

Chapter 36

I'm never going to find Shadow at this rate, Sophia leaned against a pine, her tongue hanging out of her mouth as she panted. Not when I can't make it ten minutes.

She had only been walking a short time, but her muscles were already screaming at her. No matter how hard she tried, she could not seem to straighten her legs. The knee joint just refused to bend that far, forcing her to walk in a crouch. Without the structural support of her skeleton, her leg muscles were forced to make up the deficit. That she was struggling through several inches of recently fallen snow just compounded the strain.

And I'm really starting to hate socks.

Lifting her right foot-paw, she examined the remains of her sock. Like her first transformation, her toe-claws had pierced the thin cotton material when they had grown out of her toes. This time, the much thicker keratin structures had managed to completely shred the ends and the elongation of her feet had converted them to little more than tubes around her ankles. And the way they rubbed her fur whenever she took a step was driving her nuts.

I feel like I'm learning to move my legs all over again. She examined her changed lower limb. And it's exhausting.

Relaxed, her foot dangled forty-five degrees from what was normal for a human foot. Even with the sock and fur covering it, her ankle was noticeably thinner than it had been just a couple of hours before. Contracting the muscles in her leg, she flexed her foot upwards. Without much difficulty, she was able to bring it perpendicular with her leg and a bit beyond, but it clearly was no longer its default position. Relaxing her muscles, she let it drop back to its new resting angle. She let it hang there limply for a few seconds before contracting different muscles to flex her foot downwards. The appendage bent back, coming just shy of being parallel with her leg. She again relaxed her muscles and, like a spring, the appendage returned to its new resting position.

Not human, but not quite wolf, she mused. Couldn't it have picked one?

While her muscles had changed to accommodate her new foot shape, she had not been blessed with the coordination to use them in their new configuration. Unused to the power granted by the increased rearward range of motion of her foot, she had quickly given up on running after nearly launching herself face-first into a tree. Walking had been safer, but not easier and she had stumbled frequently. Even with the support of a tree, her muscles strained to support her weight.

I don't hear the snowmobiles anymore. She perked her ears and sniffed the air. *No humans are nearby. I think it's safe to rest a bit and see what else has changed.* Her sock pulled at her fur uncomfortably as she set her foot down. *And do something about my damn socks.*

Without thinking, she angled her legs away from her body, splayed her hand-paws in front of her body and tried to squat down.

"Yelp!" she exclaimed as she lost her balance and fell backward onto her tail.

My poor tail, she rolled onto her side and tenderly moved her new appendage. *It doesn't appear to be injured at least.*

Reaching behind her, she ran the back of her hand-paw over the tail curiously. The appendage was surprisingly sensitive and she could feel the tail's fur move as she touched it. Playfully, she wagged the tail, slapping her hand-paw. A thrill went through her and she was surprised when she felt it wag even after she stopped consciously trying to.

Heh, I have a mood ring on my butt. The thought made her wag even harder. *I wonder what else has changed. My face feels like it got stretched.*

She rolled onto her stomach, jerking a bit as her shirt was pressed into several sensitive spots there. Pushing herself backward, she managed to get into a kneeling position.

Reaching a paw-hand up, she curiously brought it up to her face. As she had already suspected, the lower part of her face had pushed out into a small muzzle. It was only about an inch longer, but her lips had noticeably lengthened and formed more of a 'U' shape now.

My face is fuzzy, short hairs on her muzzle tickled her as the back of her paw-hand brushed them. *Still have hair; I wish I had a mirror.*

Opening her mouth wide, she ran a claw over her lower teeth. Immediately, she heard the 'click' and pressure in her gum as a curved claw contacted one of her canines. No longer the pitiful human version, her canines now dominated her mouth. The twin ivory peaks of her lower jaw curved outward as they tapered into deadly points. Withdrawing her finger, she closed her jaws, marveling at how the top and bottom canines perfectly slid past each other and came to rest on the outside of their respective gums.

I wish I had these a few days ago, she experimentally opened and shut her mouth several times. *So much better for eating a deer or rabbit.*

Spreading her jaws wide again, she continued her exploration. Her lower incisors felt largely unchanged, although their upper counterparts had taken on a more jagged shape. Further back, her premolars and molars had taken advantage of the extra real estate her muzzle afforded and had grown noticeably larger. Like her incisors, they had taken on a more dagger-like shape suited to tearing through hide and muscle. The feel of her lips caught her

attention as she noted the part that wrapped around her muzzle had a loose, jagged feel to them.

