and, once again, he spoke.

"Where is self's head?" he asked no one in particular.

The sounds of running feet alerted him, and he stood quickly just as four orderlies came running up. They skidded to a halt, one of them literally so as he fell flat on his ass and hydroplaned several yards down the hallway.

The orderly in the lead, the biggest, was still several inches shorter than the out-of-control mental case, but he looked a lot more confident. "Okay, nature boy," he said soothingly. "Don't make any move. No one's going to hurt you."

The orderly behind him was moving closer, and he was holding a large white straitjacket. The naked man didn't know what it was, but he was clearly able to tell that it wasn't something designed to make life better for him. He backed away, snarling, and then tripped over the fallen water fountain.

Within seconds the orderlies were on top of him. He roared, and started to struggle to his feet.

That was when he felt a sharp pain in his right buttock. He spun, looking around in confusion, and saw one of the orderlies holding a hypodermic.

"No need to keep on running around, getting yourself all worked up," said the orderly. "You're gonna take a nice long nap now. That okay by you?"

The naked man turned quickly to run, and suddenly realized that the lower half of his body had gone completely numb. Having no control at all, he thudded to the ground, where he lay helplessly as the others quickly shoved him into the strange white garment they had brought along. Water had stopped

pouring out of the broken pipe—maintenance people had shut off the water at its source, which was going to royally honk off patients until the break could be repaired.

The nurse shook her head slowly and dazedly. "Incredible. I am... really impressed."

"Aw," said Sam modestly, "me and my boys, we're nothing all that special."

She eyed him disdainfully. "I wasn't talking about you." She nodded towards the unmoving form who was being buckled into the straitjacket. "I was talking about him."

"Oh."

And as the naked man slid towards unconsciousness, the last image he took with him was his own reflection. His eyes, staring out from somebody else's face.

When he awoke, he was in a padded cell.

' I lay there, afraid to move for some time. I was inside, in a human cave, I figured, because I was in some sort of enclosure. But it wasn't rocky. It was completely covered with something, I didn't know what.

"And then I realized something. Whatever it was, I was seeing it the way that I had always seen things. In shades of gray. None of that strange visual sensation that I had no words for... what you would call 'color.' All gone.

"Slowly I lifted up my head and slid my tongue out. I felt the welcome sharpness of my teeth, touched the cold nose and elegant muzzle.

' I stood, and felt piles of heavy cloth fall away from me. I didn't know how, I didn't know why, but I was a wolf again.

"Somehow it was over. That bizarre, awful state where I had been wearing a human's body—where I had understood the human speech and even somehow responded in kind—it was all over. I inhaled deeply, pricking up my wonderful ears, overjoyed to have myself back again. I tilted my head back and started to let out a full-blown howl when I cut myself off. I still had no clear idea of where I was, how I had gotten there. If there were more humans lurking about, I didn't dare alert them.

' I thought of the rest of the pack, and then a sudden thought struck me. Had they been transformed into humans as well? Anything seemed possible. Remember, I had no idea that it had been the bite of the creature I'd fought that effected the change. I didn't know how it had happened or, for that matter, even if it had. All knew was that I wanted to get out .

"Kicking off the last of the obnoxious cloth, I walked slowly across the floor. I was astounded. I'd never felt anything quite like it. My paws just sank into it with every step. The walls were made of the same material. It was the oddest rock I'd ever seen.

' "We don't have a large number of padded cells in the forest, you see."

The wolf traced the perimeter of the cell several times. Then he stood against the wall, bracing his forelegs against it, and tore at it with his claws. To his surprise some of it ripped away, allowing large puffy material to spring out.

Food? he thought. Food for self? He clamped down on some with his jaws and immediately let go. But now some was stuck in his teeth, and he made disgusted noises as he endeavored to get it out.

Human food, he thought disdainfully.

He travelled the perimeter once more, then urinated at several points to mark this cave as his territory. He wasn't certain if he would be staying, or even if he really wanted to keep it as territory, but there were certain forms of behavior that simply had to be observed.

There was some sort of sound then, a click from a nearby wall. The wolf stood immobile, waiting to see what had caused it. When venturing in the lands of humans, one could never be too careful.

To his astonishment a wall actually began to open inward. Not an entire wall. Only a small portion, and now a human female stepped into the room.

The wolf was surprised. He had not seen a human female before, yet instinctively he knew this was one. Also, every other human he'd ever seen carried a death stick. He had assumed it was pretty much standard issue, like fangs for a wolf. But this human carried none. Maybe only human males had them.

She stepped into the room and stopped. He was certain that she had scented him, but she wasn't even looking his way. He forgot that humans only used their noses for decoration.

The human female was staring at the pile of cloth the wolf had left behind. Then she looked to the left and then the right, and that was when she spotted the wolf, who had been partly hidden by the open door. She gasped, her mouth flying to her hand, and the wolf growled and barked a warning.

Her mouth moved but no sound came out—something very unusual where humans were concerned. And then she found her voice and screamed some words in human talk. Strange how earlier, in that curious time when self had been a human, such words were understandable. Not now, though. Nor was there time to try to figure out the oddities of this.

The wolf leaped towards the female and she pinwheeled out of the way, gritting her teeth against the moment when the slaver's animal's jaws would sink into her.

As if the wolf could care less.

The wolf darted right past her and lit out down the hallway of the hospital. Immediately the wolf realized he had seriously underestimated the situation.

Everywhere! he thought frantically. Human smell, everywhere! Where is forest? Where is pack? Where is self?

He tried to skid to a halt, to get his bearings, and he slid a few more feet before stopping. Screams came from behind him, which set off more screams in front of him. He saw an open area to the side and,

pivoting, headed that way.

There were humans all over, dozens of them. All of them reacted in exactly the same way when they saw him. They shrieked and ran for cover. All sorts of humans, male and female, small ones and older ones (he could tell these from the stench of decay that hung on them) and they were all running from self.

Running from self! For the first time! The wolf felt a small exultation of power. Well, this was certainly preferable to being the hunted. He paused and barked at a small human, who gave a most satisfying shriek.

None of these humans were carrying death sticks. Maybe that was what gave all humans their powers. If only wolves could get a few death sticks, all their problems would be over.

More shouts and yells, and the wolf glanced behind him. More humans were running towards him, and these didn't look afraid. They looked very upset, and they were pointing at him.

The wolf turned and ran. More humans scattered from his way, and he rounded a corner, sliding again and knocking over a large plant. Dirt was all over the floor, and the wolf was furious that he was now leaving tracks, but it couldn't be helped.

More humans in front. The wolf spun and there were humans behind, but fewer. The wolf let out a snarl of rage, the same sound he made to freeze an animal before he pounced. It worked quite admirably on the humans. He charged them and, as they fell over themselves to get out of his way, the wolf leaped over them. His leap carried him past a gurney where his right hind leg caught a claw on a sheet, pulling it off. He fell and became momentarily entangled in the sheet, then angrily yanked it off with his teeth. Then he bolted down another hallway.

The floor turned from smooth to carpeted. A totally different sensation as, instead of the clicking of his claws marking every step, he was moving silently once again.

He saw daylight and ran towards it.

There was a clear wall ahead and to the left. Stepping through it, the same way that the female had done earlier, was another human. This one was a male, and at first the wolf paid him no mind except as an object standing between him and freedom. The male caught sight of the wolf and froze, and the wolf did likewise.

A scent overwhelmed him.

Self-death! screamed through his mind. The scent was all over this human! No—not all over! Coming from! Self-death was part of this human! Self-death—

—wasthis human.

The wolf was not a reasoning animal. All was instinct. The scent, the smell, the now—that was what mattered. But now the wolf began to reason.

This human had the self-death scent of the creature. This human had to be the creature, but now looked like a human.

Buthad been the creature that was self-like.

Just as self had become human-like.

The wolf leaped to the conclusion that somehow the self-death creature, the man, and the wolf's foray into the physical world of humanity were all connected.

It was a great deal for a wolf to assimilate—too much, in fact. It occurred to the wolf that life would be much easier if the majority of the equation ceased to be.

It also occurred to the wolf that the human in front of him, if it were indeed somehow also the self-death creature, was responsible not only for his own plight, but for the death of several pack members.

The wolf growled loudly and leaped towards the human.

With a shriek the human swung up the only weapon he had—a large black briefcase, made of the finest grain of leather. The weight of the wolf bore him to the ground, and the infuriated animal's jaws clamped down on the briefcase. The wolf let go, tried to get a better grip, but once again managed only to get a mouthful of leather.

The human struggled under the wolf, tried to shove him off. He screamed for help as the terrified nurse sat at the reception desk, petrified beyond ability to do anything constructive. The wolf's thrashing claws struck upwards and ripped a vicious scar across his cheek.

With a twist of his muzzle the wolf ripped the briefcase out of the man's hands. He saw the exposed throat, saw his chance, and struck forward.

His furiously snapping jaws missed their mark by a quarter of an inch. The struggling self-death human had clamped onto the wolf's throat with the kind of strength that was only born of desperation. With every bit of power he had, the human kept the wolf's vicious teeth barely at bay. He grunted something in that now-unintelligible human language as the wolf tried to shove his head forward. Tried to clamp down on and tear out the throat of the creature that had so disrupted his life.

A gunshot cracked over the wolf's head.

The instinct to kill, to rid the world of this unnatural thing he was fighting, was promptly overridden by another, more powerful instinct: survival. When the wolf heard that familiar sound, he immediately released his grip, vaulting over the head of the flattened human. There were frantic, shouted words from behind him, but he didn't even stop to listen. Risking a quick glance around, he saw another human, further down the hallway, holding a small death stick in both hands and swinging it around.

In front of the wolf was daylight. There was something between him and the outside, but there didn't seem to be any difficulty in going through it. The wolf leaped forward and, to his shock, hit something that didn't seem remotely interested in letting him through.

The barrier shuddered under the impact of the wolf's weight and the animal fell back, scrambling around frantically to take another try at it. Then his howl of pain combined with the second retort of a gun as a bullet grazed his flank. The pain adding new speed and urgency, the wolf lunged forward once again. This time the leap carried him through as he hit the obstruction and it shattered before him, a thousand pieces cascading all around him. His paws crunched on glass and shards were all through his fur, but at least he was out.

Pedestrians who jumped back at the crash were even more terrified when they saw what had caused it. They started to shriek. A woman dropped her groceries, another woman dropped her baby. A man bolted from the scene, and a passing car had to slam on its brakes to avoid hitting him. Another car then rear-ended the first one.

Awash with confusion and noise, the wolf didn't know which way to turn. Picking one direction arbitrarily, the wolf bolted. Humans scrambled to get out of his way, which was just fine by him.

'The noise was just—overwhelming," said Josh. 'No matter which way I turned, humans were shouting, cars were screeching and honking. I was so completely out of my element that part of me just wanted to roll over and put my paws up in the air and say 'The hell with it. I give up. I surrender.' You see, I came from a place where pretty much the loudest thing around was my pack in full howl. But in the city, such a noise wouldn't have even made a dent. And this was a very small city. By your definition, practically a one-horse town. A 'burb. But already this 'burb was a mass of noise and noxious smells. I think it's called 'progress.'

Save self, the wolf thought frantically. Tail between his legs, he started to run down the middle of the street. Cars swerved to get out of his way, honking furiously and confusing him all the more.

(More sound. More screaming and screeching. Smell of something burning as human carry-things suddenly stop. More and more humans, shouting every second. Strange, incomprehensible things.

Are carry-things alive? Must be. Don't smell alive, but they have angry voice that sounds like howl.

Howl back. Howling back by self causes more panic. Humans seem surprised. Maybe humans thought self was dog. Self isn't flattered by that.

Suddenly the air is alive with a much angrier human carry-thing.

Spin. Sniff. Eyes go wide as large carry-thing approaches with strange, spinning light on top.)

The wolf was momentarily mesmerized by the twirling, glowing orb atop the car. Then humans exploded out both sides of the vehicle, snapping the wolf from his paralysis. He spun and started to run as fast as he could.

There was a soft, deceptively peaceful sound behind him, then a small pain, and his hindquarters were lifted up, propelled forward so that they almost caught up with his front. Something had hit him from behind—he had no idea what it was.

It had only taken a moment, but even as his feet dropped back to the ground, he became suddenly aware that he was losing all feeling in his nether regions. Now he was crawling on his belly like a lowly bug, scraping his soft underside on the oil-and-dirt-slicked grime of the street.

There was another soft, spitting sound and another pain, this one between the shoulder blades. The city began to slip sideways, and the wolf thought, Self Is leaving Insane place. Even if self is dying, at least will be away from place .

The wolf made one final attempt to lunge forward and then collapsed, slipping into unconsciousness.

And he was right. He would be getting away... although he had absolutely no notion just how far away.

5

Doctor Parsons, sitting at his neatly organized, minimum-of-muss-desk, leaned across it and said to the nurse, "Now tell me again, Nurse Dover—what the hell happened?"

"I—" Clearly shaken, she closed her eyes, shook it off and started again. "The John Doe who'd been brought in the night before was eaten by a wolf. And when I opened the door to his room the wolf ran past me and tried to—"

"Hold it." Parsons ran his fingers through his gray-streaked hair. "You actually saw the wolf consuming the John Doe?"

"Well, no. I saw the clothes on the floor, and the J.D. was gone. I just assumed..."

Parsons quickly sorted through the many reports on his desk and pulled out one. Sliding a pair of thin-rimmed glasses down over his face and studying it, he said, "They found no trace of the body at all."

"I told you, it must have eaten that poor man."

"Everything? The bones, too? And it lapped up all the blood from the floor?"

"I -"

"Look, Dover," he said gently. "I'm not interested in trying to blow holes in your story here. I'm just trying to be very certain about this. Is it vaguely possible that the John Doe ran past you when you opened the door? Or that he escaped? I know you were the nurse on duty and therefore you'd be responsible, but I'll tell you right now I wouldn't be upset, if—"

"If what? If I just confess?" Angrily she started ticking off statements on her fingers, "First, the door was bolted, as per procedure. The lock hadn't been tampered with. No one got out. Second, no matter how startled I was, no matter how frightened I was, I would have noticed a John Doe as big as a house shoving his way past me. Third—"

"Okay, okay," he said with a smile, putting up his hands. "You win."

"Well, good." She returned the smile. "Because, actually, I didn't have a third. Doctor Parsons... what happened? Where'd the wolf come from? Where'd the John Doe go?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," lied Doctor Parsons.

Sheriff Henri LeRoq was a faintly unpleasant man... the kind who, when you met him, gave you the oddest feeling that he'd recently been lurking underneath your bedroom window. His black hair was thinning, and his ferretlike face was always decorated with a three-day growth of beard.



He sat in his cluttered office, thoughtfully studying a crossword puzzle. He looked up at Doctor Parsons, who was standing over him and glancing around distastefully. "You're a doc, aren't you, Ed?"

Edward Parsons, who was addressed as Ed by no one else in the town, inclined his head slightly.

"You know Latin?" He held up the crossword and tapped 5 down.

Parsons glanced at it only a moment. "Caveat," he said. "The phrase is Caveat Emptor."

"Okay." He obediently scratched it in. "Medical term?"

"Only for patients shopping around."

"Oh." The pleasant thing about LeRoq was that he never pretended to understand something he didn't, which was frequently. "So." He leaned back, abruptly returning to the original subject of discussion. "You want the wolf I caught? The one who'd been running around your hospital?"

"That's right."

"Why?"

"Because," he said patiently, "we wanted to study it carefully to make sure it wasn't the one that was attacking people."

LeRoq frowned. "From what Doc DeFalco was going around saying, you're looking for something eight feet long. This is a plain, ordinary timber wolf. He's eight feet like I'm eight feet."

"In that case, we'd like to have him for dissection purposes. We have a residents' program—"

"Look, Ed." LeRoq patiently waved off the suggestion. "No one's cutting up this wolf. If you gotta know, I got a friend who runs a zoo in New York. Most popular exhibit they got is wolves. And one of the wolves just died. So I'm sending this one there."

"I really wouldn't," said Parsons urgently.

LeRoq stared at him with open curiosity. "Why the hell not?"

"I... simply don't think that would be wise."

LeRoq absently doodled in the margin of the crossword puzzle. "Well, I think it would," he replied. "Gives us one less wolf to worry about. And gets me a few bucks in my pocket, if you must know. So unless there's something special about this wolf you want to tell me about...?"

"No." Parsons forced a smile. "No, not at all."

Parsons rose to leave, and LeRoq suddenly pointed to the doctor's cheek. "By the way, what the hell happened to your face?"

"This?" Parsons gingerly touched the gauze taped to his face. "Cut myself shaving."

"Uh-huh. From what I hear, the wolf did it to you."

Parsons laughed bitterly and extended his hands, palms down. "You got me, officer. Slap the cuffs on me. Charge me with stupidity in the first degree. I walked into the hospital in the morning, figuring I'd start a normal day, and found an escaped wolf facing me. Then he jumped me. If one of our security people hadn't started shooting—"

"Wolves are generally pretty timid," said LeRoq thoughtfully. "For him to have jumped you, you must have done something to upset him."

"Upset him?" Parsons snorted. "I'd say that I was the upset one in our little tussle. Son of a bitch tried to take my head off."

"Any idea why?"

Parsons rubbed his neck. Eyes glittering, he lied once again. "Haven't the faintest idea."

Parsons sat in his living room and watched the moon rise.

A sliver was missing from the left-hand side of the orb. No more full moon, not for another month. Parsons rubbed his hands together, studying the backs of them as if expecting to see something that wasn't there.

The phone rang.

He picked it up and an operator said "Collect call for anyone from Duncan. Will you accept?"

"Yes."

There was a pause and then a gruff voice said "Hi, curse-brother. "

"Hello, Duncan."

"I had a feeling something was bothering you. So I thought I'd give you a buzz." He yawned. " 'Scuse me. Just woke up."

"You sleep all day. How can you be tired already? Jesus."

He could practically feel the wincing at the other end. "How many times have I asked you not to say that name? Hmmm? How would you like it if I kept saying 'Hi ho Silver' to you?"

"I always hated that program," said Parsons in irritation. "Look—something's come up. Something really unnatural."

"That's quite a mouthful, coming from you to me."

"Maybe. Now here's what I need you to do..."

"Some wolves, or so I've heard," said Joshua, "have been caught in traps and become so desperate to escape that they've gnawed off their own legs. In the past I've never been able to imagine doing such a thing. But during my stay at the Flushing Meadow Zoo, I would have gnawed off my own head if it would have done any good."

Queens was beginning to return to life.

It had been a particularly difficult winter. The snow had been unrelenting, it seemed—as soon as the snowbanks from an earlier dumping had begun to melt, more snow had come blowing down from Canada. And Queens, the borough which once upon a time had been forgotten by Mayor Lindsay when it came time to send out snowplows, still ached from that years-old insult. So natives of Queens were more sensitive than other New Yorkers when winter reared its frosty head.

During heavy snows people had a tendency to want to find someone to blame—weathermen, terrorists, Mayor Penn—anybody, rather than acknowledge that weather was random and unfair.

Now, however, signs of spring were finally beginning to show themselves. The high temperature had stuck at the forty-eight degree mark for the better part of a week and was now muscling its way into the fifties. Another week of warming temperatures was predicted. Even better, since humans have short memories, no one could recall the last time that the street had been covered by ice. Snow tires were being optimistically removed, chains being stored in trunks. Service stations drastically cut their orders on their next shipments of dry gas and began putting out signs promoting spring tune-ups.

And, on this particular Saturday, Queens residents ventured out into Flushing Meadow Park.

Built entirely on landfill, Flushing Meadow Park covered an area larger than that of some cities. Its major (indeed, only) claim to fame was that it had hosted two World's Fairs, one in the 1930's and the other in the 1960's. During those times the park had throbbed and pulsed with life. Exhibits from all over the globe dotted the park, and everywhere one went there were places to go, things to see, trinkets to buy, lines to stand in.

Since the second World's Fair, the park had been like one of those inflatable sex dolls with all the air let out of it.

Oh, there were remnants of the Fairs, to be sure. The Unisphere, a huge metal globe, was still the massive centerpiece of the land. Several other structures still remained, although some, such as the New York Pavillion, had been defaced by vandals.

On this Saturday, children (whose parents themselves were children during the more recent World's Fair) romped through the huge walkways—walkways designed for ten times the number of people enjoying the afternoon. They tugged at their parents' sleeves, begging to buy a large pink-and-white balloon from one of the forlorn-looking vendors. Or to ride on the lone merry-go-round. Some were on their way to the Queens Science Museum, a round building with several rocket ships pointed upwards outside, aimed wistfully at the skies that would be forever denied them.

And some kids wanted to go to the zoo.

Why anyone wanted to go to the Flushing Meadow Zoo, in a city where the magnificent Bronx Zoo was only forty-five minutes away, is unknown. Probably for the same reason most people went anywhere: because it was there.

The zoo consisted of a large circular pathway extending from, and back around to, its gate. The path ringed a circular patch of small trees, dirt and shrubs that were disinterestedly maintained. Along the perimeter of the path was an assortment of small cages, many of them empty for as long as anyone could remember. There were also several landscapes, carefully created to have a natural look from where handfuls of animals stared out at the human passersby in a desultory manner. A heavy air of lethargy hung over the entire place.

Only one group of animals ever elicited any measurable response at all. On this particular day a mother was out with her four-year-old and her eight-year-old. The four-year-old pointed with great enthusiasm and cried out, "Doggies!"

"No, Toby," said his mother patiently. "Those are wolves." She glanced around and abruptly realized, with the kind of distant dread that mothers feel, that she had lost track of her older child. "Hank!" she called out. Holding onto Toby's hand, she quickly retraced her steps, forgetting to cut down her stride and causing Toby's feet to fly out from under him.

Meantime Hank, hiding in the bushes, saw his chance and bolted towards the wolves' section. There was a rusted fence about waist high that Hank easily climbed over. Below him was a deep, angled cement ditch, and on the other side of the ditch was the edge of the wolf home.

With the overwhelming suicidal tendencies that only eight-year-old boys, oblivious to their own mortality, can possess, Hank quickly slid down one side of the embankment and then crawled up the other side.

He hopped over the lip of the embankment and now stood there in the wolf enclosure, a good seven feet across from the pedestrian area and safety.

The wolf enclosure was a large, rocky terrain with artificially constructed cliffs for the wolves to sun themselves on. At the moment three wolves were visible, all lying about and taking it easy, for there really wasn't all that much else to do.

The boy marched up to them until he was barely six feet away and, inappropriately in Queens, gave a Bronx cheer at the closest wolf. Then he yelled a few choice words he'd heard his father say the last time a taxi had cut them off.

At this point his mother heard his voice and turned to see where it was coming from. Her immediate scream jolted the peaceful air of the zoo, causing heads to snap around and one elderly woman to reflexively clutch at her heart before she even knew what was happening.

"HANK!" she shrieked. "Get out of there this instant!"

Hank, a tousle-headed youngster who was showing a splendid chance of not living to see his hair turn gray and fall out, ignored her. That's what mothers were for, after all.

Then he saw something that he did not like at all. Those lazy wolves that had been staring at him with boredom were getting to their feet. In an unspoken unity of purpose they were now slowly approaching the boy, their mouths open and their pink tongues visible. Their sharp, pointed teeth were now clearly showing, and they were looking at him in the same way that Hank had once seen the family cat look at an

ill-starred mouse that had been caught away from its hole.

Wolves were not capable of smiling, and yet Hank had the abrupt feeling that they were grinning at him in a very unpleasant manner.

He nervously whistled an aimless tune as his mother continued to scream his name hysterically, as if repetition would magically transport the boy to her side. Now a crowd was gathering, and they were all shouting helpful things like "Get out of there!" and "Stupid kid!" and "He's had it now." All these were sentiments that Hank suddenly realized had merit.

He started to back up very quickly, some instinct making him realize that turning and bolting would be the very worst thing he could do. He had not yet fully realized his primary transgression—that he'd violated the territorial imperative of the wolves. That they saw him, not particularly as lunch, but as an intruder. A threat. And threats were generally dispatched, quickly, without fuss.

He heard a low growl behind him and risked a look over his shoulder. There was another wolf there, one that had come up from behind and cut him off. Quickly Hank altered his retreat path, so that he was running parallel to the edge of the embankment. The fourth wolf joined the other three and they started to pick up the pace, growling low in their throats. He backed up faster and faster and his back hit something solid. It was an outcropping of rock, which blocked his last hope of escape.

People were screaming for the police, for the zookeepers, for anybody.

The wolves bore down on him and Hank, his own death suddenly looming in front of him, let loose a scream of unadulterated panic. "MOMMEEEE!" he howled.

"Hank!" she screamed back and, regardless of the danger, started to throw one leg over the fence, stretching out her arms frantically.

A shadow fell over Hank and he looked up, fearing the worst.

Overhead was a fifth wolf, standing on the rocks above and looking down. He was large and gray, and even Hank could sense that there was something different about this wolf. Something wilder, something more vibrant. He looked up into the wolf's eyes, and noticed that one was green and the other yellow. In a voice as small as he was, he said, "Help."

The wolf leaped.

He landed between the boy and the other wolves and faced the boy a moment, eyeing him with unabashed curiosity. Then, amazingly, he turned away and faced the other wolves.

The wolf barked and snapped at the others and they closed ranks, looking at each other with some uncertainty. One of them half-heartedly returned a growl at the gray wolf, but the latter quickly established his dominance by striding forward and barking right in the challenger's face. He growled like a rusty lawnmower and the challenger immediately backed down, flopping onto his back and exposing his belly in submission.

The gray wolf snorted and, turning to the boy, stared at him with a look that was utterly unmistakable. Its meaning was clear.

Beat it.

Not one to pass up an opportunity to live, the boy bolted away. The gray wolf watched him go as the others, who by now had already lost interest in the intruder, wandered back to what they were doing earlier (which wasn't much of anything).

'It was the oddest thing," said Joshua. 'But at that point I was already feeling a degree of kinship with humanity— perhaps even more so than I had with wolves. Certainly with those wolves. " He sniffed in disdain. "The sorriest pack of losers I'd ever encountered. At the time of the incident with the boy, I'd been there barely two weeks and I was already the unchallenged pack head. The dominant wolf had barely contested my claim.

"Part of me was very frightened. As I've said, I had little to no time concept, no thorough comprehension of things like 'the future'. But deep inside me there was already this actual dread developing. A concern that, somehow, I might end up as dispirited and bored as the wolves who'd been there before me. After all, I had no idea where they had come from. Perhaps their circumstances matched mine, in which case I might indeed wind up overcome by the lethargy that was upon them.

'It was not a pleasant consideration."

Word spread throughout the zoo of the wolf who had saved the young boy. Of how the wolf had stopped the rest of the pack while the boy scrambled back down and up the embankment to safety. In the retelling the story grew until the wolf had singlehandedly staved off the hungry advances of a dozen slavering, snarling animals, with much blood and torn fur in evidence.

All of which mattered little to the wolf.

He lay there the rest of the day, showing little interest in the new attention and even less in the other wolves. The one female in the pack was of no interest to him, not even if she had been in heat. The escape route that required going out the way the boy had might be open to him. Hell, he could probably even jump the gap if he absolutely had to. Most of them could.

The problem was: What then?

He had been unceremoniously dumped here. There were none of the familiar scents to guide him. The sky looked wrong. There were barely any trees to speak of. He had no idea where to go or what to do.

Fortunately that hideous experience of becoming a human had not recurred. In fact, the entire incident was fast fading from his limited memory, becoming classified under a strange category of "May have happened but probably didn't." None of which solved his problem.

When the wolves were fed, he ate with only the mildest of interest. By this point the number of passing humans had thinned and eventually there were no more to be seen, which was fine by him.

Slowly the sun set.

Moved by an interest in the night ingrained in them, the wolves now started to become more active. Still, none howled. It was almost as if they were afraid to draw attention to themselves. The gray wolf paid them only the slightest heed and then went on staring out at the great nothingness before him that was

FlushingMeadowPark.

And then, for the first time in weeks, something happened that attracted his interest.

There was a smell.

He picked his head up. The wind was brisk that evening, carrying the smell to him faster than it might ordinarily have.

The smell sent a chill through him. It was the second time in recent days that he had detected something that was unique, something that he had never smelled before.

This smell was just as horrifying as the earlier one had been, just as unnatural. For one brief moment the wolf mistook it for the scent of the self-death. But it was not.

No, whatever this was, it smelled of death, but of a different kind. This was the aroma of the already dead, of the rotting corpse, of life already having flown.

The wolf brought his head around and searched with his keen eyes for the source of the aroma. From nearby another of the wolves made a low, nervous noise in his throat. He had detected it too, but, unlike the gray wolf, who was already becoming immune to the effects of these unnatural odors, this wolf was somewhat unnerved.

The gray wolf did not have far to search. There, on the other side of the embankment, was a figure. Cloaked in darkness, not to mention a billowing London Fog raincoat, the figure was standing there, hands thrust deep into its pockets. The wolf growled softly, a warning not to come any nearer. There had already been one trespass this day, and the wolf was definitely not in the mood for a second one. Particularly a trespass by a creature whose scent reminded him of rotting corpses.

Now the other wolves had caught the scent as well and they made their way towards the pack leader, towards the gray wolf, whining their inquiries. The wolf gave no response to his fellows, instead focussing all his attention on the intruder. The fur on the nape of his neck rose and he stood, his tail straight out and every nerve in his body tingling.

He glided off the rock, a gray shadow, and headed towards the edge of the embankment. The other wolves followed, keeping several feet back. Whether this was out of respect for the leader or simply due to plain, out-and-out cowardice was uncertain.

They stood there at the edge, separated by a gap that no longer seemed imprisoning but instead, friendly. It was no longer a gap between them and freedom, but between them and the source of the scent of—

—of what? Of dead-but-not-dead.

The gray wolf growled a warning to the dead-but-not-dead figure standing there, a warning whose tone was unmistakable.

The figure stood there unmoving for a moment. Then it called back to the wolf. Its words were low, almost musical—the exact meaning was unclear, but its intent was plain. The dead-but-not-dead being wanted to come over to the wolf's side.

