

READBEAST

BEASTIALITY STORIES



Chapter 1 - May

Christine had always watched the Druid pack, for as long as she could remember. They came every summer with their slowly growing pups to stay where the weather was warm and safe from Yellowstone's tourism. It was not that Yellowstone wasn't a cozy little place for wolves to stay and roam, but the summer months always seemed to attract the couples with squalling children and cameras, or students fresh out of college ready to deface and disturb nature to its core. The pack was one off the smaller, more reclusive ones in the park, and they didn't exactly like showing off their young to stranger that made odd and unfamiliar calls, despite the offers of candy bars and cheeseburgers. Thus they ventured out of the preserve, into the more dangerous parts of the world, where farmers would shoot to kill for fear of their hens and sheep. She had once seen a bumper sticker that said, "Save 10 sheep, kill a wolf," and had wondered just how many of the Yellowstone wolves the driver had gunned down. But Christine's ranch was a haven for the animals when they wanted peace from the world, as it had been when her father had owned it. Before he had died.

He had been the one that taught her the wolves' numbers. The black one with the white streak down the chest was number 265, and the gray with the kink in the tail was 127, and so on until she had memorized the entire pack. She helped him look up in park records what the new pups were numbered, and recorded them in her own diary, so she wouldn't forget in summers to come. Secretly, in that diary, she gave them true names next to the numbers she wrote. Number 265 became Midnight, and 127 became Majesty. The pups were always given cute names that she came to regret as the animals grew into their paws and ears. They no longer looked like Cupcakes and Snuggles once their muscular and lean legs carried them with a more respectable air, and their eyes took the wild and stubborn look of their parents.

Her father had died though some years ago, and the ranch was hers now, as well as the inheritance of enough money to get by, and an obscene number of hens, who's eggs paid to furnish the rest of the farmhouse. Despite the years, she hadn't changed a thing about the ranch, except to get rid of the pony rides that had once been offered there. She just didn't have the time or the will, and something about it, without her father there, felt wrong. At first, she'd also been afraid that the wolves would not come without her father's careful planning and knowledge, but when they arrived that June, she realized she could keep with her father's customs just fine, as well as adding a few of her own. She stopped looking up their numbers in the Yellowstone directory, and grew wiser about naming them to their personalities. She taught herself when in the year to take the chickens into the barn and keep them there, and how to stay away from the burrows that generations of wolves had used so they wouldn't smell her and decide to find a new place to sleep. She didn't tell anyone, but she sometimes waited up at night, unable to sleep, just listening for their calls. At those times it was so easy to remember the way they looked running across the dusty grasses of the ranch, tongues rolling out in happy, carefree manners. Christine was never truly happy, until summer came.

They were late this year though. A sudden and unexpected onslaught of thunderstorms and pouring rain had kept them in the park, and kept the tourists out. At least they were happy, she thought to herself as she traced a fingertip down the windowpane. Her warmth left a thin trail of white mist across the glass, and she watched as it dissolved into nothing, as if it had never even been there. The rain spattered out an SOS on the outside of her door, and there was the steady drip as the water that had managed to slip through a loose ceiling tile fell disappointedly into the sink. Other than those steady little beats, the house was silent. Empty.

It hadn't always been that way though. It had been a long time since her father's mutt Francie had run through the house, baying at the scent of her wild kin outside. She had died some time before her father, but had been very old for a dog, and had lived a good long life. She remembered well the season when her father had desperately tried to lock Francie inside when the wolves came. She had

been in heat, and whimpered and howled and scratched at the door, begging to get a chance at Midnight or Charlie. Christine had felt so bad that she had decided to let her out, if just for a little while. She ran straight into their midst, and Christine had watched in fascination as the males stopped growling their warnings and had approached her, sniffing wildly. Francie had braced herself forward, offering herself to the males, whimpering desperately and licking at their muzzles. Christine stood frozen in the doorway, all her muscles tense, as a large gray male licked at her dog's hindquarters then leapt up onto her, mounting her swiftly. The male's mouth opened gently, panting, as his hips thrust forward over and over, while Francie's body shook in joy. Even at that young age of 18, Christine had felt a burning between her legs at witnessing her dog being mounted by one of the Druids. But before the wolf had gotten himself all the way inside her, Christine's father had run in, shouting, and the wolves had scattered. Francie made a bound to go after them, but yelped as Christine's father caught her back legs and pulled her into his arms. He'd stormed back to the house, and locked the door behind him. Christine had always regretted not seeing the scene played out in its entirety, and to the end of her days, a pang of jealousy swelled in her throat when she remembered the look on that males face. By now, she'd felt a man's touch and had experienced human love and sex, but nothing was fonder to her than that day. She knew in her heart that no man could possibly as good as a Druid, but denied the thought whenever it came to her. Strange thoughts, she'd told herself. Not something to dwell on.

She reached up to pull down the shutter and stopped, listening intently. Had she heard something? She pressed her ear and cheek to the wet, cool glass and sucked in a breath of the cold air that hung suspended around the pane. After a moment of hearing nothing but the Morse code of raindrops, she heard, very distant, a high, lilting noise. The call was followed by another, lower song. They floated through the glass to her hopeful ears and she closed her eyes, drinking them in with her mind. She felt her lips twitch, then smile gently. A third rose up, separate from the rest, and the sounds of the others grew dim in her mind, and all she heard now was the one complex and quivering howl. It sounded so lonely, so longing...she knew just what he was saying. It was a musical sound and one that, for no reason she could discern, touched her heart more than the others had. Strange... Christine pressed a palm to the window and felt the cold seep into her pores.

It was summer.

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## **Chapter 2 - June**

Christine shoved the window open with a low grunt. Rain had made the wooden frame swell, and the window groaned as it haltingly slid open against the protests of the frame. Warm, summer air blasted her hard in the face, smelling of dust, new life, and assorted flowers. She smiled gently and breathed it in, tasted all the different colors of summer on her tongue and in her mind. She only wished she had the sensory abilities of the Druids, and could smell and recognize every member of the pack by their individual scents.

They had shown up just as the rains had begun to stop. Perfect timing for wolves, as usual. It seemed to her they had a biological alarm clock more flawless than any Rolex, and it had told them to get to Christine's ranch at just the right time, even if it was a bit late in the year. She would look outside in the morning through the mist and see flickers of dark movement amidst the swirling white. Muzzles, flicks of narrow paws and bristling tails. They were like magical creatures turned real, emerging from mists of some fairy world only to sink back in and blend into fantasy again. She questioned, frequently, whether they really even existed, or if her longing for them to be there was causing her to see things. Maybe these creatures were just ghosts of things that were not yet to be. She watched intently for that simple sign and confirmation of life out there, that glimmer of hope

with wide and desperate eyes. When the mist cleared, they always seemed to be asleep in their burrows, for she never saw them while the rains still decided to fall, on and off. It was frustrating, yet tantalizing somehow. Like they were playing a fantastic game of hide and seek with her, and she was losing.

That day, though, there had been no mist in the morning, and she had decided today was the day to force the window open and watch for them with the naked eye. Now that she had achieved the window part, she began to remember how sweet the air outside tasted in the early summer and longed to venture out into the day. It was like drinking nectar from some great yellow flower. Like warm honey. Although she could not smell the wolves amidst all that summer air filling her body, she could feel them somehow. The air was taut, silent. It too was waiting in the apprehension that spelled "Wolves," and she could feel the tense heaviness in the morning wind, the way it died suddenly to give her a moment of silence, to listen. She shaded her eyes against the sun, still low on the horizon, and scanned the sparse brush and red dirt for the fleeting blurs of motion she'd come to know and love, real or not. For a moment or two, there was nothing. The air, Christine, the whole ranch seemed to hold its breath in anticipation. And then...

Majesty. He was more white than grey now, and was one of the oldest wolves she'd ever seen, but she recognized him the instant she saw him. He had been there when she was eighteen, nearly seven years ago, when she stood in the doorway and watched as Francie had mated. The sway in his back and the thinning hairs across the top of his nose spoke to his age, but he still managed to hold his head and tail with a sense of regal dignity. She sucked in a little excited breath and felt her cheeks glow rosy and hot, as if she was still young and standing in that doorway. Even her small noise was enough to catch the Alpha's ears, and they swiveled to face the window, followed shortly by his thick square head, mechanical, but very much alive. He focused on her with a pair of cloudy but still very intelligent eyes, nose twitching as he tried to recognize the scent as wolf or otherwise. Christine waited and prayed he would not run. He might have remembered her smell somehow, for he made no move to run and showed no sign of being uneasy. He stood, sturdy, stocky body squared over his legs in a confident and noble stance. He practically shone white-silver in the sunlight. Christine smiled at him gently and raised two fingers a little from the windowsill in a wave.

"Hey boy," she whispered.

Majesty snuffled loudly and turned away from her with a flick of his age-worn tail. She was none of his concern, and because she was no threat, it would be ok for the others to come out. Now that the Alpha had scouted out the area, it was safe, and she knew the others would feel that simply by the way he was moving in the space. She bit delicately on her lower lip and watched as more forms rose over a mound of dirt. The slender white nose and paws of Tortuk was the second to arrive. Her green eyes were bright and still puppyish, even though she was now firmly an adult, and she nosed at Majesty questioningly, looking for some reassurance from her mate and leader. He turned and gently gripped her muzzle with his mouth. It meant "I'm in charge here," and Tortuk seemed to relax considerably. She was small and delicate, like a perfect little princess, and her coat was a gleaming snow white. It wasn't yellow yet like the coats of older white wolves Christine had seen before, and it seemed perfectly groomed, as if she had her own personal stylist. Christine smiled warmly at the small female but made no move to say hello. She was the skittish one of the group, and scaring her would in turn scare away the pups or cause Majesty to become uneasy.

The pups were a while in coming though. First came Sierra, a stocky gray female with a stubby bent tail where it had been broken and never healed right came up, head low, to sniff and lick at her queen's feet and muzzle. Cocoa, a young brown female was close at hand but stayed back a little, fearful of doing something wrong and embarrassing herself. Majesties oldest son, Barley, was a deep steel color, and he hung back on his father's flank, constantly on guard, some of the playful puppy

still in him as he stamped the earth with one paw then another. His long purple tongue lolled out, giving him an excited and curious expression. He'd always been so adorable, even as a pup. That was all the adults from last season that she recognized, and while a few more lingered back in the shadows of brush, she'd seen all the ones she really cared about. She wanted to see the newer additions that had just recently, a month or so ago, been born, as the wolves had just arrived. It was the price they paid for showing up so late in the year.

Now, at last, this seasons pups came into view. A small brown one, just like Cocoa, then a deep steel one just like his older brother. They nipped at each other's ears, rolled on their backs, and leapt at the adult wolves' tails. Their squeaky little barks warmed Christine's heart, and she felt her eyes become damp around the edges. It wasn't that she wanted a child, now or perhaps ever, but there was nothing quite like puppies, and the sight of them warmed her winter-cooled heart. Ears and feet too big for little bodies, droopy little eyes and minute clean white fangs, they rolled and bounded and fell and wiggled. They were utterly irresistible, no matter whom you were, whether or not you were a fan of wolves. A third, a little white one, sauntered coolly up and sat pristinely at her mother's side before beginning to lick at her paws like some sort of cat. A new little princess, Christine thought to herself and chuckled. Three pups. It was less than usual, but she was happy to see any at all. The Druids were a dwindling pack, and any offspring counted as hope for the future of the group.

Then, a dark movement caught her eye. Behind the group stood one last wolf that, while not a regular to Christine, seemed to tug at her interest. He was lanky, with thin scraggly legs and a tangled mess of fur hung from his neck and sides. His tail seemed tattered and ratty, and didn't move naturally with the rest of his lean, awkward body. One long streak of faded yellow/white went from under his jaw to under his belly, barely showing up against the black of the rest of his body. One ear was notched, probably from battle years ago, and a patch of black skin on his back haunch showed another angry war scar. His eyes were a deep gold, and they fixed Christine in an intent, calculating stare. She caught her breath as his ragged ears flicked to the front to tremble as he listened for her to make a noise. She stared back into his gaze, transfixed by the intensity of those battle-worn, spiteful eyes. Her mouth opened a little in a small "oh" as he lowered his head and tensed all the muscles down his back.

"Hi..." she managed to breathe silently, unsure what else she could possibly do at a moment like that, under such scrutiny.

The wolf stared a moment longer, then curled back his lips and rumbling growl drifted across the air to her ears, sounding like a far away earthquake in the still and muted air. She blinked, and in that instant he had leapt away, behind the dunes of red dirt and sage. Skittish or just angry, she couldn't be sure, but she did know that she'd never seen this one before, or any wolf that he might be descended from. She stared after him a few minutes thinking hard and chewing on her lower lip. He did not reappear and soon the other wolves had trotted away, leaving her with the image of a black and shifting shadow with gold eyes lingering in her head.

It looked as if she had four names to give this summer...

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Chapter 3 - July

They had been here almost a month now, and Christine knew their days together were growing short. The nights were still short, indicating that summer was still in full swing, but the deer would soon move away from their lands, as they always did, leaving the Druids without any food. No food meant no wolves. So she watched them for now, admiring the new wolves she had just met, as well

as the old friends, knowing that they would soon be gone. The pups, for instance, had grown so much, even in these few weeks, and each had grown their own personalities to match the names that Christine had taken so much time to think up.

The little brown one was growing much faster than the others, and was developing long, lean legs. The fur on the nape of his neck always stood up in spiky little peaks, giving him a rugged, wild little look, maybe like he had a Mohawk. The little stud, Christine chuckled to herself. He trotted around, head high, thin, but stout nose always catching scents as they passed him on the wind. His energy was obvious, and he broke into fits of joyful bounding every now and again, despite the reproachful looks of his packmates. At the same time, however, he seemed to hold back his true nature when too many others were around, seeming the distant, strong type. More cat than wolf, Christine noted. His name had been fairly easy to pick out. She'd had a boyfriend like that once, with so much energy, but so much composure...plus he too had thought himself "all that." Frederick, or Freddie, for short, it was. Her boyfriend had met a quick end when she'd caught him with another woman, all mouths and hands. Still, she managed to hold an affection for this little pup.

The grey one was much different than his older brother. Barley was strong, calm, and utterly immovable no matter what was going on around him. He was one of the best hunters in the pack, flawless in speed, style, and composure. Only with him was a kill sure during the hunt. His little brother, however, was the biggest klutz Christine had ever seen in her entire life. He was always falling over his own feet, yelping as he fell on his face. One of his little ears always stood up straight, while the other lay flat and limp against his skull, the perfect representation of his lopsided personality. He was overly energetic, and shook with joy whenever any pack member showed him the slightest attention, though his brother rarely gave him the time of day. He seemed almost embarrassed that they were blood related, and Christine didn't exactly blame him. The pup, however, was always so ready to please. He crawled on his belly, licked and the muzzles of his father and mother, and whimpered and barked, trying to win any sort of affection he could manage. Christine had originally wanted to call him Steel, for his coat color, but the name didn't suit him at all. He was far too much of a clown for such a serious name. Instead, she had settled on the comfortable, but quirky name of Teaspoon, or TS, when he grew up a little perhaps. If he grew up, she noted with a smirk.

The little girl was the easiest. She was demure, small, and snippy. She snapped bitterly at her two brothers, and preferred lounging about rather than frolicking like a normal puppy would do. She always ate before her brothers, and refused any sort of babying her mother or father showed her. She was, in fact, the perfect little princess and demanded she be treated as such by everyone. She held herself regally; kept her coat spotlessly white...she was downright royal. Marie was the first name Christine had thought of, and was very true to her personality, after the beheaded French queen. She hoped that this pup would not end up the same way as her namesake, but suspected that maybe she would one day end up a queen, to say the least.

