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## Intermezzo One

Dawn was still an hour away, but Jake had already been awake for some time. The car was loaded, he was packed, and it was time for him to be on the road, if he wanted a good start. Pausing in front of the entertainment center, he considered carefully. *I need something to hold my attention for the trip. Something to stop me from thinking while I'm traveling. That stretch of I-84 is treacherous enough without being lost in thought.* Looking through the collection of CDs, he rejected most of them out of hand. *Classical is out of the question. Most of what we have is romantic music, slow and quiet enough to put me to sleep this early, or too driving. I don't need a speeding ticket to start this trip!* Finally, he settled on a Meatloaf disc Kat had given him two Christmases past. *That should do it.*

As he closed the door behind himself, he ran one last inventory in his mind. Finding nothing amiss, he sat down in the car seat, slid the disc into the car's player, and backed out of the parking space. As he pointed the car toward I-26 and points east, he consciously put the heartache he'd been living with for the past week out of his mind. *This trip is to put an end to all that. Best to start now.*

Shortly after sunrise, Jake pulled into the parking lot at the Multnomah Falls Lodge. The Lodge itself was still closed, but that wasn't why he had come here anyway. Locking the car behind himself, he started up the Falls Trail, just as he had two nights before. Well, almost the same, anyway – he was dressed more normally for a hiker this time, and didn't have his *boken* with him. *And this time, R.T. isn't waiting for me. That makes a big difference.* Jake smiled to himself, a touch bitterly. *Still, I need to do this. That demon needs to be exorcised.*

It took less time for Jake to hike the trail this time; he was at the overlook less than an hour after he started his climb. After the

events of his last visit, the place looked startlingly normal. He took a moment to examine the sign R.T. had slammed into, running his fingers lightly over the wood. It was at it was before the fight, unscarred, unstained, seemingly as eternal as the rock outcropping it stood upon. Closing his eyes, Jake thought, *so little effect. A critical cusp in two lives, and this insignificant little corner of the world couldn't care less. Amazing... and humbling, too.* Opening his eyes once more, he looked around. Slowly, he drifted over to the place he had first seen R.T. that night, and sat where his adversary had. Watching the waterfall, he slipped easily into a reflective trance.

Some time later, he came back to himself. Glancing around, he tried to recall what had disturbed his meditations, when the answer supplied itself. An echo of voices drifted up the trail, accompanied by a quick burst of laughter. With one last look over the falls, and the accompanying thought, *I'm glad. A place this beautiful deserves happy memories,* Jake started back down the trail. He soon passed a troop of Cub Scouts and the attendant adults, smiling at the cubs' cheerful chatter and sense of wonder. With a wave of his own to the fox-femme leading the youngsters, he moved quickly past the troop and headed downtrail at a pace just short of a lope.

Arriving back at his car, Jake checked the angle of the sun. *High enough that I'm not going to be blinded driving into it. Guess I spent the right amount of time up there.* As he unlocked the car door, he heard the scrape of a shoe on the gravel behind him. Turning, he saw a pretty young femme crossbreed approaching him. *Looks to be... hm... cat, fox, and rabbit? Interesting...* “Yes, Miss? Can I help you with something?”

She seemed hesitant to speak, but at his question, she gathered her courage. “Um, excuse me for bothering you, sir, but... were you here two nights ago?” At the question, recognition dawned on Jake.

“Of course! You were the one working the checkstand that night! Yes, that was me.”

“Oh. Do you have a few minutes, sir? I never did get any explanation of all that, and I’d kind of like to know what it was all about.”

Jake paused for a moment, then decided he wasn’t bound to any kind of secrecy. “I can explain parts of it, but I’m still trying to piece together some of what went on. Do you have someplace we can sit while I tell you? I’m afraid it’s a long story...” He quickly locked the door behind himself.

#

“...So that was what brought me here that night. Not the way I would have chosen to visit here for the first time, but I think I’ve got what happened separated from the place in my head.” Jake stopped talking long enough to take a drink of his tea. Telling the whole story had taken quite a bit longer than he had expected, but once he’d started telling Dana about the circumstances, everything had just poured out of him.

She looked across the table at him, her chin resting on folded hands. “You cared a lot about her, didn’t you? Loved her, I should say.”

Jake’s eyes closed momentarily. “Enough to leave her. I couldn’t stay with her and risk destroying her.”

“There’s where I think you’re wrong. That shouldn’t have been your choice alone, and I think you know it. That’s why this is hitting you so hard.” Jake’s eyes popped open, sparking with anger, but Dana continued without giving him a chance to speak. “Marga was an adult; she was quite capable of making her own choices. From what you’ve told me, she knew you’d made a decision and wouldn’t listen if she contradicted you. She was waiting for you to come around, so she could give you her side of it. But that chance never came – R.T. stepped in before she was ready.” Jake flinched, and Dana reached out to put her hand over his. “That was as much her mistake as yours, and neither of you are truly to blame. Neither of

you could have known what would happen. Yes, both of you made mistakes, but not serious ones. The worst one was assuming that you'd both go on as long as necessary – that's a guarantee that none of us get, and it's one that hurts survivors more than anything else can. *It wasn't your fault, Jake. Remember that.*"

Jake swallowed, thinking hard. "Intellectually, I know you're right. Emotionally, it's going to take a while for me to resolve it. But thanks for listening – you've got some good advice, and I'll try to pay attention. Thank you."

