



[ID: An image of a polaroid of the roofs of two houses with a tree between them that has been tinted a lavender color. In all caps in the font Permanent Marker, text written on the polaroid reads: “Lyk calls to Lyk” then below that the text reads: “-A.C.D”. The polaroid is laying on a textured background of chipping white paint. END ID]

LYK CALLS TO LYK

by a.c.d

The wolf howled.

Cold, it thought.

The wolf sniffed the stiff wind.

Hungry, it thought.

The wolf saw a flicker of motion in the near-blackness, a whisper of a living creature in the barren woods.

Prey, it thought.

The wolf bounded after that small glimmer in the night, pale moonlight reflecting off the leaves in the canopy above.

Kill, it thought.

The wolf caught something warm in its jaws.

The wolf did not think.

The wolf killed.

And then the wolf attempted to chew through its shoulder.

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Eva Louise Alvarez woke up.

She was filthy; she was aching; she was tired. Worst of all, she was cold. But she was used to it.

The taste of blood lay thick in her mouth.

Eva Louise Alvarez dusted the dirt off of her scratched palms, not bothering to try getting the muck out from under her fingernails. She knew from experience that it was no use, just like she knew that finding her truck in this weather was going to be a nightmare. Her bare feet had

calloused over nicely in the years she'd been making her monthly trips, but the cracked and bleeding nails wouldn't help.

None of her injuries would help. Shivering, she took stock, counting at least ten nasty bruises forming and two scratches that were sure to scar. Rough patches of scrapes ran all along her arms and legs, per usual, and her throat felt like a desert, aching. When she attempted to roll her shoulders back she felt a pain on her right so intense that her eyes clouded over for a few seconds.

Eva blinked spots out of her murky vision and very carefully glanced at her shoulder. Further inspection showed that it was practically ripped open, dried blood crusting over her torn skin.

With a sigh—because of course this would happen—she looked around for any sign of where she was. Sometimes she'd be lucky and she'd find trail markers right under her nose. This month's forest was Pigeon River Country State. She hadn't been here in a few months—it was a little too close to Alpena for her taste. But she'd been strapped for time because she'd mistakenly agreed to work a coworker's shift just two hours before sunset like an idiot. A thought sprung unbidden into her mind: if she were really motivated not to hurt anyone, maybe she would have planned better. Maybe, unconsciously, she wanted something in her carefully cultivated monthly routine to go wrong.

Careful of her shoulder, Eva bent down and gagged into the dirt.

There was nothing to tell her where the fuck she ended up, so she rubbed the cold from her nose with her left hand and sniffed, senses still sharp from the full moon.

She hated doing this, but she could wander for hours in the wrong direction before she realized her truck was parked on the opposite end of the forest, and she had a job to get back to. At least she wasn't in high school anymore. Eva couldn't stand the thought of trying to sneak out from under her parents' noses to ravage herself and whatever poor creature was standing by once a month again.

There were people somewhere to the east of her. She absentmindedly smacked the taste of blood from her lips at the smell. Whatever the thing inside her had killed, it wasn't a person, she could tell that much.

Eva Louise Alvarez shuddered as she remembered exactly how she could tell.

She picked her way through the forest to the east. She very pointedly did not think about the fact that her shoulder was seriously hurt; she very pointedly did not think about how sweet her mouth was this close to the full moon. Instead, she counted the flares of pain in her joints; instead, she looked around the trees for anything yellow now that it was almost fall proper. She tried to talk to herself, but her throat was not having it.

Eva had no idea how much time passed, but eventually she happened upon the parking lot with her good old 2001 Ford F-150 waiting out in the cold. Charlotte (Charlie, if her brakes were behaving) had been with her since her 16th birthday. Her parents had bought her off of a work friend for \$700, ridiculously cheap for a truck. Sure, her air conditioning didn't work, her front bumper was dented in three places, and her brakes liked to give Eva heart attacks, but Eva loved that truck more than she'd loved her first high school girlfriend. She had been with her through the hellscape that was high school. Her truck bed had housed her first transformation, probably

the worst moment of Eva's entire life (discounting the night she was bitten). Charlotte meant everything to her.

She opened the driver's side door clumsily with her left hand and took care climbing in. Everything in her truck was freezing, a feeling that seeped into her bones and stiffened her joints. The air felt heavy in her lungs as she fumbled with the keys. God, she was so tired of being weighed down.

She briefly wondered how she was going to drive with her shoulder mauled. There was no one she could call to pick her up. The only people that were anything close to friends were coworkers who didn't know her well enough to drive an hour and a half on a Monday at the drop of a hat. And she wasn't leaving her truck overnight again.

Grimacing, she slowly gripped the wheel with her right hand. Angry black spots whirled around her eyes, but she kept her hand where it was. Eva took a deep breath. "You're just—" she started to say to herself, but her voice caught. Coughing, she thought, *You're just going to have to use your left hand to drive and you'll be fine.*

At least the pain kept her alert while the familiar post-moon weariness sank into her bones. Walking all the way here hadn't helped. Nothing would help.

Eva Louise Alvarez sighed, put her truck in drive, and pulled away from Pigeon River Country State Forest. She did not imagine a life where she wouldn't have to drive hours with an injured shoulder, or where she could have spent yesterday night curled in bed and covered in blankets, watching something stupid on Netflix after her shift. No, she didn't think about things like that. Instead she went over her monthly bills with the addition of caring for her shoulder. There was no use in thinking about anything else.

“This is a good decision,” she whispered to herself, voice hoarse. “You are being—” she broke off in a coughing fit. *Responsible. You’re being responsible.*

Eva walked into Alpena Family and Friends Health Clinic with her head bent down, eyes lowered and hands clenched tightly around her arms. She hadn’t been here before, though it was the closest low-cost clinic to her. Usually if she needed medical attention, she was too far away from Alpena to drive easily. She’d grown used to the anonymity of it, the ability to not be herself for however long. Here, in Alpena, she could see a customer from the diner, a coworker, someone she’d gone to school with. She was decidedly Eva Louise Alvarez and no one else. She didn’t like it.

She *really* didn’t like the feeling she got as she stepped through the doors. There was some indescribable smell drifting around so thick she could almost see it. Her knees buckled a little under the weight of it. She just barely kept herself from collapsing in the double doorway. A shiver ran up her spine, her shoulder screaming out in protest at the involuntary movement. Some instinctive thought tickled at the back of her brain, trying to form, but Eva knew exactly the ragged place those instincts came from, and she wouldn’t let it. It was dangerous, entertaining thoughts from the more monstrous parts of her brain.

