



## **DANGER ZONE ONE**

### **— WEREWOLF ZONE — PART II**

“Are you sure you should be back out after you were injured?” Reena asked.

Madison marched through the darkened woods, retracing her steps from the night before. “The day a little dog bite takes me out of action is the day I turn in my badge.”

“That was no little dog,” Reena countered. “That bite was huge!”

“Stow it, Rookie,” Madison ordered, her tone fiercer than usual. “I’ll live. Besides, it already healed.”

“What?!” Reena said, gawking in disbelief. “No way, that’s not possible! I saw what that bite looked like...”

“Damn,” Madison cursed, motioning up ahead. The Valhdmear’s wagon was just visible through the brush. “What are they still doing out here?”

“Maybe they got their permit?” Reena replied, confused.

The two officers advanced upon the wagon, no one in sight.

“Horses are still here,” Madison said, turning her flashlight to the two animals. The sight of them stirred an abrupt pang of hunger in her.

“You have come back?” Mavena raspy voice cut through the night.

The officers spun around, surprised by the old woman’s sudden appearance.

“Where is everyone?” Madison asked.

“They have gone into the city,” Mavena explained, “in search of a permit so that we might stay. I expect they will return soon.”

“Barsali too?” Reena inquired with a hint of disappointment.

Mavena shook her head. “No, Barsali is resting in the wagon. He has taken ill. The food in this country has upset his stomach. Perhaps—”

“Look, there’s a dangerous animal in these woods,” Madison interrupted. “Permit or not, you can’t

stay here. You need to relocate somewhere else.”

Mavena's expression shifted into one of unease. She swung her cane in Madison's direction. “*You*—you bear the mark! I can see it within you!”

“What are you talking about?” Madison barked. “What mark?”

“The one in your soul!” Mavena pointed upwards to the cloud-covered night sky. “Beware the moon—you will change when the clouds no longer mask its light.”

“Change?” Reena repeated, looking to her partner. “What does she mean?”

“Look, lady,” Madison took a forceful step toward the old woman, “I don't know what you're on about but—”

“You've *already* felt the changes, haven't you?” Mavena asked, stamping her cane into the dirt. “It's begun! You were bitten last night, now you are damned!”

“How do *you* know I was bitten?” Madison grabbed the woman by the shoulder. “You know what that creature was, don't you?”

“It is the beast! And now you too are cursed!”

Reena scratched her head. “Beasts? Curses?”

“Go!” Mavena warned. “Hurry and lock yourself up before it's too late!”

“Enough of this nonsense!” Madison turned, stomping away from the old woman. “Come on, Rookie—we're getting nowhere fast.”

“B-but Madison, about what she said...”

“She's *nuts*! Now c'mon!”

Mavena watched as the officers departed into the night. She shook her head, her wrinkled features illuminated by a stray moonbeam.

Madison walked along the west sector of the woods, having instructed the Rookie to patrol the south area. Whatever creature she had encountered the night before, she was more determined than ever to track it down.

Each passing step elicited a new sensation within Madison, a strange, primal urge entirely foreign to her. As she made her way deeper into the woods, the officer began to notice that the clouds had shifted overhead, exposing the luminous glow of the full moon.

“What the—!” Madison bellowed, hunching over as an explosive burst of pain worked its way through her upper body before settling in her chest. Another agonizing jolt followed, this time in her back. She dropped to her knees, the flashlight falling to the ground. Multiple spasms racked Madison's body, leaving her drenched in sweat and gasping for air. The pain had even spread to her teeth, which she could *swear* were growing longer, sharper...

Madison's fingers clawed at the grass and dirt, trying to fight back against the agony. She realized that all her senses had been elevated—the scent of animals in the woods, the sound of insects scurrying in the leaves, even her sense of touch had increased. She looked at her hands, surprised to see thick strands of white hair protruding from her skin. Madison's mind raced, but no logical explanations came. Instead, her arms and legs throbbed; she quickly noticed that her muscles were expanding—so much so that her shirt and jacket split at the seams, tearing apart. The material of her tight shorts stretched, ripping to accommodate her bodily growth.

Madison let out a piercing cry as she rolled over, clothing torn and body contorting—*shifting* into something hairy and inhuman. Even her jaw and nose had protruded forward, like a canine's snout. Her mind grew clouded, all human logic dulling and giving way to a base, feral instinct.

With everything she had, Madison crawled forward on all fours and opened her mouth to scream. What escaped into the night air was not a human yell—it was a deafening howl.

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Madison awoke to Reena pushing against her shoulder. She squinted, taken aback by the vibrant sunlight. “Wh-what happened?”