She smiled at him. "No problem. You needed to get some of this out where you could take a look at it, and I'm a good listener. If I helped, I'm glad. But I think you need to get on the road – it's almost noon, and you have a ways to go. Why'd you come this way, anyway? It's quite a detour..."

He laughed. "I had to come back, and the sooner the better. I couldn't let bad associations build about the Falls. I'm glad I did, though. It gave me a chance to meet a new friend..." He drew her paw up for a quick kiss.

Her smile broadened. "Charmer. Well, you need to get going, and I'd like to get some time up at the Fall's head before I need to clock in. So I guess this is goodbye for now..." At his inquiring look, she continued. "I get the feeling this won't be the last time. Take care, Jake." She rose and headed for the door, leaving Jake thinking. *Wow. Well, she's right... I'd better get going.*

#

Some two hours later, Jake's car was making the final climb to Highrock Springs Campground. The campground had been officially closed for three weeks now, but the Forestry Service had no objection to people using it at their own risk. Not that Jake had any worries about being crowded – Highrock was one of the highest-altitude campgrounds around Mt. Hood, and one of the least

developed. Which was exactly what Jake wanted – an escape from civilization and other people.

After parking in the empty lot, Jake got out of the car and spent a few minutes taking deep breaths of the cold, thin air. *No clouds in the sky, and no scent of moisture. Probably a cold, clear night tonight. Well, if I'm going to be ready by sundown, I'd best get started.* He unloaded his gear from the car, then carefully locked it. On a whim, he popped the hood and disconnected the battery cables. With a slightly feral grin, he thought, *that should keep it from disappearing while I'm out there.* Quickly, he donned his gear: flat quiver under his backpack, tent and bedroll slung under the backpack, bow in hand. *Ready to go. I think about an hour out...*

#

About three-thirty, Jake decided on a clearing where he could pitch his camp. About twenty yards away, there was a small lake – an oversized pond, really, but he'd spotted signs that the water was occupied. After quickly setting up his tent and building a fire pit, he pulled a fishing line from his pack and headed for the shoreline. Tossing the line out by hand, he settled in to catch his dinner and to think. Finally, he had the leisure to recall that night in the station...

*Jake and Detective Broghan entered the questioning room. Already waiting were R.T., a pair of uniformed guards, and tiger, who rose as they entered. 'I'm Mr. Moore's attorney, Arthur Ventura. I'd like to go on record as opposed to this proceeding.'*

*R.T. interrupted him. 'It's all right, Mr. Ventura. This is at my request. Let's just get this over with.'*

*'Jake, before we start, I want to apologize to you. I don't expect your forgiveness – I don't want your forgiveness – but I have to say some things to you, and you need to hear the rest of this.'*

*'First, I confess to killing Marga Thorvaldsenn. I'm not going to fight the charge. I killed her, and it was premeditated. I'm making this confession'*

*knowingly, and against Mr. Ventura's advice. Detective, what do you need to know?"*

*Mike blinked. "Are you sure about this, Mr. Moore? With a confession like that, the D.A. could push for lethal injection. Are you aware of that?"*

*R.T. laughed, a bitter sound. "I've been advised. It doesn't hold any fear for me any more. To be honest — you're familiar with the phrase, 'suicide by cop'?" When everyone in the room, guards included, nodded, he continued. "I was trying for something similar. That's why I tried to call Jake out. I was hoping he would manage to kill me. I deserve to die; I killed an innocent femme, just because she couldn't love me. I did worse than kill her — but you already know about that. I became a monster. I did it deliberately." He lapsed into silence, staring at the table before him.*

*Mike cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should start at the beginning... but first... Mr. Moore. You've had your Miranda rights read to you. Did you understand those rights?"*

*R.T. looked up, irritation blazing in his eyes. "Yes. But..."*

*Mike held up his paw. "I'm asking as a formality. This interview is being recorded, both on audio tape and video. In addition, there are observers watching through the one-way glass over there." He gestured to the mirror taking up a wall of the bare room. "One of them is the D.A. Now, will you tell us, in your own words, of the events of September twelfth, 1999?"*

*The black cat nodded. "The important part started about six-thirty that evening. I took my car to an undeveloped spot I knew of — I can point it out on a map, but that's about the best I can do otherwise. Leaving the car there, I caught a bus from a stop near there to Marga's neighborhood. I had a date for dinner at her place. A sympathy date, I guess — she was a friend, but I couldn't ever be any more than that as long as she still held out hope of getting back together with Jake there." He closed his eyes, and a tear trickled down the side of his muzzle. "I knew that, and I'd already decided what I was going to do.*

*"I got to her place a little after seven... maybe five minutes after the hour. She invited me in, and we talked for a while. She served dinner — chicken and*