The gray wolf hesitated in surprise, and one of the others said urgently, "It wants to come here," thereby confirming the gray wolf's own assessment of the situation. "Let it. Surely we can destroy this intruder."

The gray wolf considered the advice and rejected it. "It's not an intruder yet," he replied. "Let us keep it that way."

The figure took a step forward so that it was right at the fence. The barrier was flimsy, polite rather than functional, but nevertheless the dead-but-not-dead wouldn't cross it. It put out its hands and called again to the wolves, who watched it unblinkingly. There was fire in their eyes, and their collective message was as unmistakable as that of the dead-but-not-dead: Stay away. This is our place, and you are not welcome here.

The figure uttered something in a low, angry tone. It seemed to start to move towards the others but halted, grinding its teeth, as if a giant unseen hand were holding it back. It stood there for a moment, caught up in its silent struggle, a fly thrashing in an invisible web. Then, with a noise torn from its throat that most certainly did not sound human, the dead-but-not-dead turned away with a swirl of its London Fog coat. It stalked across the path, and mist seemed to surround it. The wolves squinted, for although their night vision was excellent, they had lost track of the intruder.

And when the mist cleared, the dead-but-not-dead was gone.

One of the wolves, in a nervous tone, said to the gray one, 'You meet the strangest smell of people in this city.'

The gray wolf made a disdainful noise. "You should smell some of the humans I've run into."

Dr. Edward Parsons' phone rang while he was in the shower.

Growling deeply inhuman sounds in his throat, he tied off his white terrycloth robe and stalked through the hallway, leaving a trail of sopping footprints behind him. He grabbed up the jangling phone in his bedroom, hoping that the call wasn't about some tawdry emergency at the hospital. Even though he was the administrator and didn't involve himself in day-to-day cases, every so often something came up that some piss-witted intern thought that the hospital's head should be called in on for consultation. As if Parsons gave a damn.

"Yeah?"

The operator's brisk voice came through the receiver. "Collect call for anyone from Mister Stoker. Will you accept?"

"Yeah, sure." He paused, making sure that the operator was clear of the line, and then said in irritation, "Mister Stoker. You're a riot, Duncan."

There was a snickering, Duncan clearly amused at his own joke. "You shouldn't take everything so seriously. You'll live longer."

"I'm immortal, you idiot!"

"Now, now. No need to get huffy. Or puffy."



"Enough of your anemic jokes. Have you found him?"

"I found the wolves, yeah. I'm not sure which one was your wolf. I couldn't get close enough to look at the eye coloring."

Parsons paused as the full meaning of this sank in. "Are you saying he's not dead? You didn't kill him?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying."

"Why the hell not?"

"I couldn't get close enough."

Parsons still didn't understand. "Why the hell not?"

"Because..."

"Well?!"

"Because I wasn't invited."

Parsons sat there and stared at the phone as if it had come to life and taken a piece out of his ear. "Because you what?"

"Because I wasn't invited," he repeated, sounding even more irritated than before.

"You can't be serious!"

"That's the rules."

"Rules? Whose rules?! They're just a pack of flea-bitten wolves! Jesus Christ!"

"Don't say that," Duncan said in irritation.

"Are you telling me that invitation stuff is real?"

"I'm real. You're real. You, of all people, are going to question what's real and what's imagined? Yeah, Ed, it's real. I don't like crosses and religious shit, I don't reflect, which is why I always cut myself shaving, and I have to be invited into a non-public place."

"But it's a goddamn zoo!"

"So is my life," said Duncan in commiseration.

"No, I mean where the wolves are. It's not a human abode. It's not private. How can it be private? It's out in the open air and everything."

"It's private because the wolves made it that way. They're even more territorial than humans are. Humans don't go pissing on their apartments to mark them out with their own personal scents. The wolves have made that rocky enclosure their private place, and I can't enter unless they invite me."

"How can they invite you? They're a bunch of wolves! What are they supposed to do, send you an engraved note? RSVP? BYOB—Bring Your Own Blood?"

"So what was RSVP? Respond Soon Vampiric Person?"

"They can't invite you because they can't talk," said Parsons, forcing himself to be patient. "Doesn't that mitigate things just a bit?"

"No. It just makes things harder. Besides, if they wanted me in, they could have gotten their intentions across. Wolves and we have an understanding."

"Oh, right, how could I forget?" said Parsons, rolling his eyes. "The children of the night, with beautiful music and everything."

"Yeah, kind of. Believe me, they didn't want me there."

"Well, can't you shoot him or something? Bullets don't need invitations. They can go anywhere they damn well please."

"No. No action against anyone unless I'm invited in. That's the rule."

"I don't believe this! This is real life! Not some damn game show! I want that wolf dead. I don't need to worry about him getting back here somehow. Now I don't care how you do it, just do it."

"What's the big deal about this? Look, Ed," Duncan said, and his voice became more wheedling, "if this wolf is really what you say he is, then he's the first of a new breed. Don't you think that's kind of neat?"

"No. I think that's kind of dangerous. Especially when my scent makes him know who I am, what... I... am. I don't want to have to worry about him coming back here and exposing me."

"Exposing you how? Run up to the cops, barking urgently, and they're going to say 'Look! Something's bothering this wolf! I bet there's a werewolf in town and this wolf can lead us to him. And right after that, he'll lead us to the ditch that little Timmy's trapped in.'"

"Save the sarcasm, Duncan. I'm not interested in it. Just find some way to dispatch this wolf."

"I'll have to give it some thought. I'll tell you, Parsons, it's a good thing we're old friends. I wouldn't take this abuse from just anybody."

"I'm touched," said Parsons, and hung up.

7

Darlene stood forlornly on the platform and watched her favorite handbag, the denim one she got at Bloomie's, head towards Flushing.

She had not intended to send her handbag on a one-way trip. Moments before she had been sitting on the Flushing-bound #7 train, gazing out the window at the gorgeous day and trying to ignore the various

obscene suggestions that graffiti artists had scribbled on the opposite wall. When the train pulled into the station she stood briskly, grateful that she had been able to get a seat. At just over five feet tall, she always had no end of difficulty managing to reach an overhead strap or handbar.

The doors opened to the elevated platform and she started forward. Then she froze, distressed by what she saw. Apparently this was the first train to come along since the Coolidge administration and the people on the elevated platform were packed on. Tossing aside the usual courtesy of allowing disembarking passengers to get off first, the oncoming passengers surged forward like lemmings.

For the larger, more powerful outgoing passengers, this presented only more of the usual difficulties of train-going life. Throwing elbows and shoulders and pelvis and any other jointed part of their body into it, they shoved their way through the solid moving wall of humanity.

Darlene found herself in, to put it mildly, trouble. Still, she hadn't been a New Yorker for this many years to be daunted by trivialities like physical impossibilities.

"Getting out!" was her battle cry as she hurled herself forward against the pulsing mass of humanity. She was stepped on, elbowed, jabbed, cursed, goosed, crunched, roughed up and bruised, but through it all she managed to hold on to something that was more indefinably precious than anything else.

Not her dignity, no. No New Yorker holds onto that for any length of time.

No, it was her handbag. That was always the great trick of getting off a subway. Men reflexively checked their pockets to see if their wallets were still safely nestled, and women clutched onto their handbags as if they were life preservers.

The subway announcer uttered the usual gibberish, but the key phrase as always was crystal clear—"Watch the closing doors."

Darlene was still bucking the tide when those four dreaded words were uttered. If she were stuck on the train, God only knew how long it would take the system to get her back to her missed stop. And her friends were already at the zoo, probably already marching. With a slightly modified Tarzan yell, just as the doors began to close, she shoved her way through with a shoulder slam that would have been right at home in a Roller Derby game. She burst out onto the platform, which was still crowded with people who had been frustrated in their attempt to get on the long-awaited train.

The doors, true to the garbled announcer's voice, slammed shut.

On her handbag.

She didn't notice at first. She took a step forward and was brought sharply to a halt as her handbag refused to go any further. She turned in alarm and saw that the train had begun to eat her blue denim handbag.

The doors were not fully shut. The handbag hadn't allowed them to close, and the door edges were apart from each other by a gap of at least several inches.

Now Darlene, being an old-time New Yorker, knew that the subways were built with safety devices to prevent them from moving out if the doors weren't fully closed.

The train, oblivious to this fact, proceeded to move out.

Passengers who were still shellshocked from standing for ages on the platform didn't notice. Darlene started to run alongside her handbag, holding onto the straps and pulling angrily. "Let go of my bag, you idiot train!" she shouted repeatedly, and then more loudly, "Conductor! Stop the damned thing!"

Either the conductor simply didn't see her due to all the other people still on the platform, or he was simply asleep at the switch. All that mattered was that Darlene, sprinting alongside in her sneakered feet, suddenly saw the end of the platform coming towards her with hideous speed. And she was faced with a choice equally as hideous—write off the bag or, purely on moral grounds, allow herself to be pulped against the end of the station.

She released the bag, and stood there forlornly watching it chug away towards downtown Flushing. She sighed.

"Damn," she muttered. "I always liked that bag."

The bag got off at the next stop.

Since it only protruded an inch or so into the car, it went unnoticed, the majority of it hanging outside. When the train pulled into the next stop, the door opened and the bag fell into the gap between the edge of the platform and the train. It slithered through the openings in the elevated track and plunged downward to the street below, where it landed at the base of one of the steel uprights and nestled there, in the dimness.

And there it sat for the better part of a week, until it was discovered by a wandering fellow named Otto. Otto was, in today's more enlightened society, referred to as a homeless unfortunate. In a less enlightened time, he would have been tagged as a bum. Otto, with white whiskers sticking out of virtually every visible part of his body, did not particularly care that what he'd found was a woman's handbag. A bag was a bag, and this one seemed sturdier than many.

He glanced up as a train rumbled overhead and thanked, as was his custom, the unknown patron saint of bums. Then he rummaged through the bag, drew out the wallet and pulled out the money, three folded twenties and a five, and shoved it deep into his pocket. He almost threw out the wallet but, looking at the driver's license, decided that the young woman was pretty and reminded him vaguely of a daughter he thought he had once thirty-some years ago. So he stuck it back in his bag and shuffled off on his way.

All of this is remarkably pertinent, but not at the moment.

The handbag's meeting with Otto was yet to occur as a royally pissed Darlene stomped off the platform and down the stairs. She tried to rationalize her misfortune in that now she could run across the park to the zoo without having to worry about her handbag thudding against her compact, sturdy body. But this was small comfort.

Nevertheless she ran across the park, stopping every few minutes when she felt a twinge of pain in her right ankle. She had sprained it some months back and, even though she was largely recovered, she always tended to take it easy when she felt the slightest hint of pain.

Her fellow animal-righters were indeed already set up with petitions and huge signs by the time she arrived. She charged up, huffing loudly, in front of a tablecloth-covered card table and gasped out,

"Sorry I'm late."

Her immediate supervisor, Amy Askith, looked up and icily transfixed her with a stare. "Darlene, I know this is your day off—it's all our day off. Still, you did promise you'd be here and since you did, the least you could do is—"

"Be here on time," Darlene finished. "Sorry. How's it going?" she said quickly, hoping to draw the topic of conversation away from herself.

Amy gave her a look that said clearly she knew damn well what Darlene was trying to do, but was going to let her get away with it... as long as they both knew what the score was. Amy had a jowly face, with the kind of facial wrinkles that came from worrying about everybody else's problems rather than her own, and a voice like nails on a chalkboard. With a sigh Amy slid a petition towards her. "Nine signatures," she said. "Sunday's one of their busiest days," and she chucked a thumb at the Flushing Meadow Zoo behind them. "At least a hundred people have walked past me. No one seems remotely interested in petitioning that this zoo be shut down, repaired. Doesn't anybody care about how animals are being treated?"

"Of course not," said Darlene. "Why should they? People don't care about how other people are treated, so why should they give a damn about animals?"

Amy stared at her. "What's this? Darlene the cheerful actually sounding depressed? What's your problem?"

Darlene's wide lips twitched in irritation. "Sorry. I always sounded cranky when I've watched my handbag roll away."

"Huh? Am I supposed to understand that?" Then, without waiting for a response she spoke quickly to a man with a "Giants" warm-up jacket who was going past her, a five-year-old boy firmly in tow. "Excuse me, sir—we're P.A.W."

"Really?" The man grinned. "Where's Maw?" Then he laughed as if he'd actually said something funny and walked away chuckling, his young son looking up uncomprehendingly.

Amy sighed. "We have just got to think of a better acronym."

"I don't know. Protect Animals Wherever seemed to make sense to me." She looked around. "Where's Gretchen, Tammy, Joe and Emilio? They're supposed to be picketing."

"Joe had a friend of a friend of a friend who offered him four tickets for a matinee of that sold-out British show. That was that." As if trying to ward off imagined criticism, she snapped, "Well, I can't very well bust somebody's chops just because they don't want to kill their day off, now, can I?"

"You would if it were me." Darlene plopped down next to her forlornly on the rusting folding chair. "I should be so lucky that somebody asks me to something other than a rally or a protest or some other damned thing."

"Hey, don't punk out on me, too," said Amy reprovingly.

"I'm not punking out. I'm just bummed out." She paused. "Derrick and I broke up."

"Good."

"Good? Why good?"

"Darlene, the man was mulch."

"Oh, come on. He wasn't that bad. He had a good job, in computers."

"Yeah, right. He invented a computer game."

"There's lots of money in computer games."

"You can't be serious. How much money was he going to make off a computer game called 'Auschwitz'? I mean, making a computer game set in a concentration camp? And if you screw up you wind up in an oven?" She shuddered. "It's the most tasteless thing I ever heard of." She paused and said, "Did you at least get all your videotapes back?"

"Well..."

Amy put up a hand. "Don't finish the sentence. Christ, Darlene, what is your problem? Why is it that, like a magnet, you're drawn to losers and guys who are only going to cause you misery? The only positive thing I can say about the guys you go out with is that they probably score so infrequently that at least you won't pick up any diseases from them."

Darlene seemed to brighten. "You think so?"

"That's hardly what I'd call a major social triumph."

"Well, gee, I dunno." Darlene scratched her head thoughtfully. "My shrink says that it's something called entitlement. That I feel like I'm not entitled to someone nice, so I keep going out with guys who are lousy for me. I think it had something to do with my father. I don't know what, but that's what my shrink said. It always has something to do with your father, unless you're a guy. Then it's your mother."

"Great. So how do you get out of it?"

Looking thoughtful, Darlene said, "I could become a nun."

"Great. Darlene Abramowitz, the nun. Who's going to take you, Our Lady of Perpetual Kvetch?"

They stayed there for another hour or so, gathering another handful of signatures. Then Darlene excused herself to wander around the zoo to get a look first hand at the pathetic animals whose lives she was trying to improve.

As she strolled around, she couldn't help but feel that these creatures didn't have it so bad. Certainly their lives were more together than hers. They knew when they were going to be fed. They knew what was expected of them, which wasn't much.

And so what if they had no freedom? After all, what kind of freedom did she have? Her efficiency apartment was smaller than most of the cages, and hemmed in above and below and by other people (one of whom sometimes played his stereo at all hours of the goddamn morning). She had to scrape every single month for rent money, for food money, for the lousy quarters to run the washing machine to clean her clothes. Zoo animals lived rent free, clothes free, free free.

She stopped in front of the wolves' home and thought about how the only real difference between her and them was that she was free to go wherever she wanted. Then again... she didn't really have any place to go. So who was she kidding?

"Can I live with you guys?" she called out to the wolves.

They seemed to pay her no mind, sunning themselves on the rocks and appearing blissfully unaware that dedicated animal-rights activists were killing a beautiful day fighting for their rights. Still, Darlene noticed, one of the wolves seemed to be looking right at her.

She stuck her head forward and, yes, sure enough, one of the wolves was sizing her up. She'd seen the look often enough. Derrick had given it to her some months ago in a singles bar. It was the look of unabashed, unashamed curiosity. Curiosity so open and honest that it required no apologies, no dissembling, no self-conscious glances to some other location when the look was noticed.

This wolf was gray, and larger than the others. And he seemed—what was the word she was looking for?—intense. That's it. Unlike the other wolves, he seemed to actually have something on his mind. The intellectual of the *Canis lupus* set.

Darlene made a clucking noise to confirm to the wolf that he indeed had her attention. She found her gaze drawn to his curious eye coloration—one green, one yellow. "Hi there, wolf," she called to him.

The wolf made no reply. Of course, she hadn't expected any. "Want to come home with me?" she said.

He stared at her a moment and then, as if in response, got up from his perch atop the rocks and hopped down. She blinked in surprise as he walked to the edge of the barrier and stood there, regarding her curiously.

"Son of a gun," she said, as much to herself as to him. "I think you really would come with me if you could." He tilted his head slightly as if considering the matter. "It'd be nice. I could, sic you on the neighbors. I wouldn't have to worry about break-ins. I wouldn't have to worry about dates getting fresh. All I'd have to worry about is little wolf hairs all over the furniture. And on my furniture, it could only be an improvement."

She stared at the wolf a while longer, fascinated by the intelligence she fancied she saw in his eyes. "You know," she said thoughtfully, "you look like you have more brains than my last three boyfriends. At least if I'm going to have an animal around the house, it might as well be the four-legged kind."

Someone bumped into her, and she looked around. He was kind of slimy-looking, the kind who if he sidled up to her in a bar she actually might be interested in. But here, outdoors, in the scathing honesty of daylight, he looked as unappealing as he really was. "You alone?" he asked.

"Yeah, and interested in staying that way," she replied curtly.

As if they had the utmost familiarity he draped an arm around her shoulder. "Tell you what, short-and-cute, how about if we—"

There was a growl so loud that it seemed to be coming from right alongside. The man's arm departed her shoulder as if jet-propelled, and he looked around in alarm. "You got a dog here, lady?"

Like an angry chainsaw, the growling of the wolf carried across the chasm. The man realized the source and regained a bit of his confidence. "Oh. That's all it was." He nodded in the wolf's direction. "Friend of yours?"

"Oh, yes. And very athletic." She paused. "If he had a reason to, he could clear that distance with one jump."

"Naahh. You're kidding."

She silently shook her head. "Now if you don't believe me," she said slowly, "you're welcome to try putting your arm around me again and see if he's up to it."

He grinned, cocksure, and took a step towards her—and was arrested in mid-gesture by a louder, even more menacing growl from the wolf. He stared at the animal and its lips were drawn back, exposing a not inconsiderable dual row of teeth.

"Hey," said the man quickly. "I can take a hint. I'll see you around, okay, cutie?" And he departed as rapidly as he could.

Darlene watched him go with much amusement and then looked back at the wolf. His gaze had not moved from her.

"How about that?" she said softly. "You remind me of this German shepherd I had—Josh. I'm going to call you Josh. Okay?"

The wolf wagged its tail.

8

' 'She came by every day," said Josh. ' 'And since wolves have somewhat limited memories, it quickly seemed as if she'd always been there. She would show up, greet me by the name that she'd tagged me with. If no one else was looking, she would toss some sort of doggie treat over the barrier. They tasted awful, but they were something different from the mediocre food we were getting. Besides, I was quite pleased with myself that I had trained her so well and so quickly."

("You... trained her?")

He smiled. "Very commonplace. Oh, humans think they've trained animals, of course, but they're wrong. Animals manage to condition humans so thoroughly that, putting half a mind to it, we can get humans to do whatever we want them to." Then he frowned and tapped the recorder. ' /don't know if you should put that in there. I would hate to be giving away trade secrets. "

(' 'Don't worry about it," I assured him. ' 'No one will believe you. ")

' 'You're right," he said thoughtfully. ' 'Humans are a rather arrogant lot. That's something else we've managed to breed into them. Then again, you have to take the bad with the good, I suppose."

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"Where is your pet human?" one of the smaller wolves asked Josh.

If the gray wolf were capable of shrugging, he would have done so. "I don't know."

"You attract such a variety of visitors. Humans with treats. Humans who smell like death."

The reminder of the latter made Josh uneasy. "I haven't smelled that one lately."

The smaller wolf sniffed. "Not a loss, as far as I'm concerned," he said, and turned away.

Josh watched the smaller wolf go, and then climbed up to his customary perch atop the rocks. The others glanced at him from a distance. They had become accustomed to his standoffish ways, to his vague disdain for his fellow wolves. There was no point in being concerned. Eventually he would become like them—accepting of the situation. Accepting that they would never again know freedom, or self-respect.

Each of them had, at one time or another, endeavored to make a bid for freedom. But there had always been the same problem—where to go once the freedom had been attained. Society did not have too many options open to a freelance wolf.

They assumed that Josh was going to go through the same period of bleak acceptance, and indeed they might very well have been right. But only in the event that there was never again a full moon.

This night, however, there was.

Josh lay atop the rocks and stared upwards, watching the sun vanish beneath the horizon, as always. The crowds of humans thinned and eventually vanished, as always. And the moon came out from behind a cloud, large and white and full.

Josh felt a tingling throughout his body, something he hadn't felt in what seemed like ages. He wasn't certain exactly what was causing it. . . it was vaguely familiar, and yet nothing that he could place precisely.

Oddly, the other wolves detected it before he did. They began to yip and bark mournfully, milling together in frightened confusion at the far end of the grounds. Josh turned towards them, puzzled by their apprehension, and then overwhelming pain shot through him.

And now he remembered; it all came back to him in a flash. The agonizing transformation that he had already consigned to the twilight world of never-happened, and yet here it was again. All the more hideous, too, because the first time he'd merely thought he was dying. This time, though, he realized with distant dread what was happening, what he was going to wind up as.

And as his legs muscles began to seize up, to bend and twist and pretzel into something obscene, something in his mind said Not this time. He didn't want to be there for the horror of what he was about to go through.

He shut himself down. Like an overloaded, overworked electrical system, his mental circuit-breakers simply slammed closed, cutting off all the electrical impulses to his brain. He didn't want to cope with it, didn't want to know from it. And his animal mind with the instinct for self-preservation, finely honed and untainted by trivialities like civilization, obliged him. He simply shut down, keeling over into blissful, merciful oblivion.

When he came to, the rock was cold beneath his skin.

He started to raise his head and realized that he was doing this by propping himself on his arm again. He stared uncomprehendingly at his fingers, then sat up.

Nearby he heard nervous, almost hysterical whines. He looked around, and there were the wolves, even more frightened than they were before. He noticed for the first time the variety of colors in their fur. He noticed the colors of the rocks on which he was lying and, a little further out, the hues of the leaves that were returning on the trees.

He stood up slowly, this time knowing not to overbalance himself. He towered over the world again, as he had that other time, but this time he didn't find it nearly as disconcerting. What he did feel, however, was cold.

He reached up and touched his nonexistent nose. His sense of smell was gone once again, his night vision clouded, his hearing as dull as if someone had stuffed cotton in his head.

But part of him was beginning to realize the possibilities that this form gave him that his wolf form could not even begin to provide him... most importantly, the ability to get back, somehow, to his pack.

He was in a world of humans. And now, somehow, he was human. That could only make it easier to move about.

Operating in the world of humans. It would be easy.

He took a step forward and fell off the rocks.

He tumbled down, very human sounds of pain accompanying him as he thumped and bumped down the small rocky cliff. He hit the ground with a bone-jarring thud and lay there, panting. The world spun around him and he closed his eyes, which did not improve matters all that much.

From nearby he heard the nervous sounds of the wolves once more. Slowly, moaning because of the ripped skin on his body, he started to speak to them...

... and couldn't.

He knew what he wanted to say, knew the concepts in his mind that he wanted to put across (even though the concept of "I've been transformed into a human" is not one easily framed), but he couldn't produce the sounds, even the thoughts. He puckered his lips, felt his vocal cords tightening, but all he could produce was a faint, hoarse whisper.

The wolves for their part backed up as far as they could, and whimpered.

Josh was momentarily taken aback. He was human. No teeth to rend, no claws to tear. What in the world did they have to be afraid of?

He took a step towards them, and for the first time they reacted aggressively. They bared their teeth and made determined snapping noises, although they were so far away from him that it was more in the nature

of a show than a serious threat. Nevertheless, the display of teeth by the wolves pulled Josh up short as he became aware of his total lack of defensive and offensive capabilities.

In short, he realized that messing with wolves wouldn't be the brightest thing to do.

Slowly he backed away, never taking his eyes off them. He got all the way to the edge where the dropoff was located. It was dark and his poor sight didn't even enable him to see to the bottom now, but it didn't matter. All he knew was that it was time for him to get the hell out of there.

He stepped back a few feet, took a short run, and leaped.

It was not a particularly graceful leap, all legs and arms at strange angles. He did not even come close to attaining the other side. His body half-pinwheeled around. He hit the far incline with a bone-crushing thud, and moaned as he rolled downward to the bottom of the embankment and lay still.

He took a few moments to gather his wits. All right. Here he was, lying at the bottom of the ditch, staring up uselessly into the night sky. Still, there was no reason he could not climb up the side of the embankment.

At that moment he heard a soft footfall.

He froze and his eyes narrowed. His sense of smell was, of course, negligible, but he realized instinctively who was there—the death person. Dead-but-not-dead.

Looking for him?

He didn't move. He watched the death person walk up to the fence and stare into the wolf area. He heard the death person muttering to himself, staring at the wolves, and then speaking sharply in what sounded like frustration.

Josh half rose from his crouch and then some inner sense warned him not to. He returned to his watching and waiting and, after a few moments, the death person turned and stalked off into the night.

Josh stayed there some time longer, understandably feeling naked and vulnerable. His teeth were gone, his claws were gone, his fur was gone, his smell, his hearing—everything that made him infinitely superior to the pathetic humans.

'I remember thinking, 'How did they get to be in charge?' said Josh. 'It was greatly puzzling to me. How had humans gotten into a position where their cities could snuff out forests, where their whims could snuff out our lives... it seemed so ridiculous. Here was this"—he gestured vaguely—"this hopeless body, second rate in every way to my wolf body. How did creatures possessing such useless, helpless forms wind up able to make my life so miserable? And I looked over the body and tried to figure out what it had that my wolf body didn't, and the only thing I could come up with—the only improvement—was the thumb. I thought 'Well, this is pretty interesting,' and I flexed my thumb all over. And it had its intriguing aspects, but I hardly saw it as hot stuff as I climbed up out of the ditch.

'Then I took a step forward, still crouching low, and I stepped on a sharp, pointed rock, sticking up from the dirt.

Nothing fatal, of course. Just irritating. And I picked it up without thinking and threw it... and froze, just in that position, with the outstretched arm. I'd never picked up anything before, except with my teeth, which isn't tremendously efficient. But in that instant, when picking up the stone and throwing it was simple, I got the faintest glimmerings of the possibilities. Of weapons. Of buildings.

"And I thought about all the wonderful advantages that wolves have, and it came to me in one, blinding flash that all of those advantages, all our heightened senses that we so pitied humans for not having—they were nothing compared to that one damned thumb that could turn inward. It was so horribly, hideously unfair."

"Hey!"

The blinding light flashed in his face immediately broke him out of his misery.

He squinted at the human who was waving the light in his face. This human was wearing skins the same dark color as the night sky. He had no smell... but of course, no human did now. He was holding a long stick in one hand and the small sunmaking device in the other.

"You're trespassing," he said angrily. "You're under arrest. Get out of... holy shit! Where are your clothes?" His mouth dropped open in astonishment. "Who the hell are you?!"

Josh lashed out. Driven by panic, fear and desperation, he leaped forward, a snarl curling his lip, and swept around one massive arm. It was only a glancing blow but it was more than enough to knock the unfortunate cop flat on his back, stunning him momentarily. He lost his grip on his flashlight and nightstick, which rolled in opposite directions.

Josh pivoted on his heel and bolted. He ran as hard as he could and easily vaulted the fence that surrounded the perimeter of the zoo. The night air was chilled but he no longer noticed as his heart pumped furiously, his muscled legs churning and eating up distance. Like an Olympic sprinter he ran, getting as far from the zoo and the man with the captured sunlight as he could.

It wasn't running the way he was used to. He felt an awkward jarring that seemed to reach from his feet all the way up to his shoulder blades every time his foot hit the ground. But he quickly learned to adjust, shifting his weight and running on the balls of his feet. He startled several casual late-night strollers, but they didn't seem frightened. Several even applauded, and one said, 'I thought streaking went out years ago,' a comment that made no sense to him at all even though he did understand the words.

He rounded a corner and smacked headlong into another human, and they went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

It was an older human, he quickly sensed, and as he tried to disentangle himself the older human's outer skin slid partially off the shoulder.

Josh was surprised. The skins were removable! Of course! It was so obvious, how could he not have realized? Humans prevented themselves from getting cold by wearing these odd outer coverings... now not so odd after all.

' Think of the bizarre coincidences that brought Darlene and myself together, " said Josh. "Then again, if there were no happenstance in life, then nothing would ever happen. Everything, from conception to death, is happenstance. Some events are just more bizarre than others. And this certainly qualified as one of those."

Otto had been minding his own business in the park, heading for his regular bench and preparing to sack out for the night, when the naked crazy man had appeared from nowhere and barreled into him.

He cracked his head on the sidewalk when they went down, and he felt the world spinning around him for a moment like a crazed pinball. Then he said angrily, still groggy from the impact, "Get off of me, you idiot! And let go of my coat!"

The giant naked man fingered the coat, and it seemed as if something were clicking into place behind his curiously colored eyes. Then he stared at Otto and said, "Coat." As if unfamiliar with the language, or even the ability to speak, he said, "Give... me... coat."

"This old thing?"

"Give me coat!" And this time it wasn't a request.

The naked man stood, grabbed Otto by the shirt front and dragged him behind the bushes. Otto quickly removed his coat and gave it to the naked man, who stared at it uncomprehendingly.

"I'm surprised you're not asking for my shirt and pants," said Otto in irritation.

"Shirt and pants. Yes. Now."

Otto blinked and then said, "Forget it!" He opened his mouth and started to shout "Police!"