Once, when Eva had first been bitten, her mom had tried to teach her how to make ají de gallina. Eva was useless in the kitchen, but she was going to college soon and her mom insisted she be able to feed herself before she left. At the time, Eva spent her days hurting and angry and taking it out on those around her when she couldn’t take it out on herself. The only reason she’d agreed to try to learn that night was because the thought of losing her mom’s homemade cooking

threatened to send her into an even worse spiral. As soon as her mom had taken the defrosted chicken out of the fridge, Eva had almost torn the package open with her teeth. A dark thing inside of her burst out from between her lips in a growl. The only thing that stopped her from eating an entire raw chicken breast was her mother's comforting hand around her wrist, grounding her. Her parents didn't know what she was, and there was no chance that she would ever tell them, but her mom had always recognized when she was struggling and tried to help, no matter how out of her depth she'd been.

Eva didn't have a comforting hand now, but living with this *thing* tinting her brain for years had given her an iron grip on her will.

Eva Louise Alvarez was staying human in this clinic today.

She pushed past the heavy smell and rounded on the receptionist desk in the right corner of the waiting area. A Latinx person who looked to be only a few years older than Eva sat on a straight-backed rolling chair, slumped over the desk with their head leaning against their propped up arm. They seemed to be falling asleep.

The smell surrounded the person in a halo of weighted...something. With a gulp, Eva rapped a knuckle on the edge of the desk with her left hand. "Excuse me?" Her voice cracked painfully.

The person sat up with a jolt and smoothed back their hair; it was in a loose, low-hanging ponytail. They stared at Eva for a long moment, then took a deep breath through their nose, "Hi," the receptionist smiled, slipping a pair of glasses on over dark brown eyes, "here for an appointment?" Besides their exhausted expression, they were pretty in a mousy sort of way, with a bridge of freckles over their bronze skin. Their name tag read,

ADELINA

SHE/HER

“Walk-in,” Eva replied. Her instincts were screaming at her but she muffled the sound. Staying human.

Adelina pushed her glasses up with her pointer finger and peered at Eva for a while longer. Eva shifted from foot to foot, her shoulder twinging. She was struck with the urge to run. Finally, Adelina rolled her chair over to a stack of clipboards with packets of paper on them. “Paperwork,” she said, a little too brightly for someone who was obviously very tired and also talking about paperwork.

“Fun,” Eva replied. *Staying human. Staying human.*

“You’ll need to fill these out in a minute, but let’s get you set up in the system first.” Adelina blinked owlshly, like she knew something, “Will you be visiting us again? It’s recommended that you see a primary care physician at least once a year.”

“Let’s hope not.” Eva said, before realizing how that would sound. “I mean, let’s not count on it. I have—another doctor already. Just between insurance on my job. Um—yeah.” *Super convincing. Really fantastic.*

“Well, just in case.” She began asking Eva routine questions, things she’d expected to have to answer.

Still, Eva squirmed. Adelina’s tendency to stare at her meaningfully every few answers did not help. The overwhelming cloud of...whatever it was helped even less. It was like a weighted blanket of sensation covering her head and turning her thoughts slow. It took her a few seconds to understand each question, her brain foggy.

“You can have a seat anywhere you’d like, and turn that paperwork in to me when you’re done. The doctor will see you shortly.” And she took another deep breath through her nose, like she was steeling herself up for something. “And if you need *anything*, you just come and talk to me, okay?” Direct prolonged eye-contact and then, “*Anything*. You got that, Eva?”

If Eva hadn’t been uncomfortable before (which she had been) she was now. “Right. Uh—will do, Adelina.”

The receptionist laughed a little, “Please, call me Lina.”

Eva nodded and turned towards the chairs bordering the room before *Lina* could say anything else. That was enough socializing to last the next however long she would be stuck here. The strange smell kept her legs wobbly as she shuffled into the seat farthest from Lina’s desk.

There was a small TV in her corner of the room playing HGTV and a table of magazines in the center. Eva idly flipped through a copy of TIME before tackling the paperwork. She’d been in enough situations in the past year to have all manner of medical paperwork down to a science, but it was not one she enjoyed.

She completed the forms within a few minutes, thanking everything she could think of for the fact that she’d learned to write with her left hand the year before. There’d been an incident with a broken wrist that had taken a lot of explaining away to her coworkers when it managed to heal within two weeks. Sure, her print was wobbly at best, but it was legible *and* she didn’t have to deal with the tight pain in her right shoulder any more than what was caused by resting a hand on her bouncing leg.

With the forms complete, she was hesitant to approach Lina again. It felt like she was seconds away from grabbing Eva by the arm and demanding...something from her. Or maybe the smell was making her antsy. It persisted, cloying in the air around Eva and clogging her mind.

After tapping her pen to some unimportant rhythm, she stood again. *Human human human.*

“All done?” Lina asked cheerfully, much more alert than when Eva had entered.

She nodded.

Smiling, Lina said, “Okay, you’re good to wait for the doctor.”

She nodded.

Lina held her gaze. The smell whirled around her head. A howl threatened to burst from Eva’s throat. She clenched her fists, digging her nails into her palm.

“Would you like help with anything else?”

She nodded. Then spluttered, “Er—no, I’m good. I’ll go sit down now.” Then she turned tail, making a beeline for the chair in the HGTV haven.

What is wrong with you?

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After fifteen minutes, she was led back to a room where the smell almost disappeared, waited for another twenty minutes before a doctor came in and asked about her shoulder. She took off her jacket—very carefully—and they examined the mauling with a surprising lack of questions about how she’d managed to rip her shoulder apart. They were mostly concerned with the fact that she hadn’t gone to the ER as soon as it had happened. They treated the wound with more antiseptic (as if she hadn’t done that already), numbed it, stitched it up while apologizing

for the scar it was absolutely going to leave, and told her that she probably tore the rotator cuff as well. After the stitches were complete they insisted on scheduling her for some X-Rays or an MRI but Eva almost laughed at how much that would not be happening.

Usually when she got injuries like this, they healed on their own after a couple weeks as long as she made sure not to aggravate them. She'd learned to do her own stitches when she'd woken to a deep gash on her leg only a few months after her first transformation. The problem was that it was hard to stitch your shoulder up when you only had use of one of your arms. She would just need to remember to cancel the appointments in a week or so.

