

FADE TO GREY
by Teric

NOTE: This is a speculative work of fiction and is not to be considered as canon for "Zig Zag the Story". Character Zig Zag and her grandfather created by Max Blackrabbit. Characters James Sheppard and Max created by James Bruner. Character Douglass James Sheppard ("DJ"), Kebrina Gentry, Dan Gentry, Zuri Gentry and Zephram Gentry, Anatol (Zig Zag's grandfather's name) created by Tigermark. All other characters created by Teric unless otherwise noted.

Artwork on page 14 by Philip J. Eggerding.

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The soft morning glow gave way to a bright ray of light as the sun peeked over the Tennessee mountains. For the last hour, James Sheppard had been vaguely aware of the growing light within the room, but his fatigue kept him from stirring. The old, brown recliner chair where he sat was not as comfortable as the bed, but it was soft enough to relax his tired muscles and allow him to rest comfortably. He wondered how long it had been since he had spent a night in his own bed. "Two weeks at least," he thought to himself.

James opened his eyes slightly, and yawned in the growing light of the morning. With an effort, he brought up a paw to rub the sleep away from his eyes. He brushed his glasses as he did so, pushing them further down his muzzle. The rims fell askew from around his ears, causing his glasses to dangle dangerously on the tip of his nose. With his left paw, he reached up and took them before they fell, drawing them down to his lap.

With a sigh, the coyote sat up in the recliner and stretched his sore arms. He glanced out through the large sliding glass doors that comprised the side wall of the room. Smiling slightly, he took in the familiar trees and grass of his backyard, and the beautiful mountains in the distance. The autumn morning was crisp, with a chill in the air. Dew hung densely upon the lower tree branches, bathing the red and orange leaves in sparkling highlights that danced in the morning sun.

With a start, his eyes quickly moved to a computer monitor in the far corner. Squinting slightly, he struggled vainly to read the display. After replacing his glasses, James saw the familiar blue light rhythmically flashing in the upper left corner of the monitor, with a bright yellow number 82 next to it. He let out a silent exhale of relief. His eyes moved from the computer monitor along the wiring which connected it to the sleeping form in the bed nearby. With slow, rasping breaths, her form moved the bed covers up and down.

For minutes, he took in the view of his wife in the bed before him. Zig Zag's face was turned toward him, her eyes closed, her features soft. The sharp black and white pattern of stripes that ran between her eyes and down her muzzle had faded over the years, the black turning to a silvery grey against snowy white. Though he had tucked the blankets up to her shoulders the night before, James noticed that she had worked them down to her elbows as she had moved in her sleep. Her hair, a shining satin white in her youth, had become a softer, snowy color with the passage of time. Even with age, she was still beautiful to him.

As he watched, Zig Zag's body contorted slightly, and her breath was caught in a fit of coughs. After a moment, the spasm passed, and she shivered with the morning's chill before resuming her slumber. The dull sense of dread once again rose in his heart as his eyes rested on the oxygen tube that fed into her nose.

"I'd better start the fire," he thought, reaching down to remove the wool blanket from his lap. He lowered the recliner's footrest to the floor, and stretched his legs wearily. Reaching over to the bedside table, James took hold of his cane, and braced it against the floor to the right of the recliner. As he rose and began to shift his weight to his feet, his right ankle responded with a dull pain from an old injury. With a small grunt, he ignored his foot's complaints and rose to his feet, leaning slightly upon his cane.

Walking to a chest of drawers on the far wall, he reached for a remote control. Pointing the device to the fireplace, James nodded in satisfaction as the click of a button instantly brought flames to life in the hearth. Replacing the remote on the dresser, he crossed his arms and worked his paws up and down on his shirt sleeves to bring some warmth into his limbs. He then moved to Zig Zag's bedside, and lovingly brought the covers up and around his wife's shoulders, determined to keep the cold away from her.

James' cane clicked softly on the hard wood floor as he made his way to the small bathroom built into the side of the bedroom. Turning on the light, he regarded himself in the mirror. With a sigh, he noted that his own fur had not fared aging as well as Zig Zag's. The black fur on his muzzle had faded to a dull grey, nearly matching the grey that framed his face and ears. The fur on the sides of his face had become thin and wiry, making it difficult to brush. Tough, white hairs now grew from the tips and sides of his ears. The face that he saw was lined with age and worry.

"You crotchety, blind old coyote," he said to his reflection, a brief smirk accenting the wrinkles around his eyes. He removed his glasses and placed them on the counter by the sink. Reaching down, he ran the faucet into his paws and splashed cold water onto his face. After washing the last bit of fatigue from his eyes, he took a small towel from the rack and dried his fur. Without his glasses, his reflection in the mirror blurred into a mass of grey. It was then that his nose caught the smell of brewing coffee. Replacing his glasses, he closed his eyes and drank in the smell. "The years haven't taken my sense of smell, at least," he noted to himself as he returned to Zig Zag's bedside. Leaning heavily on his cane, James knelt by the bed and inclined his head toward his wife's face.

"Good Morning, my love," he said to her softly. "DJ is in the kitchen making coffee. Would you like some?" With that, he tenderly kissed her cheek.

Zig Zag gave no indication that she had heard him. Her slow, rhythmic breaths continued as they had before. He glanced up at the computer which monitored her heart rate. 83. With a sigh, he nuzzled her cheek with his nose, taking in her familiar scent. For more than 46 years, that wonderful scent had been at his side. His nose had memorized the smell, and his mind associated it with the great joys that he had lived over his lifetime.

