

The Pack  
By Wirewolf

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Lissa is (c) her player

Reno appears courtesy of Talon

## The Pack

Meredith Delilah Coswell-Heatherford snuggled deeper into the soft burgundy linen sheets, her back against a small mountain of pillows. She keyed the next page of her latest romance novel and sighed. If only her life could be like that of the heroine in 'Windswept Passions'. To live in a beautiful castle, surrounded by wealth and servants, and be wife to a man of fiery lusts would be such an improvement over her current life.

Her husband Robert, or 'Bobby' as he insisted on being called, walked into the bedroom with a folded piece of colored paper in one hand and a double scotch in the other. Meredith kept her eyes glued to her electronic book as he meandered around the room, changing into his pajamas. She gritted her teeth as he whistled off key and shrugged on the bright red flannel nightshirt with some team or other's logo on it. She never bothered to keep up with his sports fetishes.

She continued to ignore him as he climbed into bed and set his drink on the nightstand. Her book was interrupted, however, when he asked in a brisk voice, "So what should we get the scamp for his seventh, eh?"

"His name's Wendall," she murmured, "and I've already gotten his present."

"Oh?" He sounded truly surprised, as though he hadn't considered the possibility she might buy something for her son's birthday on her own. "What'd you get?"

"Clothes," she said, trying to will him into silence so she could get on with her book.

"Clothes?" She imagined his tone of voice would have been the same if she had said she'd bought Wendall a pile of broken glass. "What kind of clothes?"

Meredith waited until she believed she could speak in a civil tone before she said, "A nice damson suit from Pellingers." She turned to look her husband in the eye and said, "Every young man should have a good suit for important occasions." Her voice warned him off further discussion.

"Ah. Sounds wonderful," he wisely concurred. "Still, I'll bet he could also use something a bit more, uhh..." He hesitated at the sudden flash in her eyes. He chose his next words with caution. "Fun. You know, something to entertain him."

"He's got plenty of toys." She turned back to her book, wishing he would let the topic go. It was not to be.

"Well, I wasn't thinking so much of a toy," he said. He reached over to his scotch and took a fortifying sip. "I got hold of this brochure today. It looks mighty interesting."

Realizing she would have no peace until she acknowledged his idea, she plucked the glossy paper pamphlet from his fingers and looked at the title. It read, 'Beecher, Inc. Breeding a better tomorrow.' She shuddered at the absolutely pathetic slogan. When she

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opened it she saw pictures of animals with lists of statistics beside each one. She blinked, turned to him.

“You’re not actually considering this, are you?”

He smiled and nodded. “Sure, why not?”

“Why not??” she repeated, incredulous. Realizing this was much more serious than she had first thought, she sat up straighter and turned off her book. “He’s too young to have such a responsibility. And he’s still too...” She paused, trying to come up with the best phrase. She hated to speak poorly of Wendall, even to her husband in the privacy of their bedroom. “Too...mischievous to own a pet.”

“Oh, come on now. He’s not that bad,” he soothed.

“Robert,” she intoned, “have you already forgotten about the fish? Two thousand dollars worth of Japanese razorfish floating dead in the swimming pool!”

“But these aren’t fish,” he insisted, pointing to the brochure. “These are good old fashioned dogs and cats and stuff. Only better.”

Meredith could sense she was going to lose this argument, and that bothered her a great deal. She flung down the brochure and drew the line. “No decent human being keeps animals in their house! That’s final!”

“OK,” he conceded. “We’ll keep it outside. I’ll get it a dog house to live in.”

She stared at him, disbelieving. “You’ve already ordered it, haven’t you? Haven’t you??”

“It’s gonna be great,” he enthused. “They’ve bred these dogs with enhanced brains and vocal cords and everything. She can talk!”

“She...can...talk.” The words were ground out past jaws that Meredith couldn’t unclench.

“Yeah. Her name’s Jirra but I’m gonna call her ‘Bitsy.’ I’ve always wanted a dog called Bitsy.” He riffled through the brochure.

Meredith flung off the bedcovers and went for some aspirin. She downed four of them with some mineral water and crawled back into bed. As she burrowed back into the pillows and sheets she wished she’d listened to her mother. She’d told her to marry for money. It was a good thing she loved the oaf she’d married. Otherwise, she’d have been sorely tempted to smother him in his sleep.

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Six weeks later, Jirra was crouched behind a grocery store dumpster hoping for some scraps. It had been raining all day and she was soaked, her fur matted and dirty. She smelled something promising, though. Meat. If only she could get into the dumpster.

She knew she had to be cautious, but she hadn't eaten in two days and she was hungry. She listened at the steel door that lead to the back of the store. Hearing nothing, she turned to the problem of getting into the dumpster. There was a cardboard box big enough for her to stand on, but it was wet from the rain and it tore when she tried to move it. Looking around further, she spied two plastic crates that had stored cryogenically frozen fruit. The sides were paper thin but very strong.

Grabbing one edge of a crate in her mouth, she pulled it over to the dumpster. It was harder turning it over so she could stand on it, but once she had it where she needed it she could stand on it and look in. She was in luck. The dumpster was full, so once she got in she would still be able to get out. With a short jump, she got into the bin and pawed around. Her nose quickly told her where the meat was. It was inside a large plastic trash bag at the other end.

It took no time to rip open the bag with her claws. Working her way through the contents of the bag took longer. Finally, she had a foam tray covered with plastic wrap. The raw hamburger inside was past its prime for human consumption, but it would make a good meal for her. Taking her prize firmly in her mouth, she made her way toward the plastic crate.

Just as she leaned down to place her front paws on the crate, she heard the back door of the store bang open. A thin teenage boy in jeans, a T-shirt and a green apron was carrying more of the plastic bags full of refuse. Jirra stared at him, frozen, as he made his way to the other end of the dumpster. With a grunt, he heaved the plastic bags on top of the one she'd clawed open. That's when he saw her.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Get out of there!"

Jirra had heard that tone of voice before. It meant business and she was on the wrong side of it. She leapt down onto the crate. She heard him running around the dumpster as she dove off the crate to the ground. In a flash she ran across the back alley to the open lot next door. She stopped for a moment and turned, wanting to know if he would follow her. What she saw was a chunk of concrete half the size of her head flying toward her. She whirled, trying to dodge the heavy object but she was too late. It struck her square on the left foreleg, knocking her down.

"Oh, yeah!" jeered the stockboy. "A perfect shot!" He danced around for a second, celebrating his accomplishment before looking for another piece of broken concrete.

The semi-morph wanted to cry out her misery and pain, but didn't want to drop the meal between her jaws. She could only grunt as she got back up and limped through the gap in

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the chain link fence separating the empty lot from the property next door. Turning the corner of the small dance studio, she left the angry stockboy behind.

Jirra wanted to stop and tend to her leg, but she wasn't happy being this close to the store or the hateful stockboy who worked there. She pushed on several more blocks until she found an alley behind another store, this one with a sheltered rear entrance. A large awning kept the rain off the cardboard boxes and garbage bags sitting outside the door. She found one box big enough for her and stepped inside, only to find it occupied. A smallish cat was hunched in the corner.

Seeing her, the cat arched its back, its fur bristling. It hissed at her, yowling and lifting one paw to swat at her. Jirra backed up a step, wondering what to do. She dropped the heavy package of meat and sniffed the air deeply. She was surprised at what she scented.

The cat was a semi, just like her. It was a newly adult female with just enough flesh on its bones to keep it from getting dangerously weak. She sniffed again, detecting the unmistakable odor that marked genetically altered pets. Watching the cat press herself against the far corner of the box, she wondered how long she had been on her own. The small orange cat wasn't yowling anymore. She was eyeing the package of meat between her forelegs.

Jirra was hungry. She knew she could eat the whole four pound package by herself. But looking at the cat made her feel guilty about the idea. She scooted further into the box, getting her hindquarters under cover. The cat hissed again and shrilled, "No bites! No bites!"

She stopped moving and just stared at the little cat. Her mind was made up. She flipped the foam tray, which had landed upside down, and gnawed at the plastic covering. Careful not to swallow any, she pried it all off. Then she looked into the cat's dark yellow eyes and asked, "Do you want some?"

The cat was startled to hear her speak. It took a few deep sniffs, taking in Jirra's scent. "You half?" it mrowed at her, still anxious.

"Yes, I'm a semi, just like you." She saw the cat relax when it realized that there was no imminent attack. "Do you want some of this?" She nosed the tray a bit closer to the cat.

"Me food?" the cat asked, a hint of purr coming through.

Jirra felt something she hadn't felt in a long time. She felt like she had a friend. Perhaps it might only last as long as the old hamburger did, but that was fine with her. She was tired of being alone, with no one to trust or talk to. "Yes," she said. "You eat food with me."

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Gingerly, the cat approached, trying to keep her gaze on the meat before her and the comparatively huge German Shepherd mix blocking the opening of the box. When she was close enough to take a mouthful, she bit into the grayish meat and dragged some back a few steps. Her purring swelled at the sensation of getting food into her lean belly.

Jirra watched the cat eat, feeling her own hunger poke her ribs. She dropped her muzzle between her forelegs and took a small bite, relishing the tang of raw meat. It was hard to restrain herself, but she knew the cat could fill her stomach with only a small portion of what was in the tray. Once the cat was full, she could take what was left. She took another small bite, watching the cat get another mouthful and step away.

It wasn't long before the orange tabby was hunkered over a corner of the tray, eating directly from the pile of meat. Her eyes were lidded in satisfaction as her hunger eased off. When she was full, she backed up and began washing. She still kept an eye on the semi dog.

“Done?” Jirra asked.

“All done full,” the tabby said, looking up briefly into the canine's brown eyes. She went back to her grooming as Jirra polished off the considerable remains of their shared meal. She swiped her broad tongue across the bottom of the tray a few times, getting the last few bits of meat. Once the tray was clean, she started licking the spot on her leg where the concrete had hit.

Skins, she thought miserably. They would turn on you in an instant and could never be fully trusted. Her previous family was a prime example. Three of them, two adults and one hateful child called 'Wendall.' Wendall was the reason she was living as a stray. The little wretch had tormented her every chance he got, pulling her ears, stepping deliberately on her tail, and anything else he could get away with. The breaking point had been the blows across her back with a branch from a tree in the back yard.

Jirra was done with skins. She would never live with them, nor trust them again.

The female tabby, clean and purring, approached her. The little ball of orange fur, her belly obviously swollen with her meal, leaned against her shoulder and rubbed, purring loudly. The cat's nose twitched and she moved around her forelegs to the wound she'd been licking. The cut was small but deep. The concrete had had a sharp point on it

“Hurt blood,” she purrped. She nosed through the dense brown fur and began licking at the blood that was matting it.

“I'll be fine,” Jirra said, giving the tabby a single lick across the top of her head. But the cat's rough tongue felt good and she was more than willing to let her continue.

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With her wound clean and her belly working on her latest meal, Jirra felt like napping. She looked at the semi cat, who had already curled up between her forelegs. Before she lay down, she asked, “What’s your name?”

