

**FLIPSIDE**

BY

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**PROLOGUE**

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“I guess I’d better get up.” Mike said, brushing the hair away from her neck and giving her a nuzzle. “It’s getting late.”

“Do you have to? I’m too comfortable. Can’t you just skip it today?” Deb pouted, latching onto one of his arms.

He nuzzled some more, breathing in the scent of her, and chuckled. “Sorry dear, but I can’t cut corners when it comes to my body...or yours, if I remember last night correctly.”

Deb sighed loudly, feigning grief. “If only you could meet your own expectations,” she said, reaching around and pinching his thigh. “Oh well, a woman can hope.”

“Eh-hem, I distinctly remember not one, but two...”

“All right, all right, go jog yourself before your ego pushes me out of bed. I guess I’ll have coffee waiting when you get back.”

“You are a sweetheart, but you won’t have to get up and have coffee waiting for me for the rest of our lives.”

“What makes you think that I won’t be up anyway?”

“You still want to work after we’re married? I’ll be making more than enough.”

“You know I want to keep working. When the kids start coming, then I’ll think about quitting.”

“If you insist. Maybe I’ll be making coffee for you for the rest of our lives.”

”Save all that ‘rest of our lives’ stuff for our honeymoon. We’re not married yet.” she retorted with a mischievous grin.

“Don’t tease me like that, baby!” he pleaded, doing his best Elvis impression, “It’s only two months away!”

“Well, you know, I’ve been thinking...”

“Hey hey, it was hard enough waiting for the engagement to make love with you. Don’t tease me now when I’ve got it so good.”

“I knew it would come out sooner or later. You just want me for my body.”

“You know I love you,” he said, kissing her cheek.

She turned and transferred the kiss to her lips. “I know. And I love you too. But as I recall, it was you who first brought up the subject of waiting, even though you wouldn’t have gotten me if you had tried. I guess that’s the price to pay for being God-fearing Christians. At least it was worth the wait.”

“Now who’s goosing my ego?” he asked, untangling himself and climbing out of bed.

“Nice buns.”

“Naughty, naughty,” he chided, stretching luxuriously and padding into the bathroom.

He studied himself briefly in the mirror, rooting around for anything new or unusual. A young, almost boyish face gazed back with brilliant blue eyes, the eyes being his most striking feature. Many a heart had been melted with those eyes.

Being twenty-five with the face of a nineteen year-old has its good and bad side. The good side was obvious, as he would probably always look young. The bad side was that he got carded buying candy. He chuckled and finished inspecting his teeth.

He was five feet eight, slim and well muscled. He jogged three or four days a week and on the days he didn’t jog; he lifted weights. He did so for endurance, not bulk, so he looked a bit sinewy. A nice vee and broad shoulders kept him from being skinny.

His body hair was sparse, a good thing because Deb liked it that way. Even though he worked hard to keep his physique, he said a silent prayer of thanks. Besides his health he had everything else a man could be happy for. He had made Head Programmer in less than a year. Granted, it was a small company and luck had much to do with it, but he worked hard and systems analyst was only a year or two away at his present pace. He also took every night course he could find that had something to offer.

Last but not least, he had the woman of his dreams about to marry him. He smiled as he remembered how Deb had changed his opinion of what the perfect woman should be.

Deb was pretty in a plain sort of way, not the voluptuous beauty he had always wanted. Her body was similar, somewhat plain but in good shape. She too worked hard to tone her figure, though in the afternoons, not in the mornings with him. What she lacked in all-out sex appeal she more than made up for by being the funniest, smartest, most affectionate and level-headed woman he had ever met. He had even quickly grown accustomed to her sometimes overwrought feminism. Most of all, she loved him.

He looked down from the mirror, leaned his hands against the counter, and prayed. He loved to pray. Anyone who is, or claims to be, a Christian will tell you that they enjoy prayer; but he really did. He honestly believed that every word was heard, and he enjoyed the sense of peace it gave him. His faith had made life's occasional hardships easier to take, especially when his parents had been killed.

He finished, being sure to give thanks. To him, saying 'thank you' was the most important part. Without his faith, he could never have had a life with such promise.

He stepped into the shower stall and closed the door behind him. Taking a deep breath, he grabbed the cold water faucet and twisted it on. Frigid water blasted onto his face and chest, making him gasp. He did his best not to yell as he was thoroughly soaked. He turned the water off and stepped out, shivering, and grabbed a towel.

"Why do you do that to yourself?" Deb asked from the bed. "One of these days you're going to give yourself a heart attack."

"Never happen. I include a request that it not kill me in my morning prayer."

"You gonna with me?" she asked as Mike grabbed his jogging clothes from the suitcase.

"I'll be glad to when I get back. Do you think you can wait, or is there some terrible crime you need to confess in case you suddenly drop dead?" Mike asked with a grin, grabbing yesterday's socks from beside the bed.

"I'll wait. Yuck! For the billionth time, will you use clean socks? You're going to get athlete's foot."

"I told you before sweetheart, woman of my dreams, love of my life, goddess of my desire, that I'm only wearing them to jog in. I'll take a real shower when I get back and put on clean socks. That way I don't dirty a pair just jogging."

"Bull. You only do it so you run out of socks one day later and therefore can put off doing your laundry. Typical bachelor scum. How will I cope?"

"By doing the laundry."

His reward for that was a pillow in the face. He threw it back and poked her rib, sending her twisting across the bed. He finished dressing and stood. "I'll be back in a few."

"Have fun."

He stood on the back porch and breathed in the cool morning air. Deb's house was the last on her street and the back yard ended in a wall of trees. The forest beyond was the perfect place to jog. The trail within was fairly smooth and wound up, down, and around the woods for about five miles before returning to its starting point. Not far in it followed a healthy stream for about a quarter of a mile, and a nearby quarry made the scenery interesting.

He walked across the yard, stretching intermittently along the way. He followed the little trail from her yard to where it intersected the main one. After a few final stretches he started. Keeping his breathing deep and regular, he settled into his usual rhythm.

The trail descended gradually toward the stream bed, following the uneven terrain. He stopped at the stream and scooped up a few swallows. As he continued along the stream, he thought of a song he had just finished writing. Computers were his career, but music was his passion. He figured that writing rock music was okay as long as he kept his lyrics reasonably clean; a hard thing to do as he suffered from an insistent dirty mind.

He had sold a couple of songs to a major label and they were now seeing duty on some band's album. He had gotten the songs to the right person completely by accident - another one of his life's fortunate turns - but he took good luck where he could find it. He had high hopes for his latest batch.

For fun he liked to listen to a song a few times and then write it. His friends had called "Mozart" in college, and he had secretly hated that. He wasn't the same at all. Mozart had composed from scratch. Mike just had a good memory and an ear for music. It would take him a few hours to learn a song, playing it out on one of his guitars or a piano. Eventually, he would get it right. Rock songs were fairly easy to learn. He didn't feel that he was able to do anything special.

Before they were killed in a car accident, his parents had tried to help him realize his musical potential. They had sent him to numerous classes, where he had always done well; but when his inheritance was accessed to put him through college, he had concentrated on higher math and computers. He was simply too practical a man to risk a career in entertainment. Music had remained an intensive hobby.

As he jogged sparks suddenly appeared in his vision. He blinked a few times, assuming something had blown into his eyes. Strangely, they didn't hurt or water.

"What's going on?" he thought aloud as he slowed, planning to rest a few moments. He never made it to a halt. As he slowed, his focus shifted. With a feeling of sudden panic, he saw that the sparks were not in his vision but in the air in front of him. Before he could overcome his momentum, he was upon them.

His whole body went instantly numb. He was yanked from his feet and suspended about three feet above the trail. Bright lights of red, blue, and yellow crackled around him. The forest shimmered as if great heat was radiating from the ground.

"What the hell?" he gasped, succumbing to his greatest vice - foul language - and waving his arms in an attempt to steady himself. Then his nerves came alive. Waves of agony flowed up and down the length of his body. He screamed as he felt himself being twisted this way and that by some invisible force.

As quickly as it had begun, the pain ceased. He was still being jostled about and the lights still flashed around him. He panted heavily and began to feel nauseous.

Then the pain returned tenfold, beginning at his feet and climbing his legs. He screamed again, thrashing against the invisible bonds that held him. Muscle and tendon stood out in bold relief as he struggled, gasping and yelping. The pain was now half-way up his thighs and still climbing, clawing mercilessly at his nerves. His throat was raw, but he couldn't stop screaming. He managed to raise his head enough to look down at the source of his torment.

Dear God save me!

The pain had reached the middle of his stomach. From that point down, his body was not just numb, but gone. The trail was clearly visible where his legs should be. As he watched in horror, the opaque black halo marking his body's boundary reached his upper chest, the pain moving with it. He screamed repeatedly for help. As the black halo closed over his head, he felt pain like he never imagined.

Again the pain suddenly stopped. His ears rang loudly as he bounced around just above the ground. He waited for the pain to return, wondering what was happening to him.

With a suddenness that was almost jolting, the lights disappeared and he fell onto the trail with a thud. The forest had stopped shimmering, and he lay there exhausted. His throat ached and his body tingled from head to foot. Here and there a muscle twitched. He panted heavily, hurting his overworked throat, but didn't care at first; then eventually forced himself to breathe through his nose.

He felt unbearably hot. Moving slowly, he fumbled for the bottom of his t-shirt, fighting off a dizzy spell at the same time. He began working it along his torso, his arms twitching violently. He finally worked it over his head, letting his arms flop to the ground. His head throbbed painfully. Man, I am messed up, he thought.

The exertion proved to strenuous for his exhausted nervous system. Another bout of dizziness hit him like a wall and he passed out.

## CHAPTER I

He awoke several hours later. The sun, he noticed as his eyes focused, was about to set. "I've been out all day!" he exclaimed, wincing as his throat protested, "Why didn't she come looking?"

He moved slowly, testing first his arms, then his legs. Everything worked, thank God. He was more sore than he had ever been in his life, but he was still alive. No corpse could hurt like this.

"What happened?" he wondered aloud. "A stroke? A stroke could have easily caused a hallucination, but what had just happened was real! If it all had been a hallucination, I wouldn't be this sore."

His throat ached and worse, his head was pounding. He sat up and immediately felt dizzy. He leaned forward with his head between his knees. That helped, and he stood carefully, a tree helping him to regain his balance.

Looking around made him realize why Deb might not have found him. He was a good 60 yards from the trail and on the other side of a large log that would have blocked him from view. Whatever it was had carried him over here while it was killing him. "It must have been a stroke," he guessed silently, "But I'm young and healthy. I can't think of anything that would bring one on. Well, I'll have to let a doctor decide that. Right now I have to get back to Deb's. She must be worried sick."

He stopped at the stream and drank deeply, moaning gladly as the cold water soothed his throat. Starting up the trail,

he realized that he had forgotten his t-shirt. He chose to come back for it. He had to get back and he wanted to be sure that he had the strength to make it. By the time he made it the two or so miles back, it was dark.

The kitchen light was on and cast a glow over the yard. The walk had loosened his muscles and cleared his head. He felt much better as he stepped onto the porch. Opening the screen door, he went in. Deb wasn't in the kitchen, but he heard the TV playing quietly in the living room. He started to call out to her but he cut off the weak croak that issued forth. He walked to the sink for a glass of water. As he reached for a glass he realized that the kitchen was redecorated. It was the same room, but the glasses weren't where they were supposed to be. He found one in the next cupboard. They weren't even the same glasses, and he took a quick glance around as he filled one. It was completely different, almost masculine, like a bachelor's house. He shook his head slightly and gulped the water. As he entered the short hallway to the living room, he saw a sight that sent his heart into his throat.

Standing at the living room entrance was a werewolf. It's fur was various shades of gray and black. The thing's body was muscular, the bulges showing beneath thick fur. It's mouth was gaping, white fangs poking from within a medium-sized, wide snout. The eyes were green, shining dimly in the poor light.

All this he perceived in an instant, because in the next he was screaming and running for his life. He heard it howl behind him as he body-blocked the screen door open and ran across the porch, onto the yard, and towards the tree line. He crashed through and sprinted down the path for all he was worth.

He was exhausted yet again by the time he reached the stream. He threw himself flat in the water, moving to the edge and peeking out between two rocks. The water was frigid but he stayed low and scanned the trail for any sign of the thing. A horrifying thought struck him.

Oh God, Deb! Please God, let her be sitting in a police station! I couldn't stand it if she were dead, especially like that; her body ripped...no! Don't think like that! She's at the police station, reporting your disappearance.

There was no sign of it on the trail or anywhere within view. Maybe it hadn't come after him. Maybe he wouldn't see it anyway in the moonlight. Maybe it was toying with him.

He gathered his courage, deciding that he had to get to Deb. He slipped quietly out of the water and started back along the trail. Keeping as low as he could, he scanned the surrounding forest continuously. A full moon offered the only light. Please God, he prayed fervently as he felt his way along the trail, adding to the scratches that already covered him, let her be safe!

"Looks like another slow Sunday night." said Deputy Matt Handly, leaning back in his chair. The remains of an Italian sub sat on a napkin beside the phone on his desk.

"Don't say that!" Vance snapped. "You know that as soon as you do the phone's gonna ring. I was looking forward to a slow night, if you don't mind." He leaned his elbows on the sheriff's desk and picked up a french fry. He used it to shove around the remains of his hamburger around before popping it into his mouth. "I guess it's about time to make the rounds, eh?"

Matt glanced at the clock and sighed. "Looks that way. Don't forget to take your yuppy serum."

"Yeah, no shit," Vance said with a chuckle, "But at least they're quiet."

The phone rang, and they stared at each other for two full rings.

"Five bucks."

"Sorry, your turn."

Vance sighed and picked up the receiver, punching the line button. "Police, Officer Vance."

The voice on the other end was frantic. Seeing the look on Vance's face, Matt gave him a questioning glance and reached for his extension.

"Nothing but babble, Dep. Something about a creature in the house...whoa! Slow down! Take it easy!" he said quickly into the phone. Matt put his phone to his ear.

"Are you calm? Now, just relax and tell me what happened. Give me the address first. yeah...okay...got it. Now please stay calm and tell me."

They both listened while the caller relayed his story. After they hung up, Vance sighed loudly. “What the hell kind of crap is this on a Sunday night? Do you think they’re on crack? And why in the hell didn’t they use 911?”

“No, they seemed to coherent after they calmed down. Could be that some freak was running around in a costume. Either way, we gotta check it out. I’ll take care of that. You go ahead out to South Franklin. Oh, and tell Hawkins to get out here and man the shop until one of us gets back. If he gets anything else, have him call you. I might be a while.”

“No sex on duty, Dep.” Vance said with a quick grin as he went back to get Hawkins.

“Never.” Handly said, walking for the door. “Besides, if this address is ringing the right bell, said occupant is engaged.” He hopped into his patrol car and headed out. It took him almost fifteen minutes to get there. Twenty-three hundred was the last house on Forest Road. As he pulled into the driveway, he saw that all the lights were on in the house. He parked behind the little Acura, grabbed his flashlight, and walked up to the front door.

Mike peered out from behind a tree. Every light in the house was on, including the flood lights for the yard and driveway. He breathed a sigh of relief. The lights weren’t on when he had come back the first time, so Deb must be all right. As he worked his way toward the tree line, he saw the headlights as a car pulled into her driveway. That was either her coming back from somewhere or the police, he thought.

He stopped for a few moments to catch his breath. In his condition, the medium grade up to her yard was tiring. He was cold and beat to hell. When he had regained his breath, he moved to the yard.

Right there to his face that caller had stuck to the same story. Matt told him that he would take a look out back; and that was why he was standing at the kitchen door, panning his flashlight along the trees, when it stepped out.

“Holy Mary of Jesus!” he gasped, the misquote unnoticed.

He thought the guy had been crazy, but there it was right in front of him, walking with a slight stoop across the yard. It was a freaking wereman!

It’s skin was light, like the skin under the fur of a natural blonde or the surface of a sandstone statue. It’s face was flat and cruel. Rippled, sinewy muscles bulged from beneath it’s skin. It was almost sensual, just like in the novels.

That’s how they get you. Then they rape you, pummeling your body with those clawless fists. After that, they grind the flesh from your broken bones with powerful jaws and blunt teeth, ripping huge chunks of meat...

He dropped the flashlight and reached for his thirty-eight.

It was Handly’s fear that saved Mike’s life. Two things happened simultaneously: Matt dropped his flashlight, and Mike saw the form silhouetted in the doorway.

He froze about ten feet from the trees, his heart jumping. Instinct took over when the thing opened the screen door. He whirled and ran back into the woods. As he broke through the tree line, he heard a gunshot. A bullet hit the tree next to him, spraying him with bark. He kept running as three more shots rang out and hit the trees around him. He ran out of breath almost immediately.

Stumbling, he left the path and headed for the nearest outcropping of rock. Feeling his way around, he found a tight crevice that opened into a small cul de sac. He scrambled in, thanking God that it wasn’t already occupied. He was fairly sure that he was hidden from outside view. The crevice he had crawled through curved slightly. He curled up in a ball, conserving his warmth, and prayed.

In his panic, it had not occurred to him that a werewolf had shot at him.

Matt backed into the kitchen, holstering his gun with a shaking hand. He couldn’t believe what he had just seen. This was supposed to be the stuff of books and movies, not southern Illinois. No one would believe this back at the station.

He turned to the civilian, who was standing by the table looking scared shitless. “You got anything to drink?” he asked, “Fuck being on duty, I need one.”

The civilian replied, the voice a little shaky, "Yeah, I've got some, uh, Jack in the cupboard. I think I'll have a belt myself. And don't worry, after that I'm not going to say anything."

"Thanks. Look, uh, I think we should keep this quiet until I can talk to the sheriff in the morning. Don't go spouting what you saw to anyone."

Green eyes widened as he poured two stiff drinks, and he started to retort.

"Listen," Matt said quickly, holding up a hand, "I assure you that we're going to hunt this thing down, but we can't go around saying that we saw a monster. Do you understand what that would do? No one would believe it. I'd look like an ass and no one would ever go after it."

"Yeah, I understand," the civilian replied, handing Matt his drink. "What if it comes back?"

They both took a long swallow. "Do you have a gun?" Matt asked, nodding as the man indicated that he did. "Then go get it. That thing ran fast enough when I shot mine. That should be enough to keep it away until we can mount a search tomorrow morning. I imagine that we'll be looking for an escaped human or some such thing. I'm definitely not telling anyone that I don't trust real well that I saw a wereman. That is, if I still believe my eyes in the morning. Either way, we'll be packin' heavy."

He woke to the sound of birds fluttering in the trees above his hiding place. As his eyes adjusted, he saw a bright shaft of sunlight shining down onto him. That's probably what kept him from freezing, that and the surrounding rock blocking out any breezes.

Wincing, he stretched his legs as far as he could, trying to work out the cramps. He was sore all over from the events of yesterday. Sleeping fitfully in a small hole hadn't helped things.

He decided to get out and take a look around. He was so cramped and sore that he couldn't bear another minute inside. He listened for any unnatural sound, hearing only the birds above. Moving stiffly, he crawled out, watching for any signs of danger. Staying near the crevice, he stretched his shoulders, back, and legs. His stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn't eaten since Saturday evening. He glanced at his watch. It was ten thirty-two on Monday. He had slept for eight hours or so.

He stood there, scanning the woods and wondering what to do, and how to explain this at work. Eventually, he opted to go back to the house. Maybe in daylight things would be all right. He walked to the stream, splashed some water on his face and chest, and trudged up the trail. God, please let Deb be okay.

Matt sat in the front office, waiting for Sheriff Worthy to get in. As he went over the details of last night, he came to the conclusion that it would be in his best interest not to tell the whole truth.

He had called Jerry Sillet, the civilian who had started this whole thing, at about six and gotten their story straight. They would say that they had seen a human, some ape that probably escaped from somewhere, and go no further. They've been known to get away before, and usually turned up in someone's yard eating shrubbery.

He would say that someone had called and reported an ape in their back yard. He had gone out to investigate. The caller had been right. He had seen it with his own eyes. He had shot at it and scared it off. Right now, it was probably hiding out in the woods behind the house.

He picked up the phone to call the Chicago Zoological Park. That's what you're supposed to do when an escaped animal is found, and he wanted to keep his story consistent. Human or wereman, they would find it later this morning. There was only so far it could go without being spotted.

It suddenly occurred to him that, if it was a wereman, they would never find it. By now the beast would have changed back to a man. Maybe they'd find a half-naked man sleeping under a rock somewhere.

A security guard answered the phone and told him that the manager wouldn't be in until nine. He asked for his home number, got it, and promised to assume the responsibility for waking the guy up.

"Mr. Childs?" he asked when the phone was answered.

“Speaking.”

“Mr. Childs, this is Deputy Handly down in Decatur. I’m sorry to wake you, but I have some important questions to ask.”

“I was already up. Decatur? What can I do for you?”

“Last night we had a report of a human sighted a little south of here. When I went to check it out, I saw it myself. It got away and is presumably hiding out in the woods there. Do you have any escaped apes?”

“Well, I’ll be damned! We don’t, but the FBI does. One escaped from their wing here about two days ago. They’ve got some of our people out with the feds hunting him down right now. You say that you saw him down there?”

Matt reveled in his good fortune, perking up his ears. Maybe it had been an ape after all. “I’ve got one witness and myself. Happened about two a.m.”

“But that’s almost what, one hundred and seventy miles?”

“Well, he was kinda skinny but looked strong enough. Scared me shitless, to be honest.” he countered, swiveling his ears.

“Hmm, maybe he hitched a ride somehow, he’s not a typical human. All right, I’ll call off a few of the guys from the search here and send them down. They should be there in about three hours. I’d rather let the feds handle this anyway, so I’ll send them too.”

“Thanks for your time, Mr. Childs. We’ll be in touch.”

“You’re welcome. Have a nice day.”

“I’ll try.” Matt said as he hung up.

When Sheriff Worthy got in about three hours later Handly briefed him on the events of last night and his call to Chicago. Worthy had listened with mild interest, habitually grooming his chest, until Matt mentioned the feds.

“Oh shit, Handly. They’re coming here? That’s all I need, a bunch of damned feds running around like they own the place. He walked over to his desk and sat down heavily, scratching behind his now flattened ears. “Now everyone’s gonna want to know why there’s feds romping around our woods. When are they supposed to get here, and why is the FBI chasing an ape?”

“They should be here any time now. As for the human, it’s there’s, supposedly.”

The team arrived twenty minutes later, complete with long-barrel dart pistols. Flashing their IDs, they introduced themselves as Agents’ Meuller, Eklund, and Ford.

They all went inside and Worthy filled them in on Handly’s story. Meuller asked to be taken to the woods where he had been seen.

“Why are you guys so interested in this thing, anyway? It’s just an ape, for crying out loud. Can’t the zoological park people handle this?” Worthy asked.

“He doesn’t belong to the park, he belongs to us. He isn’t just a human, either. He’s a very smart human. He speaks sign language and likes Beethoven, if you can believe that. We need to get him back as soon as possible. He’s been expensive. Oh, and by the way, there’s no special danger involved with him, in case you were wondering, just the usual for a domesticated yet wild animal of this type.”

“Yeah, right. Okay, the place is about twenty minutes from here. Let me fill a canteen and I’ll take you down. Handly, you comin’ or going to bed?”

“Sure, I’m off tonight. Let me give my better half a call before we go.”

Matt made his call while Worthy went to get his canteen. The feds talked amongst themselves, obviously anxious to get moving. He promised to be back for supper and hung up. “You guys sure seem to be enjoying yourselves.”

Eklund looked over and smiled, exposing white fangs and perking his ears. “Shoot, I haven’t had this much fun in months.”

Matt shuddered as he remembered last night, his fur prickling. “Me neither.”

Worthy came back in and they left. Worthy and Matt rode in Worthy's patrol car, followed by the feds in their pickup. It's bed was covered with a large steel top, air vents cut into the sides.

They reached the house soon thereafter, and Mueller questioned Jerry. Matt was relieved to hear him stick to their story. It was almost eleven before they started into the woods.

"This is the path you said he ran down?" Ford asked.

"Yeah. As a matter of fact, this is the only trail out here. We were not far from here Sunday looking for a missing person. It makes a big circle for about five miles, ending back here.

"Missing person?" Eklund pondered. "Nah, can't have anything to do with it; not on Sunday."

"Doubt it." Mueller added.

They stood at the junction, looking around, their ears moving constantly. "Not too many animal trails. I guess we'll just have to tromp around in the brush. Doesn't look too bad, though. I hope I don't have to spend the rest of the day picking briars out of my legs."

"All right," Mueller announced, "Spread out about fifty feet, sweeping just like we did up north. Keep your noses and ears open. Sheriff, Deputy, you might want to stay behind us so we have a clear shot when he shows himself. He knows us, so he might pop up."

"What kind of range do you get with those things?" Vance asked, gesturing to the dart guns.

"We won't miss within forty yards. I'd like to get as close as possible, though. The juice will knock him out in about fifteen seconds."

They loaded their guns and spread out.

He had barely gotten half way up the trail when he heard voices. Someone was obviously coming. He debated showing himself. If it was the police, he was probably safe. But someone had shot at him last night, and it might be them. He had been pondering that. Maybe it was the cop, thinking he might be some kind of prowler. If that was the case, Deb might just be all right after all.

He chose to play it safe. Making as little noise as possible, he left the trail and hid behind a large boulder. He could see the trail without exposing himself.

The voices stopped, but he could still hear them approaching. He strained to see without sticking his head out too far. His stomach growled loudly, and he cursed his situation.

He heard more footsteps. They were coming from both his right and left. He found that he couldn't move without exposing himself to one side or the other, but if he didn't move soon, they would be right on top of him.

He risked a glance up the trail and his blood turned to ice. Coming straight toward him were two of them! In broad daylight! He turned to run, did a double-take, and stopped himself.

They were wearing clothes! Both wore knee-length shorts, one dark blue and the other gray. Each wore matching shirts. As they came closer, he saw the strange cut of the shirts. Instead of buttoning up the front, they were open in a wide vee all the way to where they tucked into the pants, and seemed tailored that way. The one in blue resembled, for all the world, a cop. His large canine ears poked from the sides of a narrow policeman's cap.

The one in gray carried a gun.

A gun? What in the hell is this? Werewolves with clothes and guns? In daylight? Am I going completely crazy?

"Do you hear breathing?"

"Hey! I've got him! Oh holy shit, will you look at that!"

Mike whirled to his left. He had forgotten about the other footsteps. The creature, dressed in gray, stood not fifteen feet away and pointed a gun. It was funny, but it looked scared.

“What? If you got him, juice him!” Mueller yelled.

His mind raced. He turned and ran down the trail as another voice yelled behind him.

“Good God, what is that? Shoot it, shoot it, shoot it!”

Just before he reached a bend in the trail he heard a hollow “pop” from behind. Something stung hard beside his left shoulder blade.

“Good shot!”

He tried to reach it as he ran, but it was just out of reach and he couldn’t risk slowing. He could hear them running behind him. He tried to run faster, but something was wrong. He willed his legs to move, but he was slowing far faster than he should be. He heard bushes rustle to his left.

A fourth one!

He spun to look as he ran passed, seeing it drop to one knee. There was another popping sound and sting, this one on the back of his left thigh. He reached down and plucked something out, still running.

A dart! It had discharged immediately. He quickened his efforts, lungs heaving. A few steps later, he started feeling dizzy. The forest tilted crazily and he stumbled. The voices behind him faded, echoing oddly, and blackness closed in from the corners of his vision.

He was still trying to run when he realized that he had fallen. He crawled, dragging his drugged body along the ground. His own outstretched hand was the last thing he saw before losing consciousness.

## CHAPTER II

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me!”

They stood where it had finally dropped on the trail, sniffing the air around it. It had crawled the last few feet, one hand stretched out in front of it. The skin was bare and dirty except where the shorts covered it. One dart was still

embedded in it's back. The broad expanse was rippled with muscle. The fur on it's head was a light shade of brown and probably reached below the nape of the neck when hanging normally.

"Look, Ford, the damned thing's wearing sneakers. Now if that ain't the damndest thing!"

"Nike sneakers, Adidas jogging pants - this is getting really, really weird."

"Well, we're not going to find out anything staring at it. Let's get it back up to the truck. We'll figure out something on the way back. Eklund, you're the strongest. Pick it up and let's get moving."

"Pick it up? It's a goddamned monster!" he protested, ears flattening.

"Look, it's out cold, okay? We put two darts in the damned thing! If it so much as twitches, drop it and we'll hit it again. Ford," Mueller continued, turning to him, "You keep your gun on that thing and don't take it off, understand?"

"Sure."

"I thought they were supposed to change back in the morning." Worthy mused aloud, sniffing loudly.

"It was the second night of the full moon last night." Matt said. "Maybe it stays that way for all three days and nights. So much for legends."

Eklund knelt slowly down beside it, gulping loudly enough for the rest to hear. Keeping his eyes peeled, he reached out and cautiously plucked free the spent dart. He took deep breath, braced himself to jump, and gave it a poke. It didn't move and someone snorted. He flashed the rest a glimpse of fang and reached under its arm to get a good grip. It was wet with sweat and he felt a small patch of fur.

Suppressing a shudder, he pulled it up against him and threw it over his shoulder, standing as he did so. It weighed less than he thought it would, and he had no problem moving it. As he settled it on his shoulder it's hands flopped limply against his buttocks. He jolted and almost dropped it.

"Jesus, boss, this is creepy. If I pass out, you won't hold it against me, will you?"

"No, but when you wake back up you'll still have to carry it."

"Figures. I'm quitting the gym."

They went up the trail. Mueller and Worthy took the lead, glancing back frequently, almost sidestepping. Ford and Matt brought up the rear, Ford keeping his dart gun trained on the wereman's back.

"By the way," Matt asked, "Anybody see if it's male or female? From the smell, I'd assume it's a guy."

"It is, trust me." Eklund said with a grunt. "He practically reeks of it. How about we drop that subject?"

"Just don't bust your pants." Mueller said with a laugh. "It's probably going to be a while before you see a shower."

"Laugh it up, fuzzball." Eklund quoted with a snort. "You don't have to carry him. You do, however, have to smell him on me all the way to Chicago."

"Sheriff," Mueller started, "I need you to go on up ahead, get this Jerry Sillet dude, and have him show you his plumbing. I don't want him to see this. We'll put it in the truck and then come and get you. After than, you'll both have to tell the real story about last night."

Worthy drew a breath and glanced at Matt before shrugging. "All right, see you up there."

Eklund was panting heavily by the time they reached the yard. He almost dropped it before they reached the truck. Ford opened the cage, looking and sniffing around for anyone, and Eklund dropped it in with a huge sigh of relief.

Shackles were built into the floor of the cage, and Mueller immediately locked the wrists and ankles down. He crawled out quickly and they all relaxed, staring at the prone form lying on it's back. After a few seconds, Mueller waved for Matt to follow him inside.

After the truth of last night was revealed, they came out and Mueller walked up to the cab, opened the door, and

reached behind the seat. He pulled out a small black box, opened it on the hood, and pulled out a syringe. He loaded it from a large vial.

“Do you think we need that, boss? Two darts oughta keep him out for at least another twelve hours. Hell, one would knock out that dumb ape for at least five.”

“He’s not a dumb ape, he’s a smart ape. And that thing,” he continued, pointing at the cage, “Is not an ape.”

”Guess you’re right.”

“Do you think he’s really a wereman? They say that legends like that have some basis in fact.”

“No comment.” Ford said.

“What did you tell him?” Eklund asked Worthy, gesturing toward the house.

“I told him to keep his mouth shut. Someone will be here by dinner time to debrief him.”

When they met back at the station, Mueller stopped Matt and Worthy on their way in. “We’re going straight back to Chicago with this. Now’s the time for the typical government cover up bullshit. I think you know the drill. It ain’t all that different from what you see in the movies. You forgot to make a report of last night and today. When the real ape shows up, probably a lot closer to town, we’ll deal with that. You stick to your story. You’d be advised to quickly forget what you saw - like now. I’ve already got Childs to talk to. Let’s hope he doesn’t make this difficult. Anyway, do you two understand?”

“Gotcha.”

“Hell, I’m all for forgetting this, no problems from me. What happens if the public finds out?”

“That’s another thing we’ll deal with when the time comes.”

They arrived at the lab in Chicago two hours later. They had called ahead and made arrangements to bring the wereman to the basement complex located under the downtown branch office. It was about as secure a place as any other. It also contained a small infirmary where their new guest could be examined.

Naturally, no one had believed them. They all became believers, however, when Eklund lugged the thing down.

“Would you all stop staring and tell me where to put this thing? It’s heavy and frankly, it scares me.”

Dr. Sullivan, the man assigned to meet them, collected his wits. “Uh, down the hall in D section, number three.”

“Ah, the bare concrete, prison cell kinda room?”

“Yeah, and the steel door with the shatterproof glass. It’s also sound insulated. Not soundproof, but close. Damn, a real live wereman! What would you do?”

“Find out why he wears sneakers, for starters.”

“Sneakers?” Sullivan asked, rubbing his temples, “Why did I get up this morning?”

”Why do any of us? Anyway, he’s all yours. I’ll have the paperwork for you this evening. I’ve still got a human to catch. God knows where he is by now. How did he get away from you?”

“I’ll never tell.” Sullivan said to Mueller’s back as he left. Eklund and Ford came back a few seconds later. “If Mueller calls for me, tell him I’ll be by as soon as I’ve spent the rest of the day in the shower. God, I reek of the thing.”

“Smells kinda...well, never mind.”

“I’d rather not talk about it. He’s in the cell, sleeping like a baby. Well, a pretty mean looking baby, anyway. I’m outta here.”

John came walking in as Eklund and Ford left, casting a quizzical glance over his shoulder as they passed. His nostrils still flared. “That’s some weird cologne Paul’s wearing.” he said. “Can’t figure it. What’s up? Have they found Jud? We haven’t yet. Why are we downtown?”

“No, we haven’t found Jud,” Sullivan said, putting an arm around John’s shoulder, “But about that cologne...”

“What is it?” John asked, staring intently into the cell.

“What does it look like? It’s a wereman. He turned up in some guy’s house down south last night.”

John shot him a quick glance and flicked an ear before looking back in at the figure sleeping on the cot.

“Seriously.”

“I am serious. What does it look like?”

“Well, a wereman, I guess.” John said, not quite sure if he was being had. “I need some sleep.”

“It looks like we’re going to be busy here for a while. We’ve been assigned to it.”

John grunted, his ears perking. “Cool! What about Jud?”

“He’s on hold, once he’s caught.”

Consciousness came slowly. He sat up groggily, kneading his forehead. His skull was pounding and his mouth tasted like an old sock. Must be the darts, he thought to himself as he looked around.

He was in a cell, that much was obvious. Why? Was this the way to treat a victim? But, then again, somebody had shot at him. He remembered the werewolves and his heart jumped.

He was on a cot which stood only a few inches above the floor. The walls, ceiling, and floor were bare concrete. The door across from the cot looked like steel. A thick glass window was built in at about face height. The ceiling was a good ten feet up, a single bulb hanging down on a wire.

At the foot of the cot was a metal sink and toilet. A roll of toilet paper hung beside them. In the far corner, flush against the ceiling, a camera was mounted. A large microphone poked out from beneath it.

He got up, holding his forehead. He went to the sink and turned on the cold water. It ran brown for a few seconds before clearing up. He cupped his hands below the flow and splashed his face, then rinsed out his mouth and drank his fill.

I’m obviously in some deep shit, he thought as his mind began to clear. He began a closer inspection of his surroundings. The walls were seamless, as if the whole room had been poured in one big mold. He walked over to the door. It was hinged from the outside, as was the glass. He rapped lightly against it with a knuckle. It felt and sounded very thick.

A face appeared, making him jump. It was another werewolf, this one wearing bifocals. The lenses were set wide apart, a long arch spanning the short snout between them.

Bifocals? This is insane. I’m insane.

Something clanked against the door and he backed away, running into the cot.

God, they’re not going to eat me, are they? His stomach twisted.

The glass opened. Something red flew in about halfway and landed with a wet slap, making him jump again. The glass slammed shut and green eyes stared intently.

He walked to it and squatted over the object. It was a t-bone steak, and it was raw. His stomach growled loudly at the idea of food. He glanced up at the window, then back down to the meat. Sudden anger flared. What do they think I am, an animal?

“What in the hell is this?” he yelled, straightening. The face in the window started, it’s eyes going wide behind the glasses and the ears waving above.

“You can cage me like a damned animal, but I will not eat like one! If you’re going to give me a steak, I like mine medium rare! And a plate and silverware would be nice! What do you take me for? I haven’t eaten in at least two days and you throw me raw meat?” He bent down, picked it up, and threw it at the window. It hit with a splat and plopped to the floor. “Well, fuck you! You eat it!”

He glared hotly at the face, not caring how unusual the whole situation was. Whomever or whatever it was talked excitedly with someone out of sight. After a few seconds it looked back in, still talking. Mike couldn’t hear it’s voice nor could he read the thin lips. A few seconds later it left.

"Great," he said with a sigh. He eyed the steak hungrily. It was leaning against a small slot at the base of the door. His stomach growled again when he pushed the steak away to examine the trapdoor. "No way."

"I can't believe this! He talks! He doesn't change back into a man!"

"Talks?" John asked, turning an ear to Sullivan, "I could feel my chest shake all the way out in the hall. If I hadn't been so surprised I would have run for my life! By the way, what are we gonna do now?"

"Why, cook him a steak, of course. And...french fries. Yeah, why not? There's something I might as well try while we're at it, just to be sure."

"Oh, by the way, Mark said he'd have the camera and microphone working in about twenty minutes. He's replacing a fuse in the console and had to run to the shop to sign out a new one."

"Good, I'd like to have them working by the time his food is ready. God, I still can't believe this! I guess we won't be working with Jud for a while."

"I wonder where he is," John mused, "Probably in someone's garden."

About half an hour later Mike was sitting on the cot when he saw the camera come on. It panned slowly back and forth, stopping after a few passes to point at him. He had just finished what was probably his most desperate prayer, and had been unsure of whether he should let it show to the faces coming and going from the window. He had ended up just bowing his head.

He couldn't help but think of Deb. Was she all right? Was this happening to her? Where were all these werewolves coming from and how were they moving around in broad daylight? Is this all some weird kind of dream? Was he still passed out on the trail? What were those lights, anyway? Was he dead?

The slot at the bottom of the door slid up with a snap, startling him. A furry face, obviously younger than the first, watched him through the window. A few short whiskers stuck out from the end of its snout.

A furry forearm reached in and the raw meat was grabbed. It was replaced with a tray, the arm then withdrawing quickly. The slot closed immediately.

On the tray was another steak, cooked this time. The rest of the plate was covered with french fries.

"Dietitians, you're not," he said as he went to the door. He nodded thankfully to the new face, picking the tray up and carrying it to the cot. He sat Indian-style, the tray in his lap. There was no silverware, but a small piece of paper was sticking out from under the fries. He pulled it out and unfolded it.

"No silverware," he read aloud. He chuckled and looked back at the door. Two faces peered back. "You know, it's not going to kill you to talk to me, or give me a knife and fork for that matter. Beggars can't be choosers, I guess."

The smell was making his mouth water, so he ignored them and turned his attention to the steak. It was, as he had said, medium-rare. He ate quickly, picking it apart with his fingers and gnawing all the meat from the bone.

"Scary sight, isn't it?" John remarked from outside the door.

"Sure is," Doug agreed.

The steak finished, he started in on the fries. By the time he was done he felt a lot better. He washed his hands in the sink, drying them on the bed sheet. Carrying the tray, he walked back to the door and set it down in front of the slot. "Did I pass? I suppose a glass of milk is out of the question?"

They both walked away, returning a few minutes later. The old one with the glasses motioned for him to stand back. The slot was again opened and the tray pulled out. In its place went a one-pint carton of milk.

Mike took the carton, opened it, and drank the milk down. He set the carton back at the slot, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "Thanks," he said, watching them closely and rubbing his forehead. "Lord, I don't know where I am, why I'm here, or why I've been captured by talking werewolves; but don't you think it's about time we started

talking? It's obvious that we have little understanding of each other. Otherwise, I wouldn't be locked in a cell, scared to death, while you slide food to me under the door. I'm pretty good at coping with things, as far as that goes, but to tell you the truth; I'm tired, I'm cold, I'm confused, and my nerves are shot. So, what do you say?"

The werewolf seemed unsure of what to do.

"Let's start with names, okay? I'm Mike, Michael Riggs. You are...?"

The werewolf again motioned for him to stand back. He did so and the glass swung open.

"You're going to have to forgive me, uh, Mike," Sullivan began in a deep voice, "This is a little, well, unusual. My name is Dr. Sullivan and this," he motioned over his shoulder, "Is John Carter."

"No relation," John said with a nervous smile.

"A sense of humor, too. What next, werewolf stand-up?"

"You keep calling us werewolves. Why?"

"Well, isn't that what you are? It's sure as hell what you look like. What are you? While we're at it, what do you think I am?"

"To answer your first question, I'm just a man."

"So am I."

"You're a wereman."

"You're a werewolf."

"This isn't getting us very far," John said.

"If you want to talk race, I'm a wolf. Just wolf."

"You said you were a man. Wouldn't that mean that you were trying to say that you're human?"

"Human? 'Man' isn't derived from 'human.' Do you call yourself 'human.'"

"Oh yeah, that's right. Yes, I call myself human, but you called me a wereman. That makes me half man and half what?"

"Wolf. Half human and half wolf."

"You look like a werewolf to me. That's half human and half wolf. Wait, that doesn't work, we can't both be the same thing. I'm getting confused." This is getting deep! "You said, race-wise, that you're a wolf. What's the scientific name for you? You know, the Latin."

"Canis Sapiens."

"Bullshit!" Mike said, shaking his head and chuckling.

"I'm quite serious. What is yours?"

"Homo Sapiens."

"'Homo' stands for 'same.'"

"It also stands for 'man.' Canis is for 'canine,' right?"

"Yes."

"Canine as in dogs and coyotes and well, wolves, right?"

"No. We're similar in appearance, but not in the same evolutionary chain."

"Then why the same species name...wait a minute!" he said with sudden dread, "You're starting to sound like, like..."

"What?" John asked.

"Just how many of you are there?"

"How many? Well, at last count I think it was about four billion."

"What? Four billion! Okay, wait, we'll deal with that one later." He put his hands on his hips, sighing heavily.

"You used the word 'human.' If I'm only half human to you, then what is a normal human?"

"A primitive, semi-intelligent primate found mostly in the jungles of Africa or you local zoo."

"No way! Describe one."

"Well, they're mostly furless. they have sort of broad, lantern jaws, rough features, huge bone ridges on their brows, short legs, long arms, and powerful, stocky builds. As the name wereman implies, you are about half-way in between. You have a human's features, but softened and refined. You have the body of a wolf, but no fur, fangs, or

claws. Textbook wereman.”

Hairless apes? Mike almost laughed. “Do you consider yourselves to be descended from them?”

“No, although it’s not unlikely that we’re distant cousins. Do you?”

“No. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you what a wolf is where I come from.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Chicago, originally.”

The “wolves” traded glances, surprise on their faces. “You’re in Chicago right now,” John said.

“I wasn’t aware that they were hiring werewolves in prison.”

“We’re not werewolves, and you’re not in prison. You’re at the Chicago branch office of the FBI.”

“Really? Why?”

“Because we don’t know anything about you. You mentioned the wolves where you come from.”

“Bad segue,” Mike said, waving him off, “Are you about to tell me that you’re afraid of me?”

“We’ll get to that. Tell me about wolves.”

“Basically they’re just real big huskies with a few more teeth and a higher level of intelligence.”

“Sounds like lupes to me.”

”Lupes? Like Canis Loupes? Okay, let’s call a wolf a lupe, then. From my point of view, can’t you see why I want to call you a werewolf? If I’m a man, and a lupe is a wolf, then half of me and half of a lupe makes you a werewolf. Get it?”

They muddled that over for a few seconds. John tilted his head to one side and Mike almost laughed in his furry face.

“Yes, I can see that,” Sullivan said, “Can you see our point of view?”

“Yeah, at least until I wake up or go to heaven, whichever comes first.”

John snorted.

“Seriously.” Sullivan prodded.

“Yes, I can see. I’m not a monster and you’re not a monster. Now that we’ve established a mutual intelligence, why don’t you let me out of here?”

“I can’t,” Sullivan answered, “That’s not my decision. We have a lot to talk about, anyway. Unfortunately, I have to go for now.”

“We’ll be back tomorrow to talk some more.”

“Just as long as it goes both ways. Oh, by the way, in case you didn’t hear earlier I’m cold. Is there any chance I can have something a little warmer to wear?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” John said as they left.

This is going to take some serious thought, Mike said to himself. He turned back to his cell with a sigh. His eyes came to rest on the camera. He walked to the middle of the room. Let’s see what they think of this.

“Peek-a-boo!” he yelled, putting his thumbs in his ears and waving. He flopped onto the cot and started sorting through what he had just learned.

Out in the hall John chuckled as Mike fell onto the cot. “Well, I’ll say two things for him - he’s got a sense of humor and a nice ass.”

“Pervert,” Mark quipped, eyeing the aforementioned piece of anatomy, “But then again, you may have a point. Do you think we’re being hypnotized?”

“I don’t think so, not that we would notice. To tell you the truth, I think he’s just a little too normal to be a monster. It makes you wonder how the legend got started in the first place. I wonder if more like him are running around out there. Hell, Maybe he’s from some, I don’t know, parallel universe or something. He said he was from Chicago.”

”Parallel universe? Would you kindly say ‘pop,’ because your head is buried straight up your...”

“Mark! Look in the damned door! That isn’t some movie prop you’re watching on that screen. If we’re ready to

believe that he's a wereman, why can't we be ready to believe that he's something else? Maybe there's another Earth somewhere where he's the norm? He called us monster, remember? How do we know that our people haven't been popping up on his world? Which one, in a scientific frame of mind, would you consider first; monster or misplaced man? It's obvious he's disoriented."

"Maybe he just got in from Hell and isn't sure of what to do yet."

"Does he sound like some Hell-sent monster to you? He talks like he's been to college or at least high school. He insisted on cooked meat and asked for silverware. Would a wereman ask for silverware? Mark, pal," he continued brightly as he clapped Mark on the shoulder and shook him slightly, "We've just scratched the surface with this guy. What if we find out that he has a job, a family, a car, and lives in a middle class house in a middle class neighborhood. Too bad that Doug has to leave for the evening. I could stay up all night talking to him. I'm going crazy to find out everything. How will I sleep tonight?"

"You like him, don't you? He's got you hypnotized."

"Well, yeah, I guess I do so far," John answered, turning around, "I like his attitude. He doesn't like to take any crap and I have to admire that. And you have to admit, he can be kind of sexy in a sinister sort of way."

"Better watch yourself, Mr. Presently-Unattached-And-Desperate-For-Anyone. You may find yourself ending up as a large red smear if you fall for this...guy."

John snorted and flick his ears. "Give me a break, I just said that he was mildly sexy."

"Wait, what am I saying? John," Mark said loudly as John walked down the hall, "You hardly know him, and he's not even wolvern!"

"Okay, theory number one: I'm still passed out in the woods and this is all a dream," Mike mumbled to himself, counting on his fingers, "Theory number two: I've gone insane and this is all a product of my deranged mind. Theory number three: This is all real and I'm in a load of trouble. One is a distinct possibility, two doesn't sound likely as I was fine before this all started."

"Fine, let's work with three, then. Those weird lights I ran into could have been some sort of doorway. Now I'm on an Earth much like my own populated by werewolves. Somewhere along the way their evolution took a drastic turn from ours. That explains the legend. This could have happened before, working from this end instead of mine. Oh, I forgot theory number four: Werewolves are taking over and I'm being fattened for tomorrow's dinner. I'll forget that one for now. So, if it's three, then I'll probably spend the rest of what will most likely be a very short life being studied and poked and prodded and maybe vivisected and..."

His mind slammed to a halt. "Oh no! They'll have to kill me first. If they want me to pee in a bottle that's fine. And they're not knocking me out again either. God knows what they could do to me if I was unconscious and strapped to a table. I'll fight."

Remembering how cold he was, he crawled under the white sheet covering the cot and curled up. "I wish they would hurry with those clothes."

Mark checked the VCR. There was still a little tape left. The wereman, or whatever he was, had stopped mumbling and crawled under the sheet. He was still awake, his head propped up on one arm. Mark found it almost too easy to do his job, which was to watch Mike. It was hard not to. It was eye-catching the way his muscles stood out with no fur to cover them. He had been genuinely disappointed when their guest had climbed under the sheet.

He was facing into the room, so his face and arm were still visible. Mark zoomed the camera in, not wanting to leave for the window with the tape so close to running out, and studied the details.

The VCR clicked loudly and he jumped. The cassette had run out and was now rewinding. He switched over to the other VCR and started it. Doug didn't want any gaps in coverage. He checked his watch and filled out a label for the first tape.

The sound of footsteps brought his gaze away from the screen. John was returning and when he came into view he

was carrying a bundle of clothes under his arm.

“Security’s gotten tight. How’s our monster doing?” John asked as he walked up.

“You know, it’s funny but I’m beginning to think you were right. He’s been talking to himself ever since you left. I’ve got a tape right here. Mostly he’s been trying to figure out what’s happened to him. He’s afraid we’re going to vivisection him. That’s not a usual concern of indestructible monsters.”

“Vivisection? No,” John said with a grin, “That’s one we definitely won’t do. He’s a thinking being, for crying out loud.”

John walked to the door and opened the window. Mike slid from the cot and walked over, yawning mightily. He handed the clothes through, still careful not to touch the furless hand.

“Thanks, John,” Mike said gratefully, “I’m freezing my buns off in here.” He put the sweater on first. It was open down the front.

“The jeans should fit, although they might be a little tight around the waist. I’m a little slimmer there than you seem to be.”

“These are yours?” Mike asked as he picked them up, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“Well, I won’t need them until the dead of winter and I live close by. It’s no problem.”

“Thanks again,” Mike said, walking over to the cot. He sat down and took off his sneakers, wishing the cushion wasn’t so close to the floor. Standing back up, he gave the jeans a few shakes to straighten them out. “Jordache? Didn’t these go out in the eighties?” he asked with a smile.

John’s head was sticking through the window, making him look like a hunting trophy. Mike’s smile widened.

“Give me a break. They’re almost six years old. They don’t get used much.”

“No excuses. Go buy some Levis before you get lynched.”

John chuckled, the grumbling sound coming from deep in his chest.

Mike pulled the shorts off and dropped them at the foot of the cot. He was about to put the jeans on when he realized that the legs had come apart. “Hey, these legs...” He stopped and looked closer. “Zippers? I’ve never seen jeans that zipped down the legs like this before. Cool.”

“Really?” John asked, surprised. He looked at the bare, muscular legs and made the correct assumption. “No, I guess you haven’t. We unzip the legs when we put them on so we can smooth down our fur. You probably have no idea what it’s like to walk around with your fur shoved up the wrong way. It’s bad enough having to wear the things at all. It does become necessary in this town, though.” His eyes returned to the jock strap Mike was wearing.

“I guess that makes sense,” Mike mused, catching the line of John’s gaze. “I was jogging when this whole mess started.”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I must be getting tired. It’ll be interesting to hear your story tomorrow.”

Mike pulled the jeans on and zipped the legs down. “Much better. At least now I won’t freeze to death. Then again, maybe that’s preferable.”

“To what?”

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Mike walked slowly to the door. “John, can I ask you something?”

John watched him approach, seeing a strangely vulnerable look creep into the blue eyes. God, they were the brightest, most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. “Sure.”

“What’s going to happen to me?”

It was impossible not to feel sorry for the poor beast. Maybe he was being hypnotized. Either way, he wasn’t going to start lying now. “Ultimately, I have no idea. I’m sure that we’ll do some physical tests tomorrow and a lot of questioning, too. People like you don’t just turn up every day.”

“Will I be killed? When, maybe, you’ve learned what you want to learn?”

“No, I can’t see that happening. Mark said that you were worried about vivisection. I can pretty much guarantee that won’t happen. I’m sure that as long as you don’t cause any trouble no one will hurt you.”

“Oh, I see. Be a good pet, stay in your cage, and don’t rattle the bars.”

John sighed. “Look, Mike, put yourself in our position. If I had suddenly showed up where you come from, wouldn’t you want to study me?”

“Yeah, but isn’t it obvious that I’m not the monster you were expecting? I’m standing here talking to you, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, but...”

“I need you to promise me something,” Mike interrupted.

That vulnerable look is back, John thought. God! Those eyes!

“Promise you won’t murder me.” His head dropped and he stared at the floor for a few seconds. “I don’t want to die here.”

“I promise,” John said, sure that he would promise those eyes anything. “No one has any intention of killing you.”

Mike met his eyes for a few seconds, measuring him. He relaxed slightly. “I believe you. That helps, I guess. As a matter of fact, that’s the best thing I’ve heard all day. But what about everyone else? What about the Powers That Be?” He paused and grinned a little. “At first I thought you were going to eat me.”

“Eat you!?”

“Don’t forget, I thought you were monsters, too.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s like to be around you? I almost ran for my life when you lost your temper earlier, and you were locked in here!”

They both chuckled uncomfortably. Mike was overcome by another huge yawn. “I think I’m going to hit the sack. Dr. What’s-His-Face, oh yeah, Sullivan, will probably get me up early; and those darts are still numbing my brain.”

“I’ll be here with him.”

“Well, pleasant dreams. Mine won’t be.”

“You too,” John said as Mike walked to his cot. He heard Mike mumble a “not likely” as he closed the window. He went to the table where the equipment was set up. They watched the monitor as Mike lay down, covering his face in the crook of an elbow.

“Did you get all of that?” John asked.

“Sure did. So much for the monster theory, eh?” Mark replied, plucking fur from his stomach. He was building a small pile of it on the table. “I wish I didn’t shed through April.”

“This happens every year and you bitch every year. If your fur wasn’t so long to begin with...”

“The longest is three and a half inches, thank you!” Mark interrupted indignantly, “See how it tapers nicely onto my tummy?”

“I know how it tapers well. Mine does just fine too, I just have to have it trimmed more often.”

“You’re still jealous. You’re a plain, common brown and black while I’m a natural blonde,” Mark said, plucking more silver fur from his belly.

“Do you know why blondes have more fun?”

“Don’t start.”

“Because their lovers don’t have any!” John exclaimed, laughing.

Mark got up and took a playful swipe at him. John scrambled away, holding his hands out in front of him. “I couldn’t help it! I know how much you hate blonde jokes!”

“I’ll have you know that my performance has been judged more than satisfactory on plenty of occasions.”

“Must have been with other blondes.”

“I’ll get you back. It may be next week, it may be next year, but I swear I will.” He laughed and went back to the table, leaning back in the chair and resuming his grooming. “Now go away so you won’t distract me from my work. Not that I have to do much more than change tapes that will just get reused in the morning because he’s just going to sleep all night.”

## CHAPTER III

Three hours after leaving the cell, Doug walked into the regional director's office.

"Doug, how's it going?"

"Fine, Steve. How's the business?"

Steve Cooper was short and sported a slight pouch around the middle of his five foot two frame. His fur was black, gray, and meticulously combed. His eyes were jet black, something that always made Doug feel uncomfortable.

"Not as good as it was before I read this report," he said, nodding to the folder Doug had sent up, "Is this for real, or are you and these men playing a dangerous hoax on me?"

"Oh, it's for real, all right. Just go down yourself and have a look. Damndest thing I've ever seen. I had no idea I'd end up dealing with something like this when I took this job."

Steve snorted and twitched his ears. "They found your human, by the way. He was, I hear, about ten miles outside of town eating some guy's garbage. I've been going through hell keeping a lid on this thing."

"I can imagine."

"So, do you have anything firm on how you're going to go about this?"

"Yes. I see no need to beat around the bush, seeing how he's coherent and affable. Tomorrow, we're going to give him a complete physical and collect some samples. We'll photograph him, too. After that, we'll spend some time questioning him. The first thing I want to know is where he's from and how he got here. After that we'll be working late on the samples. Some will probably have to be sent away for analysis, though you've got a nice lab down there."

"Do you think that's safe?"

"See for yourself," Doug answered, holding out the more interesting tapes. "This is so weird," he continued, "He speaks English with a mild Chicago accent. He's obviously educated. The funny thing is, he talks like he's never seen a wolf before. He even called us werewolves. That's what's really strange. As of now, I can't even guess at where he may have come from. He says he's from here, in Chicago. I'm afraid to think too much about that. My reports may start reading like science fiction stories."

"Why?"

"Because, what we have here is a wereman that speaks perfect English and wears designer clothes. He's definitely at a loss as to what's going on. He's downright confused. What does that tell you?"

"Enlighten me."

Doug smiled. "What that tells you is that, like it or not, we're going to have to consider the possibility that he came from some place with people like him. Remember the report? He was just as afraid of us when he woke up as we were when we caught him. He thought we were going to cut him apart. He's from Chicago. What does that say to you? That somewhere, and God knows exactly where, there is a Chicago full of weremen. A United States full of weremen. An Earth full of weremen."

"Shit, Doug, you don't want me to believe that, do you? Please say you don't, because I hate to disappoint people I like."

"I'm not asking you to believe. I didn't mean to imply that I believe it, either. It's just a preliminary theory, that's all."

"Okay, I'll let that ride for now. What are you going to need?"

“All I need now are a couple of armed guards to be available for when we move him around and some more equipment for the lab.”

“Silver bullets?” Steve asked with a grin.

“No,” Doug said, returning the smile.

“What do you need to move him for?”

“Just to get him down to the infirmary and back, mostly. He seems reasonable enough for a monster, but I want to have guards there anyway. He’s going to need to use the shower facility, too. Desperately.”

“Pretty ripe?”

“Whew,” Doug began, wrinkling his nose, “I’d venture a guess that they can smell him on the third floor.”

Steve smiled. “Why not just knock him out?”

“We can’t put him under every time we want to move him. He’s a thinking man, Steve. He’s already afraid of being abused. I’m sure you caught that in my report. Besides, knocking him out over and over could be dangerous.”

“Okay, how many do you need?”

“Two to work during the day. Can you spare them?”

“Yeah, two is no problem. Since they’re already involved, I’ll send Eklund and Ford. How long do you think it will take to find out what you need to know?”

“There’s no telling until we find out more of what kind of things we need to know, if you follow. Like I’ve said, though, he’s being very cooperative. What do you think you’ll do with him when we know everything?”

“You mean when we know whether or not he’s some sort of genetic freak created by an unfriendly government to terrorize out peaceful citizens?” Steve quipped, only half joking, “I don’t have the slightest idea.”

“You don’t really suspect that, do you?”

“Not yet, but it’s my job to be cynical.”

“Well then, if you don’t need me for anything else...”

“Go on,” Steve said, standing, “I know you have a long day ahead of you tomorrow. I know I do.”

“Have a nice evening. I’ll see you tomorrow. Oh, are you two still coming over Friday or should we call that off?”

“Hmm, maybe we’d better put that on hold until we find out how much time we’ll be spending with our friend down there.”

“Okay. Say ‘hi’ to the better half for me.”

“I will.”

Mike woke early. His watch read five-thirty. A push of a button showed it to be Wednesday. He padded over to the sink, the cold floor chilling his feet. He filled the sink with cold water and splashed his face, the only part of him that was even remotely clean. He drained it and refilled it with warm water, splashing his face again, then brushed his teeth with a finger. His mouth still tasted like a crypt when he was done. He gave the camera a quick glance, then put his back to it and used the toilet. That done, he walked over to the door and looked out. A silver werewolf was walking away from the door to meet John and Doug, who were apparently just arriving. He used his hands to try and straighten his hair.

They talked for a minute or two, then came over to the door. Doug opened the window. “Good morning. I didn’t expect you to be up this early.”

“Hi.” John added from behind.

“Hi. I just woke up. I don’t sleep well in captivity.”

“How are you feeling today?” Doug asked, nodding slightly at the hint as John moved between them and bent down.

Mike smelled eggs and coffee. “Dirty,” he answered, looking down toward the slot, “But if that’s my breakfast, I’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

“I hope you like them scrambled,” the doctor said, eyeing him carefully.

“I’ll take them any way I can get them, considering the circumstances. At least they’re cooked,” he said as he stood with the tray and walked to the cot.

“I was hoping we could talk while you ate.”

“Sure, there are a few things I wanted to ask. The first of which is how long we need to keep talking through that hole in the door.” He ate a forkful of eggs and chased them with a bite of toast. They had given him silverware this time. He looked closely at the fork and held it up. “Thanks. Real silver, too. I feel privileged.”

“No problem,” Doug said, watching him eat. Mike set the fork down on the plate and held up his hands. “Look, no burns.”

He heard John laugh, along with another, unfamiliar voice, and continued eating.

“As for your question, that’s up to you. Today we hope to accomplish a lot. It will go much easier if you continue to cooperate. I’m not implying that you don’t want to, but I want things to be clear. The sooner we can build a foundation of trust, the sooner we can get all of this done with and get on with our lives.”

“So tell me,” Mike began after a sip of coffee, “What life will I be getting on with?”

“No one’s thought that far ahead, yet. But if all goes well, and that depends solely on you, you won’t be here forever. It’s important that you put your fears aside and believe that.”

“I believe you, and I’ll cooperate with just about anything that gets me out of this cell. Unless, that is, I know that it will hurt a lot. I don’t take kindly to severe pain. I hope you weren’t planning on a spinal tap or something. I assume you want to do a physical, but you’re not going that far.” He gave Doug an unyielding stare.

“Well, it was on the list,” Doug mused, “What the hell, I guess we can do without it. Oh, by the way, call me Doug.”

“All right, Doug, here’s your tray. One thing, though. The FBI makes horrible coffee. Unless you made it yourself,” he added quickly, smiling, “In that case it was great. Best cup I’ve ever had.”

“I didn’t,” Doug said, showing the tips of his fangs in a smile. John grabbed the tray from the slot as Doug continued. “Now, about today’s schedule, and our speaking arrangement. What I propose is that we have a small table and a couple of chairs brought in. There will be two armed guards present whenever anyone is in the room with you until we start to feel safe with one another.”

“Sounds reasonable, I guess, but I’m not going to attack anyone who doesn’t attack me first.”

“Good. Today, what we want to do first is take you to the infirmary for a physical. We’ll photograph, weigh, and measure you. We’ll have you do some simple dexterity exercises, and we’ll collect information on your metabolism.” He glanced over Mike’s shoulder to the toilet. “Have you used the toilet?”

“I took a leak. Amazingly enough, that’s it. I thought I was going to shit myself yesterday.”

“Do you think you can give us a bowel movement later?”

“That seems to be automatic when a doctor asks for it.”

“Good. John and myself will probably be your only visitors at first. When you’re out of your cell, you’ll be guarded.”

“Can I make a request before we begin all of this?”

“Go ahead.”

“I’m filthy and I smell like a farm animal. My mouth tastes like a grave and my hair feels like wax. I’d get on my knees and beg for a shower and a tube of toothpaste. I could also use a comb.”

“That’s probably a good idea. No offense, but your smell is extremely strong. Okay, we’ll start with the shower. The showers are right next to the infirmary, anyway. Since you’ll be out of the room for a while, I’ll have Mark get you a toothbrush and toothpaste when he gets the table.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

“Well, then, if you’re ready, we’ll get started.”

"I'm ready when you are."

"Good, good. Stand back, please."

He backed to the far wall. He heard heavy bolts being shoved aside, making him wonder just what this room was normally used for, and the door opened a crack. Doug and John stepped back and their faces were replaced by an new one.

The door was opened the rest of the way by the barrel of an assault rifle. Mike couldn't keep himself from smiling. It was staggering to think that they were afraid enough to point a gun at him. His smile grew wider when he saw the man behind it.

He was black from head to toe. Body armor, actual body armor, covered most of him. Another one, similarly outfitted, was a few paces behind him.

"Come out slowly," the guy said, sounding a little nervous.

Mike assumed that the sight of him smiling at an M-16 wasn't helping things, but he couldn't stop himself. He walked out slowly, seeing the monitoring table for the first time. The silver werewolf was watching from the bottom step of a staircase at the end of the hall. No one, not even the guards, was coming within six feet of him; and the rifles never left his chest.

"The showers are to your left, down the hall," John said, smiling apologetically.

"Okey dokey."

As he walked away, he noticed that everyone, save the guards, wore sandals instead of regular shoes. Short, thick fur covered the tops of their feet and short claws jutted from the toes. He moved slowly, growing slightly fearful of the two guns at his back. After thirty feet or so, he reached a door marked "latrine."

"Go on in," Doug said from behind a guard. Mike chuckled.

"What's funny?" John asked from behind Doug.

"I'm sorry, it's just that this is kind of funny, in a perverse way. I can't help it. Haven't you figured out that I'm just an ordinary guy?"

"Not yet, I'm afraid," Doug answered honestly.

He grinned some more and walked in. Three sinks were on his left, with three stalls to his right. He walked past a row of lockers and came to the shower room. A towel hung on each of three racks outside of it. Inside, three shower heads poked from the far wall. Under each, a large bottle of shampoo and a long-handled brush sat on a small shelf.

"No soap?"

"That's what the bottles are. Don't you recognize them?" John asked.

"Sure. I recognize shampoo, but I was asking about soap. If I use that stuff all over I'll smell like a french whore."

They all chuckled, even the guards. "It's odorless, always has been," Doug said, "I assume yours isn't?"

"Nope."

"Are you referring to hand soap?"

"Yeah, I guess that's what you'd use it for. This stuff won't suds up too well on me, although I'm sure it works a treat for you."

"You don't want to use hand soap all over. That is scented and no one will be able to come near you without a gas mask."

"No one's getting all that close now," Mike said, turning and looking at them all for a few seconds. No one moved.

"Do I get an audience?"

"Afraid so," Doug answered.

"For a shower? Oh, come on! I can understand a guard or two, but I'm not used to showering for a crowd. I don't do it any differently than anyone else."

“We don’t know that yet. John and I have to observe everything you do. After this time we can leave you alone with a guard. Please bear with us.”

John looked embarrassed.

“Oh hell, all right.” He stripped, trying to hide himself as much as possible and not look their way. To some extent, it was a bit humiliating. He felt like a specimen.

Hell, he thought, I am a specimen.

He swallowed his pride and stepped into the stall. He chose the middle spout and turned it on, staying clear of the cold, dirty spray until the brownish water was replaced with clear. He really wasn’t in the mood for a cold blast. When it had warmed up he stepped into it, relaxing and enjoying the warm shower. It felt fantastic.

“Ah. Do you mind if I don’t rush?” he asked.

“Nah, go ahead.” Doug answered.

He grabbed the shampoo and lathered himself as best he could. He quickly found that it was best to work up suds in his hair and move them down onto his body. The suds were odorless, as they had said. He glanced over to his hosts, planning to comment on it. His face flushed when he saw them.

They were all staring shamelessly. It wasn’t hard to figure out where most of their eyes were focused. John met his gaze for a second, immediately averting his eyes, and looked chagrined.