Even with these new names, Christine felt an empty spot in her heart. While every other wolf had fallen into the pack, the black, loner male was snapped at and picked on by the rest. In the hunt, he always came back bloodied and ragged, and she wasn't sure why. He was always the last to eat, so his ribs showed through his mangy coat. He kept his head low, growled at the pups, and hated to show and reverence to even Majesty. He was a rogue, and had an obvious problem with authority. And despite all these obvious unique personality traits, she had yet to find a good name for him. Nothing really seemed to fit him, and she knew the name had to be just perfect. Today, she watched out the window as he lay atop a mound of dirt, forlorn. The others had gone out for the hunt, while he had remained behind. She wasn't sure why exactly they had left him here...they had even taken the pups, for training she supposed. He lay, head resting numbly between his massive, dark-clawed paws, his liquid amber eyes only half open. He seemed elsewhere, as if he wasn't really aware of the

world around him. He didn't even seem to realize that the pack was not there anymore, either that or he didn't care. Christine leaned her elbow on the windowsill and stared at the wolf, curious and fascinated by his blank expression. What was going on between those torn, tired ears? What did he think, what did he feel? If only he could speak, the questions she would ask him.

Far away, a wolf, probably Majesty, howled out a message. The black wolf's ears propped up suddenly on his head, and his muzzle jerked up from the ground. He pushed himself tiredly up to a sitting position and stared fixedly to some mystical point in the night's sky. Christine looked there as well, but failed to see what the wolf was staring so intently at, if there was anything. Then, without warning, he jerked back his head, and let out one, short, curt, howl. It was more a bark than a real howl, but its sound split the night like some sort of knife, and made Christine jump and shiver with an unknown feeling of fear and admiration. Then, as he listened and no answer came, he slowly tipped his nose skyward and let a long, quavering howl float like a melody into the darkness. It was varied, so complex...and familiar. The third howl. Christine nodded, yes, it had to be. The loneliness was there, just as it had been a month ago, and it inspired that same familiarity it had before. She almost wanted to answer it, and felt a howl of her own swell in her throat. Involuntarily, a soft, low whistling imitation left her. The black wolf turned sharply to stare at her, as if saying, "what's this?" She blushed deeply, and turned away from the questioning expression in the wolf's eyes.

"Sorry..." She muttered. "I didn't mean to do that."

The wolf stared at her a moment longer before re-focusing on that invisible point in the night and launching another song towards the stars.

Majesty returned after some time had passed. He had no meat with him, nor did any of the other wolves. The pups whimpered, but found there was no food for them tonight, and soon quieted, and went to their den for sleep. Christine watched this with a heavy heart. It was true...the deer were leaving. Soon the wolves would leave as well and the ranch would once again be left in her care. Alone. She turned her attention back to the black wolf, who seemed not to have moved much. He was lying down again, and he blended so perfectly with the night, only his slitted, gold eyes were visible in the darkness. He looked so empty, so lost to the rest of this giant world. Something she understood all too well. She slowly nodded at his lonely figure. She'd get a name for him before they left...It was the least she could do for him.

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## **Chapter 4 - August**

The leaves were falling. It was foreshadowing of Christine's least favorite time of the year: the time the Druid wolf pack moved back to the park. She had reduced herself to leaving out chicken meat for the pups and for the leaders, in the hopes they would stay a little longer, but it was no use. The deer were all but gone, and she was just prolonging the inevitable by tempting them with food. They were meant to follow the herds into Yellowstone according to natural laws, and if they didn't, it could damage their chances of pack survival. She couldn't put those pups or the pack in jeopardy.

All three pups had grown so fast and so strong. Marie was still the little brat that she'd been when Christine had first met her, but she'd grown into her lot in life. She didn't look like she was pretending anymore when she stood up tall and regal, and her nips at her brothers were less reprimanding, more like asserting dominance. She was nearly always at her mother's side, but her paws were already gaining some of the yellow that most white wolves got, which made Tortuk look all the more brilliant for an animal her age. On Marie, it looked somehow less fitting, as if she would have preferred to stay her perfect ivory self. If wolf packs were ever run by mother and daughter



teams, however, Christine knew that the two would dominate. She'd seen Marie come back once with blood caked on her muzzle and her teeth bared. She still looked royal, but now she looked dangerous, eager to kill. She could be frightening if she wanted to...she'd make a great leader or mate someday.

Teaspoon was finally getting a hold of his own balance problems. He was still the klutziest pup of the three, and easily the clumsiest of the pack, but Christine had seen him hunt once, and when his life depended on it, he seemed to spring into action and became faster than his sister or brother, nearly keeping up with the adult wolves. Barley had been a quick one too, she remembered, but not as quick as this pup. But whenever he sat, not doing a thing, he would rotate his head, resting his cheek on one side then the other side in a very funny way that never failed to make Christine laugh. He was a clown, and a part of her hoped that the pup would never really outgrow his silly ways. She knew this was wishful thinking, though, and that nature would have other plans for the little wolf.

Freddie had learned a new trick too: the strut, and he never failed to use it. He would saunter past his mother and his sisters with nose held high, tail up. He would trot like a pony from one place to the other rather than in the normal loping gate of a wolf, which made him look like a lap dog at times. But she'd seen him defend his food from his brother before. He'd snap and growl in a high pitched and whiny tone till the whimpering Teaspoon left him alone. He'd tried this once when Majesty approached him, looking hungry or curious. He'd snapped at the older wolf's paws, letting out tiny yapping barks. The other wolf had barked back and taken a swift snap at the pup, who went skidding with a yelp away from the food to cower in the den. He'd lost his strut for a while after that, but it was back now. Christine maintained affection for him and prayed that the pup had learned his lesson and would not try the trick again. Majesty would be less forgiving next time.

The black wolf had been gone for some time, but she still heard his call every now and again, and thought of him as a distant friend more than a missing pack member. She hoped desperately that he had not fallen on hard times, and that he was just out somewhere, hunting for the rest of the pack. When she heard that call, she suddenly knew his name was Tyr, and it felt like she'd known it all along.

Christine hadn't seen the pups for a few days now either. At first she had worried that they had been injured or killed during a hunt, or that a nearby farmer had got them for trophy pelts. But the other wolves were around, so she suspected the young ones were resting up for the big move back to the park. It was a surefire sign that fall was right around the corner, waiting to spring on her and drive the wolves out of her home and heart. She woke every morning filled with dread, praying as she opened her window that they would still be out there, even for just one more day. But it was mid August now. There was little point in putting it off.

She stopped putting out the chicken meat that very night, and afterwards she sat in her room crying softly as she felt the loneliness slipping under the front door and between the cracks in the windowsill.

Christine woke up late that night, cheeks still sticky and salty where the bitter tears had been. It was cold in her small bedroom, and she could hear soft drum beats from outside, tiny and numerous. She stood and went quickly to the now fogged up window, her voice catching in her throat even though her lips repeated over and over "no." But there was nothing to be done. It was raining outside, a cold and wintry rain. Surely, the wolves would be gone tomorrow. With the cold weather, the pups four months old now, and no food to be had, there was no reason for them to stay. She sighed deeply and pressed her cheek against the glass, letting the condensation on the window partially wash away the salt clinging to her skin and eyelashes. She didn't cry now, but when she had been younger, every time they had gone, she would cry for days, alone in her room, till her father made her come out.



Her father wasn't here anymore, so she knew that if she began to cry now, she might never leave her room again. There was a rifle in her closet, and it wasn't like she hadn't thought of it before. It seemed most tempting at this time of year, but she always put it out of her mind and year after year the closet stayed shut.

The rain fell all night, and she stayed up, staring out into it with quiet melancholy. She sat at the window, watching the rainfall, and thought she began to see strange shapes in the rain. Just shimmers of moonlight through the water. They moved like fish across her plane of vision, like silver ghosts wandering the earth in search of something. She put her index finger tip to the glass and followed the shining shapes through the condensation of the rainy night, making paths of clarity.

In the transparent streaks her finger made, she could see the wolves. They looked frantic, like they were on the hunt. But so late at night? What deer or rabbit would have ventured onto her land? She watched the flashes of damp and matted fur as they turned left and right, sharp and decisive. She made out Barley, head low and eyes fixed on some other point she couldn't see. She saw Majesty, his gate slower than the others due to age, but still strong as he raced behind his oldest son towards whatever they chased. She looked hard, and could make out a few other shapes, but nothing enough to decide who it was, or what they were doing. She stared at them, wondering but afraid to go to the door and check, worried she would ruin the hunt.

She could hear snarling, barking, and then yelping. Not in pain, but in the way wolves did when they brought something down. She tried in vain to peer around the outside of the house to see what it was they had managed, but could not make out anything, not even blurry movement. She put her ear against the window, listening to the barking, growling, and tearing of what may have been skin. She smiled...maybe they'd stay now.

She put her eyes back to front, and was caught off guard by what she saw. Through the foggy window she could see a shape, just the faint silver outline caused by the falling rain. It was still, but she could almost feel it breathe, somewhere deep in her chest, and she breathed with it. The blurry gleam of gold shone through as well, like a single star of deep orange-yellow. Christine stared at it, fixated. She heard the deep, hoarse howl as he tipped his head back then brought it down again, the gold flashing once again into view. Tyr, she said in her own mind. Tyr. Tyr. Tyr. She silently repeated it over and over again, looking into that single point of light against the blackness of the night and his form. What are you, Tyr?

What are you?

She woke up the next morning to find that it had stopped raining. She was still leaning against the window sill, arms crossed below her head, and she didn't remember at what point in the night she had fallen asleep. She wasn't sure how long she had slept in either, but the sun was already high in the sky and casting a thin bright glow over the damp ground outside. The sky was blue except for a few stray clouds floating lazily above the ranch, and everything looked green, like it was spring all over again. But it was almost fall, she reminded herself, feeling her spirits sink. They sunk even further when she realized that he had not yet seen any sign of the wolves.

She sat upright sharply, and her eyes grew wide and desperate, searching the land outside. There was no sign of the Druids.

She stood slowly and turned towards her bedroom door. It seemed like she moved in slow motion as she made her way to the front of the house and opened the door. The world smelled new and musty, like freshly tilled earth, and the bright light blinded her for a moment. She held her hand in front of her eyes and took a deep breath in, tasting the wet world. So many smells that usually came with

summer or spring, but there was a distinct absence of the dingy must of the wolf pack or the pup-filled den. She sighed, and dropped her hand, eyes adjusting to the lighting.

They were gone.

It was then she saw the carcass of the deer. It was mostly eaten or mangled beyond recognition, but Christine could still tell it was a deer. The legs, minus one, were splayed out to all sides to expose the lack of flesh across the chest and stomach. The entrails were mostly gone, but little bits remained, flung haphazardly around the body. The neck was exposed, gashed open with flashes of red and white exposed where the throat and spine had been chewed by hungry wolf teeth. The two-pronged antlers stuck into the ground, light brown and white like whale bones. The head was mostly fleshless, and the ears were missing, but the eyes were wide open, cloudy black like obsidian against the clay colored earth.

Christine didn't feel sick looking at this, but she did feel a pang of pity. Poor thing, she thought. Was probably looking for shelter and stumbled right into the den. The wolves would have attacked the animal at first out of self-defense, but would have relished the hunt after they recognized it as prey. They would have taken it down, torn it up, and eaten all they could. But they also would have moved, feeling threatened by a perceived attack on the den. They were gone.

Christine wiped at her eyes, and ordered herself not to cry. It was for the best, she told herself, and it was meant to happen eventually. Why not now? She had work to do anyway. The smell of blood tended to upset the hens, even if they were in the barn. So she'd need a shovel and a tarp to move the deer out of her yard, maybe...

Christine took a step off the porch and instantly found herself falling forward. She flailed in the air with her hands as she toppled towards the ground, and then let out a sharp cry of pain as she felt the sting of the strong teeth that were now sunk deep into the back of her ankle.

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Christine fell hard against the ground, her cry dying on her lips as all her air rushed out of her. She felt light headed, sick to her stomach even, and she felt for a moment or two that she was unable to get any air into her lungs. It was like her chest refused to expand, and it took a while for her to realize that she had just had the wind knocked out of her. Suddenly, the air rushed back, and with it came all her senses, in a flood of confusion, surprise and pain.

She jerked her leg up towards her, reaching for the place on her ankle that was now smeared red with deep crimson liquid and had several small holes where teeth had been. They had hit her tendon, and the pain was absolutely maddening. She howled and put all the pressure she could manage on the wound, trying to get it to stop bleeding. But even then, in her pain and confusion, she still had the time to hear the low growl and snap of angry fearful jaws. Her eyes, which were blurry from the flood of involuntary tears, shot to the porch and tried to focus on the shape that was twitching and shuffling its way back under the porch where it had been before. Through the fog of salty moisture, she managed to make out a glaring yellow point, and that was all it took.

Tyr.

Christine sat up, still holding her ankle tight to reduce the bleeding, but now fascinated by the animal under her deck. She wasn't afraid of him, as he seemed to be retreating rather than attacking now. Tyr was lying there, mostly invisible to her, in the shadows of the porch, growling softly but menacingly. She quickly put things together and realized that she had stepped off the porch, startled him, and he had lashed out, feeling threatened. Her yell might have startled him too, which was

most likely why he had shuffled his way back into the darkness. But this brought on a whole other list of problems, the first of which was him being here, and the rest of the pack being elsewhere. And that just lead to a whole other long list of whys, and hows. It was never-ending.

Then Christine asked herself a question which, she realized, she had wondered about the night before. One bright yellow gleam? Only one?

Very carefully, she inched closer to the snarling animal, squinting and wiping her eyes with her free hand to see what she could. He growled a little louder, and she stopped where she was, unwilling to tax his patience further. Everything slowly came into focus, and she stared at the hiding animal, suddenly unable to catch her breath.

Tyr was still wet, but not from the night's rain. It was sweat; she could smell it now that she thought about it, in all its pungent odor. His torn up ears lay flat on either side of his thick head, rather than pinned back in an aggressive gesture, and his one eye was wide, crazed by fear. The other eye was not. Not to say that it wasn't scared looking or wide. It just no longer was. At all. She could see the place where it normally would have been, but there was no eye there now. Instead, there was a mound of red and angry flesh that looked like it might have gone through a meat grinder. The area at the top of his muzzle and around his cheek was stained a dark purple brown from the blood that had been slowing and maybe still was flowing. There were scratch marks around the wound, probably where he had kicked and pawed at it from the pain, trying to make it better. But most shocking, was that the area moved, rising and falling, as if it was a living creature and it was breathing.

While the deer carcass had not made Christine sick, this did, and she drew back, disgusted and suddenly sick to her stomach. She could see it all in her mind now, the fleeing deer lashing out with its small but piercing back hooves, and Tyr at the back, making sure the animal didn't double back on itself. The deer, trying one last time to defend itself, and Tyr, making a final blow to bring the beast down. She'd heard of other farmers' dogs getting kicked in the face by deer, but she'd never seen it happen to a wolf before.

All this also meant that she knew why he was here rather than with the pack. He had been losing blood all night, and the wound was probably infected. Wolves could tell when their injuries were bad, usually not right away, but after a moment of living with it. They tended not to fight it. Christine remembered how she'd found Francie one day, hiding under the porch and unwilling to come out. She'd called her father over and complained that the dog wouldn't come out and play with her. Her father had looked a long while under the porch and had talked to the dog a while in a low and loving voice, before pulling his head back and addressing his daughter.