James' brow furrowed with worry. For the last five months, Zig Zag's body had been afflicted with coughing fits that only seemed to worsen as time passed. Her body had weakened with the strain. "Cardiogenic Pulmonary Edema", Doctor Mirsk had said in his diagnosis. "A build-up of fluid in the lungs, caused by the heart failing to remove fluid from the lung circulation."

Three weeks previous, the doctor had ordered her to permanent bed rest. They had agreed that fresh clean air away from the city would likely ease her symptoms, so James had brought her here to his country home in the mountains of Tennessee. At Zig Zag's insistence, he had paid for Max to fly with them and to bring his medical equipment, so that Zig Zag could be as comfortable as possible while receiving expert medical care from her brother. Two days later, their son Douglass James had come to the house, offering to stay with them and to help care for his mother. Though DJ hadn't mentioned it, James suspected that his son had come to help care for an old, worry-worn coyote as well.

After a week of bed rest, Zig Zag's coughing had become so severe that he began staying awake at night, keeping a silent vigil over her. Despite protests from his son, he refused to lie down at night, fearful that he would be asleep if his wife's condition suddenly took a turn for the worse. During the first few nights, he had passed in and out of sleep, struggling to stay awake to watch over his wife. Finally, at his son's insistence, James had brought the recliner from the front room into the bedroom so he could sit and observe Zig Zag in a more comfortable position.

Three days ago, Zig Zag had lapsed into unconsciousness, interrupted only by her body weakly trying to cough the congestion out of her lungs. Since then, James had felt a small pocket of despair growing within him.

A knock at the door broke him from his thoughts. Raising his head, he looked across the room to see DJ opening the door. The younger coyote was nearly a mirror-image of his father in his younger

years, grey with similar black patterns on his paws and muzzle. Though DJ was already 40 years old, he still appeared as trim and fit as if he were in his early 30's. Only his eyes, wizened by the years he had spent in law enforcement work, betrayed his real age. He was holding a coffee pot, mugs, sugar, and creamer on a small tray.

"Morning, Dad," he said cheerfully. "Coffee?"

With a weary smile, James nodded to his son. Bracing his right paw on his cane, he got to his feet, again ignoring a shot of pain from his right ankle.

"That would be great, DJ," he said with a small grin. "I half expected you to bring in a box of doughnuts."

DJ chuckled and stuck his tongue out at his father. "Hey now, I thought you left the cop stereotypes back in Ohio." DJ put the tray down on top of the dresser, and offered his paw to help his father stand. James waved his son away, and shifted his weight to his left foot.

"How's Mom?" DJ asked, turning his head to look at Zig Zag's sleeping form.

"The same, I'm afraid." James sighed and took the coffee mug that his son offered him. "Not responding much at all. But her coughs are weaker this morning, and I think she got a better night's sleep last night." James spooned some sugar into his mug.

"Hey, that's progress." DJ smiled broadly, but his eyes were filled with worry. He poured a second mug for himself. James returned his son's smile, and tried unsuccessfully to hide his own concern. The younger coyote looked his father up and down, noticing the wrinkled state of his long-sleeved shirt and jeans.

"How long has it been since you've changed your clothes, Dad?" James took a sip of his coffee before looking down at himself. "How long *has* it been..?" He thought to himself.

"Not since she became unresponsive," he replied after a moment. "I guess I haven't thought much about it." Indeed, his waking thoughts had been very focused for the last few days.

"Well, you look like crap."

"Gee, how complimentary. Is this how you talk to a ranking officer?"

"C'mon, Dad, you were first lieutenant in the military, not law enforcement."

"And you, son, are a sergeant, who should know his place in the pecking order." James couldn't suppress a chuckle. DJ's muzzle parted in a hearty laugh, and James was relieved to see a bit of the worry drain from his son's eyes. DJ snapped to attention and gave a mock salute to his father.

"Yes, sir!" he barked. Releasing the salute, his voice softened. "At any rate, you really should get cleaned up, Dad. Max is going to be here at eight to check on Mom."

James nodded with a sigh. He knew his son was right. Despite his worry about Zig Zag, self-neglect wasn't going to help matters. He reached over to the dresser and drew out the top drawer, revealing several stacks of neatly folded laundry. He withdrew a clean polo shirt and a pair of jeans. At the same time, his nose caught another scent from the kitchen.

"Mmm... is that breakfast?" He asked.

DJ grinned. "You bet. I'm making your favorite bacon and cheese omelet with green peppers." With that, he took the coffee tray and returned to the kitchen.

Watching him leave, the older coyote couldn't help feeling a sense of deep pride in his son. DJ had always shown a strong sense of respect and duty to others, which was what had led him into his law enforcement career. James was certain that he had passed those traits on to his son. At the same time, the younger coyote had a soft tenderness about him at times, as well as a quirky, gruff sense of humor that certainly came from his mother.

Sitting down on the recliner, James began pulling off his three-day old clothing.

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DJ was just putting the breakfast dishes into the washer when a knock at the door alerted them of Max's arrival. As the older coyote put his paws on the table to rise, DJ quickly moved toward the front door.

"I'll get it, Dad."

James slowly pushed himself to his feet and backed away from the table. DJ opened the door to reveal a very mature looking male skunk, wearing a neatly pressed button-up shirt and slacks. His face was worn with age, but his eyes conveyed a quick mind. Thick grey hair covered his head, and the black fur around his muzzle had faded over the years. A narrow black bag was slung over his shoulder.

"Max, so good to see you." James extended his paw. The skunk took James' pawshake warmly.

"How is she?" Max asked, quickly stepping into the front room. He walked purposefully toward the bedroom, gently pulling James along with him. DJ stepped out of the way respectfully, knowing full well the worry that was shared between the two older furs.