Started, but did not accomplish it, because the man's huge hand closed on his windpipe. Oddly, the man flexed his thumb several times before he repeated, "Shirt. Pants. Coat. Now."

Otto quickly complied and in moments was standing there shivering in his tattered underwear.

The naked man endeavored to put the pants on over his head, and several of his subsequent attempts to clothe himself were equally spectacular in their lack of success. Otto stood there in stupefaction, afraid to move or cry out for fear that this muscled lunatic would tear him apart. He clutched his handbag to his tattered T-shirt and watched as the naked man managed to get the plaid shirt on, but became totally frustrated by the buttons. The pants were small and put on backward, and at one point he seemed ready to rip the coat to shreds before he finally solved that mystery. The shoes went on easily enough, albeit on the wrong feet.

Now dressed, the bruiser stared at the bag that Otto was holding desperately, and he suddenly reached over and yanked it from Otto's grasp. This time Otto would stand no more and once again he tried to shout for help.

This time the man's fist lashed out, making contact with Otto's chin. The unfortunate bum was unconscious before he hit the ground.

' Iwent through the bag, not certain why. Not certain what I was looking for. I think, more than anything, I was hoping for some clue. I still had no real idea how or why what had happened, had happened. But since so much of humanity was a mystery to me, perhaps I hoped that some artifact of humanity might give me the answers I needed .

"I found the wallet and, after fiddling with the clasp, opened it. It fell open to her driver's license and I stared at it and stared at it. At first I thought the photo on it was my reflection, as I'd seen in countless brooks. But I realized it wasn't, and I ran my fingers across the surface, which was slick and vinyl.

"I didn't have a clue as to what it was, but I recognized it as being the woman who'd been coming to visit me regularly. The human... the only human who'd ever shown me kindness. And I felt... /don't know how to express it to you, except to say that I was desperate to find someone who could help me. And I grabbed on to that image as, perhaps, being a source for help. "

("I know how that is, " I said. "Like being in a foreign city and you can't speak the lingo. And you feel like a total idiot, until you finally latch onto somebody who speaks English and knows their way around. And even though that person's a total stranger, you feel like you've found a lifelong friend. ")

"Exactly. Well, not exactly. Sort of. Actually... not at all," he admitted. ' Now that I think back on it, I guess my main motivation was that I hoped she might be able to give me some food. " He shrugged apologetically. "Sorry. "

"You'll like this motel," said the cabbie helpfully as the out-of-town businessman stepped out. "Right behind it is Flushing Meadow Park. It's real nice during the daytime."

The businessman fixed him with an icy stare and said simply, "I know you took me the long way around when you picked me up at LaGuardia." He threw several crumpled bills onto the front seat which equalled only the amount on the meter, gripped his single suitcase grimly and stalked away.

The cabbie sighed. Why did he get all the idiots? He leaned back over the seat, reaching towards the handle of the door that the shit from out of town had left open.

And a guy the size of a small land mass hopped into the back of the cab.

He was dressed like a bum, but his face was wide and alert as he looked around in open curiosity. The cabbie sighed. "Look, pal, I really wasn't looking for a fare. I'm just going to head back out to the airport..."

The man looked at the cabbie and then leaned forward. He was holding a wallet in the palm of his massive hand, and he pointed at the driver's license. It was a woman.

The cabbie squinted at it. "Darlene Abramowitz. 657 East 35th. Yeah, I know where that is. What, she a friend of yours or something?"

"Friend," said the man agreeably. He had a low, deep voice that had an unusual, husky quality to it.

"Or did you find the wallet and you want to return it to her?"

"Found the wallet," he said cheerfully.

The cabbie sighed again. "Oh, the hell with it. I'm getting sick of Queens anyway. Fine, I'll take you into the city. You seem harmless enough." He clicked on the meter and turned back to say, "Shut the door."

The man stared at the door blankly and, blowing exasperation out between his lips, the cabbie leaned back and closed the door. The noise of the slam seemed to startle the passenger, and the cabbie shook his head. "Takes all kinds," he muttered, and the taxi moved out towards the Long Island Expressway.

9

"I will never forget, for as long as I live, that first cab ride. I was already briefly, albeit unhappily, familiar with human conveyances such as cars. What was incredible to me was the New York City skyline as the taxi approached Manhattan. We were stuck in traffic, of course, so I had a great deal of time to appreciate it as we sat there.

"It was quite simply unbelievable. The lights that shone from the buildings seemed like stars come from far off, now down to earth. Never had I seen such unquestionable beauty. It was truly breathtaking, and I gazed at it for what seemed hours. The cab driver must have thought I was insane.

"He chatted most of the way, stopping every so often to ask me a question which I then ignored. He also had the radio on, and I was barraged with human language from that as well."

("Now let me get this straight, once and for all, " I asked Josh: "Could you, or could you not, understand English?")

"Yes," he said briskly. "The only thing I can really explain is, when I was bitten, it was more than just the physical attributes that were taken on. There's a sharing of minds that actually goes on. So when a human takes on the aspects of a wolf, he inherits those savage aspects of wolves... although actually we are a remarkably civilized lot, really.

"But when I took on human appearance, I also acquired human capabilities, such as speech and language. English, I presume," he said, anticipating my next question, "since that was the tongue that my assailant, Parsons, spoke. But although the capability was there to speak, I was still becoming oriented with the world around me. I was learning intonation, inflection, subtleties of meaning, idiom—the building blocks of communication. Like a sponge, I simply took it all in.

"And as I stared at the twinkling lights on top of the Empire State Building, I look down at that damned opposable thumb and shook my head. And for the first time I felt true pity for the other wolves."

Darlene stared out the window of her cramped apartment and looked up at the Empire State Building. There was something about it she always found comforting, even uplifting. Tonight the upper portions of the building were bathed in lights of green and white, topped off by red.

"Feeling Italian tonight?" she asked no one in particular. She remembered some years ago when, as a publicity stunt, a humongous balloon of King Kong had been inflated and anchored to the upper regions

of the Empire State. The balloon had barely lasted, for in no time at all King Kong had developed a king-sized hole... enough to deflate it down to a pathetic, wimpy little bag of nothing. The balloon had been reluctantly carted away, and she remembered thinking at the time that it was a sage lesson that New York was no place for real beasts.

So why did she keep winding up dating them?

She sighed and stepped away from the window. She flopped down into the sofa, and picked up her knitting. When she'd started, it was a scarf. Now it was large enough to be a car cover, and it had every color of the rainbow in it. Truthfully, she should give up, she realized, but she'd gone to too much trouble. At this rate she'd be able to knit herself a new apartment.

There was a buzz from her intercom. She frowned. Someone at the front door at this hour was never a good sign. Friends always call first, and no one in New York—particularly a single female—opens the door at night to a stranger.

She padded across the room in her stocking feet and pushed the intercom button. "Yes?"

An unfamiliar voice with a very familiar Bronx accent said "Yeah, hi, is this Darlene Abramowitz?"

She paused. "One of us is."

"Ha, ha," he said without the slightest hint of amusement. "Look, lady, I got a guy in the back of my cab. He had me bring him out here from Queens, and he's got your wallet."

"My wallet!" she said in shock. "Does it have the credit cards? Oh, shit!" She slapped her head in irritation. "I cancelled them!"

"Lady, I don't care about your credit cards. If I had to be real honest about it, I don't care all that much about you. What I care about is that I got this clown sitting in the back of my cab, and he doesn't have any money, and he owes me fourteen bucks plus toll for getting him here. So would you please get down here and bail him out so I can get on with my life, huh?"

Darlene sighed. Amy would say this kind of thing happened to her because she let it happen... but what was she supposed to do? Some guyschleps all the way in from Queens with her bag on a mission of being a Good Samaritan, and she's supposed to turn away just because the idiot didn't bring cab fare?

Actually, Amy would say "Yes."

Darlene tapped the "Talk" button again and said "Hold on. I'll be right down."

"Meter's running."

"You're all heart."

Moments later she had tossed on a bathrobe over the knee-length New York Mets nightshirt she was wearing and was heading down the four flights of stairs. She slipped once, clutched onto the handrail, and cursed herself for not taking the time to put on some sneakers. She looked down at her stocking feet which were displaying cheerful argyle socks. She shook her head. Argyle socks, check bathrobe a size too large covering a baseball shirt. She would never win best-dressed awards at this rate.



She peered out through the door of the building and stared at the cabbie, who obligingly stared back at her. Opening the door, she thrust out a crumpled-up twenty-dollar bill and said in her most convivial tone, "Keep the change."

"Thanks." He chucked a thumb at the cab. "And you get to keep the stiff."

She opened the front door of the building a bit wider as the cabbie went back to his car and stood by the passenger door, hands on hips. His passenger peered back out at him curiously through the window.

"C'mon, Prince Valiant. Out you go."

The passenger didn't move and, with an annoyed huffing noise, the cabbie opened the door and made a sweeping gesture with his arm. "Out of the cab, schmuck."

The passenger stepped out and up. For the first time the cab driver realized the massiveness of the guy he'd been mouthing off to, for his eyeline came up to around the guy's chest. That he had a woman's pocketbook tucked under his arm seemed ludicrously out of place, but no one would dare tell him.

The man looked down at the cabbie and, with a toothy smile, said "Thank you, schmuck."

"You're... you're welcome." The cabbie immediately leaped back into his cab, slammed on the accelerator and sped away, leaving a lingering trace of burned rubber. As the erstwhile passenger watched him go, he saw the cabbie stick his hand out of the cab and raise his middle finger in his direction. The man stared at his own hand in thought.

Darlene watched the cabbie go, then looked back at the small mountain of maleness who had been summarily deposited on her doorstep,

She opened the front door all the way and stared at him appraisingly.

"Well," she said.

"Well," he replied evenly.

"Nice night."

"Nice night."

She frowned and realized that not only was he repeating what she was saying, he was imitating the inflection. Even more than that—as she stood there frowning, she saw his own brow furrow in the same manner.

What the hell was with this guy? She hadn't seen such idiotic behavior since grade school, when boys would mimic everything she did just to bug her. It worked back then, and it was working just as well now.

She folded her arms and said, "Look, I really appreciate your coming by and all that. Can I have my pocketbook?"

He folded his arms as well, and, now starting to get really annoyed, she stomped her foot and said, "Stop that!"

He uncrossed his arms and looked a little hurt. "I'm..." He seemed to search for the word. "... sorry. I... did not mean to... upset you."

She tilted her head, looking at him askance. She couldn't get over this guy. He was dressed like some sort of derelict, but he didn't have the look or bearing of somebody who was down on his luck. There was something almost noble about him...

She caught herself in mid-thought. Don't start romanticizing this loser, she scolded herself. Don't get involved with yet another bizarre idiot. Don't be such a goddamn sucker, just like Amy's always saying.

Trying to put on as professional a demeanor as she could, she put out her hand and said, "Can I have my bag please?"

"Oh." He walked forward, and now there was this incredible stride of his, graceful and flowing and quiet as a river of glass—

"STOP IT!" she screeched.

He halted in mid-stride. "I'm sorry." This time his halting English was a little faster. "I didn't mean to—"

"No, no." She made quick, dismissive gestures. "It wasn't you. I was just arguing with myself."

He frowned (on his own, this time) and looked around her as if expecting to see a duplicate of her. She shrugged in embarrassment. He shrugged as well, and this time she didn't say anything but merely waved her fingers. "The bag, okay?"

"Okay." He handed the bag to her and she quickly fumbled through it, taking a quick assessment of its contents. Truthfully, she wasn't dead sure what had been in there. The damned thing was always such a mess that she hadn't had the guts to try an inventory. She found her wallet and glanced inside it. "Money's gone."

"If you say so," he said politely.

She glanced at him, wondering if he'd been the one who had taken it, and dismissed the idea. She wasn't sure why she was dismissing it, except that it just seemed ridiculous.

He didn't act like someone who would steal money, or even care about money. He seemed like...

He stood there at the bottom of the stoop, staring up at her, and slowly she took a step down, and then another, making sure to keep the door propped open with one hand.

"Look, um... I'm not exactly loaded, so I don't have much to offer you in the way of a reward." She shrugged apologetically. "Sorry."

"That is okay."

"Thanks again."

"You're welcome again."

"I didn't get your name."

"Name? Oh. What others call self."

"Yeah, that's right." Her eyes narrowed. "Look, I can see you're kind of down on your luck and stuff, but don't tell me you're so poor you can't afford a name."

"Name." He paused and then let out something that sounded somewhere between a bark and a sneeze. "Name," he said proudly.

"Well, gee, that's..." She forced a smile. "That's really great."

Now what?! she thought frantically. Invite him up? This guy I don't know anything about, in the era of AIDS and date rape? Forget it.

"Well, bye," she said quickly, and backpedalling she stepped inside and closed the front door.

He stepped up onto the stoop and stared in at her as she peered back through the small window. A stare as artless and devoid of self-consciousness as a rabbit's.

Or a...

She stared into his eyes.

One green as grass, the other yellow as changing leaves. The wild was in his eyes.

She stepped back, away from the door, and realized after some seconds that she had stopped breathing. For all she knew her heart had ceased pumping. She opened her mouth wide, forcing her lungs to expand and contract.

It's insane, she thought. It can't be. It simply, completely can't be. It's a coincidence, that's all. I've been reading too many Stephen King novels, watched too many Twilight Zone reruns at one in the morning.

She peeked out again and he was still standing there, just... standing there.

She turned and bolted up the steps to her apartment, taking the stairs two at a time. The world lurched around her as she hit the door of her apartment, which she'd left standing open. She ran in, slamming the door behind her and sagged against it, her heart hammering against her rib cage. She was uttering small, odd whimpering noises.

She closed her eyes against the insanity of it, clutching her pocketbook to her breast.

It was just impossible. That she had been visiting that wolf in the park for the past few weeks, fascinated by him, wondering why men didn't exist who had the same kind of (what, class?) that this wild animal bore. And now she saw some stranger who certainly had a kind of power and perhaps raw sexuality to him, and she had transferred her own fantasies onto him. Certainly, absolutely, that had to be it.

And in her imaginings, she could see the wolf standing there, on those rocks in his pen, and he tilted back his head and he howled. A long, beautiful sound of loneliness and—

Her eyes snapped open.

Howling.

"My God, howling," she whispered, and ran to the window.

That... that lunatic! That lunatic was sitting on her stoop, looking up at the full moon with those incredible, hypnotic eyes, and he was howling! He was goddamn howling like some animal. Passing cars slowed as drivers stared at him, and passersby crossed the street, and people in the next apartment over from hers were shouting through the paper-thin wall at each other: "Who thehell brought a damned dog into this apartment house? Someone's ass is grass!"

"I'd never been more miserable," said Josh. "An alien place, an alien body, alien feelings—rejected by everything. I needed, craved something familiar. And somehow I started to howl.

"It wasn't a good wolf howl—by wolf standards it was pretty damned miserable. But I found comfort in it, and the louder I howled, the stronger I began to feel. Humans say that howling is such a lonely sound, but it's not. It's the sound to make you feel less alone, because when I heard it issuing from my own throat, I knew that at least I had me.

"And then my howl was drowned out by something else, by the human equivalent of a howl. I looked up in shock, and there was a police car with its flashing light, barking at me with that siren noise that seemed to go in one side of my head and out the other.

"It slowed to a stop and the doors opened on both sides. The screeching of the siren had stopped, for which I was grateful, but that hypnotic red light was still spinning, and even worse, the policemen were approaching me slowly.

'What's the problem, Mac?' one of them said, and I started to crouch on the step. I remembered what the police had done to me back in Canada, and I wasn't anxious for a repeat. I wanted to run, and I think they knew that and weren't about to let me go. I find it very strange that such a natural thing as howling would be considered against the law. "

("Disturbing the peace," I said.)

He smiled. "Well, I suppose if there's one thing humans are experts on, it's how to disturb the peace. They've disrupted the forest enough times, certainly. At any rate, they came towards me slowly, because I didn't look like someone who they particularly wanted to start wrestling with... probably because I could have broken them in half.

'Sir, would you like to come with us quietly?' one of them asked.

"I said 'No, I'd rather not come with you at all.' They started to separate, and it became clear that they were going to come at me from either side."

She threw open the door and saw him poised, ready to spring, saw the cops, and shouted, "Josh!"

He turned, surprised, staring at her with those eyes, and it couldn't be and it was impossible and it was...

It was.

She plastered a smile on her face and said, "Josh, I'm sorry. It was all my fault." She turned that smile which had frozen onto her lips towards the cops and said "Lovers' quarrel, officers. I'm sorry that we disturbed you."

The cop on the right stared at them. "You mean every time you and your boyfriend have a spat he sits on the stoop and howls until you let him in?"

"Well... it works," she said brightly. She had already wrapped her arms around Josh's left one, subtly tugging him towards the building. He took several steps up the stoop.

"Well, ma'am," said the other cop, feeling very Jack Web-bish, "I think we, and your neighbors, would appreciate it if next time you find a quieter way to settle your disputes. Have a nice night," and he reflexively touched the brim of his hat.

And just as Darlene pulled Josh into the apartment building, he raised a hand and stuck his middle finger at the cop, a smile on his face.

The cop caught it out of the corner of his eye and spun, but the door slammed. The officers looked at each other and shrugged. Wasn't worth the effort.

And as the cop car pulled away, Darlene stared up at Josh and said, "It's you, aren't you? You're him. He's you."

"I... believe I am me," said Josh.

"From the zoo."

He smiled and said, "Yes."

She shook her head and then stared at those beautiful, inhuman eyes.

"I've dated some wolves in my time," she said, "but this is ridiculous."

10

The sunlight streamed in through the window and Darlene, wrinkling her nose, turned over to get away from it, even going so far as to pull the pillow over her head.

Then she remembered the dream she had had.

"Ooohhh, Christ," she muttered, stretching her legs. She reached under the blanket and scratched herself idly and wished for the thousandth time that she had a body like Cybill Shepherd's. Well, at least she sure had an imagination second to no one's.

Wolves transformed into humans indeed.

But it was nothing to dwell on. This dream, like all dreams, was already becoming nothing more than a fast-fading memory.

She rolled out of bed and stepped on Josh's tail.

The wolf, with a startled roar, leaped to his feet. Darlene scooted back on her bed, tucking her legs under her in alarm and emitting a small shriek of panic. She scuttled back, kicking loose the fitted sheet as she went until her back hit the wall. She stared at the wolf in open-mouthed shock.

Josh stared back, his annoyance subsiding as he realized that it had been an accident. He tilted his head slightly in curiosity.

Then he trotted forward and put both his feet up on the bed, poking his head towards her. She didn't move. Her nightshirt had hiked up around her stomach and the wolf began sniffing at her legs.

"Nuh... nice wolf," she stammered.

Josh stuck his nose in her crotch.

"It seemed the polite thing to do at the time," he explained, frowning at my snickering.

"Hey!" yelled Darlene, and she twisted her hips away from him. He started to follow and she forcefully pushed his snout in the other direction, snapping in annoyance. "Not on the first date!"

The wolf stared at her in confusion, not growling or snapping, but merely looking puzzled. Perhaps even a little hurt. Her lips twitched and she said, "Hey, look... I'm sorry. I know you were just trying to get my scent."

She put out a hand, palm up, and the wolf stared at the invitation and looked back at her as if to ask, "You going to pull this away too?" But she held it steady and the wolf, accepting the offer, proceeded to sniff at her hand. When he was finished, she reached to the back of his head and scratched behind his ears as if he were a big German shepherd. And, just like one of those powerful canines, Josh flattened down his ears and took to the friendly gesture.

"Sorry I reacted like that," she said. Then she frowned and said, "Can you understand me? Growl or something if you do." But the wolf merely stared at her and she said, "I get it. You only understand me when you're... him. That's why I reacted that way, you know." She shifted her position on the bed, making herself more comfortable. "If I'd thought of you as just a plain old animal, I wouldn't have been so hyper. But I thought of you as... I dunno, a man in wolf's clothing. Not that I have anything against men, you understand," she said quickly. "Not that, y' know, I haven't had a guy or two south of the border before, but..."

She blushed and covered her face in embarrassment. "Oh, Christ, am I glad you don't understand this."

She stroked his fur thoughtfully and said, "What the hell am I going to do with you?"

And as she sat there and gazed into the wolf's eyes, she remembered how it had been mere hours before, when the wolf had first come to live with her...

"I've dated some wolves in my time, but this is ridiculous."

The muscular man stared down at her and said, "You've known other wolves? You mean that this has happened to others too?"

She shook her head. "It's just an expression. You... you must know about expressions. You talk well enough, although a little stilted."

"I know the words. I feel like..." He paused, scratching his head. "... like I have part of somebody besides self in me." He looked at her hopefully. "Do you understand?"

"Not in the least. Come on." She pulled on his hand. "Let's get up to my apartment."

"Apartment. Your den."

"Right. That's right."

She pulled on his arm and he tried to follow her... and tripped. He hit the stairs with a prodigious thud and sat there, looking down in surprise.

"What, you never climbed stairs?" she said.

"There were some stairs outside, but they were much larger." He stared down at the steps as if they had somehow betrayed him.

There was an apartment at the bottom of the stairs, and the door opened to reveal a wrinkled woman with a face that was a craggy roadmap of decades gone. "What are you doing?" she said in cracked irritation. "Dragging some drunken bum up the steps, Darlene?"

"He's my brother, Mrs. Michaelson."

"You think I'm going to believe that?" replied the old woman. "You think I'm young and stupid? I'll tell you something, Darlene. You drag drunken bums in here, I'll get my shotgun and blow you both away."

"Yes, Mrs. Michaelson," she sighed.

Having stated her piece, Mrs. Michaelson stormed back into her apartment. Josh looked at Darlene curiously, and with a trace of fear. "She has... a gun?"

Darlene made a dismissive wave. "This week it's a shotgun. Last week it was a howitzer, next week it'll probably be a tank. If you believe Mrs. Michaelson, she has an entire armory in there. The slightest thing, she threatens to blow someone away with something or other."

"Why does she do that?"

"Kind of a Rambo mentality. I guess she figures if she comes on tough, no one will bother her. The city can be a really scary place if you're old."

"I'm not old, and it scares me."

Moments later she had him securely in her apartment, the door triple locked. She turned and looked at Josh, who was staring in confusion at a piece of plastic fruit. He turned to her, his face a question. "Don't even think it," she said.

He put the plastic fruit down. "You don't have real food?"

"Yes, sure I do." She ran to the refrigerator and opened the door. Inside were two cans of Diet Coke, a box of two-day-old Kentucky Fried Chicken, and a coat hanger.

"I have to go shopping," she said apologetically. "I wasn't expecting... expecting..."

Her voice trailed off as she stared at him, and then, closing the refrigerator door, she staggered across the small apartment and slumped down onto the sofa. "I really don't believe this," she said in a small voice. "I don't know how this is possible. In my heart, I know it's true. But up here"—she tapped her head—"I don't believe it."

He sat down next to her. In this position he didn't loom over her the way he did when he was standing. "I don't either."

"How..." She tried to force her voice above a whisper. "How did this happen to you?"

"It was... after the creature."

"Creature?" she said. "What creature, Josh?"

He glanced at her. "Why do you keep calling me Josh?"

"Well, I've got to call you something. What creature?" she repeated.

He stood and shrugged off his coat. Then he started to remove his shirt and Darlene blinked, trying to ignore the musculature that look carved from marble. "What is this, charades? You were attacked by a male stripper?"

He pointed to his left arm, and she gasped, "There," he said.

On his bared upper arm she saw scar tissue in the shape of an animal's teeth marks. She stood and tentatively ran her fingers over it. "My God... you mean... you mean some creature bit you and... and..." She looked up, suddenly understanding, or thinking she did. "Some creature bit you and you turned into a wolf! You were a man and then when the moon came up you turned into a..." But then she stopped in confusion, looking out at the full moon suspended in the polluted Manhattan sky. "No, that's not right."

"I was a wolf," he said. "I was always a wolf until... the creature."

She placed a hand on his chest and tingled unconsciously at the contact. His skin was incredibly hard and smooth. Quickly she withdrew it and said, "Tell me about the creature. What did it look like?"

He frowned and sat down again, she with him. She put her hand unobtrusively on his chest, telling herself it was to give him comfort and aid. "Huge," he said. "Dark. It smelled like... me. But me if I were dead, or unnatural."



"It looked like a wolf?"

"Yes. But much bigger than any I had known. Fiercer. Terrible."

She rubbed her forehead. "This is too much."

"Too much what?"

She turned to look at him. "I don't want to believe they exist. Because if they exist, then maybe vampires exist, and walking mummies, and zombies, and the Loch Ness Monster, and Bigfoot, and UFOs, and all the other things I was quite content to think were just circulation-getters for supermarket throwaways."

' "Would you be tremendously upset if I didn't know what you were talking about, Darlene?"

Her face lit up and in mild confusion he said, "Is something wrong?"

"No. Nothing at all. It's just that... that's the first time you've said my name."

"Did I do it adequately?"

"Yes. Yes, you did it just fine." She couldn't believe it; she felt absolutely girlish. "I liked the way it sounded when you said it. Real husky and... intense." She shook her head as if trying to shrug herself out of the mood. "At any rate... it sounds to me like you were attacked by... if you can believe this... a werewolf."

He sat back, frowning. "Werewolf."

"You know what that is?"

"I think..." His face was a mask of concentration. "I've told you that I feel as if I've absorbed, or ended up sharing, part of another's mind. And the word 'werewolf' is in there, but... the concept is so alien..."

"Hold on." She went to a bookshelf and, after some rummaging, pulled out a book called *Creatures of Myth*. She looked at the title, looked at Josh, and snorted. "Myth. Hah."

She flopped back down onto the bed, trying with all her might to ignore the fact that he was sitting quite close to her and was naked from the waist up.

"Hold on. I think they have a whole chapter on it," she said as she flipped briskly through the pages. "Here." She stopped and slid the book over to Josh, who looked at the chapter heading that read "Crying Werewolf." Below that was a black-and-white picture, and he shook his head. "It didn't look anything like this."

She leaned over and looked where he was pointing. "That's Lon Chaney."

"You know an actual werewolf, by name?"

"No, he wasn't a..." She made a dismissive gesture. "Skip it. Although actually, I guess I do know one. I know you."

"Am I a werewolf?" He thumbed through the pages. "It says werewolf means literally man-wolf."

"But that's for a man who turns into a wolf. You're a wolf who turned into a man. That's makes you a... a wereman."

"No, that can't be right," he pointed out. "That would mean man-man."

She looked him up and down. "Man-man would certainly cover it as far as I'm concerned."

Her tone was unmistakable as he regarded her, and he said slowly, "Are you in heat?"

She leaped to her feet as if she'd been stuck with a cattle prod, and her face flushed. Her words tumbled out, one atop the other. "You... I don't... That's a... You... a hell of a..."

"I'm sorry," he said quickly, standing up and once again towering over her. There was confusion all over his face. "I shouldn't have asked?"

"Look, I don't want to discuss this anymore," she said tiredly. "I know you're sorry. It's getting on midnight, I'm getting tired, you're probably getting tired..."

"No." She glared at him and quickly he said, "Yes. Very tired."

"Good. And I have to go to work tomorrow...no, forget that. I'll call in sick. I'm just going to need some time on this." She looked around. "Where the hell are we going to have you sleep?"

"I don't have to go back to sleep with the other wolves, do I?" he said with real concern.

She laughed lightly and walked over to her storage closet. From the bottom shelf she pulled out an old comforter and an extra pillow. "No. Not at all. You can sleep over there, next to the couch."

"And you?"

She went to the sofa, tossed the cushions off and pulled out the bed. "Ta-daa," she said.

He shrugged—such an odd-looking gesture when he did it with those powerful shoulders—and said, "Ta-daa," right back at her.

"I'll be right back," she said, and went into the bathroom to brush her teeth. When she came back out she stopped and could actually feel the pulse pounding in her head.

He had set out the comforter and pillow rather well, and lain down on top of them. He had also removed the rest of his clothes and was in the process of stretching out, enjoying his nakedness. He looked up and saw her watching him, but it didn't seem to bother him particularly. "It's a shame you humans have no fur. Otherwise you wouldn't have to protect yourself with those artificial skins."

She couldn't take her eyes from him. He was, quite simply, magnificent. She felt her throat constricting and forcibly, very loudly, cleared it. "You're right," she said, trying her best to sound nonchalant, "but then all the designer-jeans people would be out of business. Can't have that."

"Can't have that," he agreed, and it was at that point she realized that he repeated what she said pretty much when he didn't clearly understand what she meant. He was like a foreigner who knew the language

but not the customs or the subtleties of the culture he was visiting,

A foreigner. An incredibly built foreigner...

Quickly she vaulted into bed. "Good night," she said, and started to reach around to snap off the light.

Propping himself up on one elbow, he said, "Darlene— would you take your clothes off?"

She froze in mid-reach and looked down at him, and then forced herself to look at his eyes, and that didn't work because he had gorgeous eyes, so she looked at the top of his head, which was the least inflammatory part of him she could find. "Why?"

"I've never seen a naked human female. I'm interested."

"Sorry," she said, trying to sound icy. "Only when I'm in heat."

"Oh. All right. Good night." And he turned over and rested his head on his arm.

She turned off the light and lay there, staring up into the darkness.

He could have at least sounded disappointed, she thought. She turned over on her side and realized that she wasn't the least bit tired. So why was she in such a rush to get to bed?

Probably because everything that had happened had simply been so mind-boggling, so overwhelming, that she didn't know how to deal with it. The only defense mechanism her overtaxed mind could devise was to withdraw from it completely.

She went to sleep and dreamt of a powerfully muscled body atop hers, and eyes and a voice that called to the wild things inside her...

A low growling from the wolf forced her back to the present. They stared at each other, his tongue hanging out. She opened her mouth wide and let her tongue hang out as well, but the wolf merely stared at her as if she'd lost her mind which, until she actually saw him there, she thought she had.

Then he turned away and walked over to the kitchen, although to call it a kitchen was to be generous. It was so small that, with the refrigerator directly across from the stove, if you turned around too quickly you wound up turning on the gas with your buttocks.

