

First Steps

“After being here almost a month, only two and a half weeks of which were apparently spent conscious I might add, we have officially discussed lycanthropy until I’m thoroughly sick of hearing the word. I’ve listened to Doctor Loflin until my ears are ready to close. You and I have danced around recent history. Here lately, we’ve done all sorts of wonderful physical workouts. All indoors. And now, today, you’re finally letting me walk outside?” Kasey groused to Dana as the two strolled along the edge of the woods in the big clearing behind the clinic.

“Yep,” the other woman agreed with a shrug. “It was time for you to get out and about again. And you might recall that for over a week of that time, aside from the time you overexcited yourself, you didn’t have the strength to get out of your bed... much less walk. Be that outside or anywhere else. But that was then. How do you feel now? How is Kasey Wells today? Physically anyway?”

“Good,” the short brunette admitted reluctantly. “Very good in fact.”

“That’s perfectly normal for your perfectly abnormal condition,” Dana replied with a friendly smile.

After walking beside the trees for a ways, Kasey sighed. “This is all so very weird. Everything seems so strange to me. I’ve become supersensitive to motion. The last few days in the gym have shown quite clearly that I’m stronger than I should be. Quicker.” Shaking her head, she complained, “But I think the most peculiar of them all is this barrage of weird scents and smells continuously assaulting my nose. When you put it all together...” She took a deep breath and let it and the words out in a rush, “It’s... it’s like I don’t remember quite how to be me anymore.”

“I know exactly how you feel and that’s a good way of putting it,” the blonde woman replied seriously. “And it is why we’re here. Far out in the back woods of nowhere. To give you time to re-learn what it means for you to be Kasey Wells. To show you all the strange instincts and urges, strengths and weaknesses that come with being a werewolf. And to teach you to not only come to grips with them but to be completely comfortable and at peace with them.”

“Is that even possible? I mean lycanthropy is not exactly a ‘peaceful’ disease from everything you guys have told me. Same for common literature... much of which is interestingly accurate.”

“Yes, it is possible. But the literary world pretty much has presented that aspect of our existence with a more-than-fair accuracy. Peace is not an easy place to reach for lycanthropes.”

“I’ll just bet it’s not,” Kasey muttered. Just then she smelled something and her head popped up. Her gaze immediately began searching the woods. “What’s that?”

“*That* smells like rabbit to me,” Dana replied with a grin. “They release a dozen into the woods every morning there are new people here.”

“Why?”

“To give you and the other new people something to hunt,” the experienced lycanthrope replied with a decidedly wolfish grin.

“Part of the package?”

“Yes indeed. Smells good, doesn’t it?”

After a moment, Kasey admitted, “Yeah. It does.”

“Little frightening how that seems to work though, huh?”

“Yeah. Truth be told, more than a little.”

“All part of the new and improved Kasey Wells. With your new and improved taste buds, you are now hip to a number of new delicacies. I’ll try to show you the best of them while you’re here.”

“What do we do now?” Kasey asked a bit tentatively.

“Why chase after it, of course!”

“But don’t we need to....” the shorter woman made a vague hand motion which Dana correctly interpreted.

With a laugh the blonde woman replied, “We don’t need to change just to catch a rabbit or two. Of course it does make catching them easier but we don’t have to. If we can hold off your first change for a couple more days, things will be better for you.”

Dana continued explaining, “You’ve been infected for slightly over a month now. Your body has had almost the maximum allowable time to accept the disease. As a result, your body has changed. You are stronger and faster than a normal person now. Your metabolism is burning double time. As you doubtlessly noticed while going through two trays of rather bland hospital food, we tend to eat a lot and frequently. Fortunately, your time in the hospital wing is over. You’ll be staying in a regular room tonight in the same wing I sleep in. Food’s a lot better because we cook it ourselves. You’ll end up taking a shift in the kitchen too. We all do our part. But that’s neither here nor now. Despite you having a disease that drives your metabolism so hard, you have the potential to live longer than uninfected humans. You probably won’t, but the possibility exists. You’ll never catch another cold or disease so long as you live. Lycanthropy feeds on any harmful virus, bacteria, or other organisms that infect the body. Feeds on them voraciously.

