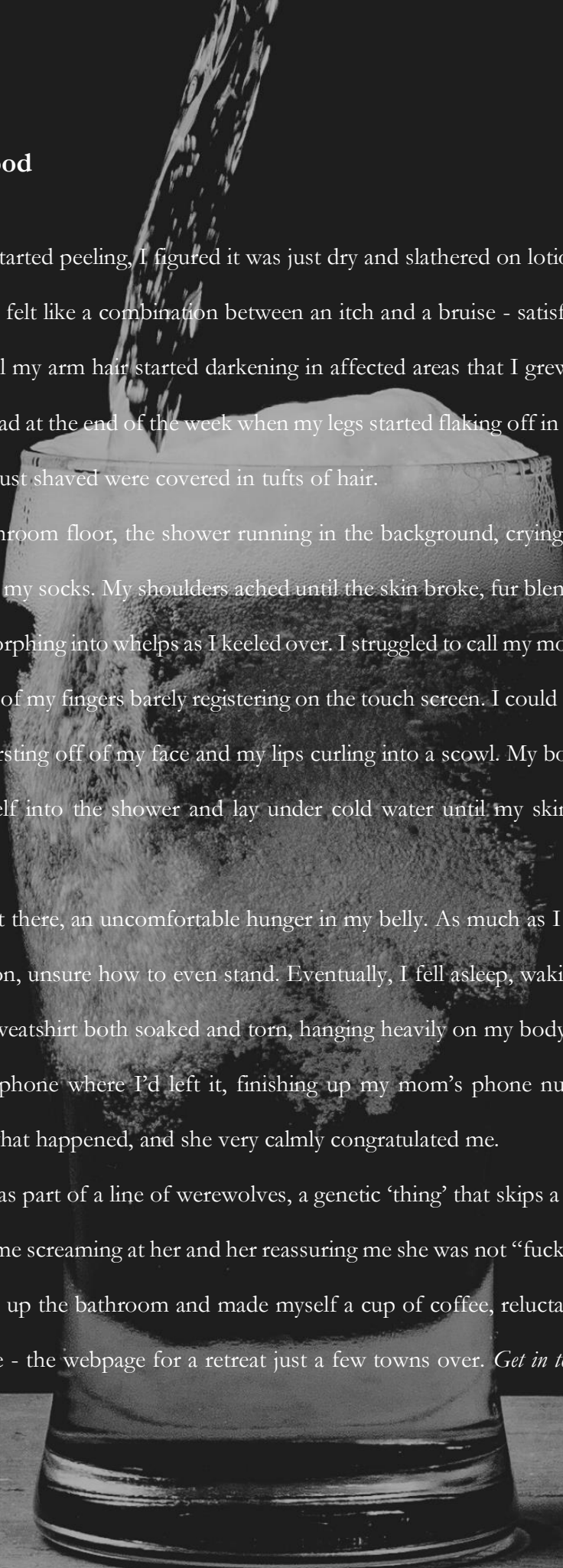


Booze & Beast Blood

by Melissa Martini

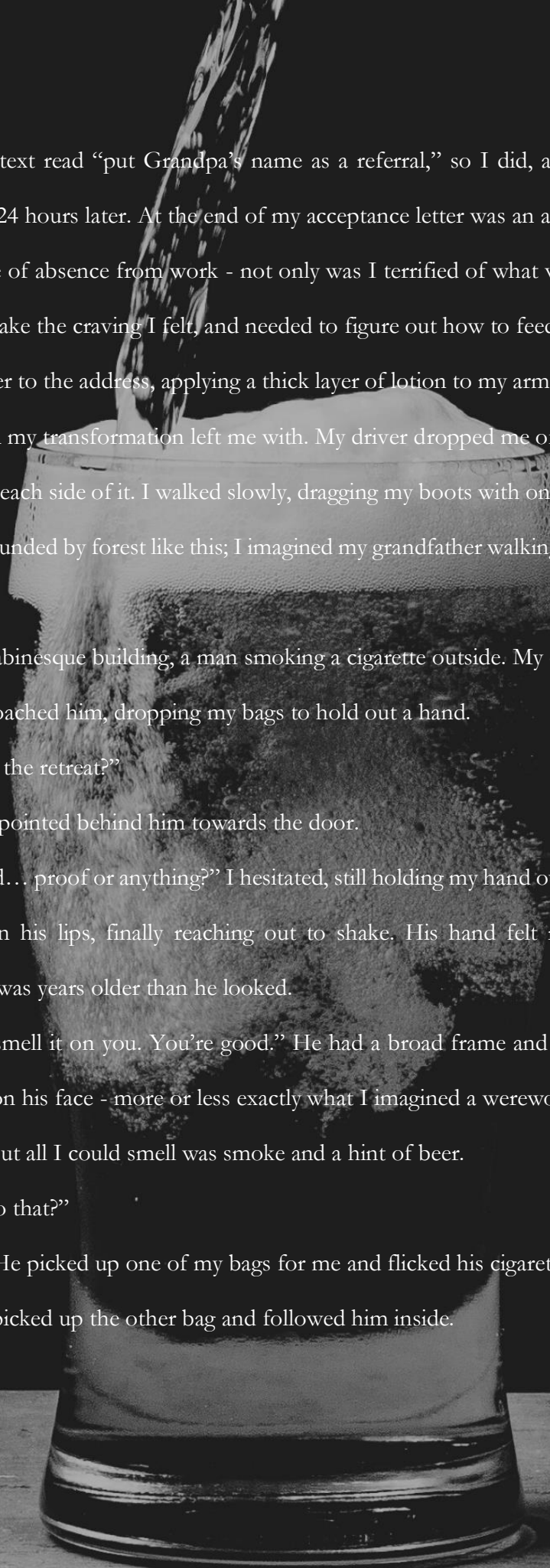


When my skin started peeling, I figured it was just dry and slathered on lotion every morning and night. Rubbing it in felt like a combination between an itch and a bruise - satisfyingly unpleasant to irritate. It wasn't until my arm hair started darkening in affected areas that I grew concerned - the situation coming to a head at the end of the week when my legs started flaking off in chunks and spots I could have sworn I'd just shaved were covered in tufts of hair.

I sat on the bathroom floor, the shower running in the background, crying as I watched my feet stretch out and tear my socks. My shoulders ached until the skin broke, fur blending into the hair on my head, my cries morphing into whelps as I keeled over. I struggled to call my mom, my fingernails thickening and the pads of my fingers barely registering on the touch screen. I could see my reflection, my eyebrows bushy, bursting off of my face and my lips curling into a scowl. My body felt like it was on fire; I dragged myself into the shower and lay under cold water until my skin was completely replaced by fur.

I spent the night there, an uncomfortable hunger in my belly. As much as I wanted to satisfy it, I could barely function, unsure how to even stand. Eventually, I fell asleep, waking up completely normal, my jeans and sweatshirt both soaked and torn, hanging heavily on my body. I turned off the shower and found my phone where I'd left it, finishing up my mom's phone number. When she answered, I explained what happened, and she very calmly congratulated me.

She told me I was part of a line of werewolves, a genetic 'thing' that skips a generation. After a lot of back and forth, me screaming at her and her reassuring me she was not "fucking lying," I hung up the phone. I cleaned up the bathroom and made myself a cup of coffee, reluctantly clicking on a link my mom texted me - the webpage for a retreat just a few towns over. *Get in touch with your inner beast.*