"Leave her alone," he'd said uneasily, shooing her away from the front of the house. "She wants to be alone for this. Dogs go off alone at times like this in their lives. Best to give her the privacy she needs."

The next morning, Francie lay dead under the porch.

Christine looked down at Tyr where he lay growling, and maybe even shaking a little, and she felt a pang of desperation in the back of her throat, tears coming to her eyes again. But not from pain this time. From sadness, from grief.

"Oh Tyr," she said softly, shaking her head. "Oh Tyr..."

At her words, Tyr seemed to quiet a little. His ears flicked forward and his lips uncurled to cover his blood marked teeth. His growling dulled to a muffled rumble inside his chest as he watched her,

probably curious to what she'd do next, now that she hadn't shown herself to be a threat.

Christine wasn't really sure what she was going to do, but she knew that she was not about to let Tyr die there under the porch. Not when she could stop it.

The two sat facing each other for another hour, contemplating one another and their current situation. The wolf had fixed his one good eye on the woman, and stared unblinkingly at her, waiting and listening. It was also possible that he'd given up at that point and was waiting for her to attack, knowing that he was too weak to fight back or escape. But she didn't attack, and she frankly had very little idea of what to do. She knew that her father would have called the police or animal control by now, but there was a major problem with this: Tyr was badly injured, and he had bitten someone now. Surely, they'd just put him down, or shoot him to ease the pain of his passing. And that was not what she wanted.

It came to her then, and as flawed as the plan was, she had the feeling it would work. After her father's death, the doctor had given her sleeping pills, real strong ones too. If she could get Tyr to eat one or two, he'd be out cold, and she could retrieve him from under the porch! After that she could...yes, and what after that, huh? Again, she was at a loss of an answer. Call animal control and lie about the bite? No. They'd still put him down.

She'd have to take care of him, maybe with some help from her friends, and hope for the best. What help? She asked herself. And what friends? It wasn't much, but it was better than the alternative, and there were no other feasible options she could think of.

Tyr watched her lazily out of his good eye, still rumbling his throat in the warning growl, but making no other move. He looked tired, worn out, and the matted fur was getting thicker with sweat all the while. He was breathing hard, his long tongue rolling to the side of his mouth, which opened wide with every intake of breath, then closed some with every exhale. The earth below his head was red, and a very small puddle lie drying in the dust where the blood had fallen. She knew she would have to work quickly if this were all going to work.

"Stay here, ok?" she asked the wolf. Tyr blinked at her and made no move to disobey.

She went into the house and found her first aid kit before she did anything else. She poured some rubbing alcohol on her wound, wincing at the burn, and wrapped a gauze bandage clumsily around the injured ankle. Then, she found the sleeping pills and went to the fridge. She still had a plate of raw chicken she had intended to give to the Druid pack, but now it could all go to one wolf. She pulled out three sleeping pills and ground them onto the meat. If Tyr needed more, she could slaughter another chicken and use that, but she figured this would be enough.

She returned to the porch, and yet again Tyr pulled back his lips and snapped angrily at her as she stepped onto the ground, though now she walked farther away from his location. She knelt and slid the plate forward, just under the edge of the porch. Tyr stopped growling and his ears shot forward, nose trembling. Even near death, Tyr was still hungry. He looked from Christine to the plate, then back again, suspicious. Then he crawled forward, slowly, hesitantly, and sniffed the plate again. He looked up at Christine once more, eye narrowed, ready to attempt to attack or run if need be.

"Eat up boy," Christine urged, backing away to give him more space. "Come on, it's good."

Tyr looked at her for a while longer, and then with great abandon, tore into the raw chicken as if he had never eaten before in his life. Christine smiled. So far, so good.

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Tyr snored peacefully, head between his paws, just barely under the shade of the porch. His head was on its side, his ears flopped to the ground, with a look of indignant peace upon his face. It had taken him long enough; Christine noted to herself, touching the back of her neck, which was now beginning to feel like it was sunburned. She had waited, watching, as the wolf shook his head hard, confused at what this overpowering feeling was, fought it with growls, then gave in and dropped heavily to sleep. She had waited a little longer too, just to make sure he was well asleep, but she now prayed, looking at the way he slept without even twitching a muscle, that she had not given him enough to kill him.

She approached him with caution, afraid that he'd wake and take out her hand or arm if she even made a sound. If she made a sound? How on earth was she supposed to carry him then? She sighed and reached out a hand to the wolf's paw. She touched it quickly, and then pulled away in case he was ready to bite her. But Tyr didn't move, and Christine felt a tingle of satisfaction along the back of her neck at the idea that she had finally touched a wolf! But she told herself to be calm and just do what she had originally intended to do. There were important things at hand.

Slowly, delicately, Christine slipped her arm slowly beneath the sleeping wolf, watching his head all the while for any sign of wakeful activity. However he didn't even flinch. Christine let out a long low sigh of relief and slipped the other arm under, and heaved upwards with all her strength. Tyr didn't move. She tried again, straining harder to pull up under the wolf's ribs, and this time she succeeded in raising his upper half awkwardly off the dirt ground.

This left her with a problem. While she could probably drag the wolf all the way to the barn, it would take a very long time, and there was no telling when he'd wake up. She needed a cart, something to drag him on. She suddenly remembered the tarp she was going to get for the deer carcass before this all happened. Surely, that would be a perfect means of it! She gently laid Tyr down again and dashed to the barn.

She found the tarp easily, but found yet another problem. The chickens. She'd put them all in the barn coop when the wolves arrived, and they were still there. She'd have to shoo them into the outside coop in a hurry! She opened the side door into the coop and then opened the inside door so the chickens could come out. They all ran at once, like they had been waiting to make a jail break and had been planning on it for some time now. At first they made towards the front entrance, but the ones in front stopped short, seeming flustered, and turned tail towards the entrance to the outdoor coop.

"Yeah," Christine muttered, doing her best to shoo them all through the door. "Smell wolf out there don't you? Yeah, you better be scared. Go on! Get!"

At last, the chickens were all in the outdoor coop, leaving the indoor one a perfect empty holding cell for a live wolf. They were all squawking now in alarm, and Christine guessed that they could see Tyr now as well as see him. Again, she reminded herself to work fast, and that she didn't have much time.

She laid the tarp on the ground and tucked the edge under Tyr's body, then gently rolled him over onto it, careful to position his paws so that they wouldn't get hurt in the process. Then, grunting and straining she pulled the wolf into the barn and into the wire mesh coop. She collapsed, exhausted, next to the body, relieved that she had managed it without the wolf waking up, and with time to spare. She turned to look at the injury now, to see what the real damage was.

The injury still seemed to breathe as the wolf snored, but it looked to have stopped bleeding. However, it was swollen and red, and bits of fur around the edges of it looked dyed a deep brown

from the blood. She touched his head and ears and felt the hot wet black fur, saturated with sweat. She ran her hand back over the wolf's head between his ears and down his neck, fascinated by the wiry texture of his coat. With her index finger she traced the white streak along his chest, then all the little scars across his head and shoulders. She gently patted the spot where his shoulders met his neck and smiled down at the sleeping beast, just as she had done to Francie as a kid.

"Good boy," she whispered to him. "Good boy Tyr. You'll be better soon, so rest."

She wanted to kiss his neck, buy her face in his side and cry for hours at the fact that at long last she was sitting beside a wolf, stroking his neck as if he was her pet. It had been a dream, ever since the first day she'd seen them in a yard, and she'd made up a name for one, secretly. She had a new secret now: Tyr. She wanted to hug him close like the family dog, have him as a best friend. She knew, though, that he was a wild animal. Still, she could at least enjoy this moment. She ran her hand down his back, across his boney, weary spine and massaged the areas between his shoulders. She let her hand follow his back down to his tail, till it met the tiny wispy few white hairs on at the very tip. He was so elegant, so sleek. Made for running and made for power.

Then his tail moved.

Christine looked up slowly to find that the wolf had raised his head and was now looking at her curiously. He blinked his good eye at her once, then it seemed like time froze. His eye slowly seemed to take in everything that was happening around him, and it grew hard, bitter. The two figures were still, the tension mounting between them. Then at last, as if in slow motion, the two began to move. Tyr was to his feet in an instant, while Christine was still leaping towards the door, frantically searching for the handle even as she scrambled clumsily out of her sitting position. Tyr leapt at her, barking and snarling, but the pills were still affecting him some, and he missed his mark. With a yelp and a crash, the wolf went headlong into the wire mesh, and then bounced back with a flop onto the dirt floor of the barn. Christine dived through the door while he was still recovering, and fumbled to try to get the door closed and locked. Tyr shook his head hard and leapt again with his full force into the door. Just in time, Christine bolted the lock and fell back, watching as the very large body of the wolf slammed into the door, scratching and snarling.

She found she couldn't breathe, and bent forward onto the ground, panting. The sound of Tyr's complaints and outrage at being trapped faded into the background as she remembered how to make her lungs work. She looked up and silently watched the wolf, still fighting the locked door with bared teeth, wide golden eye, and claws scraping the latch. He didn't seem frightened or sad. He was angry. She swallowed hard.

"Sorry boy," she panted out. "It has to be done."

There was still more to be done though. She eyed the angry sore where the wolf's eye should be and realized, very suddenly, how much of a challenge giving the animal medical care was going to be. He was awake now, and probably wouldn't fall for the same mistake twice, and what was more he was angry with her, ready to strike if he had the opportunity.

She wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

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Another page without any useful information. Christine closed the Internet window on her computer screen and sighed heavily. She'd been at it nearly an hour, with very little useful information on how to deal with a seriously injured wolf. She'd found a little about their anatomy, and a little about where to call if you needed help with one, but that was all pretty useless without any words on what

to do to treat an injury of this sort! She couldn't call. They'd put Tyr down, either for his bad condition or for that still very painful bite on her ankle. She took a deep breath, and opened another Internet search to see if this new series of words to magically gain her the knowledge she was searching for.

A few more searches without any luck, and she sat back in her chair, exhausted and empty handed. There was only one thing she could think of, and she doubted it would be very useful. With a heavy heart, she typed in "Dog injuries home treatment." She found much what she had expected. Sites explaining the symptoms to look out for, with an order to deliver the animal to a vet if it appeared to be serious. Most addressed small breeds of dogs, and none that were out for blood. So really, nothing that talked about her particular circumstances. Just as she was about to close the window, she spotted a URL that looked somewhat different than the others.

"Farm Dog Remedies?" she mused over the title. What had she got to lose? She opened the window, crossing her fingers.

It had everything.

It showed diagrams of how to clean wounds, how to restrain the dog so it didn't squirm away or injure anyone, and most important of all, it had instructions on how to properly suture a wound. At the top of the page was a large red warning that said "The creator of this website encourages all dog owners to take their pet to a vet rather than trying to treat them at home. Avoid the risks." Well, she was neither a dog owner, and there was far greater risk in calling a vet. So on both accounts, this warning did not apply to her! Christine chuckled to herself as she pressed the print button.

Once she had collected the pages, she found herself with another problem. She needed Tyr to be asleep again, and she doubted he'd eat the chicken after what had happened last time. Still, she didn't know what else to try.

Christine got the very last few scraps of frozen chicken she had been saving for her own dinner that night. She ground up one extra sleeping pill this time, to give her a little extra time to work, and pored steak sauce over the raw chicken to mask the possible smell. She wondered if she was overestimating the animal, but decided that this was definitely a time for "better safe than sorry." This done, she grabbed the pages with the medical instructions on them, as well as a first aid and sewing kit, and set out for the barn, resolved to help Tyr whether he liked it or not.

When she arrived, she could easily tell that Tyr was under the 'not' category. He was standing, head low towards the ground, and breathing heavily. His tongue moved in and out of his gaping mouth labouredly as he moved from one end of the coop to the other, and then back again in a slow pattern. His eye was wide, confused, but ever vigilant, and his nose was always twitching, probably smelling those now gone chickens, Christine guessed. His paws moved clumsily though, tiredly, and his body language dictated that he was straining to keep up his laps from one end of the coop to the other. She could hear him breathing, a low sort of growl mixed with his breath, and every few steps he would let out a snuffled bark between his breaths, hoarse as if he'd been doing it for some time now already.

Christine swallowed hard as he caught sight of her and spun to face her. He dropped his head even lower and his teeth came together in a snarl. He let out a very low growl, widened his paws to give himself a more solid stance, and then charged, barking towards her briefly before pulling to a halt right before the wire mesh and retreating in slow steps. He looked like he was challenging her, daring her to come any closer. But he looked so tired, so beat up. He was far less threatening now that he was in a cage, but she still stayed back and waited till his charges became somewhat less



aggravated before approaching.

"Hey boy," she whispered, walking very slowly. Tyr responded with a growl and a retreating step. "Easy now," she murmured holding up her free hand to show that it was empty, then holding up the other hand with the plate of chicken. "See what I've got for you?"

Tyr's ears moved hesitantly forward as he caught a whiff of the meat in her hand. His teeth stayed bared, but he stopped retreating as she approached. He looked so skinny to her, all of a sudden, the way he stood, panting, watching the plate in her hand rather than the possible threat of an approaching human.

"See? Just getting you dinner," she said with an easy smile. "Just trying to help, Tyr."

Tyr didn't respond to his chosen name, but he seemed to calm a little, apparently forgetting the result of the previous dinner he had been given. He took a step towards her and raised his head a little from its formerly defensive position. She, in turn, knelt and slid the plate towards him under the door of the coop. Once the plate left her hand, Tyr seemed to remember that she was a possible danger, and his ears pinned themselves back and he lunged with a snap at her retreating hand. She jerked it away just in time and watched as Tyr ravenously gulped down the raw meat then licked the plate completely clean of steak sauce. Part one was finished. Now, all she had to do was wait for the pills to take effect.

The effects of the previous dose seemed to have not worn off yet, because half an hour later, Tyr slumped heavily over to one side and slept, the steady rise and fall of his chest the only indicator that he was alive. Christine gave it only an extra minute, by her watch, before she went inside the coop to begin her work. She didn't have much time.

As quickly as she could, she spread out the contents of the sewing and the first aid kit on the floor, then laid out the pages from the printout in an order where she could easily read down the list of what to do step by step. She pulled on the pair of rubber gloves that she'd found in the back closet and knelt beside the sleeping wolf, very nervous of what she was about to do and if he would wake up! She'd never been a very good tailor, unlike her father, and given an injection or anything even similar! This was going to be a challenge.

She mustered up as much courage as she could, and poured out a small amount of alcohol on a gauze pad before dabbing it daintily at the mound of purple red flesh where Tyr's eye once was. The muscles around it shivered and twitched, but much to her relief, Tyr did not stir. She dabbed more generously now, adding more alcohol every time, changing gauze when one became too red with dirt and blood. Bits of skin and fur came away, even small rocks. She kept at this, picking at the wound with a tweezers as well, until the wound became light red, wet, and clean as she could get it. She poured a little of the rubbing alcohol over the wound, just for good measure, and moved on to the next tool.

This was her least looked forward to part of the job. Biting her lower lip, she carefully threaded the needle with a thin white thread and tied a firm, large knot in the end. She sat, poised over the wolf's body, and for a while she couldn't make herself move. She'd always hated getting shots, and she suspected that stitches couldn't feel much better. Still, she calmed herself, stilled her shaking hand, and forced herself to bring the point of the sewing needle to the skin right beside the angry open wound. With the feeling of nausea rising in her stomach, she did as the paper said and forced the needle down into the wolf's skin, right beside the bridge of his nose. She swallowed hard, keeping herself from vomiting, and watched to see if the wolf could feel it. He flinched briefly, and then was still again. Thank god for those sleeping pills.