“I Mindle,” the cat purred sleepily.

“My name is Jirra.”

Outside, the rain fell. Outside, the world ignored the cardboard box with two new friends in it.

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Mindle woke first. She swatted Jirra hard across the nose once, claws sheathed, and wailed, “Skins! Run away!” Then she was gone. From outside the box, the semi dog heard a deep voice say, “What?”

Panic cleared her head in an instant. She saw nothing outside the opening of the box. Taking what might be her only chance, she bolted from her cardboard haven into the dying evening light. She was at the end of the alley when she heard a sharp whistle pierce the air. She stopped, almost against her will. Looking back over her shoulder, she could see a skin, a large male, dark colored where his hide showed. She was torn. The skin knelt on the ground by the box she had just quit and called to her.

She trembled. His voice was calm, reassuring. He held out one hand, empty. Deep inside, she could feel the pull. Part of her desperately wanted to go to him, to join him and whatever group he lived with. She could feel an empty place in her that only the company of others could fill. He whistled once more, then called her.

“Here, pretty pup. I won’t hurt you. Come on.”

A slight rustle in a clump of dead grass nearby alerted Jirra to Mindle’s presence before the semi cat spoke in a fierce whisper. “Why stop? Run! Skin hurt us!”

Jirra looked from the tabby to the man by the box. He stood up slowly and took a step forward. She tensed. Still, her insides fought over what to do. She wanted to trust the skin, even though she didn’t know why.

Her indecision was too much for Mindle. The cat hissed, “Licker dog!” and fled. The insult hurt her. She wasn’t a licker! She was a semi. She could think for herself. She knew the truth about skins, about flying rocks and swinging sticks. She glanced once more at the man, but all she could see in her mind now was Wendall, carrying a thin branch in one hand and calling to her. The last thing Wendall had said to her was, “Come here, doggie! I won’t hurt you!”

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Jirra spun and galloped out of the alley into the street. She put a nose to the ground and picked up the cat's scent. It ran off to the right, so she followed it. It led to yet another alley, this one choked with debris from demolition work going on. The stink of oil and gas coming off the large machines parked in the alley was strong. Not strong enough to hide the cat, though.

Mindle was crouched between two drums full of diesel, the stench of it making her fur bristle. She spun to flee when Jirra stepped into sight, but stopped when she recognized her. She stood there, tensed to run again, waiting for Jirra to do something.

The semi dog looked around, making sure the alley was empty of skins. Finding none, she said quietly to the cat, "I'm not a lick. I used to live with skins. But they hurt me. Now I live alone."

The tabby said nothing. She merely sat down, staring at the dog.

Feeling somewhat desperate, especially after leaving the skin behind, she asked, "Do you have a pack?"

The cat watched her with its yellow eyes. Then she turned her head, looking away. "I half cat. Half cat don't pack."

Seeing she had offended the feline, Jirra sat down, wagging a few times. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I meant..." She tried to think of another way to say it. Felines could be so prickly sometimes about their independence. "Do you know any other semis who walk with you sometimes? Maybe...sit together, eat together?"

The orange tabby looked her right in the eyes again. Her ears leaned back in mild contempt. "You half dog. You need pack." She was silent again. Then her ears came up as she swabbed delicately at a narrow paw and wiped her forehead once. She walked casually to the semi dog and purred lightly, rubbing against Jirra's injured foreleg. "You no bite me. You share food. You sleep by me." She stepped away, sat down and regarded Jirra once more. "You good dog. I show you place. Show you pack. They good like you."

It was the most Jirra had heard Mindle say at one time. She said, "Thank you," and gently nosed the cat's ear. The cat regarded her skeptically.

"Big strange dog," she announced. "You fit good with pack." And with that she walked off, not looking back to see if Jirra was following.

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The scent of animals teased Jirra's nose as they got closer to the large brick building. She glanced up at the faded paint over three large doors facing the street. In the failing evening light she could barely see that it said, 'Bellows Falls Car Care Center.' A torn

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yellow piece of paper on one of the doors caught Jirra's attention. She saw Mindle scoot around the side of the building and through another door propped halfway open. Getting under the yellow sign, Jirra put her front paws against the rusty garage door and looked closely at it.

"Dog!" called the tabby. "Big door closed. Little door. Follow."

Jirra looked over at the corner where Mindle had reappeared, then followed her into the garage. Inside, she was assaulted by smells that were both familiar and strange. She knew the piercing stink of oil and gas. She could detect several semi animals as well. At least two dogs and another cat. There were others, as well. Scents she couldn't make out.

"Walk careful," the cat advised as they crossed the empty bays of the abandoned garage. "Holes full of black. Jyst fall. Smell sick now."

Jirra understood what the tabby meant by holes. She was able to make out two pits in the floor that skins had once stood in to work on cars. She assumed the 'black' in the holes meant pools of the oil she could smell. Who or what Jyst was, she couldn't guess.

Mindle led her to an office, then through another door to a large storage area that was mostly empty. There were a few tires laying flat on the cement floor. These were filled with dead grass and shredded newspapers. The animals she had smelled were there, too. Two dogs were laying in the tire/nests. A large gray tomcat was grooming in a corner. Along a wall near another broken door were two animals she had never seen before. She recognized them, though. One was a large Rhesus monkey. It was hunched over a metal pail. Inside the pail, its forelegs and head dangling over the side and its eyes closed, was an exhausted looking ferret. Both creatures had black spots on them and the stink of oil seemed to be coming from their direction.

Jirra didn't have time to look around further because at that moment a fully grown male Great Dane came charging out of another door that led to a small, walled off area of the storage room. He was barking furiously at Jirra. When he stopped a few feet from her and continued to bark and growl angrily at her, she realized he wouldn't come any closer. She also saw that he was quite old. His left eye had a slight glazing over it, a cataract that wasn't fully formed yet. The rough, black skin of his elbows was visible where time had worn the fur away.

Mindle calmly walked to the Dane and sat down, staring up at the great beast. He stopped barking and stared at the cat a moment, confusion coloring his expression.

"Her name Jirra. She help me. She want pack." The orange tabby looked over her shoulder at her. "She good half dog."

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The Dane licked his lips and twitched his heavy head, getting used to the idea that Mindle had brought a new semi into their group. He sat down and yawned, showing stained teeth that were considerably worn. "Where are you from?" he asked.

Jirra looked around at the animals in the room. They were all staring at her, even the oil soaked ferret. She turned back to the Dane, assuming he was as much the alpha as any creature there. "I left a family a day's walk from here."

The Dane stared at her, his good eye glittering in the remnants of the sunset coming through the open door. "Are they looking for you?"

Jirra shifted uncomfortably. She had assumed that she *was* being hunted by the people who had owned her. But as the weeks passed, she began to think maybe the woman of the family, who had hated her from the beginning, might have stopped anyone from looking too hard for her. While she doubted anyone was looking for her, she couldn't say for certain.

But to keep the Dane from getting worried, she simply said, "No. No one's looking for me."

"Wrong!" barked the Dane. "You are a semi! All skins will hunt you! They hunt all of us!" He trembled with sudden anger.

The other animals remained quiet and still. Jirra dropped her gaze a moment before asking, "Is that why you hide here?"

"The pack is safe here. Skins don't come here. We live without their help or their food." The Dane growled, a low menacing sound that, curiously, ended in a brief whine. "This is my pack," he warned, standing up. "Mine! I'm the alpha!"

Deep within her genetically altered brain, a tiny part of her told her she must submit to him by showing her throat. The skin gift of reason told her the chances of being a part of this pack were much better if she did. So she lay down and rolled onto her side, tipping her head back to expose her throat.

The Dane stood over her, sniffing at her head, then nipping at her throat. It seemed an insufficient show of strength to her, but she kept still. "My name is Persol. You can be part of my pack."

Jirra stood up cautiously, as Persol wandered away. He went back into the small room from where he'd come. Mindle came over to her and rubbed against her leg

"Big Persol strange. Like you." The tabby walked away then, to the gray tom where the two rubbed heads and purred. Jirra thought about the cat's insistence that she was not a part of the pack. It certainly looked like both cats were members of this odd family.

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She looked around and found the other animals were ignoring her now. Glancing at the monkey and ferret, she wondered what they were doing. Slowly, she made her way to the side of the pail opposite the Rhesus. The ferret had closed its eyes again. It was silent except for a tiny grunt when the monkey tending it pulled something from its fur.

“What your name name?” the monkey asked quietly. Its light brown eyes never left the task before it.

“Jirra,” she said, guessing that he hadn’t heard Mindle’s soft announcement to Persol.

“Yes,” the Rhesus agreed. “Mindlecat say name name, Jirra Jirra Jirra.” He chattered to himself for a moment. He continued working his nimble hands through the ferret’s oily fur. “Where you from from?”

Sensing she was going to go through the whole conversation she’d just had with Persol, Jirra simply said, “Far away.”

“Far far,” the monkey said. Then he looked up at her and said, “This Persol pack. You don’t take Persol pack pack. He bite bite bite.”

“I don’t want to take his pack from him,” she said.

The Rhesus went back to washing the ferret. “Good. Smart dog.”

Jirra took a sniff of the pail’s contents. Water, oil and semi ferret was all she could detect. “You need something else,” she told the monkey.

He picked up the dangly ferret and announced, “Jyst fall in hole. Get all black black. Soon he be dead.” He bounced the small mammal in his hands a bit and said in a strange, chattering sing-song voice, “Jyst fall black black, Jyst all dead dead, black dead ferret stinkybones!”

The semi ferret, worn out from being washed for so long, could only squeak miserably. Jirra felt bad for the little thing. As the monkey plunked his charge back into the pail for more scrubbing, she moved over to the small bricked-in area Persol had retreated to. Inside, she found what she had expected. The mechanics who left the garage last had made themselves a bathroom to clean up in after work. The floor of the small shower was lined with rags and newspaper and was currently covered by the dozing Great Dane. Looking around the mechanic’s bathroom, she spotted a mirror above a broken porcelain sink.

Raising herself up, she leaned against the sink and pushed her nose under the edge of the mirror. With a dull scraping sound, the mirror swung open on its rusty hinges. There, tucked safely inside the medicine cabinet, were a few old items. One was a large plastic bottle. She looked at the label for a moment, then raised a paw to knock it over. When it fell into the sink with a light thump, Persol raised his head.

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“What are you doing?”

Before she took the bottle in her mouth, she said, “Getting something to help Jyst.”

Persol laid back down and ignored her, so she took the bottle to the monkey. Dropping it to the floor by his tail, she said, “This will work better. Get some clean water and I’ll tell you how.”

The Rhesus picked up the bottle only to have it slip out of his oily hands. He tried again and brought it to his nose. “What what? What this do?”

“It’s called shampoo and it’s for cleaning fur. You need to use it with clean water.”

The Rhesus dropped the bottle carelessly and stared at her. He opened his mouth, pulling his lips back in a fearsome grimace. Then he licked his lips and leaned closer until their noses were almost touching.