A follow up text read “put Grandpa’s name as a referral,” so I did, and received an email acceptance less than 24 hours later. At the end of my acceptance letter was an address. I sucked it up and requested a leave of absence from work - not only was I terrified of what was happening to me, but I also couldn’t shake the craving I felt, and needed to figure out how to feed it.

I took an Uber to the address, applying a thick layer of lotion to my arms and legs in an effort to sooth the irritation my transformation left me with. My driver dropped me off at the end of a long dirt road, trees lining each side of it. I walked slowly, dragging my boots with one bag in each hand. It felt fitting to be surrounded by forest like this; I imagined my grandfather walking the same path many moons earlier.

I reached a cabinesque building, a man smoking a cigarette outside. My cheeks itched and my heart raced as I approached him, dropping my bags to hold out a hand.

“I’m here for the retreat?”

“Inside.” He pointed behind him towards the door.


“Do you need... proof or anything?” I hesitated, still holding my hand out. He let his cigarette hang loosely between his lips, finally reaching out to shake. His hand felt rough, calloused and experienced, as if he was years older than he looked.

“Nah. I can smell it on you. You’re good.” He had a broad frame and shoulder length dark hair, scruff growing on his face - more or less exactly what I imagined a werewolf to look like. I tried to smell ‘it’ on him, but all I could smell was smoke and a hint of beer.

“How do I do that?”

“Do what?” He picked up one of my bags for me and flicked his cigarette into the dirt.

“Smell it.” I picked up the other bag and followed him inside.