Repositioning her paw-hands, she closed her mouth and ran a rough, padded finger over her nose. She reflexively jerked at the organ's unexpected sensitivity. While she couldn't feel anything through the leathery pad on her finger, her nose's sensitivity to touch now rivaled that of her previously human fingertips. The olfactory organ itself had been pushed out with the rest of the lower part of her face and her leathery nostrils now pointed at an angle instead of straight down. While still present, the triangular protrusion of cartilage that formed the bridge of her nose felt like it had been pulled down her face by the formation of her muzzle.

Aside from the thin layer of fur now covering it, the rest of her face and forehead felt jarringly human. The long, thick hair on her scalp remained unchanged despite the layer of fur she sported on the rest of her head. Her ears had retaken the fully lupine form of the previous full moon and she delighted in rediscovering the excitement of moving them.

Not as much fun as my tail, but still cool. Sophia wagged her tail even as she practiced reshaping her ears. *I do wish they were on top of my head like a proper wolf. Alright, now to figure out why my boobs feel so weird.* Her ears and tail relaxed before standing erect in surprise when she turned her attention to her sweatshirt. *That's odd.*

As she stared down at her sweatshirt, a chill ran through her. Even where slivers of moonlight fell on it, the color wasn't the pinkish light-red she had remembered it being. Instead, it had taken on a sort of muddy-yellow color. She closed her eyes for a few seconds and reopened them, but the color remained the same. Pushing the front of her sweatshirt up, she discovered the same strange change had happened to the cat pattern and all traces of red had simply disappeared.

Maybe it's the lighting? I know wolves and dogs are colorblind, but doesn't that mean they see in black and white? No point in worrying about it now.

Fighting back the desire to tear off the sweatshirt with her teeth, she slipped her hand-paws underneath the hems of the garment.

This is surprisingly difficult without thumbs. Yanking upwards, she managed to wrestle the shirt off and then gasped as she looked down. *Did my breasts... shrink?*

When she had put it on earlier in the day, her well-worn bra had cupped her breasts a little too snugly. Now, the cups felt loose despite how tight the band around her chest was. Reaching behind her, she felt around the thick pelt now covering her back. It took some fumbling, but she finally felt a claw snag on her bra strap and she traced it towards the small metal hooks holding it in place.

Seriously... A growl of frustration reverberated from her muzzle as she struggled to undo the clasp. *Bras were not made with werewolves in mind.*

No matter how hard she tried, she could not seem to find a way to grip the small fasteners and slide them apart. Between her fur, pads, claws and much-reduced thumbs the clasp remained stubbornly in place. Desperate, she tore sharply at the band with a growl. Her claws snagged on the band as she dragged her hand-paws through the fur on her back, snapping the clasps.

Oops, she sheepishly picked the now ruined undergarment out of her fur. *Although I don't know what I would have done with it.* Sophia let the bra tumble down her body and into the snow, as she took a relieved breath. *That feels so much better.* Her breath caught in her throat when she looked down. *Woah.*

Two fatty globes still adorned her chest, but they were noticeably smaller and covered in dense, white fur. Bringing a hand-paw up, she flattened the long fur on her right breast to reveal the nipple and surrounding areola. As soon as it was deprived of its cover of insulating fur, she felt and saw the teat stiffen. She gingerly cupped her breast and moved it to the side. The rest of her chest had the same covering of long, white fur, but she could feel multiple sensitive spots hiding underneath. Letting go of her breast, she pressed the back of her hand against one such spot at the base of her ribs.

She started as her hand-paw disturbed the bump there. *Heh, sensitive. How many tonight? I think I had eight last time.*

With her other hand-paw, she brushed the nipple's left-side counterpart. Dragging the backs of her fingers slowly down her chest, she confirmed another pair of teats on her stomach. She was already aware of the pair on her lower stomach from her jeans chafing against them but finished her exploration by slipping her hand-paws underneath her waistband anyway.

Humans have two because they usually only have one baby at a time. She shifted uneasily as a chill ran down her back. *But I'm not human right now...*

A memory of visiting a farm when she was little flashed through her mind. The dog there had recently had a litter and the pups were still nursing. At the time, she had been entirely focused on the pups and had begged her parents for a month for one. Now, blood rose into her face as she recalled the mother lying there as her offspring suckled. She became keenly aware of the eight spots arrayed across her front and brushed one with a paw-hand.