“I’m sure you’ve read about the whole rapid healing thing and seen it in movies. And I know we’ve discussed the whole healing issue with Doctor Loflin. But out here. Out here you’ll see that its not writing on page or words spoken in a clinical environment. Out here it is thankfully real. There are a lot of variations in just how fast ‘rapid’ is for different werewolves. Your healing speed appears to be on the upper end of the scale. I hit you hard enough a couple of weeks ago that the entire left side of your jaw turned black and blue. And the next day your complexion was just as clear as can be. That’s a good sign. Not the greatest of indicators mind you, but I’m occasionally an optimist.”

“Later,” the blonde woman continued, “you’ll shapechange as well. At first you’ll turn into a wolf. Time will pass and as your control grows, you’ll eventually be able to grow claws and such in your human form. And after that you’ll gain the much fabled ability to take on the combined form. Half human, half wolf, entirely scary.”

Kasey stood blinking at her a moment before shaking her head. “I’m not sure which is scarier. The fact that this is starting to seem real or the fact that it doesn’t sound nearly as crazy as it should.”

“They’re equally scary. And we’ll talk about them both. But there is more to it. An entire world’s worth of *more*.” Dana continued, “As we’ve explained, silver will cause you very real problems. The silver allergy from common literature is real. What’s not commonly known is that gold, copper, and platinum also cause problems for us. Our scientists think that the extreme conductivity of these metals is the main problem. Their theory is that the lycanthropy itself is at least to some extent electrically based and these highly conductive metals cause problems with the natural operation of the post-disease body.”

“Our scientists?” Kasey asked with a slightly bewildered frown.

“We come from all walks of life. And yes, we have our own doctors and scientists. Doctor Loflin is only one of many. As a whole, they’ve developed a number of drugs and treatments that help with day-to-day living. More on that later though. That’s indoor stuff. For now, let’s see if we can’t catch ourselves a rabbit.” And with that she began walking into the woods.

Shaking her head, the brunette followed after her.

A short way into the woods, Dana stepped aside and with a motion of her arm indicated that Kasey should take over the lead. Preoccupied with the fresh smell of rabbit, she passed Dana by with hardly a second look.

“Not much undergrowth in these woods,” the lanky blonde noted, following along behind her. “Might want to take our shoes and socks off. We’d get better traction that way. And we’ll need it for chasing down rabbits. Little critters change directions like you wouldn’t believe.” With growing enthusiasm Kasey nodded and both women stopped and quickly removed their footwear. Eagerly, they resumed their search. “Watch your footing so you don’t make so much noise that the whole world hears where we are. So far you’ve stepped on three sticks, kicked a vine that moved an entire tree branch, and tumbled two piles of rocks. Half your mind on where you’re stepping, half your mind on your prey. You’ll get better with practice. And as you do, you’ll watch your footing automatically. Then you can devote more of your thinking to heading off your prey and watching for likely escape routes it will try to follow.”

“Mmm hmm,” Kasey muttered absently.

“Nice focus,” Dana murmured with a smile the other woman failed to see.

A moment later the rabbit sprang from cover and both women dashed after it. The sprint was short with a lot of the predicted direction changes as the rabbit made its desperate bid for freedom. A bid cut short when Kasey snatched it up and broke its neck.

“Oh bravo! And on your first try.” A knowing, slightly grim smile came over Dana’s face as she said, “That’s a fine looking rabbit. Let me see?”

Kasey, who’d been staring hungrily at the rabbit, whipped it away to the other side of her body. She then looked surprised. And upon seeing the patient, understanding look on the other woman’s face, embarrassed. “Yes Kasey, that’s one of the things that comes along with the goodies. You also get a wolf’s sense of what’s mine is mine. Just another instinct to be worked with and worked around. Later, that will give way to the wolf’s sense of pack hierarchy. Now, may I?” she again asked, holding out her hand.

Though still embarrassed, Kasey was still surprised at how reluctant she was to give up the rabbit. With an exasperated growl for her own peculiar behavior, she handed the rabbit over to her companion.

“And that,” Dana explained with a genuine smile, “is how we operate in the human world. We know and understand the wolf within, and we act like a human is supposed to act despite the new instincts. It’s not as easy as it sounds sometimes and at other times it’s the most natural thing. Others will tell you that there’s now a human Kasey and a lupine Kasey. Civilized and uncivilized. One sophisticated and the other primal. Personally, I think that’s a load of crap.