“It’ll come to you eventually. Takes time. Develops.” He walked slowly so I could keep up, waving to a few people here and there as we made our way through room after room. “I’ll get you settled in. I’ve worked here a while. Know my way around.”

Everyone looked and acted disappointingly normal: men and women were scattered about, some sitting at tables drinking despite it being quite early, others sitting around reading or watching TV. We even passed a fully equipped kitchen, and a gym with a swimming pool.

“What’s all of that for?” I asked, gesturing towards all the rooms we’d passed.

“Designated areas for any hobby you can think of. You’ll need something to focus on when all of this gets too overwhelming - and trust me, it will. You’ll have time allotted to do your own thing, unwind and relax. Helps the actual werewolf lessons go smoothly.” We reached an office and sat down at a small desk, setting my bags aside. “So, you’re Hannah, right?”

“Yep. And you are?”

“Fiero.”


“Fiyero! Like Wicked!”

“No, Fiero like Pontiac.”

“...You’re named after a car?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He laughed quietly, and I caught a glimpse of his smile, canines ever so slightly more pointed than average. He quickly covered his mouth with his hand as if resting his face against his fingers. “You’re going to be in room 203. I’m right down the hall in 217 if you need anything. Just knock. Here’s your key - Come on, I’ll walk you.”

My room was upstairs and included all the necessities - toothpaste, toilet paper, extra blankets. I unpacked, putting away my clothes and setting a succulent I brought on my nightstand. I lined up my creams and lotions, wondering what others used to soothe their skin.



Once I felt settled, I collapsed in bed and texted my mom that I was safe, to which she replied, “go make grandpa proud!” I resisted the urge to text back a vomiting emoji, as if the two degrees and full-time job I’d managed to secure on my own weren’t enough to make my lycanthropic ancestors proud.

My first hunt was scheduled so that I could learn how to transform on command and get used to functioning as a werewolf. I was escorted into the woods by a small group including Fiero. I tried to remember the others’ names: a tall redheaded woman named either Jenny or Jamie in a fitted leather jacket and dark wash jeans, an older man named Glenn whose hair was salt and peppered, a blonde in a bodycon dress and Uggs who differentiated herself from Glenn by letting me know she was “Gwen with a W.”


Then there was Fiero. He wore jeans and a dark flannel, his typical and incredibly cliched attire - I wondered if he dressed like that prior to finding out he was a werewolf, or if he felt obligated as if there was a dress code.

I was instructed to wear stretchy, disposable clothing, yet felt underdressed in my leggings and tee shirt. I focused on Fiero as he talked me through things.

“Focus on your senses. What can you hear? Smell? Taste?” I closed my eyes and listened to his voice, deep yet gentle, like a strong cup of coffee laced with too much cream - layered, complex, harmonious.

“I don’t want to kill anyone,” I mumbled, my palms sweaty as I shifted uncomfortably.

“You won’t have to. Start small. A rabbit or squirrel.” I hyper-focused on each word that came out of Fiero’s mouth. I heard a bird chirp, a leaf crunch beneath Glenn’s shoe. I took a long breath in, held it, let it out. I could smell pine trees, gum Jenny/Jamie was chewing, and the very distinct scent of tobacco on Fiero’s clothes covered up by vanilla cologne.



“I have to kill a rabbit?” My mouth felt dry and I could only taste my own sweet saliva, trying to shake the thought of a rabbit’s flesh in my mouth. My stomach churned, heartburn quickly stinging my throat and overwhelming my taste buds.

“Or a squirrel. Or even a bird, if you can catch one. Up to you.” I then focused on the smell of his skin, honing in enough to taste the saltiness. Licking my lips, my teeth suddenly no longer fit comfortably in my mouth, larger and sharper against my tongue. My entire body felt heavier as I fell onto my hands and knees, watching as my finger joints extended and curved. I let out a soft scream that erupted into a howl, threads in my leggings popping one by one.

Those around me clapped quietly and Gwen let out an unenthusiastic “woo hoo.” I sniffed the ground a few times, knowing what I had to do next. Every slight movement around me was a new opportunity to sink my teeth into something: a pair of squirrels chasing each other up a tree, a mother rabbit shuffling through grass to find food for its babies, a baby bird that fell out of its nest and struggled on the ground. Easy targets, yet I hesitated.

“Is she gonna do anything?”

“What the fuck is she waiting for?”

“Go! Come on already, make a move.”

“Calm down, guys. Give her a minute to get used to it.”