"Still unconscious," replied James. "Though the coughing seems a bit better, and she had a better sleep last night." They passed into the bedroom, and Max looked once again at the sleeping form of his older sister. Despite all of his professional medical training, he stopped short as he entered the room, emotions tugging at his heart.

For years, Max had depended upon his sister. She had paid his way through medical school, and had helped him to get his own practice started. Through his years as a successful physician, he had realized just how indebted he was toward his sister; the same sister who now lay deathly ill before him. He shook his head, realizing full well the implications of her illness.

Without a word, Max lowered his medical bag to her bed side and set about checking her IV. Opening his bag, he withdrew a fresh cartridge, and inserted it into the converter that fed vital nutrients into her arm. He then produced a small vial of clear, viscous liquid, the drug that he hoped would assist her weakened body to clear the congestion growing in her lungs. Holding the vial in his paw, he considered it for a moment, debating silently with himself. Shaking his head, he placed the vial in a small slot in the converter on her arm, and clicked a green button on its side. With a quick rush of air, the vial was drained, and the medicine began to circulate through Zig Zag's bloodstream. Max withdrew the vial and returned it to his bag.

"Tonya," Max said quietly, leaning over to her ear. "Can you hear me, sis?" Zig Zag made no indication that she had heard. Drawing a small stylus from his shirt pocket, Max reached down to Zig Zag's face. Gently, he pulled her eyelid open, and shined a small light from the stylus into her pupil. He

drew it away, then brought it back to shine in her eye once more. He removed his thumb, and her eyelid fluttered shut.

Turning his head, Max put his ear to Zig Zag's muzzle. For a long moment, he listened to her rasping breath, and drew his head away as she sputtered into another fit of coughs. With a gasp, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it upon her nose. When the spasm passed, he drew the handkerchief away, revealing deep red patches of blood. Using a clean corner of the cloth, he gently wiped several droplets of blood from her fur.

With an effort, Max stood once more. James stared at him from behind, desperate to ask but not daring to. Max remained silent, looking down upon his sister for a long moment. James heard a long, shuddering sigh.

"This isn't professional," Max muttered to himself.

"Max?" James asked, concern filling his voice.

The aged skunk slowly turned, his head and shoulders hunched over as if carrying a great weight. His grey hair hung down over his eyes.

"I can't do this, James."

"She specifically asked you to come, Max." James said quietly. "Doctor Mirsk had insisted that he care for her, but Zig wouldn't have it. She made me promise to bring you out here with us."

"I'm retired, James!" Max raised his head and flung his paw out to the side in exclamation. "And I can't let an emotional connection get in the way of my work! Do you have any idea how much Procerifin I've already given to her?" He spat. "This goes against nearly every bit of training I've ever taken! If the association knew I was here, doing this, my license would be revoked!"

James saw the tears welling up in Max's eyes. The coyote knew that Max didn't believe his own words. He saw frustration and grief begin to stream down the skunk's face. James suddenly felt a great pressing weight upon his heart, and his vision became blurred behind his glasses. Placing his paws upon Max's shoulders, James looked directly into the doctor's eyes.

"You *can* do this, Max," He hissed through his teeth, no longer able to see the skunk through his tears. "She asked for you because she knows how skilled you are. She asked for you because she trusts you. Not Doctor Mirsk." He gently shook the skunk with each statement. "Not the intensive care unit at the hospital. *You*." The last word came out in a hoarse whisper.

Max lowered his head and gritted his teeth, fighting back the lump in his throat. For a long moment, he breathed deeply through his nose, struggling to bring his emotions under control. At length, he raised his eyes to meet James' gaze.

"She's dying, James." The words were barely audible, but the force of their impact was visible on the coyote's face. His eyes widened in disbelief, and he released his grip on the skunk's shoulders. His legs suddenly felt weak, and he fumbled for his cane leaning against the bed where he had left it. He felt Max quickly bring his arm up to steady him. They heard a muffled sob come from the doorway, and James looked up to see DJ's tail quickly leaving the room.

"Somehow she must've known," Max continued at barely more than a whisper. He helped James over to the recliner, where the coyote sat down hard, his cane falling to the floor with a sharp crack. The doctor reached over to his bag and withdrew the empty Procerifin vial. Exhaling from a deep breath, he

held the vial out to the coyote, and attempted to cover his shaky voice with a professional demeanor.

"CPE normally responds very well to a Procerifin treatment," he explained. "In controlled amounts, it will strengthen the bloodstream's capacity to carry fluids, enabling it to draw the congestion from the patient's lungs." He closed his paw over the vial and lowered his arm to his side. He swallowed before continuing. "But Tonya's body has become weaker as she has aged, and her blood circulation hasn't responded to the normal dosage." He closed his eyes thoughtfully, and a tear glistened upon his cheek.

"I..." He stammered, "... increased the dosage. Against my better judgment, I administered the maximum amount allowed for a normal, otherwise healthy patient." He paused as James shot him an incredulous glance. "That's why her coughs seem to be getting better lately. But now this..." His voice trailed off as he took the bloodied handkerchief from his pocket.

"She's starting to bleed. Internally."

James was dumbstruck. For long moments, he could only stare in disbelief at Max.

"You... did this," he panted, pointing to the bloody cloth, "to my wife?" His lips curled up into a snarl.

Max's eyes widened in realization. "Oh," he started, holding up his paw in defense, "no no, she's not bleeding because of the Procerifin." He watched as the coyote's features shifted from accusation to pleading. "The bleeding is a byproduct of the CPE. The strain on her lungs is causing tiny tissue ruptures as time goes by. The extra dosage I gave to her has only slowed down the process.