The wolf's claws clicked on the bare floor, and he stopped at the refrigerator, poking his nose at the rubber gasket along the edge. Then he turned back and stared at her plaintively.

"Oh, you remember that's where I keep the food." And then she slapped her forehead. "Food! You must be starving!" She bounced out of bed, went to her dresser and pulled out underwear, a sweatshirt and jeans. "I'll go right out and get something." She reached down, about to pull off her nightshirt. Then she saw the wolf staring at her, his head slightly to one side.

She changed in the bathroom.

Ten minutes later she was back from the butcher, unwrapping a slab of steak that had been more expensive than she'd cared to think about—certainly more than she'd spent on herself in who knew how long. She laid it down on the floor and took a step back, not wanting to come between the wolf and his meal.

Josh stared at it, prodded it with his nose, and then backed away. He looked up at her and his meaning was clear: he wasn't remotely interested.

"What's the problem?" Naturally he didn't answer. "What's wrong with it?" and her voice raised slightly in irritation. "It's perfectly good. I just got it from the butcher. If it were any fresher it would be..." And then she realized. It wasn't freshly killed. He wanted something just dead, preferably something he'd killed himself.

"Now... now look," she said. "We're in the middle of Manhattan. We don't have a forest you can go running around in, tracking down elk and rabbits and stuff. I mean, what am I supposed to do, bring you over to the Bronx Zoo and say Bon appetit? I mean, where the heck am I supposed to get something fresh for you to kill?"

"The sign says you're having a sale on rabbits?" The pet-shop owner, a rotund man who kind of looked like a rabbit himself with his short white hair and ingenuous expression, approached her and said, "Oh, yes. We have quite a few—more than we can handle. And with Easter coming up, you know, all the kids want one."

Darlene was standing next to the rabbit case that was set up against the front window of the store. One of the rabbits, white with a little black spot on his back, looked up at her, twitching its nose. She gulped and said, "Uh... how much?"

"For this fellow?" The shop owner reached in and lifted out the rabbit. He practically shoved it into her arms. "Three dollars. You can't beat that price anyplace in town."

She cradled him in her arms. "Three dollars. Jeez, that's cheaper than steak."

The shop owner smiled, not quite understanding where the conversation was going. "Well, yes, that's quite true. Not only that, but they're much better pets than steaks. Sure, steaks don't each much, but they just lie around and get spoiled. You know—I think he likes you."

Darlene held him out at arm's length, biting her lower lip. Its little legs pinwheeled, and it stared at her and twitched its little nose again with its cute little whiskers, and its little ears were so soft and cute, and it looked at her with its big eyes as if to say, "You're going to feed me to a wolf, aren't you? You're going to stand by as it clamps its jaws on me and rips me to itsy bitsy rabbit pieces."

"Oh, my God," Darlene choked out, and she shoved the rabbit back at the puzzled owner. "Forget it! I can't do this! I thought I was a big nature buff, and that the food chain didn't bother me, but I just can't do this!"

She spun and shoved through the door. The attached bells above jingled cheerfully. The shop owner stared after her, then stared at the rabbit. "What did you say to her?" asked the shop owner.

Darlene barely contained her tears as she ran back to her apartment. What was she going to do now? Her wolf was hungry. This was just splendid. Also insane. She was actually running so that she could get back quickly to her apartment with the hungry wolf in it. The hungry wolf who was going to be disappointed, no less.

She ran up the stairs, hesitated outside her apartment, and then, mustering her resolve, she opened the door.

The smell hit her, and for a moment she thought she'd walked into a New York subway station. Her nose wrinkled, and then she remembered what a lot of derelicts do in the stations that make it smell that way.

The wolf was over in a corner, lifting his leg against it and marking that out as his territory, too. He'd already taken care of the rest of the place. He looked up at her with a certain amount of pride. See what I've accomplished, he seemed to say. So where's my breakfast?

Her mouth worked for a moment but nothing came out. Finally she found her voice and she said, "You creep! You pissed all over my apartment!"

He seemed taken aback by her tone of voice and she slammed the door behind her, coming closer towards him and shaking her finger angrily. "This is not your territory! This is mine! And you will not go around leaving your damned animal scents all over the place. You could get me thrown out of my apartment. You could get the health people to come and arrest me. Don't do it again!"

The wolf backed up until he couldn't back up anymore, his tail between his legs. He looked to right and left, as if trying to find someone else who might possibly be the subject of her ire.

"And another thing!" she said, her fury building on itself. "I am not going to bring Thumper home so you can eat him. Or Bambi or any other fun forest animals. You will eat what I give you. And don't expect steak all the time! I'll go broke! They make really good dog food these days and I'll get you that, with steak maybe once or twice a week. But that's it! And if you don't like it," and she pointed to the door, "you can just leave and see if anybody else is interested in taking care of you. Get it? Good!"

'Of course I didn't understand anything she was saying," said Josh. 'But her mood was perfectly clear—she was upset with me. Now part of me was inclined to just tear her throat out, because that would have quieted her right down. But there were other factors—for one thing, I was still one little wolf in a very big city, If she was dead, then I would be alone, and I was quite certain I couldn't handle being alone.

"And the other thing was, I liked her. I really, truthfully did. I had never been near a human that I liked. It was an unusual experience for me, one that I did not want to end.

"So when she had spent all her anger, and was just standing over me —her finger still pointing at me like a spear—I realized that, although I was accustomed to being the pack leader, things had changed. I was going to have to, at least temporarily, turn control of my life over to someone else.

'So I rolled over onto my back.

"She seemed surprised at first. Perhaps she realized that I was quite a proud wolf, and submitting in this manner was not something I did lightly. Then she knelt down next to me, and she did something very strange. She scratched me on the belly. It felt quite nice.

' 'And I ate her cold steak. At least she hadn't cooked it. If she had, I wouldn't have eaten it. "He sniffed disdainfully. "One has to have one's standards, after all. "

11

The coffin sat deep in the basement, dank and ominous and filled with foreboding. Somewhere chords were being played on an organ. Candelabras were laid out all around and there, chained in a corner of the room, was a young, blonde-haired, lustrous virgin. Her gown was of the purest white, but her wrist was torn and bleeding from pulling at her manacle. She had already screamed herself raw shouting for help, and now she knew that none would be forthcoming. She was doomed. Doomed and damned.

Somewhere a clock struck the hour of six. And slowly the coffin lid began to rise, accompanied by a hideous creaking that sounded like a chorus of gleeful rats.

"Oh, God." she whispered. "Oh, God, please, no." The vampire sat up with incredible speed. Duncan was wearing a tuxedo with a red sash across his chest. His face was deadly white, his eyes blazing. He turned slowly, and when he spotted the sacrifice his mouth pulled back, revealing long, pointed fangs that were still tinged with blood from yesterday's meal.

"Ssssoo," he hissed. "Guess who's coming for dinner?"

He stepped out of his coffin and approached her, his cape swirling about him, a low, evil chuckle in his throat getting louder. And she found her voice and screamed, but it was a small, pitiful thing, drowned out by his laughter that echoed and...

Someone prodded Duncan with a stick.

Suddenly the virgin and the coffin and the ominous music all vanished, the dream disappearing back into the recesses of his imagination. Everything was black around him, because he was zipped up completely in his sleeping bag. The sleeping bag that he had long ago emptied of its insulation and refilled with dirt taken from his native Fresno.

Someone prodded him again and he shouted through the bag. "Knock it off!"

"Sir! Come out, please."

"This is my sleeping bag, and my cardboard box. and my alleyway, and I'll be where I damned well want to be!"

Duncan checked the display on his digital watch and saw that it was just past six. The sun would have just gone down—safe enough. Then again, he had thought he would be safe enough in this alley—no one had bothered him there for ages, which had been pleasant since he'd already been rousted out of Grand Central Terminal.

"Look, what do you want?" said Duncan, unzipping his sleeping bag and poking his head out.

A man in a business suit and a checked tie said, "I'm Jack Wilcox, from the city social agencies. We're trying to improve your life."

"Oh, really?" said Duncan. He slithered out of his sleeping bag, which was inside of a refrigerator box lying on its side. He dusted off his raincoat and said, "How?"

"We have city shelters that we would be happy to bring you to. If you go voluntarily," smiled Wilcox, "then we wouldn't have to force you."

"Is that a fact?" smiled Duncan. "Well, I have to admit that I'm really not interested."

"But you can't enjoy this life. Aren't you uncomfortable and hungry?"

"Comfort doesn't matter that much to me," replied Duncan. "But I am hungry, yes. And I admit that there is a way you can improve my life."

"Really?" said Wilcox eagerly. "How?"

"By giving me yours."

Duncan's hand lashed out, grabbing Wilcox by the throat.

Wilcox's eyes opened wide in shock as Duncan lifted him off his feet and dangled him there.

He bared his fangs and smiled. It wasn't a virgin in a flowing white gown, but it would do.

After tossing the body in a dumpster, Duncan made his way to a pay phone and made a collect call to Canada.

"Where the hell have you been?" said Parsons in irritation. "What's going on down there? Did he finally invite you in?"

"There's... been a slight problem," admitted Duncan. "I think he's gone."

'Gone?!'

"I went over there last night and he wasn't there anymore. It might be that he turned into a human and escaped."

"Escaped?!"

Duncan frowned. "You know, you don't save any money on phone bills by using only one-word sentences. It's not like telegrams."

"Can't I trust you to do anything?"

"Look, you think you can do so much better? You should have come down here yourself."

"I couldn't get away."

"Excuses, excuses. I think you're afraid of him."

There was dead silence at the other end, but Duncan could practically see the smoke fumes coming out of the receiver.

"Look... Ed," Duncan said. "We've been friends a long time, ever since you and I nailed the gypsy who did this to us. Okay? But don't go pushing it."

There was a low growl on the other end.

"Ed?"

The growl evolved into a full-throated roar. Duncan held the receiver at arm's length and it was still deafening. He turned around and looked up at the sky. Sure enough, the moon had risen.

"Ed!" Duncan shouted at the phone. "I'll catch you later!" Suddenly the phone went dead, and Duncan realized that Ed had probably pulled the phone out of the wall.

He hung up and signed. "He's always so difficult to talk to during his time of the month."

12

Darlene stepped back and admired her handiwork. Then she gave an appreciative two-note whistle.

Josh stared at her and said, "Why did you do that?"

"That?" She whistled again and he nodded. "That's what you do when you see something really good looking. It's called a..." She hesitated, then shrugged. "A wolf whistle."

"Really?" He stared down at his clothes—black slacks, a yellow turtleneck, and a rust-colored sports jacket. "Wolves don't whistle."

"That figures. What do you do when you see something really good-looking?"

"We usually eat it."

"Oh. Okay, look, first things first. We'll both go down to the Shop-Rite and get some food to last a while. I figure it's easier to go now with you in tow, rather than when you're Rin-Tin-Tin."

"Rin-Tin-Tin?"

"Skip it."

"Okay."

"Good. And after that, we'll go—"

"Home? To my forest?"



She stopped as she was pulling on her windbreaker and looked at him. "Home. Jeez, I hadn't thought of that."

Slowly she sat down on the couch. "I was running around today, shopping for clothes that would fit—guessing all along the way and doing a good job, I might add. And it never occurred to me you wanted me to find you a way to get home."

"Are you upset, Darlene?"

"No. No, of course not," she said uncertainly. "I mean, heck, I'd offer to drive you except I never learned how. Where is home, anyway?"

"The forest."

"The forest. So you said. Well, that sure pins it down. Any special forest?"

"The forest where I live."

She rubbed the bridge of her nose between her fingers. "Josh, this isn't getting us anywhere. I need geographic location. Where is it actually located?"

He stood there, trying to grasp the idea of what she was saying. Then he tapped his chest. "I only know it here."

"Well, that's just sweet as all get-out, Josh, but it's not going to do diddly for getting you home."

"Then what will do diddly?"

"We'll discuss it in the store. Come on."

They went downstairs, past Mrs. Michaelson, who complained that Darlene's having this man stay overnight was indecent and she was going to get her shotgun. They ignored her. They walked several blocks to the supermarket, and Darlene imagined that everyone was looking at her enviously because of the gorgeous guy she was with. Either that, she realized, or they were wondering what a guy who looked like that was doing hanging out with a little shrimp like her. Selfconfidence was never going to be her strong suit.

Josh stepped up to the door and it swung open obediently. He jumped back several feet, emitting a cry of horror, nearly knocking over Darlene. Passersby slowed down a moment at his reaction, and Darlene said quickly, "He's from out of town."

She tried to push him towards it but he held his ground, saying "Uh-uh. No. Something's wrong with that door."

"It's automatic, you idiot," she hissed. "Now move your tail." And she shoved him through, following close on his heels.

Once in the store she got a shopping cart and they started down the aisles. The first one they got to was fruits and vegetables. She stopped by the melons and oranges and said, "You like fruits?"

"I don't know. I never tried them."

"We'll expand your horizons." Quickly she bagged some apples and oranges. Then she lifted a melon and squeezed it.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"You're always supposed to do that. You squeeze the melon to see if it's ripe. It shouldn't be soft. It should be firm."

"Oh."

She turned away to look at the grapefruits, and then a moment later heard a loud splutch. She turned and saw Josh standing there with a handful of massacred melon. The pulp was dripping and oozing from between his fingers, and he said, "I don't think this one was hard enough."

She glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, and then she quickly pulled some tissues out from her pocketbook and handed them to Josh. He wiped his hands obediently.

They slowed down when they reached the dog-food aisle, and Darlene waved. "Any preferences?"

He studied them all. "None of them looks particularly good," he said.

"Not now, maybe. When you've got a little more hair on your chest—and face, and arms, and legs—hopefully it will look better."

"Humans don't eat this?"

"No."

"What do humans eat? Besides fruit, that is?"

"C'mon. I'll show you."

She brought him over to the frozen food section. "Behold," she said. "Every possible sort of meal known to mankind."

He stared down at the array. "You eat this?"

"Sure. Don't the pictures look good?"

He reached down and picked up a box. "Salisbury steak? What is that?"

"Nobody knows."

Before she could stop him he tore open the box. "Hey! Now I have to buy that!"

But he wasn't paying attention. Instead he was staring at the tray with the clear plastic covering. "It doesn't look very good," he said doubtfully.

"It used to look slicker," she admitted. "Back when they had aluminum foil on it. Now everything is

microwave sa— hey! Don't!"

It was too late. Josh had bitten off a piece of the tray and the plastic and even a small portion of the steak, and was chewing it thoughtfully. She covered her eyes as his face twisted into an expression of distaste, and he promptly spat out what he'd bitten off.

"Terrible," he said. "And that thing in particular." He prodded the meat with his toe.

"That? That was the Salisbury steak. That was the only thing that was actually edible."

"Not to me. Darlene, if that's human food, I think I'm beginning to understand why hunters come through and shoot animals."

"Well..." She started taking a number of frozen dinners out of the case. "Actually, when hunters go shooting animals, a lot of times they don't actually eat them. Actually."

She started to push the shopping cart and he placed a hand on it, looking at her curiously. "They don't."

"Not always, no."

"Well, then... what do they do with them?"

She hesitated and then said, "Look, this hasn't been the best introduction to human food. How about a restaurant, my treat?"

"All right," he said, allowing Darlene to believe she had successfully changed the subject.

"Darlene hadn't realized that I'd already figured out at least one aspect of it," Josh told me. 'On our way over to the store, and once in the store, I spotted several women who were clothed in animal skins. It was clear that they were wearing them solely as some sort of decoration. One woman was even wearing the skins of a rabbit. " He shook his head and then looked up at me. "Tell me, my friend... would you have been able to do what Darlene was unable to do? Namely, purchase a rabbit in a store in order to feed it to a wolf?"

(I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. "Probably not, " I admitted.)

"By the same token, could you find it within yourself to purchase a coat made from those selfsame creatures?"

("I doubt if I could find it within my personal finances.")

"Money aside. Could you do it?"

(I sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, I suppose I could. If the right woman came along and I really wanted to impress her, I'd be capable of buying something like that. ")

He smiled ruefully. "You are all such hypocrites. "

("I know. But when you and Darlene went out to eat, who picked up the check?")

"She did. "

("So you see. We're hypocrites, but we've got all the money. ")

Josh stared at the menu. "I don't understand any of this."

"It's in French."

Josh looked around at the opulence that surrounded them. Plush velvet seemed to envelop absolutely every fixture in the place. Chandeliers, exotic potted plants, and as if the place wasn't big enough, the walls were lined with mirrors that served to double its apparent size.

Josh stared at the mirror, slowly running his fingers over his cheek in wonderment. The changes that had been wrought on him... they were simply beyond all belief. Never in his wildest dreams would he have thought them possible.

From across the table Darlene said, "Josh. Let me order, okay?" Distracted by his reflection, Josh simply nodded.

An oily waiter oozed over and, looking appropriately unctuous, said in a brittle French accent, " 'Ave m'sieur and mad'moiselle decided what they would like to 'ave?"

Josh turned and looked at the waiter with curiosity. "What?"

Darlene quickly put up a hand and said, "Josh. Remember, I'm handling this. You're in my neck of the woods." She closed her menu in utter confidence and rattled off a lengthy string of French.

The waiter stared at her and then said briskly, "As you wish, mad'moiselle. Two orders of breaded umbrella, two side orders of dirt and two glasses of white shoes." He stared at her icily and said, "Would you care to order dessert out of the Sears catalogue?"

In a moment, with the menu opened in front of her, Darlene placed a more edible order.

The wine came first. The waiter proffered the bottle to Josh for inspection, and he stared at it uncomprehendingly. From across the table Darlene caught Josh's eye and nodded. Obediently he nodded as well. The waiter then, using a corkscrew, removed the cork with a little theatrical flair and handed the cork to Josh. Josh took it, glanced at it, and popped it in his mouth.

"Josh," moaned Darlene as Josh crunched down on it and made a face. "You were supposed to smell it."

Josh scrunched his face up and spat out assorted pieces of cork onto the napkin. "It tasted better than the Salisbury steak," he said.

The waiter was staring at him in undisguised disbelief, and Darlene quickly said, "Just pour the wine, okay?" This the waiter did and got away from the table just as fast as he could.

Darlene raised her glass and said, "To the wild things."

"To the wild things," he repeated in that tone that indicated he didn't understand. Darlene drank it down and Josh attempted to do so as well. Then his mouth opened wide, his eyes seemed to leap straight out of his face, and he proceeded to gag. People from tables nearby looked around at him, wondering whether or not somebody was in need of the Heimlich maneuver.

"Are you okay?" she said in a worried whisper.

He managed to get his coughing fit under control and croaked out, "Why didn't you tell me I wasn't supposed to eat that either? I feel like I swallowed a burning log!"

"You were supposed to eat that. That's alcohol."

He stared at the glass and swirled the liquid around. "You mean it's supposed to taste like that?"

"Yes."

"Why? How does anybody consume it? Why would anybody?"

"Because we like it. It relaxes you."

"I was relaxed. Now I'm tense. And the taste..."

She shrugged, leaning back in the chair. "You get used to it."

"Why would anyone want to get used to it?"

"We get used to all kinds of things. The sharp taste of alcohol, the bitter taste and caffeine shakes from coffee, the smoke and yellow teeth and coughing from cigarettes. We're real good at getting used to everything we have to suffer with in order to have a good time."

"I see."

"No, you don't."

"No, I don't," he admitted.

When the meal came, Darlene was gratified by the look of pure joy that leapt into Josh's face. "Raw meat!" he said. "You got me raw meat! How considerate."

"It's called steak tartare, actually."

He reached for it with his hands but she quickly placed hers on top. "Watch me," she said, and daintily began to cut her meal up with a knife and fork. "Like this."

He watched her skeptically. "Is that another one of those bizarre human habits that you learned to live with?"

"Kind of, yeah."

Looking doubtful but giving it a game try nonetheless, Josh picked up his knife and fork and dutifully ate his meal that way as well. "I would have liked to just eat this quickly," he said. "This is the first decent

meal I've had in a while."

"You shouldn't wolf down your... uhh, skip it."

"You tell me 'skip it' a great deal."

"I know. That's because there's a lot of things you shouldn't worry about."

He finished eating, put down his knife and fork and said, "I want to go home."

"Sure, after dinner."

"No, I mean my home."

"We've discussed this, Josh. We have to find out where your home is. I don't think you have any idea just how big this world is." She pushed aside her plate and leaned forward. "I don't know where you came from. How can I possibly get you back there?"

"You have to try. My pack... whatever's left of it... depends on me. And my mate, and my cubs..."

"Are you telling me that you have a wife and kids?"

"Of course. Well... no cubs yet. They've yet to be born." He looked sullen. "Perhaps they may never be born. Not with that... creature roaming the forest. Perhaps they are all dead by now. Either way, they are my pack, and I have to return to them. You have to help me."

He took her by the hand and she felt something within her begin to burn. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the way he was looking at her. Suddenly she didn't care about the forest or the pack or his mate and cubs-to-be. All she cared about was—

"Dessert?"

She turned and there was the waiter, wheeling a pastry cart. "Oh, not for me. Maybe you, Josh?"

"I don't think so. If there's something that you won't eat, I certainly don't want to try it. There's enough things you do eat that have caused me problems."

"Oh, it's not that there's anything wrong with it. I just have a sweet tooth that's caused me too many problems already."

"A sweet tooth?" said Josh, as the disgusted waiter wheeled the cart away. "Where?"

"All over." She opened her mouth and pointed in. "See? A mouthful of cavities, and a mouthful of fillings and caps to go with it. I'm still paying off the dental bills."

"Is that another one of those things you have to get used to for the sake of enjoyment?"

"Exactly. Tell you what... I'll get the check and I'll take you out to show you something else we get used to for enjoyment's sake."

The disco was pounding, the walls shaking as if with life of their own.

Josh flinched back automatically as Darlene tried to pull him along, weaving their way through the crowd of dancers and drinkers. "Isn't this great!?" she shouted at the top of her lungs.

The music pounded and Josh felt it through his body, through his mind, as if it were a physical thing. He felt his heart speeding up, panic and an instinct to run flooding through him. His face was covered with sweat and he whimpered slightly. "Get me out of here," he said in a strangled tone.

"What?" shouted Darlene.

"Get me—" He lost his grip on her hand and was suddenly swept onto the dance floor.

Josh looked all about him, and everywhere there was flashing lights and the cacophony of music and noise, and people laughing and glasses clinking. Couldn't they hear his heart? he thought frantically. The pounding of it against his chest seemed overwhelming.

People smashed into him, bouncing him around like a pin-ball. He turned quickly, not knowing where to look, where to concentrate, and he fell to the floor. But there was no escaping there either, because the floor was lit up as well, and the dancing feet of the humans all about him pounded and stomped without let up.

He leaped to his feet and roared.

It was not a human sound. It penetrated the chaos of the club as people backed away, staring at him in shock or confusion or drugged surprise.

Darlene shoved through the crowd, grabbed Josh by the elbow and pulled him back out of the mass of strangers.

Within moments they were back out on the street, Josh hugging a lamppost and sucking in the air which the previous night had seemed stale but now seemed to be the sweetest smell he'd ever known. Darlene, standing several feet away, looked at him apologetically.

"I'm sorry, Josh. I guess you weren't ready for that. I should have realized."

"Yes, you should have," he said in the first angry words he had ever spoken to her. Then he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry. You were just trying to show me... what are the words? A good time. Yes, that's it. Darlene..." He turned and leaned back against the lamppost. "I think I would have a very difficult time getting used to being human. This... club... could never be my idea of a good time. I need peace, quiet, beauty. Not... manufactured fun."

She nodded and then said, "I understand. Tell you what. I know someplace that might just fill the bill for you. And at the same time, maybe it will get across to you... in a way I haven't been able to... just how big a problem we've got in trying to find out where you come from."

He stared open-mouthed across the Manhattan skyline. The breeze cut through them and Darlene huddled closer to him, only partially because of the wind. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"

They stood on the observation deck of the Empire State Building. Below them, in its multicolored majesty, was Manhattan. It was a beautiful, cloudless night, the stars twinkling down from the blue-black sky. The noises of civilization, of cars honking and people yelling and radios blasting and babies crying, all were distant and melded together into a faint, almost comforting hum.

"Josh? Are you okay?"

"I had... I had no idea..." He tried to pull together his scrambled thoughts. "Is that... the world?"

She laughed. "A small part of it."

"You mean there's more!"

"Oh, much, much more."

He gulped. "Can we see my home from here?"

"Not unless your home is in Manhattan, Queens, or North Jersey, which I doubt." She squeezed his arm. "Are you beginning to see the problem, Josh?"

She felt his arm shaking, a choke in his voice, and looked up at him.

His powerful chest was heaving, and his face was twisted in misery. He put his hand up to his face and came away with moisture. He stared at it in shock and said, "It's raining on my face."

"Those are tears, Josh," she said, and her heart ached for him. "It tells us when we're sad."

"Humans need so many things!" he wailed. He backed away from her and flailed randomly in the air. "Smiles to know when you're happy, tears to know when you're sad. You're all so... so..." He stared at his pitiful, clawless hands. "... helpless. Please"—and the tears started to come faster—"help me, Darlene. Help me get home."

He went to her and, bending almost in half, put his face against her shoulder and sobbed into it, great racking sobs that attracted the attention of everyone around them. They all responded in the usual human manner by giving someone who was truly miserable a wide berth.

Darlene put her arms around him, finding herself unable to reach all the way, and she patted him awkwardly and said, "Don't worry. I'll get you home. I'll... I'll get you home. Somehow."

13

Amy glanced up from her pile of work as Darlene bustled into the office and went right by her without her customary cheerful greeting. The office of P.A.W. only consisted of five people, so the absence the previous day of twenty percent of the staff had most certainly not gone unnoticed.

Amy got up from her desk and sidled over to Darlene's. Darlene was busy going through a Queens phone book as Amy said, "You feeling better?"



Darlene looked up. "Better?"

"From when you were sick yesterday?" she said helpfully.

"Oh, yeah. Right." Darlene took a deep breath and thumped her chest. "Right as rain. Must have been a twenty-four-hour thing."

"Uh-huh." Amy put her hand flat on the open phone book, not allowing Darlene to turn the page. "Who is he?"

"Who is who?"

"You're involved with a new guy. I can tell. I can always tell. You refuse to make eye contact with me for any length of time, because if you do you'll be forced to tell me all about him and you don't want to do that because you're afraid I won't approve."

Darlene blinked and, not making eye contact, said, "Why should I care whether you approve or not?"

"Because in addition to being your immediate supervisor,

I'm also just about the only really close friend you have." She leaned forward on the desk. "Tell me all about him."

Darlene sighed and looked up. "I met him at the zoo," she said.

"Yeah. Go on."

"During the day he's a wolf. But he was bitten by a werewolf and he turns into a man at night. His name is Josh, because I named him that. And he's gorgeous but all he wants to do is go back to his forest to be with his bitch and his cubs. So I'm about to call the head of the zoo in Flushing Meadow and see if I can strong-arm him into telling me where Josh came from originally. That answer everything for you?"

Amy sighed patiently. "You'll tell me when you're ready." She turned and went back to her desk.

Darlene smiled to herself. At least now, having made a clean breast of it, she would be able to look Amy in the eyes. She paged through the phone book until she found what she wanted, then picked up the phone and dialed.

"Look, Ms. Abramowitz, I really don't see how the source of our animals is any concern of M.A.W.'s."

She couldn't stand his voice over the phone. He sounded like a creep. "Look, Mr. Ruben, it's P.A.W., and I'm not interested in your animals in general. I couldn't care less where the diseased groundhogs and whatever else you have there came from. What I'm interested in is one of your wolves."

"We have a number of wolves."

She stared at the pencil she was playing with and imagined it was Ruben's neck. "There's one I'm interested in in particular. "

"Why? Can't get a date for Saturday night?"

The pencil snapped like a rifle shot. "It is"—she forced herself to speak patiently—"a large gray wolf, with one green eye and one yellow eye. A relatively recent acquisition, I should think." She paused. "You know the one I'm talking about."

"Yes. Yes, of course." Now there was in his voice exactly what she'd hoped she would hear—unease. "I know the one you mean. But I see no reason to tell you where it came from."

"Really? You do still have that wolf, don't you, Mr. Ruben?"

She hesitated to ask. If he said that the wolf had died, or had been shipped to another zoo, she might have problems. But he didn't sound too sharp, and he didn't sound like much of a skilled liar.

"Yes," he said after a moment, "of course we still have him. Where else would he be except here?"

Bingo, she thought smugly. "Mr. Ruben," she said silkily, "you're lying. That wolf has escaped, hasn't he?"

"That . . . that's ridiculous."

"I was by the zoo yesterday. I noticed he wasn't in his cage. Furthermore"—and now she decided to go whole hog—"I have a witness who will swear they saw the wolf wandering around loose."

"You're lying!"

"Fine. Expect a call from the Daily News ." She started to hang up.

"Wait!"

She smiled at the near panic in his voice. "Wait for what, Mr. Ruben?"

"Do you know where the wolf is?"

"Not at all," she replied. At least one of them was an accomplished liar. "But don't you think the public has a right to know that there's a wild animal trotting around loose somewhere in the park?"

"Why? They'll just panic!"

"There's that."

"Look, Ms. Abramowitz . . . what do you want?"

She smiled. "Funny you should ask . . ."

Darlene lay on the floor, her head propped up in her hands, staring at the wolf who was staring back.

"I know where you come from, Josh," she said. "I could pack you on a plane, we could be there tonight. And then what? Then I never see you again?"

"And what are you going back to? Your friends, your whole pack, might be dead. That creature is running around, the one who did this to you. What'll he do if he finds you again? He might kill you—probably will. If I bring you back, I'm probably returning you to certain death.

"But if you stay here..."

Suddenly the wolf twisted, reared back as if hit with a massive jolt of current. Darlene was startled out of her monologue as the wolf hit the floor, flipping from side to side, and tilting his head back in a groan of agony and despair.

