Beneath a Waning Moon

By : xKaylaReneex

Wandering through life oblivious is just as tragic a mistake as allowing paranoia to get the best of you. Curiosity is often fatal. There are dangerous, primal things out there, creatures that rip humans to bloody shreds before a single scream escapes. Lydia Ashby just might be one of those creatures. Then again, she isn't the only one.

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Chapter 1: Prologue

Prologue- The Initiation

"Rise, Lydia Ashby, daughter of the Pack." The girl gracefully stood from her subservient kneel under the alpha's hand. Her violet eyes sparkled brilliantly in the moonlight. She wasn't nervous. Oh, no. She was *ready.*

"From this night, you will serve the Pack with your life." Lydia moved to face the Pack, the apparition of a goddess. She was clothed in a white shift that contrasted sharply with her jet black hair. Her face was set in stone, despite the wild excitement rushing through her.

She waited impatiently as he finished repeating his words in Greek, as he had done the entire ceremony. She fluently esponded in kind. "I accept."

The alpha, her father, used the ceremonial knife to quickly cut her outstretched palm. As instructed, she squeezed closed her palm and shut her eyes and merely waited, searching for a calling of some sort - a longing. Abruptly, without her own say so, her arm violently jerked outright and her hand opened. Crimson dripped on the primitive sketches etched on the ground, each representing a different type of shifter. Earlier that day, Lydia herself had traced them with the point of an arrow. Now, she bent and touched one finger to the picture on which her blood had fallen. Her breath caught in her throat, terrified.

It was eerily silent. She could feel dozens of eyes bearing down on her as she crouched, bathed in the moonlight. Her father leaned down and she spoke almost inaudibly in his ear.

(To be continued)...

Preview:

...Her bones began to mold to those of an animal. Lydia writhed and shrieked on the ground, a fine sheen of sweat coating her. Kaden clutched her hand with his own, the muscles flexing in his arm. He spoke urgently in her ear, offering encouragement. She could only sob wildly in reply. Her muscles ripped and her bones broke, waves of pain rolled over her.

In the very back of her mind, she vaguely recalled a legend her father had told her when she was very young. It told of a Cherokee man teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, pain, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too." The grandson had thought a moment and asked, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

As Lydia felt her body be torn in two, ripped to a mass of broken bones, she found strange peace in such an old tale, and though she would never admit, understanding. Focusing on the pain and despair only worsened it, she felt. With everything left inside her, she summoned all the strength in her body, wailing one last final time as the final change tore through her.

And suddenly, it was over. Lydia felt her old skin melt away to lean muscle and rippling black fur. It was silent for a moment as the clearing stood struck by awe. Then, a shot rang out.

Chapter 2

Lydia adored summer. The blissful warmth, freedom to roam, and delicious men had a tendency to make her delirious.

Something about summer made Lydia's life worth living. As she basked under the fiery sun - her skin getting browner by the minute - all was *almost* right in the world. Lydia laid in a meadow of blooming wildflowers and golden grain that stretched as far as the eye could see. It was an otherworldly beauty.

With her eyes closed, it was easy to pretend. Lydia could almost hear her mother's voice again, whispering about places faraway. She told of the oceans, the islands, and countries Lydia longed to witness herself. Her mother had cherished her memories, and that, Lydia envied. She envied the freedom of a carefree world unknown to her. Her memories of the world were in a small-town hidden in the trees; it was this small-town she called home.

"Soon, Mother," Lydia promised. Lydia exhaled softly, ignoring the twinge in her heart, as she rested her head in a pillow of grass. A breeze rained vivid yellow pollen down on her, and ruffled her wind-blown hair. She didn't mind. She laid in a serene quiet, thoughtfully running her hand across the smooth leather book propped against her leg.

The old tome was a diary, history that'd been buried under an inch of dust in her attic. Lydia's father had given her it for the sole purpose of her Initiation, not understanding the true value of it.

She propped herself on her elbows, tucked her hair behind her ears, and opened it. The pages were yellowed from age and crisp from mildew, but it was perfect. It was her grandmother's diary.

