

Wolfsbane Brew

The change hit immediately. My ears slid upward with a liquid sensation. My teeth ached so bad I couldn't close my mouth. My muzzle grew, feeling like it was pulling off my face. Millions of electric pinpricks swept my body as fur erupted all over my skin.

I fell to my knees, stifling a howl. I heard the familiar pop-click of my joints repositioning. My muscles burned, making me want to run, to work off the pain. I looked down at silver paws.

I was a wolf. Power on four legs. Not a mere human who relied on their wits to live. It made me wonder why I ever changed back. I should remain a wolf. I could do it.

Then an image of Brittany came to me, her green eyes sparkling, a mischievous smile on her lips. I could never leave her.

Still...

I shook myself from head to tail, sloughing off the last of my humanity. Behind me, the van's back door opened and closed. I smelled two humans. Two *naked* humans. No way did I want to see that. I stepped forward into the scrub. There was no game here. Nothing lived near the Mound. Its pulsing heartbeat sent ripples down my spine. That was why Uncle Bob chose this spot—so we could find our way back. But did I really want to find my way back?

The moon rose, and its light bathed my soul in a soft caress. I closed my eyes and lifted my nose. A breeze ruffled my fur. It smelled of sawgrass and the rich, dark earth. Far away, I heard a peacock call.

Gagging sounds came from the direction of Rita's van. Then two wolves came around the side—one gray, one ruddy. Uncle Bob and Rita. They greeted me with nips and yips. I nuzzled them affectionately—but the reunion needed to wait. I had to get away from the Mound. I led them deeper into the Everglades.

Uncle Bob, the environmentalist, complains a lot about the changes in the Everglades. He hates that housing developments and golf courses encroach upon it on all sides. In addition, he blames the runoff from surrounding farms for introducing fertilizer to the swampland. He says it kills off indigenous plants and allows others to thrive.

Since I am new in town, I don't remember way-back-when. But I do know that, along with deer, gators, panthers, and black bear, the Everglades has acquired a nasty population of python. I thank pet owners for that; some people think you can leave any old thing in the Glades. You never want to tangle with a python. The only way to kill it is to take off its head—and that's

where it keeps its fangs.

One animal you don't find in South Florida is a wolf. So imagine my surprise when I entered a thicket and found myself muzzle-to-muzzle with a she-wolf. She was sleek and brown and had golden eyes.

With an alarmed yip, she ran. I barked for the others to follow and tore off after her. She was smaller than I was, but she was faster than the wind. I had trouble matching her pace. I kept her scent in my nose as we crossed a sea of sawgrass. Its blades swished at my head like serrated swords.

Who was this intruder? I knew she was a werewolf—I glimpsed her short, yellow tail as she sped before me. Why was she here? Poaching? Scouting the competition? How dare she enter my territory without permission?

My human side chuckled at that. Who did I think I was? The King of South Florida? I was chasing her because I was interested in meeting another werewolf, right? Not because I wanted to scare her away.

I dismissed the thought. With my ears flat, I ran faster. My back paws dug into the soft muck, sending clumps flying behind me.

That was when I realized that neither Uncle Bob nor Rita were following. Couldn't they keep up? I sighed. Old people.

The she-wolf veered into the forest. Was that where her pack hid? Would they jump me as soon as I entered the trees? Anger tinged my eyesight red. How dare they threaten me?

A low growl frothed my jaws as I raced into the tree line. No one jumped me. I startled a family of rabbits, and they bounded in all directions.

I let them go, focusing on the she-wolf. She was slowing, zigzagging through the trees. After a few minutes, I realized she was running in a pattern: three tree trunks, turn, five more, and turn again. Like she was playing a game.

My ruff tingled at the back of my neck, standing up in annoyance. I calculated where the pattern would take her then leaped, bowling her over. With a heavy paw, I held her down. My jaws tightened around her throat.

Again, my human flared into being. What was I going to do, kill her for playing hide-and-seek?

A moment of indecision plagued me. I released her and bounded away.

Immediately, the she-wolf scrambled up and gave chase. It *was* a game. I darted through the foliage, keeping her close but not too close. She was faster in the stretches, but even though I was larger, I cornered better. I dodged out of her way, then doubled back as she sped past.