Christine pulled the thread through the small hole she had made, hating the way it slipped across the wolf's skin, until it was taut and the knot was caught at the end. Following the instructions, she stitched down and across over and over again, slowly pulling tight each time, and the wound gradually began to close. Like a mouth, getting the sustenance it needed, the red went away, to reveal dark gray skin contrasted sharply in white sewing thread. She continued until there was only a white seam where the bloody mass had been, then tied it off and bit the thread to end the string. She sat back to admire her work for a moment, and found that she had been sweating very hard, and that her hands were cramped and shaking slightly from the effort involved in the procedure. It was sloppy looking, and she knew it, but it didn't honestly look too bad, and she'd finished it before the great wolf had even begun to wake up!

She stood up, gathered her things back into her arms, and looked down at the sleeping, Tyr with relieved eyes. He looked so much better, and although she'd need to sanitize the wound many times over the course of the next few weeks, it was a very good start. She filled the empty plate with water and laid it down next to the wolf, and pushed a little hay into the coop for him to sleep on. Before she left, she took a moment to reach down and place her hand lovingly between the animal's ears. She scratched gently there, looking into the wolf's sleeping face.

"That's better, right Tyr?" she whispered.

Tyr made a happy noise in his sleep, and his body seemed to relax considerable as she rubbed the backs of his ears. She sighed, relaxing a little herself, and left the pen, locking it behind her. It would be a while till he was better, and she couldn't be sure she'd even done the right thing, but she'd done it. She'd closed Tyr's wounds, and now all she had to do was get him food, water, everything a normal wolf needed.

As she took stock of all these things, she heard Tyr begin to stir from sleep, and she smiled. The sun beamed in through the gap in the barn door, and the smell of wildflowers from somewhere far off drifted to her nose. Maybe fall wasn't quite here after all.

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Chapter 5 - September

The leaves were mostly gone now from the few scraggly trees that dotted the landscape of the ranch. They lay in piles of crackly brown at the base of the trunks, nestled between the exposed tentacle-like roots, reaching ever outward. The wind was cold now, and it blew between the cracks in her door and at the base of her window. In the morning, the air tasted like frost sometimes, and Christine found she needed to wrap herself tightly in blankets if she had any hope of coaxing herself out of bed. Winter felt like it always came early, trying to get a jump on autumn when it wasn't even in full swing yet. The seasons always felt a little off, like everything came early. Everything but summer, Christine noted to herself. Summer, ever since school, had always felt like it would never come.

It had been two and a half weeks since she had donned the part of interim vet, and things were going surprisingly well for her. By some grace of god, Tyr had not pulled out his stitches. He scratched at them sometimes, but he couldn't bite at them, so they stayed in, letting the wound heal properly. Every other day, Christine slipped Tyr a few sleeping pills, only a few so that she could dab some rubbing alcohol onto the area to keep out infection. There had been no sign of unusual swelling or redness, and the dead flesh that she had pulled away with tweezers had not spread to the remaining skin, which looked healthy. Tyr was forever to be short one eye, but he didn't seem all that phased by it.

He was slowly becoming accustomed to Christine's presence, and no longer growled when she entered. He knew that she always brought food, and had never connected the ideas of sudden sleep and the food she brought, so he always seemed eager when she entered. He did still nip at her hand and snarl though whenever she slipped the plate under the door, but Christine had learned this habit and had never again been caught by his strong bite. Her ankle was healing nicely, but she had a row on one side of small white spots, scars, where the teeth had cut into her. She felt more like wearing it proudly, however, as it proved her contact with wolves, and made a wonderful story at bars. Not that she ever went to bars, but if she had, by god it would have made some story!

She had been given some strange looks by the butcher in town whenever she went in to ask for the poorer cuts of beef. He would ask her, every day she came, what it was she wanted, and her answer was always the same:

"Something in bulk," she would say with a smile. "Doesn't matter about the quality. Just bulk."

As it was his job to get the customer what they wanted, the butcher never asked where all the shoulder and rump cuts ended up going, but Christine could tell that he was curious. He was a thin man with a kind face but with very tired eyes. She got the feeling he never saw anything of real interest in his shop, and that her mysterious purchases might be a nice change of scenery for him.

She did occasionally buy stew cuts of beef in a small amount. She could use them to treat Tyr if she so felt, but she could also use them herself, and she knew well she'd been neglecting her own diet in favor of Tyr's. Stew was a wonderful change from the usual chicken and eggs she got from her father's inheritance, and she experimented with the different spices she had in the house, till it was thick, salty, and full of pieces of beef and potato. The wolf as well seemed even hungrier when he was swallowing down the small scraps of meat meant for humans.

Once, the butcher put down the end part of a leg bone, sawed off half way up. It still had bits of fat and cartilage sticking to the sides, and the marrow was still pink on the inside. She looked down at the addition as the butcher wrapped it up in brown paper and handed it across the counter to her along with the stew meat and a shoulder cut. Then, she looked back at him, puzzled. He shrugged at her and smiled.

"Hey, I figure you're either eating nothing but stew or you got one hungry dog back where you live," he said jovially. "Either way, this will be a help. A good stew bone, or a good chew toy."

"One or the other," she said back with a grin, unwilling to divulge which it was. "Thanks."

He didn't seem bothered by the fact that she didn't specify if it was stew or chew toy, and he wished her a good day. She left feeling happy, but still unsure whether or not to stew the bone for herself. After all, it did look like a good stew bone, and a bit of marrow in her broth would be pleasant. Then again...

Christine went to the barn when she got back. Tyr leapt up from where he was lying and bounded toward her, barking hungrily. She opened the latch to the coop, and quickly tossed in the bone before shutting and latching it again. Tyr was already on it before it even hit the ground. He sprang at it, missed, but turned sharply in the air to snap at it again, and this time he succeeded in bringing his prey down. He sniffed it, licked at it, and then settled down and pulled the one to him with one paw, crunching at the joint with his larger back teeth. His eye rolled ceiling-wards with a look of bliss spreading over his face and posture. Christine smiled and knelt, watching his tail pass back and forth over the dirt floor, making a clean spot.

"You damned wolf," she said loving, "You're going to eat me out of all the food I have. Soon I'll give

you all my chickens and then where will I be?"

Tyr didn't respond, and continued to munch away on his new toy. Christine stood up and dusted off her knees before turning back towards the house. She had stew to make.

A few days later, it was time to remove Tyr's stitches. Her printout said to give them two to three weeks, and it had now been three weeks. Three weeks of drugging the wolf to clean out the coop or his wound, of snatching back her hand to avoid a bite. Three weeks of watching him pace the coop uncomfortably, as if he'd never seen such a small space in his life, and three weeks of praying each day that the wolf would not pull out his stitches and erase all the hard work she had done. Today was the end of those three weeks, and it was time to eliminate at least the last part of that agenda.

She used bits of her stew meat to drug the wolf with the same dosage she'd originally given him. She waited till he passed into dream and entered the chicken coop with a pair of kitchen scissors in hand. She carefully cut through the yellowing thread and pulled each bit out slowly, again disliking the resistance it had as it passed through his muscle and skin. It left a series of twelve small holes in the skin that barely bled, and a wrinkled indent in the skin between them. It was still fragile looking, but it seemed to have healed considerably, and would probably be alright. No infection, no unusual redness or swelling. It seemed she'd actually done it! She'd successfully healed Tyr! She knew it had to have been luck, but who cared?

He looked happier at least. His appearance had improved too. His coat was no longer sweaty and matted with dirt, and his body language had grown more confident as he had regained his strength. Even lying there, asleep, he looked more fearsome, more majestic. His ragged ears and mangy coat were still there, but they seemed less ragged, less dingy today. Maybe she could help with the coat part too!

She had a comb in her pocket, a little one meant for human hair only, but she figured it would do. She pulled it out and began with quick little strokes across the top of his head and down the back of his neck, being careful to miss Tyr's recent scar. She could see bits of dirt, loose hair, and even the occasional tick or flea caught in the bristles of the comb, and the tangles in his coat slowly began to lessen, till the comb passed cleanly through the fur of his neck, head, and throat. He shone now, and looked like some sort of wolf from a Disney movie, one that was made for dog shows rather than wilderness hunting. She moved on to his shoulder and back, again with short sharp strokes to get out the tangles. All the while, she watched him closely, even as she moved to his belly and inner legs, to make sure that he wasn't beginning to wake up.

She was playing with the small bit of white on his chest when she abruptly noticed that she was hitting something solid by the wolf's body. She turned to find that she had run her hand directly into his sheathed member. She jerked her hand back and dropped the comb, disgusted and surprised that she had not noticed. She told herself that dog owners did this all the time, and that horse owners even had to clean down there, up inside the horse's sheath. She'd even had to do it once when she'd worked as a stable-hand; there was nothing to be disgusted by. Still, somewhere in her stomach she felt a small lump form, uncomfortable and shifting, making her feel a little queasy. What would Tyr think of all this? Tyr didn't seem to have stirred, however, and he barely even moved, almost imperceptibly. Once, his hips rocked only very slightly forward, then back, and he was still. Christine swallowed sharply, and tried to look at the recent event in a joking light.

"Sorry boy," she murmured with a short laugh and another pat on his head. "Didn't mean to lead you on. I somehow don't think I'm your type, what with the lack of tail and fur."

But she wondered now if that was really the only difference, that perhaps if she had a long bristly tail like Tyr, a longer nose, and a fur covered body, would she suddenly become interesting to a wolf? Was that all it took? She told herself to stop thinking about it. She was not a wolf, and thinking about a wolf in that manner was...well, she didn't know what it was. But whatever it was, she needed to stop it. Tyr needed care, not a mate or an owner or whatever she was. She finished brushing his tail quickly, using less care and feeling deeply uncomfortable the whole time.

Tyr began to move and Christine quickly got to her feet and exited the coop. She put the comb down by the cage, as she couldn't possibly use it on her own hair now, and turned to watch Tyr revive himself, feeling somehow as if she had violated him in his sleep. It wasn't at all a nice feeling, and it was a sort of guilt she wasn't exactly used to. Still, she insisted to herself that it was nothing, and that she should be over it by now.

Tyr made a groaning noise and pushed himself up on his two front paws. His back two still seemed to be asleep, and he dragged himself forward a few steps before they finally came to life and raised his rear to its normal height. He shook himself from nose to tail, shaking off the sleep that had come over him so mystically yet again, and put off all Christine's careful positioning of his fur to nothing. Still, Christine couldn't help but admire him, as he looked cleaner there, more healthy. It just looked right. Well, minus the chicken wire of course.

Tyr finally noticed that she was there and turned his head to look at her. He didn't bark, and he didn't growl at her. He just stared out of his one good eye in all its piercing, calculating gold. Christine found she could not look away, as if the wolf was searching through a part of her she couldn't quite name. Hopefully, slowly, she walked towards the coop, and Tyr didn't back away. She knelt and put her palm up against the wire, watching Tyr for his reaction. Tyr pinned his ears back but didn't make any sound. After a moment of the two standing there absolutely still, Tyr made his slow way over to her, and keeping her fixed in his gaze, put his nose to the wire in the same place her hand was. Christine could feel hot air on her palm and fingers as the wolf's nostrils flared, taking in and analyzing her scent. He pulled away sharply after a moment, still never taking his eye off her, and the two stood on opposite sides of the fence, studying the other, as if they had both reached some sort of understanding. At last, Tyr pulled his head away from her and began pacing the front of the coop as he had been doing before. Christine too looked away, and the moment passed.

She turned to go back into the house and heard a low howl come from the coop where Tyr was pacing. She felt her heart tighten in her chest as she painfully remembered how wild Tyr was, and of the new problem facing her. Soon she'd have a very healthy wolf on her hands, and it would be too cold to keep the chickens outside. Not to mention, Tyr couldn't stay in the barn, locked up like that forever, it just didn't feel right to her. What was she going to do? Christine covered half of her face with her hand, and neglected to answer Tyr's call, though everything in her heart was dying to. She went back into the house, listening as the low howls continued to echo from the barn.

Christine sat outside of Tyr's coop, looking in and brooding over her current situation. The wolf was asleep, naturally this time, without the help of her drugs, and he snored softly in an easy peaceful rhythm. His scar had gotten even better, and now it seemed to pulse a little when he changed the gaze of his good eye, as if his body was still telling the missing eye what to do even though it was gone. She watched his eyelids shift as his good eye moved, and the bad one pretended to, and his legs kicked a little as if he was running. Christine hoped that he was dreaming.

It had rained badly the night before, and she'd arrived in the yard to find a mass of very soggy chickens in the outdoor coop. With them all wet like that, and the roof of the henhouse a leaky mess,

the chickens wouldn't lay. And if they didn't lay, she didn't make any money. Sure, her father had paid off the ranch long ago back when they'd had horses, but there were still so many bills that needed paying. The sky was gray again today, and it didn't show any sign of burning off. Those hens needed to go inside, and not tomorrow or the next day. Today. They needed to go to the inside coop today.

But there was still the matter of the now sleeping Tyr, who might be or might not be ready to go out on his own. After all, he was pack less, blind on one side of his face, and still fairly shaky from the tough time of healing he'd had during the past weeks. There was no way of telling if he could even last on his own? Could he hunt? Could he manage even that?

Well, that was something she'd be able to test at least.

Sacrificing yet another chicken, Christine went out and rounded up a quick looking bird, snatched it up, and went back into the barn. She opened the door and tossed the squawking hen into the coop, its feather coming lose and floating down and it flapped in vain to stay aloft. About the time the bird hit the ground, Christine saw Tyr's nose begin to move. His head jerked up, all sign of sleep gone, and he focused on the bird. The hen too had noticed another presence in the coop and had gone still, looking at the wolf with wide frightened eyes. Tyr rose silently, his eye locked onto the heavily breathing chicken, his head still as the rest of his body tensed and un-tensed. There was a moment of perfect stillness, and then Tyr sprang forward, snapping and barking.

He went wide to the left of the bird and crashed hard into the wire mesh. The chicken fluttered out of the way, making terrified and frantic noises. Christine blinked, surprised at Tyr's so obvious of a miss. He was just now righting himself, shaking his head as if to shake away the impact. He spun and again fixed the bird in his sights. He sprang yet again, and again put himself hard into the wires. The chicken, free yet again, fluttered wide.

Christine sat, overwhelmed, as she realized what exactly all this meant. Tyr had one eye. Only one. Every time he jumped, he went to the left of where the target was, and Christine knew well that the eye was the cause of this. She stared, heartbroken, at the wolf and shook her head slowly.

"Damn it Tyr," she muttered. "You can't see, can you?" With one eye, his depth perception would be completely gone, making him unable to hunt, and unable to direct himself properly as he moved. He's probably run into trees if he was going fast enough and wasn't careful. There was no way he'd be able to go out into the wild now, or any time soon.

"Damn it Tyr," she said again, feeling a painful tightness in her throat.

There was a loud and angry cry from the cage. She looked up to find that Tyr had at last cornered and caught the chicken. He had the motionless bird in his jaws and was shaking it, growling like a puppy. A fleck of warm red blood hit Christine on the cheek, and she quickly wiped it away. It had taken him that long to catch a flightless bird in an enclosed space?

Yes. Tyr was definitely going to be around for a while.

Tyr sagged to one side and fell hard, raising a small cloud of dust from the barn floor where he landed. Christine let out a long low sigh and went into the coop. He was building up a tolerance to the sleeping pills, and it had taken him longer than ever before to fall asleep. This meant she had less time, but enough. Barely enough in all likely-hood, but enough.