He turned his back to them and finished that way, forcing the blood from his face and taking some more time to enjoy the shower. Once he had rinsed off, he grabbed a towel and dried himself.

He dressed as quickly as he could, forgoing the jock. It was beyond decency to put the thing back on after wearing it for three days. He considered himself lucky for not having jock itch.

The door opened and Mark soon appeared, carrying a toothbrush and a new tube of toothpaste. He handed them to Doug, glanced around, and leaned against the wall by the door.

“Thanks,” Mike said.

“Sure,” Mark said back.

Mike took the towel and walked over to one of the sinks. Once the water was running clear he started brushing. The tube said that it was a familiar brand and it tasted as he expected it to. He looked up in the mirror and through it saw them all watching, ears eagerly forward. A thought occurred to him and he looked back at himself and started laughing. A few drops of foam strayed onto the mirror, making him laugh harder. Within a few seconds he was doubled over the sink, trying not to make a mess. His eyes watered and his stomach started to hurt. He finally contained himself enough to look up.

John was chuckling, shaking his furry head. Everyone else was smiling. Mike rinsed his mouth out so he could talk. “Did that look like I think it looked, me with foam all over my mouth?”

“Yes.” John answered.

“Thought so. Let’s try this again.” He continued where he had left off, making an effort not to look at himself. He would have laughed at the sight of them doing it. The image kept creeping in and he almost choked himself before he was finished. He combed his hair and was let next door to the infirmary, the procession moving as it had before. Mark mentioned that a table and chairs had just arrived at the cell as John leaned close and whispered in his ear.

“Man, did you ever miss a show!”

“What? Tell me!” Mark whispered back.

“The shower,” John said, holding out his hands and moving them slowly apart.

Mark gaped at the implied dimensions. “You’re kidding!”

“Well, I’m exaggerating, but you get the idea.”

“Whew!” Mark replied as John disappeared into the infirmary.

“Okay,” Doug began, picking up a camera from the counter, “Pictures first. Stand against that wall, beside the scale,

and take your clothes off.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a medical curiosity. It’s nothing personal. Try to be clinically detached.”

“Is this really necessary?”

”Yes,” Doug insisted, “We need to study you. That includes establishing that you’re a normal flesh and blood being like ourselves. These pictures will establish scale and proportion.”

“A little too much scale and proportion, if you know what I mean.” Mike retorted.

Doug sighed. “Please? Don’t worry, these will not be made public. We have to have a photographic record of your basic anatomy.”

Mike rolled his eyes and did as he was told, feeling like a specimen again. Doug took over two dozen pictures, moving from one angle to another. He had Mike hold his arms straight out at different angles. They repeated the process with him facing the wall. John watched for a few minutes then turned tactfully away. Mike felt foolish and embarrassed.

“That should do it,” Doug said as the camera rewound itself. “Have a seat on the table.”

“Here, put this on,” John added, holding a hospital gown out to him.

He put on the gown and hopped onto the table, swinging his legs over the edge. Doug collected various medical torture devices from a drawer, the main ones being a tongue depressor and stethoscope.

“Okay, the basics first,” John said, taking the stethoscope from Doug. He hooked it into his ears, keeping them pointed forward, and reached for Mike’s chest. Mike braced himself.

It was freezing, as he had expected. John listened for a few seconds while Doug put a pressure band on his arm. The guards kept the rifles trained on him, wary of any sudden moves.

“Take a couple of deep breaths. By the way, you smell a lot better now that you’re clean.”

“Thanks,” he said as he breathed.

“Your lungs sound good from here,” John said, circling around behind him. Mike tried not to move when John put the disk on his back. “Again...good. I should have guessed from your physique. You have enormous lung capacity.”

“I like to take care of myself.”

“So I see,” Doug said as he wrote his blood pressure on a medical form, “Here, John.”

John looked at his blood pressure and pulse. “God man, what do you do to keep in shape?”

“I run five miles and lift weights five days a week. Weather permitting, I bike a lot. I also play a lot of basketball and racquetball.”

“Any allergies?” Doug asked.

“Nope.”

“Obvious scars?”

”I have one from an appendectomy, but just the usual beyond that.”

“How long ago was that?” John asked as he recovered from hearing a wereman admit to an appendectomy.

“Nine years ago.”

“How old are you now?”

“Twenty-five. I’ll be twenty-six September fourteenth.”

“Really?” John asked, surprised, “I’ll be twenty-six on the twentieth.”

“I’m older than you are, nyah-nyah nyah-nyah-nyah.”

One of the guards chuckled.

“Place of birth?” Doug asked, pen poised above a form.

“Northwestern Memorial.”

“Parents?”

“Deceased.”

“I’m sorry,” John said.

Mike shrugged as John walked over to the counter. He came back with a ball of cotton, three small test tubes, and a needle that looked big enough to crawl into.

“Don’t drain me dry, for crying out loud!”

“You’ll hardly miss it in your condition,” Doug said, wiping the inside of his elbow with alcohol.

“Yeah, but you could fit my whole arm in that needle,” Mike pouted as John wrapped a thick rubber band around his upper arm. “How is it you guys are so familiar with medical equipment. I thought you were zoologists.”

“Relax that,” Doug said, shaking his arm lightly. “It comes in handy. Both John and I have medical training. Oh, it looks like you have some fur after all.”

“I noticed,” John said, inserting the needle. As the tube filled, he looked up at Mike, “Will it grow?”

“No, I’m afraid that’s it.” Mike answered, wincing as he watched John fill the tubes, “That has got to be the eeriest thing to watch.”

”Hold that,” John said, pressing a cotton wad against his elbow. He walked to the counter and returned with two beakers and a sealable plastic bag. “The bathroom’s right there,” he said, pointing to a door in the corner. He took a deep breath and let it out. “We need a urine, bowel, and...semen sample.”

“Semen? Whatever for?”

“Genetic and other information,” Doug supplied, “It will tell us much about your physiology, and frankly it is of interest how a heterosexual intelligent being’s reproductive system may differ.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Doug just shrugged.

Mike eyed him for a few seconds, then John. Neither seemed ready to back down. “Oh brother!” he said, sighing in exasperation, “You aren’t going to be timing this, are you?”

Everyone laughed, including the guards. “No.”

“Any medical advice on which to do first?” he asked, walking to the door.

“Urine, bowel, semen,” Doug answered.

“Well, at least you’re not watching.”

“Hmmm, now that you mention it...” John said with a smirk.

Mike gave him a hard stare and went in. The first two were average enough but he surprised himself on the third; both in sensation and volume. He hadn’t even fantasized. He was trying very hard not to think of Deb. He wasn’t sure if he was ready to face the idea of never seeing her again.

He couldn’t hide his embarrassment when he emerged. Everyone was trying very hard to act nonchalant - he gave them credit for that much - but noses were quivering everywhere.

He handed the samples to Doug, who put the feces and urine into a small refrigerator. He paused and held up the semen for a second, studying it a little harder than the other two.

“Damn, this looks potent. Is this all, or did you lose some?”

Mike blushed furiously. “That’s all. Why? Is something wrong?”

“Well, the volume is low, to be honest. Maybe it’s all the stress you’ve been through lately. On the other hand, it does look extremely potent.”

John stepped over for a closer look and he stopped sniffing in Mike’s direction. “You’re right. Maybe that’ll make up for the lack of volume. I wonder why that is? The analysis should prove interesting.”

“Will you two stop discussing my sperm and get on with this? Jeesh, you are creeping me out.”

John blushed, or at least it looked that way. Mike thought he saw the insides of his ears go bright before he moved them back a little.

“Sorry,” Doug said, “Clinical detachment.” He opened a strange looking freezer and put the sample into it, waving the mist away as he did.

“What’s that?”

“Liquid nitrogen,” Doug answered, resealing it.

“You guys have some serious stuff down here.”

“Most of it was brought in last night. Mark got it all set up for us before you awoke. Back on the table, please, and lie back.”

Mike did so and Doug stood beside the table, feeling around Mike’s torso and probing along his ribs. Mike suppressed a giggle when it started to tickle.

“Everything feels right,” Doug said with satisfaction, then paused on Mike’s abdomen, “Flex your stomach.”

“Okay.”

“Hmmm,” he continued, eyebrows furrowing as he ran his fingers over Mike’s abdominal muscles.

“What?” John and Mike asked in unison, the latter in a quick huff.

“Your upper abdominals are short and your lowers long,” Doug said, causing John to look closer.

“They are. Wow.”

Mike went limp and exhaled. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Flex again.”

He did so and Doug felt around some more, probing to just below his pubic hairline and almost prompting a halt from Mike. “Yes, definitely.”

“In comparison with our own, you’re upper and lower abdominals are more or less reversed,” John said.

“Oh.”

Doug finished, John taking notes from him, and then Mike was told to sit up. They examined his eyes and ears next. When he had finished peering into Mike’s ears, Doug grabbed a tongue depressor. “Open wide.”

Mike saw the guards shift and he almost smiled. He opened his mouth and Doug peered in, using the tongue depressor to move his tongue around. John looked over Doug’s shoulder, making them resemble a single, two-headed monster.

“Major gag reflex,” Doug comment when Mike almost puked. John made a note. “Three fillings. Did you get those as a child?”

“Uh-Huh.”

“Strange as they seem, your teeth look healthy. Your throat looks like it should, although it’s not back as far.”

They checked his reflexes, which seemed to impress them. They measured his body for fat content and found no surprises there; it was extremely low. Skin scrapings were taken next and placed in small sample bags. Those were followed by samples of his finger- and toenails, hair, and more hair from his armpit and below his navel. He was passing his eye test, with mediocre results by werewolf standards, until they dimmed out the lights to test his night vision.

“I’ll be damned,” Doug exclaimed, mildly shocked, “I didn’t expect that.”

“We humans aren’t known for our night vision.”

“You’d think that with day vision that’s at least acceptable and outstanding depth perception you’re night vision would follow suit,” Doug mused, snatching the eye exam lamp again and looking into one of Mike’s eyes. “The smaller iris doesn’t explain...ah-hah! Your light receptors don’t look quite right. I didn’t notice that before. I bet the shape of your lens is off, too. Look at all those cones! We have to give you a color test. John, get the most comprehensive color test you can find. Is your vision typical?”

“Yeah, and the only time they check night vision is when you get your driver’s license.”

“Do you have a car?” John asked.

“I had an Eagle Talon.”

“Cool. Turbo?”

“And all-wheel-drive.”

“Must be nice.”

“It’s expensive. What do you have?”

“An eighty-eight Beretta GT.”

“Well, that’s not bad at all.”

“It doesn’t do one-forty, though.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Mike said with a grin.

“Yeah, right. Get over on the scale so we can weigh you.”

Mike got on the scale and found that he had lost weight. “I need to eat more; I’m four pounds down.”  
 “We’ll give you a big lunch,” Doug said, pointing to the wall where he had been photographed, “Step over there so we can do some basic dexterity tests.”

“Not in this thing,” Mike said, tugging at his gown, “And I’m warning you, I’m probably pretty tight after all that’s happened.”

Doug had Mark fetch his jock strap. Mike refused to use it at first, agreeing only after he was allowed to wash it out in the bathroom.

Mike was more flexible than most because of his athletic lifestyle. Even though he did feel stiff, he could still press his stomach to his thighs when he stretched his legs out. They were impressed with his overall dexterity, but were surprised when he couldn’t put his face between his legs.

“If I could do that, I would have never left the house on Sunday in the first place,” Mike said, grinning, then remembered what he had just done a little earlier and waved off any smart replies that may have been coming, “Do you mean you can?”

“Yeah, but we still get out a lot,” John answered, smiling back, “Hey Doug, I’m sure the stomach muscles have something to do with that.”

“Mm-Hmm,” Doug agreed, “And his spine, I’d guess. Time to find out.”

Next he was led to an adjoining room full of x-ray equipment. They x-rayed him from head to foot, from different angles, and with him on his back and belly. Mike sat and swung his legs while they waited for the pictures to come through, trading fast car stories with John. In spite of the fact that he looked like a demon from hell, John seemed to be a likable kind of guy. His demeanor belied his wicked, predatory features. Doug came in with the x-rays and John joined him at the light rack. Mike watched from the table, not bothering to ask to get up with two guards still aiming guns at him. Doug and John started with his feet and worked their way up, reminding Mike of his painful trip to this place, their ears eagerly forward.

“Well, except for your backbone and skull, your skeleton looks very much like ours. Nothing but insignificant little details from what I can tell.”

“What’s different about my spine?”

“Too many vertebrae and not enough cartilage. That would explain why you can’t bend over all the way.”

“You must shrink a lot when you get old.”

“We lose, on average, about three inches once the cartilage has mostly compressed.”

“Lord.”

Doug hung the skull shots up, and John pointed excitedly, his ears almost leaping off his head. “Look at that!”

“That’s the squarest looking jaw I’ve ever seen. Look at this, John.” He turned to Mike. “Did you have teeth removed?”

“I had my wisdom teeth taken out last year.”

“What are wisdom teeth?” John asked, snatching a form from the counter.

“You don’t get wisdom teeth?”

“Tell us what they are. Maybe we have them and call them something else.”

“Wisdom teeth are four extra molars that grow in the back. Most people don’t have room for them so they get pulled. Mine were impacted and had to be cut out.”

“That is weird,” John said, writing briskly.

“Do you think that they’re some kind of holdover from your race’s past?”

“Got me.”

Doug turned back to the x-rays. “You’re nose is cartilage?”

“Yeah.”

Doug shook his head. “We’ve got too much to do right now. We can look more closely at these later. I think we’ve got just about everything we need for today,” he said with satisfaction, picking up the considerable stack of medical forms and notes they had collected.

“Thank God.”

“Let’s get back to your room. We’ve got a lot to talk about before John and I get started on all this paperwork and those samples.”

“When’s lunch?”

John looked at his watch. It was the exact same kind Mike was wearing, though he had left it in the cell. “Now, from the looks of it,” he said, turning to Doug, “Why don’t we eat in his room?”

“Sure.”

“Fine with me,” Mike said, “But it’s still a cell to me.”

They sat down to eat, the guards standing in the corners opposite them. Lunch was spaghetti. Mike and John had milk while Doug drank ice tea. Doug’s note pad sat beside his plate, an uncapped pen on top.

“Do you sleep with that thing?” Mike asked.

”I don’t want to miss any of your profound statements.”

“To be a monster, or not to be; that is the question.”

They all laughed and started eating. Mike caught himself returning their stares and looked quickly at his plate. Watching werewolves eat spaghetti ranked at the top of his list for the weirdest things he had ever seen. They both chewed with their mouths partially open, supposedly so their fangs didn’t shred their lips. Neither seemed aware of it, so Mike assumed they all did and tried to ignore the noise.

Over lunch, Mike explained, as best he could, what had happened Sunday morning. Doug made sure that he included all the details, keeping strictly to the event itself. The rest of Mike’s world, he said, would be covered later.

“You’ve never felt pain.” Mike said in summary, eating the last bite from his second plateful.

“I broke my left arm when I was a kid.” John offered with a smile.

“Can’t compare. Even my appendicitis didn’t hurt like that. I felt like I was on fire, and it just...crawled up me. It was like I was being dipped feet-first in acid.”

John cringed. “Ouch.”

Doug called Mark in to take the trays away.

“You’re going to piss him off, making him an errand boy like that.” John said to Doug after he had left.

“He’ll get over it. Besides, once things settle down we won’t be so restricted. So! Onward.”

He slid his pad in front of him and John pulled one out of a pocket. “This is all being taped, of course, but I want to have notes to look back on while we talk. Since we’re starting basically from scratch, this Q & A session is probably going to wander around a bit. Let’s start with the basics about yourself. First of all - full name.”

“Michael Alexander Riggs.”

“Occupation?”

“Computer programmer.”

“Really?” John asked.

“Surprised?”

“I guess I shouldn’t be. Sorry.”

“No problem.”

“Education?”

“High school diploma and a bachelor’s degree in computer science from the University of Chicago. I’ve taken several related courses since.”

“Employer?”

“Haffley Software Systems, in Decator. I’m the Head Programmer.”

“No wonder you can afford that Talon.”

“Address?”

“Does any of this really matter? If I’m from some other Earth, than if these things exist at all, someone else will be there.”

“Yes, but what if the names matched? Wouldn’t that be something?”

“I guess so. Twenty-two seventy-eight rolling Valley Drive, apartment B.”

“Age? Oh, twenty-five and September...fifteenth?”

“Fourteenth.”

“I’m getting hot.” Doug said. “Anyone mind if I take this lab coat off?”

“Not me. I wouldn’t want a reputation for being a poor host.”

Doug took his smock off, John following his lead. Underneath they both wore light blue shirts with the same cut as the ones he had seen being worn in the woods. Each had a long slit on each side for ventilation. Other than the profusion of openings, they resembled typical dress shirts. Each wore a clip-on tie that hung from the top of the shirt. The sleeves were short and the tails were tucked into knee-length shorts.

From what Mike could see through the openings in his shirt, John was obviously well built. Muscles bulged beneath his fur wherever it was exposed, and he filled out the shirt completely. The fur on his belly was more sparse than the rest. Except for his palms and fingers, it was the only place where skin was visible on him. Mike wasn’t intimidated, though; especially after learning that he was two inches taller than the average werewolf. John, at about five-ten, was considered tall. Now, why would that be? Mike thought. God, this is weird.

On Doug’s right arm, just above the elbow, a two-inch wide band was fastened. It had an intricate black design sewn onto a white background. A small diamond, held in a gold setting, was attached in the center.

“Can I ask what that is?”

“You don’t know?” John asked, surprised.

“Nope.”

“It’s a wedding band.” Doug said, equally amazed.

“Oh. Well, that’s different. I’ve got an engagement band, but it’s on my finger.” He showed it to them. “Guys don’t usually wear them, but my fiancé’ talked me into it.”

“So, you’re engaged?” Doug asked cheerfully.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to talk about that. I’m starting to get the feeling that I’m never going to see her again.”

“Her!” John gasped, looking shocked.

“Yeah.” Mike said slowly.

Doug’s expression mirrored John’s. “You’re engaged to a female?” he asked, having trouble sitting still.

“Of course.” Mike answered defensively. “What’s the problem? You look shocked.

“That’s normal?”

“Yes, of course. Wait a second, you mean that you’re married to a man?”

“Like you said, of course.”

It was Mike’s turn to look shocked. He glanced at John, who seemed to be in agreement with Doug. Doug shook his head and let out a long sigh.

“I think we just hit a brick wall. Are you saying that you, and those like you, are heterosexual? Like an animal?”

“Yeah.” Mike said slowly. “Are you about to say that you’re all homosexual? I’ll ignore that comment about animals.”

“Sorry, it’s just that that kind of behavior is usually associated with the animal kingdom. Well, except for mating, of course.”

“Whoa! Slow down!” Mike said quickly, catching his wits. “I think we better have a mutual biology lesson. I’ll go first.”

He spent the next hour explaining human biology. He covered everything from dating to death. Both men had stopped him frequently for more details. By the time he had finished, his mouth was dry.

“Your females live longer than the males?”

“Well, not always, but statistically speaking, yes. I think it has something to do with them handling stress better than men, or men historically having to deal with more.”

“Wow.” John said through a sigh.

”Amazing!” Doug exclaimed. “A whole heterosexual society! It’s kind of sick, but amazing.”

“I think it’s your turn.” Mike added quickly.

“Let me think.” Doug said, waving him off.

They sat for a few minutes, Doug rubbing his snout. John tapped his fangs with a claw, also lost in thought. Mike chewed a nail and tried to figure out how people could evolve to be gay.

“Of course!” Doug finally said, snapping his fingers. “It’s blatantly obvious. That would explain everything. John, don’t you get it? The females live! Just like animals!” he finished, waving Mike down again.

“So,” John began slowly, “If the females live, why not stay with them? Wow! What a concept! But it does make sense when you think about it.”

“Someone want to clue me in before I get mad?”

Doug faced him. “Please forgive the constant references to the animal kingdom, Mike, but it’s the only basis of comparison I can come up with. You say that your females live as long or longer than the males. Ours don’t.”

“I’ll start at the beginning.” he said, rushing on excitedly. “We males mature at about the same time yours do. So do our females - usually between the ages of twelve and fourteen. Sometimes it takes as long as fifteen. But our females almost never live more than a year past puberty.”

“They die? Why?”

“Let me talk. When a female wolf reaches puberty, she must mate within about two months, on the outside. Statistically, there are no exceptions. If she doesn’t mate within that time, she hemorrhages to death. It’s similar to what you described as a period. In our case, once it starts, it doesn’t stop.”

“But,” Mike began, confused, “A period is just a flushing out of the egg and what blood collected to prepare for pregnancy. It’s not really bleeding, in that sense.”

“It is for our females. The prenatal blood and egg goes, and then the vessels open up. If she chooses a man and mates, she’s pregnant for about nine months, just like yours. But even pregnancy doesn’t save her. Immediately after birth those same vessels open up and, to put it simply, she bleeds to death. Most die within three hours.”

“That’s cruel.” Mike said. “That is, if I choose to believe such a completely ludicrous suggestion.”

”That’s nature. No one’s been able to do anything about it. Of course, no one really wants to. In a way that sounds heartless, but to change nature’s way of doing things would turn the entire planet upside-down. Think of the population explosion alone...”

Mike rubbed his eyes.

“Just over ninety percent of all births are multiple births. Seventy-five percent of those are fraternal twins, one boy and one girl. The rest are various combinations of boys and girls, with a few single-child births thrown in for good measure.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “You must understand that the death rate for unmated females is only about two percent. It’s considered a travesty for a female to not be able to mate. It makes her death meaningless. You didn’t mention how females are treated in your society. Here, they are given everything their family can afford. The boys are hardly neglected, but it’s the females who get the most attention. The boys grow up understanding that. After all, the girl is going to be gone before she’s sixteen, at the latest. They make the ultimate sacrifice for our people.”

“As for family structure, whoever mates with her becomes the children’s’ father. His husband becomes the stepfather. I seem to remember that stepfather means something completely different to you.”

“Yeah.” Mike mumbled in a daze.

“The term ‘mother’ is only used posthumously to refer to the female who bore the children. If a couple divorces and the father remarries, the new spouse becomes the halffather.”

“It’s easy enough to understand why you’re heterosexual. All we have to do is look at the animal world to see that. Do you understand why we aren’t?”

They both looked at him intently. Mike sat there thinking, tapping the fingers of one hand against the table top. He looked back and forth between the two werewolves, trying to take it all in. He would have never guessed that John was gay. He decided to go out on a limb. “Okay, let me take this slow. You evolved with your females dying young. Like anyone else, you all need love and companionship. With no females to spend your life with, the men were left only with each other. So, naturally, you all developed a homosexual society out of simple need. You had no choice but to turn to each other. It came as naturally to you as turning to an adult female comes to me.”

“Exactly!”

“Whatever drugs you must have given me are wearing off, because I’m not buying any of this.”

“Why not?”

”Oh, come on! Do you expect me to swallow a load of crap like that? What precedent could there possibly be for having your females die like that? At least I have the animal kingdom to back me up. What do you have?”

“We are a product of our evolution. When you get out of here, you’ll see that we’re not drugging you and we’re not lying.”

“I’m not an evolutionist,” Mike said disdainfully, “But I think that the Bible and evolution have some common ground. Okay, let’s assume that you’re not lying and I’m not dreaming this. If you are raised from childhood as homosexuals, what would possibly make you want to have sex with a female? I assume that your friends and family would impress their lifestyle upon you as you grow up. Wouldn’t the thought of sex with a female disgust you?”

“Actually, it does. I have three children, two daughters and one son. They’re all twelve. The boy’s fraternal. I expect to lose my girls within three years. However, if you suggested right now that I go have sex with a female, I would be disgusted. Offended, as a matter of fact. Except for a few heterosexuals, who hopefully all end up in therapy, no man would ever want to have sex with a female.”

“Then why don’t you all just die out?”

“Mainly, it’s the smell. It’s well...”

“Oh, give me a break! Look, I don’t want to seem belligerent, but you’re starting to push the limits of reason, here. How can you compare me to an animal when you’re talking about being irresistibly drawn to a rutting female?”

Doug looked offended. “Well, you don’t have to be rude about it.”

“Don’t play hurt and offended with me, Doctor. You have to convince me.”

“What do you want me to say? Hear me out before you start judging us. As I was saying, it’s pretty much

irresistible. If you would have waited, I would have told you that the smell isn't the only factor involved. There's also the social-personal responsibility we give ourselves. I guess you could say that the two are nature's way of making sure we don't disappear. The responsibility makes us accept that we will probably end up mating. The smell is simply a physical lure to close the deal. It's not a particularly pleasant smell, I can assure you; but it trigger our mating instinct. We don't enjoy the mating process. We understand that our mating habits, the scent and all, are similar to some animals. Wolves are, after all, mammals. I know this all must sound bizarre to you, but it's what we are."

"Mammals nurse their young."

"We don't. In that regard we're kind of like the platypus - breaking one of the mammal rules."

"It's about the most bizarre thing I've ever heard; all of it. Then again; if you're being straight with me, the thought of spending your whole life enjoying sex with a woman must seem pretty bizarre to you."

"Yes, it does. But in all honesty, I can't bring myself to judge in this case. I can't say you're unnatural, because we wolves are the only creatures we know of with our sexuality and way of life."

"I have to agree." John said.

"I suppose that, in light of your explanation, I have to feel the same way about you. It's a lot to take, though." Mike said, losing some of his anger. A race of faggot werewolves? God, this is weird!

"Mike, do you realize what this means for you?" John began. "Sexual relations with a female who is not ready to mate, and hasn't chosen you, is a federal crime. It's considered rape. The penalties for that are harsh, straight up to the death penalty. Like Doug said earlier, females are cherished; as is their purity. The law is merciless when it comes to that." They both again stared at him intently, an unnerving thing. They always looked hungry when they did it.

He hadn't thought of John's revelation. He didn't see it as a big problem, though. The thought of making love to a furry, dog-like teenager didn't appeal to him.

"If it's any consolation, I doubt you'll have any trouble." John added. "That is, once we're finished and you can get out of here."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain. Uhm, what I'm trying to say is that although you look like an evil creature of legend, you are attractive in your own way. Your lack of fur tends to make your exceptional build more obvious. Your face could be considered attractive, in a sinister sort of way."

"Hold it right there, Tonto! Don't just assume that I'm going to jump right into your way of life just because you think it's right. I don't think I can. To me, it's just not right. Can't you see that?"

"Look," he continued with a sigh, "Can we call this off for today? I've got to have some time to digest this properly before you hit me with something else, like that you all sprout leaves in Spring or something."

Doug snorted. "Sure, Mike, I understand." he said, standing and grabbing his smock. "I'll have Mark bring you some dinner before he leaves for the day. This will give us time to get to work on those samples, too."

John picked up his smock and followed Doug out.

"Oh, one more thing. I need a favor, if you can do it for me."

"What'cha need?" John asked, leaning back in the door.

"A few things, actually. I'd like a bible. It doesn't matter whether it's a King James or Living Bible. At least two werewo...wereman novels would be nice, a dictionary, biology text, and an illustrated book of animals."

"Sure, I'll have them for you tomorrow." Doug said from the hallway. "Good night."

"Good night." Mike replied, watching them go. He trudged over to the cot and flopped onto his back. Staring at the featureless ceiling, he tried to accept what he had just learned.

What in the world have I been dropped into? Is this some kind of test of my faith? All of that pain in the forest sure didn't feel like the divine, loving hand of God.

He folded his hands on his chest and prayed for a long, long time. He finished by asking for guidance and strength. Actually, he begged. He imagined himself prostrate before the light of God. He begged until tears rolled down his cheeks and wet his hair.

Those few tears broke the dam that had been built up by the events of the last few days. He turned away from the camera and cried like he hadn't since his parents had been killed. He cried with the certainty that Deb was forever lost to him. Eventually, he fell asleep.

Mark woke him for supper, staying in the room and talking with him while he ate. After dinner, he went to bed early.

#### CHAPTER IV

"I sure didn't expect that." John said as they walked down the hall. "Wait until Cooper sees the tapes."

"Neither did I. I had no idea. I was shocked enough to find out that he was a thinking man. I have no real way of knowing, but I think this is going to make things difficult for him in the future. It's a change I know I wouldn't want to have to make."

"True, but sooner or later he's going to have to; unless he wants to be castrated or spend the rest of his life as a monk. I strongly doubt he'd do either. There's always professional counseling. If he was one of us, he'd definitely be in it."

"Probably, but he's not one of us. We can't treat him like a pervert in need of treatment. The situation is entirely different. We'll just have to wait and see, I guess. We won't really know until he's been out and around for a while. I'll try to come up with something tonight. Meanwhile, why don't you get started on those specimens? I've got to go and make a report for Cooper."

"Sure, boss. I'll see you tomorrow. I may even stay a little late if I get terribly interested."

"Don't stay too late. You know they won't pay you for it without the Big Guy's permission, and you know how he is about paying overtime."

"No problem. I don't have anything to do tonight."

"You're not seeing What's-His-Face anymore?"

"Keith? We broke up last month. He was balling his roommate back at the campus. I should have known better, I guess."

“Sorry to hear it. You talked about him a lot. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good night.”

He woke a little after five, the night filled with fitful, restless sleep. He stood and stretched, yawning. Figuring that he had a couple of hours before Doug and John came in, he decided to do a little catch-up on his exercise.

He stretched out for a few minutes and began jogging in place, timing himself with the chronometer on his watch. He had been jogging for close to half an hour when he heard a knock on the door.

“Come in!” he yelled, smiling at himself.

“Howdy.” John said in greeting as he came in, followed by a guard. The guard’s body armor was gone and he now carried a holstered pistol. Both of them sniffed repeatedly.

“Hi. You’re here early.” Mike huffed.

“I wasn’t sleeping so good, so I came in early. I see you’re back to jogging.”

“Maybe I’ll find another hole to fall into. Besides, captivity is no excuse to get fat.” He paused long enough for his breathing to steady then dropped to the floor and started doing push-ups. John watched him for a few seconds before leaning out the door. He straightened, holding a cardboard box.

“I went and got you some clothes last night, courtesy of the U.S. Government. You have no idea how hard it is to find decent winter clothes in April. Anyway, I got you four pairs of jeans, four sweaters, some shirts, regular pants, underwear, and socks - you seem to wear them all the time. I already washed it all, so you can start wearing them now.”

“Thanks, that was good of you.” Mike said gratefully as he got up. He took the box and started rooting through it. “You even have decent taste.”

“Thanks. I hope it all fits. I guessed on most of it.”

“Well, let’s see. Thirty-one inch waist on the jeans and...you call this underwear?” Mike asked, holding up what appeared to be a blue patch of gauze with an elastic string attached.

“It’s a pocket, dummy.” John said, unfolding a jock strap-like pouch.

“Let me guess; anything more would bother your fur.”

“You got it. I take it your usual underwear is more...what, substantial?”

“Considerably. Things like this are illegal in some places.”

“Illegal? It’s underwear!”

“Well, they make bathing suits like this, too. Most beaches won’t allow them.”

“Oh, that’s odd.”

“Okay,” Mike said, continuing to root through the box, “Same waist on the shorts. You guessed right. What’s your waist, about thirty?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“How did you ever get such a skinny waist with shoulders like that?”

“Hard work.”

“I guess so. Large on the shirts and sweaters, that works too. Thanks again. I’d hate to stand around naked while this stuff I’m wearing was being washed.” He sat down on the cot, stretching half-heartedly.

“What do you want for breakfast? I’m sure they have pancakes or waffles if you don’t want eggs.”

“Actually, I’m not very hungry. I suppose some coffee would be nice, though. A pot would be better. When is Doug supposed to get in?”

“About seven-thirty. That gives us about an hour or so. Oh, in case you’re interested, I finished the analysis on your urine and stool last night.”

“And?”

“They seemed normal enough. You haven’t been eating your vegetables.”

“You haven’t been feeding me any. All they had last night was mashed potatoes.”

“Maybe we’ll do better today.”

Mike leaned back against the wall. “So, John, what do you do when you’re not studying monsters from hell?”

“Well,” John answered, chuckling gruffly, “I read a lot. I play tennis, basketball, and racquetball. I like to bike, too. Other than that, just the usual stuff.”

“What kind of music do you like?”

“Rock, mostly, but I’m a big fan of R & B and dance pop, too.”

“Who’s your favorite NBA team?”

“Who else?” John asked with an expectant smile.

“It’s show time!” Mike yelled, dunking into the air in front of him. He pantomimed dribbling a basketball around the cell, faking another dunk.

John laughed at the sight. “For a monster, you’re not such a bad guy. Any Bulls fan is OK in my book.” He leaned against the wall beside the sink. “You know, I’m starting to feel guilty.” he said, fixing Mike with a serious gaze.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, up until now, I’ve spent all of my time being amazed by you. You’re a normal, every-day guy who’s had his world turned inside-out; and all I’ve been able to see is how interesting you are to study. I haven’t been thinking of you as a person. I know that I’m...part of your problem, but I want you to know that it bothers me to keep you caged up like this. It’s just not, well, wolfane.”

“Wolfane? As in ‘humane?’”

“Hmmm. Yeah, I guess that’s what you’d call it.”

“You’re right, of course. Well, to some extent, anyway. I’m a fairly open-minded person. I can understand your position.” He gave John a stern look as he continued. “I don’t expect it to last forever. When you have learned what you have to learn, I want out of here. I have to make some kind of life for myself. I haven’t really thought that far ahead, but it’s something I’m going to have to face. God, I can’t imagine what it’s going to be like when I get out of here. No, scratch that. I can imagine. It’s obvious what the public reaction is going to be. AAAAHH! A monster! Quick, Harold, lock up the children!”

“Oh, I don’t know,” John said with a reassuring smile, such that he was capable of, “It didn’t take me too long to get used to you. How else could I have given you a physical? I’m sure Doug feels the same way. Oh, and the guards, too.”

“As for the hetero part, I don’t know. I’m sure that Doug is going to want to discuss that today. I have a feeling that your contact with the general public is going to be somewhat limited until your, uh, good intentions can be assured.”

Mike grimaced. “Look, John, I can tell you one thing right now. I’ll spend the rest of my life jerking off before I would even remotely consider raping somebody. As for being homosexual, I’m going to need more than time on that one. It’s just not consistent with my beliefs.” He sighed heavily. A brief picture of him kissing a werewolf flashed across his mind and he mentally shoved it aside. He thought John was an okay guy, but not that okay. And a werewolf?

“Beliefs? Do you mean religion?”

“I’ve been a committed Christian for about ten years.”

“Hey, that’s great.” John said, struck by the thought of a wereman being a Christian. “So am I. I’ve only been in the books for about three years, though.”

“All that counts is that you are now and that, hopefully, you intend to stay that way.”

“I guess that’s why you asked for a bible last night, Huh?”

“Mainly, but there are a few verses I want to look into.”

“Which ones?”

“Well, where I come from, the bible specifically states that homosexuality is wrong. I want to see if yours is any

different.”

”Hold on. Why don’t we put that on hold until Doug gets here. He’ll probably have the bible and we can go over this then. I don’t want to get too far into this with him not here. He’d be pissed if we left him out. I will tell you one thing, though. I think that you’ll find the exact opposite of what you’re looking for. Now that I think about it, you might not be too happy.”

”That’s what I want to find out.” Mike said. Jesus Christ, a faggot werewolf? I don’t want to think about it. Time to change the subject.

”How about a shower? Me, I mean.”

”Two days in a row?” John asked.

Mike rolled his eyes. ”Here we go again...”

”OK OK, the wereman takes a shower every day.” added quickly, chuckling. ”And before you ask, every other day.” He turned to Eklund. ”You want to call your buddy over?”

”Yeah, hold on.” Eklund said, walking to the door and calling Ford over.

Mike grabbed his stuff and they headed down to the latrine. John waited out by the lockers while he washed. The guards had to watch him and he ignored them as best he could. When he turned to dry off, he wasn’t surprised to catch them staring at his ass. It bothered him more this time, now that he knew it wasn’t just scientific curiosity.

He put the underwear on after drying off, looking down at himself and smiling. ”I feel like I should be posing in some cheap magazine.” he said to John as he took his towel to the sink.

”You look like you should be posing in some magazine, although you probably wouldn’t like the cheap ones.”

In spite of their vulgar look, they were actually pretty comfortable. He brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and sat a few feet down from John; who shuffled closer. He pulled on a pair of his new jeans, zipping the legs down. He glanced at John, who was watching his stomach muscles. ”You know, I really don’t understand what you all see in me.”

John blushed that strange blush again, chuckling shyly. ”I’m sorry. What do you mean?”

”I don’t understand how something so different could be considered attractive. You have fur, I don’t. My face is different from yours; it must look flat to you. My teeth are blunt. From what Doug said yesterday, I more or less resemble a skinny primate.”

”Yeah, but remember what I said yesterday. It’s most of those qualities that make you attractive. As you can quite imagine, everyone likes a good body. I’m sure that you’re aware of what hound dogs men are. The first thing we see is a good body, and you have a very good body. Your lack of fur only makes that all the more obvious. As for your face, it is demonic in a way. But you’re not ugly, just different. I guess you could say that you have one of those ‘So tough I dare you to like it’ kind of faces. You even look cute sometimes. And your eyes! I’ve never seen blue eyes before, let alone ones so bright as yours.”

It was Mike’s turn to blush. Everyone had always liked his eyes, and it embarrassed him, even if it did get him dates. He pulled on his sweater.

”Not to mention the incredible way you blush.” John remarked with a laugh.

That only made him blush harder. He pulled on his socks, following with the sneakers. He tried to control the feat flowing into his face. He had always hated how easy it was for him to blush.

Time again to change the subject, he thought. ”So, how about that coffee?” he asked as he finished tying his sneakers.

”Let’s go.”

They sat in his cell, drinking black coffee and talking about nothing in particular. John brought in an ashtray and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. ”Mind if I have a smoke? I’ve quit, but coffee always makes me light a couple.”

“Not if you let me bum one or two. I usually have a couple with my coffee, too.”

John handed him one and held out the lighter. Mike lit it and took a long drag. After John lit his, they both looked at each other and laughed.

“I won’t say it if you won’t.”

“I wouldn’t think of mentioning how funny it looks to see a wereman smoke. Oops! I blew it.”

Mike studied John’s face, not having thought to really look closely before. The fur was dark brown and patterned with black on his snout and forehead. His eyes were green and human-shaped, the only difference being the larger irises. The fur thickened into bushy eyebrows above his eyes.

His snout was medium-length and -width with a few thick, short, white whiskers at the front. His lips were black and thin with a slight, barely noticeable bulge on each side where they covered his fangs. His nose, set atop the end of his snout and blending in smoothly, was black with subtly flared nostrils.

The fur on his forehead was short, lengthening in the back and under his ears. It was neatly combed, following the shape of his head and blending neatly into his neck and shoulders. Under his chin it was slightly thinner and lengthened gradually to match his neck.

His ears, at the moment facing eagerly forward, looked like a wolf’s and he actually looked kind of cute, in a canine sort of way.

Mike mentally slapped himself back to reality when he realized that John was returning his stare. He looked down self-consciously and took another drag.

“How do I look?” John asked with a fang-filled smile, scratching the left side of his snout with a claw.

Mike smiled. “Like a werewolf who decided to change his ways and become a nice guy. I guess it was the opposing thumbs that did it.”

“Nice guy?” John gasped. “Oh no, anything but that! Would it help if I growled more often?”

“Nope. I’m afraid you’re stuck with it.”

John dropped his face into his hands. “My life is ruined.”

“Think of me. You’ll feel better.”

They were talking about basketball when Doug showed up at about seven-thirty, carrying a stack of books. “Good morning John, Mike. How long have you two been here?”

“About an hour.” John said. “I wasn’t sleeping too well so I came in early. I picked him up some clothes last night with a company card. I’ll turn it in later.”

“Oh, good. I hope I haven’t missed anything important.” Doug asked, setting the books down on the table.

“No, not really. We’ve just been shooting the bull. We didn’t want to get into anything serious before you got here. Mostly we’ve been talking about basketball. We made a bet.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Mike says that the Bulls will win the title without losing more than four games. I say it’ll be closer.”

“What’s the bet?”

“Fifty bucks.”

“Steep.” Doug said, spreading the books out and turning to Mike. “I’ve got a King James Bible, a dictionary, an anatomy text, a wild kingdom book, and three wereman novels. I hope that will do.”

“Yeah, thanks. I really appreciate it.” He picked up the bible, which was still in its plastic wrapping. He tore it off and thumbed through the pages. “So, what’s on today’s agenda?”

“For right now, it’s more talk. There’s still a lot of things we need to go through.” Doug answered. “Oh, I almost forgot.”

He left the room and returned with a plastic garbage bag. He opened it and lifted out the contents, dropping them

onto the table. It was Mike's t-shirt. "Does this look familiar?"

"It's my t-shirt." Mike said, picking it up. "My favorite t-shirt. I took it off when I first woke up."

"They found it on that trail you were picked up on, along with a lot of really strong ionization traces."

"It's a shame he canceled his own comic strip." John said, pointing at the penguin on the front of the shirt.

"Yeah, I know." Mike said. "Can I keep it?"

"Not for the time being." Doug said, pointing to the tag hanging from it. "Right now it's evidence."

"Evidence?"

"To prove that you really exist and to keep all the facts straight. You'll have it back soon." He handed out the bag.

Mike dropped it in and Doug put it on the floor beside his chair.

"What should we talk about first?" John asked.

"Let me say this, to start things off. You've only been here a few days, but it looks like you're not going to be cooped up here much longer. To be honest, you aren't what we expected to be studying when we first saw you handing over Paul's shoulder. None of this would be happening if you weren't so, well, normal."

"...Hanging over Paul's shoulder?"

"Someone had to carry you in here." John said with a smile.

"Who's Paul?"

"He's one of the guys that went hunting after you. They were expecting to find an escaped ape. He's been watching you at night."

"Oh."

"There's very little left for us to learn here. We can do the rest just as easily in a house as we can in a cell."

"Then let's get started."

"All right, first thing's first. Since Cooper has seen the videotapes and is pushing to get you out of here, there is one big issue that we have to work on right away."

"Sex." Mike guessed.

"Very good. Yes, that's it."

"We touched on that a little earlier." John added. "I said that we'd better wait for you and the bible."

"Wise choice. Why the bible?"

"John mentioned that how soon I get out of here depends on my attitude about your sexual orientation. I mentioned that homosexuality is against my beliefs. John asked what I meant, and I told him that I've been a Christian for about ten years. One of the reasons I asked for a bible was to see what yours had to say about sexual conduct. Mine says that homosexuality is wrong."

Doug wrote that down.

"That's when John pulled the plug and said that we should wait for you."

"Let's have a look, then." Doug said, leaning forward. "Do you have any specific verses in mind?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

They huddled together around the bible, Mike slightly uncomfortable with how close they sat; one on either side. Mike and John each picked out relevant verses that came to mind.

"What cologne is that?" Mike asked John after a few moments.

"None, just me. I don't stink, do I?" he asked fearfully.

"No." Mike assured him, not admitting that he thought John smelled good. They returned their attention to the bible.

Mike was shocked at what they found there. For all intents and purposes, it was a bible like any other. All the right books were there, even the ones named for women. The other differences were far more dramatic.

The mother of Jesus was indeed named Mary. She had died giving birth to him. Joseph had a husband named

Joshua.

Jesus was described as being blonde - that meant silver, Mike found out - from head to toe. He was also said to have been celibate, to Mike's relief.

The story of Sodom and Gomorra was drastically different. Sodom had not been destroyed. It was said to be a righteous city and served as a comparison to Gomorra. Gomorra had been destroyed because it was plagued with rampant heterosexual sin. It was Lot's husband who looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Much turned out to be the same as far as sexual morality was concerned. Promiscuity and premarital sex were frowned upon just as strongly. Adultery was equally forbidden, and monogamy was emphasized. All in all, the standards were the same.

When they had tracked down everything Mike and John could come up with, they all sat back with a collective sigh.

"I haven't delved into a bible like that in years." Doug said.

Mike raised his eyebrows, accustomed to his Christian circle of friends and acquaintances, and John caught it. "He's not saved. I've been working on him."

Mike smiled and sighed again, starting in on the only fingernail he hadn't completely eaten off. John tapped a fang and Doug scratched lightly on his snout, both echoing their earlier idiosyncrasies. Their study had taken almost an hour.

"Tell me what you're feeling." Doug asked carefully, fully aware that Mike had just seen his religious beliefs challenged.

Mike hesitated, running his hands over his face. Everything had been just as he remembered unless it dealt with sex or family. "I'm not sure." he admitted. "I guess it all boils down to one point. Which bible do I follow; the one I came from, or the one I'm going to? Which one is right for me? I'm kind of stuck between worlds. Do I follow the Jesus of my home, or do I follow your Jesus? Do I have a choice? Can I accept it if I don't have one? According to your bible, Jesus want me to fall in love with and marry a man. I just don't have a simple answer for you. I'm sorry."

"Mike, let me ask you this." Doug began. "Do you consider yourself to be an open-minded person?"

"Yeah."

"Then do this for us; and please, feel free to take your time." He leaned forward, resting on his elbows and adjusting his glasses. "Put yourself in our place for a few minutes. Don't think of a wolf. Think of one of your own kind, someone you think you would be attracted to if you were norm...homosexual. Now wait!" he added quickly when he saw Mike's eyes widen. "You said you had an open mind. Don't make a liar out of yourself."

"You told me the same thing not three hours ago." John added with a grin.

Mike sighed. "Go ahead."

"Okay." Doug continued. "Now, imagine this person. Imagine yourself married to him. Don't think of sex. Just think of being with him, being in love with him. Think of feeling the same way with this man as you would with a, uh, woman. Imagine just sitting with him, say, watching TV. You're cuddled together, talking about how your day went."

"Well, dear, it started off with me being shamelessly stared at while I showered. Then I was interrogated by monsters, after which..."

"Be serious."

Mike sighed and sat back, thinking about what Doug had said even though it made him ill to consider it. He couldn't just do nothing, because both of them were watching him closely; and he had said that he had an open mind.

So he went along with it. He didn't imagine someone he knew, though. He imagined John. Might as well, he thought. He knew John, but not very well. He figured that his appearance, along with not really knowing him well, would help distance himself from what Doug wanted him to think. He also figured that if he was going to allow this fantasy, however celibate, he may as well go all the way.

He had a dog while he was growing up, so imagining himself cuddling up to a furry body was far from repulsive. As a matter of fact, he had always liked curling up with the big German Shepherd. Why not just think of John as a dog who could talk? He talked to his dog, anyway. The only difference here is that this time the dog would talk back.

He allowed his mind to roam, setting the scene of John and himself sitting on a couch watching the news.

The whole episode was bringing back memories of his dog, and he remembered how he would frequently give him a kiss on the top of his head. Reggie had been his best friend, after all, even if he was a dog.

One thought led to another, his mind drifted, and he found himself kissing John.

He had already observed that these wolves, as they called themselves, had lips that were thin but perfectly capable of producing speech. That meant that they were also perfectly capable of kissing. Their tongues were as thick as a man's but almost as long as a dog's. He shuddered inwardly and pushed the thought from his mind.

The worst part, to his dismay and shame, was that he had actually drifted away enough to enjoy the scenario. Something inside of him, on a level that he couldn't identify, was attracted to the feelings those thoughts had bred.

I must be remembering my dog, he thought, forcing himself back to the present. He looked from Doug to John, letting his gaze rest on Doug's. He could think of nothing better to do, so he shrugged.

"Well?"

"Well," he began, "I guess I should start by telling you that I didn't imagine another human. I imagined one of your kind. I don't know why, but somehow that made is easier. Uh," he faltered, not sure how to express what he had felt, "I'm not really sure how I feel. And if I was, I probably wouldn't be able to put it into words. Something, I don't know, in the back of my mind, felt content. Even a little happy, I guess." He blushed slightly. "It was like, oh hell, something like an animal magnetism. And that was most likely just an extension of the pleasure of cuddling with my dog when I was a boy." He sighed in sudden exasperation. "God, I can't believe I'm saying this!"

"Leave the psychoanalysis to me." Doug said, putting his pen down. "Mike, if it's something deep inside of you, then it's a part of you, right? No matter how deeply buried, it seems to be there. Your society suppressed it, our society built on it. Just because your people built upon one side the coin doesn't mean that the flipside doesn't exist."

"Tell us exactly what you imagined." John suggested.

"Basically, just of me and a wolf sitting on the couch, watching the news. We were sitting close, the wolf resting his head in the crook of my shoulder. We were talking quietly, but I didn't imagine any specific words. Then we just..." He refused to admit the rest.

"...What?" Doug asked.

"Nothing." Mike answered evasively. "That was it."

"You were about to say something. Level with me. I saw you shake your head back there."

"All right, damn it! I imagined a kiss." His eyes darted to John for a split-second before he continued. "I didn't try to imagine that, I just went a little spacey and it popped up. Maybe I was just caught up in the feelings from hugging my dog. Just don't read anything more than that into it, okay? It doesn't mean anything below the surface."

John had caught the glance, his eyes blinked and his mouth popped open slightly. Shit, he knows I thought of him; Mike swore to himself. It's probably written all over my damned face!

He looked at Doug, who was watching him and thinking deeply. He couldn't bring himself to look back at John.

"Why, do you think, did you kiss him?" Doug asked carefully.

“Look, I said I didn’t do it intentionally, all right? I don’t know why! I was reminded of my dog, and I gave him a little kiss now and then!”

”Mike, will you stop being angry and think?” Doug admonished. “Stop hating the fact that you did and ask yourself why you did. We will never get anywhere if you don’t stop being afraid of your own feelings. Help us out. Help yourself.”

Mike glared at him, thinking about what he had just said. His anger, fueled by his embarrassment, began to fade. He took a deep breath, held it for a few seconds, and released it with a whoosh. “I guess it was just something I would have done under the circumstances.” he admitted cautiously. “It’s time like that when people are most likely to express affection - just, you know, sitting together.”

Doug and John exchanged a quick glance, smiling. Mike caught it.

“What are you smiling about?” he asked, anger creeping back into his voice. “Wait a minute! You set me up, didn’t you? You wanted to see how far I would go!”

“Yes.” Doug confessed. “I thought of this last night. If it’s any consolation, I think that, for now, you passed. You see, I had to know how you would react to a situation like that. You kissing him was more than I was hoping for.”

Mike glowered at him.

“That’s one meeeaaaan look.” John said. “Why are you so mad? You imagined it. This will probably go a long way toward getting you out of here. Don’t make us doubt you.”

“I don’t like having my feelings manipulated.”

“That’s why you’re mad?” Doug asked.

“Yes, damn it! The feelings I can deal with. I just think it’s a little unfair to trick me into feeling them.”

“I can’t help it.” Doug remarked with a smile. “I have a degree in psychology.”

Mike hurrumphed.

More seriously, Doug continued. “We had to know what you are capable of feeling. We also had to do it in a way that assured your honesty. It’s not that we don’t trust you. You’ve shown yourself to be worthy of trust. I just wanted to make sure that you were being honest with yourself. I’m not trying to convert you to our way of life, I promise. That’s something you’ll have to work out on your own. I will say, however, that this realization is a good first step. The rest you’ll have to deal with at your own pace, with no more tricks from me. Anyway, I’m satisfied.” He sat back and wrote on his note pad.

”I guess there’s worse ways to pry information from me.” Mike said, calming down. “When it comes right down to it, I can’t blame you for my own imagination; even though you maneuvered me into it.”

“That’s better.” Doug said, still writing.

“Next subject?” John asked.

Doug finished writing and looked up. “The next subject is: What does Mike want to do when he gets out of here?”

“Uh-oh, I hadn’t had the chance to give that any thought. I’m a computer programmer by trade, but I hardly think that anyone would hire me. Truth is, I could probably program circles around most people my age. The only other thing I’m really any good at is music.”

John leaned forward intently. “In what way?”

“I play guitar and a little piano. I also write. I like almost all kinds of music, but most of what I write is rock and roll. I’ve got a couple of songs doing time on someone’s first album. It just came out a couple of months ago.”

“Who’s?”

“Ever hear of a band called Antares?”

“I just bought it a week ago! I can’t believe it! Which songs did you write?”

“Shallow Talk and Why Won’t I leave? I’ve written better since.”

“No way! Shallow Talk is my favorite song on there! I’ll be right back!” He jumped up from the table and

practically ran from the cell.

He jogged down to the phone at the end of the hall, Mark calling after him. If what Mike had said was true, his semi-serious theory of a parallel Earth would be all but proven.

He grabbed the phone and dialed the number of his landlord, who lived in the apartment below his. Mark came up, asking what his hurry was. John waived him off.

The phone rang twice and was answered. "Hello."

It was his landlord's husband. "Hi, Mr. Spierchek, this is John from upstairs. This is important. Is your husband around?"

"He's fixing someone's kitchen sink at the moment. Do you want me to get him?"

"Do you have the room keys handy?"

"Yes, why?"

"I need you to do me a favor, please. Can you go up to my apartment and look at something for me?"

"I guess so. Do you want me to call back from up there?"

"No, I can't give you the number here. I'll call you back at mine."

"Okay, give me a minute to get up there."

"Thanks." John said, hanging up.

"What's the deal?" Mark asked.

"Did you hear what he said in there?"

"Yeah, I was watching on the monitor. I don't have the album."

"I do. I want to see if Mike is listed on it." John said, tapping his foot impatiently. He picked the phone up and called his apartment. His phone was answered on the third ring.

"Hello...John?"

"Yeah, it's me. Okay, in my CD rack, the first one on the left, you'll find a CD by a band called Antares. Please get it for me."

"This is important?"

"I know it sounds trivial, but there's something important here at work that I need to check. That CD is the answer. Please trust me."

"All right. Hold on."

John tapped his fangs with a claw, hoping Mike's name would be on the CD.

"Okay, got it."

"Good. Now look for two songs. One is called Shallow Talk and the other is Why Won't I Leave?"

"Yeah, they're on here."

"Who wrote them?"

"Says M. Riggs on both."

"I knew it! Okay, is M. Riggs or Michael Riggs mentioned anywhere else on it?"

"Hold on a minute, the 'thanks' column is a mile long."

"I'll wait."

John waited, his mind racing. He couldn't believe that it matched up. He'd transfer the information upstairs and have a check done on the M. Riggs mentioned on those songs. He wondered what would come up.

"There's one thing that might be what you want, but I'm not sure."

"What is it?"

"It's in the 'thanks' column. It says 'thanks for bailing us out, Mike.'"

"That's him! It's got to be!" John exclaimed before he could stop himself. "Thanks a lot, Mr. Spierchek. You've been a big help."

"Sure."

"Bye." he said, slamming the phone down. He walked quickly back to the cell, Mark stopping off at the desk to reload a tape. Mike and Doug were waiting for him.

“Mike,” he said as he sat down, “Did they mention you anywhere else on the album beside the credit for writing those songs?”

“Yeah, they thanked me in the usual ‘thanks’ column. It says some- thing about bailing them out because they didn’t have enough songs written when they hit the studio. I never met them, though.”

“I don’t believe it!” John exclaimed, turning to Doug. “I had my landlord’s husband go up to my apartment and look at the CD. Those two songs are credited to him and the remark in the ‘thanks’ column was just what he said it was. We’ve got to send this upstairs and see what they can find on this guy.”

“Son of a gun.” Doug said. “This is outstanding. When we checked with the company you said you worked for, they had someone completely different at your position. He’s forty-six and has a son. The name didn’t even match. Now it does. I wonder what they’ll turn up?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t wait to find out.” John added.

“John, why don’t you call upstairs and have them get on this right away. No, better yet, I’ll call Cooper and have him make sure it gets done.” He got up and headed for the door. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Shallow Talk is a great song. Were you writing from experience?”

“Yeah. I got dumped big time by some tramp just before I met my fiancé’. The song pretty much says it all about her. John warned me.”

“I know how you feel. Who’s John?”

“A friend of mine. You know, they kinda messed with it.” Mike continued. “My version is more textured. It’s a shame they don’t plan to release it as a single. I could have made a pretty penny from that. I assume that on your CD it’s about a guy.”

“Yeah.” John said, leaning back and looking at Mike with admiration. “And to think, I know the guy who wrote my favorite song. I just want to bang my head against something whenever I hear it.”

“It is one of my heavier songs, and not as refined.”

“I hope they can find out about it soon.”

“It should be interesting.”

Doug returned, a smile on his face. “Cooper says that we should know by late today or tomorrow. Are your songs successful?”

“They’re on the album, but they won’t be singles. All of this still doesn’t change the fact that I’m not going to have a job. I can’t go on living off of the FBI forever, and I’m not going to star in any horror movies, if you know what I mean.”

“That would probably be the worse thing you could do.” Doug agreed. “I imagine you could make money doing commercials, posters, and the like.”

“Commercials and posters?”

“I already told you that you’re kind of sexy.” John remarked.

“You did?” Doug asked him.

“He asked.”

“No sense in lying about it, I guess.”

“Not you, too?” Mike asked, exasperated.

“I might not be young and virile like John here, but I’m not dead.”

Mike looked unconvinced.

“You may not be generally aware of it,” Doug continued, “But you have a...presence. Being near you is like standing near a, I don’t know, stallion.” Mike briefly interrupted him with a snort. “I mean it. You practically radiate strength and maleness. It’s hard to explain, and a little intimidating sometimes. Being on the tall side adds to the effect. If you weren’t such a normal, nice young man I’d be afraid to be near you. Do you remember the day you woke up?”

“Yeah,” Mike said, chuckling at the utter silliness of it all, “I’m going to get you back for that.” Them afraid of me? I don’t have claws and fangs to rake and tear with, Mike thought silently. God, this is weird.

“For what?”

“The steak.”

“Oh, that.”

”Would you be surprised to find out that, before I got to know you, you scared the hell out of me, too? Remember, I was hunted down in the woods like an animal, shot, and dumped in a cold cell. I thought you were going to eat me.”

“Eat you!” Doug gasped, remembering the tapes he had watched. “Why would you be afraid of us?”

“Look at my hands.” Mike said, holding them up. “What would these...claws do to you? Not much. You poked around inside my mouth. What good would my teeth be against your fangs? Think about the animal kingdom and then look at me. We humans all grew up with an inborn fear of anything with fangs, fur, and claws. We spent God knows how long fighting off wild animals with clubs and rocks. Those kinds of fears don’t evolve themselves away overnight. Don’t you have lions, tigers, bears, and such in here?” he asked, tapping the animal book. “You look more like them than I do. All of those werewolf books and movies didn’t help, either.”

“I see your point.” John said.

“Also, I didn’t know that that guy in Deb’s house was a normal person. I was too scared in those woods to make much sense out of what was happening. Good Lord, guys, I was running for my life! I’ve never been so scared.”

“We’re so different, yet so alike. Amazing.” Doug mused.

“So, what am I going to be advertising? Silverware?”

They both laughed. “Wouldn’t that be ironic?” John asked, glancing at his watch. “I thought so. It’s lunch time. Are you guys as hungry as I am?”

“Probably more.” Mike said.

“What’s everyone hungry for?”

“Alaskan king crab legs and lobster tail with melted butter.” Mike suggested.

“I wish.” John sighed.

“Okay, I’ll settle for anything except liver, Brussels sprouts, or SOS. I’d like two-percent milk if they have it.”

“Got it.” John said, turning to Doug. “Let’s go before he gets hungry enough to munch on an arm or two.”

“Woof woof.”

Mike leaned back as they left, trying to picture himself doing a commercial. What would he be pushing, the gorilla exhibit at the local zoo? Bananas? Eagle Talons?

“Hey, that wouldn’t be too bad.”

He talked Mark into turning the camera off so he could preserve his dignity while sitting on the toilet. When he was done, he picked up the animal kingdom book and turned to the table of contents. He looked up the chapter on gorillas and found it quickly.

“Well, I’ll be damned.”

The first page showed two apes, one male and one female, standing side-by-side. The male was holding on to a branch above his head with one long arm. Both had very sparse fur, like a hairy human.. They almost lacked pubic hair, making the picture seem vulgar. The male was a light shade of tan, the female a little lighter. A darker one could be seen in the background, out of focus.

Everything else seemed normal for an ape. The proportions and features were as they should be. Basically, they looked as if they had mange. He peered closely and saw no stubble, so he probably wasn’t being fooled by impostors.

Why should they be different? Apes didn’t have anything to do with the evolution of werewolves. This makes absolutely no sense.

“God, this is weird.”

He flipped back to the table of contents, looking for wolves. They weren't there. He remembered what Doug had said and looked up "lupe." Sure enough, it showed a picture of a typical wolf, standing within a small clump of trees.

"Gray Lupe." the caption read.

He closed the book, setting it aside. He grabbed the anatomy text, flipping slowly through from the first page. He studied the various diagrams with interest. From what he was seeing, they were just like him under the skin. The skull and spinal column were the only noticeable differences.

Morbid curiosity made him pause at the reproductive section. It showed the usual cutaways. He was about to continue on when something in the male diagram caught his eye.

His college biology class came back to him as he looked at it. Their seminal vesicles and Cowper's glands, along with their prostate gland, were huge. It was a wonder they fit. The scrotum looked a lot larger than it should be.

He recalled his physical and how they had stared at his semen sample. They had mentioned that there wasn't much but it looked strong. The diagram would explain that. With that much fluid to go with the usual dose of sperm cells, their semen was bound to be thinner and more copious.

He realized how gross his thoughts were becoming and closed the book, setting it aside and picking up one of the novels.

It was titled Moon Kiss. The cover showed a werewolf, his snout shrunken and fangs gone, writhing in apparent agony. A full moon was shining over his left shoulder. He opened the cover to where a short excerpt usually appeared.

He was cornered. He pushed himself tightly against the wall at his back.

The thing was walking slowly toward him, a cruel smile spread across its face. A huge erection preceded its steps.

It reached him, pressing its smooth, furless body against his. Hot, fetid breath brushed his face.

Moving with blinding speed, it forced him down onto his hands and knees. Holding him down with its weight, it moved behind him.

He screamed as he felt his pants being ripped away. He struggled, calling for help. It countered his every move, keeping its weight on his back and laughing evilly.

It entered him without warning, thrusting roughly. He gasped and tried to crawl away, breaking claws against the concrete floor. Then the fists came. They smashed into his ribs, cutting off his screams. He heard his bones breaking.

The thrusting, pounding, and maniacal laughter continued long after he had blacked out...

"Yuck! That's disgusting!" Mike said, throwing the book back onto the pile.

"What's disgusting?" John asked, walking in with a tray. He set it down in front of Mike. On it was a plate filled with two pork chops, mashed potatoes, and green beans.

"Thanks." he said, glancing back at the book. "I was just looking at one of these novels. Gross. Is this what people are going to think I am?"

“Hold on.” John replied, going back out for his own tray. He came back in and sat across from Mike.

“Doug said he would have to skip. Cooper wanted to talk to him over lunch. As for your question, I’m afraid so. Well, at least at first. I think people will come around once they get to know you. To be honest, you’re pretty easy to get along with.”

“I hope so.” Mike said, cutting one of his pork chops. “Did they have two-percent?”

“Sure did.”

“What are we doing for the rest of the day?”

“Doug and I are going to finish with your samples and get your medical data in order. We have to write a plain-English medical report for the politicians. That will take us all day, probably. I guess you’ll be on your own. It’ll give you a chance to get some reading done, anyway.”

“I’ve glanced through some of it already. I might as well tell you about that semen sample you were so interested in. I think that you’ll find it a bit short on various fluids. According to this,” he continued, giving the text a tap, “You have larger internal glands than I do. You know, seminal vesicles, Cowper’s glands, and that sort of thing.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know how you find room for it all;” Mike said teasingly, “And since you thankfully never stuck a finger up my butt, you wouldn’t have known.”

John almost choked on a bite of pork. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

They spent the rest of lunch talking about basketball, concentrating on the Chicago Bulls.

“I’m just glad that they’re a better team than they used to be. Remember when Jordon scored something like sixty-three points against Boston and they still lost? How can you have a player score like that and still lose?”

“By not having Scotty kicking butt.”

“Yeah, Pip’s my man. The dude is bad.”

Doug and Steve got their lunch and sat in a discreet corner of the cafeteria.

“So, how’s the wereman business?”

“Booming. I can’t believe that it’s only been a few days. I’ve come to the conclusion, beyond any doubt, that he’s as normal a person as you or I. Well, except for his appearance.”

”What about his, you know, problem.”

Doug swallowed a bite of pork before continuing. “I can tell you one thing. He’s not going to become normal overnight. When you see the tape, you’ll see that it’s also a religious thing for him. That’s always hard to deal with. But, to be fair, I can’t just leave it at that. I conducted a little experiment this morning. I had him imagine himself living as you or I do. I told him to avoid thoughts of sex and intimacy and concentrate on an innocent little scene of married life. I even told him to imagine one of his own kind to make it easier for him.”

“I’ll say right up front that it was obvious he wasn’t faking. You could practically see the thoughts on his face. His expressions are actually pretty easy to read. Anyway, he said he imagined himself cuddling up on the couch with a man. They were watching TV and talking quietly. Exactly what I was looking for.”

“When John asked him to describe what he had imagined, Mike hesitated. When we got him to talk, two very, very important things came out.” He took a sip of tea and stabbed a piece of pork.

“Well? Don’t keep me in suspense.” Steve prompted around the beans in his mouth.

“First; he didn’t imagine another wereman, he imagined a wolf. And,” he added, gesturing with his fork, “If I read a couple of quick expressions correctly, it was John he was thinking of.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all. Even so, John might have just been convenient. Anyway,” he said, making an effort to keep his voice down, “The second thing he admitted to was that he had kissed him. That was what he had been so afraid to admit.”

Steve looked on intently, ignoring his food.

“He said, get this, that it was what he would have normally done under those circumstances.”

Steve’s eyes widened even more. He remembered that he had taken a bite of food and swallowed. “How do you know it was John? Did he say so?”

“No. But when he admitted to kissing the man, he unconsciously glanced at John. John caught it and, well...gawked a little. Mike blushed like no wolf could and looked extremely mad at himself.”

“Why so mad?”

“Because he says it’s unnatural for him, and we went through a whole bible session where he pointed out verses that are heterosexual where ours are homosexual.”

They sat for a few minutes, thinking to themselves and finishing their lunch.

”Do you plan to come down and meet him?”

“I’m too busy dealing with all of this on my end, on top of everything else I have going. What does all of this mean, exactly?”

“What it means is that even though he’s a heterosexual, he is capable of having feelings for a man and acting on them. Like I said, he’s not going to accept those feelings overnight, but I think they are there. They can be built upon.”

Steve considered for a few moments. “You want to release him, don’t you?”

“This was a major factor in keeping him here. We’ve broken the surface, at least. To tell you the truth, we don’t really have a reason for keeping him locked up here any longer. John and I will have the medical reports ready today. There’s nothing more to learn that we couldn’t learn in a house somewhere. Tomorrow morning, my report will include a recommendation to move him out. What you do with it is up to you. What do you think? I know you’ve been considering it.”