"Tonya didn't ask me to come here because she trusted me to heal her. She asked me to come," Max furrowed his brow and turned his face away in frustration, "because she knew I would look past my better judgment and overdose her medication. She knew that Doctor Mirsk would never have agreed to it. Somehow, she knew that her time was soon coming, and she wanted me to delay it as long as possible."

The fire crackled brightly within the hearth, but James shivered in his chair. His mind raced, desperately snatching at any shred of hope he could find. A question burned within him, one that he was almost too afraid to ask.

"How..." he choked. He closed his eyes and took a long, shuddering breath. "How... long...?" His face felt tight, his jaw straining as he gritted his teeth. He knew that the answer would pronounce Zig Zag's death sentence. The last traces of Max's medical professionalism fell from his face.

"Two weeks," the skunk whispered, lowering his head in grief. "Maybe three."

James caught the sound of pained, shaking sobs coming from the kitchen.

FADE TO GREY PART 2

Crack.

Two pieces of newly split log fell to either side of the old tree stump. James bent down to pick up the larger of the two, and replaced it upon the stump. Gripping the ax with both paws, he wrenched it free from where his last stroke had buried it within the tree bark. For what seemed like the hundredth time, he lifted the ax over his head. With a cry of frustration, he drove the blade down with bone-jarring force.

Crack.

Small wooden splinters exploded away from the impact, and the log once again fell into two pieces on either side of the stump. His shoulders ached, his back muscles complained painfully, and the blisters on his paws were threatening blood. The white-hot agony in his right ankle screamed at him. He snatched up the split pieces of log and threw them into the pile of broken, splintered wood that he had been building for most of the afternoon. Wiping his already-soaked sleeve across his eyes and nose, he reached for a fresh log and placed it vertically upon the scarred stump.

Gripping the ax handle, he pulled forcefully, attempting to free the blade. After several attempts, he looked up to see that his last cut had buried the ax head completely within the stump. With a cry of rage, he wrenched at the handle with all of his strength. When it again failed to come free, he felt his legs collapse from under him, and his paws slipped from the ax. The coyote fell to his side, his left shoulder digging painfully into the dirt and grass. His fur, drenched in sweat, clung to his clothing. His breath came in quick gasps through clenched teeth.

James rolled onto his back, utterly defeated. For minutes, he lay upon the ground, his chest heaving from the strain of activity. His throat burned with each breath, and his vision blurred. Squeezing his eyes shut, he immediately saw her in his mind; her piercing eyes, the sharp pattern of black and white that outlined her features, her silky white hair framing her beautiful face. Shaking with grief, he threw back his head in the grass, and howled to the sky.

He was interrupted by a frightened cry from the back door of the house.

"Dad!" A female voice shouted at him. "Dad! What on earth...!" the voice cut off with a sudden gasp. James turned his head to see the face of his daughter, the straight white stripes on her face furrowed in worry, her eyes wide with shock. Kebrina Gentry reached her father in four running bounds, and dropped to her knees beside him in the grass.

"Dan! Zeph!" She cried, turning her head back toward the house. "Come quick! He's out here!" James saw her leaning over him, her face filled with worry and fear. Her paws clutched his shirt collar, ripping the buttons away to expose the fur on his chest. As

she lowered her ear to his heart, a tall German Shepherd skidded to a halt behind her. Seconds passed as Kebrina listened. James struggled to speak through his panting.

"Not... having...", he huffed, "heart... attack..."

Kebrina sat bolt upright and stared at her father. Dan stepped over the coyote and knelt opposite his wife, putting his paw to James' neck to test his pulse. He nodded to his wife, indicating that her father was in no immediate danger.

Soon, a younger, teenage German Shepherd approached, his eyes wide with terror. His fur was white, his muzzle black, and two black streaks went from between his eyes over his head and down his back.

"Grandpa..." the youth stammered.

"Zeph," Dan said with calm insistence, turning to look at his son. "I need you to help me get Grandpa into the house." The young fur nodded. Dan lifted James' arm over his shoulder, and motioned for Zephram to take his mother's place on the coyote's left side. Kebrina rose and stepped back as her son knelt by his grandfather. James felt strong arms supporting his back and legs as he was lifted into the air. He grunted sharply as his dangling right ankle shot fresh waves of pain through his body. Looking up, he saw the face of his son-in-law, his brow lined with worry.

After an awkward entry through the back door, they were able to sit James upon the couch in the front room. Kebrina silently followed, having recovered his cane from where he had discarded it on the patio. His breath had calmed somewhat, allowing him to speak.

"Right ankle... killing me." He grunted, gingerly lifting his leg from the floor. Kebrina nodded, leaning his cane by the couch where he sat. She quickly disappeared around the corner into the kitchen, and James heard her rummaging through the cabinets. Dan sat next to him on the edge of the couch, while Zephram backed away toward the front door. Seated on a padded chair near the door, Zuri Isabel, Zephram's skunkette twin, looked on silently, her jagged black-on-white fur pattern echoing that of her grandmother.

"What were you trying to *prove* back there?" Dan blurted, his eyes filled with concern. "Looking at the size of that pile of splinters, I'd say you've been at it for two hours!"

James smiled weakly. "I can still chop with the best of 'em..." He coughed on the dryness in his throat. Kebrina returned from the kitchen clutching a bottle of prescription painkillers and a tall glass of water.

"Dad," Kebrina began, handing him the pills and the water, "I know you're hurting." She pursed her lips tightly before going on. "But killing yourself out there is

not going to do Mom or anyone else any good." The coyote lifted a pill to his mouth, then drank greedily from the glass. Once it was empty, he exhaled in relief, and returned it to his daughter.