Now that the wound was treated, it should only take a few days for it to scab over. She would have to make sure to keep it clean until then. Eva wasn't one to push her luck, but she'd learned not to underestimate the ability of her skin to knit back together. It helped with more than just her werewolf-related injuries. She didn't have anyone to hide the cuts she gave herself from anymore, but the habit was hard to break.

One of her coworkers had approached her about it once, but the most recent marks were already gone, healed and barely visible. She'd never been grateful for the bite, but a part of her couldn't help but thank the person who'd made her like this, whoever that was. She couldn't remember much of anything from that night, but she knew that they must've been just like her, someone in a shitty situation who could barely manage keeping themselves safe let alone anybody else. They'd ruined her life, but Eva had definitely ruined lives before. She couldn't help but feel like it was always meant to happen. Eva Louise Alvarez was always meant to become the same kind of monster on the outside that she was on the inside.

The person who'd bitten her gave her pain, but maybe she needed that pain. They'd also given her something to fall back on when that pain became too much. She was trying to *stop* hurting herself, but knowing that she didn't have to worry about sickeningly well-meaning stares when she indulged in that release was reassuring. (And, really, was she actually trying that hard?)

Eva was hit by the smell as soon as she entered the reception area again. She barrelled past the desk and out the door without a second glance at Lina. The smell seemed to follow her out before dissipating on the sidewalk. She breathed a breath of cold, clear air, thankful for the heavy numbness in her chest for the first time in a long time.

Just when she was about to head to her car, Lina burst through the clinic doors, bringing the smell with her. She ran full tilt at Eva, grabbing her by the shoulders and shaking hard. As soon as Eva cried out she let go with a frown and said meaningfully, "I think you need help."

"What—?"

"I think you need help," Lina repeated, "and I think I'm one of the very few people who can give it to you."

Eva started to turn around, the smell messing with her senses, making her teeth feel sharper and her nails longer. "Look, I just want to go home, okay. Just let me go home."

"No!" Lina grabbed her left arm, "Listen to me, I can help you."

"I'm fine!"

"No," she pulled Eva so that she was forced to look into Lina's eyes, then flicked her gaze to Eva's torn shoulder, "No, you're not."

“This was just an accident.” She tried to shrug off Lina’s grip, but it stayed strong. A growl formed in her throat, but Eva would rather choke than let it leave her mouth.

“A preventable one. You’ve been hurting yourself.” It wasn’t a question.

“How would I even do this to myself?”

“Not you—well, yes you, but—look, I know about your, uh, furry problem.”

Eva’s blood ran cold, the smell forgotten. There was a hand around her lungs and a steel trap around her heart. She was done breathing for the time being. “What.” She croaked out.

“You know, the *big dog* you’ve got messing up your life?” Lina squeezed her wrist, “Me too.”

“*What.*”

“I’ve got a—uh, big dog too.”

“*What!*”

“Look, Eva, I don’t know how else you want me to say it, but just know that I know where you’re coming from and I *do* know how to help you because I know you need help.”

Eva sucked in a breath through her teeth.

Lina squeezed her wrist again, “You’re not alone.”

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Lina was driving her to the outskirts of Alpena. There was barely anyone around for miles in any direction, but Eva knew from experience that a mile wasn’t enough for the wolf. She didn’t understand how this was supposed to make her feel safe.

“Is this where you...” Eva tried to think of the word, “transform?”

Lina smiled, something small but sincere in a way that made Eva uncomfortable, “You’ll see when we get there.”

“Are you going to explain how you want to “help” me?” Eva asked.

Lina’s smile didn’t change, “You’ll see when we get there,” she said.

“Are you going to actually answer any of my questions?”

Lina’s smile adjusted itself into a frown, “Ask different questions.”

Eva considered that for a moment. *Fine*, she thought to herself, *I won’t be getting answers about what the hell is going to happen, but maybe I can get some answers about what the hell happened before*. “What was that—that smell. At the clinic,” she said aloud.

“Oh that?” Lina shrugged her shoulders and flexed her fingers on the wheel of the car, “Your body was reacting to me being another werewolf. Something in our chemistry overwhelms us when we meet each other. Don’t ask me why, because I have no idea. There isn’t exactly anyone we can ask. It won’t be like that forever, though, don’t worry. I’m sure you’ve already noticed the feeling fade the longer we’ve been in the car together.” Eva nodded despite the fact that Lina’s eyes were on the road ahead. “Once you get used to it, the feeling goes away, but the—” she seemed to be searching for the word, “ —the scent doesn’t. With enough practice, you’ll be able to pick me, or any werewolf you’re around for a long time, out of a crowd.”

Eva tried not to focus on the implication that she would be around Lina for a long time. *This can’t last, Eva*, her brain supplied helpfully, *things will always break bad eventually*. But she could listen for now. Figure out what her next move should be from here. At least she hadn’t had to drive with her shoulder again.

“Any more questions?” Lina asked, once Eva had been silent for too long.

“Are there more people like us? Is that where you’re taking me?”

Predictably, Lina’s little smile came back full force and she said, “You’ll see when we get there.”

Eva kept her mouth shut for the rest of the drive, watching the trees wind around the road. She tried counting things to pass the time because Lina had proven that she wasn’t going to give Eva the conversation she needed. One, two, three mailboxes. Four, five, six potholes. Lina seemed just as content to sit in silence, making no more efforts to say anything until they pulled into a well-trodden driveway.

You’ll see when we get there, Lina kept repeating. Well, they were here, and Eva didn’t see anything besides an old-looking two-story and a Prius parked in the driveway. As Lina approached in her beat-up minivan, she honked out Shave and a Haircut, scaring a few birds gathering in the front of the house.

She parked and got out of the car. Eva hesitated—just for a moment—before following suit, mindful of her shoulder. It still ached in a dull sort of way, but she hadn’t seen any blood through the bandages the doctor had put on it an hour or so ago so she couldn’t have been mistreating it too badly.

Lina stood in the driveway with her hands splayed wide. She appeared to be waiting for Eva to pick her way carefully out of the car before she said, “This is it! Welcome to the Lycanhouse.” She put her hand to the side of her face and stage-whispered, “Jada came up with that name, we’re still working out the kinks. In fact,” she glanced at the Prius, “Jada should be here right now. You can direct all suggestions at her.” And Lina turned towards the house and set off for the front door.

Eva scrambled after her, smelling something faint but distinguished off of the Prius as they passed. Right, more werewolves means more of all of...*that*. More overwhelming urge to rip something apart. More getting used to it.