She saw his hind legs start to lengthen and she did exactly what she had done the previous night—she bolted from her apartment.

She slammed the door behind her and tried to ignore the howls of pain that were coming from her apartment. Then she heard the sounds of footsteps and saw the people who lived above her, an elderly couple whose name she couldn't even remember, coming down the stairs.

They stopped in front of her, reacting to the sounds coming from within her apartment. The grunting and moans caused them to raise their eyebrows, look at each other, then at her.

"I got a friend visiting," she said, and when she realized that that alone wasn't carrying much weight she added gamely, "She's got really bad cramps."

"She sounds like some sort of animal... no, wait," said the elderly woman. "Now she sounds like a man."

"Hormone shots. To help the cramps."

"Hmmpf," said the old man. "They're not helping very much, you ask me."

They walked on past and now the moans had tailed off to gasps. She rolled her eyes as, from downstairs, Mrs. Michaelson shouted, "I'm coming up there with my bazooka."

Darlene opened the door, walked in quickly, and there was Josh, naked and exhausted, lying on the floor. He turned to look up at her and said, "This is getting to be very, very painful."

"I know. I'll take you out somewhere to make up for it."

He sat up slowly, carefully. "First things first. Did you find out where I came from?"

She bit her lower lip, and looked into those eyes, and imagined those cable-muscled arms wrapped around her...

"Not yet," she said. "No luck. But I will. I know I will."

This time she didn't fool around with a French restaurant. She took him to Beefsteak Charlie's. They brought him a steak the size of a Buick, with a price tag equal to the national debt. Darlene had ordered it to be cooked as rare as possible. But what shocked her was Josh's reaction when he bit into it. His face wrinkled and he said, "I think it needs to be cooked a bit more."

She stared at him slack-jawed. "Cooked... more?"

"Yes." He realized how odd that sounded coming from him. "I'd just... I'd like to try it that way. Just this once."

"Well, sure, of course." She signalled to the waiter and had the steak sent back to be cooked to medium. And when it was brought back, Josh ate every bite and smiled as he did so.

He saw the waiter walking past with a pitcher filled with yellow liquid and inquired as to the contents. "Beer," said Darlene. "You wouldn't like it."

"Can I try it?"

"Well, sure, if you want." She dutifully ordered him a mug of beer and, when he sipped it, she waited for him to spit it out.

He finished every drop and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Can I get another?" he asked.

The Rialto was playing a double feature—Silver Bullet and An American Werewolf in London. It was an extremely difficult double bill to resist.

When the first film came on, Josh was astounded. He sat there for a moment, blinking in confusion. Then he got up from his seat, went straight up to the screen and put his hand against it, staring at the flat image.

Cries of "Hey! Knock it off, you idiot!" rang through the theatre and Darlene had to hurry and drag him back to his seat before he was lynched. Once she had settled him in, and bought him a jumbo popcorn, and explained to the best of her ability just how a movie worked, he sat there fascinated throughout the entire double feature. He was particularly interested in the human-to-wolf transformations, and, try as she might, Darlene found it impossible to explain the concepts of special effects to him.

Still, for all the excitement that bubbled through him during the films, he was strangely quiet when they came out. They walked down the street, her arm through his, and she said, "Josh? What's bothering you?"

He looked down at her and said, "Would you be capable of shooting me with a silver bullet? To end my life? Like in those films?"

Her mouth opened and then closed again. "You're kidding, right? I mean... I couldn't even off a bunny rabbit. Kill you? No. No way."

"I see."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"What I believe," he said, "is that the life of a werewolf— or whatever it is I am—seems doomed to be a short one ending with violence."

"Josh." She stopped, took him by both hands and faced him. "I will never let anything happen to you. No

matter what. No matter what kind of trouble you're in, I will be there to help you. I promise."

He smiled. "I suppose I've sounded pretty depressing, huh?"

"Nothing I can't live with."

Grasping her hands firmly, he said, "I've depressed you. I didn't mean to. Please accept my apologies. In fact, I know how to cheer you up." He pointed further down the street.

She looked where he indicated and shook her head. "Oh, no, Josh. Not a disco. You had a really tough time there last night, and I don't want to put you through that again."

"I'm game. Sorry," he said quickly. "A forest animal should never say he's game. Some hunter might be nearby and misinterpret. But tonight I'm human, and you've worked hard to make things good for me. The least I can do is try to return the favor." And he pulled her, in no uncertain terms, towards the disco.

She waited for the same panicked reaction to set in as it had the previous night. This time, however, Josh glided through the crowd, holding her hand firmly but not using it for a lifeline as he had before. And this time, instead of shielding his eyes from the lights, he was watching the dancers carefully.

Anxious to get him away from the crush of humanity, Darlene started to point and say, "Look, there's a table over in the corner," but she never got the chance. She was almost yanked off her feet as Josh pulled her straight into the middle of the dance floor.

He spun her around and her face was against his chest. He looked up and there was a feral smile on his lips as he began to move to the music. He placed his hands on her hips and pressed her against him. She gasped at the closeness and could only follow along with his overwhelming strength as his pelvis began to gyrate slowly, back and forth to the music. The sound pulsed through them, filling them with something primal, something unmistakably sexual.

He laughed low in his throat, his face slick with sweat, and she continued to move with him. He placed one hand against the small of her back and swept her down, almost to the floor, and back up again. She rubbed herself up against him, her breath coming in short gasps, and she managed to get out, "You pick up on this stuff fast."

His reply was lost in the sound and the beat and the talking of the people around him... lost in humanity.

By the time they left it was well after midnight, and Josh had downed several more drinks during their time in the club. But the liquor seemed to have had no effect on him, except maybe to make him even more relaxed with her.

He was adapting incredibly fast, she realized as she brought him back to her apartment. He was losing the fear of civilization that had encompassed him. He was learning, learning that there was nothing to fear from humanity... or from her.

She opened the door and suddenly felt herself lifted up. He had swept her up in his powerful arms and was now carrying her into the apartment. "Josh!" she laughed. "What do you think you're doing?"

He kicked the door shut behind her and buried his mouth in the base of her neck. She trembled in his arms and sighed, "Oh, God, Josh, stop it," but she didn't say it with any sincerity.

His voice rough, he said, "Are you in heat yet?"

"I'm getting there," she replied. "What about your mate?"

"She'll be fine without me." He set her on her feet and then slowly bore her to the ground. His hands worked their way under her shirt. Hoarsely he said, "Take this off."

She slid her shirt over her head and then, taking his face in her hands, she kissed him deeply.

He howled.

He pulled his head away from her with startling fierceness and grasped at his mouth in pain. "What did you do?" he moaned.

"Nothing! A kiss! We call that a kiss."

"Don't do it again," he said. "It hurts."

"But it shouldn't—" And then words were lost as he overwhelmed her.

And part of her mind shouted at her that it was wrong, that she was making a terrible mistake. That this was not a human, despite all outward appearances, but a creature of the wild. Of the supernatural.

And she agreed. She knew she shouldn't. She knew it was a huge mistake, even as she pulled off her clothes and revelled in the feel of his body against hers. She knew that she was entering a new step in a relationship that could only end tragically, even as they twisted and writhed in each other's arms.

It was awkward and clumsy, for his preferred position was most definitely not hers, but eventually they found a compromise.

You'll be sorry! her mind screamed at her, and she knew that she would be, but as the heat flooded over her, washing away the last of her inhibitions and concerns, she didn't care. She simply didn't care.

14

He soared above the skies of Manhattan, not certain what he was looking for.

Duncan flapped his wings and angled down, mindful that he had to hurry since soon the sun would be rising, and to be caught outside of his sleeping bag at that crucial time would give him a case of permanent sunburn, all over.

Parsons had described, to the best of his vague knowledge, what the human form of the wolf looked like. It shouldn't be too difficult to spot a massively built naked man running around. On the other hand, the city was huge and besides, if he was really naked, he'd probably be locked up somewhere at the moment.

Duncan hit a pigeon.

He wasn't expecting it, and what the hell was the stupid bird doing out at this time of night? For whatever

reason, it was there, and Duncan and the pigeon collided in full flight. They smacked off of one another, the pigeon spiralled away, and Duncan never did discover what ultimately became of it. All the vampire bat knew was that he was now careening out of control towards the street.

He flapped his wings furiously and pulled out of his plunge, finally pulling himself together and arcing upward. The sun would be up inside of half an hour, though, and with a mental shrug he gave up and flapped off to his refrigerator carton and home.

Darlene spent the day making preparations.

It was Saturday and she spent it shopping. Shopping for sexy lingerie for herself, for sexy clothing for Josh, for a sumptuous meal that she was going to prepare, for velvet ropes to add an air of kinkiness to the proceedings (as if sleeping with a man-wolf wasn't kinky enough). At home she made preparations under the interested gaze of the wolf.

And that evening, as the moon came up, she was prepared. A bottle of wine on the table, a candle flickering in the middle. The bed already pulled out and fitted with silk sheets (her credit limit already bent near to the breaking point as the result of her new relationship). She was wearing a pink silk teddy and, over that, a short purple kimono. She had laid out an appropriately leisurely ensemble for Josh to wear once he transformed.

She sat down, legs crossed demurely, and waited for the change.

And waited.

And waited.

By the time she had waited a half hour, with the wolf staring at her blandly, she began to realize something was wrong.

She looked out the window and realized, with sinking heart, that the full moon was beginning to wane. Her hopes for a romantic evening waned even faster.

She put down the glass and said softly, "Aw, shit."

Then she went into the kitchen, pulled the roast out of the oven and brought it back to the table. Under the wolf's watchful eye she cut it in half and then simply tossed it to him. And as he gobbled it she said sadly, ' 'bon appetit."

By the next morning she had managed to put aside her disappointment, and was even chiding herself for being foolish enough to forget that werewolves only change at full moon. It would be another month before Josh the wolf would change back into Josh the human.

She spent the next month making it the best month that the wolf had ever spent in his life.

Darlene had been astounded at the speed with which Josh had become acclimated to humanity. But that was only Josh. Now it was time to woo the wolf over to her as well. She decided to do so by giving the

wolf the absolute best of everything.

She stepped up real meat to four times a week, becoming such a fixture in the butcher shop that the butcher took a liking to her and started cutting the price for her. He was also more than happy to give her large bones that had enough meat left on them to give Josh something to gnaw on. Josh just adored those.

She started to buy from a gourmet pet-food store, until she realized that it was costing her more, for that than the meat she got at the butcher shop. So she returned to the more normal dog food for those days she couldn't afford fresh meat.

She made Josh his own bed out of a futon, and even took the plunge and got cable TV. She recorded six hours worth of werewolf films from a variety of cable stations, and alternated them with six hours worth of Lassie reruns which the wolf also seemed to enjoy. She would plug these into the VCR before she left in the morning so that the wolf could be entertained.

And when she came home she would pamper him, brushing out his fur or scratching behind his ears, which he really seemed to like. She got him a flea collar. She got him every doggie toy she could think of.

Then she got a book on wolves, and one of the things it emphasized was that wolves, being wild animals, are damned near impossible to domesticate.

It made her wonder briefly how she had managed it. How had Josh gone from being a wolf accustomed to foraging in the wilds of Canada to a happily housebound animal? She realized then that Josh was no longer simply a wolf. Even in his wolf form, there was still elements of the human in him now, elements that were serving to...

To what? Domesticate him? Well, that should make her happy. Shouldn't it?

April turned unusually warm and she began taking Josh for longer and longer walks. One Sunday the temperature actually hit the 70s, unusually balmy for that time of year in New York.

That day Darlene was feeling especially adventurous. Besides, it was becoming apparent to her that Josh was starting to go a little stir-crazy. He didn't scratch at the door so much as stand there and stare at it in clear irritation. The only time she took him out was early in the morning and late at night to do his business.

It was time, therefore, for an adventure, especially with the summerlike weather. As Josh watched expressionlessly, Darlene changed into a bikini and pulled on a T-shirt and jeans over it. Then she reached into a drawer and pulled out the leash.

Josh growled in annoyance. Darlene stopped and, from several feet away, said, "You always gripe about it, but it can't be helped. You have to have a leash on, or some cop is going to stop me, and that's all we need." She approached Josh slowly and, although he was still clearly reluctant, he submitted and let her put the leash on him.

Moments later they were out in the street, and Darlene flagged a cab. It slowed down as it approached but then the cabbie spotted Josh. "No way, lady!" he shouted as the cab accelerated and went on its way.



Darlene sighed and looked down at Josh. "I guess we walk, sport."

Fortunately it was a lovely day, and the hike to Central Park was nothing overwhelming. Occasionally someone passing by would question her as to what breed of dog Josh was, and she would hedge her bets by saying that he had a little wolf in him. This, she reasoned, was most definitely true.

When they got to the park they wandered through until Darlene found a reasonably grassy area where the sun was shining unobstructed. She found that a number of people were already there sunbathing. She realized that she had forgotten a towel, but the hell with it. There was no way she was going to walk all the way back home just to get a towel.

"Lie down, Josh," she said commandingly, and Josh did so. Then she stripped down to her bikini and, arranging the clothes under her as a makeshift cushion, she lay down on the grass, her head tucked on Josh's stomach, and closed her eyes. There was something incredibly "relaxing about being surrounded by all that fur and inner strength. Josh, enjoying a rare moment of outdoor relaxation, rested his head on his paws. He, however, did not close his eyes. Despite all appearances the world of humans could still be a threatening place, and he didn't want to take his eyes off it if he could help it.

She had no idea how long she had fallen asleep for, because she wasn't wearing a watch, but she was awakened by a soft clicking and a low growling. The latter came from Josh, the former from a camera. She opened her eyes, shielding them with one hand from the glare of the sun.

A man was standing several feet away, taking snapshots of her. Without moving from her spot she said, "You want to tell me what you're doing?"

He lowered the camera. He didn't look like a pervert. He looked like a college kid. "I'm a photographer," he said. "You looked real good lying there and I was hoping you wouldn't mind if I took a couple of shots of you."

She raised an eyebrow, patting Josh on the head to let him know there was no immediate threat. "You really think I look that good? I've been dieting like mad over the winter."

"It shows."

"Really?" This kid sure knew how to push the right buttons.

"Yeah. Of course, I guess having your friend around takes care of extra table scraps, so you don't nibble them later."

"Who, Josh? Yeah, you could say that."

"Josh. And you are?"

"Darlene. Darlene Abramowitz."

"Live here in Manhattan?"

"Yep."

He bobbed his head slightly in acknowledgement. "Thanks, Darlene. Enjoy the day."

"You too."

Bobbing his head once more, he walked away. "Nice kid," Darlene said to Josh.

As Darlene was getting dressed for work the next morning, her phone rang. She picked it up and said "Hello?" while pulling on a sneaker.

"Ms. Abramowitz? This is Mr. Feld."

She blinked in surprise. Mr. Feld her landlord? He owned a number of buildings and she rarely saw him. The super handled problems around the place—Mr. Feld was just a name at an address where she sent an ungodly amount of her pay every month. Thank heavens for rent control. "Hi, Mr. Feld. What's up? Shutting down the gas heater again for a week for repairs?"

"Not at all. Ms. Abramowitz, you are aware that there is a no-pets clause in your lease."

She froze and stared at Josh. "Uh... yeah."

"So what are you doing with a large dog in your apartment?"

"Oh, he's... he's not a dog, exactly."

"Is he a canine?"

"Well, yes."

"Then he's a dog," said Feld with finality.

"Look, Mr. Feld." She started to tie her shoe. "How did you find out about him?"

"Page two of the Daily News," he said.

"What?" She stopped tying. "What do you mean?"

"The photo of you in the park. Very becoming, but I believe you owe me an explanation."

That little fink! she thought furiously. Out loud, she said, "Look, Mr. Feld... he's not technically a pet. A close friend of mine passed away, and she lived alone and hadn't left any provision as to what was supposed to be done with her dog, Josh. And the family members just wanted to give it to the pound, and I couldn't let that happen. Seven days and then he's killed. You saw him in the paper, he's a gorgeous animal. And you know I—"

"Yes, Ms. Abramowitz, I know animals are a very big part of your life," he sighed. "Look, I'm not a bad guy. Pets are just bad business, like children. They lower property values. I personally love animals. I don't want to be responsible for having the dog killed. But I have my investment to consider. You know what a dog can do to an apartment."

Having scrubbed the place down three times with Lyso! and still barely gotten the scent out, Darlene

said regretfully, "Yeah, I know."

"Now if it's a temporary thing, that's fine. But it can't be long-term. I'll give you thirty days to find another home for him. Otherwise I'm afraid you'll have to find another home for both of you. Fair enough?"

She didn't think so, but she had a feeling it was the best she was going to get. "Yeah. Sure. Fair enough."

"Good." He hung up without any further words.

She stared at the phone and then blew a Bronx cheer at him.

When she went out to work she stopped by a newsstand and grabbed a copy of the paper. Flipping it open she gasped to find a shot of herself, bikini clad, lying in the park and dozing against Josh. Below it was a caption that read, "Manhattanite Darlene Abramowitz signals the arrival of spring as she lounges in Central Park with her dog, Josh. Temperatures hit the 70s yesterday and are expected to rise that high again today."

"Great," she said in irritation. "Now I'm part of the damned weather report."

When she got to the office she was greeted with a chorus of whistles. On her desk she discovered several dozen copies of the picture, clipped out neatly and arrayed on her desk top. The others were grinning as Amy sidled over and said, "I see your dieting did wonders for you, Darlene."

"Jealous, Amy?" she replied silkily, a response that got a chorus of cat hisses and poised fingernails as if claws had been bared. Feigning a direct hit, Amy staggered away, leaving Darlene to wonder if there had been anyone who hadn't seen the photograph.

As it happened, there was. Mr. Ruben at the zoo, for example, read the New York Times, a paper considerably beyond printing photos of skimpily clad women. So he never saw it, which was fortunate, for if he'd recognized the wolf in the photo, as he most assuredly would have, all hell could have broken loose.

And Duncan didn't read it, for there was very little in most newspapers to attract his attention. Besides, he too preferred the New York Times when it came to papers, since there was more to wrap himself up in.

However, the wire services picked up the picture, since other parts of the country were going through a significant cold snap and they thought it would warm the cockles of other readers' hearts to see that spring might actually be on the way.

The picture eventually, through the magic of wires, wended its way up to Canada and landed in the morning newspaper of Doctor Edward Parsons.

Parsons leaned forward so abruptly when he saw it that he knocked his coffee over. The brown liquid cascaded across the neatly completed personnel reports that he'd been working on and dripped down to the floor, leaving stains like dried blood.

"Goddamn," he spat out.

He read the caption silently, mouthing the words. Her name leaped out at him, as did the word "Manhattanite." And the wolf's face. Since the photo was black-and-white, he couldn't tell what color the

eyes were, but he would bet anything—his life excluded, of course—that it was the wolf. The wolf.

He spun and looked at the calendar he had hanging on the wall. It had come from an insurance company, and the thing that was helpful about it was that it had, neatly printed under each day, a little drawing of the moon and what phase it was in. He looked at it only out of habit, to confirm what he already knew. The next full moon was in two days. If only that idiot Duncan would call in.

He leaned back and toyed with the idea of hopping a plane down to New York and attending to this himself. It would be so simple. Just track her down. Where she would be, the wolf also would be. And then he would fire a silver bullet, or simply wait until the full moon and rip the wolf to shreds in its human guise...

Except...

Except...

He stared at the wolf in the picture and felt a cold shiver clamping on his spine. There was something about that creature. Something that he didn't like. Something that a gut instinct, some primal intuition, warned him about.

He had been a werewolf for some years now, moving from town to town when the murders started to pile up in one particular area. No one ever associated the deaths with him, of course, for they were all clearly the results of animal attacks. And no one in this enlightened day and age gave the concept of man-into-beast any credence at all.

During the first months of his curse he had been frightened, certain that behind every building or around every corner there lurked someone with a gun loaded with silver bullets, ready to kill him. But as months turned into years and he went on undetected, a certain sense of confidence began to envelop him. And as the years went by the confidence turned into a sense of invulnerability. Nothing could hurt him. Nothing could stop him. The curse was a blessing and he would go on and OR, year after year, killing and feeding as he pleased.

Except...

Looking at this wolf in the picture, this one lousy thrice-damned wolf, stirred in him the feelings that he'd had when he was first transformed. He felt uncertain, nervous. He felt as if somehow, through some horrible accident, he had sown the seeds of his own defeat. He saw his own death between those jaws.

And there had been dreams recently. Dreams of teeth clamping down on him, filling him with pain and agony beyond all belief. He had tried to shake them off but had been unsuccessful. He had not been able to see the source of the pain, of the teeth, but he could imagine it. Imagine it all too vividly.

Looking at the picture one more time, he decided that things would remain as they were. When Duncan called, Parsons would tell his brother-in-curse what the picture had told him. Perhaps Duncan himself had already seen it and was working on it from his end. Besides, with any luck at all, perhaps the wolf would choose not to come back. From the way the wolf was just lying there, he was looking pretty damned comfortable.

Perhaps civilization was treating him quite well.

Darlene had been looking forward to the first night of the full moon with more anticipation than she could recall since her prom night. Of course, on her prom night she'd thrown up in the girl's room half the time, so twisted in knots was her stomach. However, she had a few more years under her belt at this point and there was no nervousness on her part, but only anticipation.

For the first time in quite a while she became a clockwatcher. Work went very slowly, even bordering on coma, and the hours seemed to drag by. Eventually, however, the hour hand crawled towards 5:00. She had her desk cleared by 4:45 and waited patiently, hands folded, her feet bouncing agitatedly under her desk.

At five minutes to five all hell broke loose.

Amy had been gone most of the day but when she banged in through the door, her arms loaded with papers and file folders, Darlene felt her heart sink down to her shoes.

"All right, people!" she shouted. "Gather round!" She slammed the massive pile down on Darlene's until-recently spotless desk. "We have what you could call a significant problem!"

Amy was wearing her one and only dress-for-success power outfit, so Darlene knew that she'd been off doing serious business-type things. "What's going on?"

The others gathered around as well. "Looks like you had a wonderful day," said Gretchen.

"It would seem," said Amy tightly, ignoring all attempts at civil greetings, "that our legislators have been extremely busy in our nation's capital. A bill has been introduced that caters entirely to the American Rifle Association, would put several already at-risk species in danger of complete extinction, and would turn several hundred acres of currently protected forest land into a shooting gallery."

"Holy shit," murmured Joe.

Gretchen gave an unpleasant laugh. "Your tax dollars at work."

"That is really the pits," said Darlene. She glanced at her watch. "Well, I gotta go."

"Hold it!" said Amy in no uncertain terms. "No one goes anywhere. "I've got piles of phone numbers here. Senators, congressmen, lobbyists, reporters, other animal-rights groups—anyone who'll listen. We're going to be working late, making calls to anyone and everyone who'll listen. I hope nobody had anything planned."

"But Amy!" said Darlene urgently. "It's five o'clock! I mean, other offices will be closed anyway if we try to call them."

"Only Eastern Standard Time," replied Amy. "And for those people who aren't around, well, that's why God created home phone numbers."

Darlene blew air from between her teeth. "You're really going to be obnoxious about this, aren't you?"

"It's a very obnoxious bill. And what's with you, anyway?" Amy looked at her with some surprise. "You're the original go-getter. You're the original damn-the-consequences-let's-nail-the-bastards woman. Something up with you that's more important than this?"

Darlene hesitated, then sighed. "Nothing's more important. Gimme some of those phone numbers."

By the time they got out it was well after 9:00. Darlene ran from the subway station, her heart pounding, nervous and agitated. She had tried to call Josh once the moon had risen but there had been no answer. Was he okay? Had he lost control of himself and gone wandering through the streets, naked and wild once more? He could be lost, he could be dead, he could be anything. Josh, Josh, her mind screamed.

She got to her apartment, pounded up the stairs and shoved open the door.

Josh belched loudly.

She stopped in the doorway, staring at him.

He was seated on her couch, his legs propped up on the table. He was wearing one of her T-shirts, which was ludicrously small on him, so a vast expanse of his belly was exposed. And he was wearing undershorts and socks, and seemed perfectly content in that attire. In one hand he was cradling a beer, and there were several empties lying strewn about.

The TV was on, tuned to a miniseries that was an adaptation of a Sidney Sheldon potboiler. Josh turned to look up at Darlene and smiled. "Oh, hi, Darlene." He slapped the cushion next to him. "Sit down. I was wondering where you were."

Slowly she crossed the room and sat down next to him. She stared at him. "Josh... are you feeling okay?"

"Fine. I'm fine. Why?"

"You look... real relaxed."

"Well, why shouldn't I be?" He belched again. "Sorry." He crushed the can and tossed it across the room, missing the wastebasket by a good two feet. "You got any more of this stuff?"

"Josh, are you sure you're feeling all right?"

"Yeah, I feel fine. Why do you keep asking?"

"I don't know." She paused. "I went food shopping yesterday, so I got plenty of stuff. Want me to make you some dinner? Or we could go out."

"I ate."

"Ate? Ate what?"

"A box of Hostess Ho-Ho's."

"Hostess Ho-Ho's?" she said incredulously. "You can't be serious."

He stared at her. "Why not?"

"Well, because it's not... not..."

"Not what?"

"Not you!"

He seemed taken aback. "It's not?"

"No! Look... let's go out, okay?"

"But I'll miss the show."

"Screw the show! I've gotta get you out of here. I've got to get out myself a little bit. Otherwise I don't know what's going to happen with you."

"But it's late," he whined.

"It's nine-thirty! You're supposed to be a night creature."

"Oh, all right," he sighed. "If it'll make you happy."

"Yes, it would. Very."

She got him into some reasonable-looking clothes and shoved him out the door. Moments later they were walking along Third Avenue, and she said, "There's a really nice Italian place I'd like to take you to. Francesca's, over on 28th. You'll love it."

"Hold it." He stopped and sniffed an aroma that wafted through the late evening air. "Let's try that place. It smells great."

She looked where he was pointing and she felt her spirit plummet. "McDonald's?"

"Absolutely."

"McDonald's? I want to take you to a great Italian place and you want to drag me to McDonald's?"

He stared through the large front windows. "It seems very popular there."

"It's cheap! That's the only really good thing about it."

"Well it seems fine from here, and I want to try it," he said in an uncompromising tone.

Bowing to the inevitable, she took him to McDonald's. There she nibbled halfheartedly at a fish sandwich and watched in growing dismay as Josh quickly chowed down no less than four Big Macs and an order of large fries. The only trace he left was the paper it had been wrapped in.

"Great stuff!" he said cheerfully, and she moaned in disbelief.

She wanted to stay out late, to somehow get the old wolf juices flowing, but Josh insisted on returning home and watching the last half hour of the movie. When "To Be Continued" appeared at the end he

moaned in dismay. "When does it continue?" he demanded.

"Tomorrow night," said Darlene tonelessly.

"Well, we'll just have to see it then." He paused. "What's on now?"

"The news." He nodded and sat back.

Darlene stared at him. This was not the way it was supposed to be going. What the hell was wrong with him?

"It was, quite possibly, one of the most humiliating times of my life," Josh said to me.

("Well, I don't see what was that big a deal, to be honest," I said. "I mean, you weren't doing anything illegal or immoral. And millions of people spend evenings like you did—watching TV and eating junk food and stuff.")

"But Darlene was right. It wasn't me. And I couldn't see it." He shook his head. "I was... am... a creature of the supernatural. When a man turns into a wolf, he becomes acclimated to what it's like to be a wolf. And I was becoming... civilized. A full human. Worse... atypical human. It was... not pretty."

"Get up, Josh," she said briskly. He obeyed, then stood to one side watching the news as she removed the sofa cushions and pulled open the bed. "I'll be back in a little bit," she said.

"Uh-huh," he nodded.

Darlene walked into the bathroom, being careful to leave the door partially open, as invitingly as possible. As she undressed she became more and more uneasy about the change that had come over Josh. And there was most definitely a change, despite what he said.

For one thing he had not even asked whether, after all this time, she had discovered where he hailed from. It had been her guilty secret for close to a month that she had not told him when she first found out. She had dreaded his asking. Except now he didn't appear remotely interested. It was as if something in him had simply died.

Well, she decided, a small smile playing on her lips, what she was going to have to do was find a way to reawaken the animal in his soul. That was all there was to it. And she was most definitely capable of doing so.

Now naked, she started up the shower, letting it run off her hand until she was satisfied with the temperature. Then she stepped into the tub, sliding the shower curtain closed around her. But it was one of those clear plastic shower curtains, designed for keeping the bathroom dry but most definitely not for hiding things from prying eyes. Rather than concealment for modesty, it was more of an invitation to dance.

She lathered herself up, cleansed every part of her. Then, in as silky a voice as she could muster, she called out, "Oh, Josh... I could use someone to do my back."



She waited for an answer. Nothing.

"Jooosshhh," she cooed, and she tried to keep that sultry tone while raising her voice—not an easy trick. "I could reeaaaally use someone to scrub my baaaaacckk."

Still no answer.

Now beginning to feel a little annoyed, she shouted, "Josh! Can you hear me?"

Once again, no response.

She sighed in irritation and shut off the water. Stepping out of the shower, she quickly towelled off her hair. Then she towelled off the rest of herself but, instead of putting on the bathrobe that was hanging on the hook near the door, she instead wrapped the towel around herself. It was decent by barely a quarter of an inch, which was exactly what she wanted.

If the mountain wouldn't come to her, she would have to go to the mountain.

She stepped slowly out of the bathroom and cooed, "You must not have heard me, Josh. You missed the chance to do my back. But you still have the opportunity to do the rest of... me..."

Her voice trailed off as she stared at her lupine paramour.

Josh was asleep, snoring loudly.

Her arms dropped, as did the towel. She stormed across the room and, leaning over Josh, grabbed him by the shirt front. One of her breasts brushed against his face.

"Wake up, you idiot!" she shouted in his face. "Wake up and have one of the greatest sexual encounters in your life!"

Josh half-opened a bleary yellow eye. "What?" He yawned, and the beer on his breath threatened to knock her out.