“Skin trick?”

Jirra returned his stare calmly. “Skins made it. Skins use it.”

“Work? You fool Bashoe?”

Jirra noticed that Bashoe was looking concerned now, even worried. She wondered if perhaps there was something more to the casual washing of the ferret. “Yes it works,” she said. “I want to help Jyst.”

“Help Jyst?” Bashoe sat back, regarding her solemnly. “Persol say skin tricks bad, no use.”

“Persol doesn’t care about Jyst, does he?” Jirra asked quietly, but her anger leaked out and colored her words.

“Persol care,” the Rhesus whispered. “Just don’t believe Jyst live with black fur.”

“Do you care?” Jirra challenged.

Bashoe’s eyes glittered in the rising moonlight. Without saying a word, he lifted the ferret out of the pail and laid him on a nearby rag. He carried the pail outside, and Jirra could hear him dumping the water out. Moments later, Bashoe had refilled his pail from an open topped oil drum that collected rain water. He brought it back in and sat down, then gently placed Jyst inside.

“What I do?”

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Under Jirra's direction, Bashoe used the shampoo to get the majority of the oil from Jyst's coat. When the ferret was plucked from the gray, frothy water without any visible oil on him, Bashoe put him down and began chittering and screeching and jumping around like a rabid animal.

"Shampoo killed the black, all the black gone!" he raved. "Jyst live long time, fuzzyfluff Jyst long long time!" Then he picked up the rag and wrapped it around the ferret. Carrying his charge under one arm, he took off toward a steel ladder near the back of the room and scrambled up it to reach a small raised storage area she hadn't noticed before.

It got quiet in the garage after that. The other animals there were sleeping, except for the two cats who were talking quietly. Jirra laid down against the wall opposite the pail full of smelly, oily water and closed her eyes.

It wasn't the same as having a family. She didn't feel entirely safe here. But being a part of the pack was better than being with skins. They wouldn't turn on her for no reason. She drew a deep breath and gusted it out through her nose, setting dust on the floor dancing.

Perhaps she could learn to be happy here.

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During the night, she woke to the sound of barking. Two dogs had come in to the storage area and one of them was barking happily and sniffing at all the other animals there. It was a Labrador mix of some kind, and when it spotted her it came right to her. Wagging and whining, it touched noses with her. She could tell it was male and, more importantly, it was a licker. She was surprised none of the other animals had been concerned about its presence.

The other dog that had shown up was a large malamute. This animal also seemed strange to her, for two reasons. First, it was carrying a five pound bag of dog food in its jaws. Second, there was a bird sitting on its back.

She stayed where she was as the licker wandered outside to drink out of the rain barrel. Watching the malamute, she saw it bring the bag to the door of Persol's bathroom/den and tear it open. The contents of the bag spilled out onto the floor. Persol came out from his shower bed and nosed the food on the floor. He spoke a few words to the malamute, then began eating.

The malamute noticed Jirra the same time Bashoe came down from his loft, the dried out ferret slung carefully in one arm. Bashoe reached the malamute and the two began talking. When they both went silent and turned to look at her, she wondered if she was in trouble. She sat up, ready to bolt for the nearest open door, as they came toward her. She could see the bird on the malamute's back was a gray parrot.

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There was no detectable scent of aggression from the four semis who approached her, so Jirra relaxed somewhat. The malamute sat down near her, the parrot on his back climbing to his head with a small fluttering of wings. Bashoe the Rhesus also sat, gently placing the recovering ferret Jyst in front of him. The malamute spoke first.

“Bashoe said you helped Jyst.” He spoke softly, regarding her with golden eyes framed by a mask of black and white fur. “Why?”

“The ferret would have gotten sick if it didn’t get clean. I wanted to help.”

The malamute leaned closer, sniffing at her. When he leaned back, he glanced at Bashoe, who met his eyes only briefly. Then Bashoe spoke.

“How you know about clean clean stuff?”

Jirra whined quietly before saying, “Wendall dumped some oil on me once. They had to wash me with shampoo to get it out.”

“Who Wendall Wendall?”

The young skin’s face flashed through her mind, along with his mean tempered tricks and hurtful torments. Jirra looked away and said, “Nobody.”

Bashoe stroked Jyst’s long, lean body with care and said, “Mindlecat say Jirra hurt. Where?”

“A skin threw something at me. It hit my leg.”

Looking at her from under his brows, the Rhesus asked, “Bashoe look?”

Jirra felt a bit uneasy about having the monkey touch her, but seeing the way he was caressing his friend the ferret helped ease her fear. She held out her foreleg the way Bobby had taught her for the demeaning trick he’d called, ‘shake hands.’ The monkey’s surprisingly gentle grip first smoothed the fur down, then ran against the lay of the fur. Bashoe quickly found the wound, as Jirra confirmed with a short whimper.

The Rhesus brought his face close to the injury, peering at the newly formed scab. He sniffed at it. “No sick sick,” he declared. He looked at her head a moment, specifically her ears. He gently wiped aside the fur in her left ear and studied it closely. “No bugs,” he added. Then he looked directly at the malamute and said, “En why ay, six one.”

“What?” she said.

The malamute asked, “How old are you?”

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“Two years,” she said, confused. “Why?”

“Newest,” said Bashoe.

The malamute looked over at Persol, the gray parrot on his head bobbing with the movement. The Dane was still eating from the food on the floor. He turned to Jirra and explained.

“My name is Reno. I was bred in the Beecher Kennels of Rutland, Vermont. I was whelped four years ago. My mod number is five five. That means you are a newer mod than me. Than all of us.”

Jirra looked at Bashoe, then Reno. She licked her nose and asked, “What does that mean?”

“It means you are smarter than any of us. You are a German Shepherd, the smartest breed, the newest mod.” Reno glanced at the Dane again. “It means you are a threat to Persol’s pack.”

“I am not!”

“Quiet,” Reno urged her.

She stood, getting the feeling she was about to be expelled from the group. “I don’t want to take his pack,” Jirra insisted anxiously. “I want to be a part of it.”

“I know,” said Reno. “Bashoe told me. I believe you.”

Her panic subsiding, Jirra sat again. She couldn’t shake the feeling that things were not going to go well for her, though. “So am I a threat or not?”

“Not to us,” the malamute assured her. “But Persol would not see it that way. He’s a much older mod. This is his pack because he’s the biggest. He’s kept us from getting caught by the skins. He drove away the lickers they sent to find us.”

Something didn’t seem right. Jirra thought about it a moment before she realized. “Why do you have to bring him food, then? He told me the pack doesn’t need food from the skins.”

Reno stretched out, his forelegs almost touching her. He let his hindquarters drop with a soft thump and regarded her with his beautiful golden eyes. The parrot on his head fluttered to the ground and toddled over to the ferret.

“Where have you been eating since you left your family?” he asked.

## The Pack

“Garbage bins, dumpsters. I found some food that a licker had left once, in a bowl by a house.”

“So you’ve been eating the scraps the skins leave behind.”

Hearing it put that way bothered Jirra. “They aren’t going to feed me,” she defended herself.

“Some will,” Reno countered.

The idea was utterly foreign to her. Skins feeding a semi who didn’t belong to them? Why would they do such a thing? And more importantly, who?

“Skins will feed me, even though I’m not theirs?” She glanced at Bashoe, wondering if the two were making a joke at her expense. The Rhesus was casually grooming the ferret, who was gently batting at the wings of the parrot. The parrot seemed to be teasing Jyst. It would extend a wing for a target, letting the ferret get one gentle swat in, then pull it back out of his reach.

“Some skins want to help us. So do some beasters. We know which ones to go to. Some feed us out there, a few give us food to bring here.”

“But why do they do it?”

Reno yawned hugely. “Who knows what two-leggers think?”

Jirra looked over at Persol, only to find him leaving the remains of his meal to the licker that had followed Reno in. The Dane moved back to his shower/bed.

“But why does Persol eat food the skins give you when he said he wouldn’t? And why is that licker here?”

“Questions questions, why why why,” chittered Bashoe. “Too much brain brain.” He worked out a speck of something from the ferret’s sleek fur and inspected it briefly before flicking it away.

Reno grinned, his long tongue flopping from his mouth for a moment before he licked his nose and answered. “The food Persol gets from me comes from a beaster I know. And Jake, the licker, is loyal to the pack. So Persol lets him stay.”

“Will he let me stay?”

The malamute turned serious. “Only if he doesn’t think you’re a threat to his being alpha.”

“I don’t want to take his pack away from him,” she repeated.

## The Pack

Reno yawned again. “Then you can stay.” He laid his head down on his paws. “I’m tired. I’ll show you what houses to go to for food tomorrow.” He closed his eyes and said nothing more.

Jyst and the parrot were getting energetic in their game of tag. They had scampered off, leaving Bashoe to himself. The Rhesus ambled off to the ladder and climbed up to his private perch. Jirra noticed some of the other dogs were gone, as were Mindle and her mate. They must take turns getting food, she realized.

Jirra laid down next to Reno, and thought about her new pack. It would take some getting used to, but she felt like she had a much better chance with these semis than she ever had with Wendall and his parents.

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When Jirra left her home in Keene, New Hampshire, she had headed west until she crossed the Connecticut River, then turned north until she reached Bellows Falls. She spent the next few weeks getting to know her new home. She thought she had explored most of the small town, but as Reno led her around the next morning it became clear that she hadn’t seen even half of the place. He scooted around the streets, the gray parrot on his back, and pointed out the houses where a meal could be occasionally had. It was important, he told her, not to go to the same houses over and over. That might give the skins a pattern to follow.

“Are they really looking for us?” she asked.

Reno stopped to scratch. “They used to. I don’t think they do anymore. I think most of the skins in this town don’t care about us anymore. They couldn’t catch us, and we don’t cause trouble. So they ignore us now.” He looked at Jirra. “But Persol says we should be careful anyway. Why take the risk?”

As they visited the houses he showed her, Reno lifted a leg against certain trees. That was to help mark the pack’s territory, he told her, and so everyone in the pack could tell which houses were safe. At one point, the parrot took off flying. Reno seemed not to notice.

They got to the center of the small town, a cluster of worn buildings with faded signs and few cars. Little moved through the drab streets. Reno said nothing as they walked behind the few stores with large dumpsters. He showed her the scrap bin behind the diner where the owner routinely left discarded food for them. They nibbled on a few tidbits left from the morning’s breakfast rush, then moved on. As they headed out of town, Reno said, “It’s best not to speak aloud while you’re in town. Only bark if you need to say something.”

## The Pack

Jirra took his advice to heart. If she was to live here, she'd need to know how to get along with the skins. As they headed toward the outskirts of Bellows Falls, she asked, "Does Persol ever leave the garage?"

"Not much. He's too old and his joints hurt him. The pack takes care of him now." He sniffed around a maple tree near the city limits sign, then lay down in its generous shade. "He's from the same breeding kennel as you."

Jirra stared in confusion. "How do you know what kennel I'm from?"