“You’re absolutely sure that we can safely take him out into society?”

“Well, maybe not into society. He is all alone - more than any normal person could be - but he’s smart, level-headed, and he’s taking all of this very well. This has all been more of a shock to him than to us. He’s the one who’s had his world taken away from him. It may help his frame of mind to be in a house or something instead of that bare cell.”

Steve sighed. “All right, we’ll move him out on Monday. That will give us time to stock a safehouse. You realize, of course, that we’re going to have to let the press in on this.” he finished, blanching.

“Oh, God, I hadn’t thought of that. How are you going to handle it?”

“Valium.”

Doug chuckled. “Are you going to let them know where we’ll be keeping him?”

“I don’t think we’re going to have a choice. They’ll find out within a day if they don’t just follow us there. I’ll have to assign guards for around-the-clock security.” He sighed again before continuing. “I guess we’ll have a press conference Monday morning to let the vultures get a good look at him and ask a few questions. After that, we’ll take him to the house.”

“Where will the house be?”

“We’ve got a safehouse in a nearby suburb. That should do. It’s on a big lot, so it will be easy to keep the curious away.”

“Who do you think we should have staying with him? Other than the guards, of course.”

"I have no idea."

"How about John?"

"John? Isn't he your assistant?"

"Yes, but Mark would be a good replacement. He's been with us the whole time, monitoring the equipment. I hired him along with John, so he can handle anything John can. Also, it appears that John and Mike are fast becoming good friends."

"Oh yeah?"

"Well, I already told you that it was John who popped into Mike's little domestic fantasy. They seem to have a lot in common, too. They're the same age, like the same music, and share a lot of the same interests."

"Also, that would put John in the perfect position to keep us apprised of Mike's progress. John's got a minor degree in psychology. Hell, if we're lucky, they may even end up as more than just friends."

"Are you serious?"

"You saw the photos. What would you do if you were twenty-five?"

Steve opened his mouth to reply, then thought better and closed it. Instead, he smiled. "I now have a lot of work to do."

Doug stood with him, letting the subject drop. "I have to get to work on those medical reports," he said, flashing Steve a big, mocking smile. "Have a nice day."

"Go away. This is all your fault."

John brushed passed the guard in the doorway and entered Mike's cell, having just taken their trays back. Mike was sitting Indian-style on his cot, propped against the wall at the cot's head and staring into space.

"Earth to Mike."

It took a second for him to look up and he smiled self-consciously. "Sorry."

John sat backwards on a chair and leaned his arms on the back. "What's on your mind?"

Mike sighed. "I'm just trying to get a grasp on what's happening. I keep expecting to wake up, you know? Who could imagine something like this? Was my life just too perfect the way it was? With the exception of my parents' dying, my whole life has been nothing but roses." He huffed quietly before continuing. "I thought it was because I deserved it. I thought it was my reward for leading the kind of life God wanted me to. 'Here's a guy who tries. Here's a guy who has helped bring no less than four more souls to me. Let's give him something in return.' Was I arrogant? Was I getting too comfortable? Was I losing that hunger for righteousness? If God wanted to kick-start my faith, there are a lot of ways he could have done it. Why this?"

"I can't answer for God, but let me try and help. Do you consider yourself a typical Christian?"

"Is there such a thing?"

"The reason I ask is because even good Christians want to blame God for things that go wrong."

"John, you said you are a Christian too, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then you feel that you live your life for God, that he guides your life. He doesn't make choices for you, but he guides you."

"Yeah."

"So, look at me! Really look at me! Is this guidance? The various scientists will call this whole thing a freak of nature. They'll assume, with reservations, that other universes exist close to ours. They'll assume that a rare scientifically explainable phenomenon sucked me from mine into yours. Where does God come into that?"

"Mike, if this is leading to where I think it is, please don't use this as a reason to start hating God; or giving up on him."

"Oh no," Mike said with an emphatic shake of his head, "I'm not losing my faith. I just want to know what I did to

deserve this. Of all the things that could have happened..."

John watched him as Mike shook his head again and fell silent. His three-point-eight average in psychology wasn't doing him much good at the moment. What about the Bible? What could it possibly have to say about this? It's not as if you could open it up and read "...and as a lesson, God sent so-and-so to the world of weremen. It was there that he discovered a new-found strength in God, and he did it like this..." Mike seemed like the kind of guy who would resent pity, but John was having trouble not feeling it. This whole thing went far beyond simply dealing with a heterosexual. Mike was completely lost, completely out of his element.

"Of all the people it could have happened to..." Mike began, falling silent again. A few seconds later he fastened those eyes on John with a look of sadness that made his heart melt. "I want my life back."

John took a deep breath. "Mike, you're assuming that this is all some sort of punishment, aren't you?"

"Does this look like a gift to you? Put yourself in my shoes."

"Are you the type of Christian that believes that God would do something like this as punishment? I'm not. You should know better than to think that God works that way in this New Testament day and age."

"I know." Mike said with a long sigh. "So is it Satan, then? Didn't God sit by while Satan covered Job with boils? That poor man was tormented to test his faith. I'm not saying that I compare with Job, but you see my point, don't you? My faith is not in need of testing, I know that for a fact. I have lived my life for Christ and I am not going stale on him. Didn't the advent of Christ do away with the sort of thing Job went through? Why am I here?"

"You are not another Job." John said, punctuating each syllable with the tap of a claw on the chair. "Have you stopped to consider that maybe there is a reason for you being here?" He held up a hand to quiet Mike before continuing. "I know that's an easy thing for me to say. I'm on the simple side of all of this. I know things look bad to you now, but does this have to be a bad thing?"

Mike sat silently and mulled that over. John's heart went out to him. He looked so...vulnerable. He couldn't imagine what must be going through the were...human head right now. How would he deal with something like this? He'd seen Mike praying a lot on the tapes they've been making. He suspected that once he had ended up crying. It was amazing how someone with such a monstrous face could look so helpless. It was obvious that God wasn't in any hurry to answer those prayers, too. Now that he had brought it up, it wasn't hard to imagine him as another Job. But they both knew that God didn't work that way.

Why is he starting to look so cute? he asked himself as Mike returned those incredible eyes to him.

"Am I really going to have to be homosexual?"

That took John off-guard and he hesitated. Should he, especially right now, bring up the fact that he really had no choice? Was he being close-minded and selfish because he had an inherent desire to make him a homosexual? It was only right, and he wanted Mike to live right. But right and wrong were obviously subjective, and the fact that Mike was so unusually sexy might be clouding his judgment. Did Mike have a choice?

As for being sexually active, he didn't. There would be no sex with females for him. What if Mike would rather choose abstinence? That would definitely be his choice to make. John had to admit that he'd rather not see that happen. From what he had seen of him, Mike sure had a lot to offer a man; and not just sexually. Please God, he said silently, I may be a little selfish, but do me a favor.

"Would you be willing to spend the rest of your life alone?"

Mike thought for a few seconds. "I don't know."

"Everyone needs to be loved. I'd hate to think that you'd be willing to live out your days a lonely man."

Mike shrugged.

"You were engaged, right? Do you consider yourself a worthy man to become a husband?"

"I guess so."

"Well, then, don't you think that someone could see that in you; someone just as worthy?"

"It's not the same."

“Why not? Love is love.”

“You’re not giving me choices, you’re giving me reasons for one choice.”

John sighed and dropped his gaze to the floor. “What do you want me to do, come right out and say that you have no choice?” He looked back up. “I don’t know if that’s true. You are a very special case. You may have choices that I don’t realize, or refuse to let myself consider. I have to be honest and say that my intentions may be a bit selfish.”

“Why?”

“Because to me, being a homosexual is right. That’s the way I live, the way everyone lives, the way God teaches us to live. I’m trying not to think of you as someone who needs to be cured of something, but I can’t help wanting what I believe is right. I also don’t want you to choose to spend the rest of your life depriving yourself of having someone to love. I know you well enough to know that you would be miserable. I almost want to say that I hope you accept our way of life just because of the obvious pleasure you could give and take from it. I’m talking generalities here, not necessarily me.”

“Not interested?”

“Would you want to hear my answer if it was ‘yes’?”

“Can’t hurt to hear it.”

“All right, I am interested.”

”Why? Don’t I look like a monster to you?”

“Yes and no. If you look past the fact that you look like a wereman, and take you at face value, you look attractive. You only look evil when you’re mad. As for your body...” he finished with a meaningful glance at Mike’s chest.

Mike self-consciously pulled the sweater’s opening tighter. “When’s Doug supposed to show?”

## CHAPTER V

“How about now.” came Doug’s voice, so quiet Mike almost didn’t hear him. John reluctantly tore his attention from their conversation to watch Doug walk in.

“Guess what?” Doug asked, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorjamb.

“You’re going implant a properly programmed computer chip into my brain.”

John gave Mike an admonishing glance before turning back to Doug. “What?”

Doug looked at Mike. “I just had lunch with Cooper. Come Monday, you’re out of here.”

“Are you serious?” Mike exclaimed, rising from the cot.

“Already?” John asked.

“Absolutely. I told him that there was no longer a reason to keep you here. The main reason we had you here in the first place was because we were afraid you’d go berserk and eat everyone. John and I expected to come in that first morning and find a half-naked wolf sitting in the middle of a ransacked room. So, come Monday, we’ll be moving you to an FBI safehouse in the suburbs.”

“Thank God! A real house, with carpet and windows and a kitchen...”

“John?”

“Yeah, boss?”

“I’m recommending that you move in with him. What do you think?”

John stared at him with a shocked expression. “Are you kidding?”

“No. We’re going to need someone there with him to keep the guys upstairs apprised of his acclimation to our society. You know him better than any of us and you don’t have a family waiting at home. It would give us a perfect way of helping Mike to start a new life. You have a minor in psychology with a great grade. Do you think you can handle it?”

“What about our work with Jud? He’s back now and I thought that I would be going back to him, with you.”

“I can promote Mark to your spot as my assistant. He’ll be a suitable replacement for you. We’ll be able to handle Jud between the two of us until your work with Mike is done. Since you’ll technically be working, your pay won’t change. It sounds like a cake job to me.” Doug raised his eyebrows and perked his ears expectantly.

John looked over at Mike, who smiled and shrugged. He thought for a moment, looking back at Doug and then letting his gaze rest on the floor. Share a house with a wereman? God, this is weird.

“What about my lease? And all my stuff?”

“They can take care of the lease upstairs. I’m sure they can convince your landlord to sublet. Anything you have that won’t fit in the house they can have stored for you.”

John thought quickly. Doug obviously wanted an answer right now. He had the strangest feeling that Doug had already decided. He was a nice guy, but he always seemed to get his way once his mind was made up. At least, it would probably look good on his resume’. He looked back at Mike, who had grabbed a chair at the table.

“I promise I won’t bite.”

John couldn’t help but smile. He was so cute when he teased, and he didn’t even look evil. Oh well, he thought, there goes my social life. “All right, I’ll do it.”

“Great.” Doug said happily, clapping his hands together. “Now that that’s settled, we’d better get started on those medical files. We’ve got a lot of work to do for the rest of the day. Mike,” he went on, turning to him, “I hope you don’t mind if we leave you to yourself for the rest of the day.”

“No, go ahead. I’ll get some reading done.”

The two of them walked out, followed by one of the guards. The other one, Paul, hung around for small talk.

The weekend passed in a blur. Most of his time was taken up with workouts, reading, and prayer. The guards had lightened up considerably, and Paul had beat him in three close games of chess.

He read the bible a lot, and found that everything except the sexual and marital references seemed to be as he remembered.

On Sunday night he sat himself down and tried to come to grips with his feelings about Deb.

It would now be foolish to deny the fact that he would never see her or any other human again. He didn’t even know where she was, let alone the world he had known all his life. The odds of the phenomenon that brought him here repeating itself were astronomical. It wasn’t supposed to happen at all. He was a victim of a freak of nature, and there was little chance of it rectifying itself.

Her loss was a deep, empty ache in his soul. He loved her more than life itself. She had been the center of his attention for so long that he hardly knew what to do with his time.

He tried to remember the good times they had shared, which ended up being close to all of them. The only thing they ever argued about was her overwrought femininity. He ended up crying again.

He decided to keep wearing his engagement band. Even though he would never see her again, he wanted to have something to remember her by.

He had finished his prayer that night by asking god that He grant her a happy life and a loving husband. That had brought the tears back, and he fell asleep with them drying on his face.

On Monday morning, Doug and John woke him up at seven-thirty.

He went through his usual morning ritual, shaving with a razor Doug had to get from some nebulous FBI source. The entire concept of shaving had puzzled both of them when Mike had asked for the razor. Mike blew them off, not being in the mood for explanations. Neither had pressed the issue, seeing that he was in a bad mood. The coffee came quicker than usual.

He resumed his practice of waking up to a cold blast of water. The guard had laughed loudly, bringing John over from the lockers. He joined in on the laughter as Mike gasped and sputtered under the frigid spray.

When Mike had gone through at least three cups of coffee and two of John’s cigarettes, Doug risked a friendly greeting and handed him a box to pack his things into.

As he sipped his fourth cup, he noticed that both John and Doug seemed unusually nervous. “Why are you two so touchy? You’re both going to shake the fur out of your skin.”

John laughed uneasily. “We’ve never been in a press conference before.”

“What press conference?”

“Oh my God!” Doug cried. “I completely forgot to tell you! We’ve been so busy and neither of us has been around...oh, Mike, I’m sorry.”

“Press conference!?”

“The Bureau is being very careful about you.” Doug hastened to explain. “The last thing they want is to be accused of any typical cover-up garbage. Since it will be impossible to keep you hidden once we leave here, Cooper decided to have a press conference before we leave to let the press know about you. It’s scheduled for ten o’clock. After that, we’ll leave for the house. I can’t believe we forgot to tell you.”

“Press conference!”

“Is there a problem?” Steve asked as he was led in by a guard.

“Damn straight there is!”

“I forgot to tell him about the press conference.” Doug admitted sheepishly.

“Oh, hell,” Steve said with a sigh, “Over the whole weekend?” He walked over to Mike, offering a tentative handshake. “I’m Steve Cooper, the director here in Chicago.”

Mike shook the proffered hand, still dumbfounded.

“What Doug didn’t tell you,” Steve continued, giving Doug a disapproving glance, “Is that we scheduled a press conference to announce your existence to the outside world. We don’t want to be accused of covering up your existence. If we waited for you to be discovered, the public fallout would be disastrous.”

“What am I supposed to do at a freaking press conference?”

“Okay, I’ll go over the whole thing with you.” He sat on the edge of the table, steadying himself with one foot on a chair. “My press agent will make a statement before we go out and show a few photos of you. We’ll all be walking in through a side door when he’s finished. Myself and my assistant will be first, followed by Doug, yourself, and John. We will be sitting behind a long table. The press will have their microphones set up on it. Of course, no one is going to believe us until you walk out. After they all calm down, we’ll field questions from the press. Easy.”

“Oh, wonderful!” Mike said, looking down at himself. He was wearing a pair of zipper-leg Levis and a pale yellow shirt. The shirt was open down the front and back in typical werewolf casual wear fashion.

“You look fine.” John assured him.

“Whatever you say.” Mike remarked, starting to pack. “Now I’m nervous! What am I going to say?”

“Just answer their questions honestly. If they ask something you don’t want to answer, don’t be afraid to tell them so. I’m sure they won’t come up with anything you won’t have an answer to.”

Mike kept packing for a few seconds before looking at Steve. “You’re staring.” he said, resuming his packing. Screw being nice, he thought. A press conference!

“Sorry.” Steve said, looking away. “This is the first time I’ve actually seen you in the flesh. I’ve been too busy talking to just about everyone in the whole damned government about you to get down here.”

Mike finished packing and sat on the cot with a huff. “So, what now? We just wait?”

“Afraid so.”

“Well, we’ve got an hour. Tell me about this house you’ve got for me.”

“It’s pretty nice, actually. Normally, we’d use it for hiding witnesses or other important people. It’s a split-level ranch with a finished basement. It has a large living room, dining room, kitchen, laundry room, three bedrooms, and a garage on the first floor. The two rooms downstairs will probably be used by the guards, when need be. The kitchen and laundry room are stock and waiting.”

“How many guards will there be?”

“We’ll have at least one inside at all times. Four or five will watch the grounds. And they’ll be guarding you this time, not guarding against you.”

“Isn’t that kind of conspicuous?”

“Yes, but we figure that we’ll have no way of avoiding detection. Chances are that we’ll be followed from here when the press conference is over.”

“Really?”

“We can’t control every street from here to there. There’s no harm in them being nearby. The guards will keep them off of the property. I’ll make sure that that’s clear when we have the conference.”

“How long will I be staying there?”

“Until you get some kind of life started.”

“Hopefully, that won’t take too long.” John said.

The next hour seemed to drag on forever. Everyone hung around Mike's cell, fidgeting in his own way. Mike paced like a caged tiger, John tapped his foot, matching the rhythm with a claw against one of his fangs, and Doug groomed himself fastidiously. Steve left early to fetch his assistant.

At nine fifty-five Steve returned with another werewolf, introducing the new face. He looked genuinely scared.

"It's show time." Steve said after Mike shook the man's hand. "Let's go."

They all left the cell and walked to the end of the hall, taking the stairs up to the first floor. Mike turned and blew a kiss back down the steps. Once upstairs, they walked down a long corridor, receiving wide-eyed stares from dozens of werewolves. Mike looked around constantly, amazed at how many of them there were.

The hallway opened into a large, deserted lobby. Steve led them to a door in the center of the wall to their right. Mike could here what must be dozens of voices coming from inside.

"How many reporters are in there?" Mike asked.

"About forty, if you count the camera and sound men." Steve answered, stopping before the door.

It opened a crack and a wolf slipped through. His eyes widened when he saw Mike. Turning to Steve, he muttered uncomfortably. "They're, uh, ready, sir. They, well, they think this is a joke. Some of them are ready to leave." His gaze shifted back to Mike.

"I would be too." Steve said as he turned to the others. "Ready, everyone?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, I guess." Mike said as his stomach flip-flopped.

"Ditto." John said.

"Let's go."

Steve opened the door and walked in, the rest following. As Mike came into view, the crowd of reporters gasped in unison. Mike smiled as some of them actually jumped from their chairs, freezing in half-standing poses.

He followed Doug up onto the platform, taking his seat behind a row of microphones and eyeing the crowd nervously.

They were all staring at him in open amazement. Mike almost smiled again. The sight of so many werewolves, all clutching cameras, tape recorders, and note pads was hilarious. On the other hand, it meant that he really was on a world full of werewolves.

A cameraman toward the back of the crowd came to his senses and snapped a picture. The flash caught Mike off guard and he blinked to clear his vision. A torrent of flashes followed as the rest of them recovered from their initial shock. Cameras were still flashing as numerous hands shot up throughout the small crowd. Steve pointed to a reporter wearing an NBC press ID on his shirt.

The guy stood slowly, clearing his throat. "Uh, Eric Downs, NBC News." he started, gawking at Mike. "Uh, hell," he went on, shaking his furry head slightly, "Uh, what's your name?"

Steve dropped his head, grabbing the top of his snout with two fingers.

Mike smiled in spite of himself. This was getting fun. "Michael Riggs."

"Where are you from?" Downs asked as more hands shot up.

"Originally? I was born in Chicago and raised in Decatur."

Downs sat down and hands shot up again. They were all calling his name, vying for attention. Mike chuckled as he marveled at how quickly all of the reporters had recovered after the ice had been broken. Steve pointed to a man with a CBS ID. Mike gave him credit for knowing who to point to first - go for the networks.

"Are there any more like you?"

"Here? Not that I know of. How I got here was quite a fluke, and a painful one at that."

"How did you get here?" someone yelled as the CBS guy sat down.

"Gentlemen," Steve interrupted quickly, shaking his head, "Please refrain from asking questions that were answered in the initial briefing. If you weren't taking notes, that's your problem." He pointed to the ABC man, who stood and

glanced at a note pad.

“Do you, or did you, have an occupation?”

“I’m a computer programmer.”

That started a wave of voices as they all talked amongst themselves. John leaned close to Mike and whispered in his ear. Mike had to ask him to repeat it, because a werewolf whisper was practically inaudible.

“I just heard someone say that we’re going live in about ten seconds. Gulp.”

“Can you prove that?” the reporter yelled above the din.

“Give me a good computer and I’ll program something.”

“Quite, please!” Steve said loudly, pointing to another man. Everyone shut up as he stood.

“Chicago Tribune. Where did you work, uh, Mike?”

“Haffley Software Systems. Someone else is doing my job here.”

“We were told, before you came out, that you supposedly come from an Earth much like ours, but populated by people like yourself. Some weird natural phenomenon sent you here. Do you believe that? Can we believe that?”

“I can’t honestly tell you. I can guess, though, based on what I was told over the weekend. Even though it’s just a theory, what you just said seems to be true. I know that I have lived the past twenty-five years on an Earth full of my own people. I wasn’t born yesterday, and I’m obviously not a wolf waking up from some crazy dream. So, I would have to say that that’s the only plausible explanation.”

“Chicago Sun Times.” another one began. “Are you married, engaged, or seeing anyone?”

“I’m not married. I was engaged, but my fiancé’ is evidently on another world. How could I be seeing anyone?”

John chuckled, and Mike elbowed him. Another reporter stood.

“Do you have any hobbies?”

“I write and play music.”

“What kind of music? What instruments?”

“Rock and roll, guitar, and a little piano.”

“Who, exactly, are you?” a reporter asked, gesturing to Doug and John.

Doug leaned forward. “I’m Doctor Doug Sullivan. I’m in charge of everything having to do with Mr. Riggs. This,” he added, nodding to John, “Is my assistant, John Carter. He’ll be serving as a liaison between Mike and myself.”

“Does Mike have any, you know, unusual abilities?”

All of the reporters laughed, but none took their eyes from Doug. Mike laughed and shook his head.

“None whatsoever. He’s stronger than he looks and extremely fit, but nothing you would call superwolven.”

Mike laughed again as Doug continued. Superwolven?

“...His vision isn’t very sharp and he can’t see too well at night. Other than that, he’s just like us.”

That sent most of them scribbling on their note pads. “What are you going to be doing when you get out of here?”

All eyes turned to Mike. “I have no idea. Maybe I’ll sell silverware.”

The crowd laughed again, writing on their pads and checking tape recorders.

“Are you cold without any fur?”

“No, but I do have to dress warmer than you when it gets chilly.”

The conference went on for what seemed to be forever. Question after question came as the reporters overcame their initial fear and grew bolder. Some of the questions were quite personal, which Mike refused to answer.

When one reporter, following up on an earlier question, asked him what mode of lovemaking he preferred, Mike told him in no uncertain terms to mind his own damned business. That brought on more scribbles and a laugh from John.

If only they knew, the faggots, Mike thought to himself.

Steve brought the conference to an end now that the questions had grown meaningless. The last one was to know what was being done with Mike.

"We're taking him to a nearby house, where he will be staying until he becomes self-sufficient." He held up a finger before continuing. "Now, I'm going to warn you all right now. The house and property will be guarded twenty-four hours a day. It's government property and any trespassers will be dealt with to the full extent of the law. I personally guarantee anyone caught near that house a few nights in jail, and if I have my way, it will be B-block."

The reporters cringed. John leaned close and whispered in Mike's ear. "That's where they put the rapists."

Mike returned the smile. "If you ask me, that's where they should put all of these guys. The can be really obnoxious."

"Is the government paying for this?"

"Yes." Steve answered.

"Do you think the taxpayers will approve of this use of government funds?"

Steve sighed loudly. "It doesn't really matter. The government is paying for the house whether someone's living in it right now or not. As for the guards we'll be assigning to it, they'd be getting paid anyway. If they weren't guarding this house, they'd be guarding something else. That's their job. No money is being spent that wouldn't be spent anyway."

That said, Steve ended the show and the reporters began filing out, glancing back at Mike constantly.

He stood and stretched. Five or six flashes went off as he did. He looked at John as his vision cleared. "Boy, I just can't wait to see the caption under those shots." he said, striking a dramatic pose. "Crazed man-eating wereman raises fists to strike out at his captors!"

"You're too cynical." John replied with a smile as they turned to walk out, breathing a sigh of relief now that it was over. "I'm glad that's done. I hope my whiskers aren't uneven."

Mike laughed. "Look here."

John turned to him and Mike studied the short whiskers closely. "Oh my, they're all crooked."

"You're kidding!" John cried, going cross-eyed to look at his snout.

Mike completely lost it at the sight, plopping into a chair and holding his stomach.

"You're lying, aren't you?"

"Oh John, don't ever do that again! I don't think I could stand it!"

"What?"

"Nothing." Mike said, catching his breath and edging past him.

"Oh, Mike." John said behind him. "We found out about the Michael Riggs who wrote those songs. Get this: He's a senior at the same university you went to. His major is computer science. His parents died when he was seventeen, just like yours. A trust account for his parents' estate is paying for his college education. Music is his hobby and his friends call him 'Mozart.' Well, they did, anyway. Here's the weird part. The day you arrived, he disappeared without a trace from the same trail we found you on. They found his body yesterday, along the bank a ways downstream. The autopsy said that he died from a sudden brain aneurysm. Bruises on his body indicate that he was thrown about twenty feet a few minutes before it hit him. He landed in the stream, floated about a mile, and snagged in some growth along the bank. He pulled himself out of the water, unhurt except for a few bad bruises, a sprained wrist and a little water in his lungs, and then just...died. No one on the search party noticed him because he had sat down between some rocks and the water covered his scent. His fiancée' found him. Strange, eh?"

"Yeah, it is." Mike agreed. "I almost feel guilty. He would probably still be alive if I hadn't showed up. It must have been awful for his fiancé'. I guess you can't have two of us on the same planet. I wonder why it wasn't me? I'm the one out of place." He thought for a few moments as they walked. "It could be that the hole wasn't big enough for both of us and he got caught in some kind of feedback. One thing doesn't make sense, though. If he's a senior in college, then that means that he's twenty-one. That's four years out of synch. I didn't write those songs until after graduation. That means that he wrote them while he was still in school."

"You got me." John said, leaning his head closer, "But that's not all. He was born in Chicago and grew up in Decatur. He and his fiancé' were at an Eagle dealer three weeks ago looking at Talons. He owned two guitars."

“So do...did I. A Gibson and a Jackson.”

“I bet scientists are going to go crazy over this.” John said as they headed down a set of stairs. “Seems to me that this whole thing must be part of someone’s master plan. Everything fits just right when common sense says that it shouldn’t. And then again, some things don’t fit. For instance, why didn’t he just end up in your world instead of getting thrown twenty feet away and having his brain stopped?”

“I wish I knew. Like I said, he just may not have fit. That halo was wrapped around me pretty tight. And I wish whoever it is with this master plan would get bored with me real soon. God, this is all so weird.”

The stairway ended at an underground garage. They walked toward a plain-looking minivan. It was the same gray color as the suit worn by the guard standing next to it. Mike’s box was at his feet.

“You guys really go for gray, don’t you?”

“They’re not all gray. This one happens to be the only one available at the time. We’re extremely busy.” Steve replied.

“I hate Chryslers.”

“I thought you owned an Eagle Talon. They’re Chryslers, aren’t they?” Doug asked with a curious glance.

“I owned an Eagle Talon because it’s mostly a Mitsubishi and has better looking wheels than the Eclipse. The price was a little lower in the end, too.”

“Oh.”

“What do you mean by ‘mostly Mitsubishi?’” John asked.

Mike smiled as he climbed into the back seat, pushing his box underneath it. “The only thing Chrysler about an Eagle Talon or Plymouth Laser is the body and interior. All the running gear is Japanese. They assemble them in Normal.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“The way I see it,” Mike continued, “The only good Chrysler is a Mitsubishi, and the only good Ford is a Mazda.”

“What does Mazda make for Ford?”

“The Probe is a Ford body and interior on a Mazda MX-6 chassis. The new Escort is a 323.”

“Really? You know a lot about cars, don’t you?”

“Cars are my third passion.”

“Anything I should know about my Beretta?”

“You should have held out for the GTZ.”

“I shouldn’t have asked.”

They pulled out of the garage with one of the guards driving. Steve rode shotgun and the front bench was occupied by two guards. John and Doug joined Mike in the back. The windows were heavily tinted, making the early afternoon look like twilight.

The driver wove through town, heading for the bypass. As they threaded their way through the lunch-hour traffic, Mike’s predicament set in with a finality that was, until now, impossible.

Downtown Chicago looked exactly the same as he remembered it. There was, of course, one big difference. The streets were full of werewolves. He looked around in amazement.

They came in all combinations of black, gray, brown, and silver that he could imagine. Some were fat and looked quite comical. Some were short, while others were tall. Couples and groups walked through the crowd, chatting just like normal people would. Many of them were probably chatting about the press conference Mike had just left. Their clothes seemed normal enough, except for the fact that everyone wore shorts and had gaps in their shirts. Almost all wore waist bags, as is the current fashion back home. Some carried them over their shoulder.

Occasionally he saw children. They were extremely cute and were usually accompanied by a single male adult.

As the van stopped at a light, a man and two small kids began to cross the street within a small crowd of pedestrians. Mike nudged John. "I assume the smaller one is a girl."

"Yeah," John agreed, "You can't tell?"

"They look pretty much the same to me."

"I'd guess that they're about eight." John said as they walked passed. "I wonder why they're not in school?" "Don't ask me." Mike said as he watched them cross the street and disappear into an electronics store on the corner. "Hey, that's the store where I bought my car speakers."

"You came up here from Decatur to buy speakers?"

"I was up this way visiting a friend, and besides, they were on sale." Mike answered matter-of-factly as he continued to look around in amazement. They left downtown and turned onto the bypass. Now that they were out of town, he turned his attention to the cars around him. A Cadillac was slowly passing them. Mike peered into the driver's window and saw a hugely fat werewolf driving it. They guy looked more like a bear than a werewolf. He leaned back in his seat, sighed, and closed his eyes. "Well, Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

"What was that?" John asked.

"Nothing."

He opened his eyes and saw a billboard in the distance, growing closer as they passed an exit sign. A werewolf, silver from head to toe, appeared to lean against one side of the billboard's edge. He was shirtless and showing his fangs in a smile. The rest of the sign was occupied by a large, hand-written phrase. "The only one-step, all-over fur color kit; and only from Clairol." Mike read silently, laughing to himself at the totally ridiculous parody.

"What?" Doug asked from the other side of John.

Mike noticed for the first time that they both were watching him closely. "You wouldn't understand."

John glanced out the window and caught a glance of the billboard as they passed it. "That billboard?"

"Yeah." Mike admitted. "I've heard of hair color, but that's ridiculous."

"...And expensive."

"You were going to do that?"

"I thought about it, once."

"Why?"

"Well, brown and black is kind of common. I was thinking of dying myself completely black. Unfortunately, it costs about a hundred and ten bucks."

"Brown and black looks fine to me."

"You think so?" John asked as Mike looked him over.

"Yeah, but you can take that with a grain of salt, coming from me. I hardly think that I'm qualified to comment."

A funny half-smile crept onto John's face and his eyes brightened. "Sure you are."

Mike looked back out the window, feeling suddenly uncomfortable. That's it, you idiot, he thought, lead him on!

Mike continued to watch the traffic as they exited the bypass and turned onto a suburban street. They followed it for a few miles, continuing on until the housing started to thin. To Mike, it all looked like a thoroughly twisted version of suburbia.

Werewolves were mowing lawns, washing cars, trimming hedges - all going about the business of day-to-day life. He was having trouble believing his eyes.

"The press is following us." the driver said to Steve as he turned down another street.

They all turned and looked out back. Sure enough, a van marked with the NBC logo was trailing them at a discreet distance.

"We'll shoo them off at the house." Steve said warily. "There are already a couple of men there."

They turned onto what would be Mike's street. A Seven-Eleven was on the corner with a small bar next door.

About a mile down the road they reached the house.

It was attractive in a plain sort of way. The top half was light blue aluminum siding and the bottom half was brick. A large bay window faced out from above and to one side of the front door. Bushes lined the front and a small sidewalk curved out from the door to meet the driveway. A two-car garage was built into the lower level, and a basketball hoop hung above it. A simple wooden fence bordered the yard.

The driver pulled into the driveway, waving to a guard as he pushed the remote for the garage door. Steve called for a guard to ward off the press van, barely raising his voice. Whoever it was nodded and headed out toward the road, speaking to another guard.

Yet another guard met them in the garage and called a hello to the driver as he closed the door.

“Good Lord,” Mike said, impressed, “You look like you’re trying to start a war here.”

“There won’t be this many after we get you settled.” Steve answered as he stepped out. He slid open the side door and everyone followed him out.

They walked toward the guard at the door to the house, John grabbing Mike’s box for him. Paul was waiting at the door to the house. The lack of light somehow enhanced the fact that he was built like a Mack truck.

“You know Paul, of course.” Steve said to Mike. “He’ll be in charge of security here.”

“Yeah, and now that I’ve got you locked up in a house with me, I’d like to talk to you about that day in the woods. You wouldn’t happen to be one of the guys who shot me, would you?”

Paul’s snout paled noticeably and he looked as if he would bolt for his life. “Well, Mike, uh...”

“Relax, I’m kidding.” Mike said, laughing.

“Actually, I shot you first.” Mueller said, emerging from the doorway. He seemed as though he wasn’t nervous, and shook Mike’s hand firmly. “Ford would have got you first, but he missed. I hope you understand that it was nothing personal. To tell you the truth, you scared us shitless. You run like the wind, too.”

Mike smiled, glad to meet someone who wasn’t afraid of him. “Do you think I was running like the wind for the fun of it?”

Mueller’s smile widened. “Paul did get you, though, if I remember correctly.” he said, turning to Paul. “It was the thigh, right?”

“Yeah.” Paul agreed.

“That hurt.”

“Anyway, let’s see what this place looks like.” Doug interrupted, giving Mike a small push.

The house was a typical half-duplex. Mike passed a laundry room and saw the back door on his right. After a small closet came the kitchen. Mike walked through it and circled around through the dining and living rooms. The house, to Mike’s mild surprise, was L-shaped. A hall led from the dining room back to the bedrooms, making the house larger than it appeared from out front. He concentrated on the living room first.

It was fully furnished in a conservative taste. A TV sat in one corner by the bay window. A couch, lounge chair, and love seat were arranged facing it. A coffee table and two end tables completed the furnishings. Each end table held a lamp in addition to the one in the ceiling.

The dining room contained a table, six chairs, and a small china cabinet. He walked back to the bedrooms next, passing a fairly large bathroom on the way.

The master bedroom was big, decorated with more of the living room’s conservatism. The queen-sized bed and night table were both only a couple of inches from the floor, as his cot had been.

“John, what’s with the beds always being so low?”

“What do you mean?” John asked from behind.

“Where I come from, most beds are mid-thigh height or so from the floor.”

“That high? What if you fell out?”

“You don’t.” he answered, facing him.

John looked puzzled. “Yeah, but what if you do? Doesn’t it make you nervous to be sleeping up so high?”

“Nooooo.” Mike said slowly. “Well, let’s just chalk that up to being one of those things.”

He looked in on the master bathroom, which was small but complete. “Who gets the master bedroom?”

“You’re the guest of honor.”

“I guess so.” Mike agreed as he peeked into the other bedrooms before heading for the kitchen. Once there, he opened the refrigerator. In addition to the usual milk, eggs, lunch meat, and so forth, a twelve-pack of beer sat on the bottom shelf.

“You weren’t kidding when you said the place was fully stocked.”

“A gift. We aim to please.” Steve said.

“Thanks.” Mike said, rooting through the cupboards. John followed him, and again they found the usual sort of things one expects to find in the average kitchen.

”Anyone else hungry?”

“I am.” John agreed, grabbing the bread and getting some bologna from the fridge. They hunted down the plates and silverware and started making sandwiches. Doug, Steve, and Paul joined them.

Mike looked at the bologna John was using. “You eat that stuff?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Do you know what they use to make it?”

John stared at him, his head tilted slightly. Mike chuckled at the sight as John read the label. “Beef and pork.”

“Ah!” Mike exclaimed, smiling at his newest victim and picking up his plate, “But do you know what beef and pork?”

“What are you getting at?” John asked, his head still cocked. He picked up his sandwich and took a bite. “You’re not going to hit me with another bit of your endless wisdom, are you?”

Mike grinned wider as John chewed. “Sure it’s beef and pork; as in beef and pork skin, eyes, noses, tongues, lips...”

John stopped chewing and a mildly disgusted look invaded his features. “You’re kidding.”

Mike laughed wickedly and turned away, grabbing a coke on his way into the dining room. John followed, taking a tentative bite of his sandwich. He sat across from Mike as the others joined them. Mike took a bite, looking at John and scratching his nose. He winked as John took another bite.

“Leave me alone, damn it!” John growled.

Mike laughed and stuck his tongue out.

“I hate you.”

Mike decided to leave him alone and Doug spoke up. “Have you thought about what you want to do yet?”

“No. I was too busy quietly freaking out during that drive over here.”

“How about my suggestion?”

“What, you mean doing pin-ups and that sort of thing?” Mike asked, thinking. “I don’t think that I’d make a very good model. Do you think anyone would buy them? Who wants a poster of a monster?”

”I think they would sell tremendously. Since it’s unlikely for you to get a job as a computer programmer, you may as well take advantage of your appearance. They don’t necessarily have to be pin-ups, either. You could advertising something. I’m sure you could probably get into magazines and commercials, too.”

“Why does it have to be so impossible for me to just get a job? I’m sure the novelty will wear off sooner or later. Programming is what I’m best at, and my qualifications are more than adequate. I don’t mean to sound vain, but I’m a damn good programmer.”

“It just wouldn’t work, Mike.” Steve said. “If anyone took the risk of hiring you, which isn’t likely, there would be problems galore. Please forgive me for saying this, but your appearance would be highly distracting in a work environment. Also, I don’t think it’s unrealistic to assume that not everyone is going to be your greatest fan. If you bump into someone, it will be sexual harassment. If you get promoted, it won’t be the best man for the job, it will be the wereman.”

Mike sighed. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should give Doug’s suggestion a try. While I’m at it, I might make it a temporary thing. I’m going to start writing as soon as I get the time. If I can come up with enough material, I would like to try to release an album. Music is my next-best talent.”

“That’s an idea.” Doug said. “Do you have anything you wrote before your, uh, accident?”

“I’ve got some songs that show potential. Of course, I’m going to have to write them all over again from memory. That’s not such a bad thing, though, because they need to be rewritten anyway.”

“What kind of supplies will you need?” Steve asked, removing a note pad from an inside shirt pocket.

“Do you all have those things? Well anyway, herein lies our problem. Everything I own is sitting in my apartment which, at the moment, is in another universe.” He paused to finish his sandwich. “It would be expensive.”

“How so?”

“Writing music takes more than a pencil and paper. I need sheet music - as many reams of it as you can carry - pencils, a sharpener, and erasers. I need an electric guitar, preferably a Jackson, and everything that goes with it. I’ll also need an acoustic guitar. Several sets of strings for each, picks, an amp, foot pedals, etceteras. I’d also like a piano.”

“Wow.” John said.

“Okay, make me a list.”

“You’re serious?”

“Are you serious about making an album? How much do you think it will all cost?”

“Quite a few hundred. I can’t make good music playing on junk.”

“Whew!” Steve breathed, shaking his head.

“Look, buy them for me on loan. As I make money I’ll pay the Bureau back. I probably won’t be able to do it all at once, of course, but if this model stuff sells it shouldn’t be too long.”

Steve thought for a few moments, saying nothing.

“Put it in writing, and I’ll sign it.”

Steve looked up, making up his mind. “All right, we’ll do it that way. We’ll have to wait until we get your legal status in order, though.”

“Legal status?”

“Don’t forget, every legal document with your name on it is back where you came from. We have a lot of paperwork we’re doing on you. You need a social security number, a driver’s license, birth certificate, and so on. If you want them, we can arrange for a couple credit cards and get you registered to vote. Technically, you’re already an American, so we aren’t going to naturalize you. I’ve already had this stuff started. We’re using the portraits from the lab for your driver’s license.”

“I guess this means that you can get speeding tickets in your new Talon.” John joked.

Mike leaned back and rubbed his eyes, letting the conversation sink in. “You know, when I think about it, I can’t believe what I’m doing. I’m sitting here talking about doing pin-ups for werewolves, for crying out loud! And guy werewolves at that! Writing full time? How will I get a band?” he said, becoming more and more upset. “God, I can’t stand all of this uncertainty! My life was perfect before all of this! I was madly in love and engaged to the perfect wo...person. I was so sure and secure in my life and my faith! It’s just one thing after another. What is becoming of my life?” he finished, fighting off tears of frustration.

John reached over and put a firm, furry hand on his arm. “A new life, Mike. And in spite of the way you feel now, it does have promise. A great deal of promise.”

Doug motioned for the others to leave. They all got up and quickly wandered outside.

“There are going to be people here to see you through this, Mike.” John continued when everyone had left. “People who care about you.”

Mike regained control after a few seconds, leaning back and pulling his arm from under John’s hand. He rubbed his eyes and sniffed, chuckling self-consciously. “That didn’t take much, did it?”

“You’re under a lot of stress.” Doug said reassuringly. “You’re handling this very well. Most people would be pulling their fur out by now.”

Mike got up and grabbed a tissue from the kitchen, returning to his seat after blowing his nose. “I’ve cried more in the last week than the rest of my life combined; even more than when my parents died. It’s not going to solve anything. What I need to do is deal with it.” he said, smiling weakly.

“That’s the spirit.” John said, holding up a finger. “But I’m sure you understand that it’s always best to cry when you feel the need. That was quite a battle you just put up. Letting go will keep you from having a nervous breakdown later.”

“He’s right.” Doug added as he stood. “I’m going to talk to Steve. I imagine that you’re going to need some sort of manager or something. The sooner we deal with all of this footwork, the sooner you can get your life in order.”

Mike watched him go, getting another tissue to blow his nose. He threw it away and started gathering dishes. John helped him carry them to the sink. Mike found some dish soap under the sink and started running water. John hunted down a dish rag.

“Mind if I dry?” he asked. “That way I won’t have to worry about my arms getting all sudsed up. I can’t seem to find any dish gloves.”

“No. I hate to dry, anyway.”

“So, who do you think you’ll want to advertise for? I’m sure that’ll be one of the first things your future manager is going to ask.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Who do you think would be interested?”

“Good question. Why don’t you start by telling me who you won’t advertise for?”

“Ford, liquor, beer, and stuff like that.”

“That leaves a lot.”

“I could do Nike commercials with Michael Jordon.” Mike suggested, brightening.

John picked up on his sudden good cheer. “Yeah! Do you think you could get me in to meet him?”

“Hey, we haven’t even asked yet!”

“You never can tell.”

“I can’t wait to meet this manager. He’ll probably be the typical agent. Big, fat, ugly, and hanging a big cigar from the corner of his mouth.”

“Ah, don’t worry. I’m sure they’ll find you someone who knows what he’s doing.”

“I hope so, but it is the government doing the choosing. I still can’t believe that I’m talking about becoming a model. What a thought! What time is it, anyway?”

John put down the glass he was drying and looked at his watch. “Oh no! It’s fifteen after four! There’s a Bulls game that started at four!” He dropped the towel and bolted for the living room.

“What?” Mike said, leaving the dishes and following him. John was finding the right station as Mike plopped onto the couch. They had only missed the first couple of minutes. The Bulls were behind by a couple of points, as they usually were at the beginning of a game.

Mike stared at the screen in shock. After all he had seen, it had never occurred to him that the Chicago Bulls would

be werewolves. But sure enough, there they were. After overcoming his initial surprise, he began laughing at the spectacle of werewolves playing basketball.

John looked over at him. "What's so funny? Grant just had the ball stolen."

"I'm sorry, John. It's just that I never thought that, well, you know," he answered, nodding at the TV.

"Oh, yeah. I imagine that it looks pretty weird to you."

"Uh-Huh."

Mike tried to identify the players by the numbers on their jerseys. He found number twenty-three. "Hey! He's the wrong color," he said as he watched Jordon dribble up the court. Michael Jordon was mostly silver. A patch of dark gray started just below his neck and disappeared into the top of his jersey. Silver continued below the shorts. Paxson was jet black. "This is all wrong."

"What is?"

"Paxson is black. He should be white, like me. Well, off-white, anyway. Jordon should be black."

"He has black skin?" John asked, his ears perking toward Mike.

"Well, it's actually brown. Pull back the fur on your arm."

John held out his left arm and pulled a clump of fur back with his other hand. His skin was a light shade of copper underneath.

"He's about three shades darker than that. A little darker than this couch, I guess."

"Oh."

"Your fur's brown there. Does your skin change color under the black?"

"Yeah," John answered, pulling his shirt away from his shoulder and showing Mike the skin underneath. The skin there was charcoal gray.

"Just how many colors do you humans come in?"

"Anything from basically white, like me, to skin so black that it almost looks purple when the light hits it right. Most fall somewhere in-between. Great! Not only do I have to look for the right werewolf, but now I have to look for the right werewolf in the wrong color."

"We're not werewolves, you know," John said defensively.

Mike looked apologetic. "Sorry, I'll get used to it, I promise."

John smiled, tapping his hand on the armrest. "Something's missing. My hand feels...empty."

"Beer!" they said as one. "I'll get it," Mike volunteered.

Doug came back in as he was getting the beer. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. There's a Bulls game on. Want a beer?"

"No thanks. I've got to call home and let them know that I'm on my way. Steve said that he can have a manager over tomorrow to talk about signing you. Supposedly, he's one of the better ones available locally. Steve called him from the phone in the van. He said that the guy was practically drooling through the phone. I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, take it easy."

Doug watched as Mike bounded back into the living room, vigorously shaking what must be John's beer. He marveled at his quick change of mood.

He picked up the phone and dialed his home number, watching as Mike handed John the shaken beer. John popped it open and sprayed it all over himself. Mike burst into laughter and Doug couldn't stop himself from smiling. John fumbled the foaming can onto the coffee table and punched Mike, who shied away.

"I'll get you for that!" he heard John promise as he tried to brush beer out of his pelt.

One of his daughters answered his home phone. "Hello?"

"Hi, sweetheart. I just called to let you know that I'm on my way home."

"Are you in the house with the monster? We watched you on TV. Cool!"

"Yes, I'm here with Mike, who is not a monster. He's just a regular guy."

“He’s at the monster’s house!” he heard her yell to his son, who picked up another extension.

“What’s he doin’?” he asked.

“Right now he’s watching the Bulls and getting mildly drunk with John.”

As if on cue, they both yelled and rose from the couch as Jordon slam-dunked on a fast break.

“Was that him?” Donny asked.

”Yes, son, that was him. I’ve got to go. Tell your stepdad that I’ll be home in about half-an-hour, okay?”

“Okay dad. Can we see him?”

“You saw him on the news.”

“Yeah, but we wanna meet him.” Sandra said.

“Maybe later. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“Okay, bye.”

“Be good.” he said, hanging up. He headed out the door, calling a goodbye into the living room.

“Oh!” they both yelled as the Bulls made another play. They glanced back and waved, turning immediately back to the game. Doug thought of how funny it was that they were so much alike. He walked out to get a ride into town.

Mike was watching Jordon walk off the court at half-time. It seemed weird, but he could actually recognize the real Michael Jordon in his face. A sudden thought occurred to him as he looked at the silver and gray fur. “Hold on,” he mused quietly, “If Jordon is silver and not black...”

“Go on...” John urged.

Mike thought for a few seconds, unsure of how to proceed. “What do you consider a minority? I mean, how do you tell different people apart?”

“You mean their ancestry?”

“Yeah. Take you for instance. I’m British and German. What are you?”

“African and Swiss.”

“How can you tell?”

“Well, tell me how you tell, and we’ll go on from there.”

“Okay, African Americans, like Jordon, are various shakes of brown. Most often, they’re referred to as ‘black.’ Like I said earlier, anything from the skin under your brown fur to jet black. People of European stock are like me, fair-skinned. Orientals have a golden, yellowish tint, and Hispanics are somewhere in-between blacks and Orientals. Of course, that’s a stereotypical description. Doesn’t your fur coloration or facial features give any indication of racial heritage?”

“Well, Orientals tend to have slightly slanted eyes, for some reason or another, but that’s about it.”

“What do you consider a Caucasian?”

”Someone of European descent.”

“Yet you wouldn’t know without asking.”

“Right.”

“But that would mean...” Mike started, his thoughts racing. “Why was the civil war fought?” he asked, taking another direction.

“Slavery, mostly.”

“Where did they get most of the slaves?”

“Africa.”

“So, after slavery was abolished, how did anyone know if someone had been a slave, or the child of a slave?”

“I guess they would have had to ask.”

“Are you saying that the descendants of the slaves had no problems melding into society?”

“Well, at first they did. but after that, it wasn’t a problem. After a while no one could say who had or hadn’t been a slave, and their kids lost the stigma after a few generations.”

Mike sighed, blowing out his cheeks. Could this be real? No discrimination? No civil rights movement? How could history here be even remotely like his own without the civil rights movement ever happening?

“Have you ever heard of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.?”

John thought for a few moments. Actually thought. “Not that I remember. Who is he?”

“Oh boy.” Mike said, rubbing his forehead. Doing the best he could, he told John about racial discrimination back home, and the treatment blacks had received throughout the decades. John’s eyes looked as if they were ready to pop out of his head, and his ears started folding back. “You mean to tell me that I’d be looked down upon, even today?”

“In your case, it could even be worse with the right people. Being of mixed descent would brand you a half-breed. Your parents, especially the African one, would have been looked down upon. A lot of whites resent it when a black person marries a Caucasian. I think it’s a childish way to think, myself. I like to think that people like them are a minority. I hope they are, even though it doesn’t really matter too much to me anymore.”

“I can’t believe it!” John exclaimed, pinning his ears back completely. The fur on his shoulders began to rise. “You people discriminate against Africans now?”

”Hey, relax! I’m not talking about me! And believe me, it’s a whole lot better than it was thirty years ago.”

“That was nineteen sixty! Why? What’s so bad about being of African descent? People are people! We’ve felt that way since the war was over!”

John was obviously very offended, but Mike pushed on. “Do you think people would feel that way if you knew who the descendants of the slaves were?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Because slaves were uneducated and misunderstood. They worked in the fields all day and got nothing but lousy food, mediocre shelter, and beatings for it. When they were set free, God bless Abe Lincoln, they were still unschooled. People thought, and thought wrongly, that they were unclean and barbaric. That was their own fault, because they didn’t go out of their way to make life for their slaves clean and healthy; and they made no attempt to understand their culture. The slaves brought their culture over with them, and so-called civilized Americans didn’t comprehend them. The slaves had to fight their way into society.”

“It’s so easy, you see, for us to recognize African Americans. All we have to do is look at them and see the color of their skin. I don’t mean to put your society down, but I think that things would be very much the same here if people could look at you and know immediately that you were the descendent of a slave. You said that after a couple of generations, nobody know who was related to a slave and who was not. That made it easy for you. If someone was descended from a slave and said that they weren’t, who would know?”

John thought that over, moving his ears up slightly. After a few seconds, he spoke. “I see what you’re saying, but I don’t see people hating them. I’d like to think that they would help them out.”

“Come on, John.” Mike said with a disapproving glance. “I think you’re putting a little too much faith in human, um, wolvern nature. I’d love to think that they would have helped them out back then, but it didn’t happen that way.”

“I guess so.”

“Have you ever heard of affirmative action?”

“Yeah, it’s an anti-discrimination law.”

“For who?”

“Immigrants, mostly. A lot of people resent people who immigrate to America and take jobs that they could have had. The government set up a quota system, or something like that.”

“It doesn’t apply to African Americans?”

”No. Nobody knows who is one until they ask, and it’s not a part of most job applications. With all the cross-breeding over the years, it’s hard to say who is African and who isn’t. Who cares, anyway? It’s a wonder that my mother was a full African. Tell me,” he continued, “Since you’re used to judging people that way, what did you think I was when you met me?”

“I don’t judge people that way. I judge individuals, and I thought you were a monster.”

“Be serious.”

“I haven’t thought about it. Like you said, there’s no real way to tell with you. Because you’re so different, it never occurred to me to wonder. It wouldn’t have affected my opinion, anyway.”

“Yeah, but did you have any idea that I was part African?”

“No.”

“What would you have thought if I was black, like Paxson? Would you have assumed that I was African? You acted surprised when you saw him.”

“No. I don’t look at you as if you were human, so color wouldn’t have meant anything to me. It still doesn’t mean anything to me.”

Half-time ended, and they turned their attention to the game.

“So, what do you think of me now?” John asked during a commercial.

“I think you’re worrying over nothing. I said that I’m not prejudiced.”

“Just checking.”

“I don’t think of you as black, white, or orange, if that’s what you mean. I think of you as a furry, fangy, claw-handed guy whom I hope doesn’t have fleas.”

“Fleas!” John exclaimed with feigned anger. “I take a shower every other day, thank you!”

“Just checking.” Mike said, turning back to the game. The Bulls won, barely. They relaxed after the final tense moments were over, finishing their beers. Twelve empty cans littered the coffee table.

“I’m buzzing like a bee.” Mike said, chuckling in spite of his attempt not to.

“I’m fine. It takes a lot of beer to get me drunk. I didn’t always live such a clean life.”

“I don’t drink that often. I’m maybe a little drunk.”

“Well, if I’m moving in, I might as well go home and get a suitcase packed for the next couple of days. I don’t have anything here.”

“Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” Mike asked suspiciously.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I hope you’re not lying to me. If you feel the slightest bit buzzed, don’t go. Did I tell you how my parents died? A drunk driver broadsided them. He was doing about eighty-five in a fifty zone. If I find out that you lied to me, I’ll beat the fur off your ass.”

Mike’s conviction was self-evident and John felt for him. He couldn’t imagine what he’d do if he found out that his parents had been killed that way. He didn’t blame him for getting mad. Nonetheless, he wasn’t lying. “No, you didn’t tell me, and I’m sorry. I had no idea. I promise, I’m fine.”

“All right.” Mike acquiesced. “I’ll be here.”

John left, hitching a ride downtown to get his car. Mike walked to the bay window and looked out over the yard. One of the guards was leaning on the front fence, eyeing one of the press vans unwaveringly. Another guard stood beside him, facing the other way. Apparently, the van wasn’t going to leave any time soon. They were, however, smart enough to stay at a discreet distance.

Across the street, about fifty yards to his right, was another house. Two wolves were sitting on the front porch, talking and watching his house. One of them pointed when he noticed Mike silhouetted in the window.

Mike smiled and waved. They both waved back. He left the window and walked to the coffee table, picking up beer cans. He carried them into the kitchen and threw them away, grabbing one of the remaining cans from the refrigerator. He popped it open and took a sip as he walked back into the living room, chiding himself for snapping at John. He knew that he was overly sensitive about drinking and driving, but he had no intention of changing. He had a good reason for the way he felt, and he was right.

He grabbed the remote control and flipped through the channels until he found MTV. *Al B. Sure!* was on. It offered

Mike his first view of dancing werewolves, and he laughed as he watched them.

As he had noticed with Jordon, Al B. Sure! was eerily recognizable.

Paul came walking in from the back yard, and Mike turned to look at him, his head spinning. "Hey, what's up?"

"Not much, I just got relieved. You wouldn't believe all the cameras they have pointed at this place."

Mike burped. "I saw the van parked down the road."

"That's not all. There are portable camera crews all over the place. I think they're running shifts so they don't miss anything."

"Just as long as they're quiet."

"We're not letting them get close enough to make any noise." Paul assured him, sitting on the love seat.

"You're looking pretty drunk."

"Who, me?" Mike asked with a giggle.

They watched videos for a while. Mike was mesmerized watching familiar videos being acted out by werewolves. He was surprised by the number of bands that he didn't recognize. There were at least four rock bands he had never heard of before. Three of them were obviously very successful. A band he knew was in the top twenty never appeared.

He flipped through some more and stopped at an aerobics show. Within moments he was laughing himself silly, soon bringing a loud growl from Paul.

He had been learning about growls and such things by observing the people he knew and the TV. Quiet, low-key growls, snorts, and woofs were a good thing, used instinctively to express pleasure, approval, or affection. Sexually aroused men on a few shows he had glanced at were growling constantly. All were a constant, integral part of communication. Things get worse as growl volume rises, usually accompanied by folded-back ears and raised hackles. When feeling frustration, as with Mike when he became vague or uncooperative, they tended to emit a short, loud snort or huff.

Paul cut off his growl with one of those snorts, glaring at Mike with his ears folded part way back.

"I'm sorry." Mike said honestly. "I really have a lot to get used to."

"The quicker you stop laughing at us, the better."

"I know. I'm sorry."

John returned about an hour and a half after he had left, carrying a large suitcase. "I've got a surprise for you."

"What?" Mike asked, getting up.

"Stay here." John answered, going back out to the driveway. He returned a few seconds later carrying an acoustic guitar.

"Where did you get this? It's not bad." Mike asked as he took it from him. John handed him a pick from his other hand.

"My neighbor plays a little. I asked him if I could borrow it for a few days. He's got a broken arm and can't play. I told him it was for you and he practically threw it at me. I'd like to have it back to him in two or three days, if you don't mind."

"No, of course not. Thanks a lot." Mike said, giving him a slap on the shoulder. He sat on the lounge chair, strumming it experimentally. "Ugh! Does he know how to tune this?"

He sat back and began hand-tuning it. In a few minutes he had it sounding right. By then, most of the off-duty guards had wandered in.

"Oh! I almost forgot." John said, running back out to his car. He came back with a case of beer and tossed one to Mike.

"You trying to get me drunk?"

"Who, me?" John asked in exaggerated disbelief. "Besides, you're already drunk."

Mike took a swallow as John passed beer around to the guards and took the case into the kitchen. He began strumming the opening to Loves Me Like A Rock. “Who’s going to sing along?”

No one looked interested.

“Come on, loosen up! Everybody knows this song. You guys gotta live a little. Didn’t any of you go to college?”

A few mumbled ‘yes’s’ came back.

“Well, everyone does this in college, right? So lighten up, slam down some beer, and let’s go.”

“All the beer you can drink for anyone who sings along. I’m in.” John said to help out. “Who knows, a bunch of drunken fools just might have a little fun.”

John had to swear on his life that the beer would keep coming before three of them finally agreed. The other two had to go home to their families. Mike started singing and everyone joined in, singing back-up.

“I like your voice.” John said to Mike. “It’s different.”

“You’re interrupting the song.” Mike said, repeating the current stanza.

Everyone but Mike was hesitant at first, but loosened up after a few beers. Soon they were all laughing more than they were singing, especially after Mike tried to play My Ding-A-Ling. They laughed, choked, and drank their way through it after several stops to catch their collective breath. After about an hour they were all pretty sauced, and Mike had to give up on the guitar. He couldn’t hit two right notes in a row.

The guards indicated that it was time for them to go home. Mike told them in no uncertain terms that they were welcome to leave after they had sobered up, or after they found someone to drive them. John advised them not to argue and they went downstairs to watch TV in the den. Mike picked the guitar back up and picked at it absently.

“I haven’t done that in years.”

“Neither have I.” John said, flopping onto the couch. “Now I am drunk.”

“You guys sound like a chorus of falling rock.”

“We weren’t that bad, were we?”

“No, I’m just kidding. You do have a deep voice, though.”

“It’s a manly voice!” John declared with a flourish.

“Speaking of voices, are there any female celebrities? You know, pop stars or anything like that? Doug did say that they live once in a while. I hardly think they’d be secretaries.”

“Only a couple that I know of. Do you have a band called Heart where you come from?”

“Yeah, Ann and Nancy Wilson.”

“Right. Neither of them ever got pregnant. As for their voices, they definitely sound like no one else. Oh, there’s a famous actress or two.”

“What are their songs like lyrically? I doubt that they would sing about anything intimate, being women in your society.”

“Believe it or not, they sing about the same things men do. Of course, they only go so far. The rest of the band are guys, so you could consider it singing in the third person.”

“Can I ask you a delicate question?”

“Sure.” John said, rolling onto his back.

“I know there aren’t a lot of adult females, but do they, you know, have any sex drive?”

“No. They lose that after puberty.”

“Oh.”

“You weren’t thinking…”

“No, I wasn’t. But now that you mention it…”

“Hey! Enough of that!” John said, shuddering. “You could probably get arrested just for thinking it.”

“I’m kidding! Relax!” Mike said quickly, laughing as his head spun. He had entirely too much to drink. “I wish the room would hold still.”

“You know, they say that sex is a good cure for over-indulgence.” John provided with a wink.

Mike did a double-take. "You were trying to get me drunk!"

"Was not!" John countered.

"Was too." Mike said smugly, crossing his arms.

"Was not."

"Was too."

"Was not."

"Was too a million times."

"Damn it!"

"I win." Mike said, casting his gaze at the ceiling.

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did...damn it! You know I wouldn't take advantage of you. I know we have to take this slowly."

"Assuming something?"

John blinked, the alcohol slowing his thoughts. He blushed when he realized what he had said. "No, of course not. I mean..."

Mike waved him off. "Sorry I brought it up. But then again, if it was anybody..." He stopped himself, realizing that he had gone too far again. Damn this beer! Time to change the subject. "I wonder what this manager Steve found me is going to have to say in the morning."

John let it drop. "My guess is that he'll want to find out what kind of things you want to do. He'll have some ideas of his own, I'm sure. From what Doug said, the guy was bananas. He'll probably have a lawyer and a contract with him when he gets here."

"Just as long as he doesn't expect me to do porno." Mike said, pointing below his waist. "This stays covered."

John laughed, shaking his head and rolling onto his side. "I doubt he'll want to go that far. I bet it would sell magazines, though. I'd buy one."

"Of course you would. You're a satyr. I guess they might sell. I don't know."

"You still don't believe that you're attractive, do you?"

"Not really. I'm used to being thoroughly average."

"Here's something I haven't thought to ask;" John began, sitting up and twitching his ears. "What do you think of us?"

"I wish I had an easy answer to that." Mike said, trying to collect his thoughts. The beer was making it difficult, and he didn't want to say something he would regret.

"Handsome? Ugly? Monstrous? Exotic?"

Better tread lightly, Tonto. "Well, tell me this; how do you see yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"On a scale of one to ten, how do you think you rate?"

John grinned sheepishly. "I don't know."

"Come on, everyone has an opinion of themselves. I think that, as a human, I'm fairly good looking. Give me something to work with."

"Okay, if you insist. I guess I'm pretty good looking. I'm not going to break hearts at first glance, but I don't think I'm ugly. I keep in shape, too."

"Yeah, I noticed." Mike mused. This was going to be hard, and he knew that John wasn't going to let him slip out of it.

"Well?"

An easy out popped to mind in the nick of time and he ran with it. "Do you remember what Doug said about physical presence and that sort of thing? I guess it's about the same way with you."

"Yeah, but how do we look?"

"I'm trying not to judge your appearance in human terms."

"How do we look by human standards?" John asked with a loud burp.

“That isn’t really a factor, is it?”

“Sure, if that’s the basis of your opinion. I admit that I judge your looks that way. I can’t help it; the differences are too obvious to overlook. I will say this, though; I see you as a person, not as a wolf in a costume or a monster.”

“I don’t know how to answer without insulting you.”

“Why?”

“Well, hell,” Mike sighed, trying to phrase his answer carefully, “You look, I don’t know, like...”

“What? Monsters?”

Mike shook his head.

“Aliens?”

“No.”

“Animals?”

Mike blew it. He had reacted to that last suggestion, and John couldn’t help but notice.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” he asked, anger creeping into this voice. His hackles started raising. “You think we’re animals.”

So much for my easy out, Mike thought. He tried to regroup. He genuinely liked John, and he didn’t want to insult him. John was the only friend he had. “No!” he said vehemently. “Not...quite. I mean, I know you’re not animals, but it’s hard for me not to perceive you that way. I’m getting better, believe me; but, well, don’t you see that in yourselves? Every time you see a picture of a wolf, I mean lupe, don’t you see the resemblance? Can’t you see how this could be hard for me?”

“Talking lupes! That’s what we are to you.” John said angrily, standing unsteadily and walking toward the hallway. Mike got up and rushed over to him. Grabbing an arm, he swung John around to face him.

“John, look at me! John, you’re the only friend I have! I don’t want you to start hating me over something petty like this.”

“Petty!”

“Look, I’m trying to adjust to this. You’re putting words in my mouth. I hate that! I know you’re not animals. I know that you have intelligence, souls, and feelings. The fact that yours were just hurt proves that.”

John’s expression softened and his ears and hackles returned to their normal positions. Mike almost giggled as the short whiskers on his snout moved forward.

“Listen,” Mike continued with a soft sigh, “I’m not very good at putting my thoughts into words. What I said was, I don’t know, a verbal rough draft. The thoughts behind what I said are much more complex. I can’t just say that you remind me of a lupe and leave it at that. I don’t know what to say.” He let go of John’s arm and looked at the furry, sandaled feet. “I don’t know how to say what I feel.”

John clasped his upper arms lightly. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have gotten mad. I keep forgetting that this is a lot harder for you than any of us. As a matter of fact, we don’t waste our time denying that we resemble lupes. It just sounded wrong coming from you. I was way out of line.”

Mike looked back up. “I should be the one to say I’m sorry. I guess I was a little insensitive. Truce?”

“Truce.” John agreed as an odd, familiar look crept onto his face. His furry head moved forward ever so slightly.

Mike knew what was coming, and looked back down quickly. His vision spun again and he back away, casting for something to say. John let go and dropped his arms.

“I know it’s early, but I think I better go to bed. I’m still drunk, and being hung over probably wouldn’t sit too well with my future manager.” Mike said, walking over to the love seat and picking up the guitar.

John was still standing where he had left him. “Mike, I need to tell you something. Since I’ve...”

“Don’t, John.” Mike said, interrupting him.

“But I want to tell you...”

“Don’t say anything.” he interrupted again, moving past him toward the bedrooms. “I’m too drunk and I’m not

thinking. Just...let it go.”

John watched him disappear into the master bedroom, the door closing softly behind him. He sighed, walked over to the couch, and sat down with a huff.

He mentally slapped himself. He had just been about to tell Mike that he was starting to feel a little more than friendship.

Damn it, he knew it was too soon for that! He knew that Mike could not possibly be ready for that yet, even if the feelings might one day be mutual. All of that beer had made him forsake caution and force Mike into a situation he couldn't deal with. He had actually tried to kiss him!

It had never occurred to him that he was the only real friend Mike had. Aside from being a generation older, Doug was too clinically detached to be considered a friend. It suddenly became clear just how important their friendship was to Mike. At the moment, John was the only constant in his life.

He made a silent vow to do nothing more to jeopardize that, following with a short prayer. That done, he picked up the remote control and flipped through the channels for a few minutes. He found nothing worth watching and was having trouble focusing anyway. Eventually, he rose and went to bed, trying to ignore his sudden arousal.

## CHAPTER VI

He arose early in spite of the inebriation of the night before. He put on a short robe and stepped into the hall. Mike's door was still closed and he heard the sound of his shower running. He went into the kitchen, putting on some coffee and glancing at the clock. It read eight-thirty.