As everyone’s impatience grew, I took one step forward and froze up, my paws brushing against the leaves and dirt beneath me. They felt familiarly like mittens, as if I was wearing my own knitted skin. As I stood there and pondered whether my back paws felt like socks, shoes, or mittens, too, someone kicked me from behind, their shoe jabbing my tailbone. I quickly shot my head back and snapped at their foot, just missing - Glenn laughed as I bared my teeth and growled at him. “Bitch tried to bite me but can’t even bring herself to go kill a fucking rabbit?” He sucked his teeth and spit at me.



I squealed, rubbing my face into the dirt to get his saliva off me.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you, man?” Fiero shoved Glenn, who stumbled back into a tree, the skin on his arms quickly erupting to reveal tufts of white and silver fur. At the sight of this, Fiero thrust forward, his back splitting open, a licorice colored coat bursting through. I thought Fiero was big as a human, but as a werewolf he was alarmingly large. Gwen and Jenny/Jamie fled, and I cowered as he and Glenn began snapping at each other, tumbling in the dirt like two overgrown dogs playing - but they weren’t playing - they were out for blood. Curled up against the ground, I whined as Fiero pinned Glenn down and let out a roar. Glenn began melting back into a human, his shirt and pants slightly torn. He slipped out of Fiero’s grip and ran off.

Fiero breathed heavily, panting. I slowly walked up to him, nuzzling my nose into his neck in thanks, but he flinched away. I relaxed, morphing back into a human, my clothes hanging loosely on my body. I sat by Fiero’s side patiently until his breathing steadied and he was able to retract his fur, skin returning, and clothes just shreds barely covering him. While my skin was just red and irritated, Fiero had abrasions and bruises covering his arms, chest, and back.

“Thank you.” I reached out to touch his hand, but he pulled away.


“Please leave.”

“Let me help you.” He glared at me and we locked eyes, his gaze serious yet afraid.

“Get out of here!” It came out as a growl despite him no longer being a werewolf, so I nodded and began speed walking away when he added, “Hannah, you did good today.”

“Thanks. So, did you.” I smiled at him and he nodded.

When I got back to the building, I headed straight for the bar and ordered a shot. Glenn and co. were nowhere to be found, so I felt less embarrassed to be standing there in my half-torn clothes. However, by my third shot, a fully dressed Fiero found me and took the barstool next to me. He



looked me up and down but didn't say anything. A bruise adorned his chin. "I don't like transforming. I only do it when absolutely necessary."

"Understandable." I motioned for the bartender to pour him a shot, too.

"If I could avoid this all, I would. But I come from a shit city and a shit family. I only work here because it gives me a place to sleep that isn't the streets." He downed the shot. "Plus, I can paint."

"You paint?"

"Out of all the things I just said, that's your follow up question?" A smile tugged playfully at his lips, but he resisted. He ordered a beer, I ordered a seltzer.

"I figured it'd be the only way to keep you talking."


"You figured right." He took a sip. "I paint in the library every morning. People are usually just in there reading, but it's the only room here quiet enough to get creative."

"I write." I shrugged, nearly spilling my seltzer as I lifted it to my lips. "Maybe I'll join you sometime."

Eventually, I figured things out. I plotted out the forest ahead of time, found the location of a bush with red berries, and buried my snout in them each hunt. I could satisfy everyone else, even if I wasn't satisfying myself. No one ever asked about it, so I continued, consuming more fruit than in my entire life - but at least I wasn't consuming lives.

Then, I concocted a solid daily routine: Each morning I woke up, made a cup of coffee, and wrote in the library while Fiero painted on the other side of the room. We rarely spoke, but occasionally he'd take a break from his canvas to hover over my shoulder and read what I was writing. Sometimes I strolled over to his area, mug in hand, watching him choose a color to dip his brush into.

I spent countless hours letting his paintings inspire my writing, my fingers producing poetry that longed to evoke the feelings his art made me feel. He seemed drawn to darker shades, swirls of blacks, greys, purples, and blues. He filled canvases while I filled notebooks, desperately trying to find



ways to describe his brush strokes and the hands that held said brushes. When he accidentally got paint on his face while tucking a strand of hair behind his ear, I didn't tell him - I only wrote about it, the dark green speck just above his beard.

When I penned a poem, I was proud of, I tore it out of my notebook, folded it up, and handed it to him before I left the library. "I wrote this about your painting."

"Huh?" He looked up at me, cleaning his brushes off in a cup of water.

"It's a poem I wrote about your painting. I just thought you should have it."

