

Chapter 43

Sophia grimaced as her dad's angry voice echoed through the small room. Deputy Bowman quickly yanked the phone from his ear while Dr. Banks stopped packing his bag to stare.

I've never heard Dad yell like that... A deep chill ran through Sophia. *He sounds panicked.*

Bowman took a breath and put the phone back to his ear, "Mr. Jones, Sophia is safe here at the Sheriff's Office. I ca..."

He had evidently turned down the phone's volume significantly because Sophia could not make out what her dad said next. However, her sensitive ears could tell his tone and volume hadn't changed much.

"No, she's not under arrest," Bowman assured him, wariness seeping into his voice. "And doesn't appear to be hurt." He paused, listening. "Why don't you come down to the office and we can..." His eyes widened slightly in surprise, "Oh... You're outside? We'll meet you in the lobby." Bowman hung up and sighed, shaking his head.

Sophia stood stock still, not daring to move or make a sound.

"Happy New Year indeed," Dr. Banks quipped sardonically as he resumed packing. "Suppose I can't blame him."

Deputy Bowman gave a thin smile, "Certainly earning that holiday pay."

"He's here already?" Sophia asked tentatively.

"Yep." Bowman confirmed and added, "Let's hope his BAC is below legal limits."

Oh no, no, no. If my Dad gets arrested because of me... Sophia's eyes widened and her back stiffened.

The Deputy opened the door and gestured for her to follow. Trembling, she joined him in the hall.

"Eh, I won't do anything unless it's particularly bad," he assured her. "You Jones have cost me enough sleep for one night. Unless you've something you want to share, you're his problem now."

Thanks a lot. Her fear turned to indignation.

Bowman chuckled and gave her shoulder a light squeeze. Sophia bristled at the unexpected touch as her anger blazed.

Don't touch me!

Mirth turned to shock on the deputy's face as he took a step back and swore, "Fucking hell!"

The sound of something approximating a low growl reached her ears and Sophia realized it was coming from her. To her horror, she realized she had pulled her lips into a snarl, fully exposing her changed canines. Icy terror appeared in her chest and she snapped her mouth shut.

I just growled at a sheriff! Shaking, she hurried down the hall away from the still-stunned deputy. *There's no way he missed my teeth. He's going to arrest me now for sure!*

Flinging the door open, she half-jogged across the front office.

Deputy Johnson's head jerked up from his cubicle, "Is something wrong Miss?"

Sophia didn't respond, instead pushing open the glass doors that led out of the office.

"I've got it," she heard Bowman say from behind her as the door closed.

I'll try for the mountains. She started towards the exit and, without thinking, bent forward towards the floor as she moved. *I'm on all fours again. Well, no point in pretending now.*

Unfortunately, her boots were not created with moving on all fours in mind. The front sole of one of her boots caught on the floor, throwing off her rhythm. Her hands slapped for a few strides against the cold tile before she completely lost her balance and sprawled painfully forward.

"Sophia!" Deputy Bowman exclaimed from just behind her. "Are you okay?"

So much for my daring escape. Sophia pushed herself up, feeling defeated.

"I'm fine," she said dourly, getting to her knees.

"What was all that about?" Deputy Bowman asked her as he offered his hand to help her up.

Sighing, Sophia took it and climbed to her feet. The deputy held her coat in his other hand and handed it to her.

"Aren't you going to arrest me?" she asked in confusion as she put the coat on.

Bowman jerked his head back in surprise and responded, "No. Why would I arrest you?"

I panicked for no reason... She gave an embarrassed shrug, looking at the floor.

"Come on, let's go see your dad," he told her, reaching for her arm and then apparently thinking better of it.

Sophia nodded and followed behind him. When they reached the lobby, Sophia saw her dad pacing just outside the exterior glass doors. He noticed them and put his hands on his hips as he waited impatiently for Bowman to unlock the door. As soon as it was open, he darted forward, wrapping his arms around a surprised Sophia. His breath still had a fair bit of alcohol on it, he reeked of cigarette smoke and his embrace was stiff, but it was genuine.

“What happened? Did someone try to hurt you?” he asked, his voice angry. “When I get my hands on the bastards...”

“Dad, I’m okay,” she assured him, returning the hug. “No one tried to hurt me.”

“I had a doctor check her out,” Deputy Bowman spoke up. “She was a bit uncooperative but seemed physically fine as far as he could tell. He also said...”

Her dad broke the hug and whirled on the deputy, “What is this about then, Carl? Are you harassing my daughter now? I’m not enough; you have to go after my daughter too?”

What..? Sophia gaped at her father in confusion.

Deputy Bowman’s face grew angry, “Damn it Eric, I’ve been looking for *your* daughter all night and...”