*pasta, I believe, with white wine. I turned it down, asked for water instead. When she went into the kitchen for that, I dosed her glass. Rohypnol, a small dose. We ate and talked more over dinner, and she started falling under the drug. When she was completely under it, I got up and came around the table to her. Took her paws, started nuzzling at her face. Drew her up, and led her into the bedroom.*

*“I knew what I was doing was wrong; it was rape, even if she wasn’t fighting me. I stripped her, then pushed her down on the bed. She kept trying to pull me down with her — that was the drug, not anything she’d have done. I tied her to the bedposts and gagged her, then I went back out to the dining room. Cleaned things up so it would look like she was alone for the night. Then... then I got that knife from my jacket, and went back into the bedroom.*

*“The dose had worn off by then — she was aware again. She knew what was going to happen — some of it, anyway — I could see it in her eyes. She was terrified, trying to say something behind the gag. She tried to scream when she saw the knife. She seemed relieved when I dropped that...*

*“I had my way with her. Just about anything I could do, I did. I knew I was only going to get one chance, so I didn’t leave anything undone. It just kept escalating — first I did all I could on my own, then I started using the blade. She kept trying to beg me from behind the gag, but I wouldn’t listen. Finally, I put my hands around her throat... I think that was when it finally occurred to her that I was going to kill her. She kept struggling, but her eyes... it was like she was resigned to it.” R.T. lapsed into silence, his eyes looking at something in the past.*

*Jake became conscious of his hands — his claws were buried in the wood of the table. With a wrenching effort, he pulled them loose, causing both Mike and the lawyer to glance sharply at him. “Up at the falls, R.T. — you told me her last words were for me... something about...”*

*R.T. raised his eyes, met Jake’s glare. “I lied,” he said, his voice colored with regret. “You had already told me you meant to bring me back alive. I had to try and get you so mad you’d kill me. I never wanted to be brought in alive.*

*So I tried to push you over the edge. I never took the gag out of her mouth, Jake – I couldn't take the chance of her screaming."*

*Mike cleared his throat. "Okay, back to your statement. After you – finished – what did you do?"*

*R.T. sighed. "I took the keys to her car. Took the knife with me, took her car out to where mine was waiting – I tossed the knife in the water in the ditch, then drove the car in over it. Left her car, took mine, and drove back home. And had nightmares all night."*

A tug on the fishing line brought Jake out of his memories. Hauling the fish in to shore, he found himself wondering how long he'd sat thinking. When he put it into his catch bag, he got a partial answer. *Long enough to catch three fish... I guess I haven't lost any of Dad's training.* Baiting the hook and throwing it back out, he thought back to the rest of that long, long night. It was more of the same, he and Mike posing questions, and listening to R.T. answer. The memories still hurt and carried a heavy freight of rage and grief, but they didn't rise up with the strength that had occupied Jake for so long. *Which means I've already relived everything important. Now, I need to decide what to do about it.*

Jake coiled the fishing line and gathered up the catch bag, now holding a dozen fish, and started back to his camp. *Hub. A dozen. That might well carry me through Tuesday; I must have been really distracted to keep going so long.* Quickly, he built a fire in the pit, then set about cleaning his catch while the fire settled into a comfortable, steady burn. By the time he'd finished that little chore, and the attendant clean-up, the fire had died down to a bed of coals. Digging his kit out of the pack, Jake pulled out the frying pan and began cooking four of the fish. The entire time his hands were occupied, his mind wrestled with the question: *so how do I feel about it? And what do I do now?* Dinner came and went, and still the problem remained. As he returned to his camp after cleaning the dishes, the thought crossed his mind, *this is ridiculous. I'm never this indecisive. I have to come up with something.*

Staring into the fire, Jake considered. *I have to decide something. Right, wrong, or indifferent, I have to reach a conclusion and put this behind me. So what do I decide?*

*Well, I've got three issues facing me. Let's take a look. First, there's Kat. We've made a start, but there's still some healing needed there. Second, I have to come to some resolution about Marga – in my heart, I still haven't accepted that she's gone. And until I do, that's just going to linger. And what do I decide about R.T?*

*Kat... I can't do anything about that right now. That problem was caused when I made a decision without her, and if I try to fix it without her, that'll just make things worse. I have to table that one until I can talk with her.*

*Marga? He probed his feelings, came to a realization. Not yet. That problem is waiting on something. Which leaves...*

*R.T. How do I feel about him now?*

*A grin, equal parts humor and pain, flashed across Jake's face. Well, he's no longer a friend, that's for sure. But what is he?*

*He's not an enemy. He lost, and all he has left is the wait for his destiny. He's not even fighting that. I think all he can be for now is a part of my past.*

*So what do I do with that? Just forget him?*

*No! I can't do that – his memory is inextricably bound up with Marga's, and I won't be able to forget her.*

*Forgive him?*

*Can I?*

*...*

*No. I don't have that right. Only two furs have that right. She can't forgive him, not any more, and he won't forgive himself. He's already passed sentence, and is only waiting for someone to carry it out.*

*May his soul find peace and rest.*

...

Something drew Jake's attention, something across the fire from himself. Ears and whiskers twitching, he could sense nothing, but something had disturbed his reverie. Something that was still there, despite the fact that he could see nothing, smell nothing... On a hunch, he closed his eyes and tried to enter a meditative state.

