

Chapter 45

The sound of knocking at her door jolted Sophia, messing up the curved line she was in the middle of drawing.

“What?” Sophia snapped in irritation.

“The Browns dropped off your cell phone,” her dad told her through the door.

Huh, I didn't even hear them come by.

“Oh, okay,” she replied.

Setting down her sketchpad, she rolled off her bed and stepped onto the floor.

Gah, what's with these clothes? She squirmed futilely against the sensation of her clothes as she ambled over to her door. *I just can't get comfortable in them.*

Grasping the doorknob, she turned it and cracked the door. A wave of cigarette smoke and alcohol-laden air drifted through the opening. If that wasn't enough, there was a vaguely human undercurrent to it all that made her skin crawl. Even the tantalizing smell of cooked pork couldn't quite overcome the repellant miasma. Her dad, standing outside her room, especially reeked of alcohol and had more than a little cigarette smoke on his clothes.

Great, now my room stinks. She barely resisted the urge to immediately shut the door.

“You going to come eat ever?” her dad asked, handing her the phone through the crack. “Meats been done for almost two hours now.”

“What's the point?” Sophia asked sullenly and closed the door.

Two hours? Wow, I had no idea.

She sulked back to her bed and sat down. Looking towards her window, she was surprised to see the sky had taken on the colors of twilight.

Looking down at her phone pensively, she flipped it open, only to discover the battery was dead. Scooting along the side of her bed, she plugged it into the charger on her nightstand and left it there. She glanced over at her laptop to confirm it had gone into standby before swinging her legs up onto her bed. Leaning back against her headboard, she reached over to pick up her sketchpad.

Wow, I don't even remember doing any of this, she stared down at the sketch in shock. *It's beautiful.*

The drawing was one of the best she'd ever made with even the shading done with exacting detail. She had drawn a close-up of two wolves in an open, snow-covered field. The sun rose above a distant mountain peak. For the wolves, the smaller of the two was leaning against the other, with its tail raised up high happily. The fur pattern on the larger wolf's head

and muzzle was Shadow's almost to the last fur follicle. Turning her scrutiny to the smaller wolf, Sophia noticed its hindquarters were oddly proportioned for a wolf. Its hindlegs were slightly further apart compared to its forelegs and its pelvis looked wider than it should have been.

Why did I draw a wolf with hips? She traced her finger over the smaller wolf in bafflement. *I guess it's me... But why hips?*

Despite the oddity, the picture invoked a deep sense of melancholy in her. Shadow's absence made her feel so incomplete and vulnerable. She closed her eyes and recalled the feeling of his strong muscles underneath his thick fur even while he tenderly nuzzled her with his muzzle.

Her eyes flew open as she started to tip over, preventing herself from falling off the bed just in time. *Damn it, I need him. He asked me to be with him forever and now I can't be with him at all.*

A buzzing sound brought her attention over to her nightstand. There, her phone had finally charged enough to turn on. Its small screen lit up and a short musical jingle played as it went through its startup sequence. After finishing, its screen went dark briefly before lighting up again and buzzing several times.

I guess it's not surprising people tried to call me. She reached out for it and hesitated, anxiety flaring. *Better get it over with.*

Picking it up, she brought it over to her nose and sniffed at it. Aside from the unsurprising smell of plastic, there were some faint, human smells on it, none of which were hers. However, she couldn't tell more than that. Flipping it open, she peered at the screen. Surprisingly, there was only one voicemail. The sole recording was a frantic-sounding message from her dad imploring her to call him when she got it.

Well, no need now, she sighed loudly and then deleted it. *Why didn't anyone else try to call me?*

There was also a lone text message, but she didn't check it immediately. Instead, she pulled up her phone history. There was a single call from Cameron's cell number from soon after she had fled his house. Several unanswered outbound calls had been placed to her dad.

Ah, they must have found my phone right away. The recognition lightened her mood slightly. *That makes sense; I wonder when I dropped it?*

She moved the selector to the option for text messages and hesitated. A strange sense of trepidation crept through her as her finger hovered over the selection key.

I'm starving, I should get something to eat. With a snap of her wrist, she shut her phone. *I'll check the message later.*

Admittedly, she was more than a little hungry and the lack of prey smells in her room kindled a deep restlessness in her.

Well, there's always dad's friends... She giggled and set her phone down on her bed. *They'd probably taste disgusting anyway. Pork'll have to do.*

She was still laughing quietly when she left her room.