“No. I think there’s only one you and you now have two sets of instincts. One from an incredibly advanced primate and the other from a supernatural lupine. There are stark differences between the two. But there are also similarities. Both have the urge to run away when fear overtakes us. Both have the urge to kill and to fight under the right circumstances. Wolves are not evil creatures. They hunt to live. To feed themselves, their pack, and their

young. When most people think of werewolves, they think of evil, bloodthirsty monsters. The wolf's instinct is indeed to seek blood when hungry. But wolves do not kill for fun. No, the evil in werewolves comes from the human side. It's from that side that you have to watch for a monster emerging from you. A monster that has nothing to do with the alternate shapes you'll be taking on soon."

"I don't want to be a monster," Kasey whispered, looking at the dead rabbit in Dana's hand.

"Then don't become one. I didn't want to be a monster either. And despite being able to take on frightening shapes, I think I've succeeded thus far in not becoming one. It's a matter of willpower. I've seen people who looked strong fold under the conflict between sane thought and primal instinct. If left too long unresolved, that conflict leads to madness. And I've seen people I thought would be weak take control of their new condition as though they were reborn. Those people have moved on to positions of prominence within this new world you're now part of. Once you've changed, you'll begin to truly understand what I'm saying."

"It sounds... scary. Soul splitting."

"It can be if you let it. Or it can reveal things you didn't know about yourself. Some frightening in their strengths and in their weaknesses. That's one of the great potentials of becoming a supernatural wolf - you gain its strengths. Hopefully, those strengths will be enough to make up for any weaknesses you might have."

"And what about the wolf's weaknesses?"

"Hopefully your willpower is strong enough to make up for them. You'll soon find out one way or another. Now come on, let's get back to the facility."

"Shouldn't we..." Frowning, Kasey gestured towards the rabbit.

"Eat it?" Dana asked, clearly amused.

"Yeah," the smaller woman replied, looking determined yet perhaps a little green around the edges.

Dana stepped forward and cupped the side of the other woman's face. "Our brave Kasey. Ready to try anything. While your new digestive system would do just fine eating it raw, we all make a conscious decision not to eat 'abnormally' while looking human. Our first and primary law is that we must fit in with humans. Therefore, at all times we behave as humans do when we're in human form. To start abnormal practices is to invite disaster. That's why we do not eat raw meat in human form. We do not sniff other human's derrieres." That sparked a surprised giggle from the smaller woman. "And we don't run around in the woods naked. No sense having people think we're wiccan's or something."

"Hey, I've got friends who are wiccans."

"Great. Don't visit them anymore. Try to talk to as few people as possible who are neither part of the pack nor part of mainstream human society." Dana paused at the look on the other woman's face. "Alright then, let me put it to you this way. Follow these rules until you understand your place in the veiled world. Once you know what you're getting yourself into and can completely control yourself, then think about going off the reservation, so to speak."

"Uh huh," Kasey replied with a frown. After walking most of the way back, she asked, "Veiled world?"

"The hidden world we live in. The world behind the veil. The world humans never see. Not and remain human. It's an interesting place. Filled with werewolves, vampires, trolls, and even some other types of lycanthropes. There's a whole new world waiting for you out there. But first, you have to thoroughly explore and master the new world that is yourself."

“You almost sound like my Karate instructor,” Kasey stated, brow crinkled in thought.

“Was she wise?”

“*He* was a pain in the ass. But he knew his stuff and he was a good teacher.”

“Well, I’m definitely going to be a pain in the ass,” Dana laughed, pulling Kasey close and messing her hair to the shorter woman’s obvious annoyance. “And I know my stuff. Hopefully I’ll be a good teacher. Time will tell.”

A few minutes later they reached the edge of the woods. Dana thrust the rabbit up into the air and called dramatically, “Behold! The mighty rabbit slayers!” This set Kasey to laughing most of the way to the clinic. Just before entering, Dana suddenly stopped in her tracks halting the new werewolf with her.

“What is it?” Kasey asked, following Dana’s gaze to a man she recognized, leaning against the side of the building.

“What are you doing here?” Dana demanded.

“I’m here to help,” he replied with a predatory grin that held an ugly edge to it.

“Why are you here?” she almost literally growled.

“Grady wants her able to fight,” the man told her, new annoyance giving way to anger. “Don’t be giving me any crap about it either. You’ll do as I say and get her ready to fight as soon as she’s able. Faster even. With Emory stepping down, word will get out. New threats to the pack will come. She’s our weakest link.”

“Give her a break, she just woke up!”