As soon as Eva stepped in front of the door, it swung open and she was struck with the need to keel over, coughing. A tall Black person in a fuzzy pink bathrobe and colorful silk pajamas with a pattern of heart emojis stood in the entryway. They were smiling wide enough that it seemed like it would crack their face in two, and their dark brown eyes were lit up. The person's hair was tucked into a shiny pink bonnet that matched their robe. When they noticed Eva kneeling, they bounced over to her, only to start kneeling themselves.

"Oh! Sorry! Wow, that is *strong*," the person laughed, and then proceeded to throw up into the bushes.

Lina patted them on the back, "You'll get used to it."

The person wiped their mouth with their sleeve, still clutching their stomach, "*Ahem*. Hi," they grit their teeth in a smile, "Jada, she/her. Nice to meet you."

"Eva," she said from the ground, "she/her." A headache was starting to build beneath her temple from the combating sensations coming off of the other two werewolves. Her vision sharpened every time she blinked, nails too. *Staying human, staying human, staying human*.

She sucked in a breath through her teeth. They felt heavy in her mouth.

Her senses heightened in a paradoxical blur. It felt like what she'd experienced at the clinic but worse, compounded by the Prius in her peripheral and a building of sensations coming from the house. There was a tidal wave of overwhelming feeling just behind the door and it was threatening to wash over Eva and sweep her away.

They stayed like that for what felt like hours (but Eva would guess that it was about ten minutes) before Jada said, “God, wow! Definitely wasn’t expecting that, should’ve seen it coming.” She stood a little straighter, “Don’t think I’m gonna lose my lunch again.”

Eva coughed. “Yeah.” The weight on her chest had been growing lighter, but it had not disappeared. She made an attempt to get up off of the ground, but ended up kneeling awkwardly, a palm against the concrete. She took a moment to feel the roughness of it against her skin, pointedly not looking at how claw-like her nails had become. Her right shoulder twinged in pain.

“Is anyone else home?” Lina asked, continuing to rub circles into Jada’s back.

“Robbie and Sahithi went to get ice cream. Sky’s at work.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

“Didn’t wanna change out of my PJs,” Jada shrugged.

Eva lifted her head. She felt...better wasn’t the word, but more in control. Less overwhelmed. Eva Louise Alvarez was used to pushing past pain like this. (*But the scent isn’t necessarily painful*, a small part of her said. She ignored that part.) “Can we go inside now?” She asked.

“Oh, right!” Lina clapped her hands, “Let’s give you the grand tour.”

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Jada opened up the final door on the first floor, which had a staircase going down. The stairs themselves were cement and cracked, bare of any paint or polish. There was a single lightbulb lighting the way. A lonely string trailed from the cage of the bulb. It gave a weak flicker before deciding to stay on.

Eva was confused. She'd expected stairs going up. She could've sworn there'd been a second story window when she'd taken in the house for the first time (but maybe that was the nausea talking.) "A basement?" She asked.

"Yep," Jada popped the *p* loudly. "It's where we hide the bodies."

Eva stared.

After a moment or two, Jada laughed and said, "Kidding, kidding." She held up her hands placatingly, "No bodies to hide. There's not even any severed limbs. The only unsettling things down there are Lina's weird Christmas decorations."

Lina came up behind Eva, making her jump out of instinct. She'd stayed in the kitchen when they'd gotten to that part of the tour, claiming that she was making herself a grilled cheese sandwich. Now she was back, and defending her decorating preferences, "A wooden nativity scene is not weird!"

"It is when each figure is, like, two feet tall." Jada said with the air of someone who'd gone over this before and was tired of explaining it for the *nth* time.

Lina was undeterred, "Just because it's a little bigger than most doesn't mean—"

Eva took this as her cue to interrupt before the strange argument could be fully rehashed again. "What about upstairs?"

"Oh, that?" Jada shrugged, "Nothing up there except our incredibly haunted attic. There's a pull-out ladder down the hall," she pointed to the outline of a trapdoor on the ceiling about 10 feet away.

"Haunted?" *Great, Eva*, she thought to herself, barely resisting saying it aloud, *You finally wrap your head around more werewolves existing and suddenly ghosts are real too.*

“It is *not* haunted,” Lina said pointedly, “The only supernatural creatures of the night in this house are us.” She paused, possibly because she was thinking or possibly for dramatic effect. Eva didn’t know her that well, but she would guess the latter, “And, of course, the gremlin that secretly lives up there and steals our food sometimes.”

“Gremlin?” Eva practically exclaimed.

Jada rolled her eyes, but there was fondness behind it, “Oh, here we go again.”

“The gremlin is real!”

“And the ghost isn’t?”

“No,” Lina said, matter-of-factly, “because ghosts don’t steal the lemon poppyseed muffin I’d been specifically saving for myself that no one in the house will own up to stealing under pain of death!”

“Death?” Eva interjected. This conversation was just becoming more confusing, she decided.

“Well, more like pain of intense glaring.”

Jada laughed, “That’s definitely not enough to convince half the people who live here to spill their beans, Lina. You know it was probably just Sky pretending they didn’t see the sticky note in the dark.”

“I choose to believe the best of my family,” Lina huffed. She crossed her arms and tapped a foot, “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. That isn’t the only time food’s gone missing. The gremlin is real, just admit it.”

“Under pain of intense glaring?”

Lina pouted, “You win this one, Jadita, but don’t act so smug. I *will* get you to drop the haunting story for the gremlin one day.”

“And when that day comes,” Jada began, smiling like she couldn’t imagine doing anything else. It was an unprotected kind of smile that made Eva feel like a trespasser as she watched it form. “Believe me, you’ll know.”

Lina and Jada looked at each other a moment longer, Jada’s grin never going stale and a fond smirk finding a home on Lina’s face, replacing her scowl. There was something so tantalizing to Eva about the way that they looked at each other. In that stare, Eva could see years worth of memories rolling together into a tidal wave of emotion that tipped the balance of anything Eva had ever considered family. She’d never shared a look like that with someone, she was sure of it. That was a look that said that they would go to hell and back for each other, that they *had* gone to hell and back for each other, and they’d come out the other side with a completely new definition of closeness.

Eva knew she could never be that close to someone. Not when she was what she was. (Although a small part of her—a very small part—couldn’t help but think that Jada and Lina were the same thing and they had come out the other side. That maybe it was okay to hope.)

Eva looked away, opening her mouth to ruin the moment before she had to confront any more stray emotions—when they all heard the sound of a key in a lock and a doorknob turning.

Lina sniffed the air an inhuman way that Eva refused to let herself become. Her smirk turned into a wide smile “Robbie and Sahithi are home.”