“Dad!” Sophia broke in sharply. “It was my fault.”

Her dad’s head snapped towards her and he started to say, “Your fault..?” He paused, his eyes squinting. “What happened to your eyes? They’re yellow.”

Well, shit.

“Nothing,” Sophia stammered, looking away. “I’m just really tired.”

“She either doesn’t remember or won’t tell me,” the deputy broke in, exasperation clear in his voice. “It’s been a long night and a very frustrating morning. She’s free to go and I’m supposed to be helping get ready for a party, so if you’ll excuse me...”

“Yeah, we’ll be going,” Her dad retorted. “Come on Sophia.”

He grabbed Sophia’s arm and pulled her through the open door. The door shut and then clicked behind them.

“The County Sheriff will be hearing from me ‘bout that asshole, sure as hell,” her dad ranted as he stormed towards the parking lot. “Did he touch you sweetheart? I swear...”

“Dad, please!” Sophia pleaded, trying to keep up. “He didn’t do anything to me.”

They reached his truck and he finally let go, heading for the driver’s side. Sophia rubbed her arm where he had grabbed her before opening the passenger door and climbing in. His truck’s cab was stale and stank more than usual. Her dad started up the truck and backed out.

“What happened Soph?” he asked at last. “I got a message from someone named Robert Brown claiming you were at his house with some school friends and had suddenly run off into the woods. Next message was the sheriff saying you had been missing for hours. That all true?”

Sophia was pressed roughly into her door as her dad took a left turn sharply and she realized she wasn’t buckled in. Scrambling, she quickly clicked her belt into place as her dad sped down Forest Road.

"I guess so," she confirmed reluctantly, trying to sink into her seat.

"Why'd you run away?" he asked.

"I... I don't know," she replied.

Yeah, that'll satisfy him. Her heart thumped in her chest as she stared at her hands.

"You... don't know?" Her dad repeated in disbelief. "Sweetheart, you know you can tell me anything."

Certainly not this.

"I don't know what happened," she repeated with more certainty but still not meeting his eyes. "I just don't."

They pulled roughly into their driveway, the front left wheel of the truck jumping the curb.

"Now you know I value your privacy and let you live your own life," her dad said. "But this is serious. You've been actin' real strange the last couple a weeks and now you go missing and when you turn up, your eyes are different."

At least he hasn't noticed my teeth yet. Sophia pushed against her canines with her tongue.

"You doin' drugs or alcohol?" he asked pointedly as he pulled into the garage.

Sophia snapped her head up in shock and protested, "No!"

Damn it, the last thing I need is him thinking I'm on drugs.

"I couldn't blame you with everything that's happened, but it's not the answer," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "If it's drugs..."

Not now, please... She begged Wolfgang as she caught herself before she could try to gnaw off her shoulder strap. *I need to get to my room before I do something stupid.*

"I'm not doing drugs!" Sophia insisted, throwing off her seatbelt and opening the truck door. "I need to be alone."

"You sick then?" her Dad asked as she climbed out. "Sophia!"

She hurried over to the side door leading into the kitchen and opened it. The smell of vomit and urine was still present in the house but much fainter. Far more interesting was the smell of the juice on the chicken packaging coming from the trash. Her stomach growled and her mouth watered as she stepped into the kitchen. Now that she was home, she realized just how hungry she was.

No! She forced herself to ignore the tantalizing scent coming from the garbage and walk through the kitchen. *Oh crap.* Her body went rigid as she saw the floor of the dining room. *I forgot to clean the kitchen floor!*

The door shut behind her and her dad's footsteps echoed through the kitchen.

“Sophia,” he said, his tone angrier and more assertive than before. “If you need some time to yourself before you talk to me, fine. But you can’t just ignore me.” His footsteps stopped behind her. “The hell? Are those... paw prints?”

Sophia’s mind went blank and she felt faint.

“How’d a dog get in here?” Her dad asked in confusion before adding, “Weird-looking prints.”

Dog! Her mind seized desperately on the word.

“Oh yeah!” she exclaimed desperately. “The front door was locked this morning, so I had to use the backdoor.” She avoided her dad’s eyes as the words tumbled out of her mouth. “I forgot to close the door and some dog wandered in. It ran off when it saw me.”

“Any idea which dog?” her father asked tensely. “We don’t need no dog thinking it can come in our house.”

“No,” Sophia replied. “I didn’t get a good look.”

Her dad sighed, “Well, let me know if it comes by again.” He paused and then added, “Strange the prints only come into the house.”

Oh for...

“Huh, yeah, strange,” Sophia echoed, making for the hallway. “I’ll clean it up later.”