After performing the tarp trick again and dragging the sleeping wolf out into the evening light, Christine went inside and grabbed Francie's old collar and leash from where it was still hanging over her kitchen counter: a memorial to a lost friend. It looked big enough to go around Tyr's neck, and she found to her relief that she was right. She fastened the collar around the wolf's thickly furred neck, clicking it onto the last notch, just barely. She attached the pink leash to the post of the front porch, figuring it was at least an area Tyr was familiar with and still smelled himself on. She left the wolf there on the tarp then to go tend to her chickens.

They were at first very reluctant to go into the coop, as it smelled of weeks of wolf, but they eventually filed in. She eyed the birds with bitter eyes as she shut the door of the coop and turned to go.

"You're all luckier than you know that I didn't feed you to him," she hissed at them as she left.

She saw Tyr shifting into waking even as she approached. He was making low rumbling noises and shifting uneasily from one front paw to the other. He stood then, and looked about him confused at his new surroundings. He made a move to bound away, but found himself attached to the porch! Rather than strain at the leash like a dog would have done, Tyr spun, head facing where the leash was tied and began barking and growling, shaking his entire body as he tried to back out of the collar. There was no luck at this, and he began pawing furiously at the rope before trying to chew it in half. Both times, he ended up still attached to the porch. Christine watched all this sadly. It just didn't seem right.

"I'm sorry boy," she whispered.

Tyr looked up and spotted her, his eye wide and angry. He ran at her, snarling and barking as if he knew she was the one who had done this to him. The leash caught him long before he reached her, and he yelped in surprise and pain as the leash jerked him backwards onto the ground. He was up again in a flash, straining to attack his captor again, with the same result. Christine walked to within a few feet of the leash radius and sat down, staring at Tyr unafraid and very sorry. The wolf fought a while longer and then seemed to calm down.

The two looked at each other much like they had the day a few weeks before in the barn. They sized each other up, curious but weary. Then, this time, Tyr made the first move. He walked calmly towards her nose down, and eye trained on her face. Christine too sat forward and slowly reached out her hand. Tyr strained out his neck and sniffed her hand, watching the girl for any sign of trouble. Again, Christine felt the warm breath of the wolf on her palm and wrist, and she didn't feel afraid.

With little warning, Tyr opened his mouth and tried to place it over her fingers. Christine jerked her hand back, but she realized suddenly that it wasn't a threatening gesture. The bite had not been hard, and it had been more of a way of communication. Christine suddenly understood. She reached swiftly back out and grasped Tyr's nose firmly in her hand. The wolf jumped and made a move to pull back, but Christine held tight to the wolf's nose. Tyr struggled a moment longer, then stood still, looking into Christine's face questioningly.

"No no," Christine said with a small smile. "You're not the boss of me. Other way around." She shook the wolf's muzzle a little to emphasize her point. "Got it?"

She let go and Tyr stood very still, looking at her and barely breathing. Then, slowly and gently, he lowered himself to the ground and began to lick at his muzzle and whimper like a puppy. It was as if he knew how beneath her he really was. By the looks of it, he'd performed this act many times

before. Christine stared at the begging wolf, surprised at how easy it had been. Did she dare?

Christine slowly reached out a hand, and holding her breath, rested her hand on the wolf's head, right between his ears. Tyr didn't move to bite her or protest, and she let out the breath she'd been holding in a long sigh. It looked like this way of working with Tyr would be tolerable after all. She rubbed her hand back and forth, and the wolf's tail moved briskly across the ground in a happy gesture.

"Good boy," she whispered, and smiled as Tyr continued to wag his tail.

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## **Chapter 6 - October**

Tyr didn't take kindly to the leash at first. He'd never had the experience of wearing one before, Christine was sure, and he didn't seem to want to start now. He'd tried to chew through the pink line many a time now, and she'd had to go get a replacement for it more than once, afraid that he'd get through this time and run off. After a few weeks, he finally began to quiet about it. He didn't howl or growl or strain at the end of the leash after a squirrel that had run by. He seemed to quietly accept his fate. He still couldn't be walked or anything like that, as he was far too powerful for Christine to hold back without some serious bracing and lowered center of gravity. So instead she bought an extra long replacement to the leash so he had his roam over the entire dirt yard. It was bigger than some zoo pens, she told herself, which was a mild comfort to her.

Christine had considered calling a zoo once or twice, but had now decided against it. Tyr seemed happy enough where he was, after all. He got four meals a day, one big one right before dinner, sloppy medical care (but still medical care) and a fairly large area to mess around in. Christine had never really liked the zoo atmosphere, with it's dead-eyed animals, cat, sleepy, and bored. But more than that, Christine was not yet ready to let him go. She still held out some hope that he'd learn new depth perception somehow, even with his one eye, and that she'd one day be able to release him. She also sometimes admitted that she just wanted to enjoy the fact that she had a live, wild wolf living under her porch, if only for a little while longer.

Tyr, when he was in a good mood, let the girl pat his head or back, an act that still sent shivers down Christine's spine whenever she did it. It was thrilling to feel the warm body, so strong and ready under her hand, and also to feel the wiry sleekness of the wolf's coat. The whole experience was somehow spiritual to her, and whenever he allowed, she would run her hand in long smooth strokes over his head and behind his ears. Other times, he growled to tell her that he wished to be left alone, and she obliged, knowing that while alphas, which she was now, got the last word, it didn't mean that those below wouldn't lash out once or twice in protest. She also found that he very much enjoyed being brushed. He would arch his back as she ran the cheap plastic comb through his fur, and his tail always seemed in motion. It was probably nice feeling, she thought, against all those fleas and ticks that thrived off him. The next time she went to the store, she bought some dog treats meant to get rid of ticks and fleas, and prevent heartworm. Even after he's chewed these down, he still enjoyed being brushed.

With all this special treatment, Tyr was beginning to look cleaner, more domesticated, but his large paws and sharp eye reminded Christine that he was not her pet. He was a wild thing, and would behave as such in any given situation. She had been lucky, she told herself, that he had not yet been more violent with her, and she did her best to keep her distance when he seemed in a strange mood. Tyr seemed sweet enough though, and mostly he just lay at the foot of the porch door, head over his crossed paws, staring out into the sunlight in the direction of Yellowstone.

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"So, it is a dog," the butcher said with a sudden smile.

Christine realized that he must have seen what was in the other bag she was carrying, and quickly closed it better so no one else would get a peek. She had decided that Tyr didn't really suit sporting Francie's old pink collar, and had bought a new one for him. She had chosen a yellow/orange to match the wolf's eyes, though she had considered a red as well. Anything strong and bright that wasn't a pink really would work for him. She blushed a little and smiled up at the butcher behind the counter, unsure why she was so eager to hide Tyr's existence or why she was even blushing.

"Yeah," she said sheepishly. "New dog."

"Not so new," he said. "Had him for quite a few months now, if I remember correctly."

"You keep track of my orders that well, huh?"

He shrugged. "It's my job."

She noticed then what a charming smile the man had. It was quite disarming, and she very suddenly found herself at surprising ease talking to him, even about her new housemate.

"Well you do it well," she said lamely. It had been meant as a compliment, but it came out in the tone of a joke. Her ease with him wavered and was gone, the spell broken by her own verbal clumsiness.

"Hey, I hope you don't mind me asking," the butcher said, his smile dropping a little. "But is that much pure beef really good for a dog? I mean, you said new, and I know that puppies shouldn't be getting their paws on stuff like that..."

"Oh, don't worry," Christine said hastily. Her comfort was definitely gone now. "He's a special dog. Vet's orders and all."

She was a horrible liar, and she knew it. Her stomach always tightened up and she felt like running off somewhere to hide whenever she told a lie. That was something she had picked up from her youth, she guessed, back when her father always managed to catch her at her lies. At 18, she could never sneak out after curfew or lie about where she was going. She always had to operate in half-truths, so her guilty face would not give her away. Her ears also turned a bright red color and felt hot, a dead giveaway to anyone who really knew her.

But the butcher didn't know her all that well, and he seemed to buy the lie.

"Ah, what breed?"

"Well," Christine fumbled with her words, trying to find something that would make sense, but also be a half truth. Hm. Half... "He's part wolf, you see, so he needs a really meaty diet."

A half lie about a half breed. Her ears didn't feel so hot anymore, and the cramping in her stomach lessened slightly. The man again nodded.

"Wow," he said with a low whistle. "You ever taken care of a wolf dog before?"

Christine shook her head, then quickly changed her mind and added "But my father did before he passed, so I know how it's done."

Another half lie. Her father had raised a wolf dog, but it was long before her time, somewhere up in Alaska. She also didn't know how it was done, but she was learning, so this lie felt a little more relaxed than the first.

"Well then, more power to you," the man said with a laugh. "I just hope he's got plenty of room."

"Oh he does," she added, and felt herself relax still further. That disarming smile was getting to her again. And now she noticed how young he looked, how his dark hair hung almost over his bright green eyes that now weren't quite so tired. He looked a little Irish to her, with a mix of something else, she couldn't tell what. Really, he was very attractive. She'd never noticed all this before, she'd always been in such a rush to get the meat and get out.

The butcher stuck out a hand across the counter in a friendly gesture, and Christine took it. She found now that he had a very firm handshake and a very strong grip. His hands were surprisingly clean, not those of a messy butcher.

"The name's Darryl," the butcher said.

"Christine," she said back.

"Christine what?"

"Tulsa," she said, releasing his hand. The butcher blinked in surprise and went still a moment.

"You mean your dad is Jeff Tulsa? As in, the Tulsa horse ranch?"

"Was," she said somberly. "And it's not a horse ranch anymore. Just chickens."

"And wolves."

She felt her stomach do a summersault.

"Erh, yeah. At least during the summer."

Darryl laughed a little to himself. He didn't seem upset, and didn't seem to be questioning her, so she told herself to relax.

"I remember," he said. "They come up from Yellowstone. No wonder you know how to take care of a wolf dog."

"Yeah," she said. "Right."

Darryl's face softened a little, seeming to remember a ways back in the conversation where the word "was" had been sad.

"So Jeff's dead huh?" he said quietly.

"Two and a half years now," Christine said in an equally low tone. "Almost three."

"Damn shame. I knew him when I was younger. Gave me pony or horse rides half price. He was a good man, your father."

"Thanks." Christine stood in silence with the man, the both of them observing the moment in recognition of her dead father. But then the stillness became comfortable and Christine cleared her

throat to break it. She was never sure why people said sorry when someone died. It wasn't as if they had caused it, and how was she supposed to respond? Awkward silences were always bound to follow.

"Well," she said. "I've got to get back to feed my dog."

She moved to pick up the paper wrapped parcel of meat on the counter. She felt a hand cover hers and she went still. She looked up at Darryl, confused and a little uncomfortable.

"Hold on a second," Darryl said with another charming smile.

"Um, yes?" Christine said, withdrawing her hand slowly to leave the parcel where it was. The man looked uncomfortable too for a moment, then looked up and gazed squarely into her eyes.

"Well miss Tulsa," he said with a long breath out. "I'd like to take you to dinner tonight if you'd be willing."

Christine blinked, a little surprised. An attractive young butcher was asking her out? Well, they had seen each other a while on her visits to get meat, and a change from stew would be nice. Besides, the man had known her father, and it had been so long since she'd been on a date with anyone, or even been out of the house, or not cooked for herself...

"Sure," she said, straightening up a little and smiling herself, before she could think about it too hard and talk herself out of it. "I'd like that."

"Meet me at Lois May at seven tonight? Or do you need a ride?"

"No, I have a ride. I'll meet you there. I haven't been to Lois May's in years!" Christine picked up her order of meat and dropped it into the bag with the collar and turned to go.

"I'll see you at seven then Miss Tulsa?" Darryl called to her over the counter

"See you at seven," she called back over her shoulder, then added "And call me Christine."

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Lois May's was one of the fancier restraints in town. Given, it was a small town, but the restaurant was still pretty nice. It had all sorts of American style food, all ritzed and glitzed up to be even more delicious and bad for you, with special gimmicky names, and a wide selection of wine to choose from. Christine wasn't sure how dressy to be, however, and eventually decided against a dress, going with a nice skirt and blouse. Truth be told, she hadn't really dressed up since her father's funeral. It was a nice change, even if it brought back a few stinging memories.

She got there right after Darryl did, and she saw him still being seated by a waiter as she came into the restaurant. She called to him, and he looked up at her, smiled, and called her over to the table. Looking around, she noticed that almost every girl in the place was wearing some sort of short or long dress, and she instantly felt out of place and severely underdressed. Darryl didn't seem to think so, however, and pulled her chair out of her to sit as he might for any well dressed lady.

"You look wonderful," he told her as she sat down. Christine felt herself blush.

The night began quietly enough. Christine sipped her wine, ordered the Southern Chicken special, and listened as Darryl began to speak at great length about how he'd met her father when he was

younger. She laughed hearing about the same ponies she had ridden when they were still on the ranch, and felt sad at the same time about her father's sudden departure from the world. She acknowledged that she had never properly grieved about her father's death, and she got the feeling she was reaching some sort of closure very soon now.

The subject changed, and the mood became lighter. Christine felt both relief and regret.

The two sat at the table laughing together as their food arrived, and laughed all the while they ate. Christine couldn't remember the last time she had laughed so much, or the last time she had even sat at dinner with anyone, a friend or a date. It was downright refreshing. She tried her best to contribute to the conversation, but somehow her thoughts and words always kept coming back to Tyr and her recent experiences with him. Darryl seemed more than willing to listen, though, and she changed her stories with lies to make it seem as if she'd just bought Tyr, and if he behaved like a normal dog should. Until...

"He lost an eye," she found herself saying, and instantly wished she hadn't. Darryl stopped eating his half deep fried duck and looked up, obviously interested.

"How's that?"

"Well, um, a deer got it. Kicked him right in the face," she explained.

That wasn't a lie at all, and she felt herself slip back into ease. Darryl was nodding slowly, seeming to understand what must have happened.

"Ah. Interesting. Any hope of him ever getting it back?"

Christine shook her head sadly.

"No. There's nothing there now. A scar, but no eye." She sighed. "It's sad really."

"You said his name was Tyr? Spelled T-Y-R?"

"Yeah, why?"

Darryl sat back in his chair, smiling as if he knew something she didn't.

"A fan of Norse mythology are you?" he asked teasingly. Christine just blinked.

"Um, no actually. Why do you say that?"

Darryl's smile never wavered, but he now sat forwards towards her, and lowered his voice to take on some sort of storytelling quality.

"Well, in mythology, there was this huge wolf that was going to destroy or eat the world or something. Fenrir. The gods all formed a plan to capture him with a collar, but he wasn't having any of it."

Christine too leaned forwards as she listened to him tell the story. This was interesting, and certainly not the boring normal dinner conversation.

"So Fenrir tells the god's that to prove this isn't a trap to catch him, all the while they put on the collar, one of them has to hold a hand in the big wolf's mouth. The sword hand, which is a big deal. Without a sword hand, you can't be a warrior. Anyway, he says that if he is captured he'll bite off the

hand. Now, all the gods know that they have to do this, so someone is gonna lose their sword hand. But none of them are willing to do it. Finally, one man or god steps forward and says he'll do it. After telling the god's off for being chickens and honorless scumbags, he puts his hand in the wolf's mouth and they capture Fenrir. Finding himself caught, the wolf bites off the man's sword hand. That man's name was Tyr."

Christine smiled proudly. It seemed to work so well to her. Tyr had given an eye so that the Druid pack could eat and continue to thrive, and in the process had also been taken out of commission. Although the stories were not exactly the same, the similarities were enough where she felt the name fit the wolf perfectly.