Reno's tongue lolled in good natured humor. "Bashoe told me, when he looked in your ear. You have a tattoo. En why ay, six one. That stands for New York Albany, mod number six one."

"I didn't know I have a tattoo in my ear," Jirra whined.

"Of course not." Reno's voice got darker. "They don't want semis to know too much. That's why we can't read." He scratched again. "Bashoe was taught letters. That's how we knew about the marks in your ear. He taught me letters, maybe he could teach you, too."

"But I can already read," Jirra said softly.

"Oh," Reno urfed. He glanced away, embarrassed. "I should have known. You being a newer mod would mean you were already taught stuff an older mod like me never knew, like letters."

Jirra shifted, moved closer to him. "No, I mean I can read words. I can read signs and things."

The malamute regarded her with disbelief. "You can't! No semi is allowed to read! Who taught you?"

"I was taught in the kennel. I was designed for it."

The two semi dogs stared at each other for a long while. Finally Reno said, "If you want to stay with the pack, you won't tell anyone about this. Understand? If you can read words, that would make you a threat to Persol, and the pack would turn on you."

The idea of the whole pack turning against her set her fur on end. She whimpered quietly and said, "I won't tell."

Just then the gray parrot fluttered by and settled on Reno's back. The malamute glanced over his shoulder at the bird. The parrot squawked, "Merse isn't home. His truck is gone." Reno gently nosed the bird's chest, then turned to Jirra.

## The Pack

“I was going to take you to see Merse today, but he’s not there. I’ll show you his house instead.”

“Who’s Merse?”

“He’s the beaster who gives me bags of food for Persol. He’s a lupiform, a skin with wolf fur and fangs.” Reno got up, the parrot flapping to keep its balance. “Come on, I’ll show you on the way home.”

Jirra followed the malamute down a dusty side road that cut off the main road through town. They loped along at an easy pace until he stopped at another side road. This one was a badly rutted gravel road with standing water in the low spots. Both semi dogs lapped at the water before moving on. It wasn’t long before Merse’s home came into view.

Jirra knew she wasn’t the best judge of two-leggers and their standards, but the run down travel trailer she saw didn’t look fit to be anyone’s home. Several windows had been broken out and covered with plywood. The sides were so badly rusted and molded that she couldn’t tell what color it had originally been. It was covered in dents and gouges and all the tires were flat. The only sign that anyone might live there was the scent around the spot of dead grass where Merse parked his truck. She could easily pick up the beaster’s spoor, and it was only hours old.

She wondered why Merse lived in such poor conditions. Reno was already heading away, toward the garage, calling to her. When she caught up with him she asked, “Why does Merse live out here? Why doesn’t he live in town?”

“Skins don’t like beasters any more than they like semis. They won’t help him, just like they won’t help us.” The parrot on Reno’s back fluttered its wings and chirped, “We’re on our own.”

Jirra thought about this. “But you said some skins do help us. Why won’t they help Merse?”

“A few do help him. That’s why he has a place to live and a truck to drive.” Reno stopped walking and sat down so suddenly the parrot wound up taking flight before resettling on his head. It nipped one of his ears to show what it thought of being dumped. “Jirra, you said you lived with skins, right?”

She sat down next to him. “Yes.”

“You know how skins treat semis.”

The Shepherd licked her whiskers, uncomfortable. “Yes.”

“Some of them treated you well, but the rest did not. Right?”

## The Pack

It was true. In the Heatherford house, only Bobby had treated her with any kindness. He hadn't really treated her like she was intelligent, but still he had seemed to honestly like having her around. Once she ran away, she found only one skin who showed her any sympathy. A little girl saw her walking along the road as she rode her bike to school. The girl had taken part of her sandwich out of her lunchbox and left it on the ground for her. All the other skins she had seen had either ignored her or chased her away.

"Right," she said quietly.

"Well," said Reno, "skins treat beasters the same way. A few like them, the rest don't. That's the way things are." He stood up again and set off walking.

Jirra sat in the middle of the dusty gravel road for a while, asking herself a new question, one she'd never asked herself before. Why did skins dislike semis and beasters so much? It was a hard question, and she didn't think she'd ever know the true answer.

Reno was almost out of sight when he barked twice to her. She stood up and galloped after him, her mind still gnawing on the question.

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Bellows Falls and the abandoned garage were feeling much more like home to Jirra after a few weeks. She was getting good at finding food for herself. She was also becoming deft at finding food for the rest of the pack. Remembering her successful, though painful, raid on the grocery store dumpster, she began to look at getting food differently. It was less a matter of her own survival and more a matter of the pack's survival. Once, while she was watching a delivery truck unload behind the very same store she'd been at before she met Mindle, she saw a box of small cans fall and split open. Cans went everywhere, and the skin taking them off the truck cursed loudly. Once the truck had left she scouted around and found several of the cans that had been overlooked. Studying the labels told her the cans contained cat food. She gathered them up and put them in a small cardboard box to bring to the garage. It took a while to explain to Bashoe, the only one with paws nimble enough to pull the pop tops off, how to open them for Mindle and her mate, Seroh. Both cats were grateful.

She also learned to find food that she didn't consider food herself. She'd seen Bashoe eating leaves from certain trees. That prompted her to watch some of the roadside fruit and vegetable vendors. Several times she waited until they'd left and hunted through the spoiled produce they'd tossed to the ground before leaving. She found cabbage and other greens as well as fruits that both Bashoe and his friend Jyst the ferret liked. Her proudest moment came when she found an old plastic shopping bag and taught herself to put the loose vegetables into it, greatly increasing the amount she could bring back to the pack.

## The Pack

Jirra worried that Persol might see her ability to help feed the pack as a sign she wanted to be alpha, but he never said a word. As long as Reno brought bags of dog food from Merse, Persol seemed content to watch over his pack from the shower in the bathroom.

One day she was returning from a rather unsuccessful foray when she realized she was close to Merse's house. She stopped, out of sight of the trailer, and thought. She was curious about the beaster. She'd only seen a few of his kind in the kennel where she was whelped and trained. She'd been frightened of them as a pup, and she still felt uneasy around them now.

Deciding it was worth a look, she approached the trailer. When it came into view, she could see a battered old pickup truck parked next to the trailer. It looked about as worn out as Merse's home did. Movement caught her eye, and she stopped in her tracks. Coming around the dingy red truck was a tall, thin beaster. His pelt was a mix of light and dark grays, and something on his face twinkled briefly as he turned his head.

Merse walked around his truck until he was behind it, then opened the tailgate. As he was gathering something from the bed of the truck, he paused. Slowly, he turned his head until he was looking directly at Jirra. She didn't know what to make of it. Could the beaster actually tell she had been watching him?

Merse stared at her for several moments, then turned back to his truck. He picked up something he wanted and closed the tailgate. He made his way into the trailer, glancing once more at her before he closed the door. Jirra was still confused when she left. She gave the beaster's house a wide berth.

When she got to the garage, she remembered another puzzle that she'd seen. She decided to investigate it now. She reared up under the piece of yellow paper stuck to the big door at the front of the building.

Persol and Reno were sitting quietly together, watching the fully recovered Jyst scamper after the parrot who was teasing him again. They both looked up at Jirra when she came bounding in. She was greatly agitated and yelping.

"We have to leave! The skins are going to destroy this place! They're going to tear it down!" From the scent she was broadcasting to her raised hackles, there was no doubt that Jirra was upset. Neither Reno nor Persol could understand what she meant, though.

"We're not leaving," Persol said, his ears pitching backward.

"What do you mean?" Reno asked. "What about the skins?"

"They're coming to destroy the garage!" she whined in fright. "They'll kill us all if we're in here!"

"Where are they?" demanded Persol. "Where did you see them?"

## The Pack

“They’re coming,” Jirra repeated. “They’re coming here!”

“Are they here now?” Reno asked, trying to piece together her intended message.

“No, no! They’re coming! We have to leave!” Jirra began looking around, trying to find all the members of the pack.

“Wait!” boomed Persol. By now the other members of the pack were picking up on Jirra’s distress and getting restless and worried. “Where are the skins now?” he growled.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you see them?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know they’re coming here?” Persol pressed.

“I read the paper on the door outside. It says they’re going to destroy this place because it’s condemned! We have to leave before it’s too late!”

“Jirra!” Reno whined, suddenly frightened. It wasn’t the skins he feared, though.

“Liar!” Persol howled. “Licker! You aren’t taking my pack anywhere!” His ears flattened to his skull and he broadcast a scent of rage. His aging body tensed as he growled at Jirra.

In her distress, it took Jirra a moment to notice that Persol had become angry. She couldn’t understand why until he barked at her.

“You’re not of my pack, licker! You can’t be alpha! No semi can read! The skins won’t allow it!” He approached her menacingly, baring his worn fangs. “Get out!”

“But they *are* coming!” Jirra realized her mistake too late. She looked to Reno. The malamute’s ears were flattened, his tail wedged between his legs. He stepped back as Persol advanced on her. He was scared, and she couldn’t blame him for that, but there was the safety of the pack to consider. “We all have to go! They will knock this garage down on us and we’ll all die!”

Rage had supplanted reason in Persol’s mind. He took one more step toward her and barked, “You have to go! NOW!!” And with only that warning he lunged at her, snapping at her head.

Jirra flinched, then shrieked as Persol’s jaws clamped shut on her left ear. She pulled away in terror as he shook his massive head and she felt her ear rip along its edge. She

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wailed in pain and fright as she turned to run. Persol struck again, managing to catch the tip of her tail between his jaws. Jirra howled her agony as she leaped away, feeling much of the fur on her tail pull out. She ran, not caring where she went as long as she was away from Persol.

She bolted from the garage, barely missing the oil bottomed pits. Once she was outside she fled toward the tree line, not stopping to see if she was being followed. She didn't stop when she made it into the woods, either. She didn't stop until she felt tired enough to want to rest. When she did slow down and come to a panting halt, she turned and listened, trying to hear if any of the pack were chasing her.

Jirra felt terrible. Not only did her ear and tail hurt, but she hurt inside, too. Reno had warned her the pack would turn on her if she revealed her ability to read. And now she had no pack. She had no one at all. She was on her own again, and she whimpered at the idea.

She couldn't hear anyone chasing her, so she lay down for a few minutes to catch her breath. As she calmed down, she began to worry again. When the skins destroyed the garage, the pack would be killed. It wasn't her pack anymore, though. The thought of Reno and Jyst and Bashoe and Mindle being killed made her want to go back, even though the pack had rejected her.

The more she thought about it, though, the more she realized the pack \*hadn't\* thrown her out. Persol was the one who had attacked her, sent her running for her life. The others had only watched. She wondered if maybe she could go back and try to explain it to Persol again. Maybe Reno could talk to him first, try to explain it all.

No, she decided. Reno was just like her. He wanted to stay in the pack, and would not do anything to jeopardize his place. She didn't blame him. The pull was strong in semi dogs. The desire to be part of a pack had kept her among Wendall's family too long. She had felt the pull every time she got close to a skin, despite the fact she couldn't trust them.