“I'm rebounding,” he thought aloud, watching coffee run into the pot. Keith had left a deeper scar than he had originally thought. The fact that he still missed his company annoyed him. Keith had been a good actor, because he had obviously never felt a damn thing for him. He glanced into the robe at his muscular torso. Keith had surely been after nothing more than his body. He almost couldn't blame him. John had no trouble admitting that he had a fantastic body. The fur on his chest was three inches long, thinning and tapering to one inch on his stomach and growing back out as it reached his thighs. Regular trips to the barber kept it all neat and even.

The muscles underneath were hard and well defined. What lay below the cloth belt was equally desirable.

That still didn't change the fact that Keith was a cold-hearted snake. He knew what John had been feeling for him and had made no effort to let him down lightly. “No sex, no Keith.” had been the gist of his announcement. John had told him that he wasn't interested in pre-engagement sex. Well, interested, but not willing. Keith had tried to seduce him, claiming that John didn't love him. He had seen right through that. It was childish and more than a little transparent. Keith had stormed out and never returned. Two days later John found out about his exploits during his late “trips to the library.” Tramp.

“Forget everything good that I ever said about Keith,” he had told his father the next day. His dad had been his usual understanding self, chiding him for not dating another Christian to begin with. John had assured him that he wouldn't make the same mistake twice.

He thought about Keith some more as the pot filled. He couldn't remember a single good thing about him. All of the affection and meaningful words had been exposed for what they were; a ploy to get into his pants.

“I'm not rebounding,” he said to himself as the memories cleared his doubts. He realized what Keith was, and left it at that. The fact that he had fallen so hard for him was his own fault. Mike, on the other hand, was many times over the man Keith was.

He grabbed two mugs from the cupboard and poured himself one. A bleary-eyed Mike came down the hall, wearing an identical robe. "Sleep well?" John asked.

"Right up until the point when I puked my guts out."

John smiled. "I heard. How're you feeling?"

"I'll be better after some of this coffee." Mike answered, accepting the mug from John. They went into the dining room and sat down. "Do you always look like that in the morning?"

John looked down at himself. His fur was a tangled mess. He claw-combed an arm half-heartedly. "Yeah, I guess so. I'll be back to my well-groomed self after a good shower."

"How long does it take you to dry off?"

"Not long, I brought my fur dryer."

"Fur dryer. Right."

"Are you going to cut the fur on your face today?"

Mike rubbed his cheeks and neck, feeling the sparse stubble. "Yup."

"Why don't you let it grow?"

"Because it makes me look ten years older."

"To us it would just make you look more normal. Isn't that surgical shaver clumsy, anyway?"

"Yeah, but you don't understand. It's rough and sparse. Makes me look like a wino."

John laughed, then winced, putting a hand to his forehead.

"I suppose I could grow a mustache. No, on the other hand, they're too much trouble and I probably wouldn't look right with one."

"What's a mustache?"

"I guess I should explain how the hair grows on a human face." He traced a line around his stubble, explaining beard growth while they drank their coffee. "See the stubble above my lip?"

"Yeah."

"If I let that grow, cutting it off at the corners of my mouth, I'd have a mustache."

"You mean just a patch of fur under your nose?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because it looks good on some people."

"Whatever you say. It sounds pretty weird to me."

"I saw that stuff in your bathroom. Don't you trim the fur on your face?"

"Yeah."

"Well, there you go."

"Okay, touché. But then again, we're not interfering with nature, just straightening things up. It's kind of funny how backwards you can be."

"How's that?"

"You grow little patches of fur at all the wrong places, except your head and face, and then you cut that off."

"What do you mean by 'all the wrong places?'"

In answer, John wiggled an arm out of his robe and lifted it over his head. His armpit was bare, the long fur thinning around it. "We don't grow any down, uh, there, either." he said, nodding under the table.

"I'll try to keep that in mind." Mike said, smiling and shaking his head. "Does the word 'uncouth' mean anything to you?"

"Sorry." John said, slightly embarrassed, "That's just the zoologist in me. He notices things like that."

"Tell him that he's a pervert."

"Is not! Am not! I'm just...thorough."

"Are too."

"Am not."

“Are too.”

“I’m not going through this again. It’s not my fault that your fur is backwards.”

“It’s not backwards, it’s just right.”

“...and so curly!”

“John! What did you do, count the hairs in my sleep?”

“Four hundred and fifty...”

“You didn’t!”

“No!” John exclaimed, laughing.

Mike grabbed John’s mug and went into the kitchen for refills.

“They’re coming with my stuff today.” John called in to him.

“Already? Where are they going to put everything?”

”Assuming they didn’t break all of it in my absence, I guess we’ll stash most of it into the spare rooms downstairs. Thanks.” he added as Mike handed him his mug. “I hated not being able to be there when they packed it all. Do you think I should set the stereo up downstairs?”

“Yeah. Oh, by the way, I was watching MTV while you were getting your stuff last night. I saw half a dozen bands that I’ve never heard of. Also, bands that I know are on the countdown never showed. They weren’t just nobody bands, either. I’m talking about platinum sellers. I wonder how many bands I know that you don’t.”

“Name one.”

“Here’s a really big one; Def Leppard.”

“Deaf Leopard? Never heard of them. What kind of band are they?”

“Hard rock. Their last two albums combined for about fourteen million copies.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, and a couple of the bands I didn’t recognize looked pretty big, too.”

“Like who?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Hey!” John said suddenly, perking up. “If they don’t exist here, why don’t you record their stuff? It would make your writing an lot easier. At the very least, you wouldn’t have to worry about material.”

“I hadn’t considered that. It wouldn’t exactly be right, would it? I don’t want to pass someone else’s stuff off as my own.”

“Technically, you wouldn’t be because they don’t exist. Who’s stuff would you be plagiarizing?”

“Def Leppard’s.”

“Who? I’ve never heard of them.”

Mike sat back thoughtfully. “I don’t know. I’d still feel guilty.”

“So change the songs a little. Add your own touch. You could rewrite them any way you wanted to. Some of them might not even be the same songs anymore. A sculptor has to start with a well-shaped piece of rock, right?”

“You do have a point.” Mike conceded. “I’d have to write them from memory anyway. There’s no way I could get everything exactly right even if I wanted to.”

“You could also add your own songs. Just write them in the same style.”

“I’d have to change the lyrics substantially.” Mike mumbled, rubbing his chin. “Maybe you’re right.”

”I’m always right.” John said, smiling. “And if you still feel guilty, which you shouldn’t, you can always explain it in the credits. I don’t think you should, though. Just take the credit. You have to have the talent to write them from memory in the first place.”

The phone rang. A guard who was making toast in the kitchen picked it up. “Mike, it’s for you. Dr. Sullivan.”

Mike got up and walked into the kitchen, taking the phone with a mumbled thanks. “Howdy.”

“Good morning. How are you?”

“Mildly hung over, but I’ll live.”

“You better drink lots of coffee, then. Steve, myself, Mr. Cole and Mr. Hise will be there in about an hour.”

“Who?”

“Gordon Cole is your prospective manager and Aaron Hise is a lawyer.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll be fine. I’m starting to wake up.”

“Can you get John for me?”

“Hold on.” He called John in and went back to his coffee.

“Hi Doug.”

“Hi. Don’t tell me you’re hung over, too.”

“Not really, I got plenty of sleep.”

“Good. Well, anything worth reporting regarding our furless friend?”

John filled him in on last night and this morning, omitting the more personal details.

“A patch of fur under his nose?”

“That’s what I said, but he got even when I told him that we trim our snouts.”

Doug hurrumphed. “He would find something. Okay, if that’s all you have, I guess that I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

“Okay, see you then.” He hung up and grabbed his mug, downing the rest of his coffee. He headed back to his bedroom. “If I want to look presentable in an hour I better hit the shower.”

“I suppose I should get dressed. What should I wear?” Mike asked as he followed him.

“Put on a light shirt and don’t wear the winter pants.”

“I have light shirts? They all look light to me.”

“Try the, um, red one. Make sure the pants match.”

“Yes, mother.”

“Mother?” John asked, casting a glance over his shoulder. “Oh, that’s right.”

“Sorry. Yes, father.”

Mike started putting his clothes away as he hunted through the box for his red shirt. He put it on the bed with a black pair of shorts and white underwear. He had just finished unpacking when a knock sounded on the door jamb.

It was John, and he was soaking wet. A towel was wrapped around his waist. Mike laughed. His long fur was plastered down, making him look skinnier. It also made his powerful build more obvious. “You look like a drowned rat.”

He was holding a pair of black sandals, which he held up. “Stop laughing or I’ll jump on you and get you all wet. I wanted to give these to you before I forget. I have an extra pair. Now you won’t have to wear those stuffy sneakers all of the time.”

Mike walked over and took the sandals. They had a soft plastic sole and leather straps. “They’re a little big on me, so they should fit.”

“Thanks. When can I go shopping so I can stop borrowing your clothes?”

“Good question. You’ll have to ask Doug or Steve when they get here. Now I have to get back to the bathroom before I dry like this.”

He left and Mike started dressing. The shorts, which they called just plain pants, were baggy and ended just above his knees. He wondered what they would consider shorts. Short shorts were probably reserved for lingerie, or whatever passed for it here.

It took him three tries to get the shirt on right. It had so many open areas that it was difficult to find which ones to stick his appendages through.

The back was completely open. The sides were solid, curving around to a wavy, seven-inch wide opening from neck to bottom. A seam ran around the waist to hold everything together. It was held up by two thin strips running from

shoulder to shoulder along the front and back of his neck. The sleeves just covered his shoulders. It, like the pants, hung loosely.

It took another minute to figure out the sandals, since he had never worn them before. The straps had to be crossed over the ankles, Roman-style, and buckled. The loosest notch felt comfortable.

As he left his room, he heard the hair - no, fur dryer - stop. As he passed the bathroom door, he heard John cry out in dismay. "Are you all right?" he called, knocking on the door.

"No!" John called back.

Thinking something was wrong, Mike opened the door. John was standing naked in front of the mirror. His back was bent at an impossible angle, his face close to his groin and almost upside-down. He was staring at a faded white spot about two-thirds of the way up the inside of his right thigh. Mike averted his gaze.

"My spot is fading!" John cried. He saw Mike staring into the shower stall and grabbed a towel, covering himself self-consciously.

"God, John, I thought you were hurt or something." Mike said, unable to resist a smile as he looked back at John.

"My spot's fading, and you just stand there laughing at me."

"I'm sorry." Mike said, smiling more. "I didn't know it was so important to you. What's so bad about a spot fading?"

"Well, look at it!" John whined, holding out his leg and keeping his privates covered.

Mike looked. It was oblong, about six inches in length, and ended just below where his groin would be had it not been covered. Dark brown hairs had begun invading the white. "I take it this is significant."

John sighed, grabbing a pair of underwear and slipping them on. Mike felt that he took a little longer than necessary doing it. He couldn't help a quick glance at John's large, hairless scrotum. He was almost jealous of the size of it. He quickly looked away.

Thus covered, John went back to examining the spot, running a claw through it. "It's not that bad, I guess. It's just that..." he sighed again, shaking his upside-down head. "Well, everyone always thought it was cute. Now it's fading."

"Everyone?"

John turned his head to him without straightening. Mike smiled at the sight. John stood erect before speaking. "I'm not a slut, but I'm not a virgin either."

Still smiling, Mike shook his head and left, heading to the kitchen. He grabbed a pen and pad from beside the phone and sat down at the dining room table. He started making a list of equipment he needed, writing the approximate price for each item.

John came in a few minutes later, dressed casually for a werewolf. He had on a white shirt that matched the cut of Mike's and blue shorts. He looked over Mike's shoulder at the list and made a sound similar to a whistle. "You don't work cheap, do you?"

"It's the same stuff I had before." Mike answered as John's furry head moved closer to his. "It took me a while to save up for it all. But hey, I'm not going to make good music playing on junk. Was that a whistle?"

"It was a good whistle." John said defensively, moving into the chair beside him and shuffling close.

"This is a good whistle." Mike countered, whistling a few notes.

"You sound like a bird!" John said with a laugh.

"That's the point! What are you supposed to sound like, a vacuum cleaner?"

"I resent that!"

“Mine’s better than yours.”

“No it’s not.”

“Is too.”

“Is not.”

“Is too.”

“Will you stop!”

“If your tongue didn’t weigh five pounds you could probably manage a decent whistle.”

“I resent that, too! My tongue is just fine the way it is.” John said in mock indignation, clapping Mike on the back of his head.

Mike just laughed. “I win.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes I do.”

“No you don’t!”

“Yes I do.”

“Damn it!”

Mike laughed and continued his list. When he finished, he turned to John, who had been staring at him while he wrote. “You don’t think I’m imposing, do you?” he asked, waving a hand in John’s face.

“It seems reasonable to me. They can always make you pay them back when you start making money.” John answered, turning an ear toward the front of the house. “There’s a car pulling up.”

“I didn’t hear it.”

“I thought your hearing was as good as ours.”

”I was wearing those bizarre headphones for the hearing test, remember? The ones we had to break to get to fit? My ears can’t gather outside sounds like yours can. Being able to turn yours around like you do is a big help.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.” John mused as they reached the landing at the front door. “I’ll have to tell Doug.”

The door opened and Doug, Steve, and two other werewolves walked in. John and Mike gave them room as they came up the short stairway.

“Good morning John, Mike.” Steve said, gesturing to the two strangers. “This is Gordon Cole and Aaron Hise.”

Mike shook their hands, smiling and making an effort to appear harmless. In spite of his efforts, both seemed intimidated.

Gordon was slim and about five-foot-five. His fur was shorter than John’s and a uniform dark gray in color. Aaron was about the same height and slightly chubby. His fur was again shorter than John’s and mostly dark brown.

Mike tried to break the ice. “We’ve got some coffee if you guys would like some.”

“Thanks, I would.” Gordon said nervously, staring at him and sniffing.

“No thank you.” Aaron answered, mirroring Gordon’s actions.

“Well,” Mike began, heading into the kitchen, “Shall we get down to business? Cream or sugar?”

“Black, please.”

“Let’s have a seat in the living room, shall we?” Steve prompted, steering everyone in.

Mike came out with Gordon’s coffee. Gordon, Aaron, and Doug sat on the couch. John was in the love seat and Steve seated himself in the lounge chair. Mike handed Gordon his coffee and sat beside John.

Everyone seemed itchy and the silence dragged on for a few seconds as the two new recruits stared at him. Gordon seemed to have forgotten his coffee.

“We’re never going to get anywhere if these guys don’t lighten up,” Mike thought to himself. John saved them from any further discomfort, albeit at Mike’s expense.

“He wants to do porno.”

Everyone started and John laughed.

“Do not!” Mike said hurriedly, elbowing John in the ribs.

That seemed to relax them and Mike gave John a grateful glance. Gordon remembered his coffee and took a small sip before speaking.

“Well, I guess we can start by, uh, telling you a little about Aaron and myself. I’m a certified agent and manager. Currently, I represent two models and one pop band. I work for Major Talents Unlimited. I get paid on commission, so I don’t make money unless you do. My cut is usually fifteen percent. Working on commission helps to keep me honest and forces me to work hard.” He took another sip of coffee before continuing. “Aaron here is a contract lawyer from a consulting firm. He’ll be writing and legalizing the actual contracts for us; that is, if you’re interested. He doesn’t work for me or the agency, so you can be assured that he is impartial. The contract for us will be fair to both and any contracts we do on your behalf will also be done impartially.”

“It sounds good so far.”

“Have you thought at all about what you want to do? Except porno, of course.” Gordon asked with a smile. Mike smiled back. “Not a whole lot. Up until now, I haven’t been taking this whole idea too seriously. Now, that’s not entirely true.” he hastened to add, “I just haven’t had any idea of where to start.”

“Let me make a few suggestions, if I may.” Gordon said, warming to the subject. He pulled a slip of paper from his briefcase. “I can see us making a lot of money and making you more famous than you ever thought possible. Just about anything you do is going to sell, believe me. There’s always going to be a certain amount of notoriety associated with you, but notoriety alone doesn’t make much money. What I suggest is that we start out slowly. A little modeling for a magazine or clothing manufacturer would be a good place to start. Commercials can’t be too far away. I know a company or two that would jump at the chance. We could even combine the two and have you do posters to advertise clothing. It would be even better to get you in as a representative for a line of clothes, like Michael Jordan and Nike. We could have you model shirts, pants, and that sort of thing. What do you think?”

“Sounds like fun. There would be one condition, though.”

“Yes?” Aaron asked, producing his own note pad.

“I have to have the final say in who I do or do not advertise for. I imagine that you don’t usually work that way, but there are things I simply refuse to associate myself with in that regard.”

“Such as?”

“First let me say that I have no idea if any of these would even be interested. But, given, the offer, I won’t have any part of some people.”

“I’m not going to push a product when I use the same thing from their competition. For instance; I use Castrol motor oil, so I wouldn’t do a commercial for Mobil. I know I’m not going to be advertising oil, but you get my point. I won’t do Ford. I hate Fords. I won’t do cigarettes, beer, booze, trucks - I hate trucks - or stupid stuff like toothpaste, cooking oil, and that sort of thing. Am I blowing it?”

“No.” Gordon said quickly. It was obvious that he wanted Mike to sigh very badly. “Most people in your position have similar feelings. We always try to work around them, and we still have a lot to work with. Is it true that you owned an Eagle Talon? I’ve worked with Chrysler before. Do you think you would like to eventually do a commercial for Eagle? I’m sure they would be interested.”

“I’d do one for them tomorrow. I loved my Talon.”

“Great, I’ll call them first thing. The Talon’s a sports car, and I thought of a good idea already. I think it’s got merit. I was really hoping you would be willing to do that.”

“I’d have to sell them on the idea, of course. My idea is to have a guy walk up to the car and get in. As the view switches to the cockpit, we’d fade you in. You would drive the car around while we filmed a few shots of you slamming gears, yanking the wheel, and generally having a blast and looking wild. As the car stops, we’d fade you out when the driver climbs from the car. Then we’d have an off-camera voice say something catchy.”

“I’d actually get to drive?”

“Yes. It would be important to see the scenery moving outside the car. Actually, to amend what I said earlier, it would be more effective to have you climb out of the car, lean against it, and then fade you back to a wolf. Yes! That would be perfect!”

“Assuming that they would want to do it.” Mike said doubtfully.

“Oh, I’m sure they will. It’s a perfect idea. You’re image fits it to a tee.”

“How much do you think they would be willing to pay?”

Gordon looked at Aaron.

“Well, for a commercial, I’d say about sixty grand,” Aaron began, “But they don’t like to work that way. They usually want to go for a multi-commercial deal which, by the way, would be better for you. That would mean money in the six figure territory. In your case, they’d be willing to pay big.”

“Six figures!” Mike said, whistling. Four sets of ears jumped.

“That was a whistle.” John said with a smile.

“It sounded like a bird.”

John elbowed Mike, who elbowed him back and whispered. “Vacuum.”

“Vacuum?” Aaron asked.

Mike hadn’t expected them to hear. He decided to be careful about that from now on.

“He thinks our whistles sound like vacuums.” John said.

“Oh.”

“Do you really think they’d be willing to fork out that much money?” Mike asked Gordon, getting the conversation back on track. “It’s not like they need to. Those cars are selling like hotcakes as it is, and I’m hardly an established quantity.”

“That’s exactly why they will want to.” Gordon answered. “They’ll want to advertise more to keep their market share. Signing you would give them truly one-of-a-kind advertising. Your commercials would bring people into dealers like a free body trim.”

“Body trim?” Mike asked, laughing loudly. He imagined a werewolf sitting in a barber’s chair while the barber trimmed fur from his chest. He continued laughing as the image played out.

“What’s so funny?” Gordon asked, smiling at Mike’s outburst.

“Oh, nothing.” Mike replied as he calmed himself. “It’s just another one of those things.”

“What?” Doug asked. “Tell us.”

“I just imagined one of you sitting in a chair getting trimmed.” Mike admitted, laughing some more. “Sorry, I can’t help it.”

“What about your music?” John asked him when he stopped laughing.

“Oh, that’s right!” Gordon exclaimed. “A rock band fronted by a wereman! Sorry,” he added quickly, “I meant a rock band fronted by a guy who looks like a wereman. No, I mean...”

“Don’t fret it.” Mike said, waving him off. “I’m getting used to it.”

“Do you have anything written yet?”

“I haven’t had the time. I do have a lot of songs in my head, though. All I have to do is get some instruments and stuff and get them down on paper.” he replied with a meaningful glance at John.

“Did you make a list?” Steve asked.

“It’s on the dining room table.”

Steve got up and fetched it. “That’s a lot of money.”

“So’s these possibilities Gordon is throwing at me. Oh, by the way, did you ever get that stuff for me?”

“I left them in the car.” Steve answered, motioning for one of his men to get them.

“What did you get?”

“A driver’s license, social security card, birth certificate, immunization and medical records, a Visa, a savings account and a checking account. You’ll have to sign off on most of it.”

“What’s my Visa limit?”

“Twenty-five hundred.”

“Not bad. I guess it pays to have friends in high places. Thanks.”

“This could be great!” Gordon exclaimed, looking around the room. “Can you imagine the public reaction when we pop a commercial on them totally unannounced? No one’s seen you since that press conference.”

“I’m going to be seen again before we have time to film any commercial.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked warily.

“I’m not staying cooped up in here twenty-four hours a day. It’s a nice day and I intend to spend most of it in the yard. I need to exercise, too. If I’m going to be a model, I can’t let myself get out of shape.”

“No harm in that.” Doug said. “It ought to make tomorrow’s paper more interesting.”

“Crazed wereman escapes, rampages through yard.” John said dramatically.

“Yeah, right.”

“So, Mike, what do you think?” Gordon asked. “We’ll see about the commercial and some other things, and go on from there. When word gets out that you’ll be starting a band, we’ll have to do interviews. I would like to hold off on that, though. Sound good?”

Mike sighed as he thought of what he was doing. The scope of it all was beyond anything he had ever imagined. But he had to make a living, and if this was his chance he might as well grab it. “Okay. God, this is weird. It’s all happening so fast. I guess we have some paperwork to do?”

“Great!” Gordon said as he stood.

They went into the dining room, sitting around the table. On his way in, a guard handed Mike a thick manila envelope.

He opened it on the table and removed a wad of documents. “I need a wallet.”

“I’ll get you one later today.” John offered.

“Thanks for the offer, John, but you’ve spent enough on me already.” He glanced at Gordon before continuing, shuffling through the papers. “I want control of my life, too. I will not be led around by the nose, okay? I may be new at this, but I’m not naive.”

“We can work all that out right now.”

Steve turned to John. “Sounds like your stuff is here.”

“Sure is.” John agreed, standing. Mike looked and saw a small moving van pulling into the driveway. The driver waved at the guard, flashing an FBI badge.

The rest of them spent the next couple of hours hashing out a rough draft for the contract, talking over sandwiches at lunch time. Most of their effort was spent on details, since a standard contract had already been written. John spent the time with a guard, moving his stuff into the basement. He joined them just as they were finishing, at about two o’clock.

“Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to get back to the office and draft this thing up.” Aaron said, standing and stuffing the rough draft into his briefcase.

“You mean you’re going to make it incomprehensible.” Mike said sarcastically.

“But always fair. You drive a mean bargain.”

“I have to go, too.” Gordon said. “I’m going to spend the rest of the day on the phone.” He shook Mike’s hand enthusiastically, his earlier discomfort forgotten. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Good luck.”

“Luck is not a factor.” he replied happily as he followed Aaron out.

“You’re going to be a very wealthy monster if this works out.” Doug said with a smile.

“If. There are entirely too many ‘ifs’ in my life. If they’re interested, if the public goes for it, if the posters sell, if I would only wake up.”

“I’m sure it will all work out.” John said, clapping him on the shoulder. “I told you already that you’re irresistible.”

“If you say so. Need any help with your stuff?”

“Nope. We’ve got everything put away.”

“In that case, I’m going outside. I guess I’m going to have to jog in this.” he said, looking down at his clothes. “I’ll need my sneakers, though.” he finished, heading back to his room.

“Jog where?” Steve called after him from the front door.

“Around the yard.” he called back.

He put his sneakers on and headed for the back door. John was waiting for him, sporting an pair of his own.

“Mind if I run with you?”

“If you can keep up.” he answered with a smile as he stepped out.

“You worry about yourself. I’m a physical god.”

They took their shirts off, draping them over the railing on the back porch. The day was sunny and no clouds were in sight. Mike guessed the temperature to be about seventy or so.

He started stretching, John doing likewise. He was a little stiffer than usual, but his body had recovered from the events of ten days ago. He glanced at John. The sun gleamed on his fur, highlighting the long hairs on his shoulders and upper back. Ten days! he thought as his mind caught up with him. It seems like a lifetime ago.

“What was that?” John asked.

“I just realized that I’ve been here ten days, now. It seems like forever.”

“I can imagine.”

“Hmm.” Mike mumbled, poking experimentally at John’s chest and stomach, “Been working out, John?”

John looked down at himself, smiling as Mike lifted an arm and felt the triceps there. “Yeah, a lot. Not so much lately. You’ve been keeping me busy.”

“Your fur’s softer than I thought it would be.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re not as cuddly as a bunny rabbit, but it’s softer than, say, a dog’s.”

“It better be.”

“What do you do to keep yourself looking like this?”

“The muscle or the fur?”

“Muscle.”

John explained his routine as they continued stretching.

“So you don’t want any more bulk?”

“No, I’ve got myself right where I want to be. I’m just trying to keep what I have. How do you manage to stay so ripped?”

“You’re as ripped as I am. Your waist is painfully slim for as wide as your shoulders are.”

“What do you do?”

“Bore myself silly with repetitions. I keep the muscle groups isolated and nautilus equipment seems to work best for me.”

“Me too. I wonder if there’s any way to get you access to a gym?”

“I doubt it.” Mike said. “Are you ready?”

“Ready to watch you collapse into a heap.”

“No chance.”

The lot was a good two acres, and they jogged the perimeter. John jogged on the inside, making room for Mike as they passed a guard every fifty yards or so.

“How many men do they usually have out here?” Mike huffed.

“Not this many, usually.” John huffed back. “The guards from inside are out here too since you are.”

They jogged for about thirty minutes. Mike concentrated on his rhythm, feeling his body respond to the exercise. His legs felt strong, pumping steadily without weakening. He breathed in deeply with each inhalation, savoring the

feeling of power his body communicated.

With each circuit of the yard, he saw various lenses pointed their way. They looked on from any vantage point that offered an unobstructed view. He and John rounded the back left corner and started back toward the street.

“Last one back here is a rotten egg!” Mike yelled, taking off at a sprint.

“Hey!” John yelled, running after him.

Mike flew around the yard as fast as he could push himself. The guards flashed past as he ran. Soon he reached the back corner again. He walked in a small circle, his chest heaving. He had underestimated the length of a sprint around a two-acre lot, and was exhausted. He felt ready to pass out.

He smiled as John came running up a few seconds later. Mike had beat him by a good twenty. John was in the same shape he was, panting too hard to speak. His tongue lolled from the side of his mouth like a dog’s, only it wasn’t quite as long.

“Make...sure...you...don’t...bite...that...thing...off.”

“Ha ha.” John replied, using two breaths to form the words.

They walked toward the porch, catching their breaths. “That Mueller wasn’t kidding! You do run like the wind!”

“You didn’t do so bad yourself.” Mike replied, sitting on the grass and stretching again.

“What are you gonna do now?”

”Oh, push-ups, I guess. After that, I’ll do some crunches. I’ll do both until I collapse.”

“After that run?” John gasped.

“I’m going to catch my breath first. Think you can hang?”

“I’ll give it a try.”

They rested for a few minutes, then started their push-ups. John gave out about four long reps before Mike. “You wimp. With arms like that you should have outlasted me. You need more endurance.” Mike said, flopping his around a bit.

“Give me a break.”

They rested for another minute before beginning the crunches. Mike went first with John holding his feet down.

“How many are you going to do, roughly?”

“I don’t know. I never count.” He started, closing his eyes after a few so he wouldn’t see John staring. He didn’t really blame him. It was his nature, after all. Eventually, he squeezed out one more painful rep and fell back, his stomach burning. He barely had the strength left to breath. “Did you count?”

“I lost count a long time ago.” John said. “I got bored.”

“Or ran out of fingers.”

“They way you bite your claws all of the time, you’re lucky to have fingers. Now get up and hold my feet.”

“I can’t get up.”

John chuckled and pulled him up to his knees. Mike hunched over and grabbed the furry ankles as John lay down.

John followed Mike’s example, collapsing onto his back. “I’m going to hate you for this tomorrow.”

“You’re going to have to do it again tomorrow. Besides, I don’t remember pointing a gun at your head.”

“I do. You bashed a guard and grabbed it, threatening to kill me. All I could do was cower in fear. I’m telling the papers tonight.”

Mike laughed. “Just don’t tell them that I ate him, okay?”

“No deals.”

”I could always eat you.”

“Don’t tease.”

“Well, you just blew it, no pun intended; and I was going to give it to you tonight.” Mike said with a chuckle. He surprised himself by joking like that with a homosexual, but he didn’t think of it as a big deal. He joked like that with his friends occasionally, and John was clear of their respective standings.

John turned to him, smiling. "Any chance I can redeem myself?"

"Well, you could buy me a new Ferrari, Disney Land, and wait on me hand and foot for the rest of the day."

"I'll have to see about the Ferrari part." John said, walking to the back door. "I'll be right back."

Mike stretched some more while he waited for John, finding that he had lost little of his elasticity. John came back out and threw a basketball at him. Mike was caught off guard and merely swatted it aside.

"Oh, this is going to be easy!" John said as Mike chased it down. Mike threw it back as they headed around front to the hoop.

Mike got the ball and stopped about twenty feet out from the hoop, dribbling it playfully. "Ready to get stomped?"

"Let's see what you got, big guy."

Mike charged, feigned right and passed the ball behind his back. He bullied past John and went for a lay-up. The ball hit the rim and John caught it, running back with Mike chasing him.

"Nice move, homeboy, but you have to get the ball in the basket."

John made his basket and the game continued. The neighbors Mike had waived to the night before watched from the street, jockeying for space with a couple of news crews. Most of the guards gathered around also.

John was back-dribbling toward the basket when Mike grabbed him around the waist and picked him up.

"Foul! Help, I'm being fouled!" John yelled, kicking his legs. Mike carried him away from the basket and put him down.

"How did you manage to dribble the wrong way?" Mike asked.

"Cheater!" John yelled as he started dribbling again. Mike stole the ball from him and ran up for a basket.

"I win!"

"You cheated!"

"I don't remember setting down any rules." Mike said smugly.

"No rules, eh?" John asked, running at him.

"It's over!" Mike said, turning and holding the ball tightly. "I won!"

John grabbed his waist and lifted him over his shoulder.

"Put me down!"

"Give me the ball."

"No! I won!"

John began bouncing him on his shoulder.

"Oof! Oof! Stop!" Mike grunted. He dropped the ball. John dropped him and grabbed it, running up and making a basket.

"Tie!"

"I give up." Mike said with a laugh. He sniffed under an arm. "I think I'd better get a shower before I start affecting the weather."

"Is the shower included in the 'wait on you hand and foot' part?"

"No."

"Damn."

They both took a short shower. Mike was rooting in the kitchen cupboards when John came back from his room.

He had toweled off without blowing himself dry and hadn't gone out of his way to look neat.

"Too worn out to groom?"

"No, I just didn't feel like being bothered with it. I don't plan on going anywhere tonight...and who are you to talk?"

he added, pointing to Mike's hair.

John had him there. He hadn't even bothered to comb it, and it was getting long. He shrugged and turned his attention back to the cupboards. "What are you hungry for?"

"Anything that isn't still alive."

"There's some chicken in the freezer. We can defrost that in the microwave. How about some broccoli and...macaroni and cheese?"

"Sounds good." John said as he got the chicken from the freezer. "How do you want the chicken?"

"Marinated in white wine and broiled with green peppers, garlic, and chives."

"How do you want the chicken?"

"Fried, I guess." Mike acquiesced. "Can you fry? I'm pretty lousy at it."

"You can't fry chicken? Damn, neither can I."

"Baked? Ah-hah! Barbecue sauce."

They got everything ready, waiting for the chicken to thaw.

"What's the game tonight?" Mike asked as they put the chicken in the oven.

"Hold on." John said, getting the TV guide from the living room. "The Celtics from hell." he said as he returned. "It should be a good game, though."

"Hey, there's brownie mix in here." Mike said, grabbing the box. "I hate it when that happens. I'm going to have to make it, now."

"I get to lick the bowl." John said quickly.

"No contest there." Mike joked, giving John a shove.

Mike made the batter. When it was mixed, he took a huge spoonful and put it in his mouth, moaning.

"Hey!"

Mike stuck his tongue out.

"Yuck!" John said, then smiled. "But then again, what a kiss that would make. Lay it on me."

Mike punched him and poured the batter into a pan. John grabbed the bowl before he could finish wiping it out.

"Give me that! I'm not done!"

"What fun is licking the bowl if you don't leave anything in it?"

"You're hopeless." Mike said as John's face disappeared into the bowl. "God, I can't watch."

John pulled his head up and stuck out his chocolate-covered tongue, waving it around in front of his snout. "Thure you done wan do dry dat kith?"

Mike shoved the bowl back up to his face, turning to put the noodles on. "Just what I need, a nympho wolf hounding me."

John walked to the sink and filled the bowl with water.

"You're done with that already? You pig!"

"If it was you, we'd still be here this time tomorrow."

"Gives me more time to enjoy it. You have batter on your chin."

John licked it off.

"Well, it's good for something, anyway."

"It's good for a lot of things."

"Satyr."

"I can't help it. I haven't had a boyfriend in two months."

"You said you were good looking. Maybe you aren't trying hard enough."

"Oh, I'm trying." John said, taking the spoon and stirring the noodles.

Mike gave him a sidelong glance as he dumped broccoli into the steamer. He had an idea of who John was talking about. John was about to say something more when a guard walked in.

"You have a visitor." he said, waving Mark into the kitchen.

“Hey Mark, what’s up?” John asked, continuing to stir.

“There’s a special news report on TV about the world you supposedly come from, Mike. They’re playing excerpts from your explanation in the cell.”

“Great.” John sighed. “Now the whole world is going to know about your heterosexuality. I was hoping that wouldn’t come out for a while.”

“From what I hear, it was Mr. Cooper’s idea to do it. I had just finished cataloging the tapes when he asked for the one they’re showing. He said something about not covering anything up and took off.”

“He’s really treading lightly with me, isn’t he?”

“I can understand that. You know how the press would bitch if they found out something important before he told them.” John said.

“Guess what else. There are politicians who are insisting upon meeting you themselves. My guess is that they want to know if you’re a genetically engineered terrorist or not.”

“I’m a computer programmer, not a terrorist. This computer is dead, Jim.”

“Referring to a computer as ‘dead’ is not logical.”

“Spock, you’re such a putz. Hey, that’s a thought. What do Spock’s ears look like?”

“They don’t have any fur and are about nine inches long. His fur’s light green.”

“Oh, I’ve got to see some reruns.” Mike said with a grin.

“So, what’s new with you two?” Mark asked from the fridge.

“I’m going to be a model.” Mike answered.

“Really? For who?”

“Not sure yet.” he answered, jumping as he burned a finger on the steamer. “Maybe Eagle, maybe sportswear, maybe posters, maybe, maybe, maybe.”

“Stop being a pessimist.” John said with a nudge. “They’ll pounce on it.”

“I’ll buy.” Mark said with a loud sniff. “Is that dinner cooking?”

“Yeah, McDonald’s is right down the road.”

“You’re not going to make your best friend eat at McDonald’s with barbecued chicken cooking, are you?”

“Well...”

“Yes, you can eat.” Mike said, taking his finger from his mouth. “How did you know it’s barbecued chicken?”

“We smell better than you, remember?”

“...And your snout gets longer every time you open your mouth.” John added.

“Does not.”

“After that’s eaten, we’ve got what brownie mix John left us for brownies.”

“You’re the one who spooned up half the batter in one bite.”

“I’m the guest of honor, remember? I’m allowed.”

They talked idly as dinner finished cooking. As they ate, Mark filled John in on their work with Jud.

“How did he react when he was caught?” John asked.

“He was scared from all of the catchers surrounding him, but when Doug and I got there he calmed down. After that, it was just a matter of convincing him to stop eating that poor guy’s garbage.”

“Who’s Jud?” Mike asked around a fingertip.

“Stop that!” John said, swatting his hand away. “You’re never going to grow claws if you don’t stop biting them like that.”

“If they grow, they’ll just get brittle and break off. Mine aren’t nearly as hard as yours.” Mike said, switching to another finger.

John growled at him and swatted again, missing. Mike laughed and held a fingernail in his teeth.

“Hopeless.”

“Jud’s the ape we were working on when you showed up. We have a small wing at the zoological park.” Mark

said.

“What does the FBI want with an ape?”

“We’ll never tell.” John said in a conniving tone. “Mainly because we don’t know. Doug knew what the ultimate result was to be, but we weren’t privy to that. We just did what we were told. We have a general idea, but we don’t know the exact details; not that we don’t have some good guesses, though.”

“How did you end up with me?”

“We were available.” John said with a shrug. “We both have degrees in zoology with minors in psychology, and they figured we were probably better equipped to study you than some FBI desk jockey. Of course, you were supposed to be a wereman, not a normal guy. Still, our qualifications fit.”

“Does the FBI recruit a lot of zoologists?”

“Actually, we’re not in the FBI. We just work for them, like any other company. When our work with Jud is done, it’s job hunting.” Mark replied.

“How did he end up in someone’s yard?”

“He got away. I can’t say how. Come to think of it, he’s who Paul and them thought they were looking for when they got that call about you. Personally, I thought it unlikely that he would have wandered that far south. He would have had to be headed there on purpose, and moving fast.”

“Let me guess; that dude in the house.”

“Yup. From what I hear, you scared him shitless. I’m sure the press has gotten their hands on him by now.”

“Not half as much as he scared me. Werewolves instead of weremen.”

“Oh yeah. That’s weird.”

“It’s a lot weirder having to live it, believe me.”

“What do, uh, werewolves do?”

“Basically, they run around when the moon is full and eat people.”

“Sounds like fun.” John said with an evil, fanged grin.

Mike smiled. “Maybe we can hook up for the next one.”

”Just make sure that I’m out of town.”

John turned to Mark. “Wimp.”

“Hell, you’d be the first one we’d look for.” Mike added.

“Yeah, and we’d do you reeeaaal slow.”

Mark looked at Mike. “You’ve been talking to him in his sleep, haven’t you?”

“I’ll never tell.”

“He’s been doing more than talking. I woke up once.”

Mark gaped as John swatted at Mike’s hand again. He stopped chewing and yelled. “John!”

“Do you want to know what he was doing? He had one leg wrapped around my waist...”

“Liar!”

John laughed, gave Mike’s arm a punch, and returned his attention to Mark. “It was great! Of course, I had to pretend that I was still asleep so he wouldn’t eat me.”

“Satyr.” Mike said, picking up his dishes. John and Mark followed with theirs.

“He does have a nice ass, doesn’t he?” Mark asked John as he recalled their first day with Mike.

Mike glared at them over his shoulder. “Wonderful. Now I’ve got two satyrs on my back.”

“We don’t both have to be on your back.”

Mike blanched. “You two are sick.”

“You know what they say; two’s company, three’s, well, uh, even better. You’ll never know until you try.”

Mike’s shoulders tensed, and John caught sight of it. He pressed his snout to Mark’s ear as Mike’s dishes hit the sink. “Watch out. He still gets mad if you go too far. I better change the subject.”

“The first game should be starting about now. Why don’t we do the dishes later?” he said to Mike.

“Good idea.” Mike agreed in a clipped tone. He walked into the living room while Mark and John put their dishes in the sink. When he was out of earshot, John said quietly to Mark, “We ought to tread lightly on that subject for now. He’ll joke about it to a point, but too much and he’ll clam up like a vault.”

“Sorry. I went too far?”

“A little, but it’s not your fault. Don’t worry about it.”

They grabbed a round of beer and joined Mike, who had the game playing. The tense moment was soon forgotten as the three of them got into the game. Doug and Steve came in just as it was ending.

“I’ve got to go.” Mark said as they came in. “I’ve got a date.”

“Who?” John asked.

“Bob Christman. Jealous?”

“A little. See ya later.”

“Yup.”

“Hi Mark.” Doug said as he and Steve walked in. “Hi you two.”

“What’s up?” Mike asked, turning the TV off with the remote. “Isn’t it kind of late?”

“We just stopped by to say hello and maybe talk a little.”

“About what? Gordon is taking care of most everything now.”

“I was thinking more along the lines of your personal life. Have you given any thought to your situation?”

Mike sighed. “Can’t you let that rest for a while? You act as if it’s the only thing that matters.”

“Of course it isn’t. However, it is important; especially now that the general public knows everything about you.”

“I don’t really have anything to say about that right now.”

“He has a sense of humor about it, if that means anything.” John added from the couch.

“That could be good or bad, under the circumstances.”

“I don’t think I’m exactly sure what it is you want.” Mike said, becoming annoyed.

“I want you to take this seriously. We have to be very careful about you. Your appearance is going to make it hard for the general public to accept you as it is. We need to know that you’re making progress.”

“Progress!” Mike exclaimed, his anger flaring. “How can you say that? It’s been, what, ten or eleven days? I can’t believe the gall you have! I will not screw on demand!” He glanced at John before returning his glare to Doug.

“And don’t look at me like that, because I know exactly what you mean by ‘progress!’”

His voice had reached a shout by now. “Have you ever stuck your tongue in a female’s vagina?”

“What!?”

“Have you?”

“You do that?”

“Answer the question.”

“Heavens no!”

“Then don’t expect me to stick a dick in my mouth overnight!”

He stomped away in fury, hitting the wall on the way to his room. Stepping through the door, he slammed it as hard as he could, rattling the frame. Spinning around, he punched it with all of his might. It was a hollow interior door and collapsed where his fist struck.

He paced in a haze of anger, flexing his throbbing hand. The pain only added to his frustration, so he kicked the base of the bed savagely. The headboard slammed loudly into the wall.

He was so infuriated that his eyes began to water. He couldn’t believe what Doug had said. Progress!

He slowed his pacing, pausing long enough to slam his uninjured hand into the dresser, stooping to do so. This time the pain helped to calm him and he slowly counted to ten. He had never been so insulted and angered in his entire life. He had completely lost control. He glanced at the battered door and smiled sheepishly.

He recalled what he had asked Doug and his smile widened. Oral sex with a woman was probably a pretty disgusting

concept for a race of homosexuals to consider.

He sat on the edge of the bed and convinced his breathing to slow.

"I should go talk to him." John said, getting up once his chest had stopped shaking.

"That might be a bad idea." Doug chided, grabbing his arm. As if to reinforce his point, another thud sounded from the bedroom.

"Maybe you're right." John tentatively agreed, sitting back down.

Doug sighed loudly. "He's right, you know. I am pushing. That was a totally rude thing to say. I guess things are going so smoothly that I keep forgetting that he's only been here for a couple of weeks. Today he actually wasn't on the front page of the papers. I should apologize."

"Not now, I hope." Steve said.

Doug smiled. "I'll give him a few minutes to calm down. I've got kids to feed."

"Well, I don't," John said as he stood, "And I need to talk to him." He walked away before they could stop him.

"You should wait!" Doug called after him.

John shook his head and kept walking. "Damn it, Doug, he's just a man!"

Mike glanced at himself in the mirror above the dresser. He looked like hell. His face was still a little flushed and his eyes were red and puffy from the furious tears. There came a quiet knock at the door and he ignored it.

It opened a crack and John's short snout, followed by the rest of his face, peeked in. He saw Mike sitting with his head in his hands and came in, closing the door quietly behind him. He noticed the splintered dent and his eyes widened.

"Not now, John." Mike said, looking up.

John was momentarily speechless. He couldn't get over how beautiful Mike's eyes looked when they were wet. "There's something you have to know."

"Not now!"

"Yes, now!" John said, refusing to back down. "I'm going to talk and you are going to listen. I know you enough not to cower every time you raise your voice. I have something to say. I saw the way you looked at me out there; and after what Doug said, I know what you were thinking. You have to believe me. I wasn't put here to seduce you. If I want you, and damn it, I'm telling you right now that I do; it's because I want to want you. I am not a whore for the FBI. If you weren't who you are I would beat your ass right here and now for even thinking it. But," he finished, lowering his voice, "I see what you're going through. I just want to help you adjust at your own pace. I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy, with whomever it may be with."

Mike toyed with the straps on his sandals, unable to meet John's gaze. "Everything that meant happiness to me is gone."

"Then you'll just have to find new happiness. It's not as hard as it seems. You don't seem like a quitter to me. I know you've lost everything. I can't say that I know how you feel, but I can understand the depth of your pain. I do know that you can be happy here. All you have to do is not give up. Like I said, I can see enough to know that you're not a quitter."

"How about crybaby?" Mike asked with a self-deprecating smile.

"You only need to cry once."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I mean is that I've seen you since day one and you've been taking all of this on your own. I've tried to put myself in your shoes and I know that I could never handle something like this on my own. You need someone,

Mike; whether or not they have fur, fangs, or gonads on the outside. God meant for us to need each other. Let me help you.”

John stepped over and sat close beside him when Mike didn't respond. “Come on, a good hug never hurt anyone.”

“You wouldn't...think anything of it?”

“I'd think of it as giving a friend what he needs. Do I need to say that? Give it a try.”

Mike shook his head slightly and John folded a leg around them. They both felt a bit uncomfortable as they awkwardly embraced.

John had been right. Mike needed someone, anyone, to hold. A fiancé, minister, or good friend were all just as good when you needed someone. He rested his head on John's shoulder, feeling the long fur on his face. Tears again wet his eyes. “It's all happening too fast, John. Too much. I just don't know how to deal with all of this.”

“I know, I know. We'll work it out.”

“God, I miss her.”

John knew this was coming, and petted the back of his head softly. “It's all right.”

“It's like she's dead, you know? It's like they're all dead.” He drew a shuddering breath before going on. “I mean, I know they're not, but it feels that way. I've lost them all. I've lost her.”

John stroked the velvet fur softly. “They'll miss you, but they'll bounce back.” he said quietly.

Mike sniffed. “I lived with my aunt after my parents died. Do you even know what an aunt is?”

“Yeah.”

“She was a mother, too. My cousin was thirty-five or so. She was just like a mother to me.” Mike said, tears rolling down his cheeks and onto John's pelt. “You have no idea what a mother is like. They have a bond with children no father could match. Their love for their children goes deeper than any man could know.” He sniffed again and shifted his grip on John's coat. “I wanted Deb to have that. I wanted to share it with her. Now she's gone...I'm gone. What if she never finds someone? What if she never knows what it's like?”

“She'll know someday.” John whispered, choosing his words with care. “They aren't dead, remember? Try and be glad for her. She's got her whole life to live. She was saved, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then she'll have the strength she needs. They all will. Wish the best for them. Pray for them.”

“I'm getting your fur wet.”

“I don't mind.”

As Mike quietly cried, John thought of how good it felt to hold him. Mike felt warm and strong, even with his lack of fur and present state of mind. He smelled good, too. He found himself wanting to marry him right on the spot.

Mike let his frustrations drain onto John's shoulder. As thoughts of her again invaded his mind, he knew that he was still crushed by his loss. She had been his life, and now he was going to have to spend the rest of it without her. Now he had to spend it with werewolves. He wished that he would wake up and find himself lying beside her, crying into his pillow over some bad dream.

Why me? he cried out in his mind. Why did you do this to me?

A few minutes later he pulled away, wiping his eyes and feeling embarrassed. He looked at John's shoulder and smiled weakly.

“Feel better?”

“Yeah, thanks. I guess I did need that. Your shoulder's a mess.”

John glanced down at the wet patch of fur where his pelt was exposed. “What else are shoulders for?” he asked, picking up a towel from the foot of the bed and rubbing the spot. He tried to ignore the strong smell of Mike on it.

“Look,” Mike began, “Now would be a good time for me to say a prayer. Would you excuse me for a few minutes?”

“Sure, but I’d be glad to join you if you want.”

Mike blinked, momentarily struck by the thought of a werewolf praying. He hadn’t thought to visualize that yet. He shrugged and smiled. “Sure.”

They prayed for a few minutes, asking for strength, guidance, and understanding. When they were done, Mike stood. “Are they still out there?”

“I haven’t heard them leave.”

“I guess I should apologize.”

“You better let Doug go first. He’s feeling pretty criminal.”

They walked back to the living room. Doug and Steve were sitting quietly and sipping coffee. Mike stopped in front of the couch, John beside him, and took a deep breath.

“I’m calm.” he said simply as he sat.

“Mike,” Doug began immediately, “I owe you an apology. I was being narrow-minded and pushy. For ten years I’ve been teaching people exactly how to not do that. I keep forgetting how new all of this is to you; how strange it all must seem. I’m not making excuses, I should have known better. I’m sorry.”

Mike gestured absently. “It’s all right. I just need time to adjust, that’s all. I shouldn’t have lost my temper.”

“He put a hole in the bedroom door.” John added with a chuckle.

“Either way, you may never see the...end result...anyway.” Mike said.

“Why’s that? That is, I mean, if you want to talk about it now.”

“Well, ever since I was born again, it’s been my belief that sex is sacred; a part of marriage. I never touched my fiancé until we were actually engaged. To me, sex isn’t just something you do for fun. Of course, both parties should enjoy themselves. But for me, sex is more than that. It shouldn’t just be a...taking of one another’s pleasure. Sex should be a physical extension or a physical expression of what you feel inside. It should be a culmination of the love you feel, not just of the lust you feel. The feeling should originate inside.”

“Have you ever had sex with someone you didn’t love? That’s all it was - sex. It may have been very good, but there was no real feeling, no real passion.”

He hesitated and took a deep breath before continuing. Everyone was rapt. Without realizing it, he was becoming more and more impassioned as he talked. “That way, it’s just two people performing a biological function;” he continued, “Or in your case, well, I don’t know what you call it. But with someone you love, you, I don’t know, feel each other. You kiss and touch and everything you do is immersed in the - Lord, this is gonna sound tacky - aura of the love you have. There’s no selfishness, no hesitation. You do everything for them and you feel them, love them, and know without a word that they love you too. That’s why I save myself for love. I’m not going to sleep with anyone I don’t love first. That’s why you may never know.”

He sat back, mildly embarrassed. He had surprised himself with his vehemence.

“I do!” John said, fanning himself with a hand.

“Wow.” Doug added, shifting in his seat.

“Can you write that down?” Steve asked with a smile.

Mike blushed furiously. They all sat in silence as it faded.

“You don’t think you could love one of us, given time?” Doug finally asked.

“I just don’t know. That’s why I said that you may never know.”

“Well, you just take your time.” Steve said, getting up. “And now, I’m going home.”

“So am I.” Doug agreed.

“I think I’m in love.” John whispered into Doug’s ear as he walked past.

“Well, bye then.” Mike said as he watched them walk to the door. He looked over at John. “I hope I didn’t scare them off.”

“Let’s put it this way,” John said, putting an arm around his shoulder and steering him toward the kitchen, “Their husbands are probably in for a long night.”

“God, I don’t want the blame for that. You guys are easily impressed, aren’t you?” he asked with a grin.

“One hundred percent testosterone, and anything will set it off.”

The phone rang, and they raced for it. Mike won. “Mike’s Wereman Emporium.”

John rolled his eyes.

“Hello, Mike?” It was Gordon.

“Yeah, is this Gordon?”

“Yeah, and I’ve got fantastic news! I talked to Chrysler. They want to do the commercial. They’re talking about getting the paperwork done and the shooting started in, get this, five days! They can have you in front of a camera in three weeks!”

“Damn.”

“...And the money! Chrysler is talking about an open-ended contract for one or more commercials at sixty grand a pop plus royalties! Adidas is talking one-twenty for a catalog shoot! All I had to do was convince them that I was looking at other interested parties who were willing to spend the money for one-of-a-kind advertising.”

“Wow! So, what do you want me to do?”

“I’ll be over tomorrow afternoon to work it all out with you. I just wanted to call and let you know. I’ll be spending the morning getting all of this organized on my end.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“About three sound good?”

”Fine.”

“All right, then. Goodbye.”

“Later.” He hung up and turned to John.

“Mike’s Wereman Emporium? Are you totally deranged?”

“Maybe. Don’t sleep on your stomach. That was Gordon. The Talon commercial is a go at sixty grand a pop. Adidas wants me to model a line of winter clothes for the big one-twenty; before taxes, of course.”

“Good Lord!”

“I suppose I should be ecstatic.” Mike said evenly.

“You’re not?”

“Oh, I don’t know. All of this without any idea of whether I have a single shred of talent.”

“Well, how hard can it be to put on a shirt and stand there?”

“I’m sure it’s not that simple.”

“Hmm. Maybe you could get them to work me in.” John said with a laugh as he unwrapped the brownies and grabbed a couple.

“Sure, why not? It definitely pays better than zoology.”

“Get real. I am not model material.” he said, handing Mike a brownie.

“You said you were handsome and you’ve got the body. Do you think I thought of myself as model material two weeks ago?”

“Now, but you’re different.”

“I’m not that different.”

“Come on,” John said, rapping on Mike’s head with his knuckles, “Reality is calling! Gordon probably has visions of sugar plums dancing in his head right now. That money you were just quoted is a tentative number to see if you work out. After that, it’s millions. I can just see you on a full-length poster; smooth, hard, unobstructed, unhindered, uncovered muscles bulging out everywhere, big blue eyes shining with that cute look-but-don’t-touch look of

yours..."

"What look-but-don't-touch look?"

"Well, actually, I haven't seen it yet. But I bet it's great!"

"Oh, please."

"Come on, let's see it."

"No. Why?"

"You have to practice, right?" John asked, leaning back on the counter and taking a bite. "So, let's see it."

"Oh, come on." Mike said, suddenly bashful.

"Don't be shy. Hey! I like that bashful look. Do that one again."

"No!"

"If you're going to be a model, you have to practice."

"I have three weeks; and besides, it's embarrassing."

"Take it seriously and you won't be embarrassed. Now, the look-but-don't-touch look."

"I thought that would be the one you're the least interested in."

"Be serious! This is your job, remember?"

"And here I am, eating a brownie. Okay, but I've never made that look before. Think of something else."

"Okay. Look vulnerable."

"This is ridiculous."

"Do it or I'll tell Gordon that you're not taking your career seriously."

"That's blackmail."

John just shrugged.

"All right, damn it, vulnerable."

They spent the next two hours in the living room. Mike took the love seat and John sat across from him on the couch. Mike felt like a fool, while John was obviously enjoying himself. They went over dozens of poses and expressions.

"If I look like a monster, how is anyone ever gonna buy a 'pouting' look?"

John was sitting with his arms crossed, trying valiantly to keep his face neutral. "It's cute. I like it. Your expressions are easy enough to read."

"Yeah, but is anybody going to believe that I could pout?"

"Of course. You've seen the news. They've been playing excerpts from that press conference and your interviews constantly. Steve made another announcement today. Every time you go outside, they get more. Our basketball game, if you want to call it that," he added with a smile, "Did a lot for establishing your basic normality."

"If you say so." Mike said, chewing a nail.

"Stop that! And I say so. Now, look at me like you're about to jump my bones."

"You've been saving that one, haven't you?"

"Come on."

"I can't just make that up."

"Sure you can. Just think of something horny. Imagine me naked."

"You didn't say you wanted me to throw up."

John picked up a cushion and threw it at him. He knocked it away and laughed. "Okay, if you insist."

He sighed and tried to put on a dirty look without laughing. It worked the third time.

"Great! I like that one a lot!"

"You would."

"Anyone would, that's the point."

"That's enough. I'm tired. I didn't sleep too well last night."

John looked at his watch. "Good Lord, it's almost one o'clock!"

"Good night." Mike said, jumping up from the love seat and heading down the hall.

“Good night.” John said, following him and cutting into his own room.

One of the night shift guards poked his head into the bathroom as Mike was brushing his teeth. Mike remembered his time downtown and almost laughed again.

“You going to bed now?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“See you tomorrow evening, then. Oh, and I liked your rehearsal.”

“Thanks.” he said around the toothpaste.

After the guard had left, he looked at himself in the mirror. “You’re going to be a pin-up vamp for werewolves. God, this is weird.”

He walked out and turned on the bedside lamp. He jumped as the light fell on John, who was wearing nothing but bikini briefs and lying on his side.

“This is my let’s-spend-the-night-together look. Do you like it?”

Mike had to laugh. “Get out of my bed.”

“But it smells so good. Wait! You haven’t seen my watching-you-slowly-undress look yet.”

“Get!”

John rolled onto his back, threw his arms wide, and hung his head over the edge of the mattress, resting it on the floor. “How about my take-me-I’m-yours-and-I’ll-do-anything look?”

“Out!” Mike said, laughing at the spectacle, “Or I’ll sleep in the living room.”

“All right.” John said, getting to his feet. “Spoil sport.”

“Maybe some day you’ll get lucky.”

“One can hope.”

## CHAPTER VII

“You’re drinking too much coffee.”

“It’s not my fault you got me up at ten.” Mike grumbled, taking another sip.

“That’s over eight hours. More than I got.”

“You went to bed the same time I did.”

“Yeah, but I had to stay up and relieve all of the tension from watching you pose for two hours.” John said with a chuckle.

Mike laughed. “You are hopeless. Of course, knowing you, it probably only took a minute or two.”

John sipped his cocoa, deciding against admitting that he was telling Mike the truth. “Well, let’s be open minded, shall we? If you were sitting here with a friend back home, would you joke that way about a woman?”

“I guess.”

“Well then, I guess that makes you just as scummy as the rest of us.”

“Okay, you win.” Mike agreed, adjusting his robe. An idea occurred to him and he grinned mischievously.

“Uh-oh.” John said.

“How would you like to completely freak out Doug and Steve?”

John smiled. “What’s on your evil, child killing, man mauling mind?”

“Well, I need clothes, right? I’d like to buy some music, since your collection needs some work. I’ve got a credit card...”

“You can’t mean it.”

“Let’s go to the mall! It’s Saturday, so the place will be packed. This would be great! We’ll grab a few guards and go.”

John laughed. “Let’s do it!”

They jumped up and got dressed. Mike was waiting in the living room when John came out, sporting a pair of earrings.

“Your ears are pierced?”

“Yeah, aren’t yours?” John asked.

”Let me see.” Mike said, grabbing one of John’s ears before he could answer. He looked closely to where John’s ear was pierced on the bottom of the outside edge. Hanging from it was a small silver cross, attached to the end of a short chain. He grinned and let John go. “Is that the only spot?”

“Yeah, what about yours?”

“Pierced ears aren’t my style.”

“Why not? Everyone gets them.”

“You’re the only one I’ve seen.”

“Think of the circumstances. Everyone you know works in a profession where earrings would be unsafe. The guards won’t wear them when working, and Doug, Mark, and I won’t either because of all the lab work we do. I just remembered that I can wear them now.”

“What about Gordon and Aaron?”

“I don’t know. Both of them were pierced. Let me see your ear.”

Mike tilted his head while John examined his ear. “Your lobe is awful thick. I don’t think they make posts that long. What about up here, where it curls over? That might work.” he asked, running a claw along the upper curve of Mike’s ear.

“I don’t want my ears pierced.”

“Why not?”

“Just because. What other earrings do you have?”

John showed him back to his room where he opened, of all things, a small jewelry box. He pulled out a number of earrings, some of them half a foot long.

“What do you do with those long ones?” Mike asked.

John gave him a puzzled look before huffing. “I guess you wouldn’t know. Here,” he said, holding one up, “This end goes in your ear. This end,” he continued, showing it to him, “Has a tiny clip that you fasten onto your fur.”

“Where?”

“Anywhere it will comfortably reach. Your range would be a little limited.”

“Put one on.”

“I usually don’t go that far unless I’m going someplace classy.”

“Oh. Well, let’s go.”

“Think about it. You’d look cool.”

“I’ll think about it.”

They went out and confronted Paul, who was sitting by the living room window keeping an eye on a nearby press van.

“Round up the posse, Paul, we’re going to the mall.” Mike announced cheerfully.

“Are you sure it’s okay?”

“Of course,” John said, looking serious, “Just get three or four other guys and let’s go. You’ll only need a couple to watch the house while we’re gone.”

“Well, I don’t know...”

“Come on.” Mike said, pulling him out of his chair.

Seeing no point in arguing, Paul got up and called in a few guards. They all went to the garage and piled into a van.

As they drove to the mall, Mike was again confronted with the reality of his situation. Having only a select few near him, it was easy to forget that he was a lone human on a world full of werewolves. As they drove on, it became increasingly easy to remember. It looked like any other Saturday except for the fact that everyone was a werewolf. He sighed as another thought occurred to him.

He would never see another human being again.

“You look gloomy all of the sudden.” John said, shaking him from his thoughts.

“It’s nothing.”

“Go on and tell me.” John prompted.

“I just realized that I’m never going to see another human being.”

John put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “I know.” he said softly. “We’ll try to make you regret it as little as possible, okay?”

“Thanks.” Mike said, refusing to get depressed. In spite of his thoughts, he honestly wanted to savor this. He was taking great pleasure from the idea of how mad Doug was going to be.

The driver pulled into the mall parking lot and stopped at the main entrance. With the van’s dark, tinted windows no one could see inside.

“Are you ready?” Mike asked John. “This is going to be the shopping experience of a lifetime.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

One of the guards opened the sliding door and stepped out. There were five guards in all, and four of them

formed a semicircle around the door.

"It's been a while since I've done escort duty." Paul said.

"Just keep me from attacking the innocent." Mike said as he stepped out.

John was coming out behind him when the first person saw who it was within the circle of guards. He froze in his tracks, his jaw dropping open to reveal white fangs. Mike smiled and waved at him as they walked to the entrance. The man raised his hand to about chest height, his mouth still gaping.

"This is going to be a trip."

As soon as they entered they became the immediate center of attention. People stopped and stared in shock. No one could believe what they were seeing. Watching someone like Mike on a newscast and actually seeing them in the flesh were two very different things. Mike was sure that many people simply didn't believe that he really existed. That was changing very fast.

Men instinctively shoved children behind them. The kids, for the most part, pointed and whispered. They appeared more curious than frightened. Babies were clutched tightly. Mike found it impossible to get a good look at them.

"Where to first?"

"Penney's, I guess."

Penney's turned out to be right around the corner from the entrance, and they walked in. A crowd of shocked patrons watched them go from the main mall. Mike looked behind his little group and waved. He saw a cashier across the hall talking frantically on the phone, gesturing toward him.

Mike laughed and turned his attention to shopping. "John, you're going to have to help me out. I have no idea what's in fashion around here."

"Sure."

They wandered through the store, clumps of people gathering at a discreet distance. "This is easy." Paul said.

"No one has the guts to come close."

"Just wait until the press gets here." another guard said with a sigh.

"Yeah, no shit."

John helped Mike pick out a large pile of clothes. "You need a pocketbook." he said after Mike had finished trying the sizes.

"Parallel universe or not, I will not carry a pocketbook." Mike said emphatically.

"Just look at a few." John said, pulling one down from a hanger.

Mike looked at it and sighed in relief. It wasn't an actual pocketbook as he knew them to be. It was one of those waist bags that had become so popular back home. He remembered seeing most of the werewolves wearing them.

It was black and fairly simple in design, as they tended to be, although it was bigger than usual. The material was leather.

"Looks good to me." he said as he took it.

"You can wear it around your waist or like a camera bag. Why did you act so put-off? Now you look relieved."

Mike explained what a pocketbook was where he came from and who used them.

"Where do you put all of your stuff?" John asked when he had finished.

"You say: Honey, would you hold on to this for me? Well, unless you have one of these." he finished, holding the waist bag up. "A unisex pocketbook was a godsend."

"If you say so."

They went to the closest counter, threading their way through racks of werewolf clothes. The cashier gaped as Mike deposited his clothes and credit card on the counter.

"Charge, please." he said with a smile.

The cashier glanced between Mike and the card three or four times before picking it up. "Uh, yes sir. Wow!" he said, collecting his wits. "You're really for real, aren't you?"

Mike blessed the boldness of youth. “Looks that way.”

“Wow! My stepdad says that you’re just a media prank, but wow!”

“I’m for real, trust me.”

“Cool!” the teenager said, starting to ring up his clothes. “Is this the first store you’ve been to?”

“Yeah.” Mike answered, trading glances with a somewhat older werewolf who was putting his clothes into a plastic bag.

“Aw, cool! Wait until everyone finds out that I was the first one to sell you something!” he said excitedly, setting the receipt down for Mike to sign.

“Good Lord, doesn’t inflation suck?” Mike said to John as he took a pen from the cup. George, as his name tag read, watched in apparent amazement as he sighed his name. He grinned to himself and handed the receipt back, winking and taking his copy.

“Have a nice day, Mike. Can I call you Mike?”

“George, I’m just an average guy. Everyone calls me Mike. And you have a nice day, too.”

”This is a blast.” John said as they walked back toward the mall.

“It’s different, I’ll say that much.”

They reached the mall and started down the long corridor, listening to the exclamations of other mall-goers. Everyone but Mike heard a commotion ahead, and soon he too saw the crowd parting about halfway down the hall. A newsman, carrying a microphone, was running toward them. He was flanked by a camera and light crew.

“Uh-oh.”

“Here they come.”

“All right, keep it tight, guys.”

“Mr. Riggs! Mr. Riggs!”

“Should I jump out and bite him?”

“No!”

“Mr. Riggs!”

“Keep walking.”

“Don’t let him get too close.”

“Mr. Riggs! Eric Downs, Channel Five! Can I have a word with you?”

“Watch the rest of them.”

“I remember you. You were at the press conference.” Mike said as the news crew fell into step with them.

“Yes, I was. You remember? What brings you here today?”

“What brings anyone to the mall? I’m shopping.”

“What are you buying? You were just in Penney’s, right?”

“Clothes, mostly.” he answered, holding up the bags. “I’m a little short right now.”

“Is the Bureau paying for it?”

“No, it’s plastic.” he answered, grabbing the Visa card from his waist bag and holding it up. “Never leave home without it.”

“What else are you buying?”

“Oh, shoes and some music, I guess. That should do it for today. I have to make payments on this thing.”

“Anything in particular?”

“I’ll know when I see it.”

”Will you be going anywhere else today? Grocery shopping, maybe?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t tell the press!”

“Will you be out in public more now?”

“I don’t know. It depends on what I’ll be doing.”

“What will you be doing for a living?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see. I have to make a living somehow. Use your imagination.”

“Will you be making movies?”

“Movies? You mean, like wereman movies?”

“Yeah.”

“Hell no. That’s the kind of image I’m trying to lose. I’m not a wereman.”  
 “Yesterday we all learned that your world is heterosexual. What do you think of ours? How do you feel about being considered a monster?”

“You just cut right to the chase, don’t you? Oh, hold on, this is my store.”