"Bri, I have no intention of killing myself," he said, resting his head on the back of the couch. The pain in his ankle and shoulders began to ease. "I had to blow off a lot of steam." He met Kebrina's gaze. "Did DJ call you?"

"Yeah, he caught us on the cell-com when we were about an hour out."

"So you know, then."

Kebrina nodded, then turned to look at her children across the room. "I haven't told them yet," she said, motioning for Zephram and Zuri to join them by the couch. "But they deserve to know. They're not little any more." James nodded, and brought his paws up to take Zuri's as she approached.

"Grandpa, what's going on with Grandma?" Zuri asked, her white pony tail bobbing softly at her back.

"She's dying, isn't she," came Zephram's voice from behind her. Zuri froze, and Kebrina shot her son an accusing glance.

"Zeph!" She gasped. Her son met her gaze, and fell silent.

James closed his eyes with a sigh. He drew Zuri down to sit beside him, and his ears caught a weak coughing fit coming from the bedroom. All heads turned toward the sound until it passed moments later.

"Your children are very bright, Bri," he chided his daughter. His eyes began to burn once more as he prepared to reveal the truth to his grandchildren.

"Your grandmother's lungs are very weak," he began, his eyes still closed. "Uncle Max was here this morning, checking on her, when she starting coughing up blood." There were several gasps, but he continued. "The walls of her lungs are starting to break down, and blood is seeping into her airways." Zuri frowned at the mental image, bringing her paw up to her neck.

"Does it... does she hurt...?" she asked, her voice shaking.

"I don't think so," answered James, finally opening his eyes to look at her. Though his tears were long spent, his eyes ached and his vision blurred slightly. Zephram knelt by his mother, listening.

"She's been unconscious for three days. I don't know for sure, but I think she's been spared the pain."

"What did Max say?" Dan asked from behind him.

James did not turn, but continued looking into his granddaughter's face. The black streaks in her white fur were somewhat different, but she certainly had Zig Zag's genes in her. The coyote caught himself wondering if this is what Zig Zag had looked like in her teenage years.

"Two or three weeks," James answered.

All of them sat quietly, lost in thought. After several moments, the silence was broken as the front door opened. DJ stood in the doorway, wiping his feet, and carrying a bag of groceries. Though his face was calm, his eyes were bloodshot, and the fur below his eyelids was matted. His eyes moved over the room's occupants, and his muzzle parted in a warm smile.

"Bri! Dan! I thought that might be your car out front." DJ moved into the kitchen to set the grocery bag on the table, and then returned to the front room. Kebrina rose to her feet and took her brother in a tight embrace.

"Hiya, little bro," she sniffled, looking up into his face. DJ's smile faded, but not completely, as he pulled his older sister's head onto his shoulder. For a long moment, he held her, and her shoulders trembled as she wept.

"Shhh... it's OK, Bri." He whispered to his sister. "We're gonna..." His voice trailed off as he caught a better look at the disheveled figure sitting on the couch. Releasing the embrace, DJ regarded his father with an accusing glance.

"Just going to chop a few blocks, eh?" He scolded the older coyote. "Just need to get some fresh air, that's what you said, yes?" DJ took his father's left paw and examined the rough blisters that had grown there over the last two hours. "How much tinder am I going to find piled up back there?"

"Too much," answered Kebrina from behind him, her voice still a bit shaky. "I found him lying in the grass, gasping for breath. He scared me to death; thought he had a heart attack." DJ's eyes widened with realization, and he folded his arms across his chest, silently demanding an explanation from his father.

James sighed weakly and tried to shrug his shoulders. "You ought to have seen what I did to the trash can back at the office," he said with a grin. DJ cocked his head at him, confused. With a chuckle, his father continued.

"Oh, that was a long time ago when I was first getting to know your mother. I had a pretty bad day once, and I decided to take it out on a trash can instead of ringing the neck of a certain problematic cheetah." He shook his head ruefully at the memory, still softly smiling to himself. "I mashed it up pretty good."

Straightening, he motioned with his head toward the backyard. "I don't think that stump is going to be able to take much more after today," he informed DJ. "I think it's going to take both you and Dan," he put a paw on his son-in-law's knee, "to pull that ax out of it."

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The night air was cool, and the sounds of chirping crickets in the backyard penetrated the sliding glass doors. Low flames burned dimly from within the fireplace. A nearly full moon shone brightly over the mountaintops, while a gentle breeze swayed the tree branches, creating a dancing pattern of moonlight and firelight across the bed. Under the soft glow, the bed covers outlined Zig Zag's body, now turned on her side. Propped under her head, a folded towel bore patches of dark stain.

Opposite the glass doors, against the far wall, an exhausted coyote slept, his head pitched awkwardly sideways against the back cushions of the recliner. His legs sprawled in front of him on the footrest, covered only partially by a wool blanket. A long bandage was wrapped around and under his right ankle, binding it tightly to prevent further injury.

After the events of the afternoon, DJ had helped James limp into the bedroom and sit in the recliner. Despite protests from the elder coyote, Dan had wrapped his ankle firmly with the bandage, insisting that he keep his weight off of it. There, from the recliner, he had watched each of his family members as they visited with his wife.

Though Zig Zag had given no response, the furs had conversed with her for upwards of an hour. While Zuri's statements had occasionally been broken by her tears, Zephram had done his best to maintain his composure. Even so, James had heard the young German Shepherd's voice crack more than once. Kebrina had spent the time sitting beside her mother, gently holding her paw while the younger furs spoke. Dan and DJ had stood opposite James near the glass doors to the backyard.