Once I lost her completely. I stopped running and boosted my ears. Where could she have gone?

Coming from nowhere, she sailed through the air and hit me with all fours. “Grrruff,” she said happily. *Tag! You’re it!*

Grinning, I raced after her. It was fun. I forgot all about her being a mysterious intruder. I played as if she were a toy—a chew toy that bit back.

A while later, the howl of a wolf brought me up short. I froze, listening. Another wolf? Did the she-wolf belong to a pack after all?

She looked at me, gave an apologetic whimper, and headed in the direction of the howl. I trotted beside her. Each step took me further to the dark side. These wolves were uninvited. I’d marked this land as mine. By the time I was close enough to scent them, I was stoked for a fight.

The she-wolf and I stepped into a clearing. Uncle Bob and Rita stood on one side. Two other wolves stood opposite. The male was black with red eyes. The female was small and brown. All four of them had their fur on end, trying to appear larger. But bristled as they were, none were as large as me.

I stepped into the center of the clearing, staring down the newcomers. The male met my gaze without flinching. I would take him first, show him how I feel about poachers.

As if oblivious to the tension, the she-wolf walked over, nipped my ear, and nuzzled my neck. Then she crossed the clearing to stand with her... parents. Yes, now I could smell it. They were a family, not a dangerous pack.

I dismissed them with a woof and turned my back. My ears perked, alert for movement behind me. None came. I nudged my uncle, demanding his attention. The moon was setting. I needed to get him back to his truck.

Relief washed through me when Rita and Uncle Bob allowed themselves to be herded from the clearing. Better yet, the three strangers didn’t follow. I didn’t want to be known as the bully who beat up a family for passing through.

I kept my group moving until I could no longer hear or smell the newcomers. Only then did I slow to a relaxed trot. Soon I sensed the magical drone of Tony’s Mound like the hum of power lines in the back of my skull.

We reached the vehicles as the moon set. Rita hopped into her van to turn back into a human in private. My uncle stayed with me. I watched him shift—his face flattening, his spine straightening. It looked painful.

When it was over, he sat naked in the dirt, looking at me. “Your turn.”

I gave him my best doggy grin, tongue lolling.

"I'm not kidding, now," he said. "You have school in the morning. Shift back."

I sneezed loudly, hoping to convey that I had other things to do.

Rita rounded the back of the van. She wore jeans and a frilly blouse. My uncle's clothes were folded over one arm. "What's going on? Why is he still a wolf?"

Uncle Bob winced. "I told you he was—"

"You said he was unusual, but I didn't think..." Her voice went up an octave. "The moon is gone."

I snorted at that. The moon was never gone. Even when it was on the other side of the planet, I could sense its presence.

"He shifts at will," my uncle said. "But now is not the time."

Now was the perfect time. I spun about and hightailed it out of there. I had to hurry or I would miss them. I picked up the scents of the three wolves at the clearing and followed them to a narrow dirt road that wound through the forest. They stood near a charcoal-gray Lexus, all of them human once more.

The father's skin was as black as his wolf's fur had been. He wore brightly colored pajama bottoms, and he was pulling a matching tunic over his head.

The mother wore a long, shapeless dress that split to her knees. Her dark, shoulder-length hair stood out like a frizzy halo, making her head appear two sizes too big.

The girl was not yet clothed. Her smooth body reminded me of a chocolate Easter bunny. She pulled on a pair of tattered cut-offs and a faded blue shirt that had *The Doctor Is In* on the front. She looked younger than my human, perhaps fourteen years old.

"You bloody well *do* know what I'm talking about," the father said in a deep voice. "Those wolves might have been dangerous."

"Yes, it's all my fault, isn't it." The girl put her hands on her hips. "I'm in charge. I was the one who should have surveyed the ruddy area instead of assuming we were alone."

"Not to worry," said the mother. "I'm sure they were just passing through."

The father sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He looked at the girl. "Ayanna, you are not to leave my side again, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Daddy." Ayanna sighed, rolling her eyes.

Turning, she looked directly at me. I was downwind and hidden in the brush. She couldn't know I was there—and yet... She stood unnaturally still, her eyes glinting gold in the half-light. She looked wild and completely alien.

Then her father called her name, breaking the spell. They got into the car and drove away.