The first several pages depicted the origin of shifting - a tale scribbled in her ancestors' diaries and told around late-night campfires. Lydia could envision her grandmother, perhaps fifteen at her first entry, eager to tell her version of the historic legend. Little had Lillian known, the diary would outlast even her.

Lydia flipped to page one.

Father told me of the Maya today. Upon birth, every mortal child was given a Nahual by the gods, a spiritual being whose essence was of a shape-shifter. The Nahual took the form of powerful beasts, tasked with protecting and guiding their humans to their destinies. Mestaclocan was the first of the Nahual.

Mestaclocan had the ability to change his appearance and manipulate the minds of animals, as did his brethren. He was a protector of mortals. In one tale, Mestaclocan came upon a jaguar and a hunter. Both the mortal and the beast were predators, yet were dying. Mestaclocan could see life within both of them. For he had the temptation of free will, he did not immediately go to rescue the mortal. Instead, he struggled to choose between right and wrong. The mortal represented his spiritual half; the jaguar his animal.

The script became illegible, and Lydia exhaled, an ominous feeling surrounding her. As the last few sentences rang in her mind, she recalled her Initiation just weeks past. Her father had concealed her nature from the rest of the pack, adamantly warning her to do the same. The only weight behind his warning was the look in his eyes: pure fear.

Still caught in her thoughts, Lydia was an unsuspecting target. A hand clamped down on her bare shoulder, bringing her fears to life. With a small shriek, she leapt to her feet and wheeled around, throwing a hard punch. Her fist was caught in a warm, tight grasp: Kaden's.

Speaking of delicious men, she thought, shaking off her dreary mood. Kaden was the beta's son, just months older than her. His pale blue eyes smiled wickedly at hers, and his chestnut-brown hair ruffled ever so slightly in the wind. Puberty had changed him from the awkwardly cute boy she'd known into a strong, handsome man. He was alluring. He was her best friend.

But he also had scared her half to death. "What the hell, Kaden!" She went for another hit at his chest. Again, he barely caught it with a deep chuckle. She was becoming stronger. "Hey, Lydia."

She sighed under her breath, freeing her hand from his grasp after a moment. She couldn't help but forgive him, yet she was unable to hold her tongue, "What are you doing out here? Did Rebekah get tired of her plaything?" Rebekah was that girl you either hated or loved. Perhaps they were alike, Lydia mused, except she'd learnt Rebekah was all bark and no bite.

Kaden's eyes glinted mischievously, a smile hinting at the corners of his lips. "I spent half my afternoon hunting *you* down." He raised his eyebrows inquiringly at the book sprawled in a disheveled array at her feet.

She retrieved it, keeping her face perfectly blank despite her growing unease. "I'm looking at some stuff for my dad. I needed some quiet."

The lie slid from her tongue almost too easily, though Kaden eyed her doubtfully. He knew her better than she knew herself sometimes. "Right. You realize tomorrow's your first shift?"

It was if he could sense her inner turmoil, and though she yearned to spill her guts to him, she couldn't. Lydia nonchalantly agreed, but her mind was on faraway places - the oceans, the islands, the countries that would soon be hers. The full moon was just a shift for some. For Lydia, it was a turning point.

As she stood in the meadow, Lydia knew she would be long gone before the moon reached its apex. In that split second after her bones molded to that of a beast's, her Pack would see her for what she was - an omen of death. She wasn't a wolf, a bear, or a fox; kind, strong, or intelligent.

The full moon was the harbinger of her death if she stayed. But, she *would* protect herself. As she eyed her lifelong friend, Kaden, she hated to tack on: no matter who got in the way.

Lydia had a secret advantage; her Pack wouldn't be convinced, defeated, or outsmarted. But, Lydia was a panther.

She was fast.

NOTE: If you read chapter one before I posted chapter two, I changed the story line. Chapter two won't make much sense unless you reread this. Enjoy!

Chapter 3

The following day, Lydia was on edge. With the coming full moon only hours away, her whole being was aware of the setting sun. As the air cooled, her body grew smoldering hot, and her muscles cramped until it became nearly unbearable. She was pretty snide, needless to say.