The conversation moved over many topics, from camping trips in the back woods of Tennessee to the Alaskan cruise they had taken six years previous, to the many Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays they had spent together, to the playful, silly rivalry Zig Zag and Dan had built up over the years about the proper way to prepare spaghetti sauce.

James had mostly listened to the conversation, occasionally adding small remarks of his own. His energy had been more than spent, and he had fallen asleep in the recliner shortly after Kebrina and DJ had moved into the kitchen to prepare dinner. They had left him in peace, the Gentry family returning to the motel earlier in the evening, while DJ had cleaned up and gone to bed in the guest room.

Now, the soft moonlight and nocturnal sounds surrounded the sleeping couple like a blanket. The coyote stirred momentarily as his wife was set upon by a brief spasm of coughs. His brow creased in worry, but he did not awaken. The coughs passed, and Zig

Zag's breaths became slow and even.

In his slumber, James' dreams were troubled. He saw himself in a great forest, wielding a cumbersome, heavy ax whose blade had dulled considerably. In the distance, he saw his wife, a shining white figure slowly walking away among the trees. He struggled to follow her, but found himself caught in dense, low-hanging branches. With all of his strength, he struck again and again with the ax, desperately trying to follow his love. With each stroke, he grew more weary, and Zig Zag became more distant. He called out to her, but she did not seem to hear him.

"James."

He stopped in confusion. Her voice was close, yet she seemed to be miles away through the trees.

"James."

The forest faded from view, and he opened his eyes. The moon had climbed considerably above the horizon, and the clock on the chest of drawers read 10:47 PM. His ankle throbbed with a dull ache. The sounds of chirping crickets and gently rustling leaves met his ears, nearly masking a small rustle of movement from the bed before him.

"James..." Zig Zag's weak voice called him from the bed. In the darkness without his glasses, he could not see more than a dim, blurry shape, but his eyes detected movement. His fatigue was drowned in a rush of hope, and he flailed at the side of the recliner for the footrest lever. He pushed himself out of the chair, and made several clumsy hops on his left leg before he was able to plant both paws on her bedside.

"Zig, I'm here," he panted, leaning closer to his wife. Her features came into clearer focus as he drew near. He saw her eyes open, her nose turned up toward him. His muzzle parted in a joyous smile, and he felt tears welling up in his eyes.

"Hello, my love," he said over the sudden tightness in his throat. Zig Zag turned her muzzle away from him as she began to cough once more. With his right paw, he gently lifted the towel and wiped the blood away. When she was able to breathe once more, she sighed in relief, slowly moving her paw up to his.

"What time is it?" She asked. He closed his eyes and smiled at her, pausing before he answered.

"It's late, Zig. You've been asleep for a long time." Her brow creased with concern.

"How long have I...?"

"Nearly four days." Her features relaxed, and she nodded weakly.

"And Max...?"

"He was here this morning. He said..." James stopped abruptly, unable to continue. Zig Zag's gaze softened and filled with understanding.

"I know," she said softly. "I've known for a long while now. And now you know too." He squeezed his eyes closed, and felt a tear boil down his cheek.

"It's OK," she whispered, gently squeezing his paw. "We both knew this time had to come some day. And you're here. We're here. Together." She took a rasping breath. "Because of you I've become someone I never thought I could be. We've had so many wonderful years..." She was cut off as another coughing fit began. James lovingly stroked her hair and her ears until it passed.

"I'd much rather have it this way, James," she sighed. "I couldn't bear the thought of one of us being taken suddenly, if there were an accident." There was a long moment of silence as he took this in. Finally, he nodded to her.

"I've loved you for so long, Zig. I'll never stop loving you. You've made me happier than I thought possible." Her eyes began to shine with her own tears as he continued. "What am I going to do when you're gone?" He sniffled and wiped a paw across his eyes. Zig Zag smiled.

"Do you remember that day at Disneyland, before Bri was born?" She asked. James took a long breath, searching through his memories for that day. After a moment, he nodded.

"We were running to get to that new ride at the back of the park, and I..."

"You fell and twisted your ankle," he finished her sentence. Zig Zag smiled wistfully and nodded. The moonlight glinted softly in her eyes as she again turned her muzzle to face him.

"You carried me the rest of the way," she remembered. "I put my arms around your neck, and you carried me the same way you did the day we got married, when you brought me into the honeymoon suite."

"All through the line of the ride," he continued for her, grinning at the memory. "Even after your ankle stopped hurting."

"You were my knight in shining armor. Everyone else in line was looking at us funny or giggling behind our backs. But I will never forget that day." James brought his muzzle to hers, and kissed her tenderly for a long moment. They parted, and she gazed at him seriously.

"Some day soon, it will be my turn to carry you." Her whispered words burned

into his heart. He lowered his head and felt the tears flowing freely along his muzzle, forming small drips at the tip of his nose. He made no motion to wipe them away as they fell and mingled with the dark stains on the towel.

"Can you hold me that way again?" With an effort, Zig Zag raised a finger to James' chin. He looked at her incredulously.

"But, the cold... I can't..."

"Silly coyote," she said with a weak grin. "C'mon, let's live it up, Grandpa."

Placing both paws on the bed, James lifted himself to stand on his left leg. Paw over paw, he made his way gingerly to the other side of the bed, where he gently pulled the bed covers down from around his wife. He sat down beside her.

"Can you bring your arms up around my neck?" He asked. She strained to lift her left arm, but only succeeded in bringing her paw up to his cheek before her strength failed.

"I can't..." she huffed, winded from the effort.