“Are you okay?!” Reena asked, her voice wavering and panicked. “Who, or what, did this to you?”

“Wh-what are you t-talking about?” Madison stuttered, realizing that she was lying on the dirt, naked. Her attention shifted to her hands, covered in something dark and red.

“There's blood on your hands,” Reena said, concerned. “On your lips too!”

Madison could feel the dried blood sticking to her face. She sat up, startled. “I don't remember anything...”

“I was looking for you all night,” Reena explained. “I heard something howling, like a dog or wolf! I was worried it attacked you but, that blood, I don't think it's yours.”

Madison glanced over her body, seeing no cuts or open wounds. “Then...who's blood is it?”

“I don't know,” Reena said, shaking her head. “All I found were some dead sheep. It was horrible, they were torn to pieces...”

“Sheep?” Madison repeated, gazing down at her bloodied hands. “What the hell's going on...?”

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Madison awoke to the sound of banging. She stirred out of bed, wincing as the early morning sun streaked in through her apartment window. Dressed only in a gray tank top and matching panties, she shuffled out of bed and exited the room. Groggily, Madison headed towards the direction of the racket, reached the front door, and swung it open. “Who is it?! What do you—”

“I am glad to find you safe and at home,” Mavena responded, standing outside the apartment.

“*You?*” Madison said, doing a double take. “How did you find out where I live?”

Mavena gently nudged her way by the officer and entered the apartment. “Our people have many abilities which may seem,” she paused a moment before continuing, “*beyond* reasoning to one such as yourself. There is more to this world than machines and—”

“What do you want?” Madison snapped, shutting the door and turning to the woman, who was already busy looking around the apartment.

“The night before last,” Mavena said, her expression grim, “you were attacked and bitten by a beast.”

“I was bitten by a *dog*.”

“It was no dog...”

“Then *what* was it?”

Mavena raised her cane, aiming the tip in Madison's direction. “You can already feel the changes within you. The first transformation has already taken place last night.”

The officer's eyes widened. “What are you talking about?”

“You were bitten by a werewolf and now, you too, share the curse.”

“Werewolf?!” Madison gasped. “Are you insane? If you came all this way just to tell me that, you wasted your time. Werewolves aren't real.”

Mavena struck the floor with her cane, signaling for silence. “How *else* do you explain what is happening to you? Do you think we came to this country to perform? No. I came to seek a cure for my grandson.”

“Barsali?”

“He too is inflicted with the curse of the wolf,” Mavena explained, her wrinkled face becoming

increasingly forlorn. “I had hoped that, with science and medicine, something could have been done for him. I was wrong. Only the old ways can truly bring him peace.”

Madison shook her head. “Hold on, you're saying your *grandson's* a werewolf?! And what? He changes on every full moon?”

“No—the moon need not be entirely full for him to transform. As long as the moon, in *any* phase, is in the night sky, he will become a wolf. You will share that fate as well, but since you have only just been bitten, the transformations will be slower. You will not turn again until the next moon cycle.”

“What do you mean? Next month?”

“Yes. Barsali may not have any hope of his destiny being reversed—but *you* still have a chance to escape this horrible affliction.”

“How?!”

Mavena leaned in, her voice rising just above a whisper. “You must free Barsali. If you destroy the one who bit you, *your* curse will be lifted.”

“Let's say—just for the sake of argument—I believe you,” Madison began tensely, “how would I even go about doing that?”

Reaching into her pocket, Mavena pulled out two silver bullets. “You must shoot him in the heart with one of these—made of pure silver.”

“You really *are* off your rocker! You're asking me to *kill* your grandson?”

“What he lives through now is *worse* than death—it is a living hell,” Mavena lamented. “To release him from this nightmare would be the *only* humane option.”

“This curse,” Madison leaned up against the wall, sighing, “you're certain there's no other way to break it?”

“I have done all I can,” Mavena offered the bullets to the officer who, after a reluctant pause, accepted them. “It is now out of my hands. If you still need *more* proof, return to the woods tonight and you will see.”

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Madison walked through the vacant industrial sector, circling around the heavy construction equipment and skeletal iron-work frame of a partially constructed building. Taking in a deep breath of frigid night air, she noted the presence of a light fog that had rolled into the area. The moon was not quite full, but vibrant enough to illuminate the ground.

A distant howl shattered the eerie quiet.

“Y-you *sure* that old lady said it was a w-werewolf?” Reena asked nervously, trailing behind her partner. “That sounded kind of close...”