I still want a puppy... The unbidden thought both terrified and tantalized her. *Not like that!* Half-heartedly, she tried to banish the memory and confused feelings it conjured. *But I'm a werewolf and my boyfriend is a wolf...*

She drew a ragged breath and realized her small tail was swaying slowly behind her, betraying her wayward desire. Below, she could feel tightening in a part of her hidden by her makeshift shorts.

Being a werewolf is fun and exciting, but that's all it is. All... we are. The surge of shame and horror belied the attempted rationalization. *I mean, it's fine once a month; I wouldn't really want to be like this all the time. This is all just because it's a full moon and my instincts are really strong.*

Again, she tried and failed to convince herself of her own thoughts. Suddenly feeling exposed, she looked frantically for her sweatshirt.

See? I'm just pretending to be a wolf.

Just then, she realized her sweatshirt was dangling from her jaws and not her hand-paws. Embarrassed, she swiftly grabbed the shirt with all eight still-functional fingers. Aligning it with her head, she slipped back into it.

There, now to get my socks off. And then I can find Shadow. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. *Just to cuddle with!*

Falling forward onto her hand-paws, she tried to reach her paw-feet with her muzzle. To her momentary puzzlement, she was unable to bend that far.

I'm not actually a wolf; why is it so hard to not act like one? She shook her head and focused on her human memories.

Reaching a hand-paw down, she slipped her fingers into the top of her sock and slipped it off her elongated foot, her claws further shredding the remaining fabric. Dropping the ruined sock into the snow, she proceeded to remove the other one.

Why does it feel so wrong to be human? She tried to ignore the disquieting recognition of just how far she had willingly drifted from humanity over the last month... and how much she craved getting even further from it. *Well, I'm a werewolf tonight and can figure all that out tomorrow.*

Burying her doubts and conflicted emotions, she turned her thoughts towards finding Shadow. Tilting her head up, she sniffed. Her olfactory lobe lept into action, decoding the chemical information carried by the air. From it, her brain fashioned a sort of map of the surrounding area.

The scents of her friends were still present, but they were distant now. Bruno was with them and she could still smell his enthusiasm for the "game" she had created for him. The nearby houses gave off a combination of artificial scents quite distinct from the natural world around her. A large, but relatively distant combination of similar smells came from the direction

of town. Among them were some vaguely familiar smells, but they were little more than hints and too fleeting to recognize. To the north, she could detect asphalt from a road cutting through the mountains. Judging by the relatively sparse vehicle smells, it wasn't heavily used.

I need to go... She thought about where Shadow and her territory was in relation to town. *That way.*

Pointing her nose in that direction, she mentally explored the distinct tapestry of chemicals coming from it. Unfortunately, she couldn't detect any trace of Shadow's scent from where she was. Distantly, it occurred to her that she had almost effortlessly slipped back into behaving and thinking like a wolf.

Unexpectedly, her conscious brain registered the sensation of pressure and muted cold coming from her fingers *and* toes. *My fore and hind paws are on the ground...*

It was true; her knees no longer touched the ground and she was balanced firmly on the balls and toes of her changed feet. Unlike a real wolf, her feet extended a bit behind her with her "hock" at a significant angle. Instead of resting on her palms, she was balanced comfortably on her fingers and knuckles allowing her to keep her torso mostly level with her head without putting strain on her wrist. The knuckles on her hand were bent at an impossible angle for a human. On her rear, she felt her short tail twitching in tune with every minute shift in her balance. Unlike being on two legs earlier, this felt right.

No wonder why my jeans no longer fit; my legs got shorter while my feet got longer. She shrugged inwardly. *Why not try walking on all fours?*

Putting her weight over her left "paw", she picked up her right hand-paw and moved it out in front of her. She immediately felt the hind and fore digits of her limbs still on the ground curl down, digging her curved claws into the compacted snow. Unlike human fingernails, these keratin structures were directly connected to the bones in her digits and she could feel the firm grip they afforded. In combination with her rough pads, she would have little difficulty maintaining traction in the slippery snow. She marveled again at how the muscles in her lower back and tail subtly twitched to further aid in her balance.