"Oh, cool. Do you want me to read it now?" He started unfolding it, but I stopped him.

"God, no. Read it later." I laughed as he slipped it into his back pocket.

"You got it. Maybe I'll paint you something some time." He smiled at me, then went back to cleaning his brushes.


"I'd like that."

When the full moon came around again, I wasn't sure if berries would be enough. I'd been told time after time that full moon hunger would not only be different than daily hunger, but also much more intense than whatever hunger I'd felt on that first full moon night spent sleeping in the shower. A text from mom read, "full moon tonight! Have fun sweetie!"

Glenn and co. assigned Fiero as my mentor for the evening. We sat at a table together sipping beers with everyone else while Glenn and another older man stood at the front of the room reciting lines about lore, tradition, and symbolism.

Fiero was drinking much faster than usual, his cheeks burning up before I'd even finished my second pint. A shameful hunger stained his face, his shoulders slightly hunched and his posture worsening each time I looked at him. I caught him gazing at me, eyes slightly glazed over. He shook it off, breaking eye contact and taking another sip.

"You doing okay?" I asked, nudging his hand.



“You know I don’t like transforming.” He shrugged, his eyebrows furrowed in frustration and embarrassment. “Maybe you should find someone else to mentor you tonight.”

“Fiero, no. I’m glad it’s you.” I tried to take his hand, but he pulled away.

“Even after what you’ve seen of me? Full moons make it even worse.” He stood up and started heading towards the stairs. I took a long sip of beer before chasing after him.

“Fiero, wait.” I grabbed his arm and yanked. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t transform during full moons.”

“What?”

“I don’t transform. I drink until I pass out. If you want someone to hunt with, it’s not gonna be me. Sorry, Hannah.” He placed his hand on mine and gently removed it from his arm.

“I didn’t even know that was an option here.”

“It’s not. I’m just a good liar. Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s a bottle of whiskey waiting for me upstairs.” He continued up, and I followed closely behind him.

“Why don’t you transform?” I stayed close, watching him pull his keys out of his pocket and miss the doorknob’s keyhole four times before he finally got it.

“I told you. I don’t like to.” He sighed heavily as I followed him inside.

“Why not?” He opened the whiskey and poured us each a glass.

“The same reason you smash berries all over your snout.” I choked on the whiskey, feeling it get pulled into my nostrils, burning. I coughed a few times, shaking my head. “Don’t worry, you’re not in trouble or anything. Everyone knows. We can all smell it on you. It’s impressive you can control your hunger that well, and it’s a better strategy than hiding in your room and drinking yourself half to death like I do.”

“I’m scared berries won’t be enough for me tonight.”

“Oh, they definitely won’t be.”



“I don’t know what to do.”

“You can hang here with me and drink, but only if you promise not to eat me.” He refilled my glass, a smirk playing at his lips.

“Right back at you. Sorry, was that too far?”

He laughed. “No, it’s cool. You got it.”

As the night went on, I found myself anxiously pacing back and forth, sipping whiskey every few steps. Fiero’s room was littered with half painted canvases, some on easels and others stacked on the floor. Sketches and torn sheets of paper were scattered about in one corner, various types of paints and brushes in another. His closet was slightly ajar, a canvas hanging out of it. It was organized clutter, far from the disarray it appeared to be at first glance: the more I observed, the more I realized everything had its own place.

“I read your poem, by the way.” He opened a small drawer on his nightstand and pulled out the folded piece of paper. “I liked it a lot.”

“Thanks, but the real question is where’s my painting, huh?” I gestured towards the canvases in front of me. “I’ve been waiting.”


“About that...” He dug through them as I sat on his bed to steady myself.

He held up a half-painted canvas before tossing it onto the ground. “I never finished it.”

“Oh.” I tried to hide my disappointment by picking it up and looking it over. I couldn’t make much out. “Well, I like it so far.”

“I’m sorry. Been distracted preparing myself for tonight.”

“About tonight - how does this work?” I held out my glass for a refill. His hands shook as he poured, spilling a bit onto my jeans. “Do we chain ourselves up and hang out as werewolves all night?”



“No, I don’t transform at all during full moons. Too dangerous for me - if I can stay human physically, it’s easier for me to stay human mentally.” He refilled his own glass. “The alcohol just helps me sleep through the urge to transform... and you know, kill.”

I laughed and took a sip. “Got it.”