They turned into a record store. By now the entire mall knew he was there, and most people were in the main hall. The record store was deserted. Mike started roaming through the rock section. John already had most of the R & B stuff he liked.

Downs followed them in. “Do you have an answer, Mr. Riggs?”

“Yeah, I have an answer.” he said, stopping and facing Downs. “I think it sucks. I hate having people be afraid of me. Everyone I meet treats me like plutonium. The only person who’s treated me like a decent being was a cashier at Penney’s. I just want to be Mike Riggs - no one special.”

“Do you honestly think that’s possible?”

“No, it probably isn’t; but that won’t stop me from trying.”

“I see that you’re looking at the rock section. What bands do you like?”

“A few. Look, I didn’t come here to do an interview. I knew you or someone like you would show up, but if you want an interview you’ll have to talk to my agent.”

“You have an agent? What’s his name?”

“Gordon Cole. Now please go away.”

The guards closed in, blocking Downs out completely.

“You heard him.” Paul said, towering over the reporter. “Interview’s over. Make some distance.”

Downs wisely backed off, his ears flicking back momentarily. He motioned for the cameraman to keep filming as they move to where they had a clear view, and Downs spent the remainder of their stay talking into the camera; placing himself so that Mike could be seen shopping behind him.

Mike picked out four CDs that he wanted and they repeated their earlier experience at the register. It seemed that teenagers were the only people who weren’t afraid of him.

Moving back out into the mall, they hunted down a good shoe store. Two more news crews arrived, but he spoke to neither. He continued to enjoy himself, watching the crowds react to his presence.

John helped him pick out some shoes. With the exception of sneakers, shoes consisted mainly of sandals.

“Doug’s gonna have a hissyfit.” Mike said to John with a smile.

“I can’t wait.”

“You didn’t tell him?” Paul asked, shocked.

“Of course not,” Mike replied matter-of-factly, “He would have said no.”

“Oh my god,” Paul cried. “I’m going to get fired, I know it.”

“We’ll stick up for you.” John said. “We did sort of mislead you.”

“I’m going to have to keep a closer ear on you two.”

They stopped at the arcade, and Mike and John shared a game of pinball. After that, they fought their way back outside and climbed into the waiting van. Downs and the other crews followed them out, jumping into their own vans.

“Why are they following?” Mike asked as they pulled out onto the street. “They know that they’re just going to get stopped at the house.”

“Probably in case we go anywhere else.”

“I could eat a roast beef sandwich or two right now.”

“No, don’t do this to me.” Paul begged.

Mike smiled at John. “Hungry?”

“Sure am!”

“No!” Paul said with a loud growl.

“Oh come on, Paul! Stop growling at me and live a little! We’ll cover for you. A burger joint isn’t going to be any worse than the mall.”

Paul considered for a moment. “All right, damn it. Joe, find a burger place.”

”One with roast beef.”

They drove down the main drag and found the right store. Three news vans pulled in behind them.

“That asshole Downs is still with us, along with the rest of the local media.”

“You’ll live.” John said.

They got out and walked into the restaurant. It wasn’t too busy, and the few people eating noticed them immediately. The reaction was similar to that in the mall.

“You sit down and tell me what you want,” Paul said to Mike, “And I’ll go get it.”

“Aw, I want to order myself.”

“No. It will go quicker this way.”

The news crews burst in and surrounded them, sitting at the other tables or standing wherever there was room. They began a barrage of questions.

“I’m here to eat, damn it, not answer questions. Leave ma alone for fifteen minutes, all right?”

“What did you order?” a reporter yelled.

“Food.”

Mike ignored them after that and talked to John, aware that everything they said was heard and recorded. The guards formed a ring around their booth, angering the press by obstructing their view. After a few minutes, Paul came back with their food. Mike thanked him and began dowsing his two sandwiches with barbecue sauce.

“You’re supposed to be able to taste the meat, you know.”

“Eat your own food. Who’s paying for this, anyway? I don’t have any cash.”

“My treat.” Paul said over his shoulder. “I may as well do something constructive with my last paycheck.”

“Is this an unauthorized outing?” came a voice from across the room.

“Stop worrying. This pop is flat.” John said.

“So is mine.” Mike agreed after a sip. “Crazed wereman goes berserk in burger joint over flat pop. Update at eleven.”

They finished their food and bullied their way out to the van. Some of the reporters actually tried to touch Mike. Paul and his men batted their hands away, though.

“We’re definitely going to have to buy a paper in the morning.” John said.

“Should be interesting, eh? I’ll drive down to the corner store in the morning.”

”No you won’t!” Paul growled.

“Steve’s going to have baby.”

“Let him. Demons need a life too. We have to get back now anyway ‘cause Gordon’s going to be showing up soon.”

The phone was ringing when they walked in. Mike ran to the living room and picked it up. “Hello.”

“Are you out of your furless mind?” Doug yelled. It was the first time Mike had ever heard a werewolf yell, and it almost shook his chest right through the phone.

He flinched and pulled the phone away from his ear. John smiled at him wickedly. “Oh, hi Doug. What’s up?”

“What’s up? You went to the mall? Why didn’t you ask or at least say something or leave a message? They’re interrupting TV shows to show you running around the mall and eating lunch!”

“...And?”

“And!”

“Look, Doug, I told you that I wasn’t going to stay cooped up in here twenty-four hours a day. I needed some clothes. I didn’t see any problem. I was going to have to go shopping sooner or later anyway, right? Right now I’m wearing John’s shoes and loaned clothes. I can’t have people running every little errand for me.”

“All right, you do have a point; but at least you could have told somebody.”

“Okay, I’m sorry I didn’t let you or Steve know. But tell me this; what difference would it have made? If I called you and you said no, I would have gone anyway. I am my own person. What difference does it make whether I went today or a week from now? What would you do, make a public announcement? Wereman will be shopping today, keep the children at home?”

Doug didn’t answer.

“From now on, I’ll check with someone first, all right?”

“They showed that stuff live, you know.” Doug said, the volume and growl gone from his voice.

“Good, that means they didn’t have the chance to edit it.”

“So far Gordon’s secretary has gotten thirty-two calls for interviews. Did you have to give them his name?”

“We don’t live in a vacuum, Doug. How many more hours do you think it would have taken for that to get out?”

“Maybe you’re right.”

John waved at him and pointed out front. “Uh, it looks like Gordon’s here. He’s got a pickup full of stuff, too.”

Mike said, watching the truck pull up. “That must be my equipment. I guess I’d better go.”

“Okay, I’ll see you around. Please let someone know next time you want to go somewhere, all right?”

“Sure. Have a good one.”

“You too.”

He hung up and looked at John, who had been listening in on the kitchen extension. “I think we pissed him off.” “I’d say that. I haven’t heard him that mad since I lost a whole batch of Jud’s blood samples. It’s all your fault. It was your idea. He’s going to ream me like a dog when he gets the chance.”

“Oh, excuse me, Mr. Innocent! You agreed to everything, and happily at that!”

“Only because you were talking to me in my sleep again.”

“I’ll never tell. Now I guess I’d better go face the music with Gordon.”

They went out and helped unload the truck. Mike had a similar conversation with Gordon before they started, and again refused to be too apologetic. They lugged the equipment downstairs to the den and Mike began unpacking, feeling like a little boy at Christmas.

“Okay, give me the rundown while I try this stuff out.” he said to Gordon as he began tuning his Jackson.

Gordon went over the details of the contracts, Aaron explaining the various legal aspects.

They had gotten him two guitars, one electric and one acoustic. All the associated equipment was there, including a large amplifier that was even better than the one he had back home. He had plenty of blank sheet music and two packs of pencils. They had gotten everything he had asked for except the piano. “No luck with the piano?”

“We didn’t get around to that one today. We’ll rent you one tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow’s’ Sunday.”

“Oh yeah, right. Damn, I didn’t even think of that. You’ve actually got these people working on a Saturday. Mike, my boy, I see huge amounts of money in our future.”

“If things keep up.”

“They should. It’s not going to be easy, though. Now that you’re going to be writing, you’ll need a band. How in the hell are we going to assemble a band? I guess we’ll have to have auditions. I’ll get started on that Monday morning.”

“What will you do, put an add in the papers?”

“That’s a start. I’ll have to reserve a local theater.”

“Do you think anyone will be interested when they find out who they’re auditioning for?”

“Hell yes, they’ll be interested. We should start by getting some particulars from you on what kind of guys you want to play with.”

“Well, let’s see.” Mike answered thoughtfully as Gordon grabbed a pen and paper. “No drugs, no heavy drinking, and no one over twenty-six. They have to be very good. The other guitarist has to be able to play intricate, layered parts. They all have to have varied tastes because it’s unlikely that any two of my albums will sound alike. I don’t like the idea of making carbon copy albums.” He considered for a few more moments before continuing. “They don’t have to be able to write because I’ll be doing most of that, but they have to be able to read music. They have to live a relatively clean life and be resistant to the more decadent elements of the rock lifestyle. And they have to be healthy; I don’t want to be dragging some big, fat walrus around on tour if the album’s successful. I guess that about does it.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?”

“My lyrics might not find a home in any hymnals, but I want a clean band. No concessions.”

“All right, I’ll have this in the papers in, say, two weeks. Will that give you enough time to get some material written?”

“Yeah, but what about demo tapes and that sort of thing?”

“We’ll worry about that after you and the band have had time to get acquainted. Once we narrow the field to the best candidates, you’ll have to get to know each other and learn to play together. Being in a band means more than just plugging in and playing. You have to get a feel for each other and learn how to play off of each other. Depending on how many people respond, it could take two or three days of auditions just to find the right guys.”

“A whole band full of studs!” John said happily from his perch on the steps.

“What?” Mike asked.

“You said that they have to be young and healthy. I can’t wait.”

”Satyr.”

“How many guys do you think you’ll need?”

“I get to be there for the auditions, of course.”

“Of course. It’s your band, not mine. By the way, do you have any ideas for a name?”

“I’ll discuss that with them.”

“How many?”

“I need at least one other guitarist, a lead singer, a drummer, and a bass player. It would be nice if the singer can play a little guitar and has a broad vocal range. I won’t need a keyboard player per se, but we’ll need one for the recording and concerts. Oh, and everyone has to be able to sing too, except for the drummer. He’ll be too busy to worry about it. If I’m going to be writing the stuff I think I am, there’s going to be some heavy backing vocals.”

“What kind of rock would you classify your music as?”

“It’s hard to say. It will probably be classified as heavy metal since everything is these days. That’s not an entirely accurate description, though. A lot of the songs I’ve got up here,” he said, pointing to his head, “are mid-tempo rock. It doesn’t sound typical, that’s for sure. You know how bands tend to sound alike these days. This stuff won’t sound like anybody, I hope.”

“Three guitars sounds pretty heavy.”

“For a lot of songs, it’s not so much the force of the guitars as it is the arrangement. For instance, most bands nowadays just play a simple rhythm and solo arrangement. With my stuff, it won’t be like that on a lot of songs. One guitarist will play a note or chord and hold it while the other plays over it. It’s kind of hard to explain.”

“That doesn’t sound like what you wrote for Antares.”

“It isn’t.”

“How many songs do you have in mind?”

“About seventy minutes worth.”

“All in your head?”

Mike glanced at John, thinking about their conversation about bands and the songs he planned on writing. “Like I said before, music has always been my hobby. I was always looking to sell songs.”

“Okay, about these contracts. You’ve heard all there is. All you have to do is sign. That makes us partners and sets you up to show on Wednesday to shoot the commercial. What do you think?”

“What about the other one, the Adidas?”

“The contract is locked in, it’s just a matter of setting a date. That won’t be for a month and it will take a couple of days to shoot.”

“What am I going to do between the commercial and the photo shoot?”

“Write your music and get your band together. You won’t have a lot of free time. Prepare yourself to be very busy.”

“I’m just glad you didn’t suggest going on Arsenio or something like that.”

“The best time for that is when your album comes out so you can use the shows to promote it. Now that we’ll need it, I think. You could put out the worst album in history and still go platinum on the novelty factor alone.”

“No dice, this is going to be a great album.”

“That’s what I like to hear. I like your attitude.”

“You should have seen his attitude when he first woke up.” John said with a smile.

“How would you like it if I starved you for three days and then threw a raw steak at you?”

“Raw steak?” Aaron asked with a laugh.

“Do you want to hear a little?” Mike asked as he finished tuning his guitar.

“Absolutely.”

He broke into the opening riff for Tear It Down, playing through the first chorus and doing his best to sing the lyrics. He followed with a few excerpts from other songs. He avoided the ballads and mid-tempo stuff because they would sound wrong with only one guitar. He said so when he had finished.

“Damn, I like it. I like it a lot. I can’t wait to hear the rest.”

“I’m going to need a partner for that. John, you don’t play, do you?”

“Sorry.”

Mike shrugged. “We can play around with it a little bit at the auditions. Not too much, though. I don’t want to give my stuff away to someone who I won’t be playing with.”

“Definitely. So, do you want to get these things signed?” Gordon asked, taking the contracts for himself and Chrysler and holding them out for Mike.

“Sure, as soon as I read them.”

“That’ll take a while.”

“I’ve got time.”

“I think I’m going to take a nap.” John said, standing and heading upstairs.

“Have fun.” Mike said offhandedly as he started reading.

It took almost an hour and a half to get through it all, even with Aaron explaining things to him. He was trying as hard as he knew how to find any loopholes that might get him screwed later.

They seemed to be fair. As a matter of fact, to the untrained eye they seemed conservative. He said so to Aaron.

“They’re understandably nervous about working with you. They want to make sure that everything is cut and dry. Notice that they were quite in agreement about not announcing this ahead of time. That way they’re protected if it doesn’t work out.”

“Why wouldn’t it work out?”

“No reason, really. They just want to cover their throats.”

He finished reading and signed the various copies. Gordon pulled out a cooler that he had been hiding from Mike.

He opened it and removed a bottle of champagne and three glasses. “Here’s to our first deal!” he said happily as he popped the cork.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“Of course I should have.” he replied, pouring glasses and passing them around. “Here’s to a long and fruitful career.” he said dramatically, toasting Mike and Aaron.

“Here here.”

They discussed the task of organizing the auditions as they finished their drinks. After the second Aaron indicated that he should get the contracts back to his office. Gordon agreed and Mike turned off his equipment, following them up the stairs. They all shook hands and Mike quietly closed the door behind them.

He walked up to the main level, glancing into the living room. The top of John’s head was visible on the arm of the couch. He smiled and tip-toed into the room. A guard sitting at the dining room table saw him and placed a finger over his lips, pointing to John.

Mike smiled wickedly at the guard and sneaked up behind John’s head. He couldn’t help but notice how cute John looked when he was asleep. His ears were perked up and his breathing was deep and slow.

Careful not to make any noise, he reached out with an index finger and lightly brushed the long hairs just inside John’s ear.

The ear twitched like a dog’s and Mike suppressed a laugh. It was so funny, in an irrelevant way, how they did that. He looked up at the guard, who chuckled and shook his head.

He brushed the hairs again, watching the ear flick. It was becoming hard to keep quiet and his stomach quaked.

As he tickled the ear some more, John reached up and brushed at it with his hand, quickly settling back into deep sleep.

He did it once more and John’s ear twitched four or five times rapidly. Mike couldn’t help it anymore and burst into laughter.

John’s head snapped up and he grabbed his ear, rubbing hard. Mike fell to his knees, laughing hysterically.

John kept rubbing the ear and wiped his eyes with his other hand. He looked at Mike and growled.

Mike looked up at him and continued to laugh. “I’m sorry, John! It was just so cute, you know?” he said between breaths.

John growled again and got up. He took a step toward Mike, who stood and began backing away.

“I’m going to get you for that. I bet you’re ticklish, aren’t you?”

“No!” Mike lied, holding up his hands.

“Oh, I think so. I saw you trying not to jump when Doug examined your stomach. You’re going to pee yourself if I can help it.” John countered, the fur on his shoulders and upper back standing on end.

“My, don’t we look frightening?” Mike laughed when he saw it, still backing away.

John lunged for him, grabbing an arm.

“No! I promise, I won’t do it again!” Mike yelled as he tried to fight John off. He was still laughing too hard to do much good.

John yanked him close and pinched his ribs. Mike twisted and his knees buckled. John pushed him to the floor and continued to tickle him.

“Stop! I won’t do it...!” Mike yelped, squirming.

John laughed and sat on his stomach. Mike fought as best he could, but couldn’t muster the strength to get out from under him.

”Stop! Stop!”

John finally quit, standing to survey Mike’s exhausted body.

“That ought to teach him.” the guard said from the dining room.

John smiled at him and looked back at the panting Mike.

“That was unfair.” he gasped from the floor.

“How’s that? You were the one itching my ear.”

Mike chuckled as he tried to catch his breath. The image returned but he was too tired to laugh. “God, it was funny, though.”

“You gonna do it again?”

“No.” Mike answered. “At least, not without room to run.”

“Uh-uh. Promise you won’t do it again.” John said, fighting his way back onto Mike’s stomach. He pinched his fingers in Mike’s face.

“Oof! Okay, okay, I won’t do it again!”

“Promise!” John urged, trying not to get turned on by their position.

“No! What about a year from now? Maybe I won’t be able to help myself then.”

“Promise.” John said again, poking a rib.

Mike jumped. “All right! I promise!”

John nodded and got up, pulling Mike along with a hand. “Good.”

“I had my fingers crossed.” Mike said as he ducked into the kitchen.

“You’re hopeless.” John accused, turning to the guard. “Give me your gun.”

“Don’t!” Mike said from the kitchen, remembering not to yell.

“Are you kidding?” the guard asked. “And miss the fun next time?”

“There isn’t a damned thing in here to eat.” Mike said from the kitchen, closing one of the cupboards and opening the fridge.

John joined him. “Want to go out? My treat.”

“Don’t you think we’ve caused enough grief for one day?”

“Call Doug and see what he says. Or better yet, call Gordon. Maybe he can get us a whole section reserved.”

“That’s a thought.” Mike agreed, heading for the phone. He pulled Gordon’s card from his wallet and dialed his home number.

“Hello.”

”Hello, Gordon?”

“No, this is his husband. May I ask who’s calling?”

“This is Mike.”

“Mike who?”

“Sorry, Mike Riggs.”

“Oh, okay, hold on.”

Mike heard him call for Gordon. He barely raised his voice to do it. “You know, he hasn’t stopped talking about you for days.” Gordon’s husband said.

“Apparently I’m a gold mine.”

“Can’t say that I don’t hope so. Here he is.”

“Nice talking to you.”

“You too.”

“Mike?”

“Yeah. I have a question for you.”

“It’ll have to be quick. I’ve got half of America on hold.”

“Hold on a second.” Mike said, covering the mouthpiece. “John, where do you want to go?”

“Red Lobster.”

“I was wondering if you could reserve a section of Red Lobster for me. John and I want to eat out.”

“Not again!”

“There’s nothing here that we feel like eating. Come on, can you?”

Gordon sighed.

“Tell them that your client is a big tipper.”

“To do that sort of thing, you usually need a big party.”

“Have you started supper yet?”

“No...”

“So bring the hubby and invite some friends.”

“Well, I don’t know. Hold on.”

He waited while Gordon’s muffled voice conversed with his husband.

“Okay, I’ll get with the guys from Eagle and Adidas. They’re at a hotel in town for the legal work anyway. This might be a good time for you to meet them. I’ll call you back, all right? I imagine that their spouses are in town with them and will come along.”

“How long will this take?”

“Not long. I’ll be right back with you, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll be here.”

“Bye.”

“Well,” he said, hanging up and turning to John, “I hope you weren’t expecting an intimate little dinner. Gordon said that he can’t get the space reserved unless there is a large party. So he’s going to call back.”

“I heard. And here I am, a lowly zoologist, dining with the big guns.”

They watched TV while they waited for Doug to call. Mike sat in a daze watching werewolves act out a popular sitcom. Gordon called back a half-hour later.

“So, what’s the deal?”

“I’ve got Red Lobster’s party room reserved for seven. Two guys from Eagle, three from Adidas, and their wives and husbands will be there. I assume you’ll be bringing the guards?”

“About three or four. They’re eating now, so they won’t need to eat there. Does Red Lobster know who’s coming?”

“No, and they won’t be calling anybody about it once we’re there. I’ve got a little bribe money saved up.”

“I thought you were an honest businessman. Just tell them that I’ll eat them.”

“Now, now, don’t go scaring the natives.”

“Okay then, we’ll see you there. We’ll take John’s car so the press outside is less inclined to follow.”

“Is it in the garage and does it have tinted windows?”

“Yes and hold on. John! Does your car have tinted windows?”

“Yeah. And I’m two hundred miles away.”

“Sorry. Yeah, he’s got ‘em.”

“I’ll see you there.”

“Bye.” Mike said, hanging up and walking back to the living room. “It’s on. We’re taking your car.”

“How are we gonna stuff ourselves and four guards into my car?”

“We can take three, then. Do I talk too loud?”

“Yeah, a little.” John answered honestly.

“Is it overbearing?”

“Only when you yell from ten feet away.” he said with a grin.

“I’ll try to remember, but you have to remember that I can’t hear you from far off unless you raise your voice.”

“I’m getting used to it. I guess you’re not aware that I usually call you nine hundred times before I get your attention.”

“Nope. What else is on? I hate this show.” Mike asked, recognizing the introduction to his most hated sitcom.

“I like it.”

“I’ll eat your arm if you don’t change it.”

“Then you won’t be able to eat your seafood.” John said smugly, holding the remote away from Mike.

“I have a big appetite.”

“It’s a part two, and I want to see it.”

“All right, we’ll watch it. Actually, since we have half an hour, I’m going to go write a little. Come and get me at about six-thirty.”

“Okey dokey.”

Mike went downstairs, digging out the sheet music and turning his guitar on. He played a few intros, getting the timing and chords right. Once he had that done, writing the rest was fairly easy. He kept time by tapping his foot and playing the song out in his mind.

He had the first guitar track written and was working on the second when John came down. “Time to go. How’s it going?”

“I’m pretty far into the first song. I’ve got the words down and one guitar track.”

“That was fast.”

“It’s not so bad when you’re writing from memory instead of scratch.”

“Is it one of the ones you played earlier?”

“Yeah, Pour Some Sugar On Me.”

“I liked that one. Let me read the words.”

John started reading the sheet Mike handed him, smiling occasionally. “Am I supposed to interpret this literally or figuratively?”

“Whichever way you want to.”

“Both seem pretty fun to me.” John said, glancing through the gap in the front of Mike’s shirt. “Of course, you have a lot more room to pour sugar on than most of us.”

“I guess fur and maple syrup don’t mix too well, Huh?”

“Maple syrup? I hadn’t thought of that one. Should be a great video. Are you going to release this one?”

“If all goes well it’ll be the first single. I wonder who decides which ones to release? What if I say that I want to release one song, and the record company says that we should release another?”

“What did your contract say?”

“It didn’t mention that.”

“Well, make sure you have that power ahead of time.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Mike said as they headed upstairs. “I’m for damn sure not going to be taken advantage of.”

“Looks like the guards are already ready.”

“Can I drive?”

“What?”

“Can I drive? Oh, I know it’s your car and it’s fairly new, but come on, I haven’t driven in over two weeks.”

“I don’t know...”

“Come on, I promise I’ll be good.”

“You are never good.”

“When have I been bad when I said that I’d be good?”

“Well...all right. Just don’t hit anything, okay? I’m still paying for it.”

They all climbed in and Paul raised an eyebrow when Mike sat behind the wheel. “You’re going to drive?”

“Paul, I walk and talk and wear clothes, don’t I?”

“Sorry, no offense. This is all kind of weird, you know.”

“None taken.”

He started the car and put it in gear as the garage door opened. “Thank God you don’t have an automatic. Those things turn a decent car into an appliance. Which way do I go?”

”Left out of the driveway.”

He backed out and turned around, enjoying his chance to drive again. He smiled, gave John a quick glance, and floored it after shifting into second. They jumped forward.

“Hey!” John yelled as Mike shifted into third at redline. “You said you would be good! What are we going to do if we get pulled over?”

“Okay.” Mike said, slowing down. “Sorry. Sure felt good, though. This thing isn’t my Talon, but it’s got pep.”

“We’re all going to die.” moaned Paul from the back seat. “There’s a furless madman at the wheel.”

“I’ll be good.” Mike said, giving John a punch.

They drove on, John giving directions. He kept to his word and didn’t go too fast, but that didn’t stop him from having a little fun.

“Taking those corners kind of fast, aren’t you Sulu?”

“More power, Scotty!” Mike yelled. “I need more power!” He downshifted to third and sped around another sweeper.

John laughed. “I canna give ye anymore, sair! It’s only a wee vee six!”

“Will you two stop!” a guard yelled. “I’ve got kids to feed!”

“Make a left at this light, and it’s right there on the right.”

John said.

Mike stopped at the light. There were two lanes turning left, and another car pulled up beside them. The passenger, a black and gray wolf, looked over casually and did a double-take.

Mike smiled and waved. The man gawked back, poking the driver without taking his eyes away. The driver leaned forward and stared. Mike waved again. A small kid in the back seat poked his head out and yelled. “Look stepdaddy, it’s the wereman from TV!”

“The light’s green.” John prodded.

Mike took off, waving at the boy. They were almost out of the intersection before the other car moved. Mike pulled into the parking lot and parked close to the door.

“Us first.” Paul said.

They walked in together and the host froze in shock.

“We’re here for the Cole party.” Mike said to the amazed man.

”Uh...right. Uh, th-this way.” he said, walking sideways toward the back of the restaurant. He never took his eyes from Mike.

“It’s not polite to stare.” John said, smiling at him.

“Sorry.” he replied, looking away long enough to make sure he didn’t run into anything. He led them to an enclosed section in the back, leaving shocked diners in their wake. Gordon was standing outside the swinging doors with another wolf.

“Hey Gordon, what’s up?”

“I’m starving, that’s what. And on top of that, we got robbed trying to get a baby-sitter on such short notice.

Little thief.”

“In three days you’ll have plenty of baby-sitter money.”

“That’s the truth. Mike, John, meet my husband, Don.” he said, indicating the short wolf standing next to him.

“Hi.” Mike said, shaking his hand. He didn’t seem to nervous, though his ears wouldn’t stay still.

“I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. Like I said earlier, you’re all he talks about.”

“I hope he’s not boring you.” Mike said as Don shook John’s hand.

“Not yet.”

“Well, let’s sit down. Is anyone else here yet?”

“No, you know executives; they’ll be fashionably late.”

“We made pretty good time getting here. Mike drives like he looks.” John said, nudging him.

“You drove?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “I am a grown boy now.”

“Sorry, let’s sit down.”

“We freaked a couple of guys out at that last light, too.” Mike said as he sat toward the back of the room.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. It must have taken them ten seconds to come to their senses enough to pull out.”

“You didn’t cause any accidents, did you?”

“Who, me?”

“Silly of me. Did they see you come in here?”

“I don’t think so.” John answered.

Menus were set out at each place on the table, and Mike grabbed his.

“What are you getting?” John asked, picking his up as he sat beside him.

“Alaskan king crab legs. Can’t beat ‘em.”

“I think I’ll have the lobster tail. I haven’t had that in a while.”

Their host came back, ushering in six wolves. Everyone stood as they came in. Gordon introduced them, identifying them as executives from Adidas and their spouses. As everyone found their seats the host asked if they wanted drinks. Mike ordered a strawberry daiquiri.

“Do you guys have any idea exactly what this photo shoot is going to involve?” Mike asked them. “I know it’s still a ways off yet.”

“We’ve already picked out the clothes you’ll be doing. We did that yesterday while your contract was being finalized and faxed.”

“What are they?”

“Sports clothing, mostly; shirts, pants, and sneakers. You do remember that we’ll be shooting outside of LA, don’t you?”

“Yeah, and a chartered jet. Nice.”

“I can’t wait.” another executive said. “After those pictures Gordon sent us, you ought to look fantastic.”

“What pictures?” Mike asked, looking at Gordon.

“I got a few pictures from your stay at the lab. Doug gave them to me. I’ve been circulating them to stir up interest.”

“I was naked in those!”

John choked and spit water back into his glass. He covered his mouth, embarrassed.

Gordon laughed, holding up a hand. “The pictures had the, uh, private parts blacked out.

“They better have.”

“Those pictures of you running around shirtless in the papers helped a bit, too. We’re going to want you to flex a bit.”

“Will it be just me or will I be working with other guys?”

“Both.”

The host returned with the two Eagle men. They also had husbands with them, and everybody went through another round of introductions.

“Well, it appears that Mike here has been practicing for the commercial.” Gordon said to one of them.

“Oh?”

“He drove us here.” John said, shaking one of their hands. “We like to think of it as ‘making good time.’”

They all chuckled. “So, Gordon tells us that you used to own a Talon.”

“I sure did. A black TSI All Wheel Drive.”

“How long did you have it before your, uh, accident?”

“About a year.”

“How did you like it?”

“Best sports car I’ve ever driven, and I drove just about everything under twenty-five grand when I was looking.”

“Glad you like it. Will you be buying another one?”

“I don’t know. It’s going to be a while before I buy a car. I don’t even know if I’ll be able to drive in public any time soon. If things go well, it won’t be long before I can afford something a lot more expensive. But then again, I

just might buy one anyway. There's no sense in not having what you like just because you can afford something ritzier."

"Good. Glad you like it." he replied, leafing through his menu.

"You all can take solace in one thing." Gordon said to everyone. "One of the conditions of my contract with Mike is that he won't advertise for anything he doesn't like or use."

"He was wearing Adidas jogging pants when we found him." John said.

"Yeah, but I was wearing Nikes."

"Oh." said one of the Adidas men.

"Don't worry." Mike added. "As far as sneakers are concerned, anything comfortable will do. I only happened to be wearing them because they were on sale. I'd just as soon wear a good pair of Adidas."

A waiter came in, approaching nervously. "Is everyone ready to order?"

Everyone was.

"Will this be on one check?"

"Mine." Gordon said.

"Gordon, that's a big check!" Mike said. "I wasn't expecting you to pay for mine, at least."

"Expense account." Gordon replied with a smile. "It does wonders."

The waiter took their orders, glancing at Mike occasionally. As he left, he looked over his shoulder at least twice before reaching the door.

"I forgot if the guards outside wanted anything." Mike said.

"If they want anything, they'll order it. All they have to do is sit out there and make sure no one comes in."

"Or sit in here and watch you eat." Paul said from his seat near the door.

"Want anything?"

"No thanks, I was kidding."

They ate, talking over the various aspects of Mike's new career. Both were talking long-term if the current projects worked out. The Eagle guys suggested advertisements for other Chrysler cars, and Mike managed to come up with a tactful way to decline.

They all seemed a bit nervous of his intentions for after he had fulfilled his obligations. They were unsure of whether or not he would work out, but they were more concerned about him going to someone else. That fear had been reflected in the amount of money they were willing to pay him.

One of the Adidas executives tactfully made the suggestion to Gordon that it would make Adidas look bad if Mike was to go with another manufacturer. It would appear that the other had stolen Mike with more money or that Mike had been somehow unhappy with Adidas.

Gordon eased his fears by telling him that although Mike may advertise for more formal styles of clothing, no one but Adidas was going to have him for sportswear; at least, as long as a contract was in effect. He dropped a suggestion about a line of signature clothes.

"What was that?" Mike said, catching the end of the conversation.

"I just mentioned that if things work out early, it might be something to consider."

"Signature clothes?"

"Yeah, you know, a line of clothes with your signature as trademark."

"I hardly think I have the star status for something like that."

"I don't know." said one man. "It may be something to look at in the future. That would definitely be a long-term thing."

"Long-term as in 'a long time from now' or long-term as in 'last for a long time?'" Mike asked.

“Both, to a degree. It would probably last longer than it would take for us to decide to do it. Either way, we’ll have to wait and see.”

Gordon winked at Mike.

“Go get ‘em, tiger.” Mike thought.

They finished eating and talked for a while longer. The conversation wound down eventually and everyone got up to leave. Gordon paid the bill with a credit card.

Mike shook hands and said goodbye to everyone. Gordon was given the necessary information for their flight to LA. As they were leaving, the waiter approached with a piece of notebook paper and a pen.

“Mr. Riggs?”

“Call me Mike. What can I do for you?”

“Uh, could I get your autograph?” he asked, holding out the paper in a trembling hand.

Mike smiled, surprised at the request. He looked at John, who shrugged and said, “Must be nice.”

“I guess it is. My first autograph.” He took the pen and paper and leaned over the nearest empty table. “What’s your name?”

“Greg.”

“Greg, here’s my first autograph. I hope you like it.” he wrote in large letters. He signed his name at the bottom, avoiding the temptation to add a little extra flourish.”

The kid took it, smiling nervously. “Thanks.” He hesitantly extended a hand.

Mike shook it. “Sure, and hang on to it. Maybe it will be worth something someday.”

They continued out, said their good-byes again, and hopped into the car. John drove this time.

“I wonder what that’s worth, anyway?” John mused as he started the car.

“The autograph? I’m sure it will make good toilet paper.”

“I’m serious.” You probably just made that kid a millionaire.”

“Oh please. What makes you think so?”

“Think ahead, Mike. What about years from now, when you retire? You’ll be in the public interest for years to come. Even after you die you’ll be big money. Everything you ever touched will be worth a fortune. You’ll probably end up being another Elvis. Some day, if that autograph survives, it will be worth a mint. Damn! Why didn’t I think of that? I could be holding that thing right now! I want the second one!”

”Another Elvis? Anything but that. I’ll have to arrange an obvious, inarguable, public death so there’ll be no question.”

John laughed and pulled onto the street.

“We missed the game.” Mike remembered.

“Who was it tonight?”

“It wasn’t the Bulls, so we’re all right there.”

“So, what did you think of dinner?”

“It was great. I haven’t had crab legs in a while.”

“I meant the company.”

“Oh. Now bad, I guess. They seemed like typical company types. You can tell that they’re scared to death of how this will turn out.”

“I’m sure the public will go for it.”

They drove home in silence, Mike watching people as they went. When they reached the house, Paul and the other guards checked in with their replacements and left.

“I think I’m going to go to bed early for a change.” Mike said as they walked in.  
 “So will I. We gonna run in the morning?”  
 “Yeah, sounds good. I’ll see ya then.”  
 “Will you do one thing for me before you go to bed?” John asked as they walked down the hall.  
 “What?”  
 “Give me the I’m-about-to-jump-your-bones look.”  
 “No way! I’m not going to be responsible for another night of lost sleep.”  
 “I promise I won’t let it get to me.”  
 “No. Go to bed.”  
 “Meaney.”  
 “Good night, John.”  
 “Sweet dreams.”

## CHAPTER VIII

Mike sighed and looked down at Deb. Her head moved rhythmically between his legs. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the headboard.

Something felt different. Her tongue seemed to press harder and he felt something hard rubbing the sides of his shaft. He almost decided to ignore it, thinking it was some technique that she had never used before. It felt so good, and so different, that he looked anyway; planning to tell her how much he liked it.

John looked back up at him, a smile tugging the sides of his snout. His thin lips were wrapped firmly around him.

Mike screamed, snapping awake. He jumped involuntarily, climbing half-way up the headboard before stopping himself. The now-familiar surroundings of his new bedroom replaced Deb’s in the moonlight. He felt the uncomfortable bulge in his underwear dwindle quickly.

He sunk down onto his knees, leaned against the headboard, and slowed his breathing. That was the third time a nightmare like that had awakened him.

His door opened halfway and John looked in, one of the guards peering over his shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” he replied, sitting down and pulling the sheet up to his waist. “I just had a bad dream.”

“The same one you had last night?”

“Yeah.”

John walked in and sat at the foot of the bed. “Want to talk about it this time?”

“No,” he answered, rubbing his face, “It was just a nightmare, for crying out loud.”

“A bad enough one to make you scream, it appears; and one hell of a scary scream it was. They say it’s better to talk about them. Keeps them from coming back.”

“I don’t want to talk about this one. Thanks, anyway. Go on back to bed. I’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” John said with a sigh as he stood, “Let me know if you change your mind.”

“Sure. Sorry I woke you up.”

“No problem. See you in the morning.”

“See ya.”

John left, closing the door behind him. The room again fell into moonlit darkness. Mike sat there, his face in his hands, and cried.

They dropped their shirts onto the porch and stretched. John asked a guard to go buy a paper.

They started jogging and Mike realized that he felt stronger than he had last time. He hadn't noticed just how badly weakened he had been by his ordeal.

After jogging, they finished their workout with more push-ups and crunches. Mike added one-armed, diamond-handed, and spread-armed push-ups to their routine, completely exhausting them both.

"You did better this time, if I remember correctly." John said when Mike collapsed after his last crunch. "Your energy is boundless."

"You're just a wimp. I think my body has finally waken up. I wish my head would."

"Do you honestly think you could dream up such a wonderful, dashing, charming, handsome, sexy guy like myself on your own?"

"No, I guess not."

They went in to take their showers. John suggested that they could conserve water by showering together.

"Have you ever heard of satyriasis?" Mike asked as he pulled his socks off.

"Of course. Have you ever heard of 'abstinence is bad for you?'"

"Get me Michelle Pfeiffer and I'll stop abstaining."

"Who's that?"

"A gorgeous actress."

"Won't find her here. I do know of a Michael Pfeiffer, though. He was in *The Witches of Eastwick*. I guess you'll just have to make do."

"Michael Pfeiffer? Well, that makes things easier."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've been wondering how our worlds could be anything alike with all of your women dying; not to mention the other important things. Women have played a huge part in history and entertainment. From what you just said, I assume that most of the important ones have been replaced with men instead of never existing."

"Sounds too easy. It has to be more complicated than that."

"I'm sure it is, but that does explain a few things. I wonder how many actresses have male counterparts here?"

"We'll compare notes sometime."

"...And meanwhile, you'll just have to take your own shower."

"One of these days, Mike, you're going to give in to the inevitable; and I'm going to be waiting. Sooner or later, you'll want me too. I'm irresistible."

Mike laughed, walking into the master bathroom. "You'll be the first to know, I promise."

"I'm serious!" John called out as the bathroom door closed.

"I know." came the muffled response.

"Just a kiss? That's all I ask! Just one kiss to tide me over!"

To his surprise the bathroom door opened and Mike came out, grinning. "Tide you over until what? What makes you think you're due for more?" He walked up to John and planted a quick peck on his furry cheek. Without a word, he turned and headed back into the bathroom.

John recovered. "That was a kiss?" he managed to ask, smiling stupidly.

"What did you expect, tongue?" Mike asked from inside the bathroom.

"You don't have to talk loud, I can hear you. And well, maybe a little."

Inside the bathroom Mike looked at himself in the mirror and thought. Maybe that peck on the cheek wasn't such a good idea. He was being a tease, and the thought made him sick. He stared deeply into his own eyes, trying to sort out the feelings hidden there.

"All right, fuck it." he said quietly, coming to a quick decision before he changed his mind. "Maybe this'll hold him

off for a while and keep Doug off my back.”

He opened the door and poked his head through. John was still standing there with that stupid grin on his face. He walked up to him, and John’s smile faded gradually as he approached. “I’ve never kissed a werewolf before.”

“You’re serious?” John asked, amazed.

“Are you?”

“Yeah, I guess.” came his reply. He seemed nervous.

Mike felt worse. “Well then, kiss me before I change my mind. You don’t get a second chance.”

John inched his head slowly forward, swallowing audibly. Mike closed his eyes and tried to imagine that he wasn’t about to kiss a guy werewolf.

At the last possible moment he almost changed his mind, but decided not to. He had no desire to kiss a guy, even a furry, surreal one, but he had to know if he could. His current situation didn’t offer too many options, and Doug might soon find a tactful way to bring the subject up again.

He opened his eyes briefly, meeting John’s just before their lips touched. They closed their eyes as their tongues briefly met.

A short moment later Mike broke it off, opening his eyes and pulling his head away.

His mind was a complete blank. He had expected to feel revulsion, guilt, or any one of a dozen negative feelings; but he felt nothing. It was a nice kiss though, and that thought made him blush deeply.

John opened his eyes as Mike pulled away, meeting those beautiful blue ones. His heart was racing and he shook slightly all over. It was probably the single most exciting thing he had ever done. He wanted desperately to do it again. Only, he thought, a lot longer and deeper. He saw Mike blush and smiled. “That was incredible.” he said breathlessly.

Mike’s blush became even brighter and John’s face soon flushed also. Mike didn’t say anything as he looked down between them.

“Good? Bad? Indifferent?”

“Uh,” Mike began, “Good, I guess. I’m going to take my shower.”

With that he turned and disappeared into the bathroom. John stood there, unable to move. His heart was slowing and he stopped shaking. He couldn’t stop smiling, though. It was so cute how Mike had blushed.

He came to his senses and headed for the kitchen to get a glass of water for his suddenly dry throat. He practically bounced down the hall, replaying the kiss in his mind. He heard Mike’s shower come on behind him.

“Success! Success!” he cried out, partially able to keep his voice down.

“What?” a guard asked, walking in from the living room.

John filled a glass and leaned on the counter. “I kissed him!” he said happily, shaking his head and taking a few sips.

“You’re kidding!”

John just beamed at him.

“Well, how was it?”

“I’ll never tell!”

“Come on, I’m armed! Tongue?”

John’s smile widened, exposing his fangs. “It was incredible, and it wasn’t even a big one!”

“Details!”

John couldn’t contain himself. He repeated their conversation, ending with Mike ducking quickly into the bathroom. “I think he broke his own record for the brightest blush.”

“So why aren’t you in the shower with him?”

“Give the guy a break, Joe. This isn’t easy for him. I wanted to kiss him again, but he ran off before I came to my senses. I felt hypnotized.”

“John, I do believe that you have just achieved first base.”

“Three more to go!” John cheered, finishing his water.

“Batter up and good luck.” Joe said, walking back into the living room. He sat by the window and picked up a pair of binoculars. “Lucky son of a bitch.”

Mike stepped into the shower, sliding the door closed behind him. “I can’t believe that I just kissed a guy!” he said aloud, running his hands over his face. “What in the hell was I doing? I’ll never be able to keep John off of me now.

What kind of an idiot was I to think that giving him a kiss would keep him away? I was hoping he wouldn’t like it, but that ‘cat that just got the canary’ look on his face proved that one wrong. I kissed a guy! Oh, shit, shit, shit!”

He grabbed the ‘soap’ bottle and lathered his hair, which was starting to get long. His natural wave was starting to appear on the top and back.

He decided to let it grow. Maybe they’ll be impressed. Either way, it made lathering his body a lot easier. The werewolf soap didn’t suds up too well on bare skin.

“He’s going to want to do it again, I’m sure.” he said as he transferred the suds onto his body. “Shit, shit, shit.”

He rinsed off and stepped out, drying in front of the mirror. His hair looked longer than it felt, now that he looked at it. The back was nearly to his shoulders. Even wet, it seemed thicker; and flowed from the off-center part in loose waves. “My hair hasn’t been this long since college.” he said idly as he put on clean clothes. He grabbed the comb John had bought for him. It was a good ten inches long so they could comb their backs. He smiled at the thought as began combing and headed into the hallway.

John was in the main bathroom. The door was open and he was standing in front of the sink, wearing a pair of shorts and combing the fur on his chest and stomach. He was still fairly damp, and reached the comb around to his back and began combing. He smiled at Mike. “God, your fur is getting long.”

“I know. I needed a haircut before this all started.”

“You cut that too? Why not just let it grow?”

“Because the longer it gets, the harder it is to take care of.”

“How long can it get?” John asked, putting his left leg on the counter and combing.

Mike looked on and smiled. “As long as I let it.”

John’s ears perked up and his eyebrows jumped. “Really? You mean it could grow all the way down to, say, your waist?”

“That would take forever, but yeah, it could. I’ve seen pictures of women with hair all the way down to their ankles.”

“No kidding? Let yours grow!”

“Not that long! I might let it lay on my shoulders, but that’s about it. It still has to be trimmed occasionally to keep the ends from splitting.”

Mike’s hair was now dry, and John stepped over. “Let me feel it. I haven’t had the chance yet.”

“If you insist.” Mike said, turning his head.

John ran his fingers through his hair, gasping in surprise. “It’s so soft!”

“It’s average, I guess.”

“Softer than any fur I’ve ever felt. Wow.”

“Your soap does it good. Okay, okay.” Mike said, pulling away and finishing with the comb. “That’s enough.”

“You could charge admission for that.”

“Five bucks a minute.” Mike said, putting his comb on the counter beside John’s.

“I’ve got a twenty in my wallet.”

“For twenty you can have ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes! Where’s my checkbook?”

“Maybe it won’t be so hard to make money after all. I’ll just sit around, get fat, and take your money while you play with my hair.”

“Play with what?”

“Hair only!”

"If I remember correctly, and I do, you have hairs in strange places."

"That's an extra seventy-five, up front, for each minute."

"Seventy-five bucks a minute! For that much I should get the whole works. Hell, for that much you should be my love slave all night! Where's my checkbook?"

"The only check involved will be a rain check." Mike said as they walked to the kitchen.

"You're being a spoil sport again."

"I kissed you, didn't I? Do you know how hard that was?"

"Once." John said, stepping closer as Mike rooted through the cupboard for something to eat.

"If I kiss you again, you'll probably lose control and rape me. Pancakes?"

"Sure, and I promise I won't rape you. I won't even grope you."

"Maybe later."

"What's the difference between now or later? I brushed my teeth. Besides, I'm hooked."

"I knew it, damn it!" Mike said silently. He sighed, trying to think of something to say.

"Okay, okay, I'll wait. I'm not about to be accused of being pushy. I will keep that rain check in mind, though."

Mike walked to the phone and picked up a note pad. "John, I-O-U one kiss, due at a later date." He signed and dated it and held it out to John.

"The rain check came up when we were talking about you being my love slave all night."

Mike just smiled and stuffed the paper into the fur on John's chest. He walked over to mix the batter.

They made the pancakes and took them into the dining room where the morning paper was waiting. A back copy of the Sunday paper, obviously used, was underneath it.

A picture of Mike walking through the mall surrounded by guards was on the front page. Above it was a headline in bold letters.

"Wereman goes shopping!" Mike read aloud. "Imaginative."

"Who's that gorgeous guy walking beside you?" John asked, smiling and stuffing a huge fork full of pancakes into his mouth.

"I don't know. But whoever he is, he probably has an ego problem."

"Get this." Mike said, reading the article aloud. "Michael Riggs, who's appearance shocked the nation only days ago, surprised the local mall crowd with a visit yesterday. Surrounded by FBI guards and accompanied by the ever-present zoologist-cum-FBI liaison John Carter, he wandered the mall; stopping to buy clothes, CDs, shoes, and a pocketbook. According to NBC reporter Eric Downs, the first on the scene, he spent a total of about two hours in the mall." He paused to take a bite. "Where did these guys go to school? This grammar is terrible. It goes on to talk about what I bought and where. Jeez, they even found out what size underwear I use."

"The public must be informed."

"I think that knowing my underwear size is rather unnecessary."

"I hate to say this, but not too much of your life is going to be private."

"Yeah, but there has to be limits. I wonder how many illegitimate wereman babies are turning up in this week's tabloids?"

He read the rest of the article while he ate, also reading the accompanying articles on page three. Much of the stories centered on speculation about what his future would hold, and mirrored many of his own doubts.

After finishing them he picked up the funnies. The usual twisted parodies of what he expected appeared. Calvin was equally cute as a tiny werewolf, and looked much like he had once imagined himself to back home.

Doonsburry was it's usual over-political self. Mike was surprised to read that the story dealt with him. He showed it to John.

"So does today's." he said, turning the Monday comics so Mike could read it. "Notice what he's implying in the

second frame?"

"Yeah, the jerk."

"There were talking about the same thing on page three."

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. It's kind of flattering, in a way."

"Are you sure you want that kind of stuff floating around? What would your parents say? Maybe you should let someone know that you don't deserve that kind of reputation."

"What do you mean by 'that kind of reputation?' My parents already know that I like you. You're not being insecure again, are you?"

"No, but the fact is that there's no weight to these implications."

"There was one kiss and a promise for another."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, but they're not talking about one innocent kiss. As a matter of fact, this comic isn't implying innocence at all. It actually says 'moan' here. Won't people think that you're some kind of pervert? Not that you aren't," he added with a grin, "But not everybody's gonna see things the same way. That's Drakkar you're wearing, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's not too strong, is it?"

"No, but I can't stand that stuff. Do you see what I'm saying?"

"Oh." John said quietly, sniffing himself. He looked back at Mike. "So? I'm my own person. If I want to screw a wereman, I will." he answered with a wink.

"I suppose now you want another kiss."

"Wouldn't hurt."

"Why do we keep coming back to this?"

"Because it was great. Was it really so bad for you? I'd hate to think that I grossed you out."

"No, you didn't. The problem's mine. I'm just not...comfortable with it yet."

"Because I'm a man?"

"Yeah, to be honest."

"Mike, you have to understand that you're not doing anything wrong. I'm not some weirdo sneaking kisses from guys behind closed doors. Everyone you meet is just like me. What we did earlier was the normal, even right, thing to do. You don't have to feel guilty or wrong for doing it."

"I guess it's just an adjustment I'll have to make...and sex! Good Lord, I don't even want to think about that!"

"I don't want to sound pushy, but the only way to adjust is to allow yourself to open up a little. Maybe not sex just yet, but a kiss is just a kiss. They do have a habit of leading to other things, but that's what they're there for. They don't necessarily have to, though. You know what I think? This is the psychology minor speaking here."

"What?"

"I think that being raised with adult women makes you feel like less of a man for kissing another one. I've been thinking about that for a while. Not bad for a minor degree, he?"

Mike toyed with the leftover syrup on his plate.

"You said before that you have homosexuals where you come from, right?"

"Yeah."

"What's your opinion of them?"

"I think they're wrong."

"Just wrong? Not gross or hideous or revolting? Do you hate them?"

"I don't hate anybody. I just don't accept their way of life, especially the one's who claim to be Christians."

"Why them?"

“Because the Bible expressly forbids it. Well, my version does, anyway. If someone is homosexual, admits it, and asks God to help them change, the I have no problem. Sodom and Gomorra were destroyed because of sexual immorality. Homosexuality was a big part of that. So how can a Christian stay homosexual when he knows that the Bible forbids it? God destroyed those cities. He can’t just keep having sex with men and keep asking for forgiveness. Christ forgives when an effort is made not to repeat sin. No one is perfect, but you can’t keep committing the same sin over and over and expect to be forgiven. He doesn’t work that way.”

“All of that is based on the standards of your world. Do you think we’re wrong?”

“I can’t, can I? Your physiology and bible don’t jive on that subject. But every time I think that I should just put my own prejudices aside and accept what God teaches here, I think: Wait! How can there be two Gods? Two teachings? Two sets of standards? God is God, period.”

“Look at it this way. Our worlds might nearly match but we are two different races. I’m sure that there is only one God. He created everything and apparently that includes more than one world. But he did create humans and wolves differently. Maybe humans and wolves were just two different ideas that He had at the time. What He sees as right for your people and what He sees as right for mine don’t have to match. He evolved us differently. Naturally, with two different races, created differently, there has to be differences in values and lifestyles. When we were created, He also created how we should live.”

“Well, there you go. I’m here, but I’m still human. Shouldn’t I follow what God determined is right for humans? You’re reinforcing my side of the argument.”

“On the surface it might seem that way. But remember, you wouldn’t be here if God didn’t want you here. Who can say why? Maybe years from now you’ll have some kind of influence on someone’s life. Maybe that person would have died if you had never shown up. Think of all the science fiction written on that subject. You may be some kind of key that puts things right on both our worlds. No one can guess.”

”But he did put you here. Would he do that and expect you to be miserable and lonely for the rest of your life? Would he reward one of his best children that way? Don’t look embarrassed,” he said quickly when Mike smiled self-consciously, “You deserve that. There’s no way he could expect you to live life like you would have back home. It just isn’t possible here.”

“Remember, we have the same God, the same Christ, the same Holy Ghost. As for making man in His image, being a spirit allows him to appear any way he wants. His standards for this world might not be the same as those for yours, but they are still His standards. Allowing yourself to accept our way of life would not be putting you at odds with God’s teachings. It would align you with them. If you ask me, I say that if He put you here you should follow the standards for here. Let me repeat myself. They are still His standards. If that’s how He wants people to live here, then that’s how people should live. All people.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Mike mused after mulling it over for a few moments, “But then again, so does Charles Manson sometimes.”

John chuckled. “Make things any easier?”

“I don’t know. I guess so, but still...”

“What?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to say. Uh...”

“Answer me one thing before we go on. Have you been praying, beside the times we did together?”

“A lot more than I used to, and I was no slouch then.”

“What have you been praying for?”

“Aside from the usual, mostly more guidance, strength, and an open mind.”

“Do you feel that they’re being answered?”

“That depends.”

“On what?”

“It’s hard to say. I’m a realist, so I don’t waste God’s time asking that this all go away. But as for my prayers being answered, I really don’t know yet. Would I have kissed you two weeks ago when I first found out that you were

g...homosexual? No. Why did I do it earlier today? Is God helping me along? Am I insulting God by not giving in? Should I consider it giving in? I really shouldn't, because I'm not a quitter. I don't want to feel as if I'd be giving in. I have to convince myself that it's right."

"Okay, I understand that. You were about to say something earlier."

Mike hesitated.

"Is it the act itself, maybe?"

"Bingo."

"Any particular aspect or just everything?"

"Everything, I guess. The thought of doing those things makes me kind of ill. I mean, women do it all the time, but I just don't know if I can bring myself to."

"Do you mean oral sex?"

"For starters."

"Why not, because you consider it to be a female sort of thing to do?"

"Yeah, you could put it that way."

"As gross as it sounds to me, you alluded to the fact once that humans, uh, lick females, right?" John asked, blanching in spite of his attempts to be neutral.

"Not everyone, but a lot of guys do."

"Women have oral sex with you?"

"Yeah."

"So basically, what you have is two people pleasing each other orally." John looked at him for a few seconds, saying nothing. Mike held his gaze while he thought that one over. It was essentially the same thing, when he thought about it.

That still didn't make him want to do it. "You do have a point. But I still don't know that I can actually do it, you know?"

"You also said that night that for you sex was an extension of love. With sex, people do all they can to please the one that they love, right?"

"Yeah."

"So when two men love each other, don't you think that they would want to do everything they can to please each other? I'm talking about us, not you."

"I guess so."

"Don't guess. If I was madly in love with, say, Mark; do you think that I would do all I could to make him happy?"

"Yes, you would."

"So, what's the difference? If you loved a man, wouldn't you want to please him, to express that love?"

Mike sighed. "Well, from that point of view, there's no real difference; and I would. It's just, you know, the thought of a guy...yuck!"

"Ah, now we get down to the nitty gritty." John said.

"You could say that."

John thought for a few seconds before continuing. "Can we be completely candid with each other?"

"It's too late to ask; but since you did, I guess so."

"You've had females give you blow jobs, right?"

"Yes."

"Did she kiss you afterward?"

Mike shifted uncomfortably. He didn't want to lie, but he knew that John was about to win another point. "All right, yes."

"Okay," John said, leaning on his elbows and scratching an ear, "And could you taste yourself if the kiss?"

Mike shifted again. "Isn't this getting just a little too personal?"

“You agreed. Don’t evade the question.”

Mike again considered lying, but he couldn’t. He considered himself to be an honest person and he didn’t want to start lying now. Besides, John was being nothing but honest and was showing genuine concern for his feelings. He figured that it was only right and fair to be honest. Anything less would be an insult to John’s sincerity. “Yes.”

“Did you throw up in her face?”

Mike laughed. “No.”

“Did it bother you at the time?”

“No.”

“Even though you knew that you got a little of yourself in that kiss?”

“I didn’t really think it down to that level at the time.”

“Maybe not, but looking back, did it bother you? Did you think ‘yuck!’ when she kissed you?”

“No.”

“So why should it bother you now? It would be someone else’s, of course, and you would get a lot more of it; but why think that it would be so horrible? Remember, the females that did that to you probably liked doing it, or they wouldn’t have in the first place. If they like it, why is it so hard to believe that you could? You have the same taste buds and the next person.”

“Everything you’re saying makes perfect intellectual sense, but this isn’t an intellectual issue.”

”No, it isn’t. We’re talking about expressing love.”

“Yeah, but wanting to please someone I love and wanting to suck on a dick are not the same thing.”

“They are if it’s a man you’re expressing love with. That’s one of the things they’re going to need. If you love a man and you want to please him, that’s one of the things you do. Put yourself in the position of one of your females. Isn’t that what she was doing?”

“Okay, yeah.”

“So replace the female with a male and what do you have?”

“I have myself giving a blow job to a werewolf.”

## CHAPTER IX

“Stop thinking of it as something crude.” John said, pushing his plate aside. “Do you consider ordinary, non-oral sex with a female to be normal and even beautiful?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what we consider it to be? A necessary evil. Not in the strictest sense, of course, but you get the point. To us, it’s male-male sex that’s beautiful. It’s the male body that is beautiful. Procreation is just a biological function. The female enjoys it much more than we do. Oral sex is not the cruddy thing it’s usually portrayed as in skin flicks.”

“You call them skin flicks? You can hardly see your skin.”

“You can between our legs.”

“Of course, I should have remembered.”

“Do you see my point?”

“Intellectually, yes; but all of this still doesn’t change the fact that I do not want a dick in my mouth.”

“You already know what it tastes like and you said that you didn’t mind. I think that you might even have liked it a little. It’s been scientifically proven that the scents and tastes associated with sex are pleasant and arousing. You just didn’t consciously realize it at the time and you won’t admit it now. What’s so terrible about it?”

“What’s so terrible about licking pussy?”

John squirmed. “Okay, fair is fair; I think it’s gross. Are you about to ask me if I’d be willing to do it?”

“Yup.”

“Is it really a necessary thing to do?”

“Irrelevant.” Mike said, shaking his head. “Oral sex is never a necessity, in both of our cases.”

“Damn, got me. All right. To be honest, no. Smell or no smell, my face isn’t going anywhere near there. I don’t even want to see it.”

It was Mike’s turn to just look on with raised eyebrows.

“Oh no you don’t,” John said, “We’re not talking about that and what I would do in your world is not a factor. We’re talking about you and my world.”

”All I’m trying to say is that you have to put yourself in my position. If you loved a woman and she wanted you to do that to make her happy, you wouldn’t do it.”

“I’d have a choice. You have homosexuals on your world. I wouldn’t have to worry about females at all.”

“Oh hell!” Mike said, exasperated.

“Gotcha.”

“Are you saying that there are no heterosexuals here?”

“Not any that would admit it. Since all females die before seventeen, that makes them all minors. Admission of heterosexuality would mean therapy. Admission of actually practicing heterosexuality would mean prison. It’s a hard thing to get away with, a lot harder than regular child abuse.”

“So it’s either your way or a monk’s way, is that it?”

“You already knew that. What you have to do is accept it. No hurry,” John added quickly, “But you’re apparently here for good.”

“Yeah, it looks that way.”

“This isn’t a proposition, but what about being on the receiving end? Would you feel the same way having a man doing it to you as you do about doing it to him?”

“I don’t know. I guess it would be easier to have it done than to do it.”

“Oh, Mike, you just blew it. No pun intended.”

“What? Are you playing mind games again?”

“No,” John answered emphatically, “But you just proved that we’re back to this manly thing again. You have an easier time accepting a man doing it to you than you doing it to a man. You think you’d be less of a man for doing it, and that’s wrong.”

Mike didn’t say anything.

“Do you consider me less of a man because I do it? I’ve already told you that I’m not a virgin.”

“No, of course not.”

“Tell me the truth.”

“I mean it! I don’t, not at all. You grew up in a world made that way.”

“Then why treat yourself as anything less? You have to be good to yourself before you can be good to anyone else. You have to love yourself a little first. You have to understand that your manhood wouldn’t be threatened.”

“What was your grade in psychology?” Mike asked with a smile.

“Three-point-eight. Am I right?”

“Maybe you are. No promises yet.”

“Okay, I’ll accept that. Now, what about anal sex?”

“Where do you want to start?”

“Have you ever done it?”

“Yeah.”

“To a female, I presume.”

“Uh-Huh.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“It was okay. I’m perfectly happy to do without it. But if she wants it, I have no problem doing it. That is, as long as they’re clean.”

“So you don’t consider it dirty or vile?”

“I understand that it’s not necessarily a natural thing. The ass is a one-way street by design, but I know that anal sex provides sensations that you can’t get otherwise. With the size of your prostate, I can understand what it must do for you.”

“I assume you’ve never been a recipient.”

“No, have you?”

“Yeah. Would you do it for someone you loved?”

“I already have.”

“I mean if you loved a man.”

“You realize that the first thing out of my mouth is going to be ‘no.’”

“Why not? It’s a known fact - and I’m sure homosexuals on your world would attest to this - that it stimulated the prostate, creating pleasure that can’t be experienced any other way. Even a finger or two doesn’t do it justice. Tell me, which would you be less apt to do, oral or anal sex? That is, assuming that you would be willing to do either.”

“That’s kind of like asking me whether I’d like to be shot between the eyes or through the temple.”

“Come on, be serious.”

“Less apt? Oral. Most men would immediately say ‘anal’ because they wouldn’t really think about it. But since you’re making me consider this, I’ll have to say oral. What most men tend to forget is that a finger up the butt feels kind of good. Of course, I’m talking about a female finger, and she’s usually doing something else at the same time.”

“I suppose that after you get used to it you could enjoy having it done to you. Oral sex, on the other hand, is more involved. I don’t know if I’m doing a very good job of getting my point across, but oral sex implies a greater degree of, I don’t know, submission than anal sex. You have to be completely involved. You have to actually put yourself right there and work at it.”

“Submission. We’re back to the manly thing again. When you’re with a female do you give yourself to her completely? No reservations?”

“Yeah, for the most part, she can have me any way she wants me.”

“And you don’t consider that submission?”

“No, not really. That can be fun sometimes, though.”

“So what makes you feel that it’s any different with a man?”

Mike sighed, collecting his thoughts. “Because with a woman, the roles each play are built in. Deb would kill me if she heard me say it, but there’s never any question of who is who. It’s just a part of what we are as products of nature. If you want to get psychological, you can look at it like this: The male goes in and the female accepts him. You could probably psychoanalyze the entire subject of sex down to that one point. The female submits her body to be penetrated by the male. Although they may not necessarily play roles, that basic fact still remains.”

“Throw away all the psychological factors and consider only the physical ones. Not to belabor the point; but physically speaking, the female allows her body, her being, to be entered. That strictly physical fact of nature suggests, to a point, submission.”

“Even orally, it’s the same thing. The female is entered, only this time it’s her mouth. And when a man performs oral sex on her, it still doesn’t change. This time it’s his tongue. It all keeps coming back to the fact that she is the only one penetrated.”

John looked unconvinced, so Mike quickly continued. “How many times do I have to say it? There’s an, I don’t know, fundamental element of submission that goes along with being entered; and that role is delegated to the female. She has to let you in. Where is that natural role with another man? Does the stronger dominate? What if there isn’t a stronger one? Does it become the stronger-willed? How do you know who you are?”

“I can answer that one easily. Like you said, playing roles can be fun. But with another man there is an equality that, because of what you just said, could never be possible with a female.”

“Right.” Mike said sarcastically.

”No, I mean it. Listen, with a man there isn’t that natural submission. Both are male, both are equal. By giving yourself to another man, you’re not submitting, you’re giving. They are not the same thing. In most cases, that man is going to give himself right back; so there is not tipping of the scales. Of course, some men are selfish in bed, but we’re not talking about them. Do you see? It’s a perfect balance. He can’t do anything to you that you can’t do to him, and visa-versa. Orally, it’s the same thing. Anally, it’s the same thing. He can penetrate you but you can do the same to him. Like I said, perfect balance. Hell, orally you can both do it at the same time. Where’s the submission in that?”

Mike thought that over and continued to play with the scraps on his plate. It was getting harder and harder to refute what John was saying. And damn it, it did make sense when he thought about it. Even so, the fact still remained that the desire simply wasn’t there. The best he could do at this point is somehow fall in love and with that they were a woman instead of a man. But to do that would be unfair to the other person. Who was he to refuse what they craved - to express their love?

“What are you thinking? I can practically hear synapses firing.”

“I’m thinking that you’re making sense, but I still have no sexual desire to sleep with a man.”

“Well, no one is expecting that right off the bat. What I want you to do is understand that loving another man and expressing that love sexually in no way makes you less of a man. The greatest thing on Earth is love, and the ultimate expression of that love is sharing it through each other’s body.”

“What’s it like? I have to admit that I’m a little curious; in the clinical sense, that is.”

John chuckled. “Well, where do you want me to start?”

“Kissing.”

“I doubt that it’s any different for us than it is for you. We’ve already done it, and it worked fine for me.”

“It wasn’t much of one, really.”

“That just means that they’ll get better.”

“It has to be different, your tongue is four feet long.”

“Yeah, but we have a snout to fit it in.”

“If I really kissed one of you, how would you keep from pulling my tonsils out?”

He laughed again. “I’m sure that wouldn’t happen. It’s not like I...they’d be kissing you blindly. Everyone knows where to stop.”

“What about me? One wrong turn and your fangs would rip my tongue in half.”

”They aren’t that sharp. You sure have a funny way of putting things.”

“Humor helps me deal with reality. Why don’t you shred each other’s tongues when you kiss?”

“Because everyone knows where they can and can’t put their tongue. And like I said, they aren’t that sharp. Why don’t you bite someone’s tongue when you kiss them?”

“Our mouths would be open.”

“So would ours. You just...know.”

“Okay. How am I supposed to get a good seal with one of you?”

“Our lips are thinner than yours, but they’re still there.”

“Pucker.”

“What?”

“Pucker.”

John did.

“Keep your damned tongue in.”

John laughed and puckered again.

“Okay. You win there.”

“Next? Oral?”

“Into the abyss.” Mike said, rolling his eyes.

“It’s great.”

“Where’s the fun in it? Giving, I mean.”

“That’s a dumb question. Where would you use your mouth back home?”

“Breasts, genitals, neck, etceteras.”

“Well, we do that too.”

“You have no idea what a human’s tits look like.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, they have mammary glands, so you understand right away that there aren’t many truly flat-chested women.”

John thought for a few seconds. “That follows. How many do they have?”

“Two, dummy.”

“Hey, I can’t just go around assuming things. How big are they?”

“Sorry.” In answer, Mike cupped his hands under his chest.

“You’re kidding.”

”That should be about average. A lot of the time their smooth, and firm, and silken, and perky...” His voice trailed off and his eyes glazed over.

“They must look comical as all hell.”

“To a race of flat-chested, glandless females they probably would.”

“So you what, concentrate on the nipples?”

“Yeah, to a degree. Let me see yours.”

“Why?”

“They’re just nipples, John. Let me see one.”

John sighed and pulled one side of his shirt over. He pulled up a clump of fur to expose a dark brown nipple.

“Yours are bigger than mine but smaller than a woman’s.”

“Okay.” John said, smoothing down his fur and letting the shirt fall back. “Where’s the fun in it, and the other stuff.”