*I wondered how long it would take you.* The voice inside his head was heartbreakingly familiar, a sound he'd longed to hear since he first heard the news. She was also deeply amused.

"Marga..." He "looked" across the fire to see her welcome black-and-white face smiling back at him. "How... how real is this? Is that really you?"

The amusement refused to die away. *That depends on your point of view. I am the part of Marga you'll always carry in your heart. How real is an emotion? How real is your love for me? That's how real I am...*

"Real enough, then. I still love you, catling, and I think I always will."

*I know. And I'll always be with you, one way or another. Have you decided what to do about R.T?*

He sighed. "Not so much a decision, as a realization. Whether I will or no, my heart's forgiven him. What troubles me is, I don't know if I have the right to do so. I wasn't the one he committed the worst wrong against: he did worse to both you and to himself. But the decision's been made, will I or no?"

*Perhaps. But you can't make your decision based on either him or me, only on yourself. However... if it makes you feel any better, I've already forgiven him. Yes, what he did was terrible, and no, I don't know if I could have forgiven him had I lived, but I hold no grudge now. Your memories of me don't hold any*

*place for vindictiveness. So, I forgive him, and let that pass from me. Will you do the same, Jake? I wouldn't want your life tainted with bitterness over me.*

Again, he sighed. "I really don't have a choice. As I said, my heart's already made the decision. All I can do is live with it. But my heart is smarter than I am – I feel lighter, now that I'm no longer carrying that hate. Thank you, love."

She rose, came around the fire to him. As she sank down on his lap and wrapped her arms around him, he was startled to *feel* her there, a comfortable, familiar weight. As he started to speak, one finger rested across his muzzle. *Hush. This may be all in your mind, but it's real for all that.* With that, she pulled him into a kiss. Releasing him, she continued. *I will return to you, dear one. And never doubt, I love you...* Rising, she walked to the edge of the clearing, fading from view as she went.

Opening his eyes, Jake realized he felt... *happy. She isn't gone. She's with me, now and forever.*

*Thank you, Marga.*

#

For a long time in the deepening night, Jake sat watching the fire, thinking nothing in particular, merely *being*. Slowly, he came back to himself, and realized he wasn't alone. There was no one in sight, but he could again feel eyes on himself – knowing, *aware* eyes. Oddly, the sensation didn't bother him. He could feel curiosity, and wisdom, but no hostility. Finally, he spoke. "You're welcome to join me."

*I thank you for your courtesy.* The voice, like Marga's, echoed in his mind. Unlike hers, it was male. As he watched the treeline, something stirred. A good-sized wolf, a *wild* wolf, entered the clearing and approached the firepit. Dropping onto his haunches, the wolf spoke again. *I felt it courteous to wait until She had left. I offer you greetings in the name of my pack, and would know your business in our range.*

The thought carried the overtones of a ritual, but one with substance. Jake's answer was important.

"I have come to your range to heal a hurt, Wise One. It is not my intent to challenge your pack for this place, or to hunt your prey. I will be here two more days, and then I will return to the place from whence I came." Something in the wolf's presence inspired Jake's formal tone.

The wolf sniffed the air. *I scent no blood, no sickness, only sorrow and confusion, fading. Your injury was of the heart?*

"Yes. The one you felt before, the femme... she was my mate. She runs no more."

*I share your sorrow. My mate, too, no longer lives. Though... it is said, your kind mates for but a season. How is it that you carry the pain of a broken life-bond?*

Jake smiled, gently. "Perhaps in the wild my kind don't mate for life. Civilization is different – we all learn from one another, and behave in ways that our brothers in the wild would not understand. Out here, most cats are solitary creatures, coming together only a few times a season. Back there, we often stay together longer, many for their entire lives. I felt... perhaps she and I could have been such."

The wolf looked at Jake, studying him carefully. *You are not like those who come here. You... you do not disrupt the land. You belong. I think, perhaps, we can share a range, you, and my pack.* He rose and turned to return to the forest. *Come, if you will.*

Jake rose to his feet. "A moment, please." He grabbed his camp shovel and quickly covered what remained of the fire, tramping it down firmly. When he turned back, the wolf was gazing at him steadily.

*Why did you do that?* There was no accusation in the question, simply curiosity.

“Safety. Fire can be a useful tool, but if you don’t treat it with care, it can become dangerous. I have no wish to burn down the forest.”

*I was right. You belong. Come.* The wolf led the way into the forest, heading for higher ground.

#

As they climbed, they continued their conversation, learning from and of each other. *It’s like coming home,* Jake thought. *Perhaps I was right when I told Kat I was a throwback.*

*I think perhaps you were born in the wrong form,* the wolf thought at him. *I have met with your brethren of the wild on occasion, as part of my duty to the pack, and you are not like them. There is much more of the wolf in you than the mountain cat.* There was a pause in the commentary, as if he was reluctant to continue, and then: *I think... but no. That cannot be my decision alone. That must wait.*

Jake’s ears pricked up at that. “Then you aren’t an absolute ruler? You have limits on what you can do?”