Another howl echoed through the night, nearer and louder than the first.

“Whatever it is, I'm not taking any chances,” Madison said, unholstering her Halvok-99. The silver bullet Mavena had given her was already chambered in the gun, while the second bullet resided in the Rookie's firearm. “Remember, you only have *one* shot at bringing this thing down.”

“M-maybe *you* should've taken both bullets, just in case,” Reena said, pulling her gun out with a shaky hand. “You're a lot better shot than I am.”

A third howl, this one within the industrial sector, was heard.

“It's here,” Madison warned. “Be ready.”

“Backup might've been a good idea...”

“Just keep your eyes open and—” Before Madison could finish, a dark figure burst out from the fog. She spun and ducked down, narrowly avoiding the creature as it leapt overhead.

The bipedal beast landed on its hind legs and let out a low, guttural growl. The light of the moon

revealed its body, coated in thick black hair. Both officers were stunned by the monstrosity's prominent canine-like snout. Its lips contorted into a fierce snarl and its jaw opened, allowing full-view of jagged yellowing teeth.

“It r-really *is* a werewolf!” Reena shouted.

The wolfbeast's long, pointed ears twitched. It turned towards the dark-haired officer, preparing to pounce.

Madison wasted no time aiming her Halvok in the werewolf's direction. She didn't expect the sound of her fingers tightening around the firearm to draw the creature's attention—*but it did*. The werewolf threw itself in her direction, arms swinging with wild fury. Madison squeezed the trigger, but her response was too slow. By the time the gun went off, the werewolf jerked its body to the side—evading the silver bullet by mere centimeters.

“Shit!” Madison bellowed, just as the werewolf barreled into her. The officer landed hard onto the dirt, the creature on top of her, its sharp claws raised and ready to attack.

“L-leave her alone!” Reena yelled, her voice lacking any hint of confidence. She aimed her gun at the werewolf, ready to fire.

The beast stood up and howled, bearing its fangs for all to see. It swung its arm out, smashing into a nearby construction vehicle and leaving a massive dent in it.

“Take the shot, Rookie!” Madison shouted. “Aim for the heart!”

The werewolf turned its attention back to Madison, saliva dripping from its maw. In one lightning-fast motion, it thrust at the fallen officer—fangs descending towards the neck of its soft prey.

“No!” Reena cried, firing her gun before the werewolf's teeth reached Madison. The bullet streaked through the air—*and missed*. Instead, it hit the side of the nearby construction vehicle, *ricocheted* off the surface, and struck the werewolf's chest, piercing its heart.

The wolfbeast staggered back, crashing down into the dirt. It thrashed around, kicking up a cloud of dust.

Madison rolled to the side and climbed to her feet. She gave her partner a nod of approval. “Good work!”

“Y-yeah...” Reena muttered, uncertain of how she'd managed such a feat, “...th-thanks.”

Beneath the moonglow, the werewolf grew still. Its body began to contort and twist, its hair receding, jaw shrinking back, and ears retracting into its skull. The officers could only watch in awe as the werewolf ceased to be and, instead—in its place—lay the naked body of Barsali.

Madison rushed over, checking Barsali for a pulse. It was too late. He was dead.

Reena gasped in horror. “N-no way. I *s-shot* him...” The gun slipped from her fingers, dropping to the ground. “I *killed* him!”

“No, child—you freed him,” an old raspy voice called out. “You gave Barsali what he truly wanted.”

The officers turned around, their eyes locking on Mavena. She emerged from the fog, cane in hand.

“It is impossible for one afflicted with the curse of the wolf to end their own life,” Mavena explained with a sense of relief, as if a dreadful burden had been lifted from her shoulders. “He needed to die by another's hand. This was for the best.”

“I wish there was another way,” Reena replied, sniffing. She pried her eyes away from Barsali's body.

“There was no other choice,” Mavena said bluntly, “of that I am certain.”

“And what about the curse?” Madison asked. “Am I cured? I didn't—”

Mavena headed back off into the fog, her voice trailing behind her. “All has been made right. We will return to take Barsali's body, and then leave for Visaria. The Valhdemars are forever in your debt.” With that, she was gone.

Reena's shoulders sagged. “You know, Madison—she says we helped him, but it *doesn't* make me

feel any better.”

“I know what you mean,” Madison said, gazing up at the moon. “After all that's happened, I still don't believe half of it. But what choice do we have?”

Reena picked up her gun and holstered it. “I hope that's the *last* werewolf I ever see.”

“Me too,” Madison said, unable to avert her eyes from the moon—it's luminous glow calling to her. “Me too.”

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