In the dining room, a thin haze of cigarette smoke hovered around the lights. Bowls and plates of various foods were strewn haphazardly across the table. A half-depleted tray of taco dip lay in the center next to a large bowl of tortilla chips. Another bowl with what looked to be intensely picante-smelling salsa lay next to it. Also on the table were a bowl of black-eyed peas, a tray of sausage, crackers and cheese, fruit and a big plate of buffalo wings. On the counter, various bottles of liquor stood alongside the crockpot.

That's a lot of food. Her mood perked up as she took in the array of food. *Oooh, the pork smells so good and even the sauerkraut isn't half bad; being stuck here isn't all bad.*

Grabbing a paper plate, she headed over to the crockpot and removed the lid. The sweet aroma of cooked pork met her and she eagerly began to pile cuts of meat onto her plate.

"Young lady likes her meat," a masculine voice boomed from behind her. "Be sure to leave some for the rest of us!" The man laughed.

She looked behind her and saw Ron unsteadily walking over to the table carrying a plate and empty glass with a grin. His eyes were unfocused and he reeked of cigarettes and beer. It was enough to make her want to gag. Yet, there was something else about his smell that disturbed her more than that disgusting combination. Something she couldn't quite put her finger on. *Wolfgirl* seemed to come alive in her mind, fully alert.

Great, this creep. Sophia scowled and watched him warily.

"Anyone ever tell you yer eyes are gorgeous?" he asked her, his own eyes widening a bit when they met hers. "Be even prettier with a smile to go with them."

Keep talking to me like that and I'll show you a smile alright. She parted her lips fractionally, slightly exposing her teeth.

She pointedly ignored him, even while watching him out of the corner of her eye as she stepped over to the table and started putting chicken wings, cheese and sausage onto her plate. He slowly rounded the table with his own plate, randomly putting food on it. Sophia clenched hers and started inching away as he drew closer.

"Got a boyfriend?" He asked with a smirk, grabbing the salsa spoon with an unsteady hand.

Yes and you wouldn't want him angry.

"No..." she answered quietly, avoiding eye contact while taking a small step towards the hallway.

"I'd think the boys would be fightin over a pretty girl like you..." he said and chuckled.

Ron continued to shuffle around the table until he was on the same side as her. Sophia pretended not to notice, but every muscle in her body tensed up. Were she still fully human, she might not have immediately noticed him leaning fractionally towards her and starting to lift his right arm until it was too late.

NO!

Before he could get his hand even halfway to her, Sophia stepped back while pivoting to face him, bared her teeth and tried to growl. Her eyes bored into his and the hair on her arms and legs stood on end.

"Woah!" Ron exclaimed in surprise, shifting his weight back to his other foot.

Sophia just glared at him, keeping her small fangs fully exposed.

"Just tryin' to be friendly!" Ron protested angrily, his face reddening. "Why are ya snarlin' at me like a dog? No wonder ya don't have a boyfriend."

She bristled and struggled to keep Wolfgirl from taking control and sinking her teeth into him. *I can't bite him no matter how good it would feel.*

Careful not to take her eyes off of him, she slowly moved around the table, still holding her plate. When she had it between him and her, she spun and hastily disappeared into the hallway. Once she was in her room, she shut her door and stood shaking angrily.

Human males are so gross! Fuming, she stalked over to her bed and set her plate on her end table. Shadow would never act like that!

Her adrenaline started to wear off and she continued to shake again, this time from hunger. Sitting on the side of her bed, she grabbed a large handful of pork and took a big bite, not caring about the rivulet of grease that ran down her chin. Chewing with her mouth so full was a bit more challenging with her canines taking up more space, but she was too hungry to care.

I guess I haven't eaten much today, she swallowed and reached for her plate. No Wolfgirl, I'm not going to stick my face in my plate. But the desire just grew stronger. Fine, I'm in my room, who's to care?

Instead of grabbing another handful of pork, she instead picked up her plate and slid to the floor. Once she had set it down, she moved onto her stomach. Using her hands to pin the food, she started eating directly off her plate.

Messy, but it feels right. She finished off the stack of pork. *I'm tired of humans and sick of pretending to be one.*

A knock sounded on her door and she paused in her attack on the buffalo wings.

"What?" she bit out, annoyed. "I'm eating!"

"Sophia, come here," her dad commanded from the door.

What now? Annoyed, she pushed herself up and went to the door.