Amusement colored the answer, overlaying a deep sorrow. *Don’t we all? Can anyone order the sun to stop? Reverse the seasons? Had I no limits, my mate would once more run with me, and never again leave me. But I understand your meaning. Yes, I have limits. I can decide what I will, but if it is not for the good of the pack, they will not follow me. It is not so much a casting out, as me going where they cannot. So I can choose to do anything – anything within my power – but only for myself. In the end, that is all any of us can choose. That the pack chooses to follow me is a mark of respect for my age, and my strength, and honor that I have always chosen for the good of the pack before. When that changes, I go my own way. This is the law.*

Jake nodded, knowing the wolf could sense his agreement. “That makes sense. I’ve often wondered – ” He broke off the sentence and went into an alert crouch. “The forest just changed. Something... something is aware of us...”

The wolf stopped to look back at Jake, so much like his old teacher that Jake couldn't help but relax. *Indeed. My pack has just become aware of you. Come, they rest nearby.*

As the wolf walked on, Jake noticed a change in his companion. It wasn't anything physical, but he seemed... *more*, somehow. More regal, more powerful... *more charismatic. That's it. He's taking up his role as a leader. This is a creature I could follow, I think...*

Entering a clearing, Jake found his self-control tested to the limits. No less than a dozen wolves occupied the place, and all, with the exception of his companion of the last half-hour, gazed at him. Fighting the urge to grin nervously, Jake found himself irreverently thinking, *so this is what lunch feels like...*

A wave of gentle mental laughter echoed back to him from his companion. *Somehow, I doubt it. Your instincts tell you to fear, with good reason, but you do not. There is no panic in you. No, you do not share the feelings of prey.* With two powerful leaps, the alpha reached the top of a moss-covered boulder and settled into a comfortable position. In a voice which Jake knew the entire pack could hear, the alpha spoke. *Hear me! I call Council!*

Instantly, the focus of the pack intensified and shifted from Jake to the packleader. An old wolf, older even than the leader, rose and responded. *We will hear you, Akela. What matter do you bring before the Pack?* It was clear from her tone that this was a ritual reply.

*We have among us one found roaming the pack range. I have questioned him, and this is who he is.* At this, shock ran around the glade. It was quite apparent to Jake that, whatever the pack had expected, it wasn't this. Yet despite the surprise he could feel, no one interrupted as the alpha gave them a gestalt of who and what Jake was. Jake was surprised to find himself included in the broadcast, and amazed at how much the alpha – *Akela*, he reminded himself – had learned.

For a long moment, there was no response. Then, the old female (“I can't use that term about a Lady like her.” “It does not carry the

*same meaning among us. But I understand your need. Should you need to address her, she is the pack's Lorekeeper.*") again spoke. *We have heard you, Akela. This one is new among us, but a stranger no more. What would you have us consider?*

Akela replied, *this one is much like ourselves: brave, loyal to his own, honorable. He lives by the Laws of the Pack, without knowing them. I would –*

*Hold!* Another female voice, this one much younger, interrupted the alpha. She rose and stalked toward the boulder, stopping at a distance Jake could feel was insolently close. *Is it your intention to bring this one into the pack?*

Akela met her gaze calmly. *Yes. You have an objection?*

*I do not know yet. I would have a clarification of the Law.* Turning to the older femme, she continued. *Lorekeeper...*

The Lorekeeper's voice was colored in dignity, a pronouncement of office. *It has happened, in this pack and in others, that one not of the People has joined the Pack. Such is uncommon, but does not violate the Law, granddaughter.*

*I recall the stories, Grandmother. Such was not my concern. However, perhaps I addressed you out of turn.* She turned to face Jake, and spoke directly to him, the first to do so besides Akela. *Do I understand correctly your intention to return to your own range?*

Uncomfortably aware of the regard of the entire pack, Jake knelt. Meeting her eyes, he carefully answered. "Yes. In two days' time, I will depart for my own place, away from the mountain."

Turning back to the Lorekeeper, she continued. *I do not recall the Law on this. Can such a one join the Pack, intending to leave it?*

For a long time, no one moved. The pack awaited the Lorekeeper's pronouncement, apparently content to wait as long as necessary. Finally, she answered. *The Law is silent on this. Normally, one only leaves the Pack when one is cast out. But this is a convention, not a*

*requirement of the Law. Those not of the People who have joined the Pack have often left it after a time, and not all were cast out. Indeed, a few have come and gone as they willed, members of the Pack and of the Others at the same time. But it is a question to be considered.*

*Then it is not a violation of the Law. Turning back to the boulder, she addressed the leader. I have no objection from the Law. However, I would ask for a time to consider the matter, a space of a day.*

*He looked at her, apparently weighing her words. This is a reasonable request. But what of his need to hunt? Would you have him go hungry while you think?*

*Her answer was tart. I see no reason to deny him guesting rights for the day. It is your decision, of course, but I have no objections. Jake could feel a murmur of agreement from the rest of the pack.*