"Then let me be your strength a little longer." He slid his left paw under her head, and gently assisted her to a sitting position. He then braced his right paw under her legs, and lifted her toward him, turning back to face the moonlight through the glass doors. He eased her weight down into his lap, and she rested her head on his shoulder. They stared out at the night sky, enjoying each other's warmth.

"I love you, James," she whispered.

He took a long, deep breath, and whispered his response.

"I love you too, Zig."



FADE TO GREY PART 3

James adjusted his glasses and studied the small vials in his paw. Each was imprinted with a tiny label, indicating proper dosage and administration, overdose warnings, and the name of the drug in bold letters: "MORPHINE H23". The containers were bound together in a row by two long, narrow strips of velcro, originally forming a long belt of doses. Only seven vials remained.

Gingerly, James peeled back the velcro to release the next dose. Taking the small tube in his left paw, he replaced the remaining vials on the bedside table. He turned back to the bed, and reached forward to insert the medication into the converter strapped to Zig Zag's left arm.

More than a week ago, her breaths had become quick and shallow. With increasing frequency, the effort to inhale had caused her to grunt sharply in pain. Her coughing fits had also become more frequent, each spasm bringing further torment to her weakened body. Max had prescribed the strong painkiller to ease her discomfort, and had left the strip of medication along with instructions on how to administer each dose.

"Once every eight hours, at most," the doctor had warned sternly. "Never more than that. This is a heavy narcotic, James." Max had come to see his sister each morning to monitor her status, and he had repeated his warning on every visit.

Zig Zag lay on her right side, doubled over herself as she struggled for breath. Her body trembled with the effort, and she contorted with each stabbing pain that lanced through her chest.

James hesitated, the vial in his paw just inches away from the converter. Max had given her the last dose little more than six hours ago. The coyote clenched his paw around the Morphine, silently debating with himself. He did not know exactly what an overdose could do to her, but the years of news reports and horror stories about drug abuse gave him pause.

As he watched, his wife's body doubled over even further, and she sputtered into another fit of coughs. With each spasm, James heard her cry out, her voice broken as she choked and gasped for air. His heart was torn within him, and his paws began to tremble. He moved once more to place the vial into her converter.

"Don't..." DJ's voice was gentle, but James felt a firm grip on his shoulder. The aged coyote hadn't heard his son enter the room. He closed his eyes tightly, and let his paws fall upon the sheets next to his wife. For a long moment, he knelt motionless, until Zig Zag's body calmed from her coughs. Her breaths again became shallow and labored. He turned his head up to face his son.

"Why, DJ?" He demanded in an angry whisper. "Why does she have to hurt like this?" DJ's eyes were glistening, and James could see the tight worry in his son's features.

"You can't do that, Dad," said DJ, reaching down to take the Morphine from his father's grip. "I've seen what this stuff can do to furs. I've lost count how many poor kids I've had to peel off the pavement, killed when they've OD'd on this." He held up the vial in his paw, examining its contents.

"Don't you think I'm aware of that?" James snapped at him, baring his teeth. His voice immediately softened, and he lowered his head. "I'm sorry, son." DJ squeezed his father's shoulder and sighed.

"Dad..." he said hesitantly, lowering himself to kneel beside his father. The younger coyote held the tube of medicine in the tips of his fingers, and stared at it sadly for a moment. "I don't want to see mom like this either. It's tearing me up inside." James winced.

"But this..." DJ continued, closing his paw over the vial and shaking his head. "This stuff is nasty. I realize Max got it for her, but," he sighed, "I'm afraid it may be killing her too. We can get her something else for the pain."

"How much longer, DJ?" James pleaded, his eyes downward. "How long does she have to suffer?" His voice took on an edge of desperation as he balled his paws into fists. "Why her? She's already hurt so much in her life. She gave, she loved, she defended, and she suffered for it. She doesn't need to suffer any more!" He pounded his right paw into the mattress.

"This isn't the answer," DJ began, but James interrupted.

"I don't care if it's wrong!" He shouted, grabbing at the vial in DJ's paw. His son quickly drew the medicine out of reach, and James made a clumsy lunge for it. He felt his right leg tangle in the blankets hanging over the side of the bed, and his weight collided with the mattress as he slid to the hard wood floor.

DJ quickly stooped to assist his father. Taking his arm in both paws, he helped him to his feet. James brought up his anguished face to look into his son's eyes. With a rush of emotion, he buried his muzzle into the younger fur's shoulder, and sobbed openly.

"Just make it..." he sniffed, "make the hurt go away. I don't want her to hurt any more. Please." DJ took his father in a tight embrace, and stared at the trembling form of his mother in the bed nearby.

It took a moment for DJ to realize that Zig Zag had somehow rolled over to face her husband and son. She was still doubled over, and each shallow breath

brought new pain to her shuddering body. The fur around her muzzle bore small stains of blood. Her eyes glistened with tears, but they were filled with worry instead of pain.

"James..." Her voice was very weak.

The older coyote brought up his head abruptly, and turned to look at his wife. Zig Zag was barely able to lift a shaky left paw from the bed, and she held it out to him. James dropped to his knees once more, twisting his right ankle slightly. He ignored the pain, and closed both of his paws around hers. DJ sat down on the bed next to his father, turning his torso to face his mother. Straining, she lifted her right paw and closed her fingers around DJ's wrist.

"No more... drugs." Her words were barely audible between labored breaths. "Can't see," she gasped, "can't think."

James' eyes widened at her words. "But Zig," he pleaded, "the pain, you're hurting!"

"Shhhh." She quieted her husband. "Pain is... good," she breathed sharply, "when... I can see you." Her whisper shook with each painful intake of air, and she spoke through clenched teeth. DJ placed his right paw over his mother's grip on his wrist.