Miserable, Jirra got up and started walking toward the only place she thought she might find help for herself.

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Merse pulled into the long rutted gravel driveway to his trailer and shut down his truck's systems until it was still and quiet. He sighed, wondering how much longer it would be before he would have to buy new fuel cells for his worn out truck. It would be hard, he knew, to find parts for a 23 year old Kaans Pacher. The African based Kaans motor company had gone under more than a decade ago and parts were scarce.

The tall, gangly lupiform climbed from the truck knowing the question of parts was moot if he couldn't convince the Bellows Falls city council to let him have the renovation

## The Pack

contract for the water department's offices. The job would mean more money for him and his helpers than they had made all last year. It was hard work, though, convincing a group of humans to give such a profitable contract to a genemorph. Despite the fact that no other local carpenters had bid on the job, the city council was delaying giving him the contract until they checked other contractors from outside the county.

Merse was hopeful that if he waited patiently, he would eventually get word that he had the job. But waiting was hard with bills due and a truck that had over two hundred thousand miles on its electric drive system.

As he climbed the cement blocks that served as steps to the front door of his trailer, he saw movement by the corner of his house. There was a black and tan-furred body laying in the tall grass there. The dog was a German Shepherd, female, and bleeding from one ear. He sniffed deeply, realizing he hadn't noticed her there before because she was downwind. He blinked in surprise when he scented her to be a semi-morph. He pushed his glasses further up his snout and studied her a moment.

The semi was watching him, not making any sound. He could smell the blood now, but the smell was not strong enough to suggest an openly bleeding wound. He wondered if this was the same dog he'd seen at the edge of his property just hours before. It seemed to have the same markings.

Merse could also smell fear on her, faint but easily recognizable. He noticed she was shivering. She looked and smelled terrified. His heart went out to the unlucky semi. He sat on the bottom step and spoke quietly to her.

"You shouldn't fear me. I won't hurt you."

Jirra blinked, still shaking from fright and pain. She struggled to keep her ears up. She said nothing as she crouched in the grass.

"I'm called Merse. What's your name?"

She only whined, afraid to speak to the beaster. She unthinkingly flicked her ears and yelped at the sharp twinge of pain it caused.

"I can patch that ear up for you," he told her. "It must hurt a lot." When she didn't move, he added, "I can get something for you to eat, if you're hungry." She still didn't react. Finally he said, "Well, I'll be inside if you want anything." He started back up the steps to his front door.

"Please," she said as he lay his hand on the door latch. He look down at her, hunkered in the grass. She took a few uncertain steps toward him, ducking her head and whining faintly.

## The Pack

“I promise I won’t hurt you,” Merse said again, hoping to ease her fears. He moved to the bottom step again and sat down, flicking his tail out from under him as he lowered himself to the gritty cement blocks. He kept his expression and voice neutral as he said, “Come on. Let me have a look at that ear. I’m sure it won’t take much to fix it.”

Jirra felt the pull again, and wondered if she would ever be able to look at a two-legger without wanting to get closer, be part of his or her pack. Struggling with her feelings, she forced herself to move towards the genemorphic wolf. When she was close enough, he raised one hand slowly, and she sniffed at it. It reminded her of the beasters she had met in the kennel, that dry, dusty scent of wildness mixed with an almost skin-like oily smell. Then his fingers touched her, under her jaw, rubbing gently. She couldn’t help herself. She moved closer, until she was standing next to him with his dark, blunt claws working through the fur of her chest and shoulders. He continued to scratch her lightly and rub her muzzle until she felt herself relax.

“I’m going to touch your ear now,” he said. “I’ll try to be careful, alright?” She looked up at him briefly, trust in her eyes. He coaxed her to turn her head so he could see better. The wound was not as serious as he’d feared, but it had to be painful. The hole made by Persol’s blunt fang had torn in a line from the puncture to the edge of her ear, making a ragged notch. With care, it could be fixed to look normal.

Merse went inside and got his first aid kit. He used an analgesic spray to numb the skin around the wound, then carefully shaved the fur around the notch. He apologized several times when she cried out as the trimmer’s dull blades pulled some of the hair instead of cutting it. Once the wound was prepped and cleaned with antiseptic, he put a cloth bandage over the tear, folding it over the edge of her ear. He used a stiff plastic clamp he kept for use on his own ears when they got nicked or cut on the job. The clamp held the bandage in place, and he warned her against shaking her head too hard or scratching her ear too vigorously. Keeping the bandage in place was important to quick healing, he said.

When he stood up, his job finished, she stood as well, looking up expectantly at him. He cocked his head and smiled a thoroughly canine smile, his ears pitched forward, his eyes shining and his tongue lolling for a moment. “Hungry?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” she responded.

“Come inside?”

With only a moments hesitation, she moved up the steps and through the door to his trailer. Merse hunted up a bowl with a wide bottom and picked up one of the bags from beside his ailing refrigerator. He opened it and poured the synthetic beef kibble into the bowl, then added a splash of water to rehydrate the meat. It could be eaten without rehydration, but he always assumed it would taste better reconstituted.

## The Pack

Merse fixed himself a quick supper and read the latest book he'd gotten from the Bellows Falls library. Once it was dark out, he cleaned up and put the book away. He turned on his media set and tuned the radio to his favorite station. Soft, haunting strains of Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D swirled through the little trailer. Merse murred in appreciation as he sank to the floor, his head between the speakers. He hummed with the music, letting himself relax. When he felt his guest lay down next to him and put her head on his stomach, he caressed her neck.

"You never did tell me your name," he said.

"Jirra," she replied, listening to the deep, soothing sound of his breathing.

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want, Jirra. But I have to ask you something." He kept stroking her neck, helping her to relax. "Are you in any trouble I should know about?"

Jirra understood what he was asking, and told him the bitter truth. "No one's looking for me."

Their eyes met, and the message was clear. Merse sighed. "Ah, well. I know how that feels. No one looks for me, either."

The moon rose, and the two fell asleep with Ludwig's Concerto filling the air like dust motes dancing in a summer sunbeam.

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The next morning, after Merse had gone to do some handiwork for a local customer, Jirra took a walk around Merse's trailer, familiarizing herself with the area. She had to remind herself often not to scratch the clamp on her ear. Merse had changed the bandage before leaving.

She wound up back at the trailer, laying in the tall grass again. She couldn't keep the yellow demolition notice out of her mind. The skins would destroy the building and kill the pack, and there was nothing she could do to help them. Persol wouldn't listen, and the rest were unwilling to challenge him. She felt bad about it, but the pain in her ear and tail were reminder enough to keep her from going back to the garage.

She dozed in the warm sunshine, listening to the birds sing and trying not to flick her ears at the flies that landed on her head. When Merse's truck pulled up to the house, she sat up. The lupiform seemed reluctant to get out after he shut down the vehicle. He just sat and stared at his trailer. She thought she could see his ears dropping and rising, as though he was unhappy but trying to hide it.

## The Pack

Eventually he got out and dragged himself up the steps to his front door. He put a hand on the knob but didn't go in. His head lowered, and his hand dropped to his side. He turned and sat on the top step, elbows on his knees and head between his hands.

Jirra got up and moved to sit next to him. She could scent the slightest traces of fear and anger from the beaster. She whined, and asked, "What's wrong?"

Merse put an arm around her shoulders, gently stoked her. He took a long, deep breath and let it go in a heavy sigh. "Jerry Mandril, over in Westminster, got the contract. Even though he's booked until late summer." He shook his head, the sun flashing off the lenses of his glasses. "They just didn't want to give me such a good job."

Jirra didn't understand much of what Merse had said, but she understood what it meant to him. He was deeply disappointed and somewhat angry about something the skins had done. She remembered what Reno had said to her, about skins treating semis and beasters the same. The question that had nagged at her earlier came back. This time she had someone she could ask about it.

"Merse? Why do skins hate us?"

The genemorphic wolf looked at her with surprise. He didn't say anything at first, but he seemed to be thinking about something. He rubbed her neck as he considered. Finally he said, "They don't really hate us, Jirra."

She thought about Wendall, and the stockboy, and all the others who had turned on her or turned her away. "Then why won't they help us?"

Merse considered his answer. "Some of them do help us. In fact, Jerry is a friend of mine, and he's promised to sub-contract as much of the work as he can to me and my helpers. We won't make nearly as much, but we'll do all right."

That didn't tell Jirra much, and he could tell. He thought about it a bit more. "Most of the time, I think they're just afraid of us."

"But why? They made us. They made everything. Cities, cars, everything." She looked Merse over, trying to figure out what skins would find frightening about him.

"Yes, it's true, humans made us," he conceded. "But they have made lots of things that they were afraid of. We're just one of the things they fear the most."

"How can they be afraid of us? What can we do to them?"

"Well," Merse explained, "that's just it. They don't know what we can do. They are afraid because we're different. Because they don't completely understand us, or what we might do."

## The Pack

Jirra knew what she could do, which was precious little against a skin, let alone against all skins. “That’s stupid,” she said, hardly believing skins could be frightened so easily.

“Mm, not really.” Merse thought some more, then tried to explain. “You see, humans have always liked animals, but they’ve always been afraid of them, too. It’s because they can’t always control them. Humans aren’t comfortable unless they can control everything that might hurt them.”

She understood most of this, having been under human control herself. Wendall’s mother had despised her because, as she put it, ‘she’s capable of almost anything.’ Instead of seeing her advanced design as a guarantee of her obedience, she had feared Jirra because she didn’t believe she could control her.

“When humans made genemorphs, they thought they would have complete control over us,” Merse continued. He huffed a humorless chuckle. “They were wrong, and now they don’t trust us unless we’re under strict control. That’s why they seldom try to help us. Most of them think we might turn their help against them somehow.”

This new, foreign idea took hold in her, and she saw what Merse was saying. It still puzzled her, though. She had a new question.

“If they think they can’t trust us, why did skins make us in the first place?”

What Jirra couldn’t possibly know was that Merse, and probably every other genemorph ever born, had asked the same question. And no one had come up with a good answer yet, not even the humans. “I don’t know,” he told her. “Neither do they.” He laughed softly. “Humans are the strangest animals of all.”

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After several days, Jirra’s ear had healed enough to leave the clamp off and let the wound breathe. It was still tender, and she often asked Merse to rub it when it itched. His hands were gentle and soothing to her and she enjoyed the attention greatly. Merse was often gone, though, looking for extra work. She didn’t like staying at his trailer alone, but she was hopeful that Reno would show up for one of the bags of food Merse left out for him. Two nights ago, Merse had done just that, but the food was still there in the morning.

As she got used to being around Merse, she thought less about the pack and what would happen to them. But still she hoped she could see Reno again.

One morning, nearly a week after her flight from the garage, she was dozing in the grass. It had become her favorite spot to nap. The early morning sunshine felt good on her fur. Merse had left early to work on a small project someone in town had for him.

## The Pack

She became instantly alert when she heard a distant bark. She looked around, trying to find her visitor. The bark came again, from the other side of the trailer, and it sounded familiar.