*Then it is done. Turning his gaze back to Jake, he continued. I extend to you the hospitality of the pack for the space of a day. You may hunt our range, drink from our waters. Be welcome, friend. And return to this place as the sun sets tomorrow. Turning his gaze first to the young she-wolf, then to the Lorekeeper, he spoke in a less formal tone. Mother of my mate, I think you have found a new Lorekeeper to train...*

*Her reply carried the overtones of laughter. So I knew three seasons ago. So I have been doing, mate of my daughter.*

*He leapt down from the boulder, landing next to the young femme. Come. He lead her across the clearing to Jake. I would have the two of you meet. Already, I have told my daughter who you are. This is who she is. A feeling of identity surged into Jake's mind, showing him who she was, how she thought, how she felt. Turning his gaze on his daughter, Akela added, I leave it to you to guide him back to the place where he rests, Daughter.*

*As you wish, Father. She walked past Jake, stopping long enough to turn and send the thought to him, follow me, if you would.*

*Interesting, Jake thought as he rose to follow her. Is she hostile to me, or not?*

*You are the guest of my pack. What else you may be remains to be seen.*

#

It had been an intriguing night, Jake reflected as he tossed his line out into the water. She had stayed with him the entire night, to his surprise. And they had talked. She had an insatiable curiosity and an active mind, asking endless questions and challenging his answers whenever they made no sense to her. When the topic had flowed around to Kat, she had demanded, *tell me of her. Who is she?* The demand had taken him aback – his first reaction was *how can I put this in words?* With surprising tact and understanding, the she-wolf hadn't answered; she let him work it out for himself. Hesitantly at first, and then with greater confidence, he pictured his sister. Along with the images came other things: how she thought, what she meant to him. How he depended on her, the things he did for her. Her personality and her moods.

And how he had hurt her. How much he regretted that, and wanted to repair what had been done.

He put all that together in his mind, and let the wolf share it.

Her response surprised him. *Father is right. You are more like us than you seem. More like him. He may be making an error in this.*

“Why?”

*Your pack is smaller. But you, too, are alpha. Two alphas in a pack is trouble in the making.*

He considered her words, then shook his head. “In my own range, I am *sometimes* alpha – not always. But out here, I can't be alpha – not for a long time. There is too much I don't know. Out here, I'm a strange mix of cub and adult. Some things I know, some things I can do. But I can't survive on just my natural abilities –

civilization weakens us too much to survive without tools. I can survive almost indefinitely out here, but if I lost the things here in this camp... I would have to give up. I'd have to go home, or starve."

*I don't think so. If you had no retreat, I feel you would find some way to carry on. But... how can one be sometimes alpha? Either one is, or isn't. There is no sometimes about it.*

"It's different down there. In my home, I am alpha – because Kat chooses to regard me that way. She is strong enough that she could be alpha if she chose. And elsewhere – when I am..." He paused, wondering how to phrase *at work*, then gave up. "When I am in my second range, Janice is alpha. I have given my loyalty to her there. Within the Company, Matt was alpha, because he was the one who could keep us together. As I said, it's *different*. I don't know how else to describe it."

*She sat in thought for a long time. Then – I don't know if I could live in your range. It confuses me. Here, things are simple and follow the Law. There is one alpha in the pack, because two alphas would weaken it. Those who are of the pack follow the alpha because he is strong and wise; he chooses what is best for the pack. You do this in your range. You are alpha. Given time to learn the ways of the Pack, you would do it here, too, and that would be trouble. You would grow stronger, and soon you would be forced to either go rogue, or challenge Father. Or you would take part of the pack, and go to seek your own range.*

Her voice sounded much smaller. *I think... I think, maybe... I would follow you, were that to happen...*

They sat a while in companionable silence, and drifted off to sleep...

#

Earlier that morning, she had left him to hunt. He had cooked another couple of fish, then decided to restock his supply. Now he

sat quietly, occasionally pulling a fish from the water as he reviewed the file he had brought with him.

*Jane Ellen Burroughs. Female, naturally. Twenty-one years old... hm. Younger than we normally get, particularly in an engineering position. What's her background?*

*Graduated at the end of last month from University of Wyoming, Laramie. Jake's eyebrows rose: Master's degree, electrical engineering, with a minor in mathematics. I'm impressed. A 3.9 G.P.A, too. How the devil did she do that in three years? High school, high school... oh. It was five years. Still, that means she graduated high school at sixteen... I'm still impressed. He flipped back to the first page, took a look at the file photo included in the packet. Attractive, too. Could that be the trap Janice is worried about? Some sort of Mata Hari play?*

Considering that thought carefully (and pulling in another fish in the mean time), Jake decided that, while he needed to look over her professional qualifications, they weren't going to help him with the problem at hand. Once more tossing his hook into the water, he paged through until he reached the psychological evaluation. *A touch of claustrophobic reaction... well, most of us have that to one degree or another. Hm, come to think of it, her index is lower than mine. I don't think I'm going to have to deal with a screaming panic reaction, anyway. Somewhat introverted, but highly self-motivated.* He snorted. *With her academic record, I think I already figured that one out. Well, what else do the staff shrinks have to say?* Just then, another fish hit the line, forcing Jake to pause his reading.