“Screw that! We don’t have time for her weakness. Train her and train her fast. If she can’t defend herself, she’s of no use to anyone.” That statement held more than a little threat to Kasey’s ears.

“I can take care of myself,” Kasey declared with a scowl. As a member of the jogging club, she hadn’t really known much more about Ray than his name and that he was single. She was not particularly pleased to note that he was an asshole as well.

“Oh ho!” he laughed, contempt heavy in his voice. “Cinderella wakes up to find she’s a werewolf and all of a sudden she can take care of herself! Isn’t that just great?! Hasn’t even had her first change and already she’s able to take care of herself!”

“Snow White’s the one who did all the sleeping, idiot,” Dana replied with disgust.

“Don’t you backtalk me bitch!” he snarled, walking towards her several steps and stabbing a finger toward her. “You’ll do what I say when I say it! I’m higher in the pack and you’ll do what I command!”

Dana reflexively backed away and turned her head away before suddenly freezing. She then slowly and deliberately turned to once more face the larger man. “I’m her pack liaison here. This is my mission and I’m in charge of it. She’ll be taught to fight. When she’s ready.

“And not a second before.”

“That’s it,” he growled, jerking his jacket off as he stalked towards her. “I’m accepting that as a challenge to my position within the pack.”

“Ray Krieder,” a deep voice called from quite close by. A gasp of surprise that sounded suspiciously like a yip escaped from Ray upon hearing this voice. A voice that came from a very large, dark-skinned man of mixed background. “I remember you Ray,” this new fellow continued. “You were middle of the line. Nothing to set you apart. Always had to prod you to get you to do anything. No drive. I put you down hard a couple of times for bullying. Looks like I might have to do it again.”

“Chandler!” the smaller man gasped. He then seemed to gain some courage and

declared, "I'm here on pack business. This is none of your concern."

"Oh yes!" the big man nodded, turning a serious look upon Dana briefly before returning it to the other man. "I'd forgotten that. You were stupid too."

"What?!" Ray half asked, half demanded.

"Look around you Ray. What do you see?" the larger man asked, his deep voice sounding menacing.

"Trees. The Center. Two bitches from my pack. You and me," the other answered, sounding an odd mix of defiant, confused, and angry.

"Ray," the big man whispered, "You see *my* territory. You see one of *my* new trainees and you see her liaison. Honorary members of *my* pack while they remain here. And you see the Center's packmaster!" In a flash Chandler had stepped forward and knocked the other to the ground with a powerful shove to the chest. Suddenly standing over Ray, he demanded loudly, "Who am I?!"

"P...p...packmaster Chandler!" the smaller werewolf stuttered fearfully.

"Damn straight I am! I allowed you to visit out of respect for your old packmaster. Emory's a good man. A good leader. But don't you *dare* abuse my hospitality. Now here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to let you stay in the Center for a while longer if you like. However, if you give *my* packmembers any grief at all..." And without finishing that sentence he turned and strode away.

Dana caught Kasey's eye and nodded towards the Center. Ray remained where he was, staring after the departing werewolf, and made no move to follow the two women.

Walking through the door and into the clean, air-conditioned corridors, Dana explained, "*That* was Packmaster Chandler... in case you didn't figure that out on your own."

"I rather got that impression," Kasey muttered in response with a raised eyebrow. She'd seen him around the Center before but had never spoken with the big man. As they walked into the kitchen and Dana tossed the rabbit to one of the frowning men who were doing today's cooking, the smaller woman asked, "Is Ray going to be a problem?"

Leading the way back out of the kitchen, Dana frowned for several steps before answering. "If he's smart, he's not going to be a problem here. Chandler will kick his butt all the way around the building and then some. You don't mess with the packmaster. After we leave here... Yeah. He probably is. I think I'll be a little more active in your self-defense training than I'd originally planned on being. Work on my skills as well as yours."

"You think he'll attack you?"

"Not outright. But I think he'll declare before the pack that I've challenged him. You see Kasey," she explained, entering the other woman's new room and sitting down, "In a way, a pack is structured like the military. Everyone has a rank and everyone knows their rank and everyone else's."

"One of the ways to move up in rank is to challenge someone higher. I'm not really interested in moving up, but I'm becoming even less interested in putting up with crap like we saw out there. I think when he calls me out I'm going to actually go ahead and challenge him."

"Can you beat him?" Kasey breathed, her voice barely audible.