“It’s just fun. You said you do it too.”

“That’s lame. If you want to argue the point of why oral sex is fun, you’ll have to do better than that. You just proved my point.”

“How?”

“By saying that you do it for fun.”

Mike sighed.

“Look, you can’t just say that you do something for fun and leave it at that. You do know that all men have small glands down there that secrete scent, right?”

“Yeah, I read that somewhere.”

“What makes you want to do sexual things, after you actually get started, is what?”

“You tell me.”

“Sensation, scent, and taste.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay, so you get down there, right? Get that look off your face. You asked.”

Mike made his face neutral.

“You get down there and the first thing you notice is the smell. Well, you’ve already noticed that, but now it’s strong. I’m sure, even with your nose, that your females can smell it. You can smell them, right?”

”Oh yeah.”

“Okay, so the smell makes you horny. That’s only natural. Now that you’re down there and felling horny, you want to do something, right?”

“Go on.”

“Faced with what you’re faced with, you know what you’re going to have to do, right? Kissing, licking, and sucking.”

“I haven’t puked yet, so keep going.”

“Okay, so next comes the taste. From what you read in your cell, you know we tend to...drip a lot.”

“I should be jealous.”

“You don’t?”

“A little, but it takes a while to get started.”

“We’ve already established that the tastes associated with sex are arousing. So you’re aroused and the scents and tastes keep you going. Like I said, it’s a blast.”

“I suppose you just have to grow up that way.”

“Come on, Mike, think about it. Do you look upon your females with disgust when they do it?”

“Now, but they’re females.”

“You’re arguing semantics. Females aren’t any different inside their mouth than you are. It’s okay for your females to like it because your society says so. If you tasted it, you’d like it.” John ventured.

Mike blanched. “Would not.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s a guy.”

“Eliminate the male and female for a moment and concentrate only on the fact itself. Can you do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if females tasted the same way as guys?”

“That’s kind of a pointless argument, isn’t it?”

“The point is that the taste itself, considered alone, is good. It doesn’t matter whether it’s from a male or female. It

just tasted good...when you're in the mood, that is."

"Whatever you say."

"Can I say something really gross?"

Mike eyed him carefully. "How gross?"

"Really gross. It would serve to prove a point, though."

"In that case, no."

"Afraid I'll be right?"

"Deeper into the abyss. Go ahead, be gross."

John leaned back and crossed his arms. "If you were really horny, I mean horny enough to squirm around like an animal because you were so horny..."

"I hope you aren't doing this to seduce me."

"Oh stop it. Anyway, let's say you were that horny right now. If you closed your eyes and I dabbed a bit of drip on your tongue, you'd like it. Guaranteed."

"That is gross!"

"Do you want to try and refute it?"

"The only way I could refute it is if I tried, and you know where I stand on that right now."

"You've already tried." John said smugly.

"Bullshit I have."

"Your memory is failing you. What did you say a few minutes ago?"

Mike thought for a few moments before it dawned on him. "Uh-oh."

"Gotcha again."

"You are a manipulative bastard."

"Psychology minor, remember? Three-point-eight?"

"That's not the same. Almost all of it was gone."

"Which only means that it was more like drip than semen. Remember, semen is everything, drip isn't."

"Okay, strictly for argument's sake, let's say you win and move on."

"You haven't asked me how far it goes yet."

"I didn't plan to."

"How far would a female go?"

"Until the bitter end. No pun intended."

"I don't mean that. I'm talking territory."

"This is going to get gross again. We're already pushing it."

"You wanted to know what it's like."

"I know what to do, I just don't want to do it."

"There may be differences. We don't have that kinky fur down there, remember?"

"That just makes it easier for you, not different?"

"I noticed that you have fur in your crack."

"So? What are you getting at?"

"We don't."

"So?" Mike asked with an annoyed sigh.

"So would one of you go...end-to-end, so to speak?"

"Why do you insist on being gross?"

"Because I want to be honest with you. I want you to know what you're getting into."

"Who says I'm getting into anything?"

"Do you want to be castrated?"

"God, no!"

"Do you want to spend the rest of your life locked in a cell like the one you just came from? Do you want to spend the rest of your life in therapy?"

"I think I'm seeing where you're going."

“It’s either our way or a monk’s way. I seem to remember someone saying that.”

Mike put his face in his hands.

“I hate to be blunt and inconsiderate, but that is the bottom line, isn’t it? Just answer me. Forget about that stuff for now.”

“It depends. Some will and some won’t. Surely that can’t be any different, it’s personal taste.”

“Okay, let’s move on to anal.”

“Might as well.” Mike huffed.

“You’ve done it.”

“Yeah. Doesn’t it hurt?”

“No.”

“That’s easy for you to say now. You’re twenty-five.”

“Are you asking if it hurt the first time?”

“For starters.”

”Let me see...yeah, it did a little.” John began thoughtfully. “But that was inexperience, not a physical factor.”

“I don’t believe that.”

“Why not?”

“Because no one shits a turd that big and likes it.”

“How big is the average human?”

“Six and a half.”

“No kidding?”

“No kidding.”

“Wow.” John sighed, his eyes going momentarily distant. “I thought guys like that only existed in movies. You’re that big?”

“None of your business.”

“Come on, I’m still a zoologist. This is my job.”

“I haven’t measured. I guess I’m average. How big should I be?”

“Five and a half is considered healthy.”

“I should know better than to bring this up, but you looked bigger than that.”

“You think so?” John asked with a smile.

“Don’t take that the wrong way.” Mike chided.

“You didn’t look any bigger than average in the shower downtown.” John said.

“My average or your average?”

“Mine.”

“Well, conversely, you looked a lot bigger in the bathroom.”

“This doesn’t make sense.”

“Well, you were hanging at the time...this is getting sick.”

“What difference does that make?”

“What about when you get an erection?”

“What about it?”

“Well, if you look big soft, than erect...”

“Are you saying that you get bigger erect?”

“Of course, John. Can we stop this?”

“No.” John said, the zoologist coming on full song. “You get bigger when you’re hard.”

”Yes! How can you not?”

“We don’t.”

“Every creature on Earth with a dick gets bigger when erect.”

“Not us.”

“I guess I should take another look at that book. No, on the other hand, I won’t.”

“You get even bigger!” John said with obvious envy.

“You’ve got nothing to be jealous about with those two-ton balls of yours. Let’s stop talking about my dick and get back on track. I said that I didn’t buy it when you said that it only hurts the first time. That’s bullshit. The sphincter

is made to control bowel movement. Something forcing its way in is not going to be a pleasant experience.”

“Sure it is. Look at it this way. There is a moment of resistance to overcome. Once you get passed that the muscle relaxes and then the pleasure starts. All you have to do is learn to relax. Didn’t you say that you’ve done that to females? Did they scream in agony?”

“Will you please stop comparing all of this to females?”

“Because every time I do, I win?”

“Because they are obviously no longer a factor.”

“I have to find a frame of reference somewhere, don’t I? You have to consider what was happening when you were with them. You said that you would do anal sex if they asked. That implies that you wait to be asked. That implies that they wanted it and had to ask, right?”

“Yeah.” Mike agreed angrily.

“Once you learn the proper way to relax, you just sit back and enjoy. We’ve already agreed on the fact that the prostate likes to have a little fun of its own, haven’t we?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone who gives a damn about their partner won’t do anything to hurt them. You can pound away and do little good, or you can take your time, show a little concern, and both enjoy the hell out of it. Bottom line.”

Mike blew a sigh into his bangs. “This is like arguing politics. It’s fruitless.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

“Meaning what?”

“Mike, I don’t expect you to grab the nearest guy and go have sex just to see if I’m right. All I’m saying is that you can’t know what sex with a man is like until you have sex with a man.”

”Don’t you end up needing diapers after a while?”

“Diapers!”

“Well, after having your ass reamed for so many years...”

“No!”

“Back home, half the standing homosexual jokes have to do with a worn-out butthole.”

“It doesn’t ‘wear out.’”

“Pffffffftt.”

“Give me a pizza and I’ll give you a real fart. Besides, its not like you do it every time, or the whole time when you do. Sometimes it’s a little here, a little there...”

Mike chuckled. “If you say so.”

“I say so.”

“Of course, since you’re such a satyr, you probably have AIDS. Then I’d get it and we’d both waste away to a horrible death.”

“What’s AIDS?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is it, a disease?”

“You don’t know what AIDS is?” Mike asked incredulously. “You have got to be kidding. It’s the goddamned black plague of the twentieth century!”

“Really? Tell me about it.”

“I can’t believe this.” Mike said with a sigh as he watched John’s ears perk up. “Maybe you call it something else. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It’s a sexually transmitted virus that systematically destroys the body’s ability to fight infection.”

John’s ears jumped back and he wrinkled his nose. “Sexually transmitted? Yuck!”

“Well, you can get it from shared needles or blood, too.”

“Ew.”

“Doesn’t ring a bell?”

“A sexually transmitted virus? Hell no, it doesn’t. What’s the cure?”

“There isn’t one. The victim can’t fight infection, so the simplest thing snowballs. He just wastes away.”

”Oh my God.” John said with mild amazement. “Let me get this straight. It’s a sexually transmitted, incurable virus that eats up your immune system and eventually weakens you to the point of death.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Good Lord!”

“Good Lord is right! You don’t even know what it is! You’re not pulling my leg, are you?”

“Nope. If we had it, I’d know.”

“What about the other ones?”

“Other what?”

“Sexually transmitted diseases.”

“We don’t have any, thank God.” John said with a shiver.

“None?”

“Nope.”

“Come on.”

“I’m not kidding.”

“Herpes.”

John thought for a few seconds, tapping a fang. “That causes cold sores, right?”

“Simplex one does. The other one kills you if not treated, and you have it for life. It isn’t really a problem unless it flares up.”

“We don’t have that one.”

“This is amazing! Do you have any idea how lucky you are?”

“I’m starting to realize.”

“Syphilis?”

“Never heard of it.”

“Wow.” Mike said, pondering what John was saying.

“You don’t have any of that stuff, do you?” John asked, interrupting his thoughts. He was leaning back now instead of forward.

Mike chuckled. “No, I definitely do not. I had myself AIDS tested just for the hell of it about three months ago. So did Deb, and she’s the only partner I’ve had for years. The other stuff is more obvious. You can at least get crabs, can’t you.”

“Genital mites.” John amended. “That’s not a virus or disease, though.”

Mike reached out and grabbed a bit of fur on John’s arm, lifting it and making a show of looking underneath.

”What are you doing now?”

“Checking for fleas.”

John snapped his arm away. “I do not have fleas!” he said with a friendly growl.

“How can you go in the woods in summer?”

“Why?”

“You’d have to do a complete body search when you got home to check for ticks.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s not so bad if you have help. They make repellent soap, too. It must be easy for you. You only have to worry about your head.”

Mike propped his face on a hand. “Poor Reggie used to get ticks all the time. He was an insect magnet.”

“Who’s Reggie?”

“The dog I had as a kid. Poor mutt.”

“Do...did you still have him?”

“He died last year. I haven’t been able to get another dog yet.”

“Oh no!” John said, jumping in his seat.

“What?”

“My cat! She’s still at my old neighbor’s apartment! I can’t believe I forgot!” he said, jumping up and getting the phone. He talked for a few seconds and hung up, sitting close to Mike. “I’m going to go get her today.”

“Is she any particular kind, or just a cat?”

“Calico. She’s only about four months old, so she’s a little rambunctious.”

“Have you had her de-clawed?”

“Declared? Are you sick?”

Mike looked at John’s hands for a second, noticing for the first time that his middle fingers’ claws were filed down. “I guess that’s not something you would think of for your pets.”

“Why on Earth would you do that to a poor animal?”

“So they don’t rip apart everything of value.”

“That’s what they make scratching posts for.”

“Scratching posts are cheap. Cats instinctively know how much things cost. The more expensive, the more they like to scratch it.”

“De-clawed.” John said with disgust. “You humans are barbaric.”

“I told you we have this thing about claws.”

“I suppose you rip their poor little fangs out, too.”

“No, we don’t. Stop being a putz. I’m not a shaved werewolf.”

“Wolf.”

“Sorry. I’m not a shaved wolf.”

“I know, but don’t you think that’s kind of cruel?”

“That depends. If it’s just a house cat, not really. Inside, they don’t need them. But if you’re going to let them out, it might be a good idea to leave the claws alone. I saw a de-clawed cat trying to fight off another cat once. The poor thing was swatting away to no effect. I scared the other one off.”

“Did you de-claw your dog, too?”

“Dog’s aren’t usually declared. Trimmed occasionally, but not de-clawed.”

“What kind of dog was he?”

“A very, very big German Shepherd.”

“I’ve never had a dog. Stepdad’s allergic to them.”

Mike started laughing, making a sorry attempt to hide his face in his hands. “A werewolf allergic to dogs!” he thought.

“God this...is...weird!” he managed to choke out.

“What are you laughing at? You laughing at my stepdad? I’ll kick your butt.”

“No.” Mike said, calming down.

“You are, aren’t you? What’s so funny? Tell me or I’ll bite you.”

“I thought I was the one who’s supposed to do the biting?”

“I could let myself get carried away with an affectionate little nibble. Maybe I’d like human blood.” A growl crept into his voice. “Fess up.”

“Never.”

John grabbed Mike’s arm and tried to lift it to his mouth. Mike twisted it loose. “Just let me have this one little secret, okay?”

“Oh, all right, just this one.”

“Don’t start talking like we’re married. I have another secret. Want to hear it?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll never tell.”

“You’re hopeless.” John said, perking his ears up suddenly. “I could get a porno flick.”

“That’s quite all right.”

“If you really want to know what it’s like, that’s the best way to find out. Short of actual experience, that is.”

“Pornos are mostly smut. I don’t need to see it to realize the pure mechanics involved.” A brief flash of two werewolves in a torrid love scene crossed his mind and he fought it off with a smile. He hadn’t been able to watch enough TV to catch any love scenes.

“Not all pornos are like that.” John prompted. “I know of one or two that are fairly good about that. They deal with people who actually love each other and have love scenes instead of sex scenes. They’re more like an R-rated, low-budget movie gone too far.”

“And just how did we become so familiar with these movies?” Mike asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I love how your left eyebrow does that.” John came back. “I wasn’t a Christian when I first got to college, so stop being evasive.”

“I still think I’ll skip.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Besides, you’d probably get all worked up and rape me. You monsters get horny at the drop of a hat.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” John countered with a smile.

“It could be.”

“You know,” John began, turning thoughtful, “I’m sure that if our females grew up, or yours died, we would be sitting here trading stories of our various conquests instead of trying to wade through the differences.”

“Been a successful crusader, John?”

“Usually. Last time I got dumped hard. I wanted to marry him. I had even been out looking at engagement bands. Thank goodness I didn’t buy any. He took off, completely out of the blue. I found out through a friend that he was banging some guy on campus. I guess he wasn’t willing to wait for me. I was as good to him as I knew how to be. Anyway, I haven’t seen him or anyone else since. That was, oh, about two and a half months ago. I think I’ll stick to guys my own age from now on.”

“Sorry.”

“Ah, it’s not like he’s the only fish in the sea.”

“That sounds like a cop-out. He hurt you, didn’t he?”

A subtle sadness crept into John’s eyes. Mike immediately regretted saying it. He was being callous and it really wasn’t any of his business. It had been a senseless thing to say. John looked away, making him feel worse. “Damn, I’m sorry. I guess I should learn to keep my mouth shut. That was heartless.” He put an arm around the furry shoulder.

John shrugged, twitching his ears a bit. “No, you’re absolutely right. He did. Like I said, I loved him. I should have known he would just walk away like that. He was only after my body. I guess I was too blinded by my own feelings to see that he didn’t share them.”

“I was a basket case after he walked off.” John continued. “I tried not to let it show, you know, but Mark wasn’t fooled. Most of my close friends weren’t, either. Now I just content myself to know that he missed out on more than I did. Not to sound vain, but I would have been a good catch. His loss.”

“Attaboy. I sure know what it’s like to lose a loved one. Hell, I’ve lost everyone. I was engaged. I still can’t keep her completely out of my mind.”

“I can’t imagine how rough that must be. To be so close…”

“What really bothers me is how this must be for her. I know this will sound a little self-righteous, but this must be hard for her. I mean, I just disappeared without a trace. She was probably in a panic all afternoon. I should have been back within an hour and a half, at the most. She has no idea where I am, whether I’m alive or dead, or whether I’ve been kidnapped or killed. Nothing. Sometimes not knowing can be worse than seeing them dead, you know? We were supposed to be married in a month and a half.” He put his face in his hands and tried not to get upset. I will not cry again!

“Hey, she’ll be all right.” John said softly, the words sounding strange to him. He reached around and gave Mike’s

shoulder a squeeze. “You said before that she’s strong. I know this may sound cruel, but before too long she’ll get over you. Time does heal all wounds. She’ll make it and she’ll be happy again. I know that’s what is most important to you.”

Mike sniffed the sting from his nose and managed not to cry. “Yeah, she’s a tough girl. She’ll find somebody. I just wish to God that it was me.”

John didn’t know what else to say. He could tell that Mike hurt much more than he ever did. All he could do was hope to someday give him the love he had lost. He knew that his growing feelings for Mike weren’t rebounding symptoms. His experience with Keith had made him cautious. It wasn’t easy for him to fall in love. Mike, though, was just too incredible.

”I’m going downstairs to do some writing.” Mike said. “You comin’?”

“I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

He had been writing for almost half an hour when he turned to the guard who was sitting on the steps watching him. “Where’s John?”

“He was in the shower. He’s drying off now.”

“Another shower?”

“Yeah, he said something about cologne but I didn’t catch it.”

“Oh.” Mike said, smiling. Now that John was washing it off, he discovered why he had been wearing it in the first place. Even though he had no idea at the time, he felt a little bad for saying that he hated it.

John came down a few minutes later and listened while Mike wrote for another hour. The phone rang upstairs and John jumped up to get it.

He answered it on the third ring, barely beating Paul. It was Doug. “Hey Doug, what’s up?”

“I was just wondering how things were going in the land of make-believe. Anything new to talk about?”

John almost said “no” before remembering what had happened earlier that morning, and their conversation that followed. “You wouldn’t believe it!” he said, struggling to keep his voice down. Mike continued strumming chords below.

“What?” Doug asked, his curiosity peeking instantly.

“Guess!”

“He ate one of the guards.”

“No, this is better! Guess again!”

“John, I’m entirely too old for this.”

“I kissed him!”

“What?”

“I said that we kissed. It happened right after we worked out this morning! It was...” He paused, trying to find the right word. “...Amazing. Best kiss I’d ever had, and it was only a little one!”

“Fantastic! So soon? After what he had said?” Doug asked breathlessly.

“Yeah, well, like I said; he’s still unsure of himself. Let me tell you about our conversation over breakfast.”

Doug listened intently, allowing John to recount their conversation. John finally finished, catching he breath.

“Well, you were there, not me. What do you think?”

“I think I’m in love.” John almost said aloud. “I think that I made him think.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that I made him think that loving another man might not be a threat to his masculinity. That seems to be the basis of his whole problem. He feels that his manhood would be threatened by having sex with another man. The mild disgust that he feels for the purely physical aspects will eventually dissolve when he realizes that the threat doesn’t exist. He says that he still has no desire to sleep with a man, but I think that after our conversation he may

think about it enough to accept the proposition. Of course, he's going to have some feelings for the man before he does anything. Hell, maybe one day he'll get curious enough to try it, love or not. His curiosity has done in him once or twice already. He's downstairs right now, but I don't intend to let him avoid the issue. Don't worry, though, I'll be sure to tread lightly."

"Son of a gun. He really kissed you?"

"Well, actually, I kissed him. He said that I wouldn't get a second chance, so I took it. He broke it off, though. Like I told Joe, I think he broke his own record for the brightest blush. I would have held it all day. God, Doug, I've never felt like that in my life! It took a minute just to get my breathing under control. Oh, I forgot to mention the IOU."

"IOU?"

"I've got a sighed IOU for another kiss?"

"Collect."

"I intend to tonight."

"How did you manage to get that, tie him up?"

"I made him feel guilty." John said with a chuckle. "I think he was being entirely serious when he wrote it, so I won't be when I bring it up."

"Like you said, tread lightly." Doug warned.

"Oh, I will. I don't want him to feel that I'm pressuring him, even though he promised. The last thing I want him to feel is that he has to kiss me."

"You're a lucky bastard, you know that?"

"I'm not lucky yet. I'm only on first base, and I don't know about the batters waiting behind me."

"Terrible analogy. Are you really serious about him?"

"Yeah, I think I am. It's bizarre to consider, but I can't help it. He's irresistible. No one has ever made me feel like he does, especially in such a short time. And every time I look at him, I just..."

"You're gushing." Doug interrupted.

"Sorry, it's just that he's so...lovable. And likable, too. There's so many good things about him as a person, you know? I..."

"You're still gushing."

"Okay, I'll shut up."

"Just be careful. It could do irreversible damage if he were to think that you were put there to seduce him."

"Oh, I already made that point quite clear."

"How's that?"

"Do you remember when he got really pissed that one night and I went in to talk to him?"

"Yeah. You know, I almost feared for your life."

"He's just a man, Doug." John rebuked. "Anyway, remember how he looked at me during his little tirade as though that was exactly what he was thinking?"

"Yeah. Damn, I was going to ask you about that. Did you feel insulted?"

"Yeah, I did; and I set him straight on that one."

"Good. I'd hate to think that he would believe we would stoop so low. He is scary when he gets mad, though. I started having visions of horror movies. It's sometimes hard not to let one's imagination run wild."

"I know what you mean. There's nothing else to say, really. He ate four pancakes for breakfast. I imagine he'll spend most of tomorrow getting ready for his trip to the proving grounds."

"You mean 'your trip to the proving grounds.'"

"I'm going?" John asked, caught off guard.

"Of course. Just because he's leaving town doesn't mean that you don't have to do your job. You're supposed to observe his acclimation and help him to adjust. Falling in love is a fringe benefit. Don't let it cloud your judgment."

“Sorry, it just didn’t occur to me.”

”I’m surprised no one mentioned it to you. I made sure Gordon understood that you went everywhere with him. I have a copy of the schedule myself. It’s Steve’s copy, actually, but he let me have a look at it. You’re included on the list of personnel to accompany him. If you had look at all the contracts you would have found yourself in them, as a condition.”

“I haven’t looked. I didn’t think it was any of my business. I don’t want Mike to think that we’re coddling him.”

“Good idea. From now on you can assume yourself to be included in any trips.”

“Sounds good. How are things at the lab?”

“Jud has starting wetting himself in his sleep.”

“Really? Do you have any idea why?”

“I think we’re being a little hard on him. It surprised me since he’s never done it before. It may also have something to do with the, uh, special training we’re been giving him, if you know what I mean. We’ve been giving him a little more of it lately.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We’re cutting back on his schedule.”

“How’s Mark working out?”

“Fine. He’s really taking on your job well. He doesn’t seem to mind the extra workload at all.”

“That’s good. If you don’t have any more questions, I’d like to get back downstairs. I’m hearing some pretty unusual stuff.”

“I can hear it too. I guess it’s a matter of taste. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay, have a good one.”

“You too.”

John hung up and went downstairs. “What song is that?”

“Excitable. What do you think so far?”

“Play some.” John said, falling onto the couch and listening for a minute or so. “Sounds cool. I like it.”

“Who was on the phone?”

“Doug. He wanted an update.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I said that you attacked one of the guards and what’s left of him is packed up in the freezer for later.”

Mike smiled. “Really.”

”I told him that we kissed.” John said, holding up his hands when Mike started to protest. “It wasn’t an official kind of thing. I just couldn’t help it.” he finished with a shrug.

“I suppose that I would have said something too.” Mike said, picking out a few notes and adjusting the tune on one of the strings. “The bass track on this song is giving me hell.”

“What’s the problem?”

“Well, I don’t have a bass, and I’m not very good with one anyway. I’ve had the same problem before. I have to be very careful to get the right notes. Most I have to take from memory because I can’t hear them. I also hate writing drum tracks. Maybe the piano will make it easier. Gordon said he would have one for me today. I hope it’s in tune. Either way, I don’t know whether the piano will do more than a little good.”

“Sorry I can’t be of any help.”

“I’ll get it right eventually.”

Gordon showed up with the piano around lunch time. It took Gordon, Mike, and three guards to lug it down to the den. Mike played it a little, satisfying himself that it was in reasonably good tune.

“How’s the creative mind coming?” Gordon asked.

“Not too bad. The piano will help some. I’ve got two songs written and the one I’m working on now should be done soon.”

“What’s this one called?” Gordon asked after Mike played a couple chords.

“Excitable.”

“You’re going to drive people crazy with songs like that.”

“Just as long as they buy the album. Have you got an add in the papers yet?”

“I sent them in yesterday. They’ll be in next week and run until the auditions themselves, which I’ve scheduled for a month from Saturday. That’ll give you time to get back from L.A.”

“Sounds good.” Mike said, quickly writing in the series of stanzas he had just gotten right.

“I might as well tell you the itinerary for Wednesday, unless you’d rather be left alone to write.”

“Actually, I would. Right now I’m making good progress and I’d hate to lose the groove, if you know what I mean. You could write something down and I’ll look at it later.”

“Say no more. I’ll come back tomorrow. I don’t want to cramp your style.”

He left and Mike spent the remainder of the afternoon writing. John helped him with occasional comments or opinions.

Taking hints from John, Mike made quite a few alterations to some songs. A couple, he was sure, would sound radically different when recorded. He was careful, however, to preserve the integrity of the original.

He quit for dinner and they went upstairs to fix something. They ended up making meatloaf and watching two basketball games afterward.

They both headed for bed afterward, depressed that the Bulls had lost their game. Mike had just finished brushing his teeth and was walking into his bedroom when he saw John standing between him and his bed. He held up a piece of paper, waved it around a bit, and smiled. It was his IOU. “How about a good night kiss?”

“You are insatiable.”

“Fair’s fair.” he said, twirling the IOU through his fingers.

“It says ‘at a later date.’ This is still the same day.”

“You meant later.”

“Maybe, but it would be dishonest for me to not abide by the exact terms of the contract. That means tomorrow, at the soonest.”

John’s watch beeped rapidly. He reached down and turned it off, smiling. Mike looked down at his own.

“Shit.”

“Midnight.” John said with an evil, fang-filled grin.

“I should have kicked you out as soon as I saw you.”

“Too late now.”

“It still doesn’t say that I have to kiss you today.”

“Yeah, but don’t you want to get it over with? I won’t mention the fact that you’d be hurting my feelings.”

“Don’t hit me with that guilt trip crap!” Mike exclaimed with a shared laugh. “There are plenty of men you can kiss in the interim.”

“I don’t want to kiss any other men. I’m unattached at the moment, remember?”

“Are we going to stand here and argue about this all night?”

“Not if you give me a kiss. It will only take a few hours...I mean seconds. Of course, I’ll understand if you want to wait. I’m not a total snake, you know.”

“Oh, what the hell!” Mike said in exasperation, walking to John.

John watched him approach, holding up his hands. “Stop, stop,” he began, “Not like this.”

“Not like what?” Mike asked, stopping in front of him and feeling slightly puzzled; and a little relieved.

“You’re only doing this because I’m forcing you again, and I don’t want to do that. I was only kidding, anyway. Here,” he said, holding up the IOU. He tore it to pieces between them, dropping the scraps onto the bed. “A gesture of good faith.”

“You didn’t have to do that.” Mike said, looking down at the ripped paper. “Now I will feel guilty.”

“No need to.” John replied, shrugging.

Mike eyed him critically for a few seconds and John shrugged again, his ears at half mast. He looked positively pitiful.

“Oh, come here.” Mike said, grabbing the back of John’s neck and pulling him into a kiss.

After overcoming the amazement at himself, Mike peeked and saw that John’s ears had perked up again. His eyes were closed and Mike couldn’t help but think that he looked kind of cute that way. He almost started laughing.

It was a longer, deeper kiss than their first. John was less shy with his tongue this time. It was a little more than he was used to dealing with, and he was unsure of how to respond. He could feel John’s fangs with his own tongue, and the taste of him was surprisingly nice. He decided to just do what felt right.

He broke it off again, John withdrawing his tongue a bit more slowly than Mike would have liked.

“Wow.” John said softly, keeping the end of his snout close to Mike’s mouth.

“Satisfied?” Mike asked uncomfortably.

“That was extremely nice.”

To ease his own mind, Mike took the analytical approach. “I have no idea what to do with all that tongue.” he said, letting go and grinning nervously.

“You did all right by me. I’m always available for practice.”

“I’m going to bed now. We have to get ready to leave tomorrow. We’ll probably be leaving early on Wednesday.”

”Would it be too much to ask for another one?”

Mike thought for a few seconds. He was acutely aware of the fact that he had just kissed a man. Twice. The fact that John was a werewolf made it easier in a way because he didn’t especially look like another man, but he still didn’t like the idea. And he was starting to get mad at himself for liking it. John’s tongue was something else. He wondered what it would have been like if Deb had had a tongue like that.

Hell, I just found out!

John solved his dilemma by kissing him softly on the lips, keeping his tongue to himself. This time, it was John who pulled away first.

“I’ll satisfy myself with that for now.” he said with a grin.

“I guess you will.” Mike replied, giving him a chiding glance.

“I couldn’t help myself.” John said, turning toward the door. He practically floated across the hall to his own room, turning at the door. “Pleasant dreams.”

“God, I hope so.”

“Good morning.”

John looked up from the morning paper, setting his coffee down. Mike was on the front page again with another picture of the two of them in the yard. Half of the article dealt with speculation on their relationship. He found himself liking and disliking it.

The rest of the article asked the same questions they’ve been asking for weeks.

“Hi Gordon.”

“Where’s Mike?” he asked with a loud sniff, hanging a camera around his neck.

“He’s still asleep. We were up until midnight watching basketball.”

“Well, let’s get him up. We have to get ready for tomorrow. I have to be gone all afternoon, so we need to take care of this now.”

“What’s happening this afternoon?” John asked, getting up and following Gordon down the hall.

“Are you kidding? I’m up to my snout in Mike’s career. I had to give my other clients to another partner just to give myself the time. I’m going through hell trying to keep all of this quiet until the commercial comes out.”

They reached Mike's door, which was closed. John opened it as quietly as he could.

They both smiled as Mike's bed was revealed. He was sprawled haphazardly over most of it, the sheet wrapped around him and exposing his butt. That particular part of him was barely covered by the bikini-style werewolf underwear. His head was almost invisible underneath two pillows.

"My oh my." Gordon whispered.

"No kidding." John whispered back. Putting a finger to his lips, he slipped in and walked around to the far side of Mike's bed. Smiling wickedly, he took his robe off, exposing his own underwear.

Moving as softly as possible, he crawled into the bed. Mike tucked in an arm, unconsciously making room for him. He leaned over the sleeping head, putting his snout close to Mike's ear. "Good morning," he said quietly, "Time to get up."

Mike stirred with a groan. "What time is it?"

"My, you smell good. It's eight-thirty." John answered. "And by the way, you were wonderful."

Mike turned over, rubbing sleep from his eyes as John surreptitiously tucked his legs under the sheet. "What do you mean..." Mike said, noticing John tucked under the covers beside him. His eyes widened and he slid back, pulling the sheet along with him.

"I mean you were wonderful, better than I imagined." John replied, making a show of stretching. Gordon raised his camera and snapped a picture.

Mike blinked and stared, unable to think. "You're shitting me." he said, giving John a shove. "I would remember...and I want that picture."

John laughed and Gordon joined in from the doorway. Mike looked between them, still not awake.

"Okay, so I lied. You do keep the bed nice and warm, though."

"Get out, I have to take a shower."

"You're mean in the morning." John said, getting out of the bed and putting his robe back on.

"Hi Gordon." Mike mumbled, rubbing his eyes again. "Give me that picture."

"Hi. Come on," he answered, walking into the room, "We've got to talk about our trip and then I've got to get back to the office."

"What's the hurry?" Mike asked, allowing himself to be pulled out of bed. "Give me that picture before I bite you."

"No way." Gordon said, tossing the camera to John. "I've got your career to arrange, remember?" He pushed Mike toward the bathroom and took the opportunity to sneak a glance at his butt. John was already staring.

"I'm going, I'm going." Mike complained, outrunning Gordon's hands.

I'll be back in a few minutes. One of these days I'm going to stomp that camera to bits."

"Everyone likes to have pictures from home." Gordon said.

John snapped a quick picture just as Mike was closing the bathroom door. "Interested in water conservation this morning?" he asked.

"No. I'd be interested in some coffee, though; and that picture better not have included my ass."

"Of course not." John lied. "I'll have coffee waiting."

"I pity the man who has to wake up with that for the rest of his life." Gordon said with a chuckle as they walked into the kitchen.

"Oh, I could get used to it." John replied. "Want a cup of coffee?"

"Sure."

As they sat at the table, Gordon gestured at the paper. "Have you seen page three yet?"

"No." John replied, turning the page. "What is it?"

"See for yourself."

The main story on page three was, of course, about Mike. Apparently, there were rumors that Mike might be signing

contracts to advertise for as yet unknown products.

“How did this get out?”

“We leaked it.” Gordon answered smugly.

“Really? Why?”

“To keep the level of public interest up.”

“I thought the whole idea was to spring this on an unsuspecting public?”

“It still is. This will in no way diminish the impact when the commercial goes on the air in a week or so. Mike’s going to make a small fortune from this one alone. They’re going to be showing it a lot, from what I’ve been told.”

“I thought he got paid after filming.”

“He does, but he also gets a royalty each time it’s shown. I can’t say that I don’t mind the fifteen percent.”

“Yowza.”

”Yup. This guy’s gonna have me out of debt within six months. You know, I was really nervous about my FBI contacts for a long time; now I’m blessing them.”

“How does an agent get mixed up with the FBI?”

“Well, I had a reputation for being an honest, fair professional. I never allowed myself to make use of some of the more unsavory methods of promoting my clients. However, I did have knowledge of how that sort of thing is done. I had to. How else could I expect to compete with those who did?”

He paused to take a long swallow of coffee. “Anyway, they approached me about four years ago to help them dig out some less than admirable types who were running a big scam in the industry. The investigation lasted a year, and there were dozens of arrests. You might have heard something about it.”

“Can’t say that I did.”

“No surprise there. Well, afterward I let them know that I was available if they needed help again. They were good to me during that time, if you know what I mean. I wasn’t on the payroll, but I got to keep any perks that came along. So,” he said, gesturing back down the hall, “When our furless friend there showed up, they called me. They knew that they could trust me and that I’d be discreet and honest. Honesty doesn’t come often in my field. Boy, I found that out for sure.”

“So here you are,” John said, sipping coffee, “Making the big bucks with a monster.”

“What about you? Zoology doesn’t seem to be an FBI type of job any more than mine.”

“Didn’t you get all of that from the conference, and the fact that half of my life is now public record?”

“I’ve heard what everyone else has, for what that’s worth.” he said, smiling suddenly. “Any truth to what Doonsbury’s been saying and everyone else is guessing about?”

“No, not yet. As for me and the Bureau, we were trying to ascertain primate intelligence for them.”

“What would the FBI possibly do with a human? I mean ape.” he added to correct himself. “I keep forgetting to amend my use of the word ‘human.’”

“I don’t know, I just did my job every day.” John lied.

“...And now you’re the cultural liaison and boyfriend for a thinking man’s wereman.”

“Something like that.” John agreed with a chuckle.

“So this ape just walked out of the FBI branch headquarters?”

”No. We had him at the zoological park. They called for us to go downtown when Mike was on his way up.”

“Was it hard working with an ape?”

“No. He was fully domesticated. The Bureau had him since birth, and always treated him well, so he was pretty cool. Poor guy’s never even seen another ape. We even catch him jerking off now and then.”

Gordon chuckled. “This may sound like a morbid question, but can humans, you know...” He asked, bobbing his

head slightly.

“Nope.” John answered with a smile. “And speaking of humans, Mike can’t either.”

“Really? You know, it’s funny how he refers to himself as being human. Do you think his kind evolved from them?”

“No, the genes don’t quite fit. Also, he says that, where he comes from, apes have fur. Genetically speaking, they do seem to be related. Hell, genetically speaking, he’s closest to us.”

“No kidding?”

John slid closer, perking up his ears. “Did you know that if he had fur, real claws, a normal spine, and a skull like ours, he would be a wolf?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Under the skin, he’s exactly like us. Every organ, every vessel, every lymph node, every bone; everything is exactly where it should be. Exactly. The few differences are pretty much academic.”

“The skull’s obvious. What’s wrong with his spine?”

“Too many vertebra and not enough cartilage. That’s why he can’t, you know...” John answered, mimicking Gordon’s head bob.

“What about his eyes? He can’t see in the dark, right?”

“They don’t glow, either. His sensory limitations are mostly due to the configuration of his face and skull. He hears as well as us with headphones on, but can’t gather outside sound as well.”

“That’s obvious.”

“Right. He can’t smell nearly as well, but we don’t have the equipment to measure exactly how much. That’s also kind of obvious, seeing that he has no snout. All I know is that he loses a fresh scent in minutes.”

“Minutes?” Gordon asked, surprised.

“If you walked out now, and he came in ten minutes later, he’d never know you were here.”

“Wow.”

“Of course, we’d be able to tell days from now. As for his night vision, I don’t have any answer for that. There seems to be no reason for the physical difference causing his lack of it. If he wasn’t familiar with the layout of a dark room, he’d probably trip all over everything.”

“It’d be fun to watch.” Gordon said with a snort. “Speaking of which...” he added as Mike appeared from the kitchen.

He joined them at the table, straightening his bathrobe. “So, what’s on the itinerary?”

“We’ll take a van to the lake, a ferry across to Michigan, and another van to the proving grounds; complete with a few guards. Once we arrive, we will be directed to a small warehouse for a briefing on what you’ll be doing for the commercial. You’ll drive the car from the warehouse so no one, especially spy photographers from the automotive press, will see you driving. A black Talon is being prepared with limousine-black tint on the windows. You’ll be invisible inside.”

Gordon smiled as he went on. “My idea sold. You’ll be unleashed on the grounds, following a well marked course. Cameras will film your antics from various angles and the shots will be edited later. One camera will be mounted where the passenger seat would normally be with another in the back seat. After that, all you have to do is drive back into the warehouse and get out. Everything will be covered in complete detail in the briefing. For instance, your exit from the car will have to be orchestrated so that your movements mirror those of the guy in the commercial. That will assure a smooth fade, which will occur as you step out.”

“Sounds like fun.” Mike said when Gordon had finished. “How much time to I get on the track?”

“I have no idea. I’m sure that you’ll get plenty. They already have an idea of what they want the commercial to look like, so they’ll have you keep driving until they get the shots they want.”

"I just thought of something funny," Mike said. "I'm the only person on the planet without claws," He held up a hand. "And I'm doing a Talon commercial."

"So stop biting them," John said.

"One more thing," Gordon started, "I'm supposed to tell you this now, even though it will be covered at the briefing. Under no circumstances are you to even crack the windows during your drive. Chrysler does a lot of prototype testing there, and spy photographers are always prowling. We don't want to give any of them a big bonus on payday. If anyone needs to talk to you, they'll yell through the window. Am I absolutely clear? It'll ruin everything if you're seen."

"Yeah, I got it."

"Okay, make sure you're packed for a few days. The weather's supposed to be perfect, but it could go bad.

We'll be staying until it clears up."

"Gotcha."

"Good," Gordon said, downing the rest of his coffee and standing. "I've got to go. I'm trying to line a few things up, if I can convince people to keep their mouths shut. After the commercial airs all of this won't be necessary. What a relief that will be. People will start coming to us."

"What are you trying to line up now?"

"I've got those auditions to get organized. I've rented an auditorium for it under an assumed name. We're planning on a big response. I've also got to set up some interviews and the like. I'm hoping we can get you on a talk show once you have a band together. Plan on being busy for a while. Once you have a band put together, it'll really get fun. Oh, by the way, do you have any idea who you might want to produce the album? You'll need a producer."

Mike did, and told him who he wanted.

"I'll try," Gordon said, shaking his head and grabbing his camera, "But that's in the future, anyway. I guess I'll go. Are you going to be writing later?"

"Yeah, I want to get this stuff done so it'll be ready when the time comes."

"I like you, Mike. It's nice to see talent responsible enough to not need to be babied."

"I do my best," Mike replied, saluting with his mug.

They finished their coffee, reading the paper.

"Doonsbury is really getting on my nerves," Mike said as he showed it to John. "I wish he would shut up. They've been very careful to avoid any pretense of covering me up and he still feels it necessary to bring it up. How more public can you be than a press conference?"

"That's just the way he is, I guess. He has his place. He just picks on whoever is in power. He was the same way to the democrats way back when. And remember, it's been a while since the conference."

"Yeah, but he's trying to turn the whole thing into some kind of right wing conspiracy."

"You can't take him too seriously, he's a humorist. He'll shut up when you show up on Arsenio. And now, I have to go get my cat. I'll be back in an hour or so."

"Where's the litter box?"

"In that little room downstairs."

They went to their rooms, dressed, and packed. Mike pattered around the house for a while and then decided to do some cleaning. He got the pile of dirty clothes from John's room, added it to his own, and started the laundry.

John came in later, holding his partially terrified cat. He wondered how she would react to Mike. She generally took to new people pretty well, but Mike was a monster, after all.

He heard the vacuum running as he started down the steps to show Sesame where the litter box was. He looked in surprise to see Mike doing the vacuuming, having first assumed it was a guard. He started laughing.

Mike heard him and looked up. "What?"

“I’ve never seen a wereman vacuuming before.” he answered, letting Sesame go.

Mike turned the vacuum off and shot him an insulted look. “Why don’t you finish the job so I can laugh at you?”

“Sorry.”

Mike squatted down and called to the cat. “What’s her name?”

“Sesame.”

Mike held out his hand and called to her again. She walked over without hesitation and started rubbing his leg.

“Well, that test worked out. If you were a demon from hell she wouldn’t have gone near you.”

“Ha ha. At least I don’t have fangs.”

“Your loss.”

“You know, I’ve been wondering something.” Mike said, sitting down and letting Sesame attack his shoelaces.

“Why do you have fangs at all? It’s not like you go around hunting animals with your bare teeth. Or is that something you’ve been hiding from me?”

“Don’t look in the freezer. I was at the zoo yesterday.”

“Seriously.”

“I don’t know. I guess at some time we did hunt like that. We’ve only been writing history down for the last couple thousand years.”

“Great. Some night your primal instincts are going to surface and I’ll end up a pile of bloody bones.”

”I’d clean the blood off. I’m not a slob.”

“Well share a little of me with her.” Mike said with a laugh as Sesame started chewing his ankle.

“I imagine that our fangs will evolve themselves away in time. They’re not really good for much now.” He sat beside Mike and Sesame changed victims, attacking one of his shoes. “Except for...ouch! Except for affection, that is.”

“How can you be affectionate with fangs?”

“All the better to nibble on you with.” John said, leaning closer.

“Keep your snout away from my neck.” Mike said, leaning away.

“I’m not going to rip your throat out.”

“There are things about my throat that you do not need to know.”

“Sounds like another one of ‘those’ things.” John said with a smile. “I’m a zoologist, tell me.”

“No.”

John moved closer again, trying for a kiss this time. Mike almost got up, debating whether or not to let it happen. There were no IOUs to worry about, but he at least had to make a good show of trying. He decided not to, but was too late.

He closed his eyes and felt John’s lips brush his own. John didn’t kiss him, though. He slid his snout under his chin and began kissing the underside of his jaw and neck.

He had found Mike’s weak spot. Mike was caught off guard and turned immediately to jelly, leaning slowly back as John nuzzled his throat.

“Stop.” he said helplessly.

John didn’t, but looked up and kissed him a few seconds later. Mike’s eyes were closed and he looked practically asleep.

“Ohmygodohmygod I’ve hit the mother lode! He’s Jell-O!” John yelled silently.

He dove back in, causing Mike to groan.

“He groaned!”

“Stop.” Mike said again, reaching up and weakly grabbing John’s head. He managed to push him away.

“Stop!”

He struggled back up to a sitting position as his mind cleared. John let him up, the knowledge of his new discovery solidly tucked away. A renewed kitten attack helped Mike regain his senses.

“You are not allowed to do that!” Mike said loudly, giving him a push.

John chuckled evilly. “I’m going to make you my slave.”

“Not allowed!” Mike asserted again as John made a move toward him. He crawled away and stood.

John remained sitting and laughed. “You’d be all mine if I sneaked in and woke you up with that.”

“All the more reason to lock my door at night.” Mike said, embarrassed that John had discovered his one true weakness.

“All it takes is a seven-penny nail.”

“That’s why I’m going to use the door stop from the garage.”

“Not if I beat you to it.” John said, jumping up and bounding for the stairs.

Mike was closer and ran ahead of him, turning down the hall with John right on his tail. He made a flying dive for the door stop, grabbing it and protecting it under his chest.

“Give it to me or I’ll tickle you.”

Mike turned over and jumped to his feet. He stuffed the rubber stop into his pants.

“Oh oh oh.” John said through a chuckle. “That was a mistake. For you, I mean. Do you think I won’t try for it?”

Mike turned and ran for the back door to the garage. He slammed it in John’s face and ran out into the yard, stopping a few dozen feet from the house. One of the guards shook his head.

John opened the door and stepped out. “You can’t hang out here in the yard all day.”

Mike sat. “Yes I can.”

John shook his head as if to give up, then sprinted for him. Mike jumped up and ran, narrowly escaping John’s grab. He was halfway across the front yard when the door stop fell out of his pants.

He braked for all he was worth, but couldn’t get turned around fast enough. John scrambled to a halt and grabbed it.

“Ah-hah!”

Mike tried to look threatening and started for John, flexing his muscles and balling his fists. “Give it to me.” he growled.

John laughed. “I’m not falling for that! You’re no more of a monster than I am!”

Mike stopped and put on a confused look. “So, what’s your point?”

“You can’t have it.” John said, putting it in his pants. “Unless, of course, you want to come and get it.”

”Satyr.”

“You did it first.”

“I wasn’t inviting you to come for it.”

“You implied it.”

“Do you think I would? Come on, I’m hungry.”

“So...feed.” John said, widening his stance and holding his arms out at his sides.

“Do you know how you must look to all of those cameras?” Mike said, shaking his head and walking to the front door. “You are a totally hopeless case, you know that?”

“I’m a man. We’re notoriously horny.”

“You’re a satyr.”

“If God gave me a one-track mind, I may as well use it.”

When lunch time came, they decided to eat on the picnic table out back. Mike could see a photographer taking pictures from a nearby yard, two guards watching him warily. Mike tried to ignore the camera and concentrated on his sandwiches.

“Let’s give him a good picture.” John said around a mouthful. “I’ll do the beat, and you do a strip tease on the table.”

Mike punched him, laughing. “That would be a show, wouldn’t it?”

“It would be from this view.”

“I’m almost tempted to do it just to spite you.”

“You don’t see me holding you down, do you? Come on, I’ll do one with you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh come on, live a little. Let them know that you have a sense of humor.”

“I’m not the strip tease type.”

“You’d better be if you want to make videos for those songs. You know that they’re going to want you to spend a lot of time in front of the lens.”

“I’m going to make it plain that we are to be filmed like any other band.”

“Sure, but come on, what kind of video do you expect to make for a song like Pour Some Sugar On Me?”

“We could make it a typical band-on-the-set video.”

“That wouldn’t do the song justice.”

“What do you expect me to do, lie there while they squirt honey on my belly?”

John snapped his fingers, perking his ears. “Perfect! I get to lick it off!”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“I’m not going to do sleeze video. I have morals, you know.”

“Mike, I know this is going to come out sounding wrong, but you are going to be a model and a rock star. Your body is going to be your selling point. It’s something no one else has. There is nothing wrong with being sensual. It’s not the same thing as being sleezy. How many times have I told you how sexy you are?”

“I still don’t buy it.”

“Why not?”

“Because to you I look, I don’t know, bald. My face is flat, I don’t have fangs or fur...”

“We’ve been through all of this before.” John interrupted.

“How do you know that your opinion is shared by the general public?”

“Because I’ve read the polls.”

“Polls?”

“And friends. And my parents. They’re all insanely jealous. Haven’t you been reading the papers?”

“Jealous of what? You haven’t been bragging about hose kisses, have you?”

“No, of course not. Doug’s the only one I’ve told besides my dads. Did you know that one of those supermarket rags did a survey this week and eighty-six percent of those polled thought you looked sexy when we were running in the yard?”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Paul told me just before Gordon walked in. I’m surprised he didn’t mention it.”

“Great. Eighty-six percent of Gay America wants my bones.” Mike said with a sigh.

“You’re the gay one, remember?” John joked.

Mike huffed. “Yeah, I guess I am.”

The phone rang and they both went in. Mike answered in the kitchen and John picked up the living room extension.

“Hello.”

“Hello. Is John Carter there?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Rick Lorrh.”

“Rick, this is John.” he said from the living room. Mike, feeling guilty, listened in.

“John, I’ve gone through hell trying to get in touch with you. That Cooper guy wouldn’t give me this number until I

told him why I had to call you. I practically had to say the Pledge of Allegiance to get it.”

“I’m sorry. I’ve been so busy that I haven’t had much time for anything else.”

“Karen misses you.”

Mike raised his eyebrows.

“Can you come over any time soon? She’s been asking about you.”

“Uh, hold on.” John put his hand over the receiver, and Mike hung up.

“Mike.”

“Yeah?” he answered, walking over.

“Do you mind if I take off for the day?”

“No. You’re your own man. What’s up?”

“Hold on.” he said, returning to the phone. “Yeah, I’ll be over in about, oh, forty-five minutes. I’m sorry I haven’t been around.”

“That’s okay. I’ll see you soon, then.”

“Okay, bye.” John hung up, turning to Mike. “I have to go see Karen.”

“Karen?”

John seemed uncomfortable and shifted nervously. “Karen’s, uh, a friend of mine. I’ve known her since she was nine. She lives a couple of doors down from my old apartment.”

“Why are you so nervous all of the sudden? Ohhhh...”

“Well, she’s almost thirteen. It won’t be long, now.”

“Wait a minute. What won’t be long?”

John fidgeted some more, looking at the floor. “Well, um, I guess she’s going to choose me to...oh hell, who am I fooling? It’s obvious.” He looked up at Mike. “When it’s time for her to mate, she’s going to want me.”

“Really?” Mike said, smiling.

“It’s not funny.” John said defensively. “Anyway, I spend time with her, play games, take her to the mall or a movie, and that sort of thing.”

”If I remember correctly, the kids will be yours to raise, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do then?”

“I don’t know for sure. I was expecting to be married before I had kids to worry about. I’d better get going.”

“Have fun.”

“Yeah.” John said, grabbing his keys and heading out.

Mike thought about John as he headed downstairs to his music. John had seemed so nervous. Was sex really that scary to them? Fun or not, it was only natural. Even the thought of it made John uncomfortable. If it is so awful to them, why don’t they just die out?

“Ah,” he remembered, “The smell.” That and the socio-personal responsibility seemed to be the reasons. Social responsibility and personal debt seemed like a pretty fragile basis for the survival of your race.

One life for a couple more. The sense of responsibility was inescapable, he surmised. If you consider their homosexual lifestyle it seems obvious how it would be disgusting to them. They grew up that way. He still had trouble grasping that.

He turned his attention to his music, writing for the rest of the afternoon. John called to say that he wouldn’t be home for dinner, so he made himself a couple toasted cheese sandwiches. Gordon called while he was eating to let him know that they would be leaving at six o’clock tomorrow morning, so he should go to bed early.

He was asleep before John got home.

They woke him at five o’clock and he stumbled into the shower. After he had gotten dressed, they discussed the upcoming day’s work. Everyone was understandably anxious, especially Mike. He voiced his concern between gulps of coffee and drags from one of John’s cigarettes. “What if they change their minds?”

“They won’t.” Gordon assured him. “Besides, they sighed a contract. If they change their minds, they still have to

pay you half. Remember that part? Aaron made sure that it went in.”

“I know, but it still wouldn’t look good.”

“Stop worrying.” John said.

“I can’t help it. I’ve never done a commercial before.”

”Look at it this way: You’re getting paid sixty thousand dollars plus royalties, minus Gordon’s fifteen percent, to drive irresponsibly for a couple of hours. It sounds like fun to me.”

“You’re right, but I’m still nervous. What if I wreck?”

“There’s nothing to wreck into.” Gordon replied. “You’re going to be driving on open tarmac.”

They drank coffee and talked until six, when Gordon herded everyone out. Mike rode in the van with his guards, Gordon, and one of Gordon’s partners from the office. John followed in his car.

“What about the press?” Mike asked Gordon. “Won’t they follow us?”

“Yeah, but they’ll only know where we’re going, not why. Security will keep them away.”

They made good time to the docks, pulling immediately onto a waiting private ferry. Mike put on a sweater and stood along the side, watching the water and his strange new world roll by. From a distance, everything looked so normal.

They were already in the van when the ferry docked in Michigan, pulling straight off and driving quickly to Chelsea. A security guard directed them to a small warehouse just off of the proving grounds itself.

The briefing went as Gordon said it would. The executives from their previous dinner were there along with a model, professional driver, and film crew.

The commercial took all day to shoot. Mike was surprised that it was taking so long because it would only run thirty seconds. They filmed his exit from the car first, which took almost half an hour to get right. After that, it was all fun.

The course that had been laid out called for numerous power slides on a watered-down section of the grounds. Mike had a blast wringing out his favorite car again. He was genuinely depressed when the director yelled that it was time to park the car and turn it over to the professional driver. He almost considered making a break for it.

He blasted into the warehouse and slammed on the brakes, keeping them just short of lock-up. He climbed out, a sly grin on his face, as everyone emerged from where they had scattered to. Gordon was shaking his head and staring at the floor.

“That was great. Let me know when you want to do it again. Is tomorrow too soon for you?”

One of the executives laughed, shaking his head. “Well, maybe not that soon.”

“That’s a wrap, by the way.” the director called out. “Damndest commercial I’ve ever shot.”

“How long before the finished product?” another executive asked him.

”I’d say four days, to be safe. We’ve already got the prime time air, so it’s just a matter of editing the thing and delivering it. Since we already have the whole thing drafted out the editing won’t take that long. Mastering can be done in a couple of hours.”

After filming they were all taken to an expensive restaurant for dinner, their Eagle pals picking up the tab. Although their arrival caused quite a stir, the press never had a chance to arrive. Also, no one had any idea what Mike was doing in Chelsea.

They presented Mike and Gordon a check after dinner, toasting the deal with glasses of champagne.

## CHAPTER X

Mike spent the next few weeks writing. He finished the album the weekend before their trip to L.A. Gordon had the music printed and copies stashed away in his office vault while it was being copyrighted.

The commercial, when it aired, caused an incredible stir. All the news programs had stories, late night TV hosts joked about it, and every entertainment show ran a story. Chrysler watched happily as Talon sales, already strong, rose almost seven percent in just one week.

John got permission from Steve and had friends over constantly. Mike soon included them as his. They all adjusted to him rapidly and he entertained them with excerpts from the album. He often found himself feeling amazed that all of his friends were werewolves.

“I want to go to church.” he said, completely out of the blue, one Saturday morning.

“Church?”

“Yeah, church. I haven’t been to church since April. It’s two days from September, for crying out loud. I miss it.”

“Whew! That could be difficult, but I know what you mean about missing it.”

“Why don’t I just call around and see what they say? It’s already been made clear to the public that I’m a Christian. Some might be wondering why I haven’t gone already. Bible study isn’t half as good with just the two of us and a friend or two.”

“Sure. How about mine?”

“What kind is it?”

“Church of Christ.”

“Goon enough for me.” Mike said, picking up the phone book. John pointed it out to him and he dialed the number for the parish.

“Hello, Reverend Carson.”

“We call him ‘Johnny.’” John whispered.

“Reverend, this is Mike Riggs.”

“What can I do for...Mike Riggs?”

“The one and only.” Mike said, gesturing for John to pick up the other phone. John jogged into the living room and picked it up.

“Oh. Uh, what can I do for you?” the Reverend replied slowly.

“Do you remember John Carter?”

“Yes I do. He’s been a member for a few years. He’s there with you, right?”

“Yeah, he’s helping me adjust to this place and so forth. Well, I don’t know how to suggest this, so I’ll come right out and ask. I told John that I want to go to church. I haven’t been able to since getting dumped here in April. John suggested we go to your church since he’s already a member. Do you think that would be possible?”

Mike’s request was met with silence. He could imagine what must be going through Reverend Carson’s mind.

”I’d really appreciate it if you’d let him come.” John said from the living room. “I miss being there, too. It’s just not the same being home with a few friends.”

A few seconds later, the Reverend spoke, sounding unsure of himself. “Well...honestly, I don’t see why not. It would be fine with me, but I’m not sure how the rest of the congregation would feel. Would you be bringing all of those guards with you?”

Mike sighed, thinking momentarily of how much of a pain it was having to drag guards with him every time he left the house. “Yeah, but one inside would be okay. I’m sure he’ll know how to be discreet.”

“I’ll tell you what.” Reverend Carson began. “I’ll call everyone I can get a hold of today. Tomorrow morning, I’ll let you know how everyone feels about it. Would that be all right?”

“I guess it’ll have to do.” Mike said, feeling insulted. “Please let them know that in spite of how I look to you, I am a good Christian. I honestly feel that I am.”

“I’ll do my best. I’ll call you tomorrow morning about nine. What is the number there?”

“Johnny, it’s an unlisted number, as you can imagine, so I need you to promise that you’ll keep it in confidence.” John said.

“Of course.”

John gave him the number, thanking him for his understanding. They hung up and John walked over to Mike.

“I guess we just wait.”

The phone rang promptly at nine the next morning and both Mike and John pounced on it.

“Hello.” Mike said, unnecessarily holding the phone so John could listen in. The fur on his head brushed Mike’s, and John flicked his ear against it a few times.

“Is this Mike Riggs?”

“Yes, Reverend, how are you this morning?”

“I’m fine. I saw your commercial last night. It’s quite a sight.”

“Thank you.”

“I have good news.”

Mike’s doubts disintegrated and he smiled. “They said yes?”

“Every one of the forty-three I could get a hold of. It seems they all would like to see you come.”

“Great! I really appreciate this.”

”My pleasure. I’ll see you at ten.”

“See you then. Thanks again.”

“Sure. See you then.”

“Goodbye.”

“Yes!” John exclaimed, hugging Mike with one arm. “Everyone?”

“Maybe people are starting to get used to the idea of me after all. I’ve been on TV enough.” Mike said happily.

“Looks that way. Come on, let’s get ready.”

They dressed, hopped into the van, and headed to church. As they neared the church, something about Reverend Carson tugged at the back of Mike’s mind; but he couldn’t put his finger on it. He brushed it off as John talked

excitedly about their latest excursion.

When they arrived, three guards took up discreet posts around the church. Paul accompanied them inside, leaving his sidearm with another guard.

John had a semi-reunion with at least a dozen people. As he was introduced, most people stared at Mike shamelessly. Although they were obviously nervous, most of them seemed to be friendly.

Mike and John sat in the rear pew, surrounded by John's friends. Paul stood behind Mike and tried to be invisible.

Reverend Carson needlessly introduced Mike to the congregation before beginning the sermon.

Mike felt terrific. He had failed to notice, until now, just how much he had been missing church. Most of the people managed to ignore him enough to involve themselves in the service.

He was genuinely sad when it ended. He felt better than he had in weeks. As they filed out afterward, John ran into another friend.

"Long time, no see, John Perkins." he said, shaking a tall wolf's hand.

"Same to you, John Carter." the wolf said, returning the shake and slapping John's shoulder.

In an instant, everything slammed into place. Reverend Carson. John Perkins. Mike stared at the wolf in shock. The familiarity of his features was unmistakable to Mike. "John Perkins?" he gasped, still staring.

The wolf looked at him uncomfortably. He wore a strange half-sad, half-indecisive expression.

Mike couldn't speak.

"What is it?" John asked with a worried look. He moved toward Mike.

Mike snapped his eyes away, unable to look anymore. "Get me out of here." he said to Paul, turning to the door. Paul fell into step before him as Mike hurried out the door and into the van.

John Perkins watched the wereman go and tried to sort his feelings. He knew it was wrong to blame the beast, but it was hard not to. He'd have to pray about it yet again when he got home.

"What is it?" John asked again, putting an arm around his shoulder.

Mike's eyes watered and he put his face in his hands. "I should have realized when you said Reverend Carson's name." he said, sniffing and fighting the tears back.

"Talk to me." John said, giving him a squeeze. "What's wrong?"

"John Perkins was the best friend I've ever had. We grew up together. He moved up here last year. We always kept in touch and stopped by once in a while."

"Well that's great!" John said, confused. "Why are you so upset?"

"Don't you get it?" Mike asked as they pulled away. "I'm not the Mike Riggs he grew up with! Didn't you see the way he looked at me? The Mike Riggs he knew died the day I got here! He probably died to serve some kind of cosmic balance or something. I killed his best friend by landing here! I killed...myself. God, I can't sort through this!" He paused to sniff loudly. "Everyone knows that a sudden aneurysm killed the wolvern Mike Riggs because both of us couldn't exist on the same world."

"Mike, you didn't ask to come here. You can't blame yourself for that."

"He was my best friend." Mike said, his eyes watering again. "Even if he is the same person here, he'll probably hate me for killing...oh hell. He was probably at the funeral."

"Listen to me. You have no right to feel guilty."

"It's not just that." Mike countered. "How can I ignore his feelings? You have no idea how close we were. I loved him like a brother. We knew each other for twenty-one years! How do you think he felt when the Mike he knew

died? How do you think he felt seeing me?"

"I don't know." John said honestly. "I don't know him all that well. All I can say is that he'll just have to work out his own feelings. He's got God backing him up, just like us. He'll sort it out."

Mike didn't reply, and allowed John's arm to remain around his shoulders for the ride home.

Once home, Mike spent the afternoon sitting in the den, staring into space and trying to understand this latest twist in his life. The shock of seeing John - and his expression - died down to a strange, quiet buzz in his mind.

John left Mike alone and called his dad to say "hi." After hanging up he pattered around the kitchen. He knew that Mike would have to deal with this on his own, although he had told him that he was there if he wanted to talk about it.

He was close to finishing dinner when Paul opened the front door and walked in. "John, do you know a guy named John Perkins?"

"Yeah, he was they guy at church this morning. Why?"

"That's right," he said, snapping his fingers, "I never did get a whiff of him. Anyway, he's out in the street, just beyond the property line. He wants to talk to Mike."

John thought it over for a few moments before making up his mind. "Go ahead and let him in." he said, going down to fetch Mike. "Mike, can you come up for a minute?"

"Sure." came Mike's voice, soon followed by the rest of him. "What's up?"

"There's someone here to see you." John answered as the front door opened. John Perkins stepped slowly in, sniffed around, and met Mike's gaze nervously.

Mike was surprised to see him and returned his stare with equal unease.

"Can we talk?" John asked from the landing.

"Uh, sure." Mike replied, waving him up and into the living room. John sat on the couch and Mike sat across from him on the love seat.

"I'll get back to supper." John said, leaving them alone.

"I don't know where to start." John Perkins said, eyeing Mike uneasily and continuing to sniff.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw you." Mike said, pausing momentarily. "The resemblance is...uncanny."

"I know what you mean. They're the wrong color, but you have his eyes..."

"Look, I don't know what to say. I...hate to think that I was the cause of...well, that the Mike here died because I showed up. I could see your reaction. I was a basket case all the way back here. I know how it must have felt when your Mike died. We've been friends all our lives. Lord, I don't even know how to refer to you and I!"

"I wanted to hate you, you know. Mike was more than just a friend to me. If I could have died instead..."

"I'm sorry. I can't begin to tell you the things that have been going through my mind all afternoon. It never occurred to me that there were some of the same people here that knew me back home."

"What was John like? The one you grew up with, I mean."

"I can't just come up with words for that. A lifetime friendship like that doesn't lend itself well to concrete definitions."

"What did, uh, we get in big trouble for when we were ten?"

"A lot of things. We were ten."

"In the spring."

Mike smiled in spite of the situation. There could only be one answer. "We wrapped up a dead cat and gave it to Mark Huffman for his birthday."

John smiled at the memory and sighed. "It was you, wasn't it?"

"In a manner of speaking, I guess. You know, I just thought of something. You're not alone in this. On another world, a wereman that looks strangely like yourself is going through the same thing. I disappeared without a trace.

We were supposed to meet the week after I got here.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I know this is going to sound weird, but are we going to be friends?”

“I...don't know.”

Mike felt a now-familiar tingling behind his eyes and fought it off. “You're gone, yet you're here. We were best of friends, yet we're complete strangers. I wish I knew how to act. I feel completely helpless.”

“Maybe I shouldn't have come.”

“No, I'm glad you did. I feel...guilty. I know it wasn't my fault. I was just jogging and minding my own business, but it's hard not to feel somehow responsible.”

“...In the woods behind Jerry's house.”

“Jerry?”

“Jerry Sillet, your fiancé'.”

“Uh, her name was Debra. I guess I scared the hell out of my own fiancé'. God, this is weird. Who next?”

“You always say that.” John mused. “I could never break you of it.”

“I guess that's another life I've screwed up.”

“Stop feeling guilty.” John chided as he came in from the kitchen. “Like you said, you didn't ask for this. Supper will be ready in about ten minutes.”

”Thanks.” Mike said, turning to the other one. “Do you want to stay for dinner?”

“I'd better not, but thanks.” he replied, standing. “I guess I'd better go. I don't really know why I decided to come here. I guess I just wanted to know if it was really you. Sort of.”

“Before you go, will you do me a favor?”

“Sure.”

Mike asked if he still had the same phone number.

“Yeah.”

“Will you let me give you a call sometime, maybe after we've had some time to think about it?”

“Okay.” John said, heading for the door.

“I'm glad you came.” Mike said as he ushered him out the door. “I think that I feel a little better. I'll call you before too long.”

“I think that I do too. Maybe I haven't lost my best friend, only given him a new face. You know when I'm home.”

“Until then.” Mike said, watching him walk away.

After dinner they watched an NBA game before heading downstairs so Mike could keep his playing fresh. After a while he turned everything off and joined John on the couch. John immediately sat across his lap, resting his shoulders on the sofa arm.

“What are you doing?”

“Give me a belly rub? I can't believe we've known each other for so long and never belly rubbed.”

“Belly rub? Are you trying to seduce me?”

“It's just a belly rub!” John said, tugging his shirt up and over his head.

“Asking me to rub your belly is making it very difficult not to form unfair opinions.”

“Rub...my...tummy.” John growled playfully.

“Since you put it that way...”

He started rubbing John's belly, trying not to laugh. They made small talk while he ran his hand through the fur of his stomach and scratched underneath. After about ten minutes, John began a long, luxurious stretch. Mike used both hands to scratch his stomach and ribs as he did.

“Oh, oh, ohhhhhh.” John groaned. “You are good at that.”