Reno came running toward her, his stride diminished as though he had run all the way from the garage to Merse's house. When he got to Jirra he lay down, panting hard. His tongue lolled and saliva dripped freely from its tip. Over the smell of his overheated body, Jirra could detect fear. Her ears dipped and she whined, fearing what Reno's visit might mean.

"There's water on the other side of the house," she said. Gratefully, Reno followed her around the trailer to a bowl Merse had left out for her. The malamute lapped greedily at the cool water until he felt better, then lay down again.

"You've got to help me," he eventually panted. "The skins have come, just like you said. They brought big machines. I think they're going to wreck the garage today."

"Why doesn't Persol move the pack out of the garage?"

"He says they'll go away if we hide quietly." Reno's triangular ears flattened. "I think he's afraid," he added, as though ashamed to think such a thing of his alpha.

Dismayed, Jirra whined. She looked toward the road. She wished desperately that Merse had stayed today. He would know what to do. She thought briefly that perhaps she could talk to the skins and get them to move the pack out before they did their work. Her own experience told her they wouldn't listen.

"I don't know what I can do to help you, Reno. I can't make Persol change his mind, and I can't make the skins change their minds, either." She licked her whiskers nervously. "What is it you want me to do?"

"We have to force them out," he said. His panting slowed as he caught his breath.

"You're going to fight Persol for the pack?"

Reno flinched at the very thought. "No! I won't fight Persol!"

"Then what?"

The malamute's ears sank again. He raised himself up until he was sitting. He drank from the water bowl again. Finally he faced Jirra. "There's only one thing Persol's more afraid of than skins."

"What??" Jirra asked, anxious to know what he had planned.

"Fire."

## The Pack

“Reno!” she squealed, terrified of the idea. She sank to her belly, her legs feeling suddenly weaker. “No! That would kill them!”

“We have to put the fire far enough away that it won’t hurt them, just scare them,” he explained. “Please, I need your help.”

Jirra’s ears were completely flat and her tail was firmly wedged between her legs. “You’ll kill them,” she wailed. “They’ll burn up and die!”

“Jirra!” he barked furiously, “They’ll die if they don’t leave! They won’t leave unless Persol tells them to!”

“Then fight him!” she begged.

“I won’t!” Reno stood and paced a few steps away. He trembled slightly at the conflicting emotions within him. He looked back at the Shepherd. “If I fight him and lose, they’ll stay in the garage and die. If I win, Persol will lose the pack. Then he may as well be dead.” The malamute’s gaze was pained but resolute. “I won’t do that to him.”

“Not even to save the rest of the pack?”

The malamute was silent. The sun made the stark contrast of his black and white fur more noticeable than ever. He seemed an animal made of two different halves, one dark and one light. Even the sharp line of black fur that swept down from his forehead seemed to divide his face in two.

“You were part of his pack,” he finally said. “You know how it feels. It’s safe.”

“But fire is so dangerous,” Jirra whined. “It’s terrible.”

“I won’t fight him.” Reno made it clear that his mind was made up. “Will you help me?”

Persol had driven her from the pack. He had bitten her and frightened her and she knew he wanted no more of her. But he didn’t deserve to die, and neither did the rest of the pack. If Persol couldn’t save the pack from the skins, it was up to her and Reno to do it. She might even find a better way than fire to get them out.

Gradually her ears came up, but her tail refused to. “I’ll help,” she said.

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The garage seemed a foreign and unfriendly place now. Before, there had only been the pack and light traffic on the road nearby. Now there were skins, with their smelly, noisy

## The Pack

machines. The machines were huge, as Reno had said, and all had a similar sign painted on them: 'Perks Construction.'

The skins themselves lounged by the road, oblivious to the acrid stench of diesel fuel and exhaust. While they talked and laughed, several road flares burned beside the pavement, adding their own sulphurous stink to the atmosphere and painting the skin's mechanical monsters with a sickly red glow.

It wasn't hard to get into the garage without being seen. The skins seemed uninterested in the building they were about to demolish. Inside, away from the cloying odors of the skin's machines, Jirra could detect the scents of the pack. And there was a scent she hadn't smelled inside those walls before. It was fear. Even before they got inside the storage area where the pack stayed, she could smell fear in the air. It made her tail clamp harder against her belly.

The pack was huddled around Persol in the mechanic's restroom. She could see all the members except for Reno's parrot. The licker was missing, as well. All eyes turned to her and Reno as they approached. Jirra had been very worried about how Persol would react to her presence, but as the two of them neared the doorway all the Great Dane said was, "Are they still out there?" Reno's ears dipped as he said, "Yes."

A faint whine could be heard from the pack's alpha at hearing the news. Then Persol raised his head and said, "They won't stay long."

"Persol," Jirra began. A short yip from Reno kept her from saying anything more. Then the malamute glanced at Bashoe the Rhesus monkey. Bashoe stared back a moment before putting a subdued Jyst down next to Mindle. The ferret pressed itself against the cat, who nosed its ear and licked its stubby muzzle. Bashoe moved out of the press of furred bodies and joined them outside the restroom. Persol watched him go but said nothing. The three of them moved back into the work bays to discuss Reno's plan.

"What we do?" Bashoe asked.

"We're going to make fire," Reno said grimly. "It's the only thing that will get Persol to move."

Bashoe grunted, chattered quietly, then fell silent. He looked to Jirra. "Jirra help help?" he wondered.

"Yes," she said, trying hard to keep her ears up.

The Rhesus took a step closer and briefly touched the side of the Shepherd's muzzle. "Persol good dog." He dropped his hand and gazed at her from under expressive eyebrows. "Bad thing he bite bite you."

Jirra couldn't help but wag a few times.

## The Pack

“So what do we do to get fire?” Reno asked, his nervousness plain in his scent and his twitching ears.

She thought a moment. The last place she'd seen fire was at a small portable sawmill she'd come across during her trek from Keene to Bellows Falls. In the rough clearing there had been the usual skins surrounded by their noisy machines. In a few places around the clearing, there had been some empty barrels set upright and filled with scrap wood set afire to ward off the morning chill. On the morning she'd come across the sawmill, she saw one skin start a fire in one of the barrels.

Looking around the garage, she saw several barrels with open tops. “We need one of those,” she said, walking to the closest one. They were all on their sides, so the first thing they had to do was get it upright. Even with Bashoe's help, it was hard to get the rusty cylinder standing up. Once it was on end, she said, “The fire needs wood to eat. Where is there some wood to put in it?”

They managed to come up with a few splintered boards and get them into the barrel. Bashoe proved invaluable, since he had hands where the two semis could only use their mouths. They looked at the barrel, the ends of the boards sticking out of the top like dead plants in an oversized pot.

“Now we need the fire.” Jirra looked at the other two.

“Where to we get that?” Reno wanted to know.

Licking her whiskers, she said, “Wait here. I'll get it.”

Jirra hated this more than anything she'd ever done. She would rather have been back in Wendall's back yard getting hit with sticks than doing what she had to do now. She slunk out the door and eyed the machines sitting by the road. Being near skins, near their horrid machines, near fire: it was enough to make her shed every hair on her body if she thought about it long enough.

She couldn't see any skins near the machines now. She ventured out toward the grimy yellow hulks, looking for them. Then she saw them. They were all clustered around a pickup truck that had just arrived. A tall, broad shouldered skin with a huge gut climbed out of the truck and began shaking hands and talking to the crew. Jirra looked at the nearest road flare, sputtering furthest away from the group of skins. It was long enough. With her legs shaking, she crept forward as quickly as she could force herself.

Standing over the flare filled her with a sense of dread. The flare was like a living thing, an ugly red snake spitting its fiery venom at anyone who dared approach. The stinging odor, the harsh hissing of burning chemicals and metals made her hesitate. Could she really do this? Could she take this burning spike into her mouth?

## The Pack

Mindle and Jyst needed her. Reno and Bashoe needed her. Even Persol needed her, though none of them knew it. She reached down and quickly grabbed the base of the flare in her mouth. A short tug was all that was needed to pull it from the soft ground. She winced as spatters from the burning end singed tiny spots on her muzzle. As quickly as she could, she ran back into the garage. She jumped up, hooked her forepaws over the rim of the barrel and dropped the flare into it.. She and the others backed up to watch the results.

The sliver of the barrel's rim that was visible was painted a pulsing, bloody red by the flare as it filled the barrel with thin, swirling smoke. They continued to watch, but nothing else happened.

Reno paced near the barrel, finally got the courage to look inside it. "What's wrong? Where's the fire?"

Jirra couldn't understand it either, until she remembered what the skin had done to start his barrel fire. "Rags," she said suddenly. "It needs rags to get started. Something little to eat first."

They scouted the work area for rags and quickly found some. They were old and crusted with filth. "I'm not picking that up," Reno said. "I'll get sick."

Once again, Bashoe did what the semis couldn't. He used his hands to pick up the oily rags and dump them into the barrel. Jirra began to think maybe hands were the one thing she might envy about skins and their monkey cousins.

The flare liked the rags. A lot. The inside of the barrel lit up and thick, black smoke rose to the ceiling. Flames began to lick at the boards in the barrel. The wood, dry from years of sitting in the garage, caught quickly. Soon the fire was writhing its hypnotic dance above the rim of the barrel. Reno said, "Let's go," and headed for the storage area. Outside, the sound of a diesel engine coughing could be heard.

Jirra and Bashoe followed the malamute to where the pack was hiding. "Fire!" Reno barked. "The skins have made fire in the garage! We have to go!"

Persol stood, growling. "No!" he thundered. "We stay here where it's safe!"

Reno, Jirra and Bashoe stood silently, momentarily caught between the newly born fire, the impending destruction promised in the growing roar of heavy machinery outside, and the forcefulness of Persol's presence.

Jirra saw Mindle, the small frightened orange tabby pressed against Seroh, her gray furred mate. The idea of her being crushed or burned made Jirra take a step forward. "The skins are here. They made fire. We have to go." She could feel her ears flatten unwillingly and couldn't bring them up. She felt an uncomfortable pressure brought on by the fear in the air.

## The Pack

Persol turned his anger toward her. “You! You did this! You brought the skins here! They were looking for you and you led them here!”

“There’s fire here,” came a deep, threatening growl from Reno. Jirra flinched at the sudden anger the malamute was broadcasting in his scent. He bared fangs, flattened his ears and raised his tail. “If we don’t leave it will eat us all.”

Jirra trembled, terrified at being near two large angry semi dogs. She remembered Reno’s refusal to fight Persol and knew his anger was a bluff. If Persol called it, Reno would pay heavily.

The tension between the animals became electric as they sensed an abrupt change in the air. Ears flattened, hackles rose, dogs whimpered and cats hissed. The scent of fire had reached them.

Persol ignored everyone and headed for the work area. Reno, Jirra and Bashoe followed him. As they passed through the office, Jirra could sense something terrible had happened. The rooms were painted with a twisting red light that could only mean one thing. When they reached the door to the work bays, all four animals stopped, stunned.