“Sophia...” Her dad called after her, but Sophia pretended not to hear.

Opening her bedroom door, she stepped through and slammed it shut. The familiar scents of her room enveloped her like a comforting blanket.

Finally, she sank to her knees, exhaustion overtaking her. *Alone at last.*

With some effort, she managed to pull her boots off. She nearly curled up and closed her eyes where she was, but a faint whiff of jerky reminded her how hungry she was.

The bag in my backpack is empty, but I think I still have a bag left under the bed.

Rising to all fours, she padded over to the side of her bed. Bowing forward, she grabbed a plastic grocery bag with her front teeth and pulled it out from under the bed. As she remembered, there was one sealed package of beef jerky left. She tried to wag her tail but only managed to shake her butt a little. Shifting her bite to the back of the grocery bag, she shook it. The bag of jerky slipped part way out of the bag and Sophia let everything drop.

Damn it, no muzzle. With her flat human face, she couldn’t find an angle to get a hold of the bag with her mouth. *Fine, I’ll use my paw, er, hand. It just feels... wrong.*

With an irritated grunt, she reached her hand into the grocery bag and pulled the bag of jerky all the way out. Finally seeing a place to grab it, she hooked the back of the bag with her

canines and lifted her head. Shifting to her knees, she rose up far enough to place her arms on the bed and then pushed herself into it with her legs.

Boosting herself onto her bed, she moved towards her pillow. Unclenching her teeth, she let her prize drop to the bed. The plastic had four clear indents where her teeth had tightly gripped it.

She examined the bag, trying to figure out how to get it open before shrugging. *Now to see what these teeth can do.*

Pinning the bag with her right hand, she opened her mouth wide and positioned it over the base. Once it was in the right spot, she chomped down as hard as she could.

This is incredibly satisfying. She could feel the plastic deforming under the assault of her teeth.

Moving her left hand onto the bag from the other side of her head, she pulled upwards on the bag. She could actually feel the pressure exerted on her gums by the four new peaks as they fought with the thick plastic. Pulling back, there was a quiet “pop” as her canines finally broke through the material. Letting go, she let the bag drop.

Awesome! A giddy feeling ran through Sophia as she looked down at her handiwork.

Where she had bitten, the plastic was stretched and two deformations were clearly visible. Her top left canine had managed to fully puncture the plastic and the scent of jerky intensified considerably. In stark contrast, there was no sign her human teeth had accomplished anything.

Imagine what I could do with a real set of wolf teeth! Again, she tried to wag her sorely missed tail.

She bent down and grabbed a section near the puncture. Soon, her teeth had added another set of holes to the plastic. Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she started gnawing on the end of the package. The already weakened plastic started to shred and tear under the assault. At last, she worked free a flap of plastic and peeled it back, exposing the delectable dried strips of meat.

Lowering her head, she eagerly bit into a strip, her new teeth making it much easier to tear chunks off of it. Without caring about propriety or cleanliness, she wolfed it down and started on another. And then another...

Where's Shadow? A painful sense of absence gnawed at Sophia as she woke with a start. *What's wrong with my body?*

Disoriented, she raised her head from her arms and looked around. The rest of her body was curled up in a fetal position on top of her bed. The bag of jerky was lying on the bed next to her, its bottom shredded. A partially chewed bit of dried meat lay on the bed where her head had been and a small number of uneaten strips were strewn around in and around the bag.

Right, I fell asleep on my bed. She groggily glanced at the clock and yawned loudly. *Almost 2:00. Wow, I was tired.* Her mouth was parched and still had the taste of dried beef in it. *Water.*

Uncurling, she flipped onto her knees and stretched her arms forward, scattering some of the leftover jerky. Moving to the edge of the bed, she got ready to jump to the ground. As she was about to propel herself off, she hesitated.

I'm human right now. She swung her legs around and slid off the bed, ignoring the uneasy feeling that niggled at her. *If I keep giving in to Wolfgirl when it doesn't matter, it will be a lot harder to control her when it does.*

Her water bottle was still in her backpack from two days prior and she grabbed it before heading to her door. On the other side, she could hear the sounds of a college football game coming from the living room. Cautiously, she opened her door. Immediately, the smell of lemon-scented disinfectant hit her and she retched. Covering her nose, she looked towards where she had vomited earlier. The dried sickly colored streaks that had been there earlier were gone and the floor was much shinier in that spot than it had been in a long time.

I wish he had just left it, she hurried towards the bathroom. *How can he stand this? I told him I would take care of it.*

Closing the bathroom door and turning on the light, she took a relieved breath. Stepping up to the sink, she emptied the water that was still in the bottle before turning on the faucet and starting to fill it. Too thirsty to wait, she yanked it from underneath the stream of water and brought it up to her mouth. She tilted it and started lapping frantically at the water.