Introductions went about as well as Eva had expected (actually, much better considering they hadn't decided to chase Eva down with pitchforks and force her to leave them alone.) Before the smell properly hit, Jada excused herself to change into "people clothes" and promised to meet them in the living room when she was done. Then Robbie and Sahithi had entered the house and she felt the familiar feeling overtake her.

After the initial tidal wave of heady *something* that invaded Eva's nose and forced her to the ground with its weight, she found that she could shrug off the effects a little easier. Lina really hadn't been talking out of her ass when she said that she would get used to it. It only took Eva six or seven minutes to recover from the scent that radiated off of Robbie and Sahithi, and no one lost their lunch in the bushes this time.

Once everyone was standing upright, one of the werewolves took the initiative by sticking out a hand and smiling at her. It wasn't an open smile like Jada's had been, but one just on the other side of mischievous. They were white, with pale skin and light brown hair that fell around their face in choppy waves. The person was shorter than Eva by quite a bit and Eva could see crooked teeth peeking out from their smile. "Roberta, she/her," she'd said, "But my friends call me Robbie. Welcome to the club."

Eva had shaken her hand, mostly because she wasn't sure how she was supposed to respond to that. *Thanks? I want to know how to look at someone the way you all look at each other? I don't deserve your kindness but I'm taking it anyway because I'm an inherently selfish creature and you'll learn that soon enough?* She hadn't thought any of those would go over well. In the end she'd just replied, "Eva, she/her. Nice to—uh, meet you."

The apparent Sahithi had also been unsure of how to act in this scenario. They'd been silently staring at Eva with an unreadable expression on their face, barely blinking their nearly black eyes. Sahithi was South Asian, with brown skin that was a few shades darker than Lina's and long black hair that settled over their right shoulder. They were about the same height as Eva, if a little taller, which didn't make her feel any less weary of the staring. It went on for long enough that Eva was suddenly sure they were about to kick her out of the house when Robbie had elbowed them in the side and gestured at Eva. "Oh," Sahithi said, "I'm Sahithi, they/them. Or she/her, I guess, if you want. My friends call me Sahithi."

Robbie had nodded, apparently satisfied with the greeting. She'd given them a peck on the cheek that Eva wasn't sure was strictly platonic and started making her way to what Eva remembered was the living room. "C'mon people, if we're going to talk about our new arrival then we're going to do it on couches."

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There wasn't much discussion that happened for a while.

Robbie talked a big game, but the minute she sat down on the ratty loveseat against the window, Sahithi perching on the arm, she'd said, "Let's wait until Sky gets home before we say anything too big."

At one point Jada came back to the group dressed in a flowing yellow dress with chunky red earrings that almost matched the dyed-red hair of her afro. Lina jokingly whistled while she settled herself on the couch across from Robbie and Sahithi. Jada struck a ridiculous pose, and Eva tried not to laugh. *Don't get too comfortable, Eva.*

After that small moment of levity, a silence threatened to overtake the living room, until Lina made an offhand comment about the weather that morning and Sahithi had thoughts about the rain clouds that had been building and Jada was just excited for a good old-fashioned lightning storm and suddenly everything flowed like water in a river. Eva didn't dare open her mouth for fear she'd dam it all up.

Sky arrived an hour or so later. Full name Skylar, which Eva only knew because Robbie had said it in a fond but chiding voice when they'd fingergunned and introduced themselves and their pronouns. Sky was white, with a bit of a tan and messy blonde hair. They were absolutely covered in freckles and Eva could just make out their blue eyes under the sunglasses they were wearing, despite the fact that it was getting darker by the minute outside. And they were indoors.

They swept into the living room with a grace Eva wasn't sure how they were maintaining when all she could feel was the overpowering scent that happened every time a new werewolf entered the house. Luckily, this time she was already sitting down. She brought her head between her knees on the kitchen chair that Lina had dragged in between the two couches for her, waiting for the feeling to pass. Her nails didn't feel quite as long as they'd gotten every other time, and her teeth weren't quite so heavy in her mouth. *Getting used to it.*

Sky, for their part, only stumbled a little and managed to land in a tasteful heap on the loveseat Robbie was taking up. As soon as their back hit Robbie's chest, she gave them a small kiss to the back of the head. Sahithi reached out and grabbed Sky's hand almost unconsciously and Eva had another one of those moments where all she could think about was how easy these people fit together and how unlikely it was that she'd ever fit with someone the same way.

Now that she was looking for it, Robbie, Sahithi, and Sky especially seemed to be extensions of the same limbs. Tangled up on the loveseat, it was clear that their connection was different from the familial way all of the werewolves looked at each other. If Eva had to guess, she'd say they were all dating, although it felt like too small a word to describe the looks that passed between them.

What was with these werewolves and their incredibly deep connections? Did sharing that overwhelming feeling with each other in the long term lead to a stronger relationship? Would Eva start to feel that way, if she lived here? *But how can you even pretend like that's a possibility*, she told herself, giving a much-needed reality check, *they don't even know what you're capable of yet*.

Rather than dwell on that thought like she usually would, Eva had been distractedly drafted into the current conversation in the living room. She was the main topic.

"She gave herself that shoulder," Lina was saying, tossing a tennis ball she'd pulled from somewhere at some point up and down in the air. "Right, Eva?"

Eva opened her mouth to respond and then closed it. She felt a bit like a rabbit who'd wandered too close to the foxhole. She hadn't had to do this song and dance in a long while, not since her old scars started fading faster than they should. She wasn't practiced at the balancing act of explaining to a group of well-meaning individuals that she hurt herself sometimes. And she'd never had *any* practice explaining to a group of any kind of individuals that the wolf inside of her hurt her sometimes too.

Lina took her silence as confirmation, making a wide *See, I told you*, gesture (with the tennis ball in hand) at the aforementioned well-meaning individuals. "We need to help her."

Robbie adjusted a pair of glasses that she'd popped out of her front shirt pocket when it became apparent that serious discussion time was happening. "Do you hurt yourself like this often on full moons?" She asked Eva.

"Yes," she managed to get out, left hand clutching tightly—but not too tightly—to her right arm. The feeling of being a rabbit didn't show any signs of fading.

"That's not supposed to happen," Sky said, as if Eva should know that already.

Lina tossed her tennis ball to Sahithi after a moment of silent communication. "That's the point, hon."

"It happens to some of us," Robbie conceded, "when we're alone and scared. I have this theory—"

"Oooh, a Robbie theory!" Jada clapped a bit. It was obviously intended to lighten the mood, and seemed to work for everyone but Eva, who still had a slightly-less-than white knuckle grip on her injured arm.