The fire had become a monster. It had licked at the dry, rotting timbers in the roof and reached them. Flames boiled along the ceiling, moving toward the windows and filling the whole area with gagging smoke. The sound of the fire was as intense as the heat it generated. It sounded like a hundred hissing snakes, all laughing at them for their foolishness at setting them free.

The dry serpentine laughter was hammered into submission by the bellowing roar of a heavy diesel motor. A piercing shock rolled through the floor and into their legs as the furthest wall cracked and splintered, showering dust onto the grimy floor. The concrete was no match for the bulldozer, and a huge hole opened at the other end of the work bay. As the blocks and mortar surrendered to the steel blade of the dozer, the fire gleefully gulped in the offering of fresh air and burst into a raging inferno.

It was too much. Jirra lost control of her bladder, wetting the black floor between her legs. She cried, frozen in fear. She knew she was going to die. The fire, the skins, Persol: it didn’t matter. Once of them would kill her this morning.

Persol bolted. He ran to the storage room and began barking madly at the pack. “Run! Run away! Fire! GO!!” Bashoe followed him, screeching.

Reno was only a step behind the Dane. He got as far as the office before he realized Jirra hadn’t followed him. He turned around and saw her, paralyzed by the spectacle of destruction. He heard skins shouting and cursing at the fire that was now confronting them. He barked at the Shepherd. “Jirra! Run! We have to run!”

## The Pack

Jirra sank to the floor, petrified at what she had done. She had done this. She had loosed fire among the pack. They would all die because of her.

Reno ran back to her, grabbed a mouthful of her scruff and yanked. She cried out in terror, not knowing it was him trying to help. He pulled roughly, trying to get her to move. She fought blindly for a moment, then surrendered, going in the direction he pulled her.

With the fire and the skins behind them, there was only one exit left to the pack. The small door that led to the rain barrel was being used by every member of the pack as Persol barked and snapped at them, driving them out among the skins. By the time Jirra got there, one of the skins had noticed the exodus of animals and was unwittingly blocking the door. He had probably wanted to see where all the dogs and cats were coming from. Mindle, Seroh and Jyst were now trapped by the hulking skin who stood in the doorway.

“Hey,” he shouted, “there’s a bunch of animals in here!”

“Get out of there you idiot!” was the reply. “Something sparked a fire!”

“Call Simon and get the water truck out here!” someone else yelled.

“Let it burn!” another voice offered. “Less work for us!”

Persol advanced on the skin in the doorway. The 140 pound Great Dane was a serious threat to the skin, but when he barked, “Get out of the way!” at the skin, he lost his advantage.

The skin, a well muscled specimen with a thick mustache, goggled at the animals before him. “They’re semis!” he reported. “All them missing pets are in here!” He licked his lips and glanced at the door to the office, where the flaring firelight was growing in intensity. He calculated his chances and decided it was worth a try. He looked at the array of animals he had trapped and eyed the smaller ones with greed. “There’s probably a reward for you furry buggers,” he muttered.

Seroh broke first, flashing past the skin’s legs before he could react. Mindle followed, but wasn’t so lucky. A deft snatch had her held up by her tail, wailing. The skin held her at arm’s length and spied Jyst. Bashoe screamed his anger as he scooped his friend up.

That finished it. Fire, skins and death were no match for the fury felt within the hearts of the remaining pack members. Persol charged first, bounding up and slamming into the skin with his full weight. Reno was with him, step for step. The malamute rammed into the skin’s legs, throwing him the rest of the way off balance. He and Mindle hit the ground, the cats twisting loose and fleeing without another sound. Jirra found herself running with Reno, Bashoe and Mindle. They ran without stopping until the fury of the machines and the fire were far behind them.

## The Pack

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It didn't take long to gather the pack together. Reno's gray parrot had taken to the trees earlier and watched as they made their escape. With its help, they found the scattered pack members. Most had stopped just out of sight of the garage, waiting for others to reach them. In less than an hour, all were accounted for except one. Persol was nowhere to be found.

Some distance off, the howl of sirens made the pack nervous. Reno sent his parrot up again to search for Persol. The bird took off, leaving the pack to wait for the return of their alpha. Most of them had calmed down by now. Only Jake the licker was still quivering from the experience. Reno helped him relax by pressing against him and gently licking his ears.

"Where Persol?" Mindle wanted to know.

Reno looked at Bashoe and Jirra. None wanted to say what they thought. What would happen to the pack without Persol? Would one of the others take the alpha position? Would they scatter?

The longer they huddled there, waiting for something to happen, the more Jirra believed Persol wasn't coming back. She turned to Reno. "You should take the pack now."

Reno flicked his ears. "Give Flit some more time."

"Flit?"

Reno glanced at her, a slight canine grin pulling at the corners of his long mouth. "My parrot. Her name's Flit."

So they waited. To Jirra's surprise, there eventually came a rustling through the branches as Flit flew down and landed on Reno's back. "He's coming," she squawked.

Indeed, Persol showed up moments later. He was tired but unhurt. The pack greeted him with happy whines and licks and purring. He sat down, panting. When Reno asked him what happened, he said, "That skin grabbed my leg and wouldn't let go. I wanted to bite him, but...they would have hunted us for sure if I did. They're hunting us right now, most likely."

"Where should we go?" Jirra wondered.

Persol didn't answer. He eventually stopped panting and looked around at the pack. All members were looking at him, waiting for his decision. But he didn't have one. He felt his control of the pack slipping. He'd kept them together for so long in the garage, he felt lost outside in the large, hostile world.

## The Pack

The Dane closed his eyes and gave in to the reality that he was no longer fit to lead the pack. He was tired, both in his body and his heart. The pack was going to move, and he didn't know how to protect them outside the garage. For the first time, he felt old. He lay his head down on the soft grass and heaved a great sigh.

Reno saw his alpha giving up and whined softly. He looked to Jirra and Bashoe, but they were as helpless as he. He nosed the Dane's ear gently. "Persol? What should we do?"

"I don't know," Persol groaned.

Reno thought a moment, trying to understand what was wrong with Persol. The only thing that made sense to him was that his alpha was tired, worn out from his fight with the skin. He leaned down again and spoke softly for only the Dane to hear. "I know a place we can go where the skins won't find us. Merse told me about it once."

Persol looked up at him. His big ears sank and he whined faintly. "Are you going to lead the pack?" he asked.

"No," Reno said. "You are."

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Ten miles north of Bellows Falls, a shiny new Mita Katana rolled into the small town of Charlestown, New Hampshire. It ghosted quietly down the main street under electric power. The only time it made any noticeable noise was when its tires lub-lubbed over the abandoned railroad tracks that ran through the town. It headed east, turned down Cherry street and followed it to its dead end.

It parked in front of the old Blodgett house, a white two story house with brown trim. A hand painted sign nailed to a large birch tree in front read, 'Tanglefox Haven.' Maples, hemlocks and lilacs surrounded the house, shading it almost completely.

The gull wing doors of the Katana hummed open and the driver's seat swiveled to face outward. A large, heavy set human pushed himself erect and stared at the house. Seeing no one around, he called out, "Hello the house!" He stepped around to the passenger side of his car and picked up a plastic box from the seat. He put his ear against the lid of the box for a moment, listening. He was preoccupied with the box and missed seeing the sleek feliform come around the house.

Turning with the box in his hands, he yelled, "Hello th-hupp!!" Seeing the genemorphic cat that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, he involuntarily backed up two steps and raised the box as though to ward her off with it.

## The Pack

The feliform regarded him mildly, stopping several feet away to watch him deal with his embarrassment. She saw his face redden and caught the scent of adrenaline. She refrained from giving him a smile. A display of teeth seldom made her visitors feel more welcome.

The portly man breathed a heavy sigh as he tried to recover his dignity. He looked the morph over briefly and wondered if he had the right address. She was dressed lightly in a pair of torn Third Layer brand jeans and a loose T shirt from last year's Bloodtooth concert. The only other adornments were an anklet draped around the top of one wide foot and a pair of chrome ear cuffs that doubled as speakers. He could hear the tinny buzz of morph-style 'crush' music from where he stood. He mustered a deep breath and asked, "Are you Lissa Noyoki?"

Lissa touched a deliberately blunted claw to her left ear cuff to mute her music. "Yeh, that's me. Can I help you?"

"Uhh, I hope so. My name is Marshall Bridge." His eyes drifted up to the purple and green dyed hair, laying over her red tabby fur. He hesitated a moment before he held out a stubby hand.

Lissa grasped it briefly. She managed to keep the frown off her face as she felt his sweaty palm against her pads. She was tempted to let him feel the prick of her filed but no less dangerous claws. Since he hadn't yet explained why he was at her doorstep, she decided against antagonizing him.

Once Marshall had retrieved his hand from the genemorph unscathed, he breathed a bit easier. He stood as straight as his girth allowed and said, "Matty Breyer said you'd know what to do."

Matty Breyer was the local representative for the state's Fish and Game Department in Sullivan county. That likely meant one of two things. Either he was here to make a donation or to drop off an animal. Lissa was licensed by the state to privately care for injured wild animals in her home, including ones on the endangered species list. Since her visitor had a box and not a checkbook, she knew what he was there for. A deep breath confirmed what she'd already guessed. He had what smelled like a raccoon in the box, probably an infant judging from the box's size.

To be polite, she asked, "About what?"

He handed the box over without opening it. She took it and carefully peeled back the lid. Inside, snuggled within a few clean rags was exactly what she expected. The baby 'coon looked up at the open lid and squeaked at her. She smiled, keeping her lips together. Animals sometimes reacted the same way humans did to a mouthful of teeth openly shown.

"What is it?" he asked, sounding only vaguely curious. "Is it a possum?"

## The Pack

She stifled a sigh and closed the lid. “No,” she explained. “It’s a raccoon. Do you know where its parents are?”

The man’s rounded shoulders twitched once in a careless shrug. “Beats me. I found it in the kid’s wading pool.”

“I see.” Another human ignorant of animals, she thought. How surprising.

Marshall glanced back at his car. “Is that all?” he asked.

“Yeh, I’ll take care of it from here.” The human’s relief at being freed of his burden annoyed her, but she still added, “Thank you for taking the time to bring her here. If you have any more problems with raccoons, please let me know.” Far too few people knew about her and her wildlife haven. Having Marshall spread the word, or better yet return with any other wayward critters that might otherwise be harmed, could only benefit the creatures she was trying to help.

The chubby man nodded politely as he backed up to his car, never quite taking his eyes off her. When the genemorph asked, “Do you want your box back?” he actually grimaced. “Of course not. It’s had a possum in it.” He was in his car and gone within thirty seconds.

Lissa snorted at the departing Katana and reopened the box. The raccoon was a female, about 6 months old. It didn’t look like it would take much to get her ready for return to the wild. She was a bit scrawny and would need several days of feeding and a medical check up before she could be released. Lissa brought the box closer to her nose and inhaled deeply. She couldn’t smell any trace of obvious sickness. That didn’t rule out rabies or something worse, but she couldn’t detect any evidence of fever or digestive problems.