*Now, where was I? Claustro index, personality profile, oh yes. I was right about here... uh oh.* He blinked, then read the passage he had just found more carefully. *I think I just found the trap. "Muted fear/ antipathy reaction to males, probably stemming from repressed conflicts with father figure. Similar reaction to predator species, source unknown. Prognosis: potentially disruptive psychological condition, evaluated as low probability."* Ouch. Jake closed his eyes, then raised them heavenward. "Janice, I owe you one. That could have been a disaster in the making..." Carefully, Jake read through the psych evaluation section, trying to see just how

much of a problem he had on his paws. He quickly discovered that the edited version which made it into the basic employee profile wasn't enough to tell him what the problem was, just where the potential minefield lay. *Well, that'll just have to be enough. I'll have to move carefully until I can find out more on my own.*

*Is there trouble?* The thought came unexpectedly into his mind.

Glancing over his shoulder, he discovered the she-wolf watching him. "Not for your pack, milady," he replied. "One of my packs is admitting a new member, and it is my duty to teach her the ways – much as you are doing for me here."

Humor tinged her reply. *So you saw that. You may not know all our ways, but you see surprisingly clearly sometimes.*

He answered with his own overtones of laughter. "As well I should. I'm not sure you realize just how old I am."

*Oh? And how many seasons have you run, cub?* She tried for a haughty tone, came across teasing.

"This will be my twenty-fourth winter, my teacher," he grinned back at her.

*!!! How is that possible? You are of an age with Father! Only the Lorekeeper is clearly older than that!* She was clearly shocked by this.

"I've told you before: things are different down there. I think you are only now realizing *how* different." He sent a feeling of sympathy, then continued. "To be fair, I need to tell you this: we stay cubs for much longer down there. While I had the duties of an adult earlier than most would believe, I have only run as an adult for four seasons now. I think that as adults, you and I are of an age." *Certainly, your mind feels closer to my own age than your father's, milady!*

Shock still colored her response, but embarrassment was there as well. *Thank you. But I need to think on this... You have thrown my world out of balance.*

“I apologize. I didn’t mean to do so. Is there anything I can do to help?”

*I don’t think so. I think this is something I must think about, and accept in my own time.* She hesitated, then asked diffidently, *if it isn’t discourteous... how long do your people run?*

He thought for a moment, then answered slowly. “It’s not discourteous... but it isn’t easy to answer, either. You see, it’s different for different species.” At her blank look, he elaborated. “Out here, wolves live longer than squirrels, true?” At her silent affirmative, he went on. “Just so with us, though it isn’t as noticeable. But to complicate matter, my sister and I are not entirely one species.”

*How is that possible? I do not understand...*

He sighed – this was going to be difficult to explain. “Down there, it’s possible for different species to mate and have cubs. It’s difficult, but it sometimes happens – and when it does, the cubs often have traits in common with both mother and father.

“My mother was a domestic cat, as were both her parents, and as far back as they can trace. My father, too, appeared to be a domestic cat, and his mother – my grandmother – *was* purely a domestic cat. His *father*, though – my grandfather – was a mixed-breed. His mother was a domestic cat as well, but his father... well, we’re not sure if he was a mountain lion or a lynx, since the two are often confused when the memories go back that far, but we *do* know he was of a different species.

“Mostly, there aren’t many signs of the mixed breeding when it gets as far as this has, but I do carry a few.” He held up the tuft at the tip of his tail to illustrate, and spoke again. “I have this, and the tips of my ears are also tufted. My fur is a bit too coarse for a purebred housecat, and my feet still have claws. It marks me as different, down there.”

*I'm sure this is important down there – I can feel that in your mind – but what does it have to do with my question?* She looked puzzled. *I can feel that it relates, but I don't see how.*

“You’re right,” he answered. “Well, to shorten it to something manageable, the Lorekeepers down there have noticed that those who are mixed-breed tend to be healthier and have longer lives than either species they spring from. If they are right, my sister and I can expect to run another fifty seasons, maybe more.”

She sat in shocked silence for a long time. When she spoke again, her voice sounded lost. *Do... do your parents still run?*

Jake squeezed his eyes shut against the unexpected pain. *I thought I had dealt with that.* “My mother stopped running sixteen seasons ago, killed by one of our own predators. My father...When she was taken from him, he stopped wanting to live.”

He felt the sympathy coming from the wolf, but the dam was broken. Now that it was coming out, there was nothing he could do to stop it. “He knew Kat and I weren’t ready to run on our own, so he carried on as best he could. For twelve y- twelve seasons, he continued as our alpha, doing what he could for us, while we did everything we could to help him. All that time, we could feel the pain he carried, the pain of a broken life-bond, but we could never understand the depths of it.” Tears were welling out from under his eyelids now, rolling unchecked down his muzzle. “He did everything he could for us, raised us until we were no longer cubs. Then, when we could run on our own, he left our pack. He went off to die.”

*I grieve with you. How long ago did he... die?*

The tears refused to stop. Choking down the lump in his throat, Jake answered. “He’s still dying. The Lorekeepers where he went say he may live another fifteen years, or longer. He wants to die, but death doesn’t come for him...” His voice choked off into sobs.