"I have this theory," Robbie repeated, "that it's influenced by your—uh, your mental state. If it's tumultuous, then your transformation will be tumultuous. The wolf part of you feeds on your emotions. If you aren't in a good frame of mind, it's all downhill from there."

Eva blanched. Great, just great. She'd been "tumultuous" since she'd entered the seventh grade. Her frame of mind hadn't been "good" in years. She couldn't remember the last time she hadn't felt the crushing press of her own self-loathing. For a second, she'd actually thought that maybe knowing there were more people like her out there would help, that these people she barely knew could make a difference in her life. She didn't know why she'd ever thought she

could get out of the cycle of *hurt* that Eva Louise Alvarez had always perpetuated. A cycle of pain with her dead center, feeding in and off of everything. “So I’m stuck like this?”

“Not necessarily.” Robbie adjusted her glasses again. “With the right kind of exercises, you can change your thought process, really it’s all things we’ve been through before.”

Exercises, Eva thought, *what kind of exercises are supposed to stop my mind from turning my body against me when I’m an animalistic monster?* Out loud, she said, “What do you mean, exercises?”

“Well—”

“Therapy.” Sahithi said with that stare that seemed to last a lifetime. They tossed Lina the tennis ball, “She means therapy.”

Eva hunched her shoulders on instinct before the pull of torn muscle made her wince. “No.”

“I don’t think that’s exactly it,” Lina smiled warmly at Eva, but she couldn’t bring herself to do the same back. There was no way in hell she was explaining her—what was it Lina had said? —her big dog to a therapist. Eva didn’t think she’d ever be able to describe her particular brand of monstrosity to someone who didn’t already know.

“Therapy would help probably,” Robbie said, nodding to Sahithi, “But obviously we can’t make you do anything you aren’t comfortable with. And we don’t know your financial situation or if you have insurance or basically anything that could bar you from having access to therapy even if you did want to go through with it.” She took a breath, “But I do still think we can do *something*.”

Robbie tapped Sky on the shoulder and the two quickly became untethered from each other, Sahithi leaning off the back of the loveseat where they'd been resting on the arm to give them room to disentangle. Once Robbie was free, she made her way to the kitchen and opened a cabinet that appeared to be full of a stack of books and a few serving bowls of all shapes and sizes. She reached on her tiptoes to grab one of the books from the stack, not moving back to the loveseat but instead leaning against the counter with the book in hand.

"This is a kind of workbook, like one you'd get in elementary school, except for mental health. I've been buying these since I did a stint at a psychiatric hospital in high school. They gave me a bunch of different worksheets that they'd photocopied from books like these." Robbie smiled a little, "I figured I'd take my recovery into my own hands and give it a try. I fill all the activities out on notebook paper so all the pages are still blank as the day I bought it."

Eva wasn't stupid. She could see where this was going, "You want me to fill them out. The worksheets."

"I'd like you too," Robbie said. "I think they would help. They helped me through some tough spots. Obviously it's not any kind of substitute for real therapy—which is something I think you should at least try to look into—but it's better than nothing." She looked around the room for confirmation.

Lina nodded and reached out as if to touch Eva before she seemed to think better of it and settled for folding her hands in her lap. "We could help, too. We've all had to deal with this part of ourselves without the others at some point. We've got a few tricks up our sleeves."

"I give a mean backrub-followed-by-emotional-crying-session," Jada said, smiling her smile that was something Eva didn't deserve to see.

Sky adjusted their position on the loveseat so that their head was in Sahithi's lap. "I trust Robbie. If she thinks this'll help, then I know it will."

Sahithi gave a thumbs up, and her unreadable stare passed into something supportive.

Eva almost couldn't take it, that support. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to do with the fact that these people believed she could get better. These people believed that Eva Louise Alvarez was doomed to be a monster, but her monstrous existence wasn't something to be suffered through. They believed that Eva Louise Alvarez deserved a chance—no, a guarantee that the evil thing that lived inside of her would not break her body or her mind any longer. How did she react to that? Especially when she found it so hard to follow their logic.

Eva thought about the connection she'd seen between the members of the Lycanhouse. She thought about the way it seemed like their *souls* were looking at each other through their eyes sometimes. She thought about the deep well of understanding, and fondness, and *love* that was so apparent in every glance they'd all sent each other's ways. A memory of Lina's huffed, *I choose to believe the best of my family*, flashed through her mind. The casual way she'd called this group of werewolves her family. Eva realized, as if waking up from an unexpected sleep, that she wanted that. And a small part of her—so, so small still, in comparison with everything else her brain was screaming at her—thought that maybe she could have it. Maybe Eva Louise Alvarez didn't just deserve not to suffer, but she deserved to *thrive*.

Eva opened her mouth. And closed it. And opened it again. "Okay," she practically whispered. Five werewolves turned to stare at her at once, "Okay," she repeated, "Let's...try this."

“So when you get enough Freedom Tokens, you have to make a base,” Robbie explained, “But if you don’t have enough wood to build it, you’re just stuck in a loop of losing points.”

It was board game night at the Lycanhouse. Not only that, but it was Eva’s first board game night, and she was quickly learning that it was mostly an excuse for Robbie to appear smarter than everyone else under the guise of group fun. She’d been enthusiastically going over the rules of the strategy game they were about to play for the past 15 minutes. Eva’s eyes had glazed over when she’d introduced the concept of, “individual stage two actions” probably seven minutes ago.

For the most part, the rest of the werewolves seemed to be keeping up, making her think that this was the usual fare. At the very least, no one was quite as zoned out as Eva was. Jada and Lina were looking at Robbie with rapt attention, Sahithi had a sleepy but understanding smile on their face, and Sky appeared to be making a tower out of the game cards, chiming in every once in a while with a correction that sounded straight from the rulebook.

“But how do we get wood in the first place?” Lina asked, fiddling with one of the colorful pieces of the game.

Robbie sighed, “Well, I explained that already, but it’s simple. You need to plant trees in the areas that you occupy.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait,” Jada held up a hand, “But I thought you could only plant trees when you have a majority of the areas of your color. What if you occupy an area but someone else has the majority?”

“Then you’ll need to duel to gain back the majority.”

Lina looked completely lost, “How do you start a duel?”

“Oh, you can just do that,” Robbie shrugged, “Not that complicated.”

Eva let out the groan she’d been holding in throughout this entire explanation, “Why are we even playing this if no one but Robbie knows the rules?”