Kaden had braved her foul mood, and they had spent the day together. Unlike the others, Rebekah in particular, he wasn't worried about her going off on him. In fact, she did - at least two or three times. But, she couldn't be grateful enough for his just being there. With him dragging her across the village and back, she wasn't left prey to her thoughts of impending doom. She enjoyed her last day.

Kaden and Lydia hiked through the lush mountains around the town - more like, Kaden hiked, and Lydia tried not to skewer herself to be put out of her misery. By midday, Lydia was moaning and groaning with every step.

"Come on, Kaden! Where are you taking me?" But Kaden would only give her that infuriating smile, and hold back a branch so she could get by. A few times, she thought about letting a few branches hit *him*â¦

Kaden abruptly stopped, causing Lydia, who was studiously watching her step, to walk face-first into him. "Ooph!" Before she could protest, Kaden grabbed her wrist and dragged her forward, laughing under his breath. "Just look!"

She gaped, words failing her. A majestic, white waterfall crashed against massive boulders, then fed into the clearest lake she'd ever seen. With the sun sparkling gloriously off the water, it put her beloved meadow to shame.

A shirt crumpled at her feet. Lydia started. "Oh!" Kaden stood before her in all his glory, briskly unzipping his jeans as casually as if he did this everyday. Had it been any guy other than Kadenâ¦She gingerly peeked through her fingers.

Say something, Lydia. Kaden's jeans still clung to his sculpted figure, which she couldn't help but appreciate, regardless. "Soâ¦that's why we're out here." Kaden barked a laugh, and tugged his jeans off. He winked. Swim trunks.

"C'mon, your majesty. Don't make me throw you in."

Lydia bristled at the nickname. She and Kaden had grown up together: crawling babies, giggling toddlers, playful children, and, of course, the awkward preteen years Lydia preferred to forget. Kaden had created countless nicknames for her over the years, many that got him kicked, but this latest one drove her mad.

After he'd hit the "coming-of-age" mark, Lydia sarcastically liked to call seventeen, a job was thrown at him. With his first shift came new responsibilities, some not so pleasant. Kaden, never one for blood and gore, had been furious upon learning he was required to hunt. Kaden dealt with blood on a daily basis now, and skinned rabbits and deer like the rest of them. Yet, it just wasn't for him.

Lydia knew he was jealous. She would become the alpha.

They wasted the day away swimming across the lake, laying in the evening sun, and hiking back home. Lydia strode into her cabin hours later, and turned for the living room, already speaking. "Hey, Da-"

She stopped mid-sentence. A man sat turned from her, his back rigid; the tension in the air was thick. The wood floor creaked as she shifted uncomfortably. Her father looked up and cut off his guest mid-statement, though not before she heard her name andâ¦*Kaden?* From the snippets of conversation she caught, it was clear they were arguing. He shot a pointed look at the hall.

Lydia heaved a sigh, gnawing her lip. "It's important."

Her father stood up swiftly. "Lydia, it will wait." His tone left no room for discussion, but she couldn't help but wonder. *What is he hiding?*

Lydia tromped away to her room, and rummaged for her old backpack.

It was hours later when Lydia was abruptly woken by a sharp jolt in her abdomen. Her skin felt itchy and hot, and her bones kept popping in and out of place. Struggling to breathe through the growing pain, she stumbled from her room, banging off the hallway. She followed the nauseating scent of burning food. Her father was preparing dinner at the stove, something he had taken over since her mother's death though his cooking skills were to be feared.

He swiveled around as she fell against the counter, ignoring the grease that spit out onto her arm with his sudden movement. "Itâ¦hurts," Lydia sobbed.

He slowly nodded, and turned off the stove. "It's starting."

Chapter 4

The next hours were a blur. From nowhere came Kaden's father, who was dialing on his phone the instant he happened upon them. Lydia's father debated heatedly with him, coming close to ripping the phone away a time or two. Lydia was caught up in it all.

What seemed an instant later, her house was swarming with strange people comforting her, though it only added to the growing pain in her head. Nevertheless, she attempted a smile, "Hel-" but doubled over in pain. It took everything to pull herself together, though her eyes stubbornly refused to focus. She searched desperately through the swarm of faces; all she wanted was her dad.