He sat up and slid off the couch, crouching beside it. “Well, lay down, it’s your turn.”

“I’m not letting you rub my belly.”

“Come on, it’s a belly rub, not sex. You’ll make me feel selfish.”

“Humans aren’t into belly rubs.”

“You’ve never had a belly rub?” John asked in amazement.

“Nope.”

John grabbed a shoulder and pushed him down. “Off with the shirt. You don’t know what you’re missing.” Mike gave in and John returned the favor. After about five minutes Mike was helplessly relaxed and wishing he had been doing this all his life. After another five, he was sound asleep.

John walked upstairs for a mug of cocoa. Joe looked up from the paper. “Where’s Mike?”

“He’s asleep downstairs. Would you believe that he’s never belly rubbed?”

“Never?”

“Nope. After I talked him into it, he turned out to be very good at it. I showed him, though, and put him to sleep inside of ten minutes.”

Joe chuckled. “You’re seducing him.”

“I am not! It was just a belly rub. Besides, Mike would never fall for it. I’m also sure that he would feel betrayed if I tried.”

“You’re seducing him slowly.”

“Well, isn’t it like that in any relationship? The entire dating process is just one long, mutual seduction. It’s not the same thing.”

“So you two are really serious?”

“Mike doesn’t know it yet, but I think we are. I am.”

“You are one lucky bastard, you know that?”

“I love the way people keep saying that to me.” John said with a smug smile. He went to the living room and watched TV for a while, thinking about Mike too much to concentrate on it. He turned it off when he heard Mike awaken.

“I think I’m going to go out back for some fresh air.” Mike said as he came sleepily up the stairs.

“Have fun.” John said, having something else in mind.

Mike walked out back and breathed deeply, stretching and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. He smiled at himself, shaking his head as he thought about their belly rub. What a joke.

It was a cool, dry evening; quiet except for the barking of a dog in the distance. A short, louder, deeper bark sounded and the dog stopped.

“Let me guess...” Mike thought aloud. He saw a van parked along the street opposite the back yard. A miniature satellite dish was mounted on the roof, facing up.

A light caught his eye and he looked at the house. It was the main bathroom and John was now standing in front of the mirror.

He walked stealthily over, planning to pop up against the window and scare John out of his pelt. He peeked in the corner of the window and saw John standing back from the counter, studying himself carefully.

He moved his ears; sometimes one at a time, sometimes both. He tugged at his whiskers a few times and opened his mouth, apparently staring at his fangs. He closed his mouth and bared them briefly.

He reached over and snapped the light out. Mike could see the eerie, greenish glow of John’s eyes in the mirror, appearing and disappearing as he moved his head around.

When John turned the light back on, Mike tapped quietly on the window.

As John glanced his way, he jumped against the window and roared. John’s eyes went wide, his fur stood on end, and he jumped backwards; nearly falling into the hallway.

Mike braced himself against the wall and laughed, hearing a nearby guard join in.

John came out the back door a few seconds later, his fur still standing on end. “You dick!”

Mike just kept laughing.

“I almost fell on my butt!” John complained, walking over to him. By the time he arrived his fur had gone back down and he was smiling. “I’ll get you for that. I should have been expecting it.”

“What were you doing in there?” Mike asked between chuckles.

“Thankfully, I wasn’t jerking off.” John joked. He leaned beside Mike and turned serious. “Actually, I was trying to find out what it is about us that amuses you so.”

“I never said you were amusing.” Mike said defensively, allowing one of John’s arms to encircle him.

“You didn’t have to. I can see you fighting off smiles now and then.”

“Uh-oh.” Mike thought. “How do I get out of this one?”

”See, I’m a zoologist. My job is to study animals, etceteras, etceteras, etceteras; but I never thought to stop and take a look at ourselves. We’re animals just like any other furry creature. You’ve given me a new perspective, so to speak.”

“How’s that.”

“I was trying to see myself from your perspective. I can see how we could appear strange; the way we move our ears, trim our snouts and ears, our glow-in-the-dark eyes. We grow up that way, so we take it for granted. No one ever stops to think that our ears move because we don’t do it consciously. Yet everyone knows what it means when someone pins their ears back, or moves them back just a hair. Glowing eyes are as normal to us as they are strange to you. It looks eerie to me when I see you at night and yours aren’t glowing. Grooming? I can see how it would be weird to watch someone trim their ears and snout, worry about how even their whiskers are, or want to dye their entire body blonde.”

“Now you’re talking cosmetics. Society decides what’s attractive and everyone plays along, because they don’t want to be thought of as ugly or out of style. Every kind of people has things like that. Take you and I, for instance. You trim your ears, I trim around my ears. You trim your snout, I shave my cheeks and neck. What we do because of what we are may be different, but what we are doing is the same. We’re trying to make ourselves attractive.”

“Yeah, but I’m talking about our fundamental differences.”

“Okay.”

“So, what’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying. Come on, I won’t be insulted. This kind of thing is my job.”

“Going cross-eyed to look at your whiskers.”

“Stop being obvious. Everyone knows going cross-eyes looks goofy.”

“I don’t know.”

“Level with me.”

“Well, the flea jokes are pretty good.”

John growled, the first sign that he was getting frustrated with Mike again. “Lame. No one has fleas. Every brand of soap has flea repellent.”

“That was a joke, right?” Mike asked, fighting off a laugh.

”See, there you go, trying not to laugh. Look at me. If you had a coat of fur, don’t you think you’d need it?”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Lets head in.”

They started for the door and Mike spoke up again. “Speaking of trimming your ears, how much effort do you put into all of that?”

“Oh, about once a quarter for the whiskers, ears, and body; only about semiannually for the body.” John answered as they stepped inside. “What about you?”

“I just get a haircut about every month and a half or so. Here’s a thought: What’s a typical barber experience like for you?”

“You go first.”

“I just sit in a chair and he trims. It usually takes about fifteen minutes for me.”

“Man, do you get off lucky just having your head to worry about. We get to sit on a stool for our head and chest; but after that, we have to stand. You better be wearing underwear, too, because you have to take your pants off for the thighs. It all takes about an hour or so, unless you’ve neglected yourself for ages.”

“Isn’t that kind of, well, public?”

“Oh, forgot. Once you get to that part he pulls a curtain around your area.”

“Whew.”

When they were in the hallway and under better light, Mike grabbed the front of John’s shirt and pulled open wider. “Does your fur taper in on your stomach naturally or does the barber do that?”

“Both. It grows in that way but the barber keeps it neat. Except for early spring, that is. That’s shedding season.”

Mike successfully fought off another laugh, careful not to let it show. “How long does that last?”

“It depends on the person.” John began as they reached their respective bedroom doors. “I start shedding early and usually finish by early April. Mark, on the other hand, has an thick and gorgeous winter coat and sheds all the way to the end of May. Most often it doesn’t take more than five weeks and isn’t all that messy if you keep brushing it out.”

“Ah.”

“What about you?”

“What, shed?”

“Yeah, from your head, pits, or you know…”

”No,” Mike answered with a grin, “We don’t shed what we have. Well, we go bald, but that doesn’t count.”

“Bald?” John asked in shock.

“It’s a genetic thing. Many men start losing their ha…fur in their thirties and most of it’s gone in a few years.”

“Just bare skin on your head?”

“For all intents and purposes, yes. It happens in various degrees depending on the individual. Some don’t lose their fur at all. I won’t. Baldness never occurs in my family.

“Thank God for that.”

“I often do, at the risk of sounding vain to the old guy.”

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, unless you want to come in for a roll in the sack.”

“You’ll just have to roll yourself. Good night.”

“Spoil sport.”

After a slow start, Mike and John began kissing regularly. The frequency of them increased without Mike being consciously aware of it. He still felt a little uncomfortable and guilty, but it was becoming easier.

In spite of the fact that John was a man, Mike surprised himself by enjoying how good a kisser he was. A deep kiss back home was nothing compared to what John’s tongue could do. He tried not to dwell on the subject, because it still somewhat bothered him.

On the other hand, he had let it start. They had kissed for the third time the night after John Perkins had come. He had just given John a good night belly rub when he kissed him lightly on the lips. When he tried to repeat the kiss with a little more feeling, Mike had let it happen. After than, Mike had let them come when they wanted to. He saw extreme satisfaction on John’s face the first time he initiated. That had been an especially close evening, and he had felt comfortable cuddling up with John. He wanted to hate what he was doing but he would only be deceiving himself. The irrefutable reality was that he liked it.

He still thought of Deb, and that was the main reason for his guilt. He felt terrible that it seemed so easy to leave her behind and start kissing a man. He missed her, and he knew that he always would; but the thought of her no longer made him miserable.

The nightmares he had been experiencing regularly for two months had stopped. He had dreamed of Deb twice more since, but the dreams had been nice; centering on memories of good times they had shared. Some were just bits and pieces of random situations.

He was healing. The guilt remained, though. He prayed regularly and knew that God was helping him to cope. How else could he not only be kissing John so often, but really starting to feel for him? A picture of a back yard kiss had made it into the papers. He had almost stopped it from happening at the time because he knew that it would end up on someone's film, but something made him do it anyway. Afterward he had completely confused John by losing his temper.

John had acted embarrassed when he figured out what Mike was upset about. He was no more comfortable with the idea of kissing for a nationwide audience than Mike was. He had turned Mike's mood around, though, explaining that the picture would probably do him good.

He knew that it was almost an insult to God to feel guilty about recovering from losing his fiancé'. After all, if God was helping him then he should be grateful and accept that help with humble thanks. It was just something he would have to overcome. He knew that God was patient, and he let the Lord know that he was trying.

John made no more demands of him even though it was obvious that he wanted more. Mike tried, but he could no longer deny the fact that John was in love with him. It was an odd feeling.

Occasionally, he allowed himself to dwell ever so slightly on the subject of sex; usually when he was altering obviously heterosexual song lyrics for their new audience.

He tried to sort out his feelings about John. He thought of him as a good friend at the least, that was certain. As a matter of fact, John was just as good a friend as John Perkins had been. He was always sensitive to his human friend's feelings and was always fun to be around. Werewolf men do not suffer from the fear of being sensitive that plagues most human men, and any threat to their manliness never occurs to them.

He would think no more of it if it weren't for the kissing. Each time it happened he felt something give a little. He couldn't put his finger on it, but whatever it was, it was crumbling. What is it about a few simple kisses that has such an effect?

What would his feelings have been toward his friends back home if he had kissed them? Would he have possibly fallen in love with one of his male friends? A friend is a friend, but a kiss changes things.

Exactly what were his feelings for John beyond friendship? He would die for him, that he knew for sure. When someone proved themselves to be the best kind of friend, he felt they deserved that level of sacrifice. It was the best thing a human being could do for another, or a werewolf; heaven forbid it ever became necessary.

The doubts kept nagging, though. Was he falling in love with John? With each kiss, each cuddle, each belly rub, it became easier to believe. Each one felt less odd than the one before. They had already crossed the invisible line of restraint where kissing was concerned. It was different, but certainly pleasant. He had actually felt himself becoming aroused once or twice. That bothered him.

On top of that, here was something strangely comforting about holding a muscular, furry body. At first he had assumed that it was a product of his childhood. He had hugged Reggie at least once a day.

Now he was having trouble believing that. Had Doug been right? Was there something in him that wanted to hold another man?

He was beginning to realize something else about himself, too. He missed John when he wasn't around.

Maybe, he thought, it was just because John was his only close friend and he liked to have him around. John was certainly the most continually happy and funny person he had ever met.

That wasn't it, either. Wolves, as a people, had that unconscious, stronger-than-human need for physical contact. Given two wolves, whether they're lovers or not, he noticed that they almost never stood or sat without some part touching. At first he had thought that John was being pushy, using the "animal magnetism" inherent in his kind to seduce him. But after having numerous other wolves do it, everyone from Gordon to the guards, and seeing them do it to each other; he had come to the conclusion that it was just the way they were. He found himself missing that when John wasn't there. He missed the feeling.

There were also other things to consider. Was God teaching him to be a man in a wolf's world? Was it Satan trying to turn him from God? He prayed for guidance constantly. Maybe he was receiving it, but refusing to accept it.

Damn this uncertainty!

What would he do later when John reached the point when kissing simply wasn't enough anymore? What would he do when, in the middle of a kiss, John's hand started wandering south?

He put himself in John's position and imagined himself dealing with a woman. Wouldn't he want to do more after all that kissing if he was in love? Wouldn't he feel a craving from the depths of his soul for the love to be mutual? He couldn't let himself forget that John was in love with him. It was Mike's own fault that John hadn't said so by now. Wouldn't he himself expect more?

It was at that moment that he realized the extent of John's empathy. John wanted to say "I love you," but wouldn't for fear of driving him away. He could deny it no longer; John wanted him, and badly. Was it fair to deny him that?

Yes, if the feelings were not mutual; but he wasn't sure of what his feelings were. He had never been confronted with the love of a man before. If "John" was instead "Jan," this whole matter would be over and done with. He knew that he would want more if he was in John's position. If he felt the same way for a woman that John felt for him, he would have said so by now; and probably tried to seduce her. John was actually being better about this than he would be. That thought shocked him. Their good-natured banter notwithstanding, John was showing amazing restraint.

He stretched out on the couch and turned the TV off. He wasn't paying it any attention anyway. John was visiting Karen again. Lately John was sure to visit at least once a week. Every time he seemed more nervous. He was obviously afraid of what lay ahead for him.

...And then there was sex, he thought as the TV winked out. Eventually everything would boil down to that. He had already gotten passed kissing. It was bothering him less and less.

In a moment of bizarre insight he realized that John deserved him.

"Oops, I wish I hadn't thought of that." He added another twist by imagining the whole thing from a woman's point of view, something Deb had made him do frequently. John did deserve him. What had John done but be a perfect gentleman? He laughed at the thought of calling a furry monster a gentleman.

Funny as it was, the fact remained. If he was a woman, he would probably think that he had struck gold. As the ultimate test, he imagined John with Deb in his place.

What would her feelings be? Would she fall in love with someone like John? The answer was obvious. She would be in love with him. He and John were actually a lot alike.

But sex? Up until now, when it had become necessary, he had masturbated. He avoided fantasization. To fantasize was to covet, and to covet was a sin. He tried to avoid sin when he could. He was far from perfect, and accepted that as part of his nature; but the duty of a Christian is to aspire to perfection, not achieve it. He did it only to relieve the physical need. It wasn't easy keeping his mind blank, though. He longed for the touch of Deb's body.

The arousal he had thought of earlier came back to him. He had actually become aroused kissing John. Again, was it God helping him to adjust or was it a purely physical reaction?

No comfort there; it would have been a physical reaction to another man. Did that mean that he, by nature, could feel the same desires as his newfound, furry friends? Was there something in the back of his mind trying to come

forward?

If it was God helping him, he could accept that. He agreed with what John had said before; they shared the same God. He felt the same feelings of peace that he had always felt during prayer.

Guilt again crept in. He didn't feel that he owed John what he wanted. That was a juvenile concept. Sex is not something that you owe anyone. But was he being fair?

Did he love John?

If John asked, and he said yes, would he be able to go through with sex? Would he see John's nakedness and back out, disgusted? He already knew that wolves had formidably large jewels.

If he wasn't disgusted - he was well aware of what a naked man looked like - would he be able to do what he would be expected to do? Would he get cold feet?

That would be worse than simple denial. To agree and then back out would probably hurt John. He didn't want John to think that he was grossed out by a wolf's body. He wasn't, they looked kind of cool, and John didn't deserve that. They were kind of sexy.

Mike shook his head. "Now where in the hell did that come from? They must be putting thoughts in my head."

His contemplation returned to his feelings for John. He had never kissed a man before, and he was unsure of how he felt. He tried everything.

He thought of John as a woman. What would he do then?

Dead end. With a woman the entire relationship would be completely different, even if it was a werewolf female that conformed to a human life cycle. Men simply relate to each other differently than they do to women.

He thought of himself as John. What would he say to Mike to make it all okay? Another dead end.

So he was stuck with what he had, and nothing to compare it to. What did he feel?

"All right, look at it this way; if he came in right now, kissed you, and asked you to go to bed, what would you do?" he asked himself.

"I'd say no."

"You're lying," his mind argued. "Don't make snap judgments."

The simple fact was that he didn't know. Would he or wouldn't he? Did John deserve him? Yes, no question. Did he deserve John? Yes. Did he love him?

He didn't know. That was the bottom line. He simply didn't know. There were certainly feelings there, feelings dangerously close to what he had felt for Deb, but he was afraid of what they would mean.

He let out a loud sigh. Maybe he would, maybe he wouldn't. He knew that it was only a matter of time before John found a way to seriously suggest they spend a night together. They hadn't started petting yet, beyond a little back-rubbing, but John was definitely turned on by him.

He would hate to say no, but he'd have to be true to his own feelings first, just as John had said. If he felt it was right, he would...might. If he felt it was wrong, he wouldn't.

"I guess I'll just have to wait and see," he said to himself. He turned the TV back on and numbed his brain with a sitcom. Soon afterward he fell asleep on the couch.

"Mike," John said, nudging his shoulder.

He awoke and sat up, realizing he was still on the couch. "What time is it?"

"Ten thirty."

Mike smelled whiskey on John's breath. "Where have you been?"

“Karen’s.”

“You were doing shots with her?”

John blushed. “I stopped for a couple of drinks.” he answered, sitting unsteadily beside him.

“You’re drunk!”

“I am not. I only had a couple.”

“You’re lying. As often as you drink liquor you’d only need a couple.”

John remained silent.

“Did you drive home?”

“No, I went to the bar down the street. I walked back and asked a guard to get my car for me.”

“Why’d you get yourself drunk? We have to fly out to L.A. tomorrow.”

“I don’t know. I didn’t plan on it. I just kept thinking...”

“...About Karen.” Mike finished for him.

“Yeah. I don’t expect you to understand.”

Mike put an arm around the furry shoulder beside him and gave a gentle shake. “I may not fully understand, but I can imagine. I thought about this sort of thing a little earlier. I know that you feel obligated. It’s a big responsibility, but I’m sure that you can handle it. You don’t have to get yourself drunk. You can talk to me.”

John huffed, a smile tugging at his lips. “That’s supposed to be my line. I guess you have the benefit of experience, eh?”

“You could say that. We might as well work both ways.”

What on Earth made me say that? Mike thought. He regretted it immediately, hoping that John hadn’t caught it.

Thankfully, he showed no sign.

“What’s it like?”

“What do you want me to compare it to? I don’t even know how you people go about doing it.”

John explained, with marked discomfort, what he had been taught when he was younger. Mike almost laughed when John described the traditional mating position as being what he would call “doggie-style.” It was hilarious to consider but he controlled himself. He did understand why; that position helped to distance the man from what he was doing. Eye to eye contact was probably unbearable to them. The way John described it, sex was performed with an almost clinical detachment. Whether the reality was so sterile he could only guess.

“Well, you seem to have all of the essentials already.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t tell you what it feels like, you know? Will I spend the whole time trying not to puke on her back?”

Mike had to laugh at that one. Even John smiled at himself.

“John, I’m not a psychiatrist. I don’t know if it will help to say this or not, but I think that you will find that it’s not going to be nearly as bad as you think. It’s only natural. Doug said that the female enjoys it. You may not have fun, but I doubt that God would make it such a horrible thing for you. If He did, how could he expect you to be willing to do it at all? I think you put too much pressure on yourselves.”

“It’s that damn smell.” John said, shuddering and leaning on Mike for balance. “The rest of the family usually avoids her like the plague. It goes away once she mates, so her parents usually try to get it over with as soon as possible. That’s why they were so worried when I stopped coming around.”

“How soon do you think it will be?”

“I don’t know. It could be next week or next year. Mr. Lorrhah says that she’s started her spurt.”

”Spurt?”

“A figure of speech. Soon before mating the female starts a growth spurt. She gets taller, stronger, her hips widen, and her bones get stronger. Basically, it makes her able to...accept a fully grown man.”

“Sounds like puberty. How long does that usually last?”

“It comes before puberty and continues through it. It’s never the same. There’s no way to be sure.”

“Uh-Huh.”

John turned to him, still nervous. “How does it feel? What’s it like to be, you know...” He blanched.

“...Inside her?”

“Yeah. Yuck.”

“Well, assuming that your females are the same inside as mine, it feels pretty good.”

“Pretty good? Are you kidding?” That doesn’t tell me much.”

“Well,” Mike started, uncomfortable with the subject, “It’s, you know, moist.”

John grimaced and tried to stifle a burp.

“Don’t look like that. You lube yourself up for sex, right?”

“Yeah, unless there’s enough...well, you probably don’t want to know that.”

“No, go ahead.”

“You’ll say it’s gross.”

“I promise I won’t.”

“You know how we, uh, drip more than you do, right?”

“Stop right there, I know what you’re going to say.” Mike said quickly. “So with a female the lube is already there. Of course, it feels different inside, but it’s not gross. It won’t feel as tight, I know. I’ve done both. It’s just different, that’s all.”

“Yeah, but it’s a girl.”

Mike sighed. “Are they all like this?” He spoke aloud to John. “I don’t know what else to tell you. All I can say is that there is no need for you to feel so afraid of it. Just let nature take it’s course. After that, you can forget about it.”

“What if it doesn’t work the first time? Then, after a couple of days, I’ll have to go back; and back, and back, and back, until she knows she’s conceived.”

”How does she know?”

“Everything stops.”

“Everyth...oh, that everything. Don’t you think it will get easier if it comes to that? You’ll know what to expect.”

“That doesn’t mean I’ll start liking it. My dad said that it took almost three weeks to get me and my sister started. He hated it. He wouldn’t even talk about it. He didn’t even want to touch himself to take a decent shower afterward.”

“Oh boy.” Mike thought. “I’m running out of assurances.”

John interrupted him. “What did you mean when you said that you thought about it earlier?”

It was Mike’s turn to feel uncomfortable. “Oh, I just got to thinking about things.”

“What things?”

“Just...everything?”

“What in particular?”

Mike sighed again, stretching. Might as well fess up. “You and me, mostly.”

“Really?” John asked with a smile, the whiskers on his snout standing out.

“Yeah. I was trying to sort out some of the feelings I’ve been having trouble understanding. I don’t want to talk about it now. You’re drunk.” he said, standing. “We both need to go to bed.”

“Is ‘bed’ what you were thinking about?” John asked, following him and using the walls to keep his balance.

“Maybe when you’re sober we’ll talk about it. Right now you need to get to bed, and I mean to sleep.”

As he undressed, John was unable to get Mike out of his mind; and was now fighting a losing battle with a certain bulge. He sat on the bed, dropped the damp underwear to the floor, and leaned back against the headboard. He moved his hands between his legs, seeing Mike’s naked body pressed against him, his stubby tongue teasing one of his nipples. He kissed his way to his navel, running his tongue in little circles through and around it.

John growled as he imagined Mike’s head moving down further, curling his own down to complete the illusion. Minutes later the scene was played out, and John fell instantly asleep.

## CHAPTER XI

The trip to L.A. was hectic. John had been mildly hung over for most of the flight out.

They started shooting the day after their arrival. Most of the first night had been spent getting everyone acquainted. There were three other models that Mike would be working with. After a few hours and a few drinks they began to feel comfortable with him.

At first Mike had been nervous, embarrassed, and uneasy while he modeled. A modeling coach was on hand to help him along and coax him into the various positions the photographer wanted.

Most of the outdoor settings were located at private estates. A hoard of private security men kept the curious at bay.

As he had been told before, he modeled various combinations of shirts, pants, and sneakers. Most of the poses were orchestrated, along with lighting and location, to accentuate his physique. One topless, full-length bathing suit shot of him standing under a small waterfall was chosen to be the first poster.

One thing that surprised Mike was the level of patience and professionalism shown by the photographer, coach, crew, and other models. The atmosphere was lighthearted but serious. He never felt as if he were being exploited, something he was sure he would. He had heard nude models often talk that way about Playboy and he got the same feeling, even though he was keeping himself covered.

After the first few hours, he had learned to relax and enjoy himself. He had never been a ham, but he found that being a model could be a lot of fun. Most of the crew liked to keep the atmosphere light. The fact that it was also hard work kept him from enjoying it too much.

When they had finally finished the three day shoot, he told them as much. If things worked out - another "If," in Mike's opinion - he would be glad to work for them again.

Gordon had occupied his time by filming nearly every second of his work with a camcorder. Bloopers and jokes abounded.

Mike and John spent the next two days running around the city, taking in the sights, and catching some time on Venice Beach. People stared through the ring of guards to catch a glimpse of Mike giving John a long belly rub on the beach.

Neither Mike nor John had ever been to California and they both had a ball, Mike taking great joy in setting the usually mellow Californians agape. He signed a lot of autographs, and they both shopped their legs off.

They shared a hotel room, sleeping in separate beds. On the sixth day, they flew back to Chicago to be back in time for the auditions. They barely had time to unpack and fall into their beds. The auditions started at nine the next morning.

Mike, John, and the ever-present guards were ushered in at about seven thirty to avoid detection. The lights were out everywhere but on stage. The desk Gordon told him was set up near the back of the center section was invisible.

"Can you see it with those glowing eyes of yours?" he asked John.

John peered carefully into the seats. "Nope. The stage lights wash it out."

"Good." Mike said, inspecting the rented equipment. There were two large amps, a large drum set, a box of drum sticks, a set of keyboards, and two guitars.

"Did you guy all of this stuff?" he asked Gordon.

"It's rented, not that you couldn't afford to buy it all yourself, though."

Mike smiled, because Gordon was right. After Gordon's fifteen percent and taxes were taken out, Mike still had over eighty grand in the bank. He still had trouble believing that. "Speaking of which," he said to Gordon, "I think

I'm going to need someone to help with my finances. I don't know if I'm capable of managing all of this money."

"We can take care of that any time. Just don't let me forget."

"I won't."

"Will you buy me a new car?" John asked with a smile. "I really like that new Ferrari."

"You have to buy me a new Ferrari, remember? And Disney World, as I recall."

"Oops, I forgot about that. Give me a couple of days."

They milled around as the line formed outside. Mike played around with one of the guitars. Before long, it was time to start.

"Okay Mike, up to your hiding place." Doug called from the invisible table.

"How many people are out there?" he called back as he and John walked up the aisle.

"One hell of a lot. It's quite a good mix, too. I was expecting more guitarists and less drummers and vocalists. I guess I was wrong."

"What have you told them?"

"All they know is that someone big is assembling a band." He held up a large stack of papers and photographs.

"I've got the photos and questionnaires right here. We can look at them as we call each one up. We'll start with the guitars."

Mike and John sat at the table. A dim light was mounted to illuminate a shelf underneath and was shielded to prevent it from shining on them.

"Are you sure they can't see us up here?"

"Positive." Gordon said, directing his muzzle to the mic. "David Friedman, you're up."

A tall wolf with shiny black fur stepped from the wings and onto the stage. His fur looked to be slightly longer and thicker than John's.

"Hire him." John said, elbowing Mike. "What a hunk!"

Mike laughed.

"Go ahead and plug yourself in, Dave." Gordon said into the mic.

"Do you even need that thing?" Mike asked him.

"No, but I want this recorded, so we may as well."

Dave did so and turned his attention back to the blackened seating, fiddling with a few adjustments.

"Tell us a little about yourself."

"My name's Dave Friedman. I'm from here in Chicago. I've been playing since I was thirteen. I'm twenty-two now and I've been in two bands. I have varied taste in music and I'm not locked into any one particular style of play."

Gordon and Mike divided their attention between the figure on stage and his questionnaire. "What's your favorite current song?"

"Uh, Never Let You Go."

"Good start." Mike said. "Do you drink much?"

"I don't drink at all, sir. My dad..."

"Please don't call me sir. It makes me feel like a tyrant."

"Sorry. Uh, my dad was an alcoholic. I never touch the stuff."

"Drugs? Please be honest. You'll be signing a contract with a lot of specifics involved. Being honest now will save you a lawsuit later." Gordon said.

"I've tried pot twice and speed once about three years ago. I didn't like either, so I've never done it again. I haven't tried anything else."

"Religious preference?"

"Protestant."

They skimmed the questionnaire some more.

"Looks good so far."

“Hire him.” John said again.

“Shush.” Mike said, directing his attention back to Dave. “Did you bring anything to play?”

“I know a lot of songs. If you don’t have anything specific in mind, I can play some riffs from them.”

“Are you interested in lead or rhythm guitar?”

“Either will do. I like solos but I like to slam our rhythms, too.”

“Can you be subtle?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, can you play mid-tempo stuff with a lot of subtle harmonics? Can you sing while doing it?”

“You mean, like say, Boston?”

Mike thought for a few seconds, running songs through his mind. “Yeah, something like that.”

“Yes, I can do both. I can play just about any Boston song. They’re one of my favorite bands.”

“Play the final solo from Hitch A Ride. I know they trade back and forth, but bring them together as best you can.”

Dave smiled.

“That’s a good sign.” Gordon said.

“I guess you realize that I’m not going to be tuned like them?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“What’s he mean?” John asked as Dave tapped his foot a few times and started playing.

Mike leaned closer. “Boston can’t be easily duplicated because their sound is heavily technical. A lot of equipment is needed to recreate it.”

“Oh.”

Dave finished, never missing a note. Mike was impressed. “Play your favorite song,” he said, “Starting with where he begins to scream.”

Dave played some more, again performing perfectly.

“Okay, thank you.” Gordon said when Mike had finished with him. “We’ll be in touch. This phone number is correct?”

“Yeah, thank you. Oh, don’t we get to find out who this ‘someone big’ is?”

“You’ll know if you make it.” Gordon answered.

“When will that be?”

“We’ll be calling some time tonight to let you know whether you’ll be coming back tomorrow. Make sure you’re home. Did everyone hear that?” Gordon finished.

A chorus of jumbled ‘yes’s’ came from the wings, and Dave left.

“Hire him.” John said yet again.

“Next, John Gilden.”

The auditions took all day. They worked right through each meal, munching on delivered pizzas and subs. After the last applicant had left, Mike leaned back, blowing a deep breath into his bangs. “Thank God that’s over. Some of those guys couldn’t play their way out of a wet paper bag.”

“Okay,” Gordon began, “Let’s start with the guitars again. Who goes besides the one’s we threw out right away?”

“Dave stays.” Mike said without looking.

“Which one?” Gordon asked, shuffling through the applications. “There were three.”

“The first one.”

“Yes!” John exclaimed, clapping his hand on Mike’s shoulder.

“You are hereby prohibited from having sex with my band.”

“Not fair!”

“Who else?” Gordon asked, ignoring John and spreading applications and photos out on the table.

They went through them all, narrowing the field down to five for each instrument. When they reached the vocalists, one picture caught Mike’s attention and he settled it. “I want him.”

“He was kind of ugly.” John said.

“Maybe so, but he has the voice I want. Or voices, I should say. Everyone sounded okay, but he’s right on the button. And he’s practically the Rich Little of singers.”

“Yeah, he is a stand-out, isn’t he? Good, that means we won’t have to worry about vocalists tomorrow.”

The next day was harder for the applicants. Mike drilled the guitarists mercilessly. They were handed sheet music from one of Mike’s more complicated songs, threatened about using it outside of the auditorium, and made to play in pairs. Three were eliminated for not being able to time it correctly.

“I love this stuff!” Dave exclaimed after flawlessly playing through it. “I can’t wait to see the rest of it!”

“I like his attitude.” Gordon whispered to Mike.

“I like his talent.”

“I like his body.” John added.

“You are a tramp.” Mike said before turning to Gordon. The auditorium was cool, but he was plenty warm sandwiched between them. “He played that perfectly. I’m impressed.”

“Steve is the other one that stands out.” Gordon said quietly.

“Yeah, but Steve is hung over. At least, he looks hung over. Is he hung over?”

“I think you’re right.”

“It’s way too early for him to be celebrating. Throw him out.”

Gordon made a note. “Tony Sparcessi.”

Tony walked out and took his place behind the mic.

Gordon looked momentarily confused, then shook his head. “Oh hell, Tony, I’ve made a mistake. You weren’t supposed to be here today.”

Tony stares their way for a few seconds before drooping visibly and starting off the stage.

“Wait!” Gordon cried out, collecting himself. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that you were cut. Congratulations, you’re it. We didn’t even consider anyone else. Be back tomorrow morning at nine.”

Tony gaped. “I made it?”

“See you tomorrow. No celebrating.” Gordon replied evenly.

Tony jumped and ran from the stage. They could hear him howl as he left.

“He does have a good growl.” John said.

“I noticed that you furry types do that a lot.”

After Tony they finished for the day, picking those who would be the actual band members. Dave Friedman was the obvious choice for guitar. He was better than Mike. Tony could also play keyboards and passable guitar. The bass player was a semi-short, brown and gray wolf named Jim Fallon. He had been a real stand-out, playing effortlessly. The drummer, also brown and gray, was a tall man named Eric Rush. Mike rounded out the band.

Mike and John were standing in the wings, hidden by the large stage curtains. The band was assembled around the equipment, chatting with excitement. There was no question that they were it, and they were getting acquainted.

“I wonder what they think of your smell.” John whispered right into Mike’s ear. “I’m sure they’ve caught scent of you by now.”

Mike shrugged as Doug walked out and got their attention. “Good morning, gentlemen. It’s time to meet the fifth member of the band. I assume that you’ve come to the conclusion that you all made it.”

They all nodded nervously, wondering who the “someone big” was.

“The fifth member will be the principal songwriter, play lead and rhythm guitar, and sing backing vocals. He has indicated that he will be doing the writing but will also be open to input should any of you have it. He already knows that he’ll need help writing drum parts. I want to make one thing clear immediately. If, after seeing who he is, you decide to decline; there will be no hard feelings. The next in line behind you will take your place, and you’ll lose out on one hell of a good album and a lot of money. Keep in mind that he wants a clean band, image is a concern of

his.”

“All I know is that he’s already famous.” Eric said from within the drum set.

“Gentlemen, it is my pleasure to introduce to you the man behind this band. Mike?”

Mike walked out, followed by John. They all gasped, the sound of four indrawn breaths greeting him.

“Mike, meet your band.”

“Congratulations.” Mike said, feeling slightly stupid.

They stared in amazement for a few seconds and none of them so much as twitched.

“No way!”

“Is this for real?” Jim asked from behind his bass.

“I thought I smelled something funny.”

“How real it is depends on how badly you want to play stadiums.” Gordon said with a smile.

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Dave said, leaning down to retrieve the pick he had dropped before shaking Mike’s hand.

“Were you up there the whole time?” Dave asked, gesturing into the seats.

”Yup. I’m the one who’s been making your life so difficult these last couple of days.”

“So that was your stuff we were playing?” Jim asked.

“Yeah. The slow one’s called Love Bites. The other one is Excitable.”

“Well hell, I’m in. If the rest of the album is half as good...” Dave began.

“Me too.” said the other two in unison. “My parents will completely flip.” Jim finished alone.

“Great!” Gordon said, clapping his hands.

They spent the rest of the afternoon getting to know each other. Within an hour their apprehension from meeting a walking monster had faded and they loosened up, talking about themselves openly. Mike ended up telling half his life story.

He bummed Dave’s guitar and played bits and pieces of various songs for them. After half an hour he finished. Amazingly enough, they all seemed to like it.

“Seriously? You all think they sound good?” Mike asked them.

“Hell yeah.” Dave said. “Don’t you guys think so? It’s definitely not typical. I’m tired of every band sounding alike.”

Everyone else agreed.

“Thank God. The last thing I wanted was to find the best musicians only to discover that they hated the music. We would have had to go through all of this again.”

“So when do we start recording?” Tony asked, amazed at his sudden luck.

“As soon as we get a demo tape made and somebody hears it.” Gordon answered.

“How are we going to get a demo tape made?” John asked.

“Simple. I call a studio and tell them that Mike Riggs and his band want to come in and make a demo.”

“In an actual studio? Do you think they’ll just jump at it like that?” Mike asked.

“Yes. I’ve already hinted at it to a couple. You know how the entertainment business types are; wink at them and they’re yours, if you have something they want. And they want you, you seem to have a persuasive quality like no other. Industry people see you and see dollar signs.”

“Okay, so when?”

“I can imagine having us in a studio, strictly for the demo, within two weeks.”

“I didn’t know you could get an actual studio for demo tapes.” Dave said.

“Normally you can’t, but Mike here is a hot item.”

”That’s not a lot of time for these guys to learn an album’s worth of songs.”

“I still can’t believe this.” Eric said with a sigh.

“I’m just a guy, guys.” Mike said.

“You all will spend the next two weeks playing.” Gordon said, adopting a commanding tone. “I want you to be ready when we get the studio time. Your contracts are already drawn up. All you have to do is read and sign. That will leave you all the time in the world for playing.”

“It’s kind of unusual to have to sign a contract to join a band, isn’t it?”

“Not really. Besides, Mike’s a picky bastard.”

“I just don’t want any druggies or fat people.” Mike said defensively. “Where are we going to rehearse? These guys have seventy minutes of songs to learn. I’ve written a bunch more to make our concerts long enough to be worth the money without resorting to covers.” He didn’t mention that they were songs from Pyromania.

“There isn’t enough room in the house.” John added.

“We could knock out a wall downstairs.” Gordon suggested.

“I don’t think the Bureau would like that.” John said. “It’s still their house.”

“I suppose I could move out.” Mike mused.

“How could you afford a new house?” John asked. “Maybe you should wait until you have a steady income or at least a lot more money. The rent you’re now paying for the house is a lot less than the cost of owning your own.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. So, what do we do?”

“Are you sure you all can’t fit in the den?” Gordon asked.

“Well, we could fit if we took most of John’s stuff out.” Mike answered. “There wouldn’t be a whole lot of room left over. We could move the stuff upstairs. John’s TV is a lot nicer than the FBI issue one in the living room anyway.”

“Okay, let’s try that for now. If it’s just too cramped, we can figure something out.”

“All right, let’s go.” Mike said, turning to the other guys. “Do you know where I’m staying?”

“The entire United States knows where you’re staying.” Dave said with a laugh. “Hell, even the Kremlin knows!”

“Okay, it’s lunch time. Why don’t you guys go home, get your stuff, and show up at about, oh, three o’clock?”

“Okey-dokey.” Tony said, getting up. “How do we get passed the demilitarized zone?”

Mike and John laughed. “We’ll let them know you’re coming.” John said.

The next two weeks passed in a blur. Adidas called to say that catalog sales were beyond their expectations. The catalogs themselves had already handily outsold any in their history. Mike was offered a commercial contract for sneakers. Gordon handled the details.

The band practiced in the den, finding just enough room for them and their equipment.

Everyone loved the songs and caught on to them quickly, especially Dave. He seemed to have a natural knack for timing and arrangement. Mike was quick to point out that Dave was much better than he. In all fairness, Dave became their lead guitarist.

During a lunch break Eric gave Mike a nudge. “We haven’t thought to come up with a name yet.”

“That’s bad karma.” Tony said, sipping his iced tea.

“I’d forgotten all about that.” Mike said. “Any suggestions?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” John asked from his perch atop Dave’s amp.

“What?”

“Wereman, of course.”

“No! Absolutely not!” Mike insisted.

“Cool! Why not?” Tony asked.

“Because I’m not a wereman. And besides, I want the name to reflect the whole band, not just me.”

“I like it.” Tony said.

Everyone else agreed, causing Mike to sulk.

“On, come on Mike!” Dave prompted. “It sounds totally cool! And as for what you said, it will reflect the whole band. Just bite us.”

Mike hurrumphed.

“You are the driving force behind us. The songs are yours.”

“Yeah, but a song without a band is just a song. You guys are as instrumental to this as I am. The band as a whole will add personality to the music. You know I want everyone to have equal part in all of this.”

“And, as equal band members, we all vote for ‘Wereman.’” Dave said, gesturing to the others. “That makes it four against one.”

”Five.” John added.

Mike scowled.

“What else do you want to call us, ‘Fifty-Two Guitar Tracks From Hell?’”

Mike laughed and gave in. “All right, damn it. You win.”

Eric started a drum roll. “...And now, gentlemen, I give you...”

“Wereman!” they all yelled in unison, Eric ending with an ear-splitting cymbal crash.

“Well, it looks like you’re going to have to bite us now.”

“Line up.”

“I’m first.” John said.

“Do we get to pick where?” Jim asked.

“I know where I want mine.” Dave said. “Just a few nibbles ought to be enough, right? Just enough to work your magic?”

“I know where I want mine, too.” John added. “And it ain’t where you want yours.”

“John’s the smart one, satyrs.” Mike said with a smile. “It’s got to be a deep, flesh-tearing bite.”

“You could make it interesting.” Jim offered. “You know they say that you keep going if someone tears up your member during orgasm. A little pleasure, a little pain...”

“That is gross.” Mike said with a wince.

“Yeah.” John agreed.

“I can out-gross anyone in here.” Dave offered.

“You guys do not want to start a gross-out contest with me.” Mike warned good-naturedly.

“I think I could beat you.” Dave said confidently. “You’re too respectable of a guy.”

“I’ll go first.” Mike said. He leaned back and put an arm around John. He sat for a few seconds and collected his thoughts, getting the story straight in his head. A smile slowly grew across his face as the climax came to him.

“Maybe you shouldn’t have said that.” Eric said to Dave after seeing Mike’s smile.

“Here we go.” Mike began. “Okay guys, imagine this; you’re on your knees.”

“Sounds good so far. What’s the gross part?” Jim asked.

“Oh, you just wait! You have no clue!” Mike thought before continuing. “Oh, by the way, close your eyes. I want you to visualize this intensely.”

Everyone closed their eyes.

”You’re on your knees, using your mouth and tongue the best way you know how. The smell and taste are driving you crazy, and you can barely keep your hands off yourself. You can look up and see the hard, flat stomach moving in and out as your lover breathes deeply.”

Various shifts in position took place around the room.

“You’re very good at what you’re doing, and they’re moaning constantly, moving their hips rhythmically.”

John shifted closer and slid an arm across the small of his back, wrapping it around his waist in a hug.

“Keep your eyes closed and visualize what you’re doing.” Mike chided when Tony peeked. “You know you can’t stop because they’re close to orgasm, but the taste, smell, and fun are really getting to you. You feel almost delirious. That yummy fluid is almost running out of them.”

Everyone shifted some more. “God, these guys are easy to work up.” Mike thought. “Wait until I shoot them down.”

“You can’t keep your own hips still, and you’re dying to get off yourself. You can feel a soft breeze brushing your bare, hanging balls. You feel like the slightest touch would send you off. There will be no slow, sensual lovemaking this time. You’ve got to finish them, and you know they’re ready. So, you quicken the pace to a near-frenzy and just BURY YOUR TONGUE IN HER CUNT, LICKING HER IN A FURY UNTIL SHE COMES ALL OVER YOUR SNOUT!”

“Oh God! Grosssss!”

John let him go and bent over, squirming in disgust and crossing his legs. Everyone cried out, squirming and shivering like John was.

“Got you!” Mike thought with a self-satisfied smirk.

“Oh, that’s so sick! I think I’m going to puke!” Jim cried, standing and nearly doubling over in a cringe. Everyone else was twisting around in slow-motion seizures.

Mike sat back and enjoyed the show as they all writhed and rubbed their snouts. Dave put his muzzle under his waist band and took a deep breath. “Oh, that’s better!” he said with a shudder.

Everyone else followed his lead, making Mike laugh hysterically. They were still squirming when he could see again. It occurred to him then just how well he had gotten them. They all had sisters who have since passed away, and they all have that strong canine ability to remember scents as if they had smelled them yesterday. As soon as Mike had pulled his little surprise, he was sure the memory of their sisters’ mating scent had rushed in on them.

”That was the sickest thing anyone has ever done to me.” Eric said, shaking his head one last time.

“Never, ever do that again!” Tony said to Dave, shaking a finger at him.

“No argument here. I couldn’t touch that one.”

“I warned you.” Mike said smugly. “You keep forgetting where I come from.”

“Which, by the way, is a good thing for you.” John said in a moment of seriousness.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So let’s keep it that way and not do that again, okay?” John asked with a smile as he sat next to him again.

“I wouldn’t put you through that twice. God, it was funny, though. You all fell for it hook, line, and sinker.”

“I still think I’m going to puke.” Jim said.

“Want to smell mine?” Tony asked.

“Whore.”

“Only for my friends.”

“I suppose that means you’ll charge.”

“I hear that John comes pretty cheap.”

“You do?” Mike asked him.

“I do not!”

“Oh, so you’re expensive? How much?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Gotcha.”

“I think we’d better get back to work. You guys are still hopelessly screwing up Gods of War.

They sent their demo tape to, of course, Capital. Mike was relieved to find that his old contact was alive and kicking as a werewolf, and Gordon smoothed the whole thing over.

The media found out immediately that Mike was starting a band. Gordon’s phone was ringing off the hook. He took every opportunity to complain about it, but Mike knew that he was enjoying himself. They both took great delight in driving MTV News crazy by telling them next to nothing.

Capital, after hearing the demo, signed them on for what seemed like an ungodly amount of money. Having been done in a studio, the demo tape had a high quality sound. They had been impressed, as the up-front offer suggested.

They had even agreed to Mike's altogether unforgivable demands. He had insisted, mostly through Gordon, that he retain a considerable amount of control over every facet of his career. They had agreed readily, even making suggestions.

As a matter of fact, they were put off by neither Mike's demands nor the album's length. According to Gordon, they knew when they had a good thing. To give up Wereman would mean that someone else would sign them.

The band was flying to Hollywood tomorrow to begin recording.

Jerry set the photo album down on the end table and finished his coffee.

The last few months had been the hardest of his life. He still woke up some nights with Mike's dead body laying in front of him.

He knew that he was only torturing himself by looking at those last few pages of the album, but they served as a sort of therapy for him. They allowed him to remember Mike as he had been in life; always laughing, always caring, the sun shining on his perfect silver fur. He didn't want to remember the dirty corpse and matted pelt. He had gotten over him enough not to cry when he looked at them.

The doorbell rang and he walked over to answer it, looking out through the window. Mr. Peller from next door was standing outside, holding a Tupperware container full of chicken soup. Jerry knew it was chicken soup because Jake Peller had been pouring it down his throat for months. Jake was seventy two and a firm believer in its healing powers.

He opened the door with a smile. "Jake, how're ya doin'?"

"Fine, fine." Jake replied in his usual redundant manner. "How are you today?"

"I'm okay. Come on in. I see you brought more soup. Thank you, but you really don't have to keep feeding me."

Jake walked in and headed for the kitchen. "Nonsense, nonsense. Ain't nothin' a good bowl of homemade chicken sup won't cure, even the blues."

Jerry smiled as he followed him into the kitchen. Jake got out a pan and dumped soup into it, stirring it some before getting a bowl. Jerry would offer to help if he thought it would do any good. Jake, however, would pick up a truck with his bare hands and change a tire before asking for help.

Jake had long ago adopted Jerry as a sort of surrogate son, so he knew where everything was. Jerry wasn't hungry but knew better than to argue. Jake didn't get out much, so Jerry was glad to be a constant companion. Besides, he was just eccentric enough to be fun. He asked him how his day was going.

"Oh, good enough for a retired old man, good enough." he answered as he turned the burner up a notch.

"Would you like something to drink?"

"No, no, I'm not thirsty, thank you."

"Let's go into the living room while that warms up."

"Fine. Oh, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Jake asked as he walked into the living room. He spied the album on the table.

"No, I was just having a cup of coffee."

"...And looking at your album again. Mike was a good boy, but you got to let him go, son. He's with the Lord now, and damned happy to be there. Be glad for him and move on. It's not healthy to take so long to get over him." Jake said gently.

Jerry would have been angry with anyone else for talking about it so brazenly, but coming from Jake it somehow sounded comforting. "I am over him. There's nothing wrong with remembering. It's just a little bit harder with..."

"...The monster." Jake finished as he eased himself into a chair.

"He's not a monster. He's just...Mike without the fur. I've seen him on TV and I've seen him on film from that cell downtown. I've seen him on posters and driving a certain car. Every nuance, every movement, every word is just

like Mike. He uses the same words Mike would use, he chews his claws just like Mike did. He covers his mouth when he laughs, one more little thing Mike did. He even has the same eyes. Mike's weren't blue, but they still look like his. His voice is the same. That footage they showed of him playing basketball with that John guy - he used to cheat like that playing me all of the time."

"Jerry, that thing on the news is not Mike. He may have been Mike where he comes from, but he ain't here. There was a female living here that he was engaged to, remember? He walked in here that night expecting to see her."

"Yeah."

Jake was about to say more when his watch beeped. Jerry looked at it in amazement. "You bought a digital watch?"

"Damned doctor made me, the heathen. Said I was forgetting to take my heart medicine. He must have been right," he said, chuckling with a soft snort, "Because here I sit whilst my medication waits at home. How do you get this damned thing to stop?" he asked, poking frantically at the tiny buttons. It finally stopped and he looked up. "I'd love to stay, but I can't miss my pills. My doctor, the hi-tech heathen, says that it'll kill me to."

He pushed himself out of the chair and moved toward the door. "You enjoy your soup, now."

"I will, and thanks again. You know you're welcome to come back over after you've taken them."

"Oh, I think I'll take a nap, yes, a nap. You know how us old people are."

"Bye."

"Bye."

He had just closed the door when the phone rang.

"Grand Central Station." he muttered as he jogged over to answer it. "Hello."

"Hello, is this Jerry Sillet?"

"You got him. Who's this?"

"This is, uh..." A long sigh interrupted the voice. "...Mike Riggs. I understand that you called my agent."

"Oh." Jerry said, unsure of what to say next. Truth be known, he hadn't known what to say when he had called.

"Uh, look, I've been avoiding talking to you because I'm not sure if I know what to say; or what you would say."

"I'm not sure myself." Jerry said slowly. "I don't know why I called. I think that maybe I thought I could somehow deal with Mike's death better if I knew that you weren't really him. But I don't think that will work now that I've seen you so much on TV and in the papers. You're so much like him..."

"...And yet, I'm not. I'm sorry, but I don't know what to tell you. I...don't know you." Mike said carefully.

"Are you still, you know, gay?"

"No." Mike almost said, then checked himself. He had almost forgotten what 'gay' meant to a werewolf. He wasn't altogether sure of how to answer to that. He decided to say what he thought would be less painful for Jerry to hear. "No."

"That John Carter guy?"

"Oops." Mike thought. "Yeah," he said aloud, "But we're not really serious. Well, we are, but not..."

"I understand."

"Hey, I know that tone. Don't think that you're losing me, or him, I mean. He's gone, God bless his soul, and I'm just not exactly the same person. Please don't feel that way. I know this is hard for you, I've already gone through something similar."

Jerry shook his head, clearing the haze caused by hearing that voice again. "I'm sorry, I'm just a little confused. I know you're not him."

"You two were engaged, weren't you?"

"Yeah. We were going to get married this past May." he answered sadly.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about...Mike. I know that what I've said on tape sounds a bit impersonal. I want you

to know that, as a real person in the real world, I really do feel for everyone who misses him. I wish this had never happened for both of us.”

“I do too, but I’ll get over it. A little more time and I’ll be fine.”

“Do you have a neighbor named Jake Peller?”

“Yeah.”

“How is the old goat?”

Jerry snorted. “He’s doin’ fine. He was just here a minute ago. He has a digital watch now so he won’t forget his medication.”

“Jake, a digital watch?”

“You heard it here first.”

He heard the voice on the other end brighten. “That’s good. He’s a good old soul.”

“Yeah, he is. Look, I don’t mean to be rude, but I’ve got a pot of his chicken soup on the stove. It is nice to know that you’re enough like my Mike to care. That makes me feel better.”

“I’m glad, I really am. Well, good bye then.”

“Good bye.”

Mike’s voice echoed in his head as he walked into the kitchen to save the soup.

Mike hung up and sat back with a sigh. That had been a hard phone call. It prompted more reflection on his life. It was January, nine months after his accident.

It had been a bittersweet Christmas. He had gone shopping without John to buy him some presents. Although he was getting very rich, he still couldn’t afford to get him a Ferrari. He had settled on some clothes and a replacement for his aging stereo.

John had reciprocated with clothes and a few other things, including a trip to get the top of his ears pierced. Gordon had somehow managed to get him a customized razor to replace the clumsy surgical shaver he had been forced to use.

The bitter part was that it was the first Christmas in two years that he hadn’t been able to spend with Deb.

He and John, along with many of their friends, got hopelessly drunk on New Year’s Eve. John had been so wasted that he actually seriously asked Mike to spend the night in his room. Once he had recovered enough the next morning, he had gushed out a sincere apology. Mike laughed it off and thought no more of it.

His relationship with John was rolling along. They had begun kissing in front of others, something Mike wouldn’t do before. The first time it happened he had been fatally embarrassed. The guys thought little of it. “Maybe a little jealousy,” according to John.

Mike found that he was comfortable with it now. The thought that he was kissing a man didn’t seem to bother him anymore. When he had the time, which wasn’t often, he contemplated sex.

He still prayed regularly. John would join him if he happened to be there at the time. Mike could sense no animosity from God. Maybe John was right. Maybe God wanted him to accept his new life completely. They continued going to John’s church, where they frequently saw John Perkins. Over the months they had started to become friends. It wasn’t hard since, in a way, they always had been.

The thought of sleeping with John seemed less and less disgusting as time went by. He had stopped arguing with himself over the purely physical aspects and concentrated on his feelings for him. He had to confront his feelings head-on. He was falling in love with John.

It didn’t anger him, only confused him. He would have been content to have John as a close friend. Why hadn’t he left it at that? Why hadn’t he just stopped the whole thing before it could start? It didn’t help that he was a curious

person by nature, and tended to dwell on things too much. The kissing was surely a factor. They had come very close to heavy petting on a couple of occasions. The belly rubs didn't help, either. Mike found himself looking forward to them. Not just to receive them, but to give them. He realized that he liked being affectionate with John. What confused him was that he could have those feelings in the first place.

He recalled what Doug had said so long ago when he had first arrived; the feelings were there, just programmed out of him by the society he grew up in.

Was he right after all? Probably not, because it didn't fit in with his faith. As a matter of fact, Doug hadn't asked him about overtly personal matters since about two months ago. John must be keeping him informed.

John didn't help. He was just so damn...deserving! He was fun, empathic, honest, sensitive, and he took good care of himself and those he liked. They still worked out each day together, too.

Even the thought of oral sex was becoming less horrible. He found himself becoming curious. He spent every day surrounded by people who did it as a matter of course. They joked about sex just as anyone else would.

Before, they had talked about making the one you love happy. Mike was feeling a genuine desire to make John happy. It was an emotional desire, not a physical one, but a desire just the same.

He was also starting to realize that he was the closet pervert, not those around him. He was the only one that wanted what he considered normal. He wasn't surrounded by a cliché of faggots. He was surrounded by normal, well-adjusted people. People who love and need to be loved.

Maybe it was time to give love another chance. He couldn't go on denying his feelings forever.

"You look introspective." John said, walking into the living room.

"Hi John." he said, accepting John's kiss as he sat beside him.

"What's on your mind?"

Mike was still a little scared, but he decided to be honest. "I was thinking again."

"About what? Oh no. I know what happens when you start to think."

"What?" Mike asked with a smile, accepting another small kiss.

"You say something, go to bed, and I end up blowing myself."

"You do that?"

"I thought you knew. You didn't think we were joking, did you?"

"I wasn't sure."

John chuckled, embarrassed. "Masturbation is masturbation. What's on your mind?" he asked, understandably eager to change the subject.

"A lot of things. You, mainly."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Getting hungry? I swear, I'm really tough. We don't have enough tenderizer."

"I'm serious." Mike said, his stomach beginning to buzz.

"Sorry. Anything I can help?"

"Well," Mike began, totally at a loss.

"Take your time."

"I've never asked you because I was afraid of what you'd say. I'm trying not to be afraid anymore."

"Of what?"

Mike collected himself, sighed heavily, and turned to face him. John shifted a little closer and bent a leg around him.

"If you feel it, say it. If you don't, say you don't."

John stared at him for a few seconds, his whiskers and ears moving back slightly. Mike could almost hear the gears turning inside the furry head.

John took a deep breath, his eyes drilling into Mike's. "Are you sure you want to hear?"

"Whatever it is."

“I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

There, he had heard it. Mike lowered his eyes indecisively. He knew it was true. He had known for months. It seemed much harder to hear it spoken, though. He was fighting a battle inside, a battle that he felt he was about to lose. Maybe, he thought, he was winning.

“I thought that’s what you’d say.”

John didn’t reply. He just sat and waited for him to continue.

“I…” he began, taking another deep breath. He stopped, meeting John’s unwavering gaze. There was no way he could ignore what he saw.

Something inside him clicked. “I… I think that, well, I think that maybe I love you too.”

John’s expression didn’t change, surprising Mike. The only obvious reaction was a slight twitch of his whiskers. “Maybe?” he asked, his ears flicking once.

Mike took another deep breath. “Yes.”

”Yes, you love me?”

“Yes, I really love you.”

John jumped, startling him. His ears perked up and he practically choked Mike with a deep, long-tongued kiss. “You have no idea how badly I’ve been wanting to hear you say that!” he said, kissing him again.

“Whoa!” Mike said, pulling his face from John’s. “I’m not done yet.”

“What?” John asked, looking, for God’s sake, like a happy puppy.

“I’ve also been thinking about, well, you know, me and you…”

“Yeah…” John prompted.

“Well, I’ve been thinking that, well, that maybe making love wouldn’t be such a bad thing.”

There, now he had said it. Upon his admission, it seemed as if a weight had been lifted. Worrying had been half the problem. Maybe God did want him to adjust.

“You mean it?” John asked, still grinning like a little boy - or a little dog - at Christmas.

“Yeah.”

An indescribable expression crossed John’s face. It wasn’t victory. It was a look that showed he knew the full magnitude of what Mike had just said.

He kissed him, a long, passionate kiss. Furry hands roamed his back, claws tracing the lines of muscle through his shirt.

Mike responded for a few seconds, feeling the furry, rippled back through the open part of John’s shirt. He let the kiss last, enjoying the feeling and breaking off when he knew it wouldn’t be too soon.

“Not now.”

“Why not?” John asked, swallowing audibly and resting a hand on Mike’s hip.

“Because right now would be like, I don’t know, an experiment. I don’t want it to be that way. When the time is right, we’ll do it. Now, it wouldn’t be right. Besides, there’s a guard not fifteen feet away.

“Okay.” John said, kissing him softly on the lips. “But remember; it’s no new thing to me. I’ll be ready when you are. I’m just so glad that you love me too. I’ve been wanting to say it for so long.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been an insensitive bastard.” Mike confessed with a grin. “I’ll do better.”

They snuggled on the couch and watched TV for a while, Mike finding most of the sitcoms to be completely lame.

“We better get to bed.” he said after a while. “We have to get up at six or so to be ready to go.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” John agreed. “I’m glad we got the packing done today.”

They walked down the hall, wrapping an arm around each other. They stopped at the end of the hall, their doors on either side. They both stood uncomfortably for a few seconds.

“Do you think we could, you know, just share a bed?” John asked uncertainly. “We don’t have to do anything.”

“Sleep in the same bed with you and do nothing? Ha!” Mike said, trying to lighten the atmosphere. “Let’s hold off on that, okay? I just can’t.”

“Okay.” John said, reluctantly letting him go. “Looks like another night of unavoidable self gratification.” he thought to himself before giving him a kiss on the cheek. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mike thought for a few moments, not saying anything. John started to walk into his room. Mike followed him.

“John?”

“Yeah?” he answered, turning around.

Mike glanced back down the hall to make sure no guards were lurking and stepped up close. He hung his arms lightly around John’s neck. “I think that now wouldn’t be an experiment.”

“Are you sure?” John asked softly, his lips brushing Mike’s.

Mike felt himself begin to smile. “I said I love you. Kiss me before I change my mind. You don’t get a second chance.”

John smiled back and kissed him.

## CHAPTER XII

Mike lay awake thinking. John had already fallen asleep, his head resting on the right side of Mike’s chest. He scratched him lightly behind the large, fuzzy ears; trying to sort his feelings.

On one hand, he had to admit that he had liked it. He had genuinely liked the feeling of pleasing John. From all indications, he had actually done a pretty good job of it. And an orgasm was an orgasm, after all.

On the other hand, he couldn’t believe the things he had done. He reached up with his free hand and rubbed one of the spots where John had been nipping at his neck.

He had really liked that, John making full but unselfish use of his tendency to melt with a mouth at his neck. It hadn’t been at all painful, it had just added one more feeling to the whole experience. John had been inside him at the time, moving slowly.

He had never felt anything like that and was unsure of what to think of himself. He had never considered it a way of making love. He expected no tenderness, affection, or sensuality; just anal sex. John had proven him utterly wrong.

Judging from his own experience and from watching movies, werewolves could definitely teach humans a thing or two about it. It really was making love. He had expected to be sore, but it was more of a lingering discomfort.

Being penetrated had hurt quite a bit at first, when John had first gone in. He had practiced extreme care, and the

pain had faded after a few minutes; owing to the fact that John was small by human standards (average for a werewolf), notably careful, and had whispered for him to relax properly. As for the nips on his neck, John seemed to never get enough of nuzzling, kissing, teasing, and nipping him.

The overall experience was just as John had described it to him before. Neither had ever had the upper hand, even though John had all the experience. John had refused to do anything that Mike wouldn't do back. That had eventually amounted to nothing. What John couldn't have described was the emotional experience. If there had been any lingering doubt beforehand, it had evaporated quickly.

He wanted to blame John for his mixed-up emotions, but he just couldn't bring himself to. John had been willing to wait, but he had started it.

The whole time, John had been totally unselfish. Mike knew that he would have been very easy to take advantage of. But not once did John hurry him along or act as if he expected anything. He could tell that John was having trouble controlling himself. He had to admit that John had probably never been so turned on in his whole life.

Mike smiled to himself. He would have acted exactly the same way with an inexperienced, exotic woman.

So he couldn't blame John, who snuggled closer in his sleep. That left himself.

Was it so horrible? It didn't feel so at the time, it felt very right; like love. He recalled some of the things he had been doing less than an hour ago. He had done what he knew would feel good. John had actually had little advice beyond that which applied to wolves more than men.

Months ago he would have vomited to even get close to what he had been doing. Vomited. Why had it been so easy? Why had his inhibitions fled so readily? Was he adjusting? Was this what God wanted for him? Was it time to accept the fact that he was becoming a homosexual?

He answered his own question. He had done it, and enjoyed it, because he loved John.

In spite of his speculation, he felt good. The taste in his mouth didn't bother him. John had kissed most of that away and what was left was - dare he say it? - pleasant. During their lovemaking he had found himself turned on by it, and amazed at how much there was.

How could he say "no" the next time when he felt good about it? There is nothing like the warm, fuzzy feeling you have after making love with someone you truly do love. Was it God again, telling him that he loved John and could be happy with him? Right now, God was probably telling him to shut up.

Either way, he refused to be angry or otherwise upset. He planted a soft peck on the top of John's head. He licked his considerable chops and mumbled "I love you" for the second time since falling asleep. That was cute.

In spite of his screwed-up life, he had a lot to be happy for. He was richer than he had ever imagined and was getting richer every time a Talon commercial aired or a poster was sold. He was about to record an album that would make him millions. The inevitable tour would make even more millions. He had already amassed over two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. His accountant, shared by Gordon, was beginning some secure investments.

But money was material. What else did he have? He had friends, and he had John. It felt good to be loved, no matter who it was doing the loving. And he had found love again himself. Who could ask for more than that?

Happy and a lot less unsure, he fell asleep.

Mike's room was empty and the bed was made. That was odd, because he hadn't seen him around the house.

He shrugged, turning to John's door. He and his husband had gotten up early, intending to surprise Mike and John with the news that they would be joining them for a couple of weeks in Hollywood. Sam, his husband, waited in the living room with the kids. They were understandably anxious to meet Mike.

He knocked quietly and cracked the door. John was half-laying, half-sitting on one side of his bed, pressed against what appeared to be a guy under the sheet. John put a finger to his lips, pointing to the man-sized mound beside him.

He first assumed that John had brought someone home, but he stared in shock as the unmistakable smell of Mike hit him, mixed with the equally unmistakable smell of an intimate night. A few seconds later he regained his senses.

John smiled back at him, mouthing a good morning.

“Mike?” he asked quietly, pointing to the sleeping figure.

John smiled again, nodding.

“You two...?”

John gave him a indignant look as Mike stirred, but couldn't keep the smile from his face.

“It's time to get up.” Doug said. “Gordon's here, drinking your coffee. The band should be here within an hour.”

“Okay.” John agreed, leaning over Mike. “We'll be out.”

Doug winked and closed the door. Mike moved again, their voices disturbing his light morning sleep.

“Oh Sleeping Beauty? It's time to get up.”

“Not for another three hours.” came the muttered reply as Mike pushed his face into John's fur.

“Come on,” John said, rolling him over and nibbling his chest, “We have a plane to catch.”

“All right, I'm up.” He struggled against the snout to a sitting position.

John kept nibbling. “By the way, you were wonderful.”

Mike smiled, still too sleepy to feel his usual dubiety. “You're shitting me. I would remember.”

Mike and John didn't come out as they usually do in the morning, wearing robes, hair and fur a mess. They were wearing robes as usually, but had already showered. This morning they had also conserved water.

Everyone was sitting at the table, drinking large amounts of coffee. Doug's three kids had hot chocolate. Doug introduced them and they stared at him raptly.

“Boo!” he said, shooting a hand toward them.

They were typical eleven year-olds, totally devoid of fear. Mike smiled and sat down, nodding to everyone.

“See what he's like in the morning?” John asked, taking a seat beside Mike.

“Be nice to my kids or I'll put you back in your cell.” Doug said, faking an angry glance.

“I promise.” Mike said, bumming a cigarette from John.

“Your promises don't go into effect until you've had your coffee, remember? Don't listen to him, guys.” John added.

“Never mind him, kids. He's a grouch in the morning, like your stepdad.”

Sam nudged him.

“I didn't let him use the cold water blast to wake up this morning?”

“Meaning what?” Doug asked, smiling slyly.

“Meaning that I'm even meaner than normal.” Mike said between sips. “How much time before we have to leave?”

“We've got almost an hour.” Gordon answered.

The front door opened and the rest of the band filed in, looking tired.

“Coffee's in the kitchen.” Gordon said as a hello.

“Gotcha.” Dave said, heading for it. The others followed.

“Where's your stuff?” Gordon asked as they emerged with mugs in hand.

“It's all crammed into Eric's van.” Tony said, leaning against a wall.

“I just hope it all survives the flight.” Dave said, concerned about his beloved guitars.

“Don't worry.” Gordon assured them all. “We chartered a Learjet.”

“I hate those things.” Mike grumbled from behind his mug. “They ride like Yugos.”

“You hate everything in the morning.” John said, kissing his cheek.

Mike looked at Doug's kids. They were still staring at him. “Boo!” he tried again. Their only reaction was to smile.

“Be nice.” Doug warned good naturedly.

“Why don't you go get dressed? It can't hurt to be a little early.” Gordon offered.