"Anyway," Darryl continued, taking a sip of wine. "I figured you would have named him Fenrir instead, him being a wolf and all."

Christine mused over this a while, and then shook her head, still grinning,

"No, trust me," she said with a short laugh. "That name is more appropriate than you could ever know."

The night went on with more talking and laughing, and soon Christine lost track of how many glasses of wine she'd had. Darryl just kept refilling her glass, and she drained it every time. It had also been a while since she'd had anything to drink, and she found herself feeling a little dizzy, more ready to laugh, and more ready to talk about things comfortably. Still, she didn't feel too far-gone, and she kept her mouth shut about Tyr's true origins. When the check came, she was still feeling a bit off, and she asked Darryl to call her a cab home.

"Ah, don't worry," he told her. "I can get you home."

"But your car's here," she told him with a laugh. "I wouldn't have you walking all the way back here to get home."

"I'll call a cab on my cell once I get to your house," he assured her. "Just leave it to me. Besides, I'd love to see the ranch again, even if it's by moonlight. Plus I'd wouldn't mind meeting this Tyr of yours."

For some reason, Christine wasn't worried. In the dark, surely Tyr could pass as a big black dog. Also, she didn't want to try to get a cab to her ranch, and Darryl already basically knew the way there! She was tipsy, and it would be nice to have someone take care of her a little, for a change, before she got into bed to sleep the night off. She turned to him, her head swaying a little, and gave him a broad smile. He smiled back and chuckled.

"Darryl," she said a little too loudly. "If you would be so kind as to give me a ride home, I would be forever grateful."

"But of course," Darryl said with a sweeping bow. He stood and went to her side of the table, lowering an elbow for her to take. "M'lady?"

She smiled up at him and daintily accepted his arm.

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Tyr was waiting outside the hose, across the doorway on the porch where he usually slept. He raised his head as Christine, partially supported by Darryl, made their way towards the house. At first he

growled, but then put his ears forward and carefully rose as he smelled Christine. She wasn't sure if he responded to his own name yet, but he knew her as Alpha, and thus took very good care of her and always showed excitement when she approached. As the person next to her came into view, Christine saw Tyr stop wagging his tail and put his ears back yet again.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

"Easy boy," she muttered, and Tyr put his ears forward again, but still looked uneasily.

"Ah," Darryl said, "So this is the almighty Tyr."

He then made the mistake of trying to pat Tyr on the head. It had taken Christine a long time to even reach that point, and Tyr did not know this man at all. In a heartbeat, Tyr's ears were flat down on his neck again and his teeth bared in a snarl. Darryl barely had time to jerk his hand away before Tyr closed his teeth right next to it. He seemed surprised at the wolf's aggression at first, but then laughed and shook his head.

"A wolf dog. Right," he muttered good-naturedly. "Territorial buggers aren't they?"

"Oh Tyr," Christine grumbled, catching the wolf by the collar and pulling him towards the door. "Hurry, get inside and I'll let him go."

"Nah," the butcher said. "Just let him go in the house and let him do as he likes. I won't bother him, and if I'm around you, he won't bother me."

Christine was not sure if that was really how it worked, but she opened the door to the house and unhooked Tyr's leash. He'd never been inside the house before, and he was instantly distracted from the invader by the temptation of something new. Smelling a new area to explore, Tyr trotted into the darkness of the house, and left the two standing outside.

"Is the ranch how you remember?" Christine asked.

"Sorta," he said with a shrug. "I remember it for the horses. Never went inside the owner's house though."

"Oh, come inside then," she found herself saying, though she quickly added. "At least till your Taxi arrives. It can get a little cold out here."

"I'll bet. I'd be glad of getting in someplace warm."

Christine opened the door to him, oblivious to the innuendo.

The two went inside the dark house, chatting happily about the events of the evening and memories of the ranch in the past. Christine was still feeling quite woozy, and she sat down on her musty brown couch at once inside. Darryl sat beside her and put an arm around her shoulder to give her a friendly little shake.

"How ya doing? Feeling better?"

"Maybe if you stopped shaking me," she said with a laugh. "But really. I'm fine. You should call your Taxi and get going home. I'm fine here."

"Do I have to go?" He gave her a pouty lip and she giggled.



"Darryl, you should really..."

She was cut off by his mouth covering hers. She felt shock and her body went rigid, but then relaxed into the kiss, feeling happy and relaxed. It had been so long since she had been kissed, she'd almost forgotten how much she had enjoyed it! She kissed him back a moment, and then gently pushed him away.

"Mhhhh, thanks for that," she murmured dreamily. "But you should still go home."

Darryl was still a moment, then he smiled that charming, disarming smile.

"But I'm not ready to go home yet,"

"Be that as it may," Christine said with a laugh. "It's my house, and I'm kicking you out."

"No you're not."

"What do you mean I'm not!" She laughed again, but this joke was going a little far. "I told you. My house. My rules."

"Wrong again," he said, still smiling. Before she could say anything else, he had grabbed her face and pulled her forward into another kiss. He forced his tongue into her mouth and she drew back sharply, still confused from the wine, but understanding that she did not like this.

"Darryl," she said sharply, giving him a firm shove. "Please don't do that. I'll see you later, just call your Taxi."

Again, he kissed her hard, and she felt a firm strong hand pressed between her legs. She shoved the hand away hard and backed up on the couch.

"Darryl! What the hell are you doing!"

But he didn't reply. Before she could move another muscle he was on her, forcing her shoulders back onto the couch with more power than she had expected, with all his bodyweight. She was in shock at first. She couldn't move. He kissed her again and again, forcing his hand back to where it had been before, and when she felt it drawing up her skirt, she came to her senses. No. No she didn't want this! She pushed at him, fighting to get out of his grip, but he was so strong. She tried to scream but he covered her mouth with his hand pressed his bodyweight down on top of her, thrusting his hips forward against her clothed lower half. She could feel frightened angry tears streaming from the corners of her eyes as she struggled with her fists against his chest and face. He grabbed her flailing wrists and forced them down beside her head, then placed them both in one large hand so he had the other free to continue its work. She could feel him fighting to get past her panties and she brought a knee up hard into his crotch with a shrill shriek of terror and anger. He let out a low grunt and released her for a moment. But only a moment.

Before she had time to writhe away, he was back down on her, now fighting to get her skirt up and panties down. No, her mind said again. No, not this. And why wouldn't he speak? Why in god's name didn't he say anything! She looked up at him and couldn't see a human there. Just a great black face with white teeth glinting in the moonlight streaming from the window. His mouth covered hers again. She could feel herself losing strength, but continued to kick, trying to get free, trying to get some, any leverage. She was crying hard now, bitter and desperate, but there was nothing she could do. Nothing.

His mouth left hers a moment and she heard, as if from far away, her own childlike sobs and cries of pain and anguish. Much closer to her, she heard the sound of a zipper being unzipped. She knew what he was going to do and she began screaming. Screaming hard and loud and desperate, for anyone to hear.

But then there was someone else screaming too.

She felt as if she was fading into the present, and found herself pinned under Darryl, bruises on her wrists and inner legs. But her panties were still on, and she realized the screaming wasn't coming from her anymore. It was coming from Darryl.

He arched away from her, tearing at something on his lower back, howling and screaming like some sort of demon burning in hell. She saw a flash of black in the darkness and a streak of amber gold. She heard a rumble like far away thunder and the sound of skin tearing. It was all angry noises, wild noises, but so familiar somehow. Her brain whirled into motion, and finally sorted it out.

Tyr.

"You fucking mutt!" Darryl yelled, as he touched the raw spot on his back and drew his hand away with blood on it.

He spun and rose from the sofa, searching for the wolf. Christine could see a large dripping gash on his lower back through a tear in his shirt, right where the spine was, and scratch marks around it from the wolf's claws. Tyr stood in the moonlight, a silver line of silhouette the only sign of his black form against the shadowy house. Darryl growled himself, and Tyr's teeth suddenly glinted. She heard him snarl, and saw the glint of saliva along his jaws as he spread his feet into a wider stance and waited. Darryl moved first, and ran angrily at the wolf, swinging with his fists and roaring in rage and pain. Tyr leapt adeptly out of the way and closed his jaws around one free-swinging fist. Christine heard the crunch of bone and Darryl cried out in searing pain. Tyr spun behind him and jumped at the spot where the man's neck and head met. He went a little wide to the left, but still snagged his teeth on the side of the man's neck. Darryl clapped his remaining good hand to the side of his neck and let out another shout, this one also in alarm, perhaps even fear.

He caught his heel on the rug and tumbled backwards onto the ground, holding his bloody mess of a hand to his chest, and the other to his bleeding neck. He was breathing hard and looked around, trying to get Tyr into his sights. But he didn't look threatening now. He looked very afraid, as if he knew that he was being attacked by something wild, unstoppable. Something he had no hope of reasoning with, like a screeching steel train. Tyr emerged from the darkness, teeth bared and his black muzzle glossy from blood. He had his head low and walked slowly towards the fallen man, growling all the while, the light of death in his one good eye. Darryl was panting, and maybe even shaking as Tyr went deadly still and readied himself to leap. The man shut his eyes just as the wolf's body uncoiled like a spring to...

Christine leapt first and closed her hand around Tyr's collar just as the wolf was about to jump. Tyr strained at her hold, barking and snapping, but she kept him from lunging out and injuring the man any further. Darryl seemed puzzled a moment, but then stood, swaying, angry.

"What the hell is wrong with your fucking dog?!" he demanded in a yell.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Christine shrieked back, face sticky with tears.

"I oughta call the police!"

"You do and I'll tell them what you tried to do to me!" She screamed back. "I'll show them the bruises on me, and they'll know!"

"What are you talking about?! You wanted me to!"

"You really think they'll buy that?! When they see all this?"

Darryl was silent as he looked from growling dog to crazy looking tear stained woman.

"Fine," he snapped. He stood, cradling his injured hand, red in the face with indignation. "I hope you fucking die you bitch," he spat over his shoulder as he flung himself through the door and was gone. The screen door slammed behind him and Christine heard the trudge of footsteps as he walked away.

Christine, kneeling there on the carpet, felt the collar go lax in her hand. She looked down to find Tyr sitting attentively, staring at the door intently to make sure the man would not come back. Once he was sure, he turned his head upwards to look at her, and his tail slowly swayed into motion. She was silent and still, except for her heavy breathing, unsure what to do now. Christine wanted to say thank you, to tell the wolf all that he'd just done for her, but she couldn't make her mouth work.

"Tyr," she finally choked out "Tyr, I..."

And then she collapsed onto him, crying hard bitter sobs into the fur of his neck. She buried her nose into his coat and wept openly, breathing in the strong wolf musk to replace the scent of Darryl that was still all around her. She cried hard, closing her arms around the wolf's neck and pressing her face as far as she could into the fur as she choked out sob after painful sob. And Tyr stood still, to her surprise, letting her. She felt her tears mix with the black fur and felt her body slowly stop shaking. She breathed in deeply and her stomach settled and her sobs came less and less, morphing into soft hiccoughs.

Once she was able to speak, she sat back on her knees and looked down into the wolf's blood spattered face.

"My hero," she whispered, still sniffing back tears.

Tyr wagged his tail and leaned his body against her warmly. She leaned against him too.

That was the first night Tyr slept inside the house. He lay all night in front of the doormat, head across his large crossed paws, calmly awaiting any sign of trouble. Christine, knowing he was there, slept deeper and more peacefully than she had for a very long time.

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Chapter 7 - November

The snow came early that year. It didn't fly down in hard pounding shards of ice as it had in the past, or become massive hail balls that shattered car windows. To Christine's delight it fell in light white puffs like cotton and coated the red earth ground with a thin layer of fluffy ivory. For the first time in years, she went outside in the first snowfall of the year and made a snow angel, admiring the streaks of red earth below the white outline of the ethereal form. She hadn't always been happy during winter, and not at all in the most recent years, but now she found she was. The snow was light, and so was her heart.

Tyr, however, did not like the snow. Ever since the incident a month earlier, he had been allowed to roam the inside of the house at will, and was allowed out on his leash in the yard when he so chose. Christine had some difficulty convincing him not to do his business inside the house, but he seemed to like to be outside more often anyway, so it was never too bad (Though she thought sometimes she could smell wolf musk through her house and that Tyr might be going around marking his territory.) But now that there was snow, Tyr preferred the indoors. Christine had seen dogs playing happily in the snow before. She'd seen them pushing their faces into the stuff and whining happily that there was something new to play with, and she was surprised to find that the wolf did not share this enthusiasm. She figured, though, that winter was probably a time of hardship for the wolves, and thus snow didn't bring on a very happy mood. Either way, Tyr seemed to enjoy the warmth of the house, and Christine played in the snow by herself.

Christine had changed butchers now, and had found cheaper prices from the new one. This one had a wife and four children, and was well into his sixties so she doubted he'd ever make a pass at her. Despite this, Christine had made the decision that she wasn't going to date anymore for a while. Darryl had seemed so trustworthy, so kind, and she'd fallen for him completely. There was no telling if she'd do it again, and perhaps that time Tyr wouldn't be there to save her. Still, she felt happy even if she wasn't entirely sure why. Who needed a man in their life anyway? She got by fine on her own.

The snowfall was getting a little thicker, and she decided it was probably time to go back inside. She could see Tyr watching her with his golden eye from the window above the porch, looking uncomfortable that she was so far away. When she turned towards him as if to come inside he seemed to begin to vibrate all over, and his head disappeared from the well-lit window. Christine pushed the door open to find him standing there waiting for her, the whole lower part of his torso wagging back and forth with his tail. Tyr made a whining noise and nosed at her wet knees and ankles.

"Oh come off it," Christine muttered, giving the wolf and playful shove away from her as she took off her coat and hung it up by the door. "You're not that happy to see me. You're just hungry."

Tyr didn't deny this accusation and pushed past her blocking hand to continue to nose at her legs, licking his muzzle excitedly and whining. Christine sighed and gave the wolf a gentle pat between his ears.

"Ok, ok," she whispered, smiling warmly. "Stew meat it is. I won't have you dragging a big beef rib around the house tonight."

Christine had tried out getting him beef ribs, but although the wolf absolutely loved them, they made a mess of the house. Tyr would always pick them up from the plate, and run off somewhere to hide, quicker than Christine could even move to block him. She always found him by the spots of blood and steak juice that made a ragged line to wherever he had decided was his den and eating area. She'd tried to take the rib away from him the first time, but he'd snapped at her and began to growl. She reminded herself then that he was still a wild animal, even if he'd become tamer as of late. One did not try to steal food from a member of the pack unless they wanted a fight, and she absolutely did NOT want a fight. She waited till Tyr was done, then cleaned up the bloody meaty mess he'd made once he left, and vowed to only give him the ribs when he was outside.

So tonight she was decided firmly on not having to clean house, and she got him his stew meat instead. Tyr seemed a little disappointed that his dinner didn't have a bone in it tonight, but he wolfed it all down happily, growling and chewing over the thicker bits. Christine watched this a little disgustedly, though also with slight admiration, and decided that a salad was probably the best bet

for her tonight.

It was very cold that night, colder than it had been all year. The snow had continued to fall, and the radio said that they'd get ten inches at least that night, and plenty more the next day. Christine chided herself for not repairing the crack under her door and the seam around the window sooner. The whole room felt like it was made of ice, and even her blankets had no real warmth to them. When she let out her shivering breath, she could see it as a white cloud of condensation in front of her face. She shivered and nestled down deeper into her blankets, wishing she'd bought some long underwear besides this cotton nightgown. It was something she'd have to do tomorrow.