The full moon was making my skin feel even more dry and itchy than usual, or maybe it was just the alcohol dehydrating me. I felt the hunger creeping up on me like a silently stalking ghost. It wasn’t quite the same as the hunger one gets for food - it was deeper than that, an emotional hunger making my heart race in anticipation.

I could just make out the sound of howls from outside, watching Fiero bring his glass to his lips once again. I resisted the urge to pin him to the bed and dig my nails into his skin. Uncomfortable at the thought, I finished off my glass and fumbled as I poured myself more.


He seemed to notice me struggling, looking for a way to distract me. “So, uh. What side of the family you get this shit from?”

Sitting back down, the hunger seemed to evolve from a gradual increase to a sudden overwhelming need. I swallowed hard, shifting my focus to the conversation at hand. “My mom’s. My grandpa was a werewolf apparently. How about you?”

“My dad’s side. Mom left when she found out what she was in for with me. Dad raised me, died when I was in high school. Found out I was a werewolf on my own.”

“Me too. At least I was home when it happened.”

“Lucky you. I was in class at university. Broke my desk, next thing I knew, I was running out of the building and back to the dorms to hide, half naked and half covered in fur. Imagine my roommate’s confusion when I walked in.” He chuckled, then took a long sip of whiskey and poured himself more. I couldn’t help but laugh too, but the moment was quickly silenced by the interruption of more howls outside.




I imagined our fellow werewolves ripping animals and humans apart limb by limb, hot tears beginning to roll down my cheeks. At the thought of it, a pang of hunger bit at my stomach so strong that I began to cry harder, desperately grabbing the bottle of whiskey. I swished it back and forth in my mouth like mouthwash, swallowing slowly and focusing my attention on the heat as it made its way down my throat.

Fiero reached for a box of tissues on his nightstand to hand to me. I wiped my eyes as he stared down at his glass, swirling the ice cubes around mindlessly. The veins in his hands were swollen and throbbing, and I followed them up his arms to his neck. I swallowed hard, smelling sweat beading up on his skin.

A sudden whiff of blood made me realize I was digging my nails into my thigh, ripping right through my jeans. Fiero smelled it too, glancing down and quickly taking the bottle from my hand, taking his own sip, and then helping me clean up. His hands shook as he pressed a tissue into the denim, sopping up blood and the whiskey from earlier. "I'm sorry for spilling that before. And I'm sorry about the painting. I'm so fucking sorry."

His breathing was heavy and shaky, and when I looked at his face, I noticed he was beginning to cry. He dropped the bloody tissue to the ground and leaned back, holding his head in his hands. His body quivered next to me as he grabbed at his comforter and wrapped it around his shoulders, a child hiding from a monster in the closet. I pulled at it to look at his face, his brows thickening and his facial hair spreading and regrouping quickly. He began breathing exercises, steadying himself until the changes ceased. "I'm so sorry, Hannah."

I yanked the comforter around my own shoulders. My head was throbbing, and I had both chills and beads of sweat forming on my forehead. "It's okay. Hey, it's okay." I felt the fur burning beneath my own skin, my fingers aching as if I'd just torn all the cuticles off and my jaw throbbing like I'd just left the dentist.



I nuzzled into his arms, brushing my hair against his neck. I pet his head, embracing the parts of us that worked their way out from the inside. I felt as if I would lose all control if I let go. He held me silently, cringing each time we heard another howl. He breathed heavily and slowly, his body seeming to grow and shrink in my arms. At the scent of his skin, I pressed my teeth into his neck, silently sobbing. He cupped my face with his hands and our foreheads met.

His hands ran down my arms, and he dug his fingers into my skin. I'd never been in a bed with a man, in his arms, his fingers clawing at me like that, so innocently and with no other intention but to be together. To be present. To feel each other, to know that we were both there together. I'd made love with men, their hands hungry for me, but in a different way than this - this was something I needed, too, and it grounded us both. We held onto each other, working through the urges, until we fell asleep.

The next morning, I woke up groggy and hungover. My head ached, my body ached, and my skin felt sunburnt. The hunger had vanished, though, for the most part, replaced by a craving for none other than coffee. When I opened my eyes, I saw Fiero sitting at his desk, brewing a pot. He had two mugs ready.

“Cream and sugar?”

“Just cream.”

“No fun.” He smiled as I rubbed my eyes, sitting up in his bed. He poured me a mug and handed it to me. I'd never woken up in a man's bed fully clothed. “Thanks for last night.”

“I feel like I've just woken up from a one night stand.”

“Don't worry. I'll call you again in a month.”

“I'll be waiting.”