"Mom..." DJ's voice shook now. "I... I can't bear to see you like this. We can get you something else for the pain."

Zig Zag managed a weak smile as she turned her face to look at her son.

"Two aspirin," she whispered with a sharp intake of breath, "right?" Her smile widened, and her eyes glinted with her old, mischievous sense of humor.

Her mirth quickly faded as she began coughing once again. Her body shook violently, and her voice yelped from between gritted teeth. Teardrops seeped from her tightly closed eyes.

DJ held her paw tightly as he watched his mother, his brow creasing in worry. James brought up his paw to the back of her head, gently caressing her hair as she coughed. His cheeks burned, and he could feel the skin in his face pulled taut. Was there nothing he could do for her? He felt his insides twisting into knots as small droplets of blood spattered onto his fur and the sheets.

The spasm finally passed, and Zig Zag's body relaxed somewhat. Gulping for air, she panted from the strain. Her eyes opened wearily, and she looked up at her husband and son. After a moment, her breaths became calmer.

"Tired." She whispered slowly. "Sleep." She gazed upon them, but her eyes seemed far away. James suddenly felt a great tightness in his chest. He knew what his wife meant. He gripped her paw harder, as if to hold her back.

"Zig." He choked, and took a shuddering breath. "Zig...!" His eyes clouded over, and his voice caught in his throat.

"Love," She whispered shakily, closing her eyes. "Don't... worry." She drew a rasping, shallow breath. "Doesn't hurt any... more..." She smiled at him, and her features relaxed. A look of utter peace came upon her, and her breaths slowly quieted and stilled.

DJ swallowed hard, and bowed his head in reverence. James lowered his muzzle to her paw, not taking his eyes from her face, and kissed her fingers tenderly. Then, lowering his eyes, he brought her paw to his forehead, and wept bitterly.

EPILOGUE

*When through the woods and forest glades I wander,
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And see the brook, and feel the gentle breeze,
Then sings my soul!*

*("How Great Thou Art", Christian Hymn)
(Carl G. Broberg and R.J. Hughes)*

A field of tall, soft grasses stretched for miles around, gently waving in a warm breeze. A clear blue sky stretched overhead, and a forest of trees blanketed rolling hills on the distant horizon. Bright, warm sunshine spilled over her where she stood. She no longer felt tired.

As the breeze played her hair across her shoulders, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply through her nose. She was only vaguely aware of how oddly new it felt to do so. Opening her eyes once more, she stretched her arms forward, and noted that her fur had returned to its clear, sharp black and white patterns. A silky white dress hung loosely on her shoulders, flowing down to her elbows and past her knees. She was surprised at how light and comfortable it felt.

Zig Zag tested her weight on her feet, and took a tentative step forward through the grass. She felt no pain, and her legs once again felt their strength. She cried out in joy at her new-found freedom, and took several bounding steps, her dress flowing behind her. Suddenly, she stopped short, her eyes widening.

The full realization of her transition finally hit her, and she spun around to look behind. There, several meters away, she saw herself lying peacefully in the bedroom. James knelt by her bedside, silently weeping, his tail sagging behind him. DJ, his head bowed and eyes closed, held the paws of both his mother and father, while tears of grief soaked into the fur of his muzzle. Zig Zag reached out to her husband and son, and took a step toward them.

"They'll be all right," came a voice from behind her. The words were spoken in a clear baritone, with a strong Russian accent. She immediately recognized it, the voice she had loved, the words she had clung to in some of her darkest moments of childhood terror.

"Grandpa..." She turned, and for the first time in nearly fifty years, looked upon the face of her grandfather, carpenter, confidante, and friend. The tall Siberian tiger was dressed in long pants and a white robe. His large paws and muscular frame were covered in a pattern of sharp black and white stripes,

similar to her own. Her heart leaped within her for joy, and she rushed to embrace him, but he held up a paw to stop her.

"Tonya," he said calmly, "what have you done with your matriushka?"¹ Anatol's voice was soft, but his eyes seemed to pierce into her heart.

"Grandpa?" She asked, confused.

"What have you done with your matriushka?" He repeated.

Memories came flooding back to her. Looking inward, she saw herself as a child, dressed in simple overalls and a t-shirt, standing in her grandfather's workshop. Her younger self's eyes twinkled with delight as her grandfather set before her a large, brightly painted wooden doll. Placing her paws on both sides of the toy, she lifted off the top half to reveal a smaller doll within. Her eyes filled with wonder as she continued opening each doll in turn, until she finally came to the innermost doll.

The younger Zig Zag gasped as she realized that the smallest doll was painted in black and white stripes, matching her own. Curiously, she turned the toy in her paws, and her brow furrowed in confusion when she saw that the doll's face had been left unpainted.

"What expression do you want the final doll to have, little one? It's up to you, you know." Her grandfather's words came ringing back to her clearly. Zig Zag knew now what she needed to do.

Closing her eyes, she cupped both paws in front of her. She focused her thoughts on the small toy, and saw every detail clearly in her mind. After a moment, she felt its smooth surface in her paws. Opening her eyes, she looked upon the small doll she now held. The toy's face was now painted with a broad smile, and bright, twinkling eyes. A joyful sob escaped her lips as she turned it in her paws, and held it up to show her grandfather.

Anatol's features softened, and his muzzle spread in a warm, welcoming smile. He held his paws out to her, and took her in a tight embrace. She buried her nose into his chest fur, and wrapped her arms around his waist. She felt his big paw reach up to stroke her hair, and her emotions overwhelmed her.

"Welcome home, Tonya."

¹ Matriushka Dreams by Philip J. Eggerding.