

1. Andrew

Andrew stood over the body. The burning fire around them only reminded him of the anger that burned within. He wanted to see all of them burn, but fire didn't seem enough. He could only think of the worst kinds of deaths one could experience.

“It's over,” Andrew whispered, panting loudly.

The scent of blood bombarded his senses, he could smell it over every inch of Jeff's mangled body. He gently stroked the boy's muddy hair as he knelt down beside him as brief shadows of lupine and human forms darted back and forth towards them, and Andrew felt glowing judgmental eyes on him.

“How could you do this to me, you call this honor?!” Andrew cried as he held back tears. Now was not the time to show any weakness. They would only exploit it.

But, neither his anger nor their actions, however, could shroud the truth—it *was* his fault. He had taken everything too far. He hoped to be different, to drown out all the bad that started with the death of his father. He'd kept secrets and lied to them for a long time. He knew he would get into trouble eventually, but he never imagined someone else would take the hit he deserved. Now all his vain and selfish motives had caused his family to turn against him, and he was being asked to do the only thing he promised himself he'd never to do—harm a human being. The boy was near death already. Andrew's task was to finish him off.

Andrew's eyes met with one who started it all. “How could you?” Andrew whispered, unable to hold his tears as they flowed slowly down his cheek. “I trusted you.”

The shadowy figure submerged into the brush and fled. Andrew knew the guilt was enough punishment.

“Do it boy!” A dark familiar voice snarled from the shadows. Andrew's eyes raised up in the voice's direction, glowing a little in rage. His fists clenched and a growl ripping from his

throat. He refused to obey.

“No!” Andrew screamed out in the darkness, with teeth bared.

Andrew lifted the boys cold body up into his arms. Blood immediately soaked his arms and hands. Tears swelled in his eyes. The boys eyes barely opened up to look up at Andrew, his heartbeat weakening with each labored breath.

“It's okay Jeff,” Andrew said, trying to look optimistic. “I won't let them hurt you anymore.”

He brought Jeff closer to his chest and stood up. There was the sound of stirring in the grass ahead of them. The pack was gathering up to witness the strange boy who refused to be one of them. They knew he wouldn't surrender, which would only mean death.

The whole situation made Andrew sick to his stomach. He posed no real threat to the pack, yet refusing to kill his best friend was all that mattered to them. Even more sickening was the simple fact that this was all to teach him a lesson, that the human world and his would never be one.

The burning fires started to climb the trees and brush. Andrew started the fire by knocking down the ceremonial torches in an attempt to distract the pack so he could come to his friends aid.

He was a threat-less enemy. Fighting now to stay alive and escape the pack, as well as ones he once loved—the ones he hated most at that very moment—his mother and step-father. They were out there somewhere, ready to kill. His own mother willing to kill her own son, all because of a stupid ritual. Andrew's life meant nothing to them, apparently.

Sweat dripped off of Andrew's face. The fire blazed at its most intense and violent moment, burning its way through the brush and trees surrounding them. Hell itself marched steadily towards them, a perfect mirror to the rage that burned inside Andrew, making him want to shift. The murmuring noises in the dark grew closer. Faces both wolf and man began to form from the light provided by the fires. Glowing eyes and ripping snarls got louder.

Ignoring their threatening growls, Andrew slowly began to creep backwards, moving to the back of the forest, a woods he knew well, but not as well as his pack. It seemed futile to try, but he had no other way out. Escaping alive was the only chance he'd have to save both their lives.

He was out of time. There was only one thing to do now—run.

Andrew woke up gasping, his eyes flying open.

Sweat pooled on his forehead, barely trickling down as Andrew turned to the clock. He'd woken up a few minutes shy of his alarm.

Again, he thought. He took in a deep breath followed with a long sigh as he reached over to shut the alarm off before it rung.

It was the same dream, or *nightmare*; one he would never lose. Having a constant reminder of that night; the pain, the running, his only friend dying a painful death, and it being all his fault was the only bane his current existence had to offer. But, it was a reminder of the life he knew he would never return to.

Lately however, the dream had become more vivid and longer, adding more detail of things he tried hard to forget. He wasn't sure why the dream kept coming back. He wished he could wipe his memory of it.

Andrew rose up in his bed, still very tired. He wiped his crusty eyes and then the sweat off of his brow. He thought briefly that skipping his exercise routine and sleeping an extra half hour, but not if that dream was waiting for him.

Starting his morning slightly early seemed like a good way to take the dream off his mind. Andrew looked around his room, desperately finding things to focus on, but his mind was blocking his ability to do so.

“Stupid ritual,” Andrew mumbled as he threw the sheets off his bed and sat on the edge, staring off into space. He understood the ritual for years, and witnessed being done by many members before him, but it became pure madness when it was his turn.

Then of course, the pinnacle of all stupidity, having him kill his best friend based on one principle, that werewolves should not interact with humans. At least, according to *his* pack.