For a long time, Jake sat hunched in misery, fighting to regain control of himself, aware of nothing but his pain. When he was finally able to take notice of the world again, the first thing he felt was a comforting weight leaning against his back, and a muzzle pressed along his own. Gently, he reached up and scratched along her jawline. Sniffing a little, he said, “thank you for listening. It helps, a bit.”

*You’ve carried this pain for a long time, cub. And now you carry it again, not just for your parents, but for your lost mate. Please forgive me – I did not mean to disturb old hurts, or give you new ones.*

“For stirring up old hurts – there is no need to ask my forgiveness, though if you need it, I give it to you. I came up here because of those hurts, to heal or to die. I need time to grieve, and I can’t get it down there. And you gave me no new hurts. You gave me the ability to face the old ones directly, when I couldn’t on my own. For that, I thank you.” Gently, he rubbed his muzzle along hers. “You’ve treated me as more than a guest, milady – you’ve treated me as family, and I needed that. Thank you.”

Her voice came gently. *You have stopped being a guest, cub. You were in need, and I couldn’t deny you. You are family.*

They sat together in silence for the rest of the afternoon. For the first time in a long time, Jake felt peace.

#

As twilight gathered, Jake picked up his catch bag and coiled his fishing line. In a teasing tone, the wolf commented, *you have hunted exceptionally well. Will you truly eat all those, or have you overhunted?*

Jake chuckled. “I don’t think I could manage thirty fish on my own. Besides, I still have enough back at the camp to last me until I’m ready to return home. But it occurred to me – if I’m to act as a member of the pack, shouldn’t I share in the hunting duties? Tell me, do you like fish?”

*Hm. I do enjoy them, but we don't get them often. Wolves are not built for hunting in the water...* Her eyes sparkled with laughter. *I think the pack will think well of you for this.*

“I thought as much. Even if the pack refuses me, consider it my gift, as thanks for allowing me to remain as a guest.”

*Then let us return to the pack. It is time.*

#

They entered the pack's clearing together, and proceeded to the base of the rock where Akela waited. Jake knelt in front of the boulder and began removing fish from his catch bag. “Greetings, packleader. I bring the results of my hunt, to share with the pack.”

*Indeed. This is a handsome gift you give us. The pack thanks you.* Turning his gaze to his daughter, he spoke again. *And what have you decided, cub?*

*I have accepted this one, Father. He is of my pack.*

*Oh? And should the pack decide against him?* His tone was formal, but there was a note of challenge to it – challenge, and a deeply hidden chuckle.

*He is of my pack, Father.*

He made a great show of considering this, and finally relented. *Then it is well for you, my daughter, that yours was the last decision. The others were only waiting for you to decide.* The smile carried through clearly in his voice. Turning back to Jake, he said, *you are of our pack. Though you will return to your own range, know that you will always be welcome in ours. Leave and return as you please, Outland Cub; you have a place here whenever you choose.* A wave of acceptance, acceptance for who he was, washed over Jake.

His eyes bright, Jake smiled back. “Thank you, Akela. I will carry this in my heart always, and I will return when I can.”

#

Jake took one last look around the camp. What little trash he had generated was gone, buried with the ashes in the filled-in firepit. Outside of that one bit of disturbed ground, the clearing looked just as it had when he had hiked in on Sunday afternoon. All his gear was on his back, and he was ready to depart. Suddenly, he felt eyes upon him. Turning, he saw two grey forms in the treeline at the edge of the clearing.

Nodding, he greeted them. “Packleader. Sister. I bid you farewell.”

She replied first. *Be well, Brother. I will run with you again.*

*Indeed, she will. Go in peace, cub, and be welcome when you return.* Akela turned and walked back into the forest, leaving his daughter. She rose and approached Jake.

*I would have you know my name, Brother. I am Tarhea. Take my affection with you... Jacob.*

He knelt and ruffled the fur along her jaw. “I will. And you have mine... my sister.”

Mischievously, she darted forward and licked the tip of his nose. *Come. I will walk with you part of the way.*

#

As Jake pulled into the apartment complex, he noticed a familiar Lincoln pulling away. Quickly, he unloaded the car and climbed the stairs to the apartment, whistling happily. As he entered, Kat’s surprised voice greeted him. “Jake! I didn’t expect you back ‘til tomorrow!”

Smiling, he said, “Forgot I had a meeting with Janice tomorrow. So what did Jeff have to say?”

“Good news. Carl is awake, and it looks like he’ll make a full recovery – not as fast as he’d like, but he should be mobile again by the end of next month.” She grinned. “According to Jeff, he’s already trying to convince the Chief to let him come back to work.”

Jake laughed. “It doesn’t surprise me. I take it the Chief isn’t having any of it?”

“Nope.” She wrapped him up in a hug. “I take it your trip went well?”

He smiled again, returning her hug. “Yeah. Met some good furs up there. They helped a lot.”

She pulled back in surprise. “There were *other* people crazy enough to camp up there this late in the year? You’re going to have to tell me about it.”

He laughed again. “You’re not going to believe me. I’ll tell you, but you won’t believe it...”