"If I can't, he's going to damn well know he's been in a fight," the other woman stated with a growing confidence. The two sat in a comfortable silence for a while

"Umm..." Kasey began, "I take it from what Ray and Chandler were saying that Emory's still alive then?"

"Yes. He's alive but he was badly hurt stopping the damned werebear. With some

reluctance, Grady stepped into the void Emory left when he was no longer able to fulfill his duties as pack leader. Grady's an alpha male, but not a strong, confident one like Emory. Maybe he'll grow into the role. But until he does, Ray's right about one thing. Others will come a callin'. Grady wanting you to be able to fight is so much smoke. The one who's going to have to do the fighting is Grady. And he's not the world's greatest warrior. You're just someone to divert attention away from this ugly fact. At least that's my take on the situation. I've spoken by phone with a few others I'm close with and they agree."

"I don't really know Grady well. To tell you the truth, he didn't really strike me as a being particularly interesting."

"Yeah," Dana agreed sadly. "And that's another sign that he's not a very strong alpha."

After another short silence, Kasey asked, "Is Ray... normal? Is he what I can expect from every werewolf I come across?"

This sparked a surprised laugh from Dana. "Oh goodness no! Most of us are much more... well, normal. Josh, Sticks, and Emory are much more what you're likely to find. However, it seems that every pack has an asshole or two. Just like pretty much every other social group you'll find. Remember, we come from human stock, each and every one of us." She gave Kasey a speculative look before continuing, "I think I'll add a bit more about Ray because I think you'll understand what I'm saying or you will soon." At the dark-haired woman's nod, she continued.

"Ray is clever. Despite his many deficiencies, he *is* clever. What he typically does is a balancing act between our human and our lupine natures. In any given situation, he will always choose the behavior model that gives him power and authority. Not necessarily the one that's most appropriate for the situation at hand. In part, it's how he's moved up to where he is in the pack hierarchy.

"Take a hypothetical breakfast for instance," Dana continued. "Ray tells you to pass the salt. You tell him to get his own damned salt." Kasey laughed at this. Dana smiled as well but her smile turned serious, "Pissed off, Ray growls at you. Now this is obviously not acceptable behavior at a human table. However, Ray knows that the lupine side will react to a threat by a more dominant wolf. End result will be that Kasey Wells has to test the strength of her willpower against the instinctual reactions of the wolf to capitulate to the will of a stronger wolf. These surprise incidents happen quickly and are over just as quickly. In the end they're mostly harmless but they are good tests for your self-control and willpower.

"I will warn you now though. If you manage not to pass the proverbial salt, you will still most likely eventually have to fight for the right not to pass said salt. Which is why tomorrow we are going to begin training our asses off, because from this day forward, I'm going to do my damndest to pass the salt only when and to whom it pleases me to so do."

"All leading up to the challenge for who is ranked where in the pack?" Kasey asked.

"Yes, that's it exactly," Dana agreed with a sad, slightly worried smile.

"Was it like this when Emory was pack leader?"

"To a lesser extent. Emory ran a tight crew and knew when to rein some of the wilder elements in. He kept infighting to a minimum. To him it was second nature and our pack ran like a well oiled machine. Occasionally, he'd go on a vacation or a business trip. When he was away, we all had glimpses of this. Knew deep inside that without Emory around things could get ugly. But back in those days, Grady had Emory's return to fall back on and everyone knew that Emory would be pissed if they didn't toe the line in his absence. Now Grady's having to stand on his own merits...." Dana looked like she wanted to say more but closed her mouth instead.

“But we’re werewolves right?” Kasey asked. “Emory will get better and change all this back to the way it was... won’t he?”

Dana closed her eyes a moment before answering, “I don’t think so. Emory’s old. He’s almost two hundred years old.” Kasey’s gasp drew a sardonic chuckle from the other woman. “I told you we have the potential to live a long time. Even if he heals completely, I don’t think he’ll become pack leader again. Something inside him broke, and I’m not talking about his back, which was badly broken in three places. Something else broke within him and I don’t think he’s going to be able to fix it.” Tears ran down her face and without thinking, Kasey walked over and gave her a hug and a tissue. “Thanks sister. I appreciate it.”

Sister? Kasey wondered, still holding the sniffing blonde. But the word felt right.

Sister.

Pack sister.

Kasey felt a small smile grow despite Dana’s upset. It was nice to find that not all of this new world was soaked in blood or led to earthshaking new revelations.

Some of it felt comfortable and homey too.