"Oh, Christ," she moaned and let go of him. He sagged back down and snored all the more loudly.

She sat there, naked and mortified.

There was a scratching at her window.

She turned.

There was a man there. His feet were braced on the narrow ledge beneath him, his hands holding clawlike to either side of the window. A raincoat billowed out around him like a cape.

Darlene jumped back, emitting a screech and automatically grabbing up a sheet to cover her nakedness. His face was dark, unshaven, but his eyes seemed to glimmer in the darkness.

"Get out of here, you sicko!" she shrieked... or started to. What she managed to say was "Get..." and then she forgot what she had been saying. A hypnotic haze settled in over her mind, and those dark eyes

flickered with an unholy fire.

"Darlene Abramowitz," he said in a low tone laced with passion. "You should have had an unlisted phone number."

Downstairs the aged Mrs. Michaelson was just coming home from a frustrating evening of playing bingo. As the wizened woman arrived at the front door of the apartment building, she looked up and saw the dark figure clinging to the outside of the structure. "Hey! You!" she said with a surprisingly strong voice. "Get down from there, you pervert!"

The dark figure looked down and hissed, "Shut up, you old bag!"

"Pervert!" she raised her voice. "I'm calling the police!"

"I'm not a pervert," he said in irritation. "I'm a vampire! Now get lost before I suck out what little blood you've got left!"

"Vampire!" she snorted. "Get down from that window right now, you vampire, or I'm getting my shotgun!"

"You do that, lady."

Angrily Mrs. Michaelson opened the apartment building's front door and slammed it behind her.

Duncan shook his head. He was going to have to wrap this up fast. The last thing he needed was the police all over him. He turned back to Darlene, who had obediently remained in her hypnotic trance while his attention was diverted. He smiled admiringly, his lips drawing back, displaying his fangs.

She was quite an attractive little number. The old wolf had done well for himself.

She stood there obediently, like something in his dreams. "Now, Darlene," he whispered. "Invite me in."

"Invite... you?" she said hazily.

She was fighting it. The old woman had distracted him, and he was going to have to reinforce his hold. "Yes," said Duncan. "I can't enter unless you invite me in. You have to say 'Come in.' " He glanced at the sleeping form of Josh. "If your wolf friend hadn't been so far away at the zoo, I would have forced him to invite me there. I need to be very close up for my hypnosis, Darlene. You like close up, don't you?"

"Yes." She sighed and started to walk slowly towards him. Her breasts swayed slightly. "Close up."

"Invite me in." He licked his lips. "Invite me in and I'll make all your dreams... and my dreams... come true."

It would be so simple. Even a werereature such as Josh would be susceptible to being torn limb from limb. Silver bullets were not the only answer. And then there would be the girl, and it had been so long since he'd had one like her.

"All our dreams," he repeated.

"All—" She was closer to him.

"Yes."

"All our dreams?" She was tantalizingly inches away.

"Yes." He smiled and reached towards her. "Invite me in. That's all it will take. Just—"

Mrs. Michaelson shot him in the ass.

The impact of the shotgun blew Duncan clear off the ledge while ripping off a considerable portion of his buttocks. He screamed, high and long, and started to fall.

Now there was pandemonium throughout the building as windows started flying open. Somewhere in the distance a police siren wailed.

As he started to fall, Duncan instinctively began to revert to his bat form. Pain ripped through him as his torn flesh bent itself around, shrinking and bleeding. People witnessing the transformation flat-out did not believe what they were seeing.

Through it all Mrs. Michaelson remained unflappable. She was outside, leaning against a lamppost, a small throw pillow against her shoulder to absorb the recoil from the .12-gauge shotgun. The change in midair from human shape to flying rodent cut no ice with her as she calmly chambered another round. The bat spun, orienting itself, and Mrs. Michaelson squeezed off another shot. This one ripped through the bat's right wing and he spun, out of control, and fell to the ground not five paces away from Mrs. Michaelson.

His form rippled, and took human shape again. He staggered to his feet, holding his limp arm. "You... you..." he stammered out, and then lunged at her.

She waited until he was almost on top of her, then brought her hand around and shoved a crucifix against his forehead.

It burned into Duncan's skin and he howled, the hissing and the scent of burning flesh filling the air. He spun away, tripped over a fire hydrant and staggered back to his feet. He heard the ominouska-chak as Mrs. Michaelson prepared to blow away another part of his anatomy.

At that moment a police car roared up in response to the shooting and the alarmed calls to 911. The cops leaped out, shouting "Hold it!" and not quite knowing who they were addressing—the apparently harmless but heavily armed old woman, or the darkly menacing but severely wounded man.

High above the street, the naked and somewhat woozy Dar-lene slowly drew out of her trance and now, reflexively, jumped back from what had previously been in her window— except he wasn't there anymore. She blinked in surprise, and then went to the window and looked out, picking up the sheet to cover herself once more.

Below her was pandemonium.

Duncan ducked behind the policeman, his face still aching from the crucifix burn. The cop, gun out, shouted at him to "Hold it!" But Duncan, hurt and frustrated and royally pissed, had no patience at all. His hand lashed out with such force that it snapped the cop's head halfway around, instantly breaking his neck.

The cop's partner saw it, swung his gun away from Mrs. Michaelson and aimed it at the vampire. "You! What did you do?"

Duncan started to reply but once again the shotgun fired, the blast just missing him and taking out the windows of the police car. He spun and saw to his dismay that there were ejected shell casings on the ground near the old woman's feet, and she had just chambered another round. And who knew how much more ammo the old woman had on her in case she depleted the magazine.

"Jesus Christ," he said, and then moaned as his tongue burned. Enough was enough. If he'd been pushed so far that he was forgetting and doing damage to himself, it was time to pack it in.

He transformed into a bat once more and launched himself skyward. Another blast ripped through the night, but his flight was so erratic from his one injured wing that he was difficult to draw a bead on.

The cop ran over to his dead partner, gasped out the man's name, then grabbed the police radio and summoned an ambulance he knew would be too late. Tenants were slowly coming out now that things seemed to have quieted down.

Darlene, tossing on a bathrobe and running past the still-snoring Josh, was downstairs in a flash. She approached Mrs. Michaelson, who was now holding the throw pillow under one withered arm. She started to say something to the old woman, but realized she wasn't sure what. Thanks seemed appropriate, but she was still hazy about what had happened.

For her part, Mrs. Michaelson didn't seem to care. Instead she watched with irritation as the bat flapped away, out of range. She put her crucifix back onto the chain around her neck and slide it under her dress. Then she shook her head.

"Goddamn vampires think they run the whole city," she said.

16

Darlene sat at her desk, staring out into space. Amy had to address her three times before she looked up, and even then she had trouble focussing. "I'm sorry, Amy, what's up?"

"You want to tell me what's bothering you?"

"I don't really think so, no."

"Well, you better. Because there's sure as hell something on your mind."

She sat back in her chair and just shook her head. "There's a guy I know... or thought I knew. And he's just changed a little, that's all."

"Changed how?" She made a face. "Don't tell me this is Derrick again."

"No, it's not Derrick again. Okay?"

"Okay. So how has he changed?"

She paused and considered the best way to answer. "When I first met him he was probably the most exciting man I'd ever met. There was something about him that made him different from anyone I'd ever known. He was inquisitive, dynamic..."

"Sex?"

"Incredible sex," admitted Darlene. Once such a statement would have made her blush, but somewhere along the way she had lost her blushes. "Really great, yeah. And now,

I was together with him last night and he was... he was like a couch potato."

"Bummer."

"Yeah, bummer."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

Darlene pulled at her lower lip. "I don't know. What do you think I can do about it?"

"You've got to remind him of what he used to be like. You've got to let him know that you're really unhappy with the way he's being. Or..."

"Or what?"

"Or dump him."

Darlene looked taken aback. "No. No, I couldn't do that. If I dumped him, he'd have nowhere to go. He'd be helpless."

Amy stared at her in disbelief. "For Chrissakes, Darlene, is this guy an infant or something?"

"No. No, of course not."

"Well, then what's the big deal? He survived before he met you, and he'll survive after you dump him." Suddenly her eyes narrowed. "Hold it. You didn't move in with him, did you?"

"No."

Amy let out a sigh of relief.

"Actually," Darlene continued, "he kind of moved in with me." At Amy's expression she said quickly, "It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"Aw, jeez, Darlene, how could you? Now you've got a real problem." She leaned against the desk and said, "Don't you get it? Men are like stray dogs. If there's a stray dog hanging around you and you don't feed him, eventually he goes away. If you feed him, then you can't get rid of him. Even worse than that,

he can become overly dependent on you."

"Yeah," said Darlene. "Yeah, I think you're right. Thanks, Amy. Thanks for everything." She stood and started to gather her belongings.

Amy blinked in surprise and glanced over at the office clock. "It's a little after three! Where do you think you're going?"

"I have some errands to run. Oh, and I won't be in tomorrow, probably."

"Well where the hell are you going?"

Darlene patted her cheek. "Off to follow your advice. You going to fire me for that?"

She hurried out of the office before Amy could reply and hoped that she would have a job left to come back to.

As the moon began to rise, she laid out the clothes for Josh and then waited. As the change began, this time she forced herself to watch it with unwavering eyes. If she could do this, it would help her find the inner strength to say what she had to.

It started with the legs, and she did not avert her eyes as Josh flopped onto his side, howling in agony as the change began. Partway through someone started banging underneath her. Josh, in his pain, was making too much noise for the people who lived beneath her. But Darlene had no patience for that this night, and she stomped on the floor and shouted, "Don't worry! He won't be bothering you anymore!"

There. She had said it for the first time, voiced what she hadn't wanted to admit.

She was reminded of a T-shirt she'd seen. It read, "If you love something, set it free. If it doesn't return to you, hunt it down and shoot it." There was something to be said for that.

Her mind had wandered, she realized. A remarkable achievement, considering what was happening in front of her. She brought her concentration around and saw that the transformation was nearly complete. Josh's face was, like silly putty, acquiring its human quality. The howling died down to a low moan, and then he sat up, rubbing his jaw as if he'd just been slugged.

He looked up at her and said, "What's on TV tonight?"

She sat down across from him and said, "Josh... I found out where you came from."

He blinked in surprise. "You did?"

"Yes."

"That's... interesting." He paused, then stood and started to pull on his clothes. "Oh, I remember... it's almost time for the second half of that show from yesterday."

"Josh!" Her hands fluttered about. "Don't you care?"

"Yes. Yes, of course I do. Where is it?"

"A small town in Ontario called McKeeville."

"I see." He crossed to the TV and turned it on. "What channel was it, do you remember?"

She stepped in front of the TV and snapped it off. "Hey!" he protested.

"You stood there at the Empire State Building," she said angrily, "and you told me you have to get back. You made me promise to get you home."

"That was... before," he said uncomfortably.

"Before what?"

"Before what happened to us happened." He took her by the shoulders. "Darlene, I love you."

She shook him off and pulled away. "You've got a mate, remember?"

"She's a wolf!" he said. "She's the mate of a wolf! But I'm part man now, and a man has different needs, different wants! Don't you understand?"

"Yeah, sure I do," she said. "Like Ho-Ho's, and beers, and TV."

"Does all of that upset you?" he said in confusion. "Fine. Whatever you want. No more junk food. No more TV."

"It's not that!" She had to fight back the tears, to concentrate on what was being said. "Those are just symptoms of the problem. The problem is that you're losing everything that made you special. That made you yourself! You're turning into everything that's worst about people." She sat, but when he came towards her she brushed him away. "It's not your fault. It's me. I made life too easy for you. I wanted everything to be so good for you. I figured that it would be better for you if you didn't have to live the rest of your life like... an animal."

"But you were right. I don't want to go back to that life."

"No! No, I was wrong! Don't you see, Josh? You're dying. Bit by bit, little by little. You're losing the animal spirit, and there's nothing to replace it with. I'm killing you! Killing you with kindness."

"Darlene—"

She put up a hand, reached around to her pocketbook and pulled out some Polaroid snapshots. "I was over at the zoo today."

"Zoo?"

"The Flushing Meadow Zoo. Here. Your old pals say hi." She handed him the photos.

"I looked at those pictures, " said Josh, "and memories gone for a month came to me. I stared at those

lackluster wolves in the pictures, and the first thing that occurred to me was, basically, So what? They're just wolves. What am I supposed to get from this? What point is she trying to get across?

"And that's when the memories came back, as I mentioned. I recalled what it had been like when I first arrived at that zoo. How the wolves were so lackluster, so dreary. They were resigned to their fate. They had had no fire in them. And I, the newly arrived wolf from the wild, had nothing but disdain for them. How could wolves, proud wolves, allow themselves to fall so low? I had thought.

'And I realized what had happened. I realized that pampering, that the removal of the day-to-day drive to survive, had had the same effect on me as it had had on those wolves. You stop caring. When you don't have to fight for life, then it loses its meaning.

'Yes, I remembered the disdain I had felt for those wolves— and now I felt it for myself. And somehow, Darlene had known seeing those pathetic creatures would trigger that. Instinct. I guess she got that from me. "

Josh stared at the pictures of the wolves, and his large fist closed on them. They crumpled.

"McKeeville, eh?"

"That's right."

"My pack."

"They may be dead," she pointed out.

"I know. But I've got to find out."

She looked for the fire in his eyes and found it. The fire in his body was there as well, she knew, and suddenly she wanted it inside her...

... and knew that she couldn't. Now was not the time. Indeed, it might be that the time would never come again. But there was nothing she could do about that.

"All right," she said. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"La Guardia."

"Where's that?"

She stood, brushing off some imaginary dirt. "An airport. I checked and there's no direct flight to McKeeville. It's too small. We're going to have to take a plane to Toronto and change there. I bought tickets already." Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out a pair of tickets.

"And we're... we're leaving right now?" Despite the realization he'd come to, it still wasn't easy for him.

"Yeah. That's right. It's going to be necessary for us to travel at night, because there's no way I'm going



to be able to get a wolf past Canadian customs. A man, however, should have no problems. It doesn't even matter about a passport— they hardly ever check."

"All right." He smiled. "All right."

He stood there in front of her, with that smile and his powerful body, and now the tears came. "Goddamnit, why'd you have to go and be a wolf?"

"Birth defect."

She went to him and he enfolded her in his arms. He bent his face towards her and she kissed him, and again he drew his head back quickly with a moan.

"I forgot," she said. "You don't like kissing," and they simply stood there, holding each other.

Moments later they were in a car heading for La Guardia.

Across town, a cab slowed down to pick up a man in a somewhat tattered raincoat. A rolled-up sleeping bag was strapped onto his back.

"Where to, sir?" he asked as the man stepped in.

Duncan settled back in the seat. "La Guardia Airport," he said tightly.

The cab moved out into traffic.

"Queens,,huh?" said the cabbie. "I try to stay out of Queens. There's all kinds of nuts out there. There was this one guy I picked up a while back-Duncan leaned forward and said, "Look, I really rather would not hear it, okay?"

"Sure. Fine." The cabbie shrugged. "Where you off to, anyway?"

"Canada."

"Business?"

"Kind of. I'm going to kill a friend because of all the aggravation I've gotten into over him."

"Aggravation?" The cabbie glanced into his rearview mirror to get a better look at his passenger and, oddly, didn't see him in it.

"Forget it," said the passenger tiredly. "It was just a stupid joke."

"Oh. Ha, ha," the cabbie laughed uncertainly.

Duncan leaned back and slid a hand into his pocket. He felt a twinge of pain in his right shoulder—it was going to be a while before that was fully recovered. The advantage of being dead was that it was tough to kill you. The drawback was that it took a long time for wounds to disappear. Either way he didn't want to shift into his bat form until he was certain his flight wouldn't be erratic.

He caressed the gun in his pocket. The revolver had five normal, typical bullets in it—and one of gleaming silver.

His mind went back to when he had acquired the gun.

It had been not too long after he had become a vampire, and Ed a werewolf.

He remembered when he'd been down in New Orleans for Mardi Gras. The entire city had been one huge party...

And the vampire-killer had come after him, mere days after he and Ed had killed the old gypsy. The vampire- and werewolf-killer, actually, who had thought that silver was just as effective against vampires as against werewolves.

He'd been partially correct. Silver was certainly irritating. It caused him to break out in a rash. But the five silver bullets that had penetrated Duncan's body, including the one that had drilled him through the heart, had most definitely not killed him. He, however, had killed the vampire hunter, and kept the gun and the sixth silver bullet as a souvenir.

Or had it been merely a souvenir? Had he known that, eventually, he would want to use it?

He had considered Parsons to be a friend, a partner in misery. But he saw now, more painfully than ever, that Parsons had simply used him. The other night when he'd called Parsons on the phone, just before the doctor's transformation, and Parsons had told him of the photograph, the doctor had been particularly abusive. Why, he had demanded, wasn't Duncan capable of finding out these sorts of things himself? Why was Parsons the one who had to do all the thinking?

Well, last night, with a buttload of ammo and an injured right arm, Duncan had had plenty of time to think. And what he'd been thinking wasn't particularly pleasant.

Enough of Parsons. Enough of his demands. Enough of this misery-loves-company crap. Ed had put Duncan's ass on the line and Duncan had gotten it shot off. And all the time Ed had been cowering in Canada, not wanting to come down and do his own dirty work.

All right, then. One silver bullet remained in that gun. Duncan would have liked to have more, but he sure couldn't afford silver, and besides, where in New York was he supposed to go to have someone melt down silver and cast it into a bullet? Even if someone might do it, all the gunsmiths and people he might find closed up shop at dinnertime and went home like normal people. By the time Duncan was up and around, they were all gone.

Well, it didn't matter. One silver bullet was all he was going to need.

17

The werewolf, stalking through the forest, suddenly stopped. The rest of the forest seemed to have become silent.

He swung his great head, looking for danger, but there was nothing. Nothing he could smell, nothing he

could see, nothing he could taste.

But...

... there was something.

Even if he couldn't taste it or see it or smell it, it was there just the same. Some sort of danger, coming for him.

There was a brief, uninvited flash in his mind, a flash of a dream dreamt by another who was him and not him. A flash of silver, and jaws tearing and rending. A flash of the future.

Danger was not here, but it was coming. Coming for him.

Traffic was heavy at LaGuardia that night, and Duncan's cab sat in traffic for what seemed an ungodly amount of time. Finally, however, it pulled up to the passenger drop-off area. The cabbie glanced at the meter and said, "Twelve bucks even, fella. Lucky you we came by the bridge or you'd have the tolls too."

"I don't have any money," said Duncan.

"What?" Annoyed, the cabbie turned. "Don't pull this crap on me. I didn't have to pick you up, you know."

Duncan's good arm lashed out, grabbed the cabbie and yanked him halfway into the back seat. "Hey!" shrieked the driver.

"Don't you want your tip?" said Duncan, and his fangs gleamed in the moonlight.

Moments later Duncan was in the front seat, with the drained body of the cabbie in the back. He shifted into drive, calmly steered the cab over into long-term parking, found a spot and left it parked there. He made certain that all the windows were rolled up before he left.

Duncan gave a passing thought to the smell that would greet the unfortunate devil who wound up opening the cab to discover the body. He took a measure of amusement in that.

He followed the walkway into the airport and moments later was standing in line at the Air Canada Terminal. He politely waited his turn and, once up to the front of the line, saw that there were two clerks—a gruff-looking man and a rather distracted young woman. It was the man who was free, however.

Duncan stepped to one side and gestured to the customer behind him. "After you." Not questioning his fortune, the man went to the ticket seller who Duncan had disdained to approach.

Now the woman was free, and this time Duncan walked forward with confidence. "Hello," he said pleasantly. "I'd like a ticket to Toronto, the next flight, if you can."

"Of course, sir," she said. She promptly started to push buttons on her terminal. "How will you be paying?"

"I won't. You will."

She blinked. "I will?"

"Yes. With your credit card."

"But..." She wavered slightly with uncertainty. "But why should I do that?"

"Because I told you to."

"Oh," she said.

"Of course," she said.

"Right away," she said. "Your name?"

"Lugosi. BelaLugosi."

In a hypnotic fog, she nevertheless went through her long-practiced, automatic steps of punching up and printing out a ticket.

"Smoking or non?"

"Nonsmoking, definitely. Those things will kill you."

"Aisle or window seat?"

"Window. On the wing, if you have one." He smiled. "I always prefer to be on the wing."

"Checking your luggage?"

"Noooo... I think I'll keep it with me."

Something suddenly jabbed Duncan in the small of the back. "Stick 'em up!" a high-pitched voice said from behind.

He turned slowly, keeping his irritation in check, to see a six-year-old boy wearing a baseball cap, a Mets jacket and Oshkosh overalls had crept up behind him. The boy was wielding a miniature baseball bat with the words "Junior Slugger" emblazoned on it, and it was this that he was using to poke at Duncan.

He had escaped the eye of his mother, who at last caught up with him and grabbed him by the wrist. "Gary!" she exclaimed. "Don't bother the man. I'm sorry, sir. He's a little overactive. It's past his bedtime."

"Oh, that's all right," said Duncan soothingly. "Maybe he'll become a batboy." He hunkered down at Gary's level and looked piercingly at him. "I could personally arrange for him to become a batboy, in fact." And, safely below the mother's eye level, he drew back his lips just slightly and flashed his fangs at Gary.

The boy jumped back in alarm. Duncan took great delight in this until the small bat smacked him in the

side of the head.

"Gary!" his mother shrieked once again and this time, without any further flustered apologies, picked the child up and carried him bodily away. Duncan heard the boy protesting, "But he had fangs, ma!" as he was toted off into the distance.

From behind him the ticket agent called, "Sir?"

He snapped to his feet, fury starting to build. "What is it?!"

Smiling and still completely under his influence, she extended a ticket. "Here you are, sir."

He sighed. "Yes, fine. Thank you."

Turning on his heel, he went towards the security check-in area, his sleeping bag slung underneath his arm. He walked to within range of the security check-in and then stopped several feet away and waited. He had plenty of time until the plane took off. He could afford to wait for what he needed.

He saw little Gary and his mother go by. Still irritated by her son's errant behavior, she had him tucked under one arm until she got up to the security check. There she placed him on his feet and he walked through, waving his bat at a security guard in what he believed to be a threatening manner. The guard, for his part, didn't seem remotely amused.

Then, further on down the hallway, heading towards security, Duncan saw what he hoped he would see: a woman with a baby in a stroller. As she approached him, Duncan saw that the infant could not have been more than three months old and it was sound asleep, covered with a cheery pink baby blanket with dancing yellow elephants. The mother was pushing, walking with brisk steps, an airline ticket clutched in her hand.

Duncan had no idea why he seemed to have an easier time hypnotizing women than men. The chauvinist in him made him think that perhaps women were simply mentally inferior. Then again, it could be that putting a woman under his spell simply brought out the best in him. Either way, he certainly found himself able to do his best work with them.

He stepped forward, intercepting her, and smiled. "My, what a charming baby you have."

She tried to go around him, but he stepped deftly to one side, blocking her path. She looked at him intently and said, "Get out of my way or I'll scream."

His eyes flashed as he said, "Now why would you want to do that?"

She hesitated, her mind foundering, and she admitted, "I... don't know why I would want to."

"It would certainly upset a lot of people here," he chided her. "Upset me terribly. Can't have that."

"No. Can't have it," she agreed.

He squatted down, looking at the baby as he reached into his coat pocket. "Charming child. How old? Three months?"

"Two, actually."

"Two! Big for her age."

' I know."

And as the baby's mother beamed at his praise, he took his gun and slid it under the baby's blanket. Then he neatly rearranged it so that there was no visible bump. He stood. "Well," he said, sounding all business, "you must have a plane to catch."

"Yes, absolutely. I do."

"Then don't let me stop you."

He stepped aside and gestured grandly as she rolled the stroller past him and up to the gate. There the security guards, as was their custom, waved her around, since the metal detectors always went nuts if a stroller came through. And besides, who would try to smuggle anything through in a baby carriage?

Duncan, meantime, calmly placed his sleeping bag on the conveyor belt, which rolled it through the fluoroscope and naturally detected nothing. As for Duncan, since he wasn't carrying any metal, he walked through the detector with no problems at all. He picked up his sleeping bag and walked further on down the hallway.

About twenty yards away from the security clearance area, glancing around to make certain that no one was watching, he stopped the fogged woman with the baby carriage and retrieved his gun. He started to tip his hat to her but then thought better of it. There were still traces of the burned crucifix on his forehead, and in the event the police were looking for him—which they most likely were—that would certainly be one of the main distinguishing features. So, keeping his broad-brimmed hat slid down, he merely thanked the woman, commanded her to forget ever seeing him, and made his way over to the gate.

There he sat himself in a corner, away from the general hustle and bustle of the other passengers. As a result he did not notice when Darlene and Josh showed up moments later and seated themselves on the opposite side of the gate area.

"A dozen things were going through my mind at that moment," said Josh. "'And yet the thing that concerned me the most was what was going to happen to Darlene. I had grown so close to her in the relatively short time I'd known her. Yet, when wolves mate, we mate for life. What was I going to do?"

(' 'It's kind of funny, y' know ?" I said. ' 'With humans, you say a guy's a wolf, it means he goes after practically any woman he sees. ")

"Yes. I've noticed that 'wolf is a pejorative term in many aspects of human expression," he said. "The Big Bad Wolf attacked Red Riding Hood. The Big Bad Wolf tried to eat the three little pigs. The wolf tried to eat Peter in 'Peter and the Wolf.' Humans do whatever they can to tear down the wolf."

("Why do you think that is?")

He considered it. "You're probably just jealous," he decided.

Duncan slowly surveyed the gate area. Something was wrong. Something was definitely off. His nostrils flared slightly as if he could scent the disturbance. There was something here, irritating him. What could it be?

The small baseball bat cracked across his knee.

He grunted in pain and grabbed at his knee. He looked up and there was Gary, an intense expression on his face. "You're not coming on this plane with me, fang-face," he said, and swung his bat around again. His mother was nowhere in sight.

For one brief moment he considered killing the child. But that would probably cause a delay in the plane taking off, and that wouldn't do. So instead he simply caught the bat in its arc and effortlessly ripped it from the boy's grasp.

"Hey!" said Gary.

"This will be your little neck if you come near me again," said Duncan, and he snapped the bat in half. He threw the pieces down and hissed, "Now get back to your mother and keep the hell way from me. And if you tell her how the bat got broken..." He bared his fangs fully and spoke in his best graveside voice. "I'll get you when you're sleeping."

Terrified, the boy stumbled back, grabbing up his broken toy and bolting like mad in the direction of his mother. He wrapped himself around her leg as if he'd been epoxied, and she looked down in surprise. "What's wrong?" and then she looked further. "How'd your bat get broken?"

"I dunno," he whispered.

"Well, throw it out."

"I wanna keep it."

"Fine, keep it," she said, beyond caring.

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"I noticed the little boy, saw how scared he was," said Josh. "I asked Darlene why he might be so concerned, and she said to me—"

"Oh, he's probably just afraid of flying."

"I see." Josh paused. "Should I be afraid of flying?"

"No. Not at all. It's as safe as driving. Safer."

"Really? Why is it safer?"

She paused. "I'm not sure. But that's what the airlines always say. Percentagewise or something like that,

it's a lot safer. As long as you don't mind going thousands of feet in the air..."

"Thousands of... feet?" Josh's voice had gone up an octave, and his face was now markedly the color of paste. "In the air? Like a bird?"

"Uh-huh." She placed a hand on his forearm. "Josh, you're going to be okay, aren't you?"

"Oh, absolutely. I'm going to be fine. I'm going to be fine, because I'm not going to fly." He started to get out of his chair.

With strength that surprised her, she shoved him back down. "Knock it off! This is the best way. We've got to go while you're human, like I said. I don't know how to drive, and with ground transportation, you might change back into a wolf while we're in transit. With an airplane, bang you're up, bang you're back down. We'll be way in the clear and past customs hours before the sun comes up. So don't sweat it, okay?"

"But I don't want to go thousands of feet in the air."

"The airplane won't crash."

"The airplane is like a bird?"

"Right."

"The wings go up and down like a bird's?"

"Well... not exactly."

"Not exactly?" He gulped. "What keeps the plane in the air, then?"

"Flight insurance."

"I don't under—"

"It was a joke! Jesus, lighten up, Josh. If it wasn't safe, do you think I'd be going on it with you?"

"Maybe you're stupid," he pointed out.

"Every minute I spend with you sure lends support to that theory. Josh, it's going to be fine. Don't be such a wimp. Act like a man, or a wolf, or something—anything but a coward. The pack. Your mate. They need you, remember? So pull yourself together, for pity's sake. Okay?"

He trembled. "Okay."

"Everything will be fine."

"Fine. Just fine."

"Flying nowadays, it's a perfectly normal thing."

Twenty minutes later, the Boeing 727 with a number of perfectly normal Americans and Canadians, one



perfectly normal werecreature and one perfectly normal vampire, took off for Toronto.

18

"Keep your seat belt buckled, Josh," said Darlene. "You'll feel more secure."

Josh stared out the window, somewhat grateful that the ground below was shrouded in darkness. He had a strong feeling that he didn't want to see just how far down the ground was.

Darlene sat in the seat next to him, just holding his hand and lending him silent support. The takeoff had not been easy for either of them. For Josh the difficulty had been feeling as if his stomach was going to end up somewhere about three rows behind him. For Darlene the problem had been that Josh had squeezed her fingers so hard that she thought he was going to break them. Happily, neither instance had come to pass.

The aisle seat was empty. Ordinarily Darlene would have slid over to give them some room between each other, but Josh was so apprehensive that she felt the best thing to do was just stay where she was.

From the row in front of them, over the top of the aisle seat, a small boy peered over. He looked like a little Kilroy come to life. He studied the two of them as if trying to make some sort of decision about them.

Darlene leaned forward and waggled her fingers at him. "Hi there," she said.

He waggled back and replied, "Hello. I'm Gary."

This apparently caught the attention of his mother who was seated, unseen, next to him in the middle seat. "Gary," she said in a harsh whisper, "don't bother the people back there."