As she leaned forward on her displaced hand-paw, her legs straightened slightly, forcing her butt up. Then, she lifted her right-foot paw and brought it forward, plowing a trough through the top layer of snow. With her right side now ahead of her left, she moved her left hand-paw so that it was parallel with her right. She followed it with her right foot-paw and then repeated the sequence.

Wobbly, but this feels good, her pace quickened as her confidence grew. *Really good.*

Exhilaration flooded through her as she fell into a rhythm and her stubby tail wagged even as it worked to keep her balanced. There were still some challenges created by her hybrid physiology. Her limbs weren't proportioned quite right, which placed her center of gravity closer to her hand-paws and her foot-paws couldn't clear the snow. Many of her muscles had remained unchanged and complained about the unfamiliar demands being placed on them. The human size and shape of her fingers meant her front 'paws' couldn't quite roll forward properly. Her head was still connected to her body at a right angle, forcing her to constantly tilt it up in order to see. Still, the change in approach proved vastly superior to her earlier attempts at bipedal locomotion.

I could get used to this. Her tongue lolled out of her mouth and she panted slightly as she padded through the forest. *I'm actually feeling a little warm; my forepaws aren't even cold.*

Part of her winced at the ease at which she fell into thinking of her hands and feet as paws but did little to diminish her elation. In fact, the memory of her human form increasingly felt like a strange dream. It was only the ways in which her body still diverged from a wolf that reminded her it had been real. The growing aches and pains of muscles throughout her body further conspired to dispel any notion she had imagined her humanity.

I hope Shadow isn't too far, her long tongue lolled out of her jaws as she panted. *I'm going to have to rest soon.* Her nose suddenly flared and her ears perked up. *Wait, what was that?*

She stopped and pointed her small snout to her right, her nose working intently. It took but a moment to pick up the scent again and identify it as that of an animal. Her brain quickly matched the scent to one she had encountered just a few days before - that of a rabbit. It was a young female nibbling on some plant matter not far away. Sophia turned slowly to face the direction she smelled the rabbit, suddenly feeling very hungry. Time seemed to slow as her pulse quickened and she started quietly moving towards it.

Should I be doing this? A quiet voice warned her this was yet another line there would be no coming back from and she hesitated. *I've never killed anything before.* An odd question posed itself - *Is this what I am?*

Doubt tugged at her mind again, but an even deeper feeling of certainty rose to counter it. She felt more *alive* than ever; every sense was on alert and the world seemed to move in slow motion. It wasn't just hunger, it was the wolf that wanted to kill, to prove itself.

No, I am the wolf. In a moment of clarity, she acknowledged a truth that had long terrified her even as she desperately wanted to embrace it. *I've known my entire life.*

Her decision made, all but the hunt faded from her awareness. The small bursts of woody saliva in the air indicated the rabbit was still chewing away and remained oblivious. Getting as low to the ground as she could, Sophia resumed slowly approaching where she smelled the small animal. As she crept closer, her sensitive ears picked up soft snaps as the bunny continued to nibble on its meal. Sophia's breathing slowed and her steps became even more deliberate.

It didn't matter that she couldn't see the rabbit, nor that the fallen tree it was nibbling on was relatively blurry to her lupine eyes. All that mattered to her lupine mind was she could smell and hear it. She'd need her eyes soon, but not yet.

Sophia froze as the chewing noise ceased. Staying perfectly still, she waited until the bunny resumed eating.

There you are, at last, her eyes picked up movements amidst a tangle of branches near the end of the fallen tree. *Sorry bun, but you're mine*.

Had her eyes still been human, the minute movements of the rabbit's ears and body would have been imperceptible. Now, its motions stood out like a neon sign amidst the surrounding stillness even with her reduced visual acuity. Her brain quickly pieced together the glimpses of the bunny into a rough picture.

Then, the rabbit bolted.

Were she still human, the rabbit would have been a blur of motion. But to Sophia the wolf, the bunny seemed to move in slow motion. Her powerful foot-paws propelled her forward and she opened her jaws. Darting as fast as it could, it tried to jerk out of the way of the incoming werewolf. But it was far too late for the small animal and Sophia easily adjusted her expectant maw to match its movements.

Got you! Sophia's jaws closed around the rabbit's neck from behind, her dagger-like teeth sinking through its thick, white coat and into its neck.

The rabbit struggled and squealed valiantly, but it was useless. Sophia triumphantly gave a sharp jerk of her head and the rabbit went forever limp.