"Ron told me you were very rude when he talked to you," her dad said sternly after she opened it. "And I told you to take those fake teeth out."

"Tell that creep to stay away from me!" Sophia snapped at him acidly. "And leave me alone!"

Before he could respond, she slammed the door.

"Sophia!" her dad yelled and banged on the door once.

What the hell? Sophia recoiled in surprise and fear. *He's never done that.*

She didn't even try to stop herself when she got to all fours and pulled her mouth into a snarl. Even after she heard him stomping away, muttering angrily, she remained in the stance for a full minute.

I don't care if he finds out what I am, Sophia's heart rate finally settled and she relaxed her mouth. *It's not like I'm sticking around for long.*

She stayed on all fours while she padded back over to her plate and lay back down on her stomach with a huff. Leaning down, she took her frustrations out on a chicken wing. A loud snap filled the room as her teeth bit down hard on the whole wing.

Gah, that sauce is bitter. She let the wing drop and made a face as her tongue burned. *Not as hot as I expected.* A thought niggled at her. *There was a reason you shouldn't feed dogs chicken bones, what was it?*

Tentatively, she sniffed at one of the barbecue-basted wings. This one had a sweet aroma and smelled far less bitter. Leaning in, she gave it a lick. The sauce was tangy, but still had a slight bitterness to it she didn't remember.

Regardless, I should probably avoid eating the bones just in case. Shrugging, she boosted herself up on her arms and grabbed the wing. *Guess I'll have to be human for chicken wings.*

She quickly cleaned off the wing and picked up the spicy wing. Unwrapping the skin, she exposed the meat underneath and cleaned that off too. There was still a bitter taste and her tongue still burned a bit, but it was far more tolerable. She picked that one clean and moved on to another.

That was decent, she sighed, licking her fingers and looking down at the heap of bones contentedly. *It would have been even better plain*. She yawned loudly as her eyelids suddenly felt heavy. *Damn, where did this come from?*

Even getting off the floor and into her bed felt beyond her. Fatigue overwhelmed her as she lay her head down on her arm.

Sophia awoke to a loud banging noise. Annoyed, she rose to all fours and looked around her room. Quickly, she noticed her door was open and she could smell...

Is that chicken? She lifted her long snout and sniffed curiously. *Maybe pork too?*

Padding towards her door, she nudged it open and stepped out into the forest. It was oddly warm for winter and the snow was melting all around her. Sunlight poured through the trees and illuminated a chicken several yards in front of her. It clucked softly as it pecked at the ground.

Damn it, I really need a bathroom, pain radiated from her abdomen and she looked around frantically for a toilet. *I'm a wolf; I'll just go here quickly and then hunt*.

She raised her tail, crouched and quickly relieved herself before she resumed stalking the deer ahead of her. The young buck seemed oblivious as she approached. Her bowels churned uncomfortably and she again relieved herself where she was standing, but it seemed to make no difference.

I'll get the fox and then go. The fox she was hunting still didn't seem to notice her even as she got closer and closer.

Her anger flared at the smell and sight of the intruder. *This is my territory!*

Baring her teeth, she crouched down on all fours. Carefully, deliberately, she put one paw out and then another, her claws digging into the firm ground. With each step, she drew closer... and closer... Finally, she was less than ten feet from the fox, who still didn't notice her. Springing forward, she charged the hapless fox.

This is the last time you'll make that mistake!

Opening her long muzzle, she jumped and clamped her sharp teeth into the fox's throat...

What? No!!!

Pure horror flooded into her as she looked down at the bloody hole in her father's neck. His eyes were blank and his body was unmoving. She could taste his blood in her mouth and it dripped from her jaws. Other mangled bodies lay around her living room and she screamed...

Sophia awoke with a start, icy terror gripping her. Her heart raced and she could feel sweat on her face, despite the chilly air in her room. Propping herself up on her hands, she frantically looked around, terrified of what she'd find.

It was her room, the door was closed and the light was still on - just as she had left it.

A nightmare... Fear still gripped her even as the details of the dream started to fade.

Pain radiated from her stomach and her arms collapsed beneath her. Moaning, she clenched her abdomen as her bowels felt like they were going to burst.

I can't hold it! She recoiled at the thought and climbed to her feet. *Ick, not in my den!*

Staggering through her door, she clenched her butt as she shuffled swiftly for the bathroom. Reaching it, she shut the door and dove for the toilet, barely pulling down her pants and underwear in time as she sat down.