Andrew knew of other packs who were allowed to mingle and befriend humans beyond the occasional trips to town and run-ins with the small townsfolk, just as long as their secret was kept hidden. Andrew never understood why his family couldn't be that way. There was no justifying their behaviors for good. He knew his family had strange superstitions about humans, and did their best to avoid them. He was brought up with the knowledge that they were a lower

species. This blew Andrew's mind, seeing as how they dominated the planet.

Andrew's family always lived in the traditional ways, like their animal ancestors still do today, as a pack: the males are dominant, the alpha male—and female when occasion called for it—rule over all and decide pack law: hunting, mating, and survival. The part that Andrew hated the most was where he fell in; the subordinate pack members follow the alpha's lead no matter what. Everyone else, especially humans, are the enemy. Most importantly, a pack stays together, period. Nothing had changed for thousands of years—until now. Andrew was the first to ever break free from a pack and live to tell the tale. In fact, no pack member ever wanted to leave. It was unheard of. *My pack sucked that badly*, Andrew thought, grinning.

Aside from the nightmares, Andrew finds himself waking up thanking God for the blessings he has now. Escaping the pack wasn't easy at first. The first three months of his freedom was spent living completely in the wild, hunting for his own food and hardly seeing any civilization. With luck, however, a few good contracts in high places led him to fake a new last name, get a new social security number, and a drivers license. He was then able to find a job.

He moved around a lot finding many opportunities to make a living, between both human and werewolf lifestyles. He was even fortunate enough to finish what was left of his G.E.D. through night classes at an adult high school. Once he became more financially stable, he was finally able to move to a place he only dreamed of living—New York, New York.

After a few years living in the more humble parts of the big city, he found an incredible career opportunity he couldn't pass by, putting him with his current company. Moving up year by year, and becoming one of the youngest managers ever, it made living as a human even easier. As humble as Andrew was, he didn't mind being a little more than middle class.

Lately, however, these dreams caused him to be frequently late to work. Not that it mattered, he held a high position that nobody cared if he showed up ten or even twenty minutes late. He only had to be there to make sure everyone else was doing their job properly. Regardless of this, he needed to get up now.

He let out a small grunt as he lifted his body from his soft bed staggered to the bathroom. The wood floor of his condo was freezing cold, just the way he liked it. The blinds were half shut making the morning light shine in thin sections across his wall. Andrew squinted at the light as he passed by. He grunted seeing his laundry bin in the bathroom, reminding himself of what was

waiting once he got home from work. After thoroughly brushing his teeth, he stood for a second to gaze at his reflection, brushing his shaggy reddish-brown bangs back. Already he noticed the dark feelings associated with the dream had died down. Even the laundry had put him in a better mood.

Living alone was wonderful, and something he was prepared to do for the rest of his life. Exposing his secret would be extremely dangerous, not only would it cause world wide hysteria—humans are not ready to accept werewolves—he would risk being found by his family. He wasn't sure which was worse, but he'd rather be seen on the news as a Sasquatch sitting than facing his family every again.

In order to avoid both situations, minimal human contact was best. He learned his lesson about getting too close. He didn't want to repeat this mistake, even if nobody was around to tattle on him. The last time he got too close to a human, it ended up killing them. He couldn't bare to go through that again. The recurring nightmares alone were already too much for him to handle.

Besides his job, avoiding people was easy, but hiding the truth was the real challenge. Andrew hated to lie, but walking around with a target on his face at all times—by way of the symbol on Andrew's eye—made it quite difficult. The “sacred” tribal symbol over his left eye was not easy to hide. If anyone knew anything about the traditions of werewolves, they'd instantly know he was one of them. Luckily humans already had a diverse style of tattoo wear, most shrug it off thinking its some sort of gang sign or that he's just another punk on the streets. Humans always fear what is different, and the extra attention to him made it even harder to keep a low profile. Getting it removed was impossible and make-up only worsened it.

Compared to the human life, Andrew was the first to admit that life in a pack was easier; no secrets to hide, you can be yourself (in any form), and everyone you know knows exactly who and what you are. It's like one big family living in a community. A wolf utopia of some sort. Outside the pack, however, humans are curious and rather pushy about trying to figure you out. Plus the urge to shift when in pain or anger was something Andrew learned to control real quick, unlike in a pack, where you could rage out and nobody would judge.

Andrew sometimes wishes he could show the world what he really was. The world knows it as fiction, and the fiction gets everything completely wrong. Andrew gained a better understanding of a human's view by reading and watching werewolf movies growing up, and

even more so as he lived among them. He would either die of laughter or end up chewing on the movie cases. Although many weren't far off, they aren't *quite* like the real thing.