As she was beginning to find sleep through the cold of her room, she was pushed back into the waking world by the sound of scratching at her door. She listened a moment longer and heard a yelping whine from the hall outside. She sat up, feeling a little guilty. Tyr always slept in front of the door, which was now a small breezeway for snow and icy wind. Although wolves could usually manage in the cold weather, she suspected that without other warm wolf bodies to sleep next to, Tyr felt either lonely or just endangered. She was the only other living thing in the house. He probably wanted some company. After all, wolves were pack animals.

She got out of bed, rubbing her bare forearms hard to try to get some sort of heat going, and went to the door.

Tyr was sitting outside, pointing his nose skyward and letting out short yelping howls that sounded so pitiful for an animal his size and purpose. Christine looked down at him and laughed, shaking her head in mock disgust, and he stopped his howling and looked back up at her, his gaze hopeful.

"Oh you poor pathetic thing you," she crooned. "Were you getting lonely?"

Tyr just whined in response and nosed at her legs, trying to get past her into the bedroom beyond. Christine let out another long sigh and stepped to one side to let him pass.

"Alright," she said. "But once I fix the door, it's back to guard duty."

Tyr, seeming to ignore this, rushed past her, trotting victoriously with head held high. Christine rolled her eyes and shut the door to follow him. When she turned, she found he had already jumped up onto her bed and was settling down onto the side of the bed closest to the door.

"Tyr," she said with a sigh. "You've got to sleep at the end of the bed like a normal dog tonight. I need the room and the rest! There's too much chicken-related work for me to do tomorrow to be kept up by your snoring." She actually had no idea if Tyr snored, but it was her best guess. He seemed like the kind of creature who would have a mighty snore.

She went to his slowly relaxing body and gave him a little shove to tell him to get up and reposition himself, but Tyr only brought his head up sharply and growled at her hand. He made no move to bite it yet, as this was just a warning, but Christine pulled her hand quickly away all the same. She'd only been bitten by the wolf once, and she still had tiny circular scars on her ankle to show for it. She looked down at him, frustrated, as the wolf settled onto his stomach, and put his paws crossed under his chin. His ragged black tail curled catlike around his haunches and he stretched out his head and closed his eye peacefully.

Tyr was most certainly not going anywhere.

"Well damn it," Christine mumbled. "I'm sharing a bed with a wolf. Wonderful."

Tyr was large, but she found a way to slip under the covers next to him and get at least a little of the blanket beside him in the bed. She could feel his body heat radiating through the mattress to her, and she soon found she didn't really need what little blanket she had. Tyr was warm, and seemed to emit some sort of radioactive warmth, as she imagined it, that seeped into her every extremity. At first, it was almost a little uncomfortable with all the heat, but then Christine found herself relaxing and feeling at peace.

She turned to face the wolf sleeping beside her and noted to herself how big he was. His black shape stretched past her entire torso and head, more immense than he seemed when he was merely standing at her side. His shadowy figure rose and fell like he was a sleeping monster or dragon. To her relief, she found that he didn't snore after all. In fact, he looked downright peaceful. She found herself reaching out a hand towards his broad shoulders and back, and she very gently brought it down across his thick coat. It had grown thicker as the winter months had neared, and now it ceased to be wiry and sharp. It was soft now, underneath the harsh outer layer, and she burrowed her fingers into the fur, enjoying his warmth and the way his back rose and fell as he breathed. He didn't move at all as she petted his back and neck, and she gently pressed her face closer to him, breathing in his pungent male scent.

She could feel how strong he was, how swift he would be if he ran full out. She could feel the capacity of his lungs as they filled with breath after sleeping breath. She began to breathe in unison with him now, imagining that they were breathing the same breaths. She moved her body a little closer to him.

Something moist touched her inner leg, and she froze. Confusion filled her. Was there a leak in the ceiling? Was some snow getting in? Had Tyr wet her bed? Then she realized, much to her dismay, that it was her.

Christine jerked back her hand and rolled over in bed to face away from the sleeping wolf, breathing hard. Really, it couldn't be. Just something random that all women experienced, nothing to do with any real feelings she might be having. She moved her leg again and felt the dampness spread along the inner bend of her bottom leg. She felt her gag reflex tighten as she realized that she was getting wetter just from sitting there, just from touching Tyr while he slept. It was a shocking realization, and she at first denied it as hard as she could. It couldn't be the wolf that was getting her so hot, could it?

But as she thought about it, she realized it definitely was. The warmth of Tyr beside her on the mattress spread up her back and thighs and she felt the odd tingling itch between her legs that signaled she was getting turned on. His fur was so inviting, as were the powerful muscles shifting beneath his skin. His smell too made her feel an unfamiliar discomfort and urge to...to what? To do what? She dared not think any further into that question, and ordered her mind away from it.

Christine reached down and tried to readjust the sticky damp panties that were becoming more wet by the minute, and found that the moisture had already soaked well through the crotch of them and could be felt on the warm skin of her inner thigh. She was wetter than she'd ever been for a man before, and she knew it all too well. Something about Tyr lying beside her in bed, like a lover would, was just too much for her senses to handle. She drew back her hand from between her legs, the moisture now on her fingertips too, and realized she was dying to touch herself. To bring herself to release while imagining things about this wolf beside her. While touching him, pressing her body against his fur, breathing in his musk and...

Christine sat up. Her panties were soaked, as was the back of her cotton nightgown. Her own smell now filled the room, mingled with Try's wolf smell. She was breathing hard, sweating along the back of her neck and between her breasts. Yet she refused to touch herself. She refused to look back at the sleeping wolf and acknowledge the lust she was currently feeling. This was wrong. This was all so wrong, it just had to be. People weren't supposed to get off thinking of animals that way. Only sick people were like that. She wasn't sick, was she?

Then she heard Tyr let out a low sigh, and she felt a small moan of desire rise to her lips. She held it back and swallowed it down, blushing furiously at the thought of what she had just wanted to do. She stood and pulled down her dampened nightgown, the back of it and her panties becoming cold as the icy air blew past the wet cloth. She instantly wished that she were back in bed with the warmth of Tyr beside her, heating her skin and the blankets and...No. She'd change her panties and sleep on the couch tonight, and let Tyr have the bed. It was the only real option. At least the only sane one.

In the morning, she told herself, it would all be better, and she could forget that this night ever happened.

Christine woke up with a sharp pain in her back and neck. She at first questioned why on earth she was sleeping on the couch, until she remembered the incident that night before. She quickly pushed the thought out of her mind and told herself it was in the past now. There were things to do that day, and there was no need to dwell on it. Best just get up and do what needed doing.

The world was all a glistening ivory outside. It sparkled in the morning sun like a hundred tiny diamonds lay scattered in the snow, and Christine smelled the crisp scent of melting snowflakes. The radio had been wrong, that it was not still snowing, but it had been correct about the 10 inches. Everything was coated in white frosting. Even the barn. With a groan, Christine remembered the chickens, and realized that she was long overdue putting the space heater in their coop. She hurriedly slipped on all her boots and a large warm jacket, praying that the hens were still laying and that none of them were dead yet.

She was lucky in that none were, in fact, dead, but many looked sluggish or sick. Feeling the shrill cold in the barn, Christine really couldn't blame them. They seemed a little flustered when she neared the coop, and began moving away from the wire, towards the back of the cage making wary clucking noises. She wondered why, till she realized that she hadn't showered yet that morning and still probably had Tyr's scent all over her. She grumbled to herself about how she smelled like wolf, and went to get the space heater.

"Fucking hens," she muttered as she sorted through the supply stall to try to find the heater. "Thinking I'm a wolf. When I've seen them since they were born, taken care of them, kept them alive. What do they know."

The heater was old and a little rusty, but every winter she hooked up an extension cable and put it inside the coop so the hens would continue to lay through the winter. Every year, there was no fire in the coop, and the hens survived till spring came. Most importantly, there were no explosions that would cost a fortune to repair and ruin what little livelihood, besides inheritance, that Christine had. It was such a usual routine, so relaxed and so normal for her now. Her father had taught her how to do it so long ago; explaining where to set it up, how to take precautions to make sure it didn't light anything on fire. It was just something her hands did on their own now, and she allowed her mind to wander freely as she worked.

Although she'd sworn to herself to never think of the previous night ever again, she found she couldn't help letting herself slip back to the memory. It brought up so many questions about herself, about her relationship with Tyr. She'd always reminded herself that he wasn't her pet, and that he was very wild and might someday return to the wild. But beyond that she had never really decided what that made him in relation to her. A friend? Well, that much was obvious. He had saved her from imminent abuse at the hands of the butcher, and had guarded her house. But more than that, he'd given her a sense of companionship, of affection even. It was so nice to have another personality in the house, to just know that another living breathing thing was in the old farmhouse with her. Was it any wonder that...

That what? That she felt such a strong connection to him? That she showed affection for him too? Or even that she was perhaps attracted to him, as she would be to a man? After all, he'd shown her more loyalty than any of her previous male counterparts, and always seemed to be willing to be around her, with no complaint other than occasional growl. But didn't her attraction to an animal, one that could not speak or do anything a human could, make her sick? Mentally ill? Didn't that mean something was wrong with her?

Christine could feel the angel and devil sitting on her shoulders, arguing like they did in cartoons. However, unlike in the cartoons, she found it nearly impossible to tell which was the angel and which was the devil.

Why should she be sick? Who was it hurting? She had an attraction, a crush. Had it caused her any harm? Well, no. And had it caused Tyr any harm? Again, not at all. In fact Tyr seemed better off for it. So then what was the harm in her feeling a physical and emotional attraction to a wolf? And not just any wolf, but Tyr. He was a special wolf. She'd felt connection to him since the moment she'd seen him, since the moment she'd heard a far off howl in answer to the Druid pack. She dared herself to find one reason, even one, that proved feeling this way was wrong.

For the life of her, Christine could think of nothing.

But Tyr couldn't be in a relationship, or verbally consent to any sexual acts or marriage or anything normally human. Then she wouldn't do them. It was that simple. She could feel this way, be attracted to Tyr, and just not act on it, and that would be fine. So what? She had a crush on a wolf.

This realization, that she was ok with it, was so shocking to her that she burned the side of her hand on the space heater. Standing, shaking her hand and blurting out a short stream of obscenities, Christine decided that she was absolutely done with the heater. Fuck the thing. She'd set it up and had been standing next to it for some minutes now, and she had yet to eat a real breakfast. Nor had Tyr. She went back to the house, cupping her red and blistered hand in a palmful of snow to ease the burn.

Tyr ate well that day, she made sure of it. Christine treated him with a bone, though she threw it outside for him to chase, and then filled his bowl with stew meat while he was outside playing and hiding it. He looked so young, she noted, when he frolicked around with his tail and ears up, despite the snow. She knew that people said dogs couldn't smile, but it looked to her like Tyr was doing just that, when he was playing. He was getting a little heftier now, but he'd been skinny to begin with, so he was overall a healthy looking animal. His coat seemed in better order now, and fur had begun to grow in over the twisted grey skin on the place where his eye had been. He still didn't seem to like the cold too much, but for now he bounced around in it, throwing up the bone into the air and then running to catch it with a low bark and a happy sounding growl.

Christine ate inside and watched him, a smile on her face as well. He just looked so happy. And that made her happy too. He may not be a pet or a lover, but she still wanted to be sure she was caring for him well and giving him everything he needed and wanted.

That night was colder than the one before it. There was less wind singing through the cracks in the old house, but the temperature was just so low that Christine worried that any sort of liquid in the house would freeze without heat nearby. She lay in her bed under an extra blanket or two, watching her breath come out in misty puffs before dissolving like ghosts into the chill air of her room. To her dismay, she soon heard a whine from outside her room and series of scraping and scratching noises against her door. Maybe if she ignored him, he'd go away. She tried it. But ten minutes later, the whining had escalated into broken yelps and howls and a furious scrabbling at the other side of her door. Her stomach ached.

She still remembered all too well the night before, and knew how tempting the wolf outside was. It was not something wise of her to do, to let him in. She knew he'd want to sleep in her bed, and she wasn't sure how well she would be able to restrain herself if she was put in that position again. But then Tyr let out a pathetic sounding howl, a pleading one, and Christine felt her heart skip a beat and call out in answer to him. The guilt was utterly unbearable. She stood and rushed to the door. She pushed it open to find a happy looking Tyr on the other side.

"I'm sorry Tyr," she said, meaning it. "You can sleep in here."

Before she'd even finished the sentence, Tyr was past her into the room and jumping up onto the bed where he'd been the night before. He stood there a moment, then flopped down onto the mattress with his head across her pillow. Christine sighed, but was less annoyed with him this time. After all, she'd let him in, and she had known what was going to happen once he got a look at that warm bed. No one to blame but herself.

She did not try to move him over this time, but got into bed beside him, under the covers as before. She could already hear his breathing slowing down as he drifted off to sleep, and matched her breathing with his to try to mimic him. She wanted to sleep, and it was better she did, before she could feel the mattress get warm from him, or think about her current position too much. It was just less tempting if she did it that way.

But five minutes later, she found she absolutely could not sleep. Christine was wide awake. She could hear the wolf sleeping beside her, breathing deeply, his black chest rising and falling in steady rhythm. And the mattress was indeed getting warmer now under her as Tyr passed on his own body heat to her. The smell of wolf was thick in the cold air around her, and with every breath she could taste Tyr on the tip of her tongue, and feel him inside her, filling her lungs and head with strange scenes and images she had not previously allowed herself to consider. But most of all, she soon felt a familiar tingling itch between her legs as she again realized that she was lying beside a sleeping wolf. One she had saved, and who had in turn saved her.

She didn't allow herself to touch him at first, but she found soon that she could not resist it. His sleek, warm fur sprouted up between her fingers, and she felt his alive, warm body underneath her palm. She swallowed hard as she moved her hand down the wolf's back, from his shoulders to just above his tail. Tyr moved a little and made a soft, but happy, whine in his sleep. Christine felt the muscles along her inner thighs tighten, and she squeezed her legs together hard, trying to keep the wetness that could now feel against her skin from spreading too far. She moved her hand to stroke his neck and back, and felt a burn and an ache between her legs at the apex of the itch. It was so

strong, and she felt the crotch of her panties began to moisten reluctantly but steadily. She noticed that her mouth was slightly open, lips scarcely apart, and that her breathing had quickened to the point where she could hear it in the quiet room. Unable to stop herself, Christine moved her face close to the wolf and breathed in deeply the strong un-renting musk of the male wolf. It was heavenly, and now she let her legs relax to part slightly, surrendering to the lust she was feeling.

Christine wove her fingers into his fur, and breathed in again. There was nothing wrong with this, who was this hurting? Did it hurt Tyr? No. Who would it hurt to bring it a step further either? No one. Absolutely nothing was wrong with this.

A little hesitantly, she let her free hand slip down her side under the covers to pull up her cotton nightgown to above her waist. Then, she slid her hand down past her hips, under her previously clean white panties, to scratch the itch that was now killing her with its intensity. She let out a sigh as she found what a mess she was down there. She was so wet, so turned on, it was like nothing she'd ever experienced, even with men. She allowed her middle finger to search for her opening and found it tight and unrelenting. Nothing had been inside her for a long time, and she hadn't given herself any satisfaction for months now. It was about time, something inside her demanded. She slid her finger into herself, pressing forward on the front inner wall and a small spark of electricity traveled up her body, making it shake for an instant. Christine gasped softly as she began to remember what sexual pleasure really felt like and moved her finger forward again enjoying the short thrill that followed. She scarcely noticed the slow, pleading motion of her hips as they rolled forward and back in rhythm with the movement of her finger.