Ten minutes later, she finally felt emptied out enough to get off the toilet. She flushed, not even bothering to explore its scent as had become her custom.

Oooh, I don't remember spicy food affecting me like this. A slight headache had started in the time she had been in the bathroom and her stomach still seemed to gurgle. *I'm in no shape to visit Shadow tonight. I'll just get ready for bed and make it up to him later.*

She grabbed her toothbrush and put a bead of toothpaste on it. Bringing it up to her mouth, she started with the tops of her molars as she always did. At least she tried.

That's different. Instead of sliding into her mouth, the toothbrush bounced off her upper canine. *This'll take some getting used to.*

Opening her mouth wider, she angled the toothbrush to get around her canines. It took a little practice, but she found a good angle to thoroughly brush her rear teeth. The canines themselves made it so she couldn't simply brush them like she was used to. Instead, she found she had to brush the tips individually.

Just another change. She rinsed off her toothbrush and examined her teeth in the mirror, feeling oddly sentimental about the minor alteration to her routine. *Not even close to the biggest one.*

Feeling slightly parched, she left the water running and bent down to lap at the stream. It took a bit, but she was able to bring in enough to temporarily sate her thirst. She turned off the water and took one last look at her face.

I should be freaked out by my eyes and teeth changing. Her tired golden eyes stared back at her. *But it feels more like 'me' than the rest of me.*

Turning, she left the bathroom. In the hallway, she could hear her dad talking and laughing with his friends. It made her separation from Shadow rankle all the more.

He's partying while taking away the only one that truly understands me. Tears formed in her eyes as she opened and shut her door. *The only one I get to be myself with.*

Exhaustion descended on her and she barely remembered to shut off the lights before collapsing back in bed.

The massive mountain lion stared at her and growled, its glowing eyes narrowing. It stood over the elk she and Shadow had expended so much energy to bring down. Sophia knew she should cede the kill to the giant cat and seek an easier meal. Yet, that might not come in this terrible winter. It had been weeks since their last kill.

"Many Scents, it's not worth it," Shadow rumbled to her solemnly. "Let him have it."

"That's for our pups!" Sophia protested desperately. "They can't wait much longer!"

The thought of her starving pups was too much for her and she charged the hulking beast.

Sophia opened her jaws wide as she jumped - just for the lion to casually swat her away. Pain shot through her back as she flew into a tree trunk and dropped to the ground. Dazed, she looked up helplessly at the beast as it turned towards her, clearly aiming to finish her off.

"Many Scents, no!" Shadow yelped desperately and lunged at the cat.

He landed on the giant's back and bit down hard. The lion roared with rage before almost casually throwing Shadow to the ground. It turned towards her stricken mate as Sophia watched in helpless horror.

In agonizingly slow motion, she watched it open its gaping maw and plunge towards Shadow.

"Noooo!" she yelped out as the lion's enormous teeth sank deep into her mate's neck...

"No!" Sophia yelled as she sat up in bed, her eyes soaked with tears.

It wasn't real... Just another dream... She looked frantically around the room, not really believing.

Then, her guts shifted and she jumped out of her bed and scrambled for the bathroom.

I'm going to get Shadow killed... Sophia hugged her knees on her bed after getting back from the bathroom.

Her heart still thumped rapidly as her eyes darted around her dark room, frantically searching for the enormous mountain lion her mind was convinced was present. The faint glow everything seemed to have in the dark had become a source of comfort for her in the past week. Now, though, it was a stark reminder she was caught between two worlds and didn't comfortably belong in either.

I nearly got us both killed last night. Another tear slid down her cheek as she recalled the scent of the cougar's breath growing ever stronger as its jaws readied to end her life. *Shadow saved me, but it could have turned out very differently.*

She turned to gaze at her drawing on the nightstand. Like the rest of her room, it seemed to glow faintly in her vision and she could make out many of its details.

I love you so much. Her eyes fell on the illustration of Shadow. *But I endanger you. I don't know what to do...*

Reaching towards the picture, she gently brushed his image. As she did so, she nudged her phone, which lit up briefly.

Oh yeah, I had a text message. Desperate for a distraction, she grabbed it and flipped it open. *Probably someone texting to yell at me some more.*

She blinked in surprise as she saw the number it was from. Despite having deleted the corresponding contact two months before, she recognized it immediately. Her hands shaking, she opened and read it.

Hey Sophia, it's Candice. Dad mentioned you were in some trouble. I hope you're doing okay.