“All right, boss.” Mike agreed, taking his coffee with him.

“I guess I’ll get ready, too.” John said, following him.

They dressed and drove to the airport, a regular caravan of press following them. They were kept at bay, though, and they got on their plane without incident. John sat looking out the window, thinking about his night with Mike.

He couldn’t describe, even to himself, just how incredible it had been. Mike had seemed so...innocent. Working between those furless legs and looking up along that tight, furless body had driven him completely mad. Watching Mike move above him, feeling him inside, had made him crazy. Controlling himself had been exquisite torture. He was sure that Mike would be surprised to discover just how good he was. For all his talk of how he couldn’t make love with another man, he had seemed to be a natural. Maybe God was finally answering his prayers. And if all that wasn’t enough, Mike was also capable of generating suction no wolf could hope to match. It more than made up for his stubby tongue.

There were dozens of intangibles that he couldn’t put his finger on. He had no way of expressing the pure visual stimulation of seeing Mike’s naked body moving with his, responding to his, entering his. He sighed, adjusting himself within his pants. He had never felt so completely in love. And then there was the shower...

Mike sat quietly, staring out the window. He said a silent prayer, asking God to please, please set his mind straight. He almost imagined hearing a “Oh, lighten up.” from above.

Was it okay for him to enjoy it? Was it okay for him to like the feeling of fulfilling John’s needs, and having his fulfilled by him? Why did he keep asking himself over and over? Maybe he should lighten up. He knew their love was real.

...And then there was the shower. A shelf-like seat was built into the wall opposite the shower head and John had sat there for almost fifteen minutes. Mike’s mouth had been almost too tired to kiss after that.

Was it right for him to deny the fact that it had been good? He glanced down at his engagement band.

He knew it was unusual for a man to wear one. He twiddled the thin silver band around his finger. Deb, being a liberated woman, had bought it for him, asking that he wear it until the wedding. It had been a charming idea, so he had agreed. What was it to him now?

He didn’t feel like dwelling on it, so he asked Dave if he wanted to play for a while. They both had acoustic guitars with them. Dave agreed and they played for a while. Tony was singing various songs to himself, trying to the timing the way he liked it.

They landed and were chauffeured to their hotel. A whole floor was reserved to keep people away.

Mike kept busy in the studio, himself and the band spending all of their time there. Mike was amazed to find out all that was involved in recording an album. He sometimes wondered how they would ever finish. Each night he returned to his suite and collapsed. He didn’t even have time to feel guilty for neglecting John.

He was glad that they at least got the producer he wanted. As a matter of fact, the guy had jumped at the opportunity after hearing their demo. As he worked with him, Mike had a hard time keeping himself from asking a werewolf how he ended up with the nickname “Mutt.”

One factor that made their schedule so hectic was the time limitation on the studio. Another band was scheduled to use the studio before Mike thought the album could be done to his satisfaction. He had gotten into a heated argument with the man responsible for scheduling, refusing to work until he was assured that he would have the time he needed. Soon they were yelling, the schedule guy refusing to back down in spite of Mike’s inherent scariness. His ears were pinned straight back, his fangs were bared, and Mike chose to completely ignore the loud growls.

They were saved by an executive vice president, who just happened to walk in at that moment to visit his favorite prospect.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, interrupting Mike’s tirade. Jim, Eric, and Dave immediately tried to become invisible.

Mike, on the other hand, had no such intention. He turned hotly to the executive. "Please excuse the attitude, but this asshole says that we gotta be out of here in two weeks! There's no way in heaven or hell this album is going to be finished by then, and we're already working fourteen hour days! I was told that we would be given the time we need. We've got at least ten tracks to put down on the songs we have and six more we haven't even started. Everyone knew that this album was going to take a lot of studio time, yet this...person..."

The executive held up a hand and Mike stopped. He turned to the scheduler. "Figure something out, will you?" he asked.

"Yes sir." the offending man said quickly. He gave Mike a final growl and marched out.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes, thank you. Thank you very much." Mike said, calming.

"You were busy, right?"

"Yeah." Mike said quickly, knowing when to keep his mouth shut. He turned to the recording engineer. "Number seven, the backing guitar. Keep the settings the same, but add a notch or two more echo." he said, ducking back into the sound booth.

Dave breathed a sigh of relief. "Damned if he ain't the scariest thing walkin' when he's mad."

"He swears a lot, too."

"We're working on that." John said from his seat in a corner.

"This album better break every record known to man, or I'm on the street."

"Don't worry, sir," the recording engineer said, "This stuff is fantastic."

Everyone else involved seemed impressed by the quality of the songs. Mutt went as far as to comment that they sounded extremely refined for a first effort. Mike told him that he had been working on the songs for a long time, refining them as he went along. He hated to hide the real truth, but he knew that no one would ever know.

Gordon scheduled his first major interview during their stay. Mike had already done a couple of small ones with the band for MTV, Entertainment Tonight, and so forth. They had been only a few questions, though, not the all-out interview he was doing now. The "honor" went to Rolling Stone, who was featuring Mike on the cover.

The interview was a long one, as Rolling Stone interviews tended to be. Most of the questions centered around their upcoming album, that being Rolling Stone's main concern. He answered all that he could without giving too much away. The interviewer's ears perked way up when Mike told him what the first single would be.

"I can't wait for the video." he said, taking notes furiously.

"I'm beginning to think that I may give in to popular demand for that." Mike said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, everyone, from friends to the people at Capital, wants to do the video a certain way. At first I didn't want to, but it looks like I'm going to give in. It is the best idea, anyway. I might as well. I don't want to piss of the big guys. Oops, can I say that?"

"We've printed worse."

"Yeah, that's right. I've seen the word 'fuck' on a regular basis."

"We don't edit our interviews. That's why we tape them." he said, holding up the tape recorder. "What will the video be like?"

"I'll never tell."

"We're going to strip him nude and drop him in a vat of sugar cane." Tony said from the other end of the room.

"No you're not!"

"You mean we didn't tell you?"

"Something close?" the interviewer asked.

"No amount of torture will wring that out of me. You'll have to be surprised with the rest of us."

It was eleven o'clock by the time the interview was over and Mike went straight to bed. As usual, John slept with him, even though they didn't do anything but cuddle.

The album was finished after two months of almost non-stop work. Everyone was extremely impressed with it - and why not? It had already proven itself in another world.

They guys wanted to record the Pyromania stuff, but Mike said no. He wanted to reserve that for their concerts. They could always release them on a live album later. Gordon agreed.

The album was sent off to press and they promptly started work on the videos. Most of their "spare" time while recording was used planning them.

Filming them was worse. Pour Some Sugar On Me promised to be a steamer. It was split between shots of the band performing on stage and Mike having various confections dumped on his bare torso.

By the time the video was done, he was wishing he had never included the song. When the director suggested that a model lick honey from his stomach, Mike had flatly refused. He had finally agreed when John was substituted in a model's place. John was extremely excited and even more nervous. The director was happy with him, though, because he was already good looking and well built enough to be a model.

There was only one problem with filming the shots. Just off-camera an aid squirted maple syrup in a line from naval to sternum while the camera shot a close-up. John was then supposed to do one long lick along the syrup. It wasn't working out, though. Although the finished product was meant to appear sexy, the attitude on the set was far from it.

Both of them couldn't stop laughing. Every time the director said "action," John would grin widely or start laughing. "This is supposed to be sensual," the director chided as Mike's stomach was cleaned and dried for the hundredth time.

John finally stopped smiling, but it still didn't work. Now Mike kept laughing. John would get close and he'd break up.

"We cannot shoot this scene with your stomach bouncing like that," the director scolded again.

Eventually, they got it right. The director turned to the aid. "All right, now the second shot. Move that light to the second marker, and where's the honey?"

"Here."

"Where does this go on?" Mike asked as he sponged his stomach.

"Hey, I haven't finished yet," John said with an evil grin.

"You'll get some more in this shot," the director said, turning to Mike. "Maybe we should have put a laughing clause in that little contract of his."

Mike laughed. "One more sponge bath and I'll shrivel up. Where is this shot, again?"

"The inside of your thigh. Lay on your side."

"I think not!"

"Why not? He is your boyfriend."

"No! We said we'd wing it, but not that much!"

"All right, how about your neck?" John suggested.

"You know what happens when you maul my neck," Mike said quietly.

"What's that?" Gordon asked from behind his camcorder.

"I keep forgetting about your damned ears," Mike mumbled.

John flashed a smile at Gordon. "He melts like butter."

"The neck it is," the director said, warming to this new development.

"No."

John made a move for his throat and Mike shied away. "We can tie you down and move the camera so no one can see the ropes."

Mike sighed. "All right, but stop when the shot's done, got it?"

"Of course," John said, rinsing the maple syrup out with a sip of water.

Everyone got into position and honey was dripped onto his neck. John hadn't exaggerated. Mike lay completely helpless while John happily grazed on his neck. The shot lasted a full thirty seconds before John stopped. It took another half a minute for Mike to come to his senses.

"I told you it would be a great video!" John exclaimed to Mike and Gordon as they all viewed the finished project. "I didn't realize I was that sexy."

"It's lewd." Mike said. They replayed the part where John was giving his neck little kisses, tiny strings of honey connecting them.

"It's perfect! Number one for two years, at least!" the director exclaimed.

"It's not lewd, it's sexy." Gordon said. Dave, Jim, Eric, and Tony agreed. "You gotta admit," Dave added, "It fits!"

Mike gave in and they spent the rest of the evening writing the liner notes for the album.

The next video was *Excitable*, followed by *Love Bites*, *Tear It Down*, and *Hysteria*.

John had another cameo role in *Excitable*, playing a man that Mike carries into a bedroom and throws on the bed. Mike didn't find out until they viewed the finished product that the director had included the long kiss that followed. Mike didn't mind too much. It was only a kiss.

Gordon had filmed almost every minute of their recording sessions and video shoots on his camcorder. Bloopers abounded everywhere, including their antics filming the *Pour Some Sugar On Me* video. "The Making of Love And Affection" video, taking its name from the album's new title, was already in the works. Capital conducted its own interviews with the band for it.

More videos would be filmed later. Mike gave them a list of possible follow-up releases, whose use would depend on how the first few did.

They flew back to Chicago to arrange their upcoming tour. Mike stayed busy modeling a line of spring clothes, shooting a few commercials, and entrenching himself in the business end of his career.

*Pour Some Sugar On Me* debuted on radio and MTV a week after their return, two weeks before the album's release date. On the top twenty countdown the video debuted at number one. It achieved equal success on radio.

The album went platinum on record store order alone, before a single copy had actually been sold.

"What?" Mike asked in shock. Dave, the most vocal member of the band, echoed him.

Gordon smiled in triumph. "One million, one hundred and sixty-two thousand, three hundred and twenty orders!"

"I don't believe it." Mike said, looking at Eric, his best friend in the band.

"Believe it!" Gordon exclaimed. "Pack your bags, boys! We have a ceremony in Hollywood to attend!"

"What ceremony?"

"You have to be presented with your platinum record, remember?" Gordon asked, grinning.

"Don't they wait for sales? What if no one buys it?"

"Are you kidding?" Gordon wailed. "People are calling radio stations all over the country and asking for your song! Ninety-nine percent, an unheard of number, voted for it in MTV's video fights. You boys are stars! Haven't you noticed those checks coming in? Haven't you been watching the entertainment news? Those record store orders are locked in. You're platinum, guaranteed! You should hit two million within the month!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" Jim blurted.

"Wow." Mike sighed, shaking his head.

"Do you regret making that video?" John asked him.

Mike laughed. "No, I guess not."

"I told you that you're sexy."

"So are you." Gordon said to John. "People are calling me to interview you."

“Seriously?”

“John, John,” Gordon began with a shake of his head, “You spent a total of thirty-two seconds of the nation’s number one video licking Mike.”

“Oh yeah, I hadn’t thought of it like that. What did you tell them?”

“I told them that I’m not your manager. If you didn’t live here with Mike you’d be getting mobbed. People would probably cut your tongue out and bronze it.”

Mike laughed. “Oh, that’s funny. Maybe you could charge for kisses. Five bucks to kiss the tongue that licked Mike Riggs! Be still, my heart.”

“I could charge a small fortune for the rest.” John said thoughtfully.

Mike blushed.

“Speaking of ‘the rest,’” Gordon went on, “Every major adult magazine also called, along with the more hard core ones. One X-rated movie producer also called. Apparently, you’ve been discovered.”

“You’re kidding!”

“Nope. They all would like to see a, uh, little more of you and Mike together.”

John gave Mike a seductive look.

“Don’t even think about it.” He turned to Gordon. “When are we leaving?”

“They want us there tomorrow, boys. Get yourselves packed.” Gordon answered. “Oh, and try to look presentable, okay? You rock stars dress like invaders from another planet.”

“I am an invader from another planet.” Mike joked.

“Aah! Kill it!” Eric yelled.

“Get going.” Gordon insisted.

“Whatever you say, boss.” Jim said, heading for the door.

“See you for the next flight out!” Eric called over his shoulder as he left with the others.

“I’ll go get the tickets. We’ll be taking a night flight out.” Gordon added, leaving after the band. “See you in a few hours.”

“Bye.” Mike said to them. He flopped onto the couch, totally dumbfounded.

“As if I ever had any doubt.” John said, sitting in his lap.

“Oof! I can’t believe it.” Mike said, grunting under John’s weight. “Want a belly rub?”

John looked thoughtful. “I suppose you’ll be wanting to celebrate?” he asked, moving his snout toward Mike’s neck. “You have to kill the next few hours somehow.”

Mike smiled uneasily.

“Guards!” John intentionally yelled.

“Yeah?” Paul asked, emerging from the kitchen.

“Out!” John yelled, pulling Mike down with him.

“Can’t I watch?”

“Out!” Mike yelled from under John.

“I’m gone.” Paul said, heading for the front door.

“Let’s go bowling.” Mike said after freeing his mouth.

“I got your ten pin - hangin’.”

### CHAPTER XIII

Their tour was organized, starting with an opening show at a small, five thousand-seat gig in Chicago. The tour was planned for six months, crossing the States. Once announced, the first six shows sold out immediately.

Mike and the band spent the three weeks after the ceremony rehearsing. They ran around the stage and generally acted ridiculous. Within days they had formed a groove and found that they played well together. Mike and Dave meshed swiftly, finding that they shared a happy-go-lucky approach to playing on stage. They collaborated on some longer solos for many songs.

The light show and pyrotechnics were created and rehearsed. Mike drove the sound man out of his mind getting the mixing right.

He was amazed to see all of the people that were necessary to run a concert tour. The road crew numbered fifteen, including the sound man. Mike and Dave each had a guitar tech who was responsible for keeping their guitars in tune during the show. Both Mike and Dave now had five guitars each, and planned to buy more.

They had recorded the backing vocals on the album themselves, overdubbing their voiced to achieve the force Mike wanted. For the tour they had to hire four extras to recreate the sound.

John stayed equally busy, playing handyman for the band and road crew. He also got a part, through the people who shot the band's videos, to appear in another band's when the tour brought them around to California. He was as eager as Mike to simply collapse at the end of each day.

On the night before their opening show, John mated with Karen.

Mike was sitting in the living room, sipping a beer and running through the cue sheets for tomorrow's show. John was walking in with his own beer when the phone rang.

John picked it up and talked for a few seconds. Mike was unaware of what was being said.

After hearing John hang up Mike looked around to him. He was still standing by the phone, a glazed expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" Mike asked, getting up and hurrying over to him.

John put his beer down. "That was Mr. Lorrh. I have to go over right away." he said, starting to pace.

"You mean...?"

"Karen's ready. They've been trying to get a hold of me for two days."

"I knew we should have come home instead of staying at that hotel." Mike said, remembering how John had worn him out.

"Oh, I don't regret that. God, I'm not ready for this." he said, pacing faster. "I've prayed all I can pray. I don't know what to do. How do I act? What do we say? How will I look at her afterward? How can I make myself do that?"

Mike caught up with John's marching and grabbed his shoulders. John looked at the wall, tapping a foot rapidly.

"John..."

"I guess I'd better go."

"John," Mike said sternly, grabbing his snout and turning his face to him, "Look at me. If I can throw away everything I was taught from the time I was a child, you can do this. Do you understand? You've got it easy. When you've done your duty to her and country you can come back to me. I have to stay here and change my whole perspective on life. If I can do that, you can do this."

John relaxed somewhat but was still tense. "I guess it's time for the other shoe to drop, eh?"

"No, but it's the closest you'll ever come. Don't worry, you'll do fine."

"Thanks." John said, giving him a hug. "I hope I've had enough recharge time." he added with a downward glance. "I love you."

"I love you too. Now get going."

"See you soon." John said, heading for the door.

Mike watched him go, thinking of the impossibility of what he had just said. He had just told a furry, claw-handed, fang-mouthed, short-muzzled man that he loved him. It had just come out, as it had the times before, because he meant it.

They had made love six or seven times since the first, being too busy for more. Mike had enjoyed each time more

than the one before. That feeling of all-encompassing love was growing stronger. Apparently God was answering his prayers, even though the outcome wasn't what he had originally wanted. But then again, that's how God usually worked. He does what is best for you, not what you think is best for you.

He no longer felt guilty or ashamed, but he still had to wonder at himself. It was all quickly becoming normal to him, aided by the fact that it was normal to everyone else.

He had even begun joining in on the typical macho bragging that inevitably entered any conversation with other guys. John was never at a loss for something to say, bragging of how incredible it was and leaving the details to the imagination. Mike figured that he did it more to encourage his human friend than to boost his own ego.

They guys never ceased to proposition Mike good-naturedly. John usually jumped between them, wrapping Mike up protectively and growling playfully.

Shaking his head, he sat back down and picked up the cue sheets. He went over them a few more times, matching the cues with what they would be doing on stage at the time. He had been warned of the importance of staying away from the flash pots and other explosives.

He called the guys to make sure that they were doing the same. They all assured him that they were. None of them wanted to screw up their opening show.

At eight-thirty, two and a half hours after he had left, John pulled into the driveway. Mike got up and met him at the door.

"Hi." he said, giving John a hug.

John had taken a shower. His usual light, musky scent was more subdued than it normally was at this time of the evening. "Hi." he said, returning the hug tightly.

They walked into the living room, John looking uncomfortable. Mike fought off a smile and went to get him a beer.

"Well, I think I've got those pyrotechnic cues straight. I hope the show hoes okay." Mike said to break the ice.

"Twice." John said, grabbing the beer Mike offered and gulping some.

"Twice what?"

"She made me do it twice." John answered, shivering a tad.

"Oh." Mike said, unsure of what to say. He considered for a few seconds and decided to play it safe. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't know. The whole thing is a blur."

Mike sat beside him, wrapping John's arm up in his own.

"It was just like they said it would be," John began slowly, looking at the floor, "But no one ever said that she would..." He hesitated, taking a deep breath. "She...she had an orgasm."

"Are you sure?" Mike asked, successfully fighting off another smile. "Way to go, John!" he thought.

"It was pretty obvious." John said, shifting slightly. "She made enough noise. I'm glad no one else was home. At first I thought I was hurting her, but she made me keep going."

"Where did everyone go?"

"They all left when I got there. Mr. Lorrhah said she was in her room and then hustled everyone out. That's the way it usually goes. No one wants to be around for it. I can see why. Even without all the...moaning and stuff, everyone would be able to hear. When I opened her door I almost choked on the smell." He shook himself lightly. "And then I got hard. I couldn't believe that!"

"That bad, Huh?"

"It got worse. When she...came...that was disgusting. You said it would be damp, but..."

Mike smiled. "She gushed."

John looked at him and Mike quickly wiped the smile away. "Is that what you call it?"

“Yeah.” Mike answered, recalling his second serious girlfriend. She had been a gusher, too.

“It felt so...” John started, hunting for the right word, “...gory.”

Mike laughed.

“Stop laughing.” John said with a hurt look.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just never heard it described that way.”

“It was like a living thing...”

“The contractions.”

“Yeah, those.” he said, obviously ready to change the subject. “Right after that she told me to do it again. After the second time, I was, you know, running out of her.” He shivered again. “I guess I was recharged.” he finished with a wry grin.

“Well, it couldn’t have been all bad. Like you said before, an orgasm is an orgasm.”

“I don’t even remember those. I think I stressed myself right out of the experience.”

“I guess all you can do now is wait.”

“...And pray to God that it worked.”

They did pray, and then went to bed. They were both now sleeping in Mike’s room, John having moved his things over. He snuggled up close, but was definitely in no mood for sex.

Mike was still awake long after John had fallen asleep. His stomach refused to stop doing flip-flops as he thought about tomorrow’s show. He occupied himself by scratching John’s pelt before finally falling into a fitful sleep. He awoke numerous times; and every time he stirred, John would remold himself against him. It was a comforting feeling.

They were in their dressing room, preparing for the show. They could hear the opening act, a band with a fairly big hit of their own, finishing up their act. Two more songs and it would be their turn.

Everyone except Mike was extremely nervous. He was terrified.

“You’ll do fine.” Gordon said, helping Dave to get his fur looking right. “Just do it like you rehearsed it. You won’t feel like such fools with people in front of you. Don’t forget to play the crowd. Feel free to get up close. If it bothers you, put yourself behind a security man. They’ll be spread out in front of the stage.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Jim said, strapping the transmitter to the strap of his bass.

“Would you get that camera out of here?” Mike asked irritably, casting an angry glance at the cameraman in the doorway.

“Out! Out!” Gordon growled, shoving the door in the man’s face. “Save it for later.”

“I think I’m going to throw up.” Mike said. “Did you hear about all of the big shots there are out there? Half the audience must be critics. We’re headlining our first major gig! I am going to throw up.”

“You’ll do fine.” Gordon reiterated. “Think about the fans, not the critics. Besides, you’ve got great material, great presence, and you guys have really clicked. That’s why you’re headlining so soon.”

Mike rolled his sleeves up to his elbows. He was wearing a pair of pants - Adidas, of course - and a black leather trench coat, leaving the front open. Everyone else but Eric was similarly dressed. Eric wore only pants and sat restlessly beside John, twirling a drumstick.

“God, I hope we don’t screw up,” Tony said when he had finished his throat exercises with the voice coach he’d hired, “What if I forget a line?”

“How could you possibly forget a line after all of the rehearsing our boss here made us do.” Dave said, taking one of his guitars from Ralph, his guitar tech.

“Well, if we flop, at least I’ve already made more money than I thought I would in a lifetime,” Eric mused, still twirling, “See this?” he added, lifting a cheek, “That’s my accounting professor kissing my ass!”

That brought a round of chuckles and Gordon gave them all a high five. “You’ll thank me for all the rehearsing when you knock them dead.”

“If I don’t puke all over the stage.”

”Stop digesting your claws and maybe your stomach will calm down.”

The opening act finished and after a couple of minutes they heard themselves being announced. The crowd erupted. It was loud, even in their dressing room. Mike wondered how sensitive werewolf ears could stand it.

One of their crew cracked the door and poked his head through. “You’re announced. Go get ‘em.”

“You heard him, boys,” Gordon said, giving each of them a clap on the shoulder, “This is your big moment. Make me proud.”

All of the lights were out and the stage was pitch black. A sea of burning lighters cast an eerie glow over the crowd. To Mike, it looked like a scene out of hell.

The guys took their places on stage, unnoticed by the crowd except for the first few rows. A steady, rhythmic chant of “Wereman! Wereman!” washed over the stage.

Spotlights lit up the rest of the band and the crowd erupted anew. Mike was standing behind Eric, waiting for his cue, and the crowd couldn’t see him yet. The noise was thunderous, so he put in the tiny wax ear plugs one of the crew had made for him.

He peeked out over the audience while the guys got them clapping to the opening song’s rhythm. It was a see of howling monsters. He almost passed out as a wave of sudden dizziness overcame him.

“Are you all right?” Eric yelled down to him.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Mike yelled back, steadying himself. He glanced at John, who was standing off to one side. John smiled and gave him a thumbs-up.

Fog rolled out from the generators in front of him. The wall of smoke reached his mic and blue and red spotlights cast a glow over it. That was Mike’s cue.

He took a deep breath and walked slowly out through the fog, stopping behind his mic. The crowd roared louder as he appeared, a deafening chorus of gruff, wolverine voices. Arms stretched out from the first few rows. Posters of him waved in the air.

A teenage wolf in the front row flashed him. He gaped for a moment before laughing and turning away. He momentarily wished that he had been hung like that as a teen. Dave caught the whole thing and yelled a snide remark.

He gazed over the crowd as they clapped. Cameras, fixed and mobile, pointed at him. An unbelievable feeling washed over him. “This could become addictive.” he thought to himself. He smiled, drinking in the sound. “This is what you’ve waited for, Mike. Let’s get this show on the road.”

The opening song, taken from Pyromania and altered slightly, had been an obvious choice.

“I SAID WELCOME TO MY SHOWWWW!!!”

The night after their second show, they played on Arsenio; and were the only guests for the night.

“I have only one guest for tonight’s show, but I’m sure you won’t be disappointed. I’m holding my own copy of our guest’s debut album.” he said, holding up a Wereman CD.

The audience erupted and he waved them down. “Why? Because this album is so bad, we couldn’t find a copy in the record stores today. So, won’t you please give it up for...Wereman!”

After playing the opening song, they all joined Arsenio along the front of the raised interview area, Arsenio sitting

beside Mike.

“Man, they weren’t kidding, you really do smell good.”

Mike blushed, feeling extremely nervous.

“They weren’t kidding about that blush either, eh guys?” he asked, glancing down the line at the rest of the band.

“Sometimes we think his face is going to spontaneously combust.” Eric joked.

“This album did. Y’all went platinum in a heartbeat. Have you read any reviews of your opening big show?”

“Oh yeah.” Jim answered.

Arsenio turned toward the audience, pulling a newspaper from behind him. “Check out this first line; ‘Last night’s Wereman concert was by far the strangest I have ever seen.’”

“I can imagine.” Mike said. “I probably looked ridiculous.”

“No, it doesn’t say that. From what it says, you all looked a lot better than anyone expected. That was your first live appearance before a crowd of a couple thousand, right?”

“Yeah, I thought I was going to faint.” Tony said.

Arsenio turned to Mike. “I want to point this out. You wrote a bunch of songs just for the show, right? Almost another album’s worth.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to do the whole album, which would have been kind of lame; but I didn’t want to do covers, either. I’d hate for us to look like a bunch of pretenders on stage, seeing that we got there so easily compared to other bands. From what I gather, it all went over pretty well.”

“What about you guys?” Arsenio asked, looking down the line. “What’s it like working with everyone’s favorite monster?”

“You probably won’t believe this, but it’s really not any different than playing with anyone else. After you get to know him, Mike’s just a normal, if slightly annoying, kind of guy.”

Everyone chuckled. “What do you mean ‘annoying’?” Mike asked.

“Yes, tell us.” Arsenio prompted.

“Well...”

“I’m not annoying.”

“Well, if you’d stop trying to eat us every time we turned around...”

The tour was a raging success, helping the otherwise-slow concert season. Each show was bigger than the one before. After three months they played their first stadium in front of almost fifty-three thousand people. Mike couldn’t believe it. No one played stadiums on a first tour. He had to admit, though, that he had considerable draw power.

After the second show they signed on a major sponsor. Stages became more elaborate, the general theme being the full moon, along with lights and pyrotechnics. The tour was extended to include another three stateside dates, and they made a week-long trip to play two nights in Japan.

The final show, in San Francisco, was aired live on MTV.

Everyone was becoming extremely wealthy. Mike planned on buying John the Ferrari he wanted when his birthday came around.

The Lorrhah’s told John that it was all right to go on the tour. John had been afraid that he would have to stay behind.

The prospective father usually spent the pregnancy in close contact. They said it would be okay, though, because John would be back before she was due.

John had been ecstatic when he found out that a “repeat performance” wouldn’t be necessary. She had conceived that first evening.

Of course, John felt that a celebration was in order and they had both been exhausted afterward. It was their first

time together that could be considered torrid, and even John had been overwhelmed by the experience. Mike had shed his inhibitions completely.

The tour, though successful, was tiring. Mike had quickly become adept at falling asleep at a moment's notice. Cat naps were as common as sound checks. When it was finally over, they all returned to Chicago.

After unpacking Mike took the Motley Crue songs he had written in his spare time and tucked them away, determined not to work very hard for at least a few weeks. His plan was to work at a leisurely pace, doing isolated shows and playing occasional gigs.

The popularity of Love And Affection was sure to ride for at least a year and a half in total. That would give him plenty of time to do a few more overseas shows before they hit the studio again.

Working through Gordon, he began house hunting; and was looking at some land outside of Aspen. He sat down and talked it over with John, who liked the idea. Neither of them realized how matrimonial their discussion seemed.

John spent a lot of time with Karen, a die hard Wereman fan. It only took him a couple of days to overcome his discomfort with being around her. Mike met her soon after their return. She was extremely pregnant. It was odd, though, to see a pregnant young girl with absolutely no breasts. They were told that she was carrying triplets, identical girls and a fraternal boy.

"John, you stud!" Mike said, giving his back a healthy slap. "And even after the hotel trip!" John just smiled, looking embarrassed.

The big day came a month after the U.S. leg of the tour ended. A frantic Mr. Lorrh called at seven, interrupting a little foreplay they were enjoying on the couch.

They ran out to the van, the guards scrambling after them.

Mike sat in the waiting room, watching John and the Lorrachs pace like caged, well, wolves. Mike wasn't surprised to learn that men, other than the doctors and nurses, weren't allowed in the delivery room.

Mike had already met the Lorrachs on a few occasions. Being the newborns' grandparents, they would become like family to John. Mike liked them, both of them seeming to be good people. Neither had shown any sign of suspicion toward Mike, and seemed to really like him.

Misters' Lorrh?" a nurse asked from the door, trying to ignore Mike's presence.

"Yes?" they both answered quickly, ears jumping.

"She's waiting," he said gently, leading them out the door. "The delivery went fine."

Mike shot John a questioning look.

John explained. "They're going into the delivery room. They'll have Karen covered up by now and the kids cleaned. The Lorrachs will stay with her and the kids until she, uh, you know."

"Oh." Mike said, standing. He imagined what the scene in there must be as he read a brochure on childbirth. Karen would be on the bed, covered to hide the inevitable bleeding. A strong but pleasant deodorant would cover the smell of her blood. She would probably be holding one or more of the babies. Her parents would be by her side; sad to lose her, but happy for three new lives.

"It must be hell for them," he thought.

Two hours later the Lorrachs came out. Their eyes were red and puffy. Karen's natural father carried two small bundles, one in each arm. His husband carried the other.

John rushed over to meet them, followed by Mike.

Mike was unprepared for what happened. John was handed one of the girls. Mr. Lorrh, to Mike's amazement, smiled and offered the boy to him. Did he know something Mike didn't?"

He took the little bundle carefully. John Jr., as his name was to be, was by far the cutest thing Mike had ever laid eyes on.

He was half asleep, his eyes opening and closing lazily from behind a small, pudgy snout. Tiny canine ears poked from the sides of his head. His eyes were green and he was covered with a sparse coat of black and brown fur. The patterns, though not quite clear, seemed to mimic John's.

He stroked the little chest gently. The fur was velvet soft. He looked at John, holding Junior close to him. "They're so cute!" he said, taking a look at Janice and Dawne.

John was too choked up to say anything. His eyes were glazed when he looked up, trading one of the girls for Junior. Mike immediately handed the cute little girl to one of the grandfathers, knowing that holding this new life meant much, much more to them.

Three nurses were with them and soon pried the babies away. They told them that they could come and see them whenever the nursery had visiting hours, and could pick them up in a couple of days.

It was almost eleven before they got home. They turned on the eleven o'clock news, expecting to see something. The press had been at the hospital, kept at a distance by Mike's escorts.

They weren't disappointed. A photo of John appeared over the anchor's shoulder. "In a related story, John Carter, boyfriend of rock star wereman Michael Riggs, became the happy father of three today. According to hospital sources, Karen Lorrh gave birth to two girls and a boy at eight-twelve, eastern time. All three were said to be in good health."

"Boyfriend?" Mike mused. "Funny how I never thought of it that way."

"...Mr. Carter could not be reached for comment."

"Amazing, that. I'm surprised someone hasn't cashed in a phone company contact and gotten our number."

Mike said. "Paul must be merciless."

John turned the TV off, walking toward the bedrooms.

"About this 'boyfriend' thing..." Mike said playfully.

"Hold on." John said, disappearing into his old bedroom. He came back a few seconds later, carrying something about the size of a cigar box. He sat down beside Mike, facing him and hooking a leg around his butt. "There's something I've never thought to ask." he said, looking nervous.

"What's that? What's in the box?"

John sighed with relief. He had been right; Mike had never seen an engagement band box before. "Well," he started, licking his lips uneasily, "I was wondering, way back when, how you go about asking someone to marry you where you come from."

Mike was stunned. It was clear what John was getting at and his answer came out ahead of his thoughts. "You hold out the ring to her and say something like 'will you marry me?'"

After he had spoken his mind caught up with him. John was going to ask him to marry. His heart jumped and he suddenly felt the same way he had felt on stage that first night. The same way he had felt when he proposed to Deb.

John held out the box and pulled it open. Inside were two matching bands, each about two inches wide. They were black with a simple pattern sewn in with silver thread. A diamond, looking to be about a half-carat, was embedded in the center of each one. It was held in place with a gold setting. Small clasps held the setting tight against the material. "Mike," he said, his voice shaking, "Will you marry me?"

Mike swallowed, reaching out to touch one of the bands. The material felt like silk, and they both had a very expensive look. He glanced up at John, who was watching him nervously.

The past year and a half flashed before his eyes. So much had happened, so much had changed. He had come here a man, and he felt that he still was one.

A glint on his left ring finger caught his eye. He pulled the hand away from the box and looked at his engagement ring. He had never thought to take it off, causing numerous questions from the press over the months.

He removed his other hand from John's, gripped the ring, and slipped it off. His finger felt strange as he set the ring

on the coffee table.

He looked back at John, who was still anxiously waiting.

“God, this is weird.” he thought before speaking up. “Yes.”

John and Mike walked out to meet Doug, who was getting out of his car. It was a cold morning and Mike wore a sweater. John was wearing unusually long sleeves, a fashion trend Mike had started and was making huge amounts of money from.

Doug handed Mike a folder. “Your copies of all the paperwork from the Bureau. Seems no one ever thought to give them to you. I guess that’s why we need non-bureaucrats like myself. I still can’t believe that Paul’s quitting to head your security. It’s a far cry from carrying you through the woods.”

“We pay better.” Mike said.

“We? Feeling royal already? And you said the money wouldn’t go to your head.”

They both pushed their sleeves up. Doug gasped, a smile gradually replacing the surprise on his face. “You two? I should have known!”

“Yup, he asked me last night.” Mike said.

“This is going to be a media circus, you know.” Doug said.

“We’ll live. Screw the media.”

“Have you set a date yet?”

“No, we haven’t gotten to that. There is one thing that we need to ask, though.”

“Sure.”

“Well, John’s dads are going to be there, of course, but I don’t have one. John’s dad is going to give him away, as usual, and it would be inappropriate for his stepdad to do me. You’re the closest thing I have to a father anymore. Would you be willing to, you know, give me away?”

“I’d love to!” Doug exclaimed, shaking his hand. “I’d be honored.”

“Great. We really appreciate it.”

Doug sighed, looking at John. “You know, when I first assigned you to him, I never thought you’d pull a coup like this.”

“I’m just that good, I guess.”

“You fell in love. That’s cheating. I guess this only leaves one more thing.” he said, shaking John’s hand.

”What’s that?”

“You’re fired.”

They flew to Indianapolis so Mike could finally meet John’s parents face-to-face. Up until now, they had only spoken over the phone. They had been understandably surprised when John had broke the news to them. John had hinted at times of how serious they were, but they had never considered that John would actually marry him.

“Dad, Stepdad, this is Mike. Mike, this is Joe and Joshua, my parents.”

My pleasure.” Mike said apprehensively, shaking each hand in turn. A funny thought occurred to him and he turned to John, putting an overdone look of amazement on his face. “Joe and Joshua? You’re Jesus Christ!” he exclaimed, throwing his arms around John. “I’ve always wanted to meet you like this! Why didn’t you tell me?”

John looked confused for a moment and hesitantly returned the embrace. It had been a long time since anyone had teased him about that. He remembered their bible studies and laughed, his parents joining in when they remembered the joke.

“We debated naming him that.” Joshua quipped.

“Let me go. Jesus was blonde.” John said, pushing him affectionately away.

“Are the guards going to be staying?” Joe, John’s natural father, asked.

“They’ll be around, but they won’t be staying here at the house.” John assured them.

“Let’s get inside, then.”

John’s parents turned out to be the funniest people Mike had ever met. Their sense of humor was boundless, and Mike and John laughed most of their way through dinner. They had a habit of teasing each other and poking fun constantly. Mike envied John for having parents like that to grow up with. It went a long way in explaining where John had developed his own good cheer and endless humor. After a few minutes, he was having trouble believing that either could ever lose their temper.

“Get caught trying pot sometime.” John said.

“You deserved it.” Joe said matter-of-factly.

“I couldn’t sit for a week.” John said, raising a cheek and rubbing his butt. “I can still feel it sometimes.”

“Did you try to do pot again?” Joe asked.

“You wouldn’t let me out of the house for a month to try.”

“Mike,” Joe began, turning his attention to him, “I understand that you used to be a programmer.”

“Dad’s a systems analyst.” John added.

“Really? Yeah, I was.”

“What was your area of expertise?”

“Robotics software.”

“No kidding?”

Mike and Joe fell into an in-depth conversation about computers, leaving Joshua and John completely in the blue.

After a couple of minutes Joshua propped his face up on one hand and gave John a long-suffering look. “Do you want to marry me and leave these two to themselves?”

“You’re a little old for me, but sure.” John said with a wink. “The hard part will be getting that band off of his arm.”

“...But the really hard part...what?” Mike asked, catching the other conversation.

“Oh, nothing.” Joshua said. “Close your eyes.”

Mike looked suspicious. “Why?”

“Never mind. What do you say we go into the living room for a while.”

They talked for the rest of the evening, getting to know each other. Both of John’s parents seemed to be at ease with him. He was nervous, though. He really wanted them to like him. He was, after all, from another planet and engaged to their son.

His fears seemed to be groundless. When it came time for bed, they led them to the spare bedroom.

“Dinner was great, in case I forgot to mention it.” Mike said as he sat on the edge of the bed.

“Nobody cooks like your dad.” John added, taking his suitcase from Joe.

“We just threw it together.”

“I’m glad you went to the trouble.”

“Watch it.” Joshua warned. “You’re still not too big to spank.”

“I’ll help hold him down.” Mike offered.

“If this bed isn’t big enough we can make up the sofa for one of you.”

“This’ll be fine, thanks.” John said, walking his parents out of the room.

”You stud!” Josh, the more openly dirty-minded of the two, whispered with a wink.

“Stepdad!”

“So, tell us what it’s like. We’ll never find out from the press.” Joe asked.

“I’ll tell you one thing.” John said, putting his snout between his parents’ heads. “You can lick him all over!”

“And on that note, we’ll see you in the morning.” Joe said, putting an arm around Josh. “We’ll have to make plans to see the kids sometime this weekend.”

“We will. Good night.”

“Good night. Good night, Mike.”

“Good night.”

John was sitting on the bed when Mike came back from brushing his teeth. “What would you think if I dyed myself black?”

“What would I think?” Mike asked, undoing his robe.

“Yeah. Do you think it’d make me more, you know, attractive?”

Mike let the robe fall open and sat beside him. He no longer minded being casually nude around John. As a matter of fact, he was starting to enjoy seeing him nude. There was no more hiding under sheets or behind towels. He had lost the human desire to look immediately away. “I don’t know. You said before that you were going to do it before you met me, didn’t you?”

“Uh-Huh. I was wondering what you’d think.”

“Is this what you’ve been contemplating in front of the mirror for the last few days?”

“Kind of.”

“Why do you want to?”

“Brown and black is so boorishly common. Being blonde or brunette makes you more distinctive.”

“If that’s what you want, go ahead and do it.”

“I was more concerned with what you thought.”

“It doesn’t really matter to me. Do what you want.”

“You’re going to have to live with it, remember, groom-to-be? You really don’t care at all?” he asked, unsure of whether to be relieved or disappointed.

Mike sighed and flopped onto his back. John leaned down beside him, propped himself up on an elbow, and started rubbing his belly.

“Mmmmm. How do I put this?” He hesitated and enjoyed the belly rub for a few moments. “I understand that being all black makes you more attractive to other wolves, so I see why you want to dye yourself. Everyone likes to be looked at. I think you would look great all black. But on the other hand, I think you look great the way God made you.”

“But I’m so plain.”

Mike sat up and reluctantly stopped the belly rub. “Stand up and take off your shirt.”

“What for?”

“Come on.” Mike said, pulling him from the bed.

John obeyed and worked off his shirt. “Now what, the pants?”

“I’ll take them off when I want them off.” Mike said playfully before circling behind him. “Look at this fur. Your mane is mostly black. It comes down over your shoulders, curves in under your shoulder blades, forms a nice vee along your spine, and tapers down to your butt.” He traced a finger along each edge of John’s black fur as he talked, causing him to shiver slightly.

He walked back around to the front, continuing to trace. “You’ve got a wide vee that starts on your forehead, widens, and runs down to the nape of your neck. You can barely see that. Your mane is the same in front as in back. It tapers in under your chest and forms a vee into your pants.”

He moved his hands to John’s snout. “You’ve got more black on the sides of your snout that blends smoothly into the sides of your face before fading out. I’ve seen enough brown and black wolves to know that there’s more to it than just being brown and black. You have nice patterns.”

John looked himself over and smiled. “I never thought of it that way.”

“Maybe it’s just something that other wolves don’t notice enough to comment on.”

“You really like it like this?”

“Yeah.”

“Will you do me a favor, then?” he asked, moving within Mike’s open robe.

“What’s that?”

“Trace me some more?”

Mike was still worried when they were leaving Sunday evening. They seemed to like him, but he couldn’t shake his apprehension.

“Mike, would you wait for me in the van? I need to talk to them alone for a minute.”

”Sure.” Mike answered, his nervousness increasing. He knew what John wanted to talk about. Deb had done much the same when he had met her parents. He shook their hands, thanked them for the weekend, and said good bye.

Once Mike had left, John turned uneasily to his parents, who also knew what he was about to ask. They intended to make him suffer for it.

“Well, what do you think?” John asked, shuffling his feet.

“I like his eyes.” Joe said.

“I like his belly button.” Josh added.

“Come on, dads! I’m serious.”

“A rock and roll star.” Josh said, shaking his furry head. He looked at Joe. “Your boy wants to marry a rock and roll star.”

“My boy? It was your idea to keep him.”

“He was a cute pup. Maybe we should have left him at the hospital.”

“Her parents wouldn’t have let us.” Joe said, leaning on Josh’s shoulder.

“Well, it’s too late now.”

“Dads!”

“Do you think we’ve tortured him enough?”

“Yes!” John interrupted.

Joe put his arm around John’s shoulder, pulling him close. “Do you love him?”

“Yes, I really do. He’s a bizarre person to fall in love with, but I can’t help it. He’s irresistible.”

“What about his, uh, problem?”

“Very, very cured. If you could have been in there Friday night…”

“Did you lick him all over?” Josh asked.

“Better. Maybe I’ll tell you about is sometime. We’ve been…intimate off and on since the night before our second trip to California.”

“You didn’t wait? Afraid of losing another one?”

“It was just right at the time. He wanted me.”

“Oh, I see. Grab it while it’s out there.”

A flash of anger lit John’s eyes. “It wasn’t like that.” he snapped. “Yes, I wanted him, but he wanted me too. Can you imagine how that felt? For the first time in his life he wanted a man, me, and he wanted me because he loves me. I’ve been in love with him for a long time; but because of his problem, I had to tread so lightly, so slowly. We knew, and we said, that we loved each other. Hearing him say that he loved me was the most wonderful moment of my life. No one has ever told me that and meant it. He meant it. When he said that he wanted me…I just can’t explain how that felt. He had to love me a lot to do that. I couldn’t say no.”

He sighed before continuing. “I wanted to propose that night, but you know how easy it is to do that when you’re in each other’s arms. He would have realized that and probably said no. Not only that, but we were leaving the next morning for Hollywood. After that he had a seven month-plus tour coming. I didn’t want to be engaged for a year, and it was extremely important for Mike to regain his independence, financially and psychologically.”

Joe nodded in satisfaction. “Okay, I’ll go with that. He loves you too?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I have no doubt.”

“You won’t mind the media, the tabloids, the lack of privacy?”

“I told you about that last night. We won’t be living in California, so it won’t be quite so bad. People are getting used to him. Nowadays most see him as just another celebrity. It won’t be too much longer before he gets no more attention than any other big name. Granted, that will be a lot, but we can live through that.”

“Do you think he’ll make a good stepfather?”

“Can’t you tell? I think he’ll be great.”

“Okay. Son, I know what you want us to say. You want us to say that we think it’s okay for you to marry him.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“We won’t.”

John slumped.

“We won’t because it’s not our place to. If you love him, and he loves you, then there’s only one thing for you to do; marry him. What we think doesn’t apply. If it makes you feel any better, we like him and we think he’d make a good husband.”

“You do?” John asked, brightening.

”Yes we do. What’s not to like? He looks like a beast, but underneath he’s a kitten. Go ahead and marry him.”

“You’re not just saying that?”

“John, look at yourself. I’ve never seen you so happy. In the park yesterday you looked like a lovesick little boy. I just wanted to grab you, shake you like a rag doll, and slap you out of it. Unfortunately, I know it wouldn’t work. I was the same way when I fell for your stepdad. I still feel that way. Anyone who makes my boy that happy can have him. Marry him before he gets away. Technically, you’ve already done it.”

“Thanks, dad.” John said as he was pulled into a loose hug.

“Sure, now get going before he has a heart attack in that van. We’ll see you in a couple of weeks. Try not to kill your kids before we get there.”

“I will.” John said as he walked away. He was jogging by the time he reached the van and ran around to the open door.

Mike was sitting nervously, no longer able to watch the conversation between John and his parents. The look of anger on John’s face had scared him to death.

John jumped in, knocking him down onto the bench and burying him under a ton of fur. “They like you! They said you’d make a great husband!” he said, burying him further with a long kiss.

Mike dislodged his mouth. “They did?”

“Yup!” John answered, kissing him again.

“No peeking, guys.” Paul said as he slammed the door shut.

Mike stood in the darkened bedroom, softly stroking the tiny, furry monster lying in the crib. He smiled over his shoulder when he heard John slip through the door.

He continued to pet Junior as John put his arms around him and rested his jaw on his shoulder. “He’s so cute.” Mike whispered, fingering a tiny ear.

“Aren’t they all?”

“Yeah, but he’s the cutest. He already has a look of mischief in his eyes.”

“That he does. He’ll be trouble.”

Mike looked at the girls, each in their own crib. “It’s going to be extremely hard for me not to spoil them; you know that, don’t you?”

“I’ll keep you in line. The steaks are done.”

”Ready to keep Doug occupied?”

“He’s already at the table with his back to the kitchen.”

Mike smiled and followed John to the kitchen. Gordon, his husband, Doug, Mark, and the band were all sitting at the table. Jim was in the kitchen, forking steaks onto a platter. He winked and handed Mike a plate.

Mike sneaked up behind Doug, reached around, and loudly slapped a raw t-bone onto his plate.

Those not familiar with the story fell silent, glancing from Doug to Mike and back again as Doug stared numbly at the raw meat.

Everyone relaxed when Doug, Mike, John, and Mark broke up simultaneously.

“I had forgotten all about that!” Doug exclaimed as he poked at the steak. “I guess you got me!”

Mark explained to everyone about the raw steak, going to great lengths describing Mike’s reaction and the reaction it caused.

“You threw him a raw steak?” Dave asked when he stopped laughing.

Doug shrugged. “How was I supposed to know? I thought he was going to bash the door down and kill me.”

“Well at least you get to eat yours at the table.” John said.

“Do I get french fries?”

Junior was lying happily in his lap, gulping furiously from yet another bottle of brownish werewolf formula, when John came crashing in the front door and up the stairs.

“You’re not supposed to be here! It’s bachelor party night! Do you want to put a hex on our whole marriage?”

“I forgot my tux! Can you believe that?” John cried as he jogged back to their room and nearly collided with Josh.

“Get out of here!” Josh yelled after him, taking Dawne’s empty bottle from her mouth.

“Why didn’t you just send Eric?” Mike called back to him, handing Junior to Joe, who admonished him for yelling.

John came jogging back with his tux. “He’s out getting things organized. Besides, he wants your body. That’s why he’s going to my party instead of yours. Uh-oh,” he added when he saw the expression on the faces of Mike and his parents, “Please tell me you’re not getting cold feet.”

“I’m outta here.” Josh said, grabbing Joe’s butt with his free hand and guiding him toward the nursery.

John put his tux across the sofa arm and sat next to him. “You don’t think I’m going to cheat on you, do you?”

“No, I trust you; and I’m not getting cold feet. I’m just a little worried about something at the moment, that’s all.”

“What is it? What have you been telling my parents. They sure ran off in a hurry.”

“Nothing.”

“Come on, you can tell me.”

“It’s nothing, really. Your dads said not to worry. Get out before we get struck by lightning.”

“Mike, we’re going to become man and husband tomorrow. Talk to me.”

“I’m not sure how to put it.”

“Just rattle it off.”

Mike took a deep breath. “What happens when I get old?”

“Everyone gets old. We’ll grow old together.”

“That’s not what I mean. How long before the newness wears off? How long before you lay in bed at night and wish you had another furry body to cuddle up to? How long before you start looking at normal men and...wanting them?”

“You’re being insecure again.”

“No I’m not. Think of what you’re about to do. You’re going to marry me. Don’t brush this off.”

“Mike, just because the ‘newness’ of making love with you may someday evolve doesn’t mean that you’ll be any less desirable. You’ll always be the sexiest man alive to me. Remember what you said so long ago? It’s not just looks that make someone sexy and desirable. It’s what’s inside. I’ll always be madly in love with you. Can’t you see that?”

“I know, I know, but that doesn’t mean that you won’t come to miss being with a normal man.”

“What’s this ‘normal man’ stuff? All right, let’s play the game. Name something you think I’ll be missing out on and I’ll name what will make me not.”

“Okay. Half the tongue.”

“Twice the suction.”

”No fur.”

“More room to graze.”

Mike chuckled, his mood lightening. “One fourth the, uh, you know...”

“Four times the strength. It almost makes me dizzy.”

“Almost no drip. You know how important that is to you monsters.”

“Same thing again. It’s more than worth the wait. I give you things a human can’t and you give me things a wolf can’t. That doesn’t mean I’ll miss them. What I have is better.”

“Me running off on tour and sticking you with the kids.”

“We already went though all that. We love each other too much to let that be a problem. You’re already starting to worry people with talk of slowing down once we’re married. You ran out of ‘normal man’ stuff, didn’t you?”

“I guess I did. I just don’t want to someday end up as less than you want.”

John almost laughed. “Less? Mike, you are more than I could have ever hoped for. What can I do to make you believe me? I’ll do it.”

“This is going to sound extremely cheesy, but I mean it. Will you promise to never break my heart? I know it sounds tacky, but I don’t know if I could survive that again.”

“Oh Mike,” John said, melting, “I’ve promised myself that a thousand times.”

“Promise me.”

John pulled him into a tight hug. “Return the favor?”

“I promise.”

“I promise, too.”

## CHAPTER XV

Mike stood in front of the full-length mirror while Eric and Eddie fussed over his tuxedo.

It was white, the pants ending just below his knees. The white shirt and jacket had the usual openings, but were more ornate. The bow tie and cummerbund were black.

“I think I’m going to throw up.” he said as Eric tugged at his tie.

“Relax.” Eddie said. “You just have those wedding day jitters. It will all be over soon, along with life as you know it.”

“Hold still.” Eric chided.

“I love this fur!” Eddie said, running his fingers through Mike’s below-the-shoulder length hair.

“Stop that!” Eric yelled, swatting his hands away. “It took us forty-five minutes to get that right!”

“Sorry, mere drummer.” He stepped back and admired Mike in the mirror. “Weirdest looking groom I’ve ever seen. What do you think, Alex?”

“At least he’s not marrying a guy with a girl’s name.” he replied, fixing a cuff link fastened above his elbow.

“Don’t let him hear you say that.”

“I told him last night after I finished using him like a whore.”

“I’m definitely going to throw up.” Mike said, turning from the mirror and pacing.

“Tuck your shirt.”

He did and resumed his pacing.

“You’re making me nervous.” Sammy complained from a chair by the door. “Uh-oh, it’s time.” he added, waving to the usher outside the door. “Kiss your life goodbye.”

Mike stared at the door, contemplating what he was about to do. He had been extremely relieved to discover that he would not be called a “bride.” The word didn’t even exist. Since John had been the one to ask, Mike became the “groom” and took his name. Being instantly recognizable, retaining his own surname as a stage name wasn’t necessary. John was known as the “man.” Both of them would be given away, and both had a best man.

“This promises to be a very strange wedding.” he thought silently.

Everyone fled from the room, leaving Eric with him. “Sure you want to do this after that party last night?”

”Those damned dancers just wouldn’t leave me alone.” Mike said with a chuckle. “John cheated on me, I know he did.”

“He did not! I swear.”

“One last fling with the real thing before he gets stuck with furless old me.”

“John had the chance, believe me. An incredibly gorgeous guy was practically dripping all over him. He turned him down, and hard. He doesn’t want regular guys, he wants you. Can’t say I mind about the hunk. Gave me a chance to take him home.”

“You slut!”

“It was one of those things. I’m feeling terribly guilty and probably wouldn’t do myself a lot of good to fall asleep begging for forgiveness. Anyway, I wouldn’t lie to you. John didn’t. Maybe I should ask Mark about you.”

“Yeah, right. The way John abuses me I wouldn’t have the strength for it.” Mike joked as they walked up to Doug.

“I’ve got to get down there.” Eric said and rushed toward the alter. “I’ll see ya in a few.”

“Yeah.” Mike said, hooking his arm in Doug’s. He had to smile at how proud Doug looked, even though they weren’t even remotely related.

The music started and they began walking down the aisle. Aside from John’s family and numerous mutual friends, the guests were a regular who’s who of the rock industry. Mike and the band had made a lot of friends so far.

John was already at the alter, looking positively dashing in his matching white tux. It contrasted nicely with his meticulously combed fur. Mark and Eric were waiting on either side of him, holding the engagement-cum-wedding bands. Worn on the left arm during their engagement, they would now be permanently worn on the right.

They reached the alter and Doug stepped aside, taking his seat. Mike and John faced Reverend Carson together.

“We are here together in this sacred hour to witness the uniting of these two men in the enduring bond of Christian marriage. This most blessed...”

*I can't believe I'm about to marry a guy.*

"...In the garden of Eden, in the time of our innocence. God saw that it was not good for man to live alone so he created woman and gave her to Adam to..."

"Here's where this story takes a seriously weird turn." Mike said to himself as he listened to the story of a werewolven creation.

I can't believe I'm about to marry a wereman.

"Who then, in the name of our Father, gives this man to wed?" Reverend Carson asked, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder.

Doug stood briefly. "I do."

"Who then, in the name of our Father, gives this man to wed?" he repeated, moving his hand to John's shoulder. Joe stood. "I do, somehow."

Everyone in attendance laughed and Mike and John both blushed brightly.

"And now, John Emerson Carter and Michael Alexander Riggs, having freely and prayerfully chosen each other as partners for life, please hold your right hands."

"John, you are now entering a relationship with many privileges, but also many obligations. The man you love is about to become your husband. In no way could he express his love for you..."

*Look at those eyes! He's as terrified as I am. I get to look into those eyes for the rest of my life.*

"...Joys and your sorrows his sorrows. Your friends will be his friends and your God will be his God."

"Mike..."

*He looks so cute, and so nervous! I'm about to marry a fangy, furry guy.*

"...Your love will be his inspiration and your prayers will be his tower of strength. And here in the presence of God and these witnesses, you do take each other as man and husband, agreeing to love each other with devotion..."

*God, I love him! What if he backs out? What if he changes his mind about us? Oh God, please...*

*God, I love him! But marry a guy?*

"Will you take the band, John," Reverend Carson began as Mark handed it to John, "And place it upon Mike's right arm, and repeat after me these words."

Mike held out his right arm and John deftly attached it, keeping a hold on his arm afterward.

"With this band I wed thee, and all my worldly goods I thee endow."

John repeated the words, his voice shaking slightly.

"In sickness and in health, in poverty or in wealth, until death do us part."

John finished, removing his shaking hand from Mike's arm.

"John, it is Mike's desire that you too shall wear a band, a band to remind you of the entirety of his love for you."

*As if, after all this heartache, I needed a band for that! He's so cute...for a monster.*

"Will you Mike..."

Eric tapped his arm to get his attention and handed him the band.

"Repeat to him after me these words. With this band I wed thee and all my worldly goods I thee endow."

Mike repeated the words, looking straight into John's eyes. It was hard to believe that he meant them. He changed his mind before finishing the sentence with "and all my worldly goods I will let thee borrow," seeing that Joe had already broke up the audience once.

"...Until death do us part."

*"...Until death do us part." he finished. I did it! I just married a monster. A guy monster! What would my friends say? Oops, I forgot who my friends are now. I guess they'd be all for it. I wonder if I'll wake up now, now that the*

*story's over.*

"...And having sealed the pledge with the marriage bands, I do, by the authority vested in me as a minister of the church of the living God, and in conformity with the laws of the state of Illinois, pronounce you man and husband. And what God has joined together, let no man put apart. You may kiss the groom."

They leaned forward and kissed briefly and softly. Cameras flashed from the selected press gathered at the back of the church. A few were allowed in to film the ceremony.

"Let us pray."

The reception was held at a local hotel and was resplendent. John's parents couldn't afford such excess, but a lot of Mike's friends had pitched in, wanting it to be a grand occasion. Paul had chosen the hotel, its location preventing press helicopters from getting close.

Mark soon announced that it was time for them to have the first dance. They stepped to the middle of the dance floor as the song started.

"Do you realize that this is our first dance ever?" Mike asked as they moved closely.

"Great, isn't it? I'm getting horny. We should have been doing this for months. Where was my head?"

"Between your legs. So much for romance. You know, I still can't believe that I just married you." Mike said with a smile.

"I'm that bad?"

"You know better than that. It's just the enormity of it all."

"We do make a bizarre couple, don't we? Now, shut up and put your head on my shoulder."

Mike obeyed and they finished out the song. As the second started, Joe cut in on John.

"Not exactly what you expected for your boy, am I?" Mike asked as they embraced. "By the way, I'm going to get your for that little "I do" stunt you pulled."

"No, can't say that you are." Joe answered, smiling at his little giving-away joke. "Well, let me rephrase that. You're exactly what I expected for my boy, you just don't look like what I expected for him. You've made him very happy."

"I intend to keep him that way. I want you to know that."

"I'm sure you will."

"Hey, stop hogging the groom." Josh said, prying them apart. "It's my turn."

Mike looked up at Josh, one of the few wolves he had to look up at, and grinned bashfully.

"Let me guess," Josh began with a smile, "He threatened to kill you if you ever did anything to hurt John."

"Actually, he didn't. I guess that makes it your job."

"Keep your hands off his belly button." Joe called from where he was dancing with, of all people, Nancy Wilson.

Josh smiled and stuck out his tongue in Joe's direction.

"...And that too! Especially that!"

"Don't tell me you two have been lusting for me behind my back, too."

"I'll never tell. Although it was interesting trying to picture you and John that night at our place. He told us about that."

"About what?"

"Oh, I believe it was something about tracing the patterns on his coat. How you pointed out his patterns. You did that for...how long was it? Apparently you've got a velvet touch."

Mike blushed, something Josh was very good at making him do. "I'll never tell. Why are you so darned good at making me blush?"

Josh adopted a serious expression, the mischief still dancing in his eyes. “Do anything to hurt our boy and we’ll hunt you down like a dog.”

Mike laughed before turning serious. “I would never do that. He’s made me so happy.” He looked down between them. “Without John I would have been a very lonely person for the last two years. He’s shown me how it feels to love again, and I don’t ever want to lose that feeling. I don’t ever want to lose him. He’s everything to me. What would all the money be without someone to hold on to? Why am I starting to sound like a bad movie?”

“It does that to you. Disgusting, isn’t it? We’re just happy that Joe can retire early so we can leech off of you for the rest of our lives. You know how things like that play on the minds of us old folks.”

“You’re only as old as you feel, right? And from what John’s told me, you two feel very young together. As for leeching, just as long as you don’t want to move in...”

“Wouldn’t think of it. Just buy us a house in Malibu.”

“Malibu? What do you want me to do? Rent?”

“All we really want is our boy to live a happy life. Money or not, we think you can do that for him.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Hey, stop hogging the groom...”

## EPILOGUE

Jerry had just reached his car. He was about to unlock the door when he heard someone coming. A nice scent wafted in.

“Excuse me.” came a voice from behind.

He turned around to the sight of the handsome new guy who had shown up in Sunday School. Jet black fur gleamed in the sunlight as the guy smiled nervously.

“Yeah?”

The man, Jerry couldn’t remember his name, offered his hand. “Hi. I’m Cameron Johnson. I just got into town last week.”

Jerry returned the shake. “Jerry Scillet. Welcome in.”

“Thanks, you seem to have a really nice congregation here. I like your preacher’s style.”

“Yeah, he’s a little eccentric, but a lot of fun. What can I do for you?”

“Uh,” he started uneasily, “I don’t want to seem pushy, but I’d really like to have lunch with you.” he finally blurted.

Jerry hesitated, doubtful of whether or not he wanted to do this. He hadn’t been involved with anyone since Mike’s

death, now a long time ago. He'd turned down previous offers fairly quickly. He eyed Cameron carefully, measuring him. Maybe it had been too long since he had considered a serious relationship.

What am I doing? How many more times is a gorgeous guy, who also just happened to join your church, going to walk up and ask you out? Isn't it time to really let Mike go? Get on with your life, idiot.

Jerry smiled, feeling a weight lift that he hadn't even noticed was still there. "Your car or mine?"

They sat on the back porch, drinking tea and enjoying the scenery spread out beyond the grounds. A small TriV sat on a table to one side, playing a popular show.

They cuddled close, holding hands. Mike reached up and scratched his neatly trimmed beard.

"Junior!" he called over his shoulder.

"After all these years, you'd think you would know by now that you don't have to yell." John said, raising his left ear from where he had pinned it back. "He could have heard that from Nebraska."

"Sorry."

"Yes, Oh Furless One?" Junior asked from the doorway, using the nickname invented by his grandparents.

"Are you and What's-His-Face still planning on leaving tomorrow?" Mike asked.

"After ten years of blissful marriage, you'd think they would know my name by now." Steve said from where he had appeared behind Junior.

"Did you hear something?" Mike asked John.

"No, should I have?"

"Yes, we're leaving." Junior interrupted. "I have to get started on my next project."

"I told him over and over not to follow in his stepdad's footsteps. I tried and tried to get him interested in zoology. And what does he do? He takes your advice and becomes an architect." John mused. "He always liked you better."

"That's because you wouldn't let me spoil him. At least he's good at it."

"You still managed to sneak me plenty of brownies." Junior said, sitting and putting an arm across Mike's shoulder and resting his hand on John's. "It took a monumental effort to keep this tummy flat, as my former slave driver will point out." he added with a meaningful glance at John.

"Someone had to keep your stepdad from making you too fat." He turned to Mike. "He's just like you, too."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"I guess not." John sighed, looking over at Junior. "So you're not going to stay to see the kids? They'll miss you."

"I know, but I'm a little too busy to be a good uncle right now. I'll see them some time next month."

A news bulletin interrupted the show, grabbing their attention. The scene panned across a rocky cliff, moving down to the ground. A crumpled body lay there, dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt. A backpack was twisted around one arm.

It was a human body. Working it's way through his shock, something tugged at Mike's memory. "I know that place..."

A reporter came into view. "This is the scene at an abandoned quarry here in Decatur..."

"That's the quarry behind Deb's house!" Mike exclaimed. Three sets of ears perked up. "It's a little north of the stream I was jogging along when..."

"...Where two hiking teenagers came upon the amazing sight you see here. Yes, it's a wereman, found less than fifty minutes ago. It was not far from this very spot where, thirty-six years ago..."

"Thirty-six years." Mike mused with a sigh, glancing at John. "John, you're an old man!"

"Thirty-six wonderful years." John corrected, giving his cheek a peck.

“...Michael Carter was found. This time, though, it seems that Mr. Carter’s good fortune...”

Mike snorted.

“Watch it.” John warned, giving him an affectionate squeeze.

“...Was not to be repeated. Scientists brought down from Chicago, on site here for about half an hour, believe that the phenomenon that brought Mr. Carter here repeated itself at the top of this short cliff. It’s believed that this man,” he continued, nodding in the corpse’s direction, “Fell from the cliff when he appeared. Ionization at the top of the cliff, although much fresher and stronger, matches that which was measured nearly forty years ago when Mr. Carter was discovered. In a possibly related story, a man by the name of Darren Leonard has been reported missing from these same woods. Since he was also reported to be hiking near this spot, the question we have to ask ourselves is; is this man,” he again gestured to the dead hiker, “Darren Leonard, and is the real Darren Leonard lying on the ground surrounded by humans? This has been Lloyd Svenson.”

The view returned to the anchorman in the studio. “We’ll have a complete story at eleven. Meanwhile, Mr. Carter, who’s long-awaited autobiography is still North America’s best seller, is being contacted at his Colorado estate for comment. Now we return you to the season finale of *Orbital Station*, which was not cut for this news bulletin.”

“It’s a shame that he died.” Mike said with genuine feeling. “It would have been nice to talk to him. I still sometimes wonder how things are going back in the, eh-hem, real world.”

“It is sad.” John agreed.

“How much do you want to bet that dead guy’s name is Darren Leonard? Maybe this time the poor beast was smart enough to carry a wallet.” Junior said, finishing with another long-running joke.

“I guess this proves your story.” Steve added.

“It took a while, didn’t it?”

“I always believed you. I wouldn’t have married a liar.”

The wallphone inside beeped its low tone and they heard the butler promptly answer it.

“What are you going to say?” John asked, softly rubbing his snout against Mike’s beard. He slipped a hand in to rub his chest and belly.

“You’re going to make my antsy in front of the children.” He sighed and leaned his head back. “Oh, I’ll think of something.”

“You always do.” John said, pressing his lips to Mike’s throat.

“John...”

“Do you remember when you got all mad during that live People Video interview back in oh-seven?” John continued, taking his mouth away from his neck.

Mike laughed at the memory. “Oh-eight.”

“Uh-oh, they’re starting to reminisce again.” Junior said with mock trepidation. “We better run while we can.”

“Was it?” John asked, ignoring their son. “You always remember that stuff better than I do. Anyway, what was it he had asked? I’m not sure I remember. Something about whether or not I was supposed to have been assigned...”

THE END