"No, it's all right," said Darlene quickly to the still-invisible mother. "I like kids. Really. I don't mind at all." She leaned forward and asked Gary, "Is this your first trip on an airplane?"

He nodded, the Mets baseball cap bobbing on his head. "We're going to visit my gramparents."

"That's nice."

"But I'm never going by airplane again."

"That's for damn sure," the tired-sounding mother seconded.

"Why not?" asked Darlene sympathetically, remembering what it was like to be a kid and have the whole world against you. Hell, she was an adult and she felt that way.

"Because the boogeyman rides the airplane."

"The boogeyman?" Josh looked at Darlene quizzically. "Someone I should know?"

"It wouldn't surprise me if you did," she said.

"The boogeyman broke my baseball bat." Gary held up the broken bat, displaying the splintered ends.

At this point his mother snatched the pieces away. "Stop playing with that! I'll get you a new one, all right?" And she put them on the floor under his seat. Gary glanced at his mother and then back at Darlene and Josh with a "What's a kid gonna do?" expression. He sighed and slid back down and out of sight as if he'd been deflated.

Darlene laughed silently. "Kids, huh?"

Josh smiled. "Actually, that's the first one I've spoken to, really. Small humans. I hope my cubs are as enchanting."

He had to remind me of them, she thought. Carefully she disengaged her hand from his.

"Is something wrong?" he asked nervously.

"Nothing. Nothing is wrong. Calm down, for pity's sake. I'm just going to go to the bathroom. You stay here and talk with your little friend about the boogeyman."

She stood and he said nervously. "How long before we're back on the ground again?"

She glanced at her watch. "Maybe another fifteen minutes, tops. In fact I think we're starting to descend already. See? I told you it wouldn't be long at all."

"The boy spoke of the boogeyman," Josh said with an air of self-annoyance. "If I'd listened to him, the panic might not have broken out. Matters might have gone much more smoothly. Instead I didn't listen, and dismissed it from my mind—more the fool I."

Duncan was slumped down in his seat, looking out the window, when something caught his eye. He turned his head imperceptibly and, to his astonishment, saw Darlene Abramowitz walk by. There were some differences this time. She was not naked, for one thing, although she was definitely one of those females who looked much better unclothed. Also, she was not under hypnotic control, as she had been the last time.

She walked past him without taking any notice of him at all, which was fine. Because already his mind was racing past the one aspect of the situation and on to the next—namely, that if the Darlene woman was here, then Ed Parsons' "offspring" was probably in the vicinity as well.

He stood slowly, watching as she walked past. Was she heading towards her seat, or—?

No. She had gone to the bathroom and stepped inside, bolting the door behind her. So much the better. This would give him his chance to—

His chance to what?

"I sensed the danger before I knew it was there. I felt that same sensation that I had felt several times before, when I was in the zoo. Somehow, some way, I always knew when he was in the vicinity. So even as I turned, I knew who—or should I say what—I was going to see."

Slowly Josh turned to see the man in the raincoat seated next to him. From in front of him he heard the little boy hiss, "Mommy! The boogeyman's got the man in back of us!" For this warning the boy was rewarded with an audible slap, which was followed by sounds of whimpering.

Josh stared unflinchingly at his new seatmate. "Who are you?" he said in a low tone.

"Don't you mean 'What are you?' " he replied ironically.

"That too, I imagine."

"Didn't you hear the little boy? I'm the boogeyman." He smiled, speaking between thinned lips almost like a ventriloquist.

"You were at the zoo."

"So were you. I, however, was not behind bars."

"Perhaps you should have been."

The creature with the pale face looked hurt. "You insult me, sir. And here I've come to help you."

"Help me?"

"Yes. My name is Duncan. Like the yo-yo, not like the donuts." When Josh merely stared at him, he went on, "I am what, in the common parlance, is referred to as a vampire."

"Vampire."

"That's right. And you'd undoubtedly remember my old partner, Doctor Ed Parsons. He's the one who turned you into what you are."

Slowly Josh nodded once. "We're acquainted."

"I thought as much."

"You are partners in evil?"

"Us? No, much worse. Real estate."

"Real estate."

"Oh, yes. It was many, many years ago." He leaned back in the chair, reminiscing. "Ed and I, we were barely out of college. And we ran real-estate swindles. Sold property that we didn't have to people for all the money we could get from them. Everything was going fine. Then we made a serious mistake—we bilked some gypsies. Never"—he raised a finger—"and I can't put too fine a point on this—never bilk a

gypsy. They get real pissed.

"This old woman in the family that we took, she put a curse on us. Turned Ed into a werewolf, me into a vampire. Then they took off. Ed and me, we chased them across half the damned country before catching up with them in New Orleans, while Mardi Gras was going on. We killed her, thinking that would take the curse off us. It didn't. So we wiped out most of the family, after Ed raped the granddaughter. One of the sons survived and came after us—caught up with me and tried to polish me off. That's where I got this."

Josh looked down at the gun that was now pointed between his second and third ribs.

"Don't move," said Duncan pleasantly. "I don't know if you're up on all the ins and outs of this business, but a silver bullet will polish you off very quickly, and that's exactly what happens to be in this gun."

Josh resisted the temptation to look at it.

"Ed and I, we went our separate ways eventually," he said. "Ed decided to get a real career. You can do that if you're a werewolf. He became a doctor. Now me, I discovered that my needs were very few. Blood at night, a place to sleep. When you're dead like I am, creature comforts tend to be unimportant. I found that I was quite content to be one of the homeless, living in the streets, wandering from town to town. When you're a vagrant, always passing through, nameless and faceless, no one ever tags you with a few dead bodies. It's very convenient."

"You intend to kill me?"

"You are single-minded, aren't you? Well, that's what I had intended last night," said Duncan. "Before I almost got slaughtered by Grandma Rambo downstairs from your girlfriend. Oh, yes," he said as he saw Josh's expression, "I was by there last night. I was indeed going to kill you. Now everything's messed up for me. I'm a cop-killer in New York City, which is always a pain. An easily identifiable cop-killer, I might add, thanks to this," and he tilted up the brim of his hat slightly, pointing at the crucifix burns. "I had to leave Fun City. I blamed it largely on Ed for getting me into this mess. I had intended to kill him. Now, though, you're here. So perhaps I'll kill you. Or have you help me kill him. Would you like that?"

Josh looked him up and down. "Ally myself with someone who would kill his best friend? How am I supposed to trust you? Somehow," he said, "I find the concept of you and I working together a bit difficult to handle."

Duncan nodded, sighing. "Yes, I suppose you would. Then I'll just have to kill you, I suppose."

"THE BOOGEYMAN'S GOING TO KILL SOMEBODY!"

Gary's cry of alarm resounded through the airplane. People got half out of their seats, some groggily, looking around in confusion.

Duncan spat out a curse, and a stewardess seemed to materialize from nowhere, leaning over Gary and his profusely apologizing mother, asking what the problem was.

"The boogeyman!" howled Gary, pointing behind him. The stewardess's gaze, although she didn't take the child seriously, automatically flickered to the man in the row behind. She spotted the gun and shrieked.

Duncan leaped to his feet. "Nobody move!" he shouted, waving the gun.

Josh lunged towards Duncan—and was stopped short, held securely by the seat belt. Duncan swung the gun around and Josh grabbed the vampire's wrist with one hand, while reaching down and desperately pulling at the seat belt with the other.

Now people all over the plane were screaming, crying hysterically. In the cockpit the flight crew, who had already begun the descent and could see the lights of Lester B. Pearson International Airport spread out below them, heard the hysterics but had no idea what was causing the panic.

Darlene came out of the bathroom but the aisle was blocked by the pushing and shoving of people trying to see what was happening.

Josh ripped free of the seat belt and stood, banging his head into the luggage compartment but not letting go of Duncan's gun hand. Duncan struggled in his grip, pitting his vampiric strength against the cabled muscles in Josh's arms. Duncan felt the bones in his hand begin to crack under the strain of the werereature's grip and yet slowly, inexorably, he started to swing the revolver around towards Josh's massive chest.

"Get the captain!" shrieked the stewardess.

Duncan placed his left foot against the armrest and shoved his full weight against Josh, slamming him back against the wall. He lost his grip momentarily on the vampire's wrist, and then felt the barrel of the gun against his chest.

The hammer drew back.

Josh shoved Duncan's arm upwards and the gun went off, discharging its deadly cargo harmlessly into the overhead luggage compartment. The gunshot set off a new round of screaming from the passengers, as those people who had tried to calm the initial hysterics now became hysterical themselves.

Josh shoved Duncan backwards and they tumbled into the aisle. Now the gun was being held straight out, still in Duncan's grasp. People scrambled frantically to keep out of the way of that deadly barrel, and now Josh was on top, battering the vampire's face mercilessly. He growled, angry and furious, happy at last to find something tangible on which he could take out his frustration and confusion. The sounds that came from his throat were barely recognizable as human.

Duncan reached up with his free hand and grabbed Josh by the throat. Furious, he slammed Josh's head against the hard metal edge of the seat. Stars exploded behind Josh's eyes, and then a second and a third time he felt the cold metal of the chair smashing into his temple. His vision blurred. And suddenly the vampire wasn't under him anymore. He was on top of him, knees in Josh's chest, shoving him downward.

Everywhere there was screaming. No one knew what to do. No one knew what was happening. "Get the gun, you idiots!" Josh wanted to say, but Duncan's iron hand had clamped down on his throat. And the hand was so cold, as cold as death. Death was everywhere, death filled his nostrils, decaying flesh held him and dead fingernails drove into his throat.

He saw Duncan leering down at him, saw his mouth pull back like a laughing death's head to reveal those awful, pointed fangs. Josh's right hand was free and he pounded on Duncan, but it didn't do any good. Duncan knocked it aside and Josh's hand fell to the floor. He reached out, trying to find some sort of weapon, any sort of weapon. A bottle, a rock, anything.

In a second, he knew, those fangs were going to descend and rip his throat out.

Somewhere in the distance he heard Darlene scream.

And his fingers settled around something round, something wooden.

He grabbed it and, at the same time that Duncan's face began to descend towards his neck, he brought it between them, splintered point upward.

The wood penetrated the vampire's chest, piercing his heart easily. You'd think it was difficult, but it wasn't, for the human body isn't meant to exist in that unreal state and welcomes any release, any excuse to let true death claim it.

Duncan didn't even realize what happened at first. His fangs halted mere inches from Josh's neck and then, slowly, he started to sit up. He found he couldn't—his body had stopped obeying his commands.

Trembling, he looked down at his chest. Sticking out of it was a neat, brown piece of wood, professionally rounded and varnished. The dark red liquid that passed as his blood was trickling down the wood, and had already almost filled in the words burned into it. The words "Junior Slugger."

He screamed once. It was a sound that no one on the plane would ever forget. A scream that started out sounding almost human but went higher and higher in register, going past the length that a scream should go, going past the pitch level that a human scream should reach. It lost its humanity and achieved the high-pitched, skin-crawling sound of a rodent's squeal.

Then it stopped. Just like that.

The gun dropped from his unfeeling fingers and Duncan slumped forward. He fell against Josh, the impact driving the stake—the stake he himself had inadvertently created—further through him and out his back with an awfulthwutch sound.

They were embraced like two lovers and then Josh slowly got up, shoving the vampire's corpse off himself.

Duncan lay there, unseeing eyes staring up at the ceiling. There were sobs from nearby, sounds of choking and reaching for airsick bags and vomiting. Darlene, shoving her way through the crowd finally, took Josh by the arm.

"Parsons," said Josh tightly. "He said the werewolf's name is Doctor Ed Parsons."

"Oh, God," said Darlene. "Look."

Duncan's skin was blackening and shriveling, faster and faster as if anxious to depart. His eyes sunk into his head and vanished, his hair fell out, his skin burned with an invisible flame that rapidly was leaving only his skeleton. His clothes, given nothing to hold them up, sagged around him as limp cloth.

Josh imagined that he felt something go by him. Something unpleasant and ugly and unhappy...

... but relieved. Very oddly, relieved.

And Gary turned to his mother and said, "I want a bigger bat next time."

19

"You want to go over this one more time?"

Josh glanced nervously at the clock and said, "We've gone over it more times than I can think about. It's getting on towards morning. Can't I leave now?"

The Canadian official and the two police officers looked quite calm and self-possessed, as opposed to the increasingly fidgety Josh. The room that they had brought him into was very sparse, with bland white walls and a few sticks of furniture. Most significantly, there was a clock on the wall—a clock which told Josh that morning was approaching with awful speed.

The official walked forward slowly. He was lean and hawk-faced, wearing a dark blue suit and a laminated ID card clipped onto his lapel. In the ID card he was wearing a moustache but now he was clean-shaven, for what that was worth. He had introduced himself as Mr. Gascon.

"Now I must admit, Josh," said Gascon slowly, "that I don't understand what the problem is here. From what the other people on the plane have told us, you're something of a hero."

"And do Canadians always welcome their heroes by sticking them in small rooms for hours on end?"

Gascon placed one hand on Josh's shoulder. "We do when there's a case of manslaughter involved, no matter how justified that manslaughter might be. We do when the victim of that manslaughter turns into a skeleton. We do when the hero has no identification whatsoever—not so much as a library card."

"I don't read."

"A driver's licence."

"I don't drive."

"A credit card."

"I don't credit."

Gascon stepped back and shook his head. "Obviously, Josh—that's all the name you have, right? Josh?"

"Yes, my parents were very poor. We couldn't afford last names."

"I see. Obviously you don't credit, Josh. You don't credit me with enough intelligence to realize that there's more here than simple self-defense, more than a frustrated plane hijacker or robber or whatever he was."

He walked around to the one table that was in the room. On it were two items. First was Darlene's pocketbook, with all her travelling items, wallet, and other important items. Next to that, in a neatly sealed plastic bag, was the gun Duncan had wielded. The bullets had been removed and were in the bag with it. Gascon picked up the bag. "There were bits of dead flesh in the trigger guard," he said.

"Your lab people are very efficient," said Josh. "I'm surprised they're even working this late."

"Round-the-clock law enforcement. That's the Canadian credo." He put the gun down. "Now look, Josh, given all the oddities of this situation—if you were in my position, what would you do?"

Josh only had to think about it a moment. "I'd let me go."

"Yes, I suppose you would."

Josh's head began to hurt. He felt the first stirrings of the change in him and made a mental effort to force it away.

"Josh?" Gascon's voice seemed to come from far off.

"Darlene," grunted Josh. "I want... Darlene. Quickly."

"She's busy right now, Josh."

'Get her!'

Gascon was utterly cool. He had long practice, and was generally at his calmest when those he was interviewing were at their most strung-out. Turning to one of the cops, he said without any trace of emotion, "Bring in the American woman."

Seconds later Darlene entered, escorted by the cop. She saw Josh on the chair, saw him trembling, and realized instantly what was happening. She went to him quickly, put her hands on his shoulders. "Josh, I'm here."

"Darlene, we..." He fought to possess himself. "We have to leave."

"I know." She turned quickly to Gascon. "We've answered all your questions. You can't keep us here forever."

With deliberate slowness Gascon said, "We can keep you for a while. And, since your friend has no identification, we don't even have to let him in the country."

"Then we need to be alone for a little while!"

"Yes, I can imagine why," said Gascon, stepping forward. "Where do you keep them?"

"Keep what?" said Darlene in confusion.

"The drugs." He gestured towards Josh. "Do you think I'm blind, or stupid? That I can't recognize a man in desperate need of drugs? Withdrawal is a very ugly sight, Ms Abrahams."

"Abramowitz."

"Whatever."

"I'll tell you right now, Mr. Gascon... I've seen ugly. Uglier than you've seen. But not as ugly as what



you'll see if you don't let us out of here."

He came towards her and leaned forward until they were almost nose to nose. "And just what will I see? If you tell me, I may even let you go."

She looked from the moaning Josh to the clock and back at the implacable official. "All right," she said. "I'll tell you. But you won't believe me."

"Try me."

"Okay. He's a werewolf."

"A werewolf."

"Yeah. And he's going to turn into a wolf just about any minute. So if you guys value your lives, you'll let me get him away, fast."

"You're saying"—he gestured towards Josh—"that he's about to change into a wolf."

"That's right. And that man he killed on the plane wasn't really a man. He was a vampire."

"I see. And who might you be? The bride of Frankenstein?"

"No, I'm just a friend."

"You have odd choices in friends." He laughed. "You really, truly think I'm stupid. That I'm going to accept this insane story. At least give me credit for knowing that 'werewolves' transform at night, not in the daytime."

Josh moaned loudly and pitched forward off the chair, curling himself into a ball. His body trembled. "Josh!" cried out Darlene.

Losing his patience, Gascon said, "Get him off the floor!" The police officers moved to either side, and tried to haul him to his feet. Josh staggered in their grasp and then started to struggle. "He's putting up a fight!" said one of the cops.

"Let him go, you assholes! You don't know what you're fucking with!" shouted Darlene.

"Neither did you two when you thought to make idiots of us," shot back Gascon. Josh was half bent over, and Gascon grabbed him by the hair and pulled his face into view. "Now listen, you drug-crazed—"

He froze.

Josh's face was completely covered with hair. Dark gray hair. No, not just hair. Fur.

Josh snarled, his teeth lengthening before Gascon's eyes into sharp, canine teeth. With what sounded like a cracking of bone his jaw started to lengthen, his entire face twisting and distorting. His nose turned small and black, and a snout grew from the sides of his face.

Gascon stepped back, his expression one of paralytic fear. With a twist of his massive body, Josh threw

the cops to either side of him, sending both of them crashing into the wall.

Gascon pulled out a gun from a shoulder holster and fired point-blank.

Josh, still transforming, howled as the bullets slammed into him. He staggered under the impact as his arms shrunk, turned gray and furred, and his fingers lengthened into claws.

'Don't!' shrieked Darlene as Gascon emptied his gun at Josh. Darlene dove for cover beneath the table as two more bullets hit Josh, the rest missing him and smacking into the wall. But the bullets that did strike Josh had no effect on him except to slow him down slightly. Josh's teeth and claws tore away the clothes and he leaped the distance to Gascon, driving him to the floor with his powerful front legs. He stood snarling over him, his snapping jaws only inches away from the terrified official's face.

"Oh, God," he whimpered, "Oh, God, please, no..."

"Josh!" shouted Darlene with as much command as she could summon in her voice. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

For a moment the wolf seemed to hesitate. Then he turned, obeying the woman he loved. She threw open the door and they ran out.

Gascon scrambled to his feet. He felt an odd sensation in his crotch and realized that he'd lost more than his composure when the werewolf had had him pinned down.

The two cops were starting to come around. One of them said, "I'll alert the airport guards!"

"No! Hold it," said Gascon. He had removed his jacket and was now holding it draped casually in front of himself. "I...I have to think."

"Think?"-said the officer in shock. "Think about what? We have to catch them! Look!" He pointed to the table. "She took her pocketbook, and the gun! We have to—"

"Have to what? Make a full report? Is that what you're going to say, officer?"

"Well... well, yes."

The other cop, who had become alert more slowly, had already picked up on the drift of the conversation. "I think I see what he's saying, Joe."

"Do you? I don't."

"All right," said Gascon. "Let's file the report. Let's say, 'The woman claimed that he was a werewolf, and then he changed into a wolf and escaped.' Would you care to sign your name to that report?"

The officer's mouth moved, but no words came out. Gascon looked to the other cop, but that one wouldn't even meet his gaze.

"That's what I thought," said Gascon. "Now I'll tell you what my report will say. A heroic American stopped a madman from hurting a planeload of people. The madman died in the struggle. The madman's body was cremated. I'll make sure of that. The American was questioned and released. And if my superiors don't like that I didn't get his intended destination or otherwise feel I should have been more

thorough, I'll get a reprimand and six months from now it will all be forgotten. You, gentlemen, were simply obeying my instructions and so will suffer not at all.

"Otherwise," he continued, pausing significantly, "we will be 'the werewolf men.' Is that how you would want to be remembered—especially if, even if an alarm is given, they manage to get out of the airport? Then we have no substantiation... and no careers."

The cops looked at each other, then back at Gascon.

"The bar should be opening in fifteen minutes, gentlemen," said Gascon. "And I'm buying."

Darlene couldn't understand why the airport seemed so quiet. She had expected that there would be pandemonium all around them, that there would be cops chasing them and people shouting and everyone getting out of their way. She had shoved the gun into her pocketbook. It was still unloaded, but at least she could put on the appearance of being someone that shouldn't be messed with.

However, she wasn't getting the opportunity. At the most, people afforded her a quick glance before going on about their business. Fortunately, when Darlene and Josh had been brought into their respective little rooms to be interrogated, they had bypassed the customs area, so there was nothing standing between them and freedom, except her certainty that they were going to be caught.

Yet here they were, standing on the outside of the airport, and no one had interfered with them. Darlene wasn't quite sure what had happened, but she had the strong feeling that someone had decided to call it quits. Either that or the Big Guy Upstairs had finally decided to cut them a break.

She turned to Josh and said, in no uncertain terms, "Now you stay here." Then she went over to the taxi stand and found a driver sitting there in his cab, reading a newspaper. He looked up at her politely and said, "Can I help you, miss?"

"Yes," she said politely. "I'd like to go to McKeeville."

"McKeeville?" He frowned. "Can't say I know it. Hold on."

He reached into his glove compartment and pulled out a map. As he did so, Darlene gestured quickly with her hand and Josh obediently trotted over towards her.

The driver unfolded the map, stared at it, then consulted the town location index and slid his finger along horizontally until he found it. "Good Christ, lady. That's three hours away. Forget it. Rent a car or something."

"I don't know how to drive."

"Now's a good time to learn. Like I said, miss, forget it."

"Are you going to make this difficult for me?"

Darlene, who had been leaning against the window of the front door, now pulled open the rear door. Unseen, Josh slid in. The driver, meantime, was becoming increasingly annoyed. "Look, miss, close the door. There's nothing you can say that's going to make me haul myself all the way out there."

"How about if I tell you that, if you don't, I'll have my wolf rip your throat out?"

He laughed. "Your wolf?"

There was a low growl from behind him and then Josh put his front paws up on the back of the seat. He poked his head over it and rested his muzzle on the driver's shoulders.

The driver turned several different and interesting skin colors as Darlene said calmly, "Now if you drive us, you'll have lots of money" (Darlene wondered idly how she was going to explain to her landlord that she didn't have the money for the rent this month—she'd spent it all cabbng to McKeenville) "and if you don't, you'll have lots of blood... all over the front seat of the car. Now what do you say?"

The driver stammered out, "So... b-b-been in C-C-Canada long?"

"Why, no," she said sweetly, taking that as her cue to climb in. She slid into the front seat next to the driver. "But you know, I think I might stay a while. Everyone's been so polite and so helpful."

"We Canadians are like that."

"Funny. You know, I thought you all said 'eh.'"

"We Canadians are like that, eh?"

The cab rolled out of the airport. Darlene calmly took the map and proceeded to navigate, watching the road signs carefully due to her suspicion (well founded) that the driver might try to get them hopelessly lost. Josh, in the back seat, settled down and slept.

'I had another dream at that point. I dreamt of him. Of the werewolf, the one who had made me what I was. He was very angry. He was looming over me, and somehow he knew that the vampire was dead. He knew I had killed him. He sensed it, either through some sort of link with the vampire, or with me.

'And he snarled at me, and he said, 'All right, come back here, then. Return to your precious pack. Come back and try to kill me. We could have been friends, you and I, if you had succumbed to me when we first brushed minds. But you had to remain pure.'

("Was he speaking as a human?" I asked.)

'Human at first. But he slowly changed into a wolf as he spoke, and he said, 'You killed my curse-brother.' I tried to tell him that his precious curse-brother had wanted to kill him, but he didn't believe me. No reason for him to, I suppose. He told me to return, to visit my pack one last time, because that night he would track me down wherever I was hiding, and he would kill me. Kill me and everything I loved. And he kept saying one other thing, too... over and over again. He kept saying, 'I'm not afraid of you.'

"It was odd. I wasn't certain whether he was trying to convince me of that... or convince himself."

Doctor Parsons woke up screaming.

He was lying on his living-room floor as he always was when he returned from an outing. He staggered to his feet, drenched in sweat, and looked around nervously. But there was no one there.

But the dream he had had—oh, that dream.

Duncan dead. Could that be right? Could he have dreamt that and been correct? At the hands of... of that monster. That animal.

Their minds had touched once more, Parsons and his unnatural creation. The details were more than his conscious mind could recall, but he knew for certain that the creature was somewhere out there. Somewhere, coming for him.

Flight. That was his immediate reaction. It would not be any great difficulty. The house was only rented, after all. He could pack up, disappear tomorrow. Hell, he could disappear today.

And run. Run from the creature that had killed Duncan. He had created the monster. He had tried to get Duncan to stop it for him, and his curse-brother had paid the price for it.

"Duncan," he whispered. "I'll get him for you. I swear I will."

\*\*\*\*

"Police protection?"

Henri LeRoq, still working on a crossword puzzle (and Parsons couldn't help but wonder if it was the same puzzle he'd had two months ago), looked up in surprise. "Now, Ed, you know that'd be pretty difficult. I'm not exactly what you might call crawling with manpower. That big wolf is still chewing up residents and I got the mayor on my ass to get that case wrapped as quickly as possible. You have reason to believe that someone is out to get you?"

"Yes."

"Well, okay." The sheriff put down his crossword puzzle, took out a pencil, licked the tip and brought it down to a pad of paper. "Want to tell me what he looks like?"

"Um..."

Parsons had never seen the creature in human form. He'd gotten varied, conflicting reports from the people at the hospital, but other than that he had no real idea. "I'm... I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"He's big. A real big guy."

"You've never seen him."

"No. Never have."

"So, he's like what? A hit man? There's a hit man after you? Who would want to kill you, Ed?"

Parsons could tell from LeRoq's tone of voice that he was extremely skeptical. He could understand why. Why indeed would someone want to kill the quiet, unassuming hospital administrator? Then something occurred to him that hadn't before. Did he really want the police hanging around his house? Had he become so overconfident that he'd forgotten there were certain things he did that the law would hardly approve of?

He rubbed his forehead and forced a lopsided smile. "Look... Henri... I've been under a lot of pressure lately."

"We all have." LeRoq was still studying him carefully.

"Could use a vacation, I suppose."

"I can't remember the last time I had some time off," said LeRoq sympathetically.

"I've seen this guy around, thought he was looking at me, but now..." He shrugged. "Forget I mentioned it. Forget I brought it up." He extended a hand and the sheriff shook it firmly. "Everything's fine with me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Well, good. I'd hate to think that someone has it out for you."

"Me too. Definitely, me too."

"The closer we got to home, the more the excitement filled me," said Josh. "Darlene didn't have to say anything. I could smell the difference in the air. I could sense the nearness."

"And I was worried. Worried about the pack, worried about Darlene. Worried about everything except... myself. And you have to understand, for me, that was somewhat unusual. Once my main concept had been 'self.' That I was able to think beyond myself at all was what made me the pack leader. But I only did that to a limited degree. Now, however, as I sat in the back of the taxi, my head hanging out the window, I was focussed entirely on matters outside the self. Probably more of the insidious influences that humanity had had on me."

By the time they reached McKeeville, Darlene had turned on her charm sufficiently, and opened her wallet adequately, that the driver was no longer upset over his being shanghaied out to the middle of nowhere. Indeed, as the cab dropped them off at the edge of the woods, he actually wished them luck before turning and heading back in the general direction of Toronto.

Darlene stood there, looking into the dense forest. In New York it seemed that all green growing things had been ruthlessly eradicated. McKeeville, however, still had the air of a frontier town. Directly in front of the woods was a paved street, and looking onto the woods was a row of small, frame houses.

Civilization staring nature in the face, and nature in turn watching the encroaching civilization nervously. Never being quite sure when man would be tired of only living on that side of the street and decide to live on the other side as well.

Darlene barely afforded the houses a glance, turning away without noticing that the third house on the right had a shingle hanging in front of it that read simply, "Edward Parsons, M.D." Her attention instead was entirely on the wolf.

She squatted down next to him and said, "You want to find out what happened to your pack, don't you? Really, I should just leave you here. But... but if I do, then there's a real good chance that I won't see you again. And I don't think I'm ready to cope with that just yet. Soooo..." She stood and clapped him on the back. "Let's go find your pack, Jack."

The wolf looked up at her curiously.

"Josh," she amended. "It was kind of a joke. Not a very good one, I guess. Lousy, in fact. Let's go."

They made their way into the woods.

Darlene was amazed by how quickly the "real" world had been left behind. She had done more than her share of camping, but she had never gotten over the change she felt within her every time she went into the woods.

She looked down at Josh, wishing with all her heart that he could speak to her. He could not, of course, and even if he could have, his mind would most definitely have been on something else. Whereas she felt as if she were walking with blocks of concrete on her shoes, Josh made his way through the woods with growing confidence.

Good lord, what am I doing here? Darlene asked herself over and over again. Why didn't I just leave? I've done my job, haven't I? But she had already answered the question, and so there was nothing for her to do but press on gamely.

Josh stopped several yards ahead of her and sniffed carefully at the base of a tree. Then he went on ahead of her, picking up speed. "Josh, wait!" she called out to him, but he paid her no mind at all.

"Josh, please, I can't keep up!"

All attempts at quietly moving through the woods were forgotten as Darlene crashed through the brush like a miniature bulldozer. Anything short of a troop of deaf Boy Scouts would certainly be alerted to her presence in the woods, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered except keeping track of Josh.

And in that, her only goal, she was totally unsuccessful. She caught brief flashes of him but they became less and less frequent, and within minutes Josh had vanished.

She sagged against a tree, her chest heaving, trying to suck in air. "Aw, shit, Josh," she murmured.

Mustering the few reserves she had left, she pressed on, deeper and deeper into the woods. Fortunately she was prepared for this little sojourn. She wore a heavy quilted jacket over her cotton shirt, and had on khaki slacks and thick, rubber-soled shit-kickers on her feet. She could just imagine trying to negotiate these woods in an evening dress and high heels, or even pumps.