Why can't I get any? She tilted it further and squeaked in surprise as cold water splashed onto her chin. *Wolfgirl! My tongue isn't big enough!*

Annoyed, she pursed her lips and greedily sucked down the bottle's contents. After emptying it, she stuck it back under the faucet and filled it to the top. Bracing herself, she took a breath and held it before scurrying for the relative safety of her bedroom. She closed her door and then leaned back against it before sliding down to sit on the floor. With her most pressing physical need dealt with, a sense of melancholy descended on her as she could no longer ignore the steadily growing emotional void.

I can't even tolerate my own home. She took another drink from her container before setting it down and putting her arms on her legs with a loud sigh. *Even my room doesn't feel like mine anymore.*

She caught herself sniffing for any hint of the territory Shadow had claimed. Of course, all that was to be found were the residuals of artificial and dead materials, which even the presence of her own scent could not fully mask. To her increasingly lupine perception and understanding of the world, it was alien and oppressive.

But it would be tolerable if I was with my pack, with Shadow. Damn it, is there really any doubt what I'll do?

Yet, next to the gaping hole in her heart that represented Shadow and the wilderness was another, smaller hole. When she imagined agreeing to be his lifemate as she so desperately desired, that hole seemed to ache.

What is it? What holds me back? Sophia pressed her head against the door. *Is it that there are people that would miss me? A twinge of guilt shot through her. People that my disappearance would hurt?*

A hunger pang radiated from her stomach as she sat there. She tried to turn her thoughts to what was available in the kitchen, but initial thoughts of cooked cuts of meat quickly morphed into the memory of sinking her teeth into the rabbit as it tried to run. Or became thoughts of how tasty cervine innards had been.

Her mouth watered and she shook her head, trying to shake off the intrusive thoughts. *Do I even have a choice? I've already changed so much...*

Pushing herself up, she carried her water over to her nightstand and set it down. Turning her head, she gazed disapprovingly at her bed.

It looks like an animal ate in here, she grimaced at the torn bag and scattered jerky as her face warmed in embarrassment. *Heh, I guess one did. Wolfgirl just sort of took over earlier.*

Grabbing the bag, she moved it to the nightstand and placed what was left of the jerky on it. With the bed cleared, she let herself fall onto it. Immediately, a scent thrown into the air by her movement drew her attention and she sniffed the air in her room curiously. The smell of the jerky was still present of course but that wasn't what had caught her interest. Lowering her nose to the bed, she sniffed her pillow.

Weird. That's definitely me, but it's really off. Sophia touched the tip of her nose to the pillow and furrowed her brow. *I don't think it's a sick smell.*

Drawing back from the pillow, she stared down at it contemplatively.

That would have been from the night before last come to think of it. I wonder... She took off her jacket to check it. Not enough of me on it to tell.

Reaching down, she pulled off her sweatshirt, leaving just the exercise bra she had managed to find in her scarce clean laundry. Despite the relative chill in the room, it felt freeing to have it off. She flipped it partially inside out and sniffed it.

Interesting. My scent from yesterday is less... wolfish... I think. She inhaled through her nose again and made a face. *My scent definitely changed but still seems really off. More wolfish but still mostly human.* She sighed and looked down at her furless arms and fully human hands. *My whole body feels wrong.*

Feeling restless, she hopped off the other side of the bed and stood in front of the mirror. Her now golden eyes stared back at her, demanding the attention of anyone who looked at her. Pulling her mouth into an exaggerated smile, she exposed her teeth. The four tapered peaks that her canines had become belied how far from human she had drifted.

I don't belong here. She reached her hand up to touch one of the fangs. *Why do I hesitate? What do I really want?*

She pushed gently against the end of a canine. The very tip of it was rounded but quite capable of penetrating the skin of her finger if she snapped her mouth shut. Moving her finger, she tried to wiggle it. However, the tooth was as solidly embedded in her gum as any other.

No one said anything about them this morning, she experimentally closed her jaw several times, watching as the canines slid past each other. *Maybe they're not too noticeable? Maybe I could be with Shadow and live here.*

Playfully, she got onto all fours and gave as fearsome a snarl as she could.

Although... She grinned, sitting back on her knees. *Having them noticed does have its advantages.*

Her stomach growled insistently again and the taste of the rabbit's liver seemed to materialize in her mouth. At the same time, the ache from the Shadow size hole edged towards becoming intolerable.

I planned on spending the day with Shadow anyway; I'll just get a quick snack and go find him. She tugged the sweatshirt back on, gave herself one final look in the mirror and pushed herself back onto her feet. *Maybe there's still some of that deer left.*