Five pairs of werewolf eyes turned to look at her at once, all of them shocked. Sky even stopped building their card tower. *Great, she thought to herself, really good going, Eva. Glad to know you’re still completely capable of fucking up even around people who are supposed to understand you.*

The silence folded in on itself for a few more seconds and Eva opened her mouth to apologize, maybe see herself out completely, before Robbie dropped her gaze to the floor. Her cheeks turned red as the kitchen light glared off of her glasses. “Do you all...not want to play this game?”

The rest of the Lycanhouse rubbed nervously at various appendages and glanced amongst themselves. Eva, for her part, was watching the coordination in confusion. When was the part where they voiced her thoughts about not belonging at werewolf game night and threw her oddity back at her?

Another round of silence went on for an awkwardly long amount of time. The members of the Lycanhouse seemed to be having some kind of silent communication that Eva wasn’t a part of. Robbie alternated between watching their glances between themselves, watching the game board they’d just started setting up, and watching her toes. Finally, Lina spoke up, “We didn’t want to say anything, but...none of us really understand what’s going on.” Skylar cleared their throat and Lina nodded in acknowledgement, “Except Sky.”

“Oh,” Robbie looked bashful in a way Eva wasn’t used to seeing her, “Should we play something else?”

“We could play cards! Maybe Spades? Or Bullshit?” Jada looked like she’d been waiting for someone to ask for a new game for almost all of Robbie’s attempted rules explanations.

Sahithi raised a finger, “Do we even have a card deck?”

“We’ve got to right? We have all of Robbie’s weird board games—sorry Robbie, but it’s true—we’ve gotta have a card deck.”

“I have a playing card deck collection,” Skylar said, “But we can’t play with those.”

Jada looked affronted, “What? Why not?”

“Because they’re part of my collection.”

Eva tuned out the rest of the argument, racking her brain for where this conversation went off the rails in the opposite direction she’d been expecting. Bafflingly enough, she was still welcome at werewolf game night. *This is a good thing*, she told herself. Better to put off the inevitable for a little while longer, right? Better to hold out for that smallest bit of hope that this arrangement really could work? Because these werewolves had been trying to convince her that she deserved to be here with them—that she was going to be a part of the strange group they’d formed to help each other—for the past week and a half, and maybe it was time Eva tried to listen. Maybe the inevitable she was waiting for wouldn’t happen.

Eva wasn’t sure she believed that entirely yet, but she thought that maybe it was okay to start trying to.

The discussion of what game to play had evolved into Jada standing on the table and proclaiming as if an auctioneer, “And I got a game of adult Hide and Seek, do I have any other game suggestions? Adult Hide and Seek going once, going—”

Before Eva processed just what was going on, she blurted out, “Mafia,” feeling for a second like she’d been possessed. She felt her fists curl as she fought the urge to cover her mouth. Well, think of it like a test. If they didn’t kick her out for crushing Robbie’s gaming dreams then they probably wouldn’t kick her out for suggesting something to take their place.

Jada didn’t even stumble. She switched gears mid-sentence and announced, “I’ve got a game of Mafia! Do I have a counter offer? Mafia, going once, going twice, and sold to Eva Whatever-Your-Last-Name-Is!”

Everyone started cheering, even Robbie, who looked more excited at the prospect of playing a hidden role game than she ever had while explaining her complicated board game rules. She started whispering to herself while all the werewolves began migrating out of the kitchen and into the living room.

Eva couldn’t resist the small smile that snuck its way onto her face. It was a silly thing to be satisfied about, but considering the fact that she’d been sure they were going to ban her from future game nights a few minutes ago, she figured she could give herself some leeway.

And that thought was strange. Eva usually made a habit out of not giving herself any leeway to speak of. Leeway was dangerous. Relaxing her grip on herself had only ever resulted in people getting hurt. Except no one seemed to be hurt this time. *This time*, her brain said, but its voice was much quieter than it’d been in years. Maybe these werewolves were onto something.

Eva was not having a good time.

Her breath came in gasps, her arms locked to her side. She was clutching her stomach as if to tear it open, but there was no rip in her seams. At least, not physically.

Her mind raced through a million possibilities, starting with *I'm dying* and ending with *I have never been real*. Something inside her calmed at that last thought, just enough to think *Maybe things would be better then*. Her hands unclenched from her sides and slowly her arms unlocked. She watched her body look at its fingernails and claws flashed in her mind, sharp and unfeeling. Quickly she watched as the body slashed across its wrists, making marks in the skin.

The body blinked.

Eva Louise Alvarez watched as the body reached into its pocket and pulled out its keys. She felt herself gasp when the ridges connected with skin, calm being replaced by horror at the crime scene laid out across a body's arms that she was witnessing. *This is not right*, she thought.

A memory squirmed its way into her awareness, made clear by the fleshy sound of the metal scraping against the wrists. Robbie was sitting across from her at the kitchen table, holding her hand. Jada was in the background cooking dinner. She'd declared it "comfort food night" and had decided to make cornmeal porridge for everyone.

"It's easy," Robbie was saying, "Simple, really."

She had rolled her eyes, "You say that now, but I haven't even tried it yet."

"I've done it thousands of times," Robbie said, "If I can get it then so can you."

Eva had looked down, "You're so much smarter than me, Robbie."

Robbie shook her head, "None of that. Positive self talk."

“Fine,” Eva sighed, “You and I have different kinds of intelligence and I’m smarter than you sometimes. And anyway intelligence is fake and based on disgusting bullshit and it’s all subjective blah blah blah.” She quirked an eyebrow and asked, “Is that good?”

Robbie nodded.

“Just answer my questions,” Robbie said, “The script is easy to follow.

Eva nodded.

“Name five things you can see.”

“Uh—this table; your chair; the oven clock; Jada; you.”

“Name four things you can hear.”

“The podcast Jada is playing; Sahithi and Sky playing Wii in the living room; Jada; you.”

“Name three things you can hear.”

“Leftover air freshener that Lina sprayed an hour ago; Jada; you.”

“Name two things you can touch.”

“The table; you.”

“Name one thing you can taste.”

Eva Lousie Alvarez smacked her lips, and realized something. “Not blood.” She said, awe in her voice, “I don’t taste blood!”

The memory left. The keys fell out of Eva’s hands. They started shaking again. She breathed. *It’s easy*, she thought, *simple, really*. Five things she could see. Done. Four things she could hear. Done. Three things she could smell. Done. two things she could touch. Done. One thing she could taste.