She darted around a tree, shouted, "Josh! Where are y-"

And that was when the wolf jumped her.

She went down under its weight, its claws tearing at her shirt, ripping ugly gashes in her right shoulder. It crouched on her, snarling in her face, and she screamed.

From nearby a roar filled the air and a gray figure streaked through the air, slamming bodily into the wolf on top of her. It had happened so quickly that none of it fully registered in her mind. All she could think of doing was scrambling to her feet and backing away as fast as she could.

"For the second time in as many months," said Josh, "I found myself placing myself against wolves on behalf of a human. It was a very strange sensation, especially when these were members of my own pack, the pack that I'd been part of for as long as I could remember."

The wolves slowly came out from all sides, staring at Josh. One of the older wolves looked at him askance and said, "You are just returned to us, and already you act strangely."

"This human means us no harm," replied Josh.

"She is a threat to selves."

"No."

"She is in the hunting ground of the pack," said another.

"She looked for self."

"To kill you." The older wolf growled. This was human behavior he understood.

"No. This human will not kill self. And this human did not know that she was in pack hunting ground."

And now Ayesha came forward, very slowly. Heavy with cubs waiting to be born, she really should not have been away from the packplace. But when word had gone through the forest that her mate had returned, she found that she could not lie in the cave and wait to find out if it was true or not.

So her mate had indeed returned. Yet he was acting... strangely.

Ayesha studied the human. "This is a human female?" she asked.

"Yes."

There was something about the human. Something... not right. Something between the human and her mate that she could not specifically define, and yet it was there. She did not want it there. She did not like it.

"I want the human gone," she said. "Make it leave, or I will kill it."



"I am pack leader," said Josh angrily.

He took a step towards his mate but she had the advantage. She knew he would make no serious strike against her, because of the cubs she was carrying. "I want it gone, now," said Ayesha.

And now the other wolves took up the sentiment.

"Poor Darlene must have been terrified," said Josh. "We were all there, gruffing and barking at each other, and she had no clear idea what was happening."

("What was happening, anyway?" I asked.)

'My pack... wanted order restored. They had lost two packmates. They had lost their leader, until my return. They had lost a good deal of hunting ground, for rather than face the creature from hell again, my pack simply withdrew into the caves and hid on the nights that they scented the creature prowling through the woods. They wanted things to be the way things used to be. That's what I wanted, too."

("But how—?")

He put up a hand. "Patience," he said. "I know what you're going to ask. I've promised I'll tell you everything, and I will. But in my own way."

Darlene stood there, looking from one wolf to another as they growled. Now they all seemed to be growling at Josh, and the gray wolf was standing his ground, but it didn't seem like a vote of confidence to her.

Then Josh turned to her, walked over and placed his body against her legs.

He pushed her. Not angrily, but with enough force to make his intention clear to her. She stepped back a couple of paces and waited, confused. Josh shoved her again, then withdrew into his pack. They all looked at her, waiting.

Waiting for her to leave.

"Josh... ?"

He made no move towards her and, when she stood there, he set his teeth and growled at her in an unmistakable tone. A tone that said, "You are not welcome here."

Next to him a pregnant wolf that Darlene took to be his mate growled as well. And the female wolf moved over several steps so that she was right up against her mate. It was a universal gesture that cut across all varieties of the animal kingdom.

"So that's the story, huh?" said Darlene. She hadn't known what to expect, but realistically it really shouldn't have been anything else than what it was. Josh wanted to return to his pack. She'd brought him there. Whatever else happened was incidental. She'd served her purpose, and now he was done with

her.

"Fine," she said, "Fine. You're on your own." She looked at the female wolf. "Bitch," she said.

She turned her back on them in a gesture of disdain—the only thing she had going for her—and walked away.

She waited for one of the damned things to come leaping at her and tear her to ribbons, but nothing happened. She walked another ten paces, turned and, as she had expected, saw that the wolves had melted back into the woods. She suspected that if she tried to follow them again she would go down under an assortment of teeth and claws, and this time there would be no reprieve.

She sighed and started to walk back to civilization.

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She didn't know how long she'd wandered through the woods. All she knew was that her shoulder was really throbbing from the cuts that one wolf had made, and if she didn't get it tended to soon, the wounds would become royally infected. That was all she needed.

The sound of a round of ammo being chambered was so loud, so unexpected, that it caused her to jump about twenty feet in the air by her estimation and let out a shriek. When she landed she saw a man standing nearby with a thick red moustache and beard. He had been aiming a rifle at her, but was now swinging the barrel away and muttering, "Sorry."

"Jesus Christ," she managed to get out. "Who the hell are you?"

"They call me Yosemite Sam," he replied.

"Oh, right. The roughest, toughest hombre west of the Pecos."

"More like northeast, actually," he replied. He took a few steps forward. "You shouldn't be wandering around out here, ma'am. Wolves and such. Ain't safe."

"You're here."

"I'm a man," he said simply.

"Well, can't argue with that logic. You're too clever for me. See you around."

She tried to walk past him and he put out a hand on her shoulder. "Hold it," he started to say, but was cut off by the hiss of pain as she sucked in air through her teeth.

"You okay, ma'am?" he asked and then realized that his hand had come away with blood on it. "Ma'am, what in hell happened to your shoulder?"

"I got spiked sliding into second base, okay? Now if you'll excuse me—"

"You should have that looked at."

"Well you're looking at it and it's not doing a damn bit of good. Now if you don't mind—"

"Look, ma'am," he said, and reaching into his coat pocket he pulled out a compass. "You look like a capable young woman. You probably don't need me, but frankly, everyone can use a little help nowadays." He handed the compass to her. "I figure you know how to use it. Just follow the sucker due west and that'll bring you out of the woods and, if you do it just right, Doc Parsons' place. He'll get that patched up."

"That's real swell of you, but you don't have to..." She stopped and said, "Doc Parsons. Doctor Ed Parsons?"

"You've heard of him?"

She ran quickly through her mind what Josh had said on the plane—that the vampire had named the werewolf as being this Ed Parsons. But was it the same one? And maybe the vampire was lying. Vampires weren't noted especially for their veracity.

"I think I've heard of him somewhere, yeah. Which way did you say he was?"

"Due west."

"Thank you."

She took off, trying to keep an eye on the time. The last thing she wanted to do was be anywhere near this Parsons guy when the moon rose. Still, she had to know. She had to find out, and when she did—

When she did, then what? Go to the cops? Tell them there was a werewolf living in town and here's his address? They'd think she was flat-out crazy and lock her up before they'd even consider checking out her story.

What she needed was some sort of proof. A gutted body would be real nice.

Even as thoughts tumbled through her mind, she made her way west, and soon the woods thinned in front of her. Almost before she knew it she was at the edge of the forest, looking out at the houses. She scanned over the houses that were there and, sure enough, there was one that had ol' friendly Ed Parsons' shingle hanging out in front of it.

Of course, since she was facing west, she had an excellent view of the setting sun, which was already hanging very low on the horizon. She was going to have to hurry.

She ran across the street, a plan formulated in her mind. She had the scratches, after all. They needed to be treated. While she was there, she would see if she could spot anything at all that looked like it might be proof.

And as long as she could get out in time, she would be okay.

Of course, that was a major league "if."

She ran across the street, trotted up to the front door and, trying to look as nonchalant as possible, rang the bell and waited.

And waited.

But there was no answer and she stood there, arms folded, tapping her foot.

"He's not home yet."

She turned and there was an elderly man passing by. "Doc doesn't get home from the hospital until later most days."

"Oh. Okay, thanks."

As the old man walked away she trotted down the front stairs of the house and started to leave, all the while keeping a wary eye on the old fellow. The moment he was out of sight, she ran back to the house and then circled around to the rear.

She tried the dining room windows and they were locked, but when she shoved upwards on the kitchen window it slid open. "Bingo," she said, trying not to think about the fact that she was breaking and entering. Well, maybe not. After all, she hadn't had to break any window to get in, she reasoned. So this was just entering, and somehow that didn't sound nearly so bad.

Darlene slithered in through the window, falling to the floor in the kitchen but still clutching her pocketbook. It was exactly what one would expect of a kitchen, with neat linoleum tiles and a colonial styling to the kitchenette.

She had not exactly been silent when she came in, making a quite loud thud on the floor. She paused, waiting for footsteps, but none came. He definitely wasn't home, or if he was, then he was in a coma and hardly a threat.

On a hunch she went over to the kitchen counter drawers and opened them.

No silverware. Just plastic knives, spoons and forks.

She nodded. "Now how did I know?"

He could have kept stainless steel flatware around, like Josh had used in the restaurant, but obviously he was taking no chances.

This, of course, was more than enough proof for her, but she hardly thought that she could sell the authorities on it.

Time to check out the rest of the house.

There was nothing particularly enlightening about what she found downstairs. In the living room were a piano and more colonial furniture. Also a dining room that had been converted into a den with a cluttered desk against the wall. The upstairs was also nothing interesting. She was checking out the bedroom and wishing that she were looking for a vampire, because then all she'd have to do is find a coffin and she'd be set, and then something clicked in her mind.

She had barely glanced at the desk downstairs in the den earlier, but now she ran back down to it. What she'd seen out of the corner of her eye had not fully registered until just then, but now she saw it clearly,

taped against the wall. She went to it and pulled it gently off, not wanting to tear it.

It was the picture of her, the picture that had made the wire services. It had run in a Toronto newspaper, and he had clipped it out.

"Jesus," she muttered.

She folded it once and slid it into her pocket. Then she returned to the living room and noticed something else she hadn't before—there was a door that probably led down to the basement.

She tried to open it, but it was locked. So she went back to the kitchen drawers and rummaged around until she found a long, thin skeleton key. "Figures," she muttered.

Moments later she had the door open.

Something had died down there.

She wasn't sure what. She wasn't sure when. But something had most definitely died.

The basement was dark and she reached out, feeling along the wall until she found a light switch. Then slowly, hesitantly, she made her way down the stairs, taking one careful step at a time.

The first thing she saw was a workbench. A nice, mundane workbench. A hammer, a saw, a can of spray paint, and a few other assorted tools and knickknacks. A disassembled clock radio sat on it, its pieces scattered around, and Darlene wondered if he would wind up doing what she did whenever she tried to fix something electrical: namely, putting it back together with fewer pieces than it had when she started.

She took one more step down and then saw it.

Over in the corner of the basement there was a large, heavy-duty cage. The door was hanging open and, in the hook of the latch, was a large combination lock.

It looked like the kind of cage they kept wild animals in, bars running up and down and around. And on the floor of the cage were large spots of dried blood...

... and parts of a skeleton.

A skull stared up at her with eyeless sockets, a few bits of decayed flesh still clinging to it. A forearm was over in one corner, and attached to the wrist of the forearm was a manacle. A length of chain was in turn attached to that, about five feet long and bolted at the other end to the floor. Over in another corner was a leg bone.

And the leg bone's connected to the hip bone, she thought giddily. Oh, God, Oh, God, let me out of here.

A wave of nausea swept over her and she fought it back as she ran up the steps, taking them two at a time. She slipped, banging her knee against a stair, but she ignored the pain as she ran up and out of the basement. Not even bothering to close the basement door behind her, she ran for the front door of the house.

A second before her hand touched the knob, it turned by itself.

Josh cradled Darlene's limp, gutted body in his arms and tears streamed down his face. "Oh, God," he moaned, "Oh, God, why? Why did this have to happen?"

Incredibly, Darlene was still clinging to life. Putting the last bits of strength she had left into it, she managed to raise her right arm and brush away a tear from Josh's face.

"Don't... don't cry," she croaked, her voice barely recognizable.

"Is this... is this what it is to be human?" he asked, his voice hoarse with emotion. "It hurts so much. A pack leader, a wolf, doesn't know this kind of loss. Not this kind of hurt."

"I'm..." She choked on her last breath. "I'm sorry I hurt you... leader of the pack..."

All of this flashed through Darlene's mind in a split second as she saw the doorknob turning.

No way in hell.

She heard the jingle of Parsons' keys and, in a desperate leap, flung herself to one side. There, providing haven, was the hall closet. She threw herself inside, clutching her pocketbook to her breast, shoving past coats and burrowing as deeply into the back as she could. Coat hangers swung merrily and she tried to draw herself up into a little ball.

She heard the front door open and then close. She crouched down on the floor of the closet, trying to pull back to the furthest, darkest corner. It was not terribly large, but she managed to dig her feet into a pile of shoes, hopefully obscuring herself from view.

She held her breath and tried to instruct her heart to pound softer.

The closet door opened.

She shut her eyes, in her desperation falling back on the traditional, childlike logic that if she couldn't see him, he couldn't see her. She was biting her lower lip so hard, in order to prevent a scream, that she drew blood.

She waited for the "Who the hell are you?" or the low laugh that would certainly come as Parsons recognized her and delighted in the trouble that she had gotten herself into.

She saw his feet, and then she heard a coat hanger rattle as he removed it, hung up his coat, and then slid shut the closet door.

Still Darlene did not breathe, did not move. Had he really not seen her? Was this some perverse way of toying with her? If it was, it was a terribly effective perverse way.

All the while, through her mind, was running the fact that the sun was setting, that the moon was rising, that she had to get the hell out of there.

She listened for his footsteps. He was moving across the living room. There was the sound of something

scraping on the floor—a chair, perhaps—and then music floated through the living room. He was playing the piano.

The tune he played was almost childlike, and yet its simplicity had made it one of the immortal tunes. With what sounded like great gusto, he was banging out a stirring rendition of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?"

Oh, my God, she thought. That's worse than "Leader of the Pack."

The music stopped and suddenly, with quick, decisive steps, Parsons strode back across the living room. She heard him start down the basement stairs, the door slamming shut behind him.

This was her chance.

She scrambled to her feet, tossing aside subtlety in favor of a mad dash for freedom. She slid open the closet door and barrelled towards the front door.

She yanked on it, and it didn't open.

To her dismay, she saw that it was held closed by a dead bolt—the kind that didn't have a knob on the inside, but instead opened with a key. A key that Darlene did not have. She remembered an article she'd read not too long ago about an entire family that had perished in a fire, unable to open their own front door. She had skimmed the article, shaken her head, clucked sympathetically and gone on to read the gossip column. Old newspaper articles, come back to haunt her.

She turned, and there was Parsons.

He was leaning against the basement door, smiling.

"Well, well," he said. "Your picture doesn't do you justice."

She made a cross sign with her two index fingers. "Stay back!"

"You're joking, of course." He was wearing a smoking jacket and pleated maroon pants. His feet were bare. "It's so good of you to come by, Ms. Abramowitz. And here I thought I'd have to go out to eat."

The living-room window was nearby. She turned quickly and started towards it, but Parsons covered the distance in half the time it would have taken her. He was incredibly fast, and now he was blocking her exit. "Where's your friend, the wolf?" he asked.

"Where you'll never find him." She spun and ran towards the kitchen.

He ran after her, catching up with her at the open basement door. He grabbed her by the arm, and his grip was like a vise. "Now, Darlene, don't be embarrassed," he said soothingly. "I'm a doctor, you know."

She slammed her heel down on his bare foot, as hard as she could on his instep. He growled in pain, and the growl didn't sound strictly human.

She swung her hand around, fingernails extended, and raked them across his face. "You bitch!" he shrieked as thin ribbons of blood welled up on his face. He turned quickly and hurled her down the

basement steps.

Darlene went as limp as she could as she thud-thud-thudded down the steps. She landed at the bottom and skidded away.

Everything hurt. She looked up and Parsons was standing at the top of the stairs.

His eyes were glowing deep red. "Problems?" he said, and his voice sounded thicker, more hoarse. "Let me fix you right up."

She scabbled backwards towards the workbench as he leaped down the stairs, landing in an animalistic crouch at the bottom. "You haven't got a prayer," he said. "Humans are nothing but meat. Meat to be consumed by their betters."

"You were human," she said as her back banged into the workbench. She clambered to her feet.

He came towards her slowly, crouching. His face was beginning to darken, his fingernails distending. "I saw the light," and he didn't speak so much as snarl. "Humans won't survive. They'll never survive. Only animals have what it takes. If you want to live, you have to become an animal. . . and you don't have the balls for it."

She grabbed a hammer and hurled it at him. He knocked it aside and advanced on her. His mouth started to grow, to ripple outward, and his eyes shined even more brightly red. Hideous growls came from his throat. His ears started to grow. His sporty smoking jacket ripped down the back seam as his musculature twisted around and grew more and more powerful.

She was transfixed by his relentless gaze as he started to grow, to tower over her. Speech was replaced by inarticulate, fierce sounds. His pants ripped away, a huge tail uncoiling, his legs an insane combination of human and wolf. His body was covered with thick, dark fur, and he let out a full-throated roar.

Darlene swung her hand around, grabbed onto a can of spray paint, and even as the werewolf lunged at her, she sprayed it in his face.

The paint got in his eyes, his mouth, and he howled in fury. One massive, clawed arm swept out, missing Darlene and striking the workbench, smashing it to pieces. Darlene backed up quickly as the creature, blinded, lunged in her general direction.

"Help!" she screamed, but there was no one to hear her, particularly since she was drowned out by the wolf's furious roars. Her back hit the cage and she quickly jumped in, slam-ming the door shut. It seemed perfectly sensible. If she locked herself in, the monster couldn't get in at her.

The creature heard the clang of the door and lunged towards it. And Darlene realized to her horror that the door hadn't fully shut—the combination lock was still in the hook and wasn't allowing it to close fully. She had to yank out the lock, close the door, then thread the lock back through the latch and lock it.

She had the opportunity to do exactly none of this. By the time she reached through the bars for the lock, the creature had slammed into the door. She yanked her hands away before the monster broke her fingers.

The creature seized the bars of the door and yanked. Darlene tried to hold on but her strength was no match for his and the door was pulled open, and suddenly there was nothing between her and the jaws of



the werewolf. Worse, she was in an enclosed space and couldn't run.

With a roar the werewolf leaped, his massive paws hitting her dead center in the chest and bearing her down to the ground. The werewolf was over her. All she could see was his snarling face, his massive teeth, each of which was as long as her finger.

He brought his mouth down and clamped down on her skull.

Not Darlene's own skull, though. For as the werewolf's maw descended, she shoved into it the white skull from the earlier, nameless victim that had been lying on the floor next to her. She shoved it in so tightly that it became lodged in his mouth. She yanked her hand away before she lost a finger as the werewolf shook his head, thrashing about madly, trying to shake the blockage loose.

On the other side of Darlene was the chain. She grabbed it and, with all her strength, snapped it around and hit the werewolf on the side of the head with it. It sliced across his right eye, opening a gash, and blood started to trickle down, further obscuring the vision that was already hampered by the paint she'd sprayed into it.

With a strength born of desperation, Darlene shoved the infuriated creature off of herself and scrambled to her feet. The werewolf hesitated a moment and then slammed his jaws shut, crushing the skull to fragments. He turned to pursue Dariene and Darlene, out of the cage, kicked the door shut just as the werewolf leaped forward after her. The door hit the creature in the face, knocking him back, and he let out a howl of anger and frustration. What the hell was happening here? This prey should not be any problem. How was it staving off its death this long?

Darlene made it to the stairs and ran up them two at a time. She heard the creature behind her shove open the cage door. He was about to be right on her heels again. "Oh God Oh God Oh God," she kept saying as she raced up the stairs and slammed shut the basement door.

She ran three paces, then realized that she'd gotten her bearings screwed up. She was heading for the living room rather than for the kitchen and escape. She turned back towards the kitchen as the werewolf smashed through the basement door, sending shards of wood flying everywhere. He was dazed but still furious enough to tear her to pieces.

She spun and ran back to the living room, looking for something to use as a weapon. The werewolf cleared the distance between them in one leap, knocking her to the ground, flat on her stomach, and there was no way, simply no way that she was going to make it now.

"Josh," she moaned.

In answer, the living room window smashed inward.

Glass flew all over as a huge, naked man hit the floor and rolled into a crouch. For the moon had risen, and all were-creatures in the area had undergone their transformations.

The werewolf turned, Darlene instantly forgotten. He regarded the newcomer for a moment and then, as happened once before when they faced each other, the werewolf laughed.

And he spoke, in words that only Josh could hear.

"Welcome, my creation," he said. "Are you ready to die?"

The creature knew at that point that all his fears had proven groundless. He would kill the abomination. He would kill the woman. There would be no end to his life, no flashing jaws and pain of silver. The dreams and fears were groundless, for now, actually face to face with that which he had feared, he knew that he would triumph.

He leaped at Josh.

Josh, still in a crouch, jumped to one side, trying to shield his vulnerable belly and genitals. The human body was woefully inadequate when it came to fighting, particularly fighting such as this.

His feet crunched on the glass as the werewolf spun and leaped towards him again.

"Josh!" shrieked Darlene.

Josh jumped up and shoulder-rolled across the expanse of the piano. The werewolf was on the other side, growling, and Josh, muscles rippling, upended the piano onto the werewolf. The creature darted to one side, just escaping being pinned under it. His vision was still hazy, but at this point he didn't really need perfect sight. Smell was more than enough.

Eight feet of muscle and fury, the werewolf sprung at Josh. Josh turned sideways, trying to catch the creature's neck in the crook of his arm... and succeeded.

The monster was twisted almost in half, and then managed to find footing and shove his weight against Josh. The strain overbalanced Josh, and he and the werewolf tumbled together to the floor. The werewolf spun and his claws raked across Josh's chest. Josh screamed, a human scream, and a primal instinct howled in his brain, "Self-death! Self-death!"

He shoved the werewolf off himself and staggered back, hitting a coffee table and tumbling over backwards. The werewolf covered the distance with no trouble, but suddenly Josh wasn't there. The werewolf spun, looked around, and suddenly Josh was on top, straddling the creature. His arms were down and around the werewolf's neck and he twisted, clenching his teeth and grunting. The werewolf's head snapped around...

... and his neck broke with an audible snap.

The werewolf screamed, a long, awful sound. Then he went slack and limp.

Josh stood there for a moment, not quite believing it. Then slowly he lowered the creature to the ground.

Darlene, sobbing in relief, was still on the floor. "Oh, God, Josh..."

His body covered with blood, Josh still managed a half-smile. "It's all right," he said. "It's over."

Then a piece of Josh's torso flew across the room.

At first he didn't realize what had happened. One moment everything was fine; the next there was a huge gash in his side and a piece of his flesh had been sent flying across the living room. Blood began to pour from the wound, and he sank to his knees.

The werewolf stood over him, head at an impossible angle. His eyes were glowing, his lips pulled back

away from his teeth in the rictus of a death head's snarl.

And he said, "You're not animal enough to kill me."

He fell upon Josh, jaws snapping. Josh blocked the creature's mouth with his forearm and the fearsome teeth clamped down. Josh's blood trickled through the creature's teeth.

And in that moment, Darlene remembered the gun.

Her pocketbook! Where the hell was her pocketbook?

She lunged over the hall closet and burrowed into the shoes, trying to shut out the screams she heard from Josh. Her desperate fingers found the pocketbook and she yanked out the gun.

It wasn't loaded. The bullets were still rattling around in the bag.

Her hands trembled as she flipped open the cylinder, not sure what the hell she was doing, and shoved in several bullets. They looked like regular bullets to her, not silver, but that stupid vampire wouldn't have been packing a single silver bullet, right?

She swung the gun around just as the werewolf was about to tear off Josh's arm. "Freeze!" Perfect. Just like on TV.

The werewolf obediently froze, his head cocked in that same insane angle. Then he suddenly grabbed up Josh with his clawed arms and held the bleeding man in front of him.

"Darlene," Josh managed to get out, his voice thick. "Shoot."

"I'll hit you!"

"It doesn't matter. Kill him. Or he'll kill us both, and where's the sense in—arrgghhh!"

The werewolf was trying to tear Josh in half, and with a scream and a cry Darlene pulled the trigger.

It clicked on the empty cylinder.

She fired again and this time the gun spat out a bullet. She missed by a good two feet and, with tears in her eyes, took a step closer and fired again.

The bullet passed through Josh's chest and out the back of the werewolf. Both of them gasped at the impact and, screaming, Darlene emptied the gun at them.

Josh slid out of the werewolf's grasp. The creature staggered, and then he touched the wounds and laughed. Not silver. No problem. He bent over Josh to finish his work.

And Darlene, furious beyond all imagining, horrified that she had actually shot through her own lover, shrieked, "Get away from him!"

The werewolf laughed and ignored her.

"Get away from him, you son of a bitch!"

The rest of her words dissolved into incomprehensible hatred as she leaped towards the werewolf and sank her teeth into the back of his neck.

And her teeth, laced through with silver fillings and caps from all those trips to the dentist, cut through. The silver mouth which, even in a kiss had given pain to Josh, bit down on his tormentor.

It all slammed back to the werewolf even as agony beyond his wildest imaginings overwhelmed him. The dreams of tearing and rending teeth and silver. But it had always been an animal...

With a roar the creature turned away from Josh, pain galvanizing his movements. Furious, growling and snarling, Darlene held on, one hand around his left ear and the other buried deep in his thick fur. She brought her legs around and locked herself around him. A red haze covered her and she forgot everything. Forgot humanity. Forgot Josh. Forgot everything but the kill, the kill that was hers.

With those silver-laced teeth she ripped out massive chunks of the creature. He screamed, rolling onto his back to try to dislodge her, and even as she was crushed under his weight she still wouldn't let go. The werewolf's movements became more and more frantic even as the poison of the silver worked its way through him.

And then one of her caps came loose in the twisting and slid under the werewolf's pelt.

It was as if someone had poured acid into him. It slid under him and against his muscle, leaving a trail of poison carnage in him. He writhed in her grasp, fighting her, fighting death.

Something grabbed his upper jaw. He tried to slam it shut but now something had his lower jaw as well, keeping him from biting down. He was on his side, trying to escape the clawing and biting creature on his back, and now two huge hands had taken his maw firmly. One large foot was placed against his neck. He looked up.

Josh stood over him, muscles rippling, wounds in his chest already healing, and said, "So long, you bastard."

He pulled in one direction with his arms, and pushed in the other with his foot.

The werewolf's head came loose from its shoulders.

Josh hurled the head across the room. It bounced once, twice, and rolled up against the front door.

The body continued to struggle for some moments more, not quite realizing that it was dead. But when that realization sunk home it slowed down, its paws clawing at the air for a few more seconds, and then it stopped.

And still a hoarse growling came from the body.

Darlene. "Darlene?" said Josh slowly.

She was panting fiercely, barely recognizable as herself.

By degrees she raised her head and looked up at Josh, her blurred eyes refocussing. "Josh?"

"Yes." He knelt down beside her and stroked her hair, matted and thick with blood. Her face was covered with gore, like the face of a wild thing might be. Her clothes were torn and there was blood under her fingernails. "Josh... you came back to me."

"I..." He lifted her up and cradled her in his arms. "I followed your scent. I got all the way here before changing, then saw the sign with the name hanging outside..."

"It pays to advertise," she said sagely. "Josh... why did you come back?"

"I had to make sure you were all right."

"Ooohhh...I'm fine," she said through blood-encrusted lips.

"Did he bite you?" asked Josh urgently. "If he did—"

"No. No, he clawed me, terrified me... didn't bite me." And her eyes widened. "Josh... bite me."

"What?"

"Bite me. You're a were-something-or-other. Bite me and I'll be like you. I can—"

"No."

"But—"

"No," he said more firmly. He set her down. "I don't know what you would wind up like. But I know that the way you are is the way you have to be."

"And will you stay with me?"

"I can't. I have the pack. And my mate. Wolves mate for life, you know."

"I need you! You're mine! I'll fight for what's mine!"

"Darlene..."

She began to do things to him, her hands playing along the length of his naked and blood-encrusted body. Guttural, animal sounds came from between his lips. He moaned as she did, blood pounding through him, and he started to pull her clothes from her...

There was a gunshot as the lock was blown off the front door.

Josh and Darlene spun as Henri LeRoq kicked open the door and brought his gun around. "Don't move!" he shouted. "Police!"

"Oh, thank heaven. The authorities," said Josh drily.

LeRoq looked around at the mess all over the living room and then jumped back with a start as he saw, at his feet, the wolf's head. "Good Christ," he said. "Neighbors reported a hullabaloo, but..." He looked up at the naked man and bloodied woman. "I...I can't believe what I'm seeing."

"Two minutes later and you would have seen a lot more," said Darlene.

## EPILOGUE

Josh told me that rumors continued to fly for months regarding the end of the business about the murdering creature. Rumors such as this:

That Sheriff LeRoq had not singlehandedly caught the creature and killed it but that, in fact, it had been killed by some other folks, including a massively built naked man. That the sheriff had accepted the naked man's offer to give full credit to the sheriff in exchange for not dragging the man into jail and forcing him to make a statement. That LeRoq had sent the man on his way after getting him some clothes out of Doc Parson's closet.

And then there was this really weird rumor about how the creature's body disappeared the next morning in the morgue, to be replaced by Doctor Edward Parsons' body, ripped apart in exactly the same manner. This was deemed entirely too gross to be true, although Doc Parsons was never seen again. This didn't bother anyone all that much, since no one had ever really liked him.

And other rumors, mixed with fact. Like the fact, for example, that wolves do mate for life.

Of course, if a wolf happens to have two lives, then of course that changes things a little bit.

And this goes hand in hand with a rumor that there was a woman also involved with the death of the killer creature. No one knows for sure who she was and what she looks like. But there's this rumor that she comes to town once a month, using a variety of disguises, and checks into a hotel for four days and three nights, when the moon is full. Just like clockwork. And she hardly leaves her room during that time.

And one last rumor, started by some folks who supposedly had the room next to her during one of her supposed stays, is that at night you hear the damndest noises coming from her room. All kinds of growling and laughing and snarling, and it sure sounds like two people really going at it and having some serious physical encounters. . .

Then again, I've never been one to spread rumors. And besides, what two consenting adults do in the privacy of their hotel room three nights a month is certainly their own business.

Although, just between you and me, some people can be such animals.