Andrew shook off his thoughts and stretched, flexing his arms out and trying hard to pop his back. A pseudo-howl escaped his opened lips. Howling always felt good. It was a shame it couldn't be louder, but then the neighbors downstairs would throw a fuss. Stepping back into the hallway, he could see on the far wall in the office bedroom a decorated collage of sky scraper images. He stopped and smiled remembering similar pictures hanging up by his bed back at home; amazing images of structures from cities all around the world. Now Andrew could see them clearly from his condo balcony and up close every day in the city. The thought cheered him up even more.

Andrew slipped on sweatpants and found himself a clean sleeveless shirt on a pile of clean clothes next to his bed. Another thing he made a mental note of; fold laundry and put it away.

Andrew moved to the middle of his bedroom, taking a deep breath to relax himself. Letting gravity do what it does best, he gradually leaned over until his body fell forward dropping into a push up position and instantly began to do a rapid set of push ups. Andrew needed a good workout every morning to help him get through the day. One would think exercise for a being such as he would be pointless, but in fact, its was essential for their overall health and well-being. Just like dogs or wolves, werewolves have massive amounts of energy and to keep themselves from getting antsy, jittery or even violent, it took a hardy work out each day to control it. A few push ups, sit ups and a quick round the park did the trick.

Andrew made his way to his front door, grabbing his iPhone and headphones from his coat pocket that hung up next to the door. Once outside his condo, Andrew's ears came in tune with the busy sounds of the city. Although his condo was adjacent to busy traffic , it was quiet most mornings—especially this early. Sounds of honking horns and revving engines filled the sky above, evidence that his closed off paradise was surrounded by humans galore. He filled his nostrils with morning air—it wasn't as clean as he'd wish—often laden with cigarette's and city trash and grime, a smell he found to be most unpleasant.

He jogged down the end of the street to Morning Side, a small park about the size of a city block. It was his lame excuse for a forest, but he loved it either way. It was hardly occupied

with people this early in the morning, and it was more clean and frequently maintained than other parks in the area.

Andrew jogged around the 30 acre park for two hours. The cold air felt pleasing against his skin, even though it was better with fur, especially his wolf form. It was the best form to run in. He used to enjoy going out on the weekends to the national parks several miles from the city to shift, run, hunt and be free and natural. Sometimes even within the privacy of his own home he would shift and roam around for a few hours. It gave him that edge he needed when a human life became too stressful. But the drive outside the city limits took way to long. He was too caught up in the human world to make time for it. Plus, it had been a good year or two since he shifted into either of his wolf forms.

Finally after a beep of his watch indicating his time was up, Andrew's run turned into a brisk jog that led him back to his condo. He barely panted as he unlocked his door and stepped inside.

A quick shower and a few minutes of getting dressed and Andrew was ready—suit and tie, the usual outfit for a management position. The most colorful and decorative flair to his outfit was his tie. It was the only thing he had control over. Andrew's love for modern style showed in his clothing. If it wasn't his Armani suit, it would be something from Hollister or Abercrombie and Fitch.

His hair was by far the easiest to take care of. A few squirts of gel and a wild rub and tug here and there, and he was set. He patiently pulled his long reddish-brown locks down carefully fitting them around his face, especially over his left eye; it helped to hide his marking.

After fitting his belt and a last minute check in the mirror, he walked down the hall to the kitchen. By now most mornings he was starving. He flipped on the kitchen light and went to the fridge and pulled two slabs of frozen sirloin steak out of the freezer; gently unwrapping the saran wrap. Yawning, as if bored of the daily routine, he set the frozen stiff steaks on a plate in the microwave to defrost. As much as eating fresh meet was his preference, this was the best it could get. It had also been a year or so since he sunk his teeth into a kill. He missed it.

To maintain his high metabolism, he would need to eat a huge amount of carbohydrates several times a day to maintain good health. However, he can't eat raw meat all the time; it would be weird for anyone to witness—a human scarfing down bloody meat on a lunch break.

Breakfast was the only time before work he had to fill himself up to help him survive 8 hours. It truly was the most important meal of the day.

Next he went to the fridge for his joyous beverage: a cold glass of milk. He sat down at the table and chugged a full liter of it as he waited for meat to finish defrosting. Once the microwave beeped, he instantly took it out, slapped it on a plate and began to scarf it down. He exposed his fangs as he ate for easy penetration into the thick warm steak. Some blood trickled down his chin. He caught it quickly and wiped it away with a napkin. He thought sometimes that he'd need an adult sized bib to keep himself clean with how animal-like he ate. After consuming almost ten pounds of steak—including the fat—he was still a tiny bit hungry.

After loading his dishes into the dishwasher, he gathered his messenger bag and sunglasses. As he threw his jacket on, he gazed at a sign directly above the front door. It was a rustic wood panel with vinyl letters. An old co-worker had given it to him as a Christmas gift. It was random, but the message seemed to fit him perfectly. The words in Latin read, *'La vita è bella'* which meant 'life is good.'

“Life is good,” Andrew said, reading it out loud. It was a great reminder to have every morning.

He agreed, smiling. Life *was* good. In fact, life was *great*.