Tyr slept soundly beside her, and Christine closed her eyes, still smelling and tasting him, but now imagining him on her, as she'd long ago seen Majesty on Francie, pressing his hips forward into her, desperate, with such purpose. She sped the movement of her finger, and allowed herself a second one inside, loving the feeling of fullness it brought. If Tyr would only mount her like that, fuck her like that; she'd never need a man ever again. She wanted to feel him inside of her, expanding, thrusting, lusting after her with nothing but instinct and blind need. She tightened her fingers around his fur, pressing her hips towards the ceiling as she imagined him on her, in her.

Against her will, a soft moan left her lips, breaking the stillness and silence of the room. She quickly closed her mouth, but felt no change in Tyr beside her, and continued to push her fingers in and out of her, simulating the fantasy movements of Tyr. Another soft moan left her, longing and pained. It had been so long since she'd felt any pleasure, and this much was almost unbearable. Almost, but she didn't stop. She could hear the squish as her fingers moved, and feel the warm wet liquid flowing out of her, over her hands, and seeping into her panties. And then she heard something else, or rather didn't hear something.

There was no steady, low breathing beside her.

Christine went still and slowly opened her eyes, dreading what she would see. Tyr lay next to her, but now his head was raised, his eye trained on her now unmoving hips beneath the covers. She wasn't sure how long he'd been awake and watching her, but now he turned to look at her, questioningly, but not uneasily. She felt herself blushing as she locked gazes with the wolf, and she quickly removed her fingers and sat up in bed, swearing, trying to hide as best she could the evidence of what she'd been doing. She brought her fingers up to wipe them on the pillow, and Tyr's head followed her hand as it moved, ears forward and interested. It was a new smell for him, Christine realized with dread. He'd want to investigate it.

"Tyr no," she groaned, way to late.

The wolf crawled forward to press his nose against the now damp part of the pillow, sniffing in curiosity and interest. After a moment, he made a short coughing noise and pulled his head away. Now, his continuously twitching nose was moving elsewhere, searching for the original source of this strange, but pleasant, new smell. Almost amused by what was happening, Christine watched as the wolf sniffed the blankets and neared her now closed legs. Suddenly, her senses seemed to come back to her, and she placed a hand over the slightly damp blanket, again blushing furiously. But this only alerted the wolf as to the location of the source. He pressed his nose against her hand, nudging at it to try to get it to move.

"Tyr," Christine groaned again, pushing his head away with her other hand. "Cut that out."

But Tyr persisted, his head snapping back to the spot on the blankets, and now he nudged her burned fingers with his cool damp nose. She let out a little gasp of pain and withdrew her hand, gingerly touching the burned parts. Before she could replace her hand with the other, Tyr's nose was pressing firmly into the blanket, easily finding the soft part of the blanket that caved in against her moist panties. She let out a sharp little gasp, followed by a cry of surprise and indignation. She made a movement to push Tyr away, but he wouldn't have any of it. He pressed his nose against the blanket, against the source of the new scent. Christine knew she should stop this.

"Tyr!" Christine cried out again as the wolf probed with his nose into the strongly smelling spot. The cry was originally meant to be in protest, but she found it came out much differently.

Christine could feel warm air, his breath, flowing through the blanket against her panties, and through them to the moist skin beneath. The pressure of his muzzle against that aching, dripping opening was something so unexpected, and dare she admit it, enjoyable. She drew her breath in sharply as she felt another flow of warm air against her. Tyr nosed again at the indent in the blanket, trying to move it and see what was underneath. Christine felt a shock of electricity fill her as he narrowly hit a spot she herself sometimes had trouble finding.

It was too much. She stopped resisting.

She let out a long soft moan as Tyr again pressed against her, and spread her legs a little to give him better access. The realization of what was happening came to her in a flood of pleasure and amazement, and she felt herself twitching, wanting, needing. She'd already gotten herself so close just moments before, that she felt her body surging towards an inevitable finish. Her fingers wrapped themselves in the sheets, gripping hard as if that would save her. Her hips pressed forwards towards Tyr, now completely out of her control, and he responded by pressing against her with his nose, seeming to enjoy the smell of her, even licking his muzzle. Everything was moving, tightening inside her, like somebody was winding a rubber band in her chest and it was about to release. She could feel cold and hot streaking up the inside of her legs and hips and a moan again took her over. She forced her body towards Tyr, and he again found the spot with his muzzle, sending one last rush of pleasure through her. She put her head back, helpless to stop it, and cried out in ecstasy as the rubber band unwound and everything inside her released.

Tyr had brought her to orgasm.

Christine collapsed back against the mattress, pulling her lower half away from Tyr as she breathed hard, trying to still her loudly pounding heart. Everything seemed to swirl around her. She felt so dizzy, so light inside. It was amazing. She let out a sigh between her quivering breaths and tried to take stock of where she stood. Tyr, now ignored, and gone back to his side of the bed and was again settling for sleep as if nothing had just happened. But Christine knew it had. She had acted. No one was hurt, and she couldn't deny the still wonderfully relaxed feeling that was steadily flowing

through her, but could this possibly be right?

Then how was it wrong? The voice on the other shoulder asked.

Her now slowly steadying breaths made a white winter fog before her eyes. She could feel sweat along her hairline and between her breasts, and her panties would, again, need to be changed. Her fingers were still shaking from clutching the sheets so hard, but everything still felt so at peace. Despite the act, it was like everything was suddenly right in the world. She was satisfied, and had been made so by a wolf!

“Oh Tyr, Tyr,” she murmured sleepily. “What on earth am I getting myself into?”

Tyr, sleeping soundly beside her, did not answer.

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## **Chapter 8 - December**

Winter came on hard and fast after that. The cold air didn't get much colder, but ice now began to rain down from the grey sky in sheets, making roads a glistening pathway of traffic accidents and houses just tiny sugar-cube replicas against the snow around them. It was beautiful when you were inside, but leaving the safety and warmth of the home was painful. Eyelashes stuck together so that eyes could not open. Ears turned red, then purple, and the nearby hospital had already been forced to amputate two fingers that month. It wasn't a new record, but it indicated a very cold winter, one of the coldest in a very long time.

Christine had braved the winter's ice and danger to get meat, every day, though each time she got onto the road she thought it would be her last. The car slid side to side dangerously, and she had to put the chains on every morning just to get her the two and a half miles to the new butcher place. She'd also gone to get another space heater. The chickens were beginning to freeze. Some had stopped producing eggs altogether, and one has already died of the chill. There was plenty of feed left in the barn for the winter, but without warmth, she'd soon be without the little income she had. Dad's money had paid well enough, and would continue to do so for sometime, but she liked feeling that she was contributing somehow. Even a little.

Tyr too was noticing the difference in the cold. Christine had boarded up the cracks, puttied the area under the door too, to let the wolf sleep by the door as he'd done before. She no longer denied to herself that the incidents of that fateful night had happened, but she still reminded herself that it didn't seem right to her, now that it was said and done. Tyr seemed unaffected by it entirely, but it didn't matter much to her. It was still something that she ought not to do again. She was a stronger person than that. Tyr, however, had made it difficult on her. He would stand outside her door sometimes when it was very cold, and howl and whine as he'd done that night. She left the door closed, keeping temptation away, but had once nearly broken into tears and the melancholy sounds. She hated, more than anything, to hear him in pain.

He had also pressed his nose, once or twice, into her softest spot when she'd lean over or was just sitting on the sofa. It always made her jump and tense up, but she always pushed his head away, scolding him harshly, ordering that he stop doing that. She denied herself the idea that it felt wonderful when he did that, and she concentrated on other things till the wet spot spreading over her panties went dry and she forgot the feeling of his hot breath contrasted by his firm cold nose.

Other than that, she had been living her life as normally as she could. The wolf was a good friend and companion, and she still slept more soundly, feeling safer, with him draped in defense across the

doormat. He was a good boy. And she adored him completely.

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It was nearing Christmas time now. While Christine did have family somewhere out in California, she rarely got anything more than a card, and maybe a twenty dollar bill in gift from them. She wrote them a customary letter, informing them how her father's ranch was being kept up, and told them that she hoped they would visit sometime. They never did of course. But that's how family was. Make the offer...it'll make you seem more human.

Truth be told, there was no one to really buy gifts for. She had a few distant friends, but they were all very casual. She rarely spoke to them, never went out. This time of year always reminded her of how much of a loner she was, of how far away everyone was from her, in reality. It made her so depressed, but she tried to cheer herself up, telling herself that at least she wouldn't have to spend money on anyone. She could even buy herself a gift of some sort and not really feel that guilty at all. It wasn't so bad. And besides...she had Tyr.

She realized, one day over breakfast that there was someone to buy a gift for. Tyr! He may be a wolf, and didn't understand the concept of Christmas at all, but he was still a living breathing part of her family. She owed him so much, and cared about him a great deal more than that! No cheap chew toy would do for him. No extra bit of meat. She had a challenge now: to find some sort of gift worthy of Tyr in all his wild magnificence. She ate her dry cereal a little more enthusiastically that day.

She loved a good challenge.

Tyr, sitting under the table gnawing contentedly at the knee joint of some large cow, seemed to suspect that nothing was different about this month. He'd been calm lately, almost subdued. He didn't go outside, and he was looking a little plumper than he had been before. Not enough exercise probably, Christine thought. Maybe something to do with that? No, she reminded herself. He just needed to go running once the snow went away a little. Maybe take him on a walk? Or try? But that was all for later. No, there was something else, something important that she could use for Tyr's gift. He crunched away at the bone with his strong back teeth and Christine winced. She'd have to clean that up later. Oh goodie.

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All this searching meant one more thing: another trip to town. Christine had never dared to bring Tyr into the car or out into public. She figured they'd be able to tell what he really was, somehow, but she also suspected that Tyr wouldn't take too kindly to cars, or being around so many people, or possibly other dogs. So that meant he could give her no help in picking out a gift. It was all up to her. She climbed into her car, telling herself that if all the chains were on the tires, she'd be just fine, and started the engine, listening to how it groaned and sputtered in the cold air. It sounded half frozen, and she let it idle a while before she pulled out onto the icy dirt road and made her way into town. She had already decided to bypass the butcher's shop, maybe have a look at it later if she didn't find anything. But as it stood, the slippery, snowy road gave her few extra brain cells to think of where she could possibly go to find the perfect gift. Best she just get into town, and decide once there, she told herself.

In town, there was a Toys R' Us, where she knew they had dog toys, and there was also a small pet store, but this mostly catered to cats. There were a few other generic shops, but not much else. Toys R' Us seemed like the best bet out of the two, and she sloppily pulled into a parking place outside the store, bundled her coat around her, already shivering in the poorly heated car, and set out into

the blustery air towards the shop. It looked warm inside at least. It was a start.

The place was full of kid's toys, and for ten minute she searched for the pet toy section without any luck. Frustration getting the better of her, she asked a skinny female employee for help.

"Excuse me!" she called to the retreating back, and after a pause, the girl turned, her blond braids flying over her back and her braced smile gleaming metallically in the fluorescent light of the store.

"Yes? What can I do for you?" the girl asked cheerily.

"I'm looking for the pet toys. What section are they in?"

The girls face fell in mock sadness, something Christine was sure they had trained her to do when she was in orientation.

"I'm sorry," the girl said, her voice still cheery despite the "sad" look on her face. "We stopped carrying those a few months ago. We still have a few catnip mice in the back, maybe a rawhide bone?"

"No," Christine said with a sigh. "No, I'm sorry. But thank you." She turned to go.

"Um," came the girl's voice. "If you don't mind me asking, are you looking for cat or dog toys?"

"Dog," Christine said, turning where she stood, suddenly hopeful.

"Well, you actually might want to try the hunting shop a little ways away from here," the girl said, showing what looked like a little normality. Her voice had dropped half an octave and she appeared to be speaking in earnest now. "My uncle? He has this big blood hound and he gets these amazing hunting dog treats from there. They also had fur and stuff, so it depends on what kind of dog you have. There might be something there you can use?"

"Actually, that's pretty helpful," she said. "Thank you."

"What kind of dog do you have?"

"Oh," Christine said with a roll of her eyes. "He's one of a kind."

"Yeah, aren't they all," the girl said. "Well, good luck!"

Christine exited the store, chuckling to herself that she might find something to give Tyr in the very store where people went to buy things to kill his kind. It was sad, really, but if it worked, she was sure the wolf wouldn't care. With new hope, she headed for the car and tried to remember where The Rifle Case was. It was an old store, but it got plenty of business from this area, and she was sure it would still have things at lower prices for the coming holiday. Maybe, just maybe, there would be some wild and unique gift for Tyr just waiting for her inside the double doors in that old wooden shack. She just hoped that it would never be a gun.

The place looked older than she had remembered. The paint on the sign had faded to dull browns and grays, and the wood looked waterlogged from where she peered from the foggy window of her car. She remembered the sign as a bright red and white, and the place looking like an old style saloon, less like a run-down shack. But it had been some time since she'd seen the place. The only other time she had been into the shop was when her father had taken her younger self to buy a gun to protect the ranch.

There had been a case of a fox coming in to kill the chickens, completely unseen. He had even left the door latched, and just left an empty nest and pile of feathers as a sign he'd been there. Her father had found a track outside the barn, and showed her the tiny padded indents sunk into the ground.

"See that?" he'd asked her, and she'd nodded. "Those are fox tracks. Red fox I do believe, and he's stealing the hens right out from under us. Probably scares the horses and ponies something fierce too!"

"What'll we do?" she'd asked, wide eyed.

"Well we gotta get him."

They'd bought the gun, an old rifle, from the store the next day. Her father had said it was the first gun he'd owned since Sherry, her mother, had died, and was utterly silent on the ride home from the shop. He'd told her after a long period of quiet she could wait up with him for the fox to show, as long as she was very quiet and stayed in the horse stall behind him, out of danger's way. She'd agreed, excited to see a fox hunt. She didn't really know any better at the time.

When the fox entered the barn, she was stunned at the brilliant red of the fur. He moved so low to the ground, his big ears always quivering and twitching, his nose always in motion too. His big yellow green eyes were somehow so intelligent, so very human to her. When she saw her father raise the gun, slowly, with such purpose, she couldn't help but cry out to the fox to run. It was too pretty, too perfect. It couldn't die.

The fox ran. Her father calmly told her to go into the house, and the two of them never spoke of it again. She realized later that her father could have still probably hit the fox if he'd tried, but had chosen not to for some reason. It might have been that he didn't really have the heart for it either.

Now she sat outside this shop, in her car, and watched the rain slide down her window in a never-ending twisting and writhing sheet of water. It had drizzled a little before, but now she could see ice mingled in with the water, a sort of dirty sleet. Not something she wanted to be outside in. She felt a certain reluctance, even beyond this, to enter that shop as she remembered the fleeting form of the red fox, but knew that this was her best bet, and likely something she should pursue. She swallowed a breath, opened the door, and rushed through the icing rain into the store, shivering all the while.

There were two men inside, one at the counter, one holding a small tin of what looked like face paint, and they both stared at her as she entered, eyebrows raised. Christine was soaked, and very small in stature. Her eyes always seemed wide and surprised, which gave her an appearance of innocence. She knew she didn't look like a hunter, but it was still unnerving to have both pairs of small male eyes set so intently on her. She straightened up and ordered her body to stop shivering.

"Well, how are you this gloomy winter's day miss?" The man at the counter said, cracking an amused, but still friendly smile. Christine smiled back.

"