“Well now,” she murmured. “Let’s see how well behaved you are.” She sat on the steps of her front porch and gently tipped the ‘coon out of the box and into her lap. One of the rags wound up draped over her tiny head. Lissa chuckled and lifted the pale blue cloth away from her new guest. Two bright beady eyes seemed to lock onto hers. Slowly, she brought her hands around to cup the critter and lift her up. Its claws hung in her jeans, adding to the damage already done by countless other animals.

The baby ‘coon didn’t like being picked up and held. It began to squall and squirm, forcing Lissa to work hard to keep from dropping her. “Hey, calm down. OW!” The tiny teeth had found her thumb a convenient target. The skin of her thumb pad was too thick for the ‘coon to puncture, but the pressure exerted by those little jaws wasn’t pleasant. While she was working to get her thumb from between her guest’s jaws, she got a phone call. She touched her ear cuff again to reactivate the speakers, then said, “Answer phone.” She heard a click as the call was routed to her cuffs.

## The Pack

“Hello?”

“Hi Lissa, it’s Matty. Has Mr. Bridge made it up your way yet?”

“Yeh,” she answered. She held up her hand, the ‘coon dangling from her sore thumb. “Been and gone, minus one passenger.” Without warning, the ‘coon let go, and she barely caught it before it could bounce off her lap and onto the ground. Holding the small creature safely against her, she inspected her thumb. It hurt to express the claw, but there was no blood. “Feisty little bandit,” she said to both her new charge and to Matty.

“How’s she look to you?”

“I’d say no more than a week.”

“Right.” There was a distinct rattle of keys on the other end as Matty filled out the forms the state required from the both of them on any animal entrusted to Lissa’s care. “Done the prelims yet?” She would need vital statistics as well, such as weight, length, blood tests and so forth for her work.

“Not yet. Been kinda busy prying parts of me out of her mouth.”

“Ouch,” Matty sympathized. She had plenty of her own scars from her days dealing with wildlife. “Well, don’t forget to send me what you get, kay?”

The raccoon was squirming again, trying to work its way out of her lap. “Sure. Get back here.”

“Scuse me?”

Lissa was ‘coon juggling again, this time mindful of the open jaws. “Nothing. She wants to be an escape artist when she grows up, is all.”

Matty chuckled, then exclaimed, “Hey! That reminds me. Have you been listening to the radio out of B Falls?”

“Naw, had the disc mixer going all morning. Why?”

Lissa listened with only one ear as Matty told her what she’d heard about a pack of semi morphs found in an abandoned garage that was being demolished, and a mysterious fire that had sprung up inside the building as the animals made their escape. She heard Matty say, “Keep those pretty green eyes open. One or two of them may show up at your place.”

“Yeh, right.”

## The Pack

“It could happen. Oops, the boss just showed up, and I gotta talk to him. Catch you later!”

“Bye,” Lissa managed to get out before the click of the disconnect. She held the wriggling ‘coon in both hands and held it before her. “What am I going to do with you?” She thought a moment. She had an idea, but she didn’t know if a baby raccoon would react the same way her two year old niece did when she was getting out of hand.

Lissa held the raccoon against her chest and let herself relax. It wasn’t easy with the ‘coon getting its claws tangled in her Bloodtooth shirt. Eventually, though, her breathing was slow and steady, and she began to purr. The soft rumbling built, and soon the fidgety ‘coon began to quiet. Lissa smiled.

Half an hour later, the ‘coon was bedded down in a large cage, her vital statistics being sent directly to the Fish and Game Department’s computer. The red squirrel in the neighboring cage, a permanent resident she called ‘One eyed Jack,’ chattered quietly to her as she closed the ‘coons cage. “Hello Jack,” she cooed to him. The squirrel was the survivor of a cat attack. He’d been rescued by Matty herself, but had lost his left ear, eye and forelimb before it was over. She gathered a handful of sunflower seeds and wild nuts that she kept nearby and filled his bowl.

As she moved to the next cage, Lissa heard a distinct rustling behind her. She expected it would be Wicket, her neighbor’s poodle. Wicket was friendly enough but had a bad habit of getting under her feet.

She turned, then stopped. Two dogs were sitting about five yards away. She was immediately struck by the way the dogs were looking at her. The malamute looked nervous, but the Great Dane looked positively skittish. Seeing such a large, powerful animal as the Dane act as though it feared for its well being was unnatural enough. When the malamute looked from the Dane to her and back again, she would have sworn it was expecting the Dane to do something.

When the Dane opened his mouth and said, “Are you Lissa?” she was surprised. Then she remembered Matty telling her about some runaway semis. As unlikely as it was for those very animals to show up at her place, she couldn’t imagine how one of them knew her name.

It took her a moment to collect herself and answer, “Uh, yeh, I’m Lissa.”

The Dane hesitated before saying, “We need your help.”

Matty had said something about a fire. If these were the semis she had mentioned, then she might be facing animals with burns, or worse. “What can I do?”

## The Pack

The Dane said nothing more, and the malamute kept looking at him expectantly. Finally, the smaller dog said, “We need a place to live. We were chased out of our last home.”

So it is them, she mused. It was amazing to her that they had managed to find her. She weighed the prospect of adding two more borders to her lengthy list and felt confident she could handle it. But then Matty had made it sound like a lot more than just two animals had run from the garage in Bellows Falls.

“How many of you are there?” she asked.

The malamute barked twice. Lissa heard more rustling. A small troop of animals moved out of the undergrowth and sat in a line behind the first two dogs. She saw two cats, a couple of dogs, and of all things, a Rhesus monkey carrying a ferret in one arm and a gray parrot on its shoulder.

Lissa blinked, trying to take in the sight of eight more animals. No, she thought, not animals, refugees. They’d been forced from their home and needed someplace else to live. Still, taking in ten new borders at once would be a strain. Donations were down and it was hard enough to get what she needed on the small checks the state gave her for her work.

But how could she turn them away?

“I’ll be glad to take you in,” she said. She’d worry about the finances later. “I’ve got a shed out back you can use to sleep in.”

“No!” the Dane said suddenly. “You can’t take the pack!” He stood, alternately growling and whining, as though he was terrified but determined to defend his small band.

Before she could figure out how to respond, the malamute gently pressed himself against the Dane and said, “She’s not going to take the pack, Persol. She’s just giving us a place to sleep.” She watched, listening, trying to figure out what the Dane wanted. “You’re still the alpha,” said the malamute. “I promise.”

Another dog, a female Shepherd, came up on his other side and said, “You’ve been the leader for a long time. You know how to look after us. No one else could keep us safe the way you do.”

The Dane looked at his companions, then at the pack behind him. “I’m alpha?” he asked, almost sounding as if he were afraid of being tricked.

“Yes.”

## The Pack

Lissa now knew what she needed to do. She chimed in with, "It's true, Persol. I'm not looking to be the leader of your pack. I already have my own pack, see?" She gestured to the cages behind her.

The semis were silent as they regarded the rows of large cages where various animals were recovering from different injuries.

"You keep your pack in cages?" the Shepherd whispered.

It hadn't occurred to Lissa how her small rehab center for wild animals would look to a semi morph. She thought quickly, trying to see things from their point of view.

"They're in cages because..." Every semi was looking at her. She chose her words carefully. "Because they aren't semis like you. They're wild animals. They were all brought to me because they've been hurt somehow. That's what I do. I help wild animals get better so they can go back to their own packs. I'm a-" She doubted 'rehabilitator' was a word even the smartest semi would know. "I'm an animal doctor, and these are the animals I'm treating."

"Oh," said the Shepherd, as though it was now obvious to her. "You're a vet."

"Uhm, yeh. Well, sort of." Lissa chuckled a bit to herself. If they wanted to think of her as a vet, that was fine with her.

"Alright," said Persol, sitting down again.

"Alright?"

"We'll stay with you."

Lissa nodded, then smiled, letting her teeth peek just a bit. "Let me show you my shed. It's pretty nice, really."

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"I dunno, Lissa," Matty told her three days later. "You know as well as I do the law's on the side of the owners."

Lissa sat on her back porch and watched her newest charges playing in the back yard. "I know," she said, "but there have been new laws about the rights of semis lately. Laws about cruelty and mistreatment."

"Yes," Matty sighed. "But none of them have been put to the test in court yet. And that's where you will wind up, if you do this. You know that, don't you?"

## The Pack

“I know,” Lissa said softly. “That’s why I need your help. I know it will work if we get them on the payroll first. Establish them as employees of the state.” Over her ear cuffs she heard a small gasp of exasperation.

“Lissa, do you know how crazy that sounds? Employees of the state? They’re semi morphs, not genemorphs!”

“You should see them,” Lissa countered. “The monkey looks after his ferret, the new raccoon, and even the skunk with the abscessed tooth. Mindle and Seroh keep an eye on the litter of rabbits, Jirra loves keeping One Eye Jack company. Reno works as kind of a go-between for Persol and myself.” She glanced over at the malamute, who lay a few feet away. He was gnawing on the nose of a blue toy stuffed shark. She grinned. “No love for the shark,” she chuckled.

“It’s risky, Lissa. You could lose everything. The Fish and Game Department might not like being involved in this. They might take your license away.”

“I don’t have a choice anymore,” the feliform responded, her voice calm but firm. “I can’t afford to keep Persol’s pack here. If I make them official employees of the state, I get a stipend check to cover their expenses. When the story breaks, we all go to court and get the owners to sign them over to my care.”

“Semis are expensive. A lot of the owners won’t give them up. They’ll want them back.”

“I know. But these semis left their owners because they were being abused or neglected. That’s why they ran away and formed their own pack. The new laws say the owners forfeit their claim under those circumstances. If they are gainfully employed as my helpers, they have their own rights as individuals. It’s that simple.”

“I dunno,” Matty said again. “You’re going to pick a fight with a lot of stubborn people.”

“What?” Lissa retorted with mock disdain. “You think I can’t fight?” She chuckled again, louder. “Or be just as stubborn?”

Matty finally gave a laugh. “I know better than that. I’m just saying...” She paused. “This is going to be really hard, that’s all.”

“That’s why I need your help,” she said. “You *will* help, won’t you?” A gentle sigh came over her ear cuffs.

“Of course I will.”

Lissa grinned. “Knew I could count on you.”

## The Pack

“Yeah, well, I have to go now. I need to start all this paper work for a bunch of new ‘employees.’”

“Thanks a million, Matty.”

Reno came up to her after she’d finished talking and laid his head in her lap. Flit was perched atop his head, as usual. She rubbed his ear and stroked the soft feathers of Flit’s chest.

“You’re going to fight for us?”

“Yeh. It’s the only way to keep our gang here together.” She looked around the old house that had served as Tanglefox Haven for so many years. “And who knows? Maybe the publicity of a trial will help get the word out about this place. Get some donations coming in, you know?”

Jirra appeared behind Reno. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

Lissa gazed out at the menagerie frisking around the back yard.

“Trust me guys,” she said, still smiling. “You’re already doing it.”