And, as if he could read her thoughts, he was suddenly tugging her to her feet and down the hall to her room once more. *When did I end up on the floor?* Her poster-clad door was slammed behind them and locked. Lydia couldn't help but ask, "Am I dreaming?"

Her father tossed a bundle of cloth at her - a shift - which slipped from her limp fingers. "Stay with me." He gestured at her, turned away, and continued on. "You need to fight the change until we can find Kaden."

She clumsily unbundled the dress, and stepped into it, albeit backwards. Before she could even fix it, her hairbrush bounced onto the bed, and her dad kept on talking. "We're going to the cemetery. Iâ ¦figured you'd want to be with your mother."

The hairbrush slid from her hand, but her hair was mostly brushed, anyway. "Thank you." Tears welled in her eyes, and she busied herself, not wanting him to see her cry. A glance in the mirror didn't improve things much - the glow around her irises was haunting.

It seemed one moment she was slipping on her sandals, and the next she was stumbling along broken headstones and mausoleums. Lydia touched one as she passed, wiping tears from her cheek. "Hi, Mom."

Once they'd reached the dead center of the cemetery, it became eerily quiet. The graves of the Pack's ancestors decorated the ground around her, only visible because of the rising moon. Yet even the moonlight couldn't penetrate the darkness surrounding them in all directions.

"They're coming," Lydia's dad said, and she stifled a cry. It wasn't a cry of pain, but of horror.

They came from the trees, one by one, eyes glowing in the black night. Each member of her Pack filed around her in a carefully arranged circle that left her unable to escape. It was her worst nightmare. Two men entered the graveyard last - Kaden and Byron, whose eyes bore into her the hardest. The circle broke for them, and Byron roughly pushed Kaden forward. "Go."

With dawning realization, Lydia leapt forward, ready to claw Byron's eyes out. Kaden restrained her just in time, murmuring in her ear.

The pieces were put together. Byron was in her house! He and her father, the beta and alpha, had spent their day *bargaining* her. No wonder Lydia's father seemed ecstatic at her plans with Kaden, and had urged her to hold back the change. Lydia had been sold to Kaden.

"It was *my* decision!" Lydia snarled, struggling against Kaden. This boy wasn't anything more than a friend to her! Her father had made him a husband.

"Kaden is your guide, Lydia. You wouldn't survive otherwise." Guiding was a primeval custom for shape-shifters; just as Mestaclocan aided the panther through the first shift, a male would guide a female. Death was too often the outcome for females who experienced it alone - Lydia's aching body was proof enough. It was an intricate form of marriage, in her opinion.

"It was my risk to-" Lydia started to protest, but hissed as pain shot through her. Through a veil of hair, she watched the moon reach its apex. And with it came agony.

She slumped in Kaden's arms, losing consciousness as waves of pain rolled over her. Kaden gently lowered her to the ground, clutching her hand with his own. He spoke urgently in her ear, though she could only wail in reply. Her muscles ripped and bones broke; her veins rubbed together and heart raced faster and faster. She was dying.

As the world faded away, her subconscious dredged up a memory of her mother. One day, a young Lydia had gone running to her, sobbing incessantly. With gentle encouraging, Lydia blubbered, "The other kids said I can't play with them!" Her mother had comforted her with an archaic legend.

It told of a Mayan man teaching his grandson about life. "A fight is going on inside me," he said to the boy. "It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves. One is evil - he is anger, envy, pain, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego." He continued, "The other is good - he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. The same fight is going on inside you - and inside every other person, too." The grandson had thought a moment and asked, "Which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

As Lydia drifted in a place that was neither death nor life, she emphasized with the grandson from her mother's story. The pain was being allowed to get the best of her. She just couldn't feed it any longer.

Lydia struggled back into consciousness, hearing Kaden calling her name over and overâ ¦in her mind? "Wake up, Lydia," he whispered.

As her eyes shot open, it was suddenly over. Her old skin melted away to lean muscle and rippling black fur, and her white dress tore into pathetic shreds. It was silent for a moment as the clearing stood struck by awe. Then, a shot rang out.

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