Eva Lousie Alvarez smacked her lips. The taste of blood was not on her tongue.

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“What are we seeing again?” Jada asked, flicking a piece of newly purchased popcorn at Sky, who caught it and stuffed it in their mouth.

“It’s like sci-fi, but with vampires,” Robbie said. She didn’t look up from her phone, “Says here that it’s an instant cult classic.”

Eva considered Robbie, “Are you reading reviews for a movie we haven’t seen yet right before we see it?”

All of the gathered werewolves replied, “Yes,” in monotone unison.

“Robbie likes to know what she’s going up against,” Sahithi said as she came around to Robbie’s side and gestured for a twizzler in front of her face. Without looking up, Robbie opened the pack and slid one into Sahithi’s mouth. They looked pleased. Sky mimed a twizzler going into their mouth as well and Robbie complied.

“What I want to know,” Lina exclaimed, bringing up the rear of the pack, “is why we—a bunch of freaking werewolves—care about vampires at all, sci-fi or not!”

Jada whispered loudly to Eva, “She’s just mad because we didn’t wanna sit through the tragically straight rom-com.”

“Open Hearts would have been a perfectly good movie!”

“Sure, if you’re into fake ER procedure and heterosexuality,” Jada laughed as Lina huffed.

“Whatever. I don’t care.”

“It’s obvious you’re lying,” Robbie said, still scrolling on her phone as she fed Sahithi another twizzler, “but I’ll answer your question to take your mind off of your bitterness. We care because monster solidarity.”

Sky held up a hand for a fist bump, which Jada eagerly gave. They nodded and flipped the shades on top of their head over their eyes for a moment, “Monster solidarity.”

Jada cheered, “Monster solidarity!”

Sahithi shrugged, “Monster solidarity.”

Lina smiled a little past her frustration about their movie plans, “Fine. Monster solidarity.”

The pack looked at Eva all at once, but there was no obligation in their eyes. They just wanted to see if she was comfortable enough continuing the cheer.

She smiled, a small and fragile thing, and nodded, “Monster solidarity.”

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“You know we’re not actually dogs, right?” Eva asked, “I mean, most of the time.” Her tone was shy and playful

“I can’t hear you over how much fun I’m having!” Jada exclaimed, running after a ball that Sky had thrown. She caught it with a flourish, and Eva couldn’t help but laugh at how excited she looked to be holding her prize aloft for all the werewolves of the Lycanhouse to see.

Today they’d gone to the lake after Lina had claimed that Eva needed some, “good, clean fun.” It was a gorgeous day, just starting to warm up while the nights stayed cold. Eva was quickly losing the ability to cover her scars with sleeves, but she found that she didn’t mind as much anymore. Her scars were reminders of times when she was at her lowest, but the way they

faded into her skin was a reminder of how long it'd been since she'd been there. She wasn't proud of them—didn't think she ever would be—but Eva had kept them covered as much as possible for a long time just so she wouldn't have to look at them, and now she could wear one of Sahithi's oversized, faded t-shirts and not want to crawl out of her skin. She supposed that was the progress that Robbie always went on about.

And being here with her friends, she couldn't help but think of how happy she was to be watching Jada excitedly play catch with Sky. The rest of the Lycanhouse were already getting in the water. Lina had barely dipped her toes in, having insisted before they left that she was primarily planning on sunbathing but if she got hot then, "we'll see." Sahithi and Robbie were pretty far out, and Eva could just barely see them treading water and occasionally splashing each other.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It felt like they were celebrating, but there was nothing happening to celebrate besides the fact that they were all alive. Maybe that was enough. Eva found that she actively wanted to be for the first time in a long time.

Lina was right, Eva thought as she waded out into the lake and strained her fingers through the water, shivering at the cold, *I needed this*.

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Eva breathed deeply and evenly, making an effort to relax her muscles. She'd read a bit about mindfulness yesterday, so she felt more qualified to say that she wasn't practicing it very well. She was definitely judging her thoughts.

And she couldn't stop thinking, sitting down on the Lycanhouse's floor. The book she was flipping through was talking about "radical acceptance" like it was a concept she should be familiar with, but all that it was doing was confusing her.

"It is accepting in your mind, your heart, and your body," sounded all well and good until she actually tried to accept with her—well, everything, and nothing happened. She didn't think she felt any different. Her mind, heart, and body were still staring at the workbook like they were expecting answers it wasn't giving.

Maybe that was unfair; it was trying its best to get this "recovery" thing through Eva's thick skull. She was just terrible at—*No*, she heard Robbie's voice in her mind, *positive self talk*. She wasn't terrible, she was just...having it rough. She was having it rough because of the way she'd treated herself for years. She'd never thought she deserved even basic human decency, so trying to give herself that—that acceptance, it was more than she could understand.

Eva stared down at the book, really trying to focus. Radical acceptance. *Okay, Eva*. It said to accept reality. She could do that. Eva Louise Alvarez accepted reality all the time. "Or maybe you don't accept anything," she said to herself, an old edge returning to her voice, "maybe you just let things happen and wallow in your own misery for a little while until you move onto the next thing." Her teeth felt heavy, but the sensation was almost comforting. Another piece of herself falling into place. Another part of that mind, heart, and body that she needed to accept.

"So maybe you haven't accepted much, Eva," she said, "But that doesn't mean you can't start now." She had to accept that painful things happened and would keep happening, but that

didn't mean that she couldn't enjoy it when things weren't painful. That didn't mean that life wasn't worth all of the little things that cleared her mind.

She could do that.

Eva thought of Jada listening to a podcast while she cooked for everyone, of Sky insisting that they keep their sunglasses on in a movie theater, of Robbie having to reach up on her tiptoes to get to any of the cabinets, of Sahithi comfortably motioning for a twizzler from a pack that wasn't theirs, and of Lina, eyes bright and hair up, arguing for the third time that day that there really was a gremlin in the attic.

She could do that.

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The wolf howled.

Cold, she thought.

The wolf sniffed the stiff wind.

Lonely, she thought.

The wolf saw a flicker of motion in the near-blackness, a whisper of a living creature in the barren, winter woods.

Friend, she thought.

The wolf bounded after that glimmer in the night, pale moonlight reflecting off the leaves in the canopy above.

Fun, she thought.

The wolf caught up with something bounding ahead of her.

The wolf did not think.

The wolf yipped.

And then the wolf danced with her friends.

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Eva Louise Alvarez woke up.

She was filthy; she was aching; she was tired. Worst of all, she was cold. But she was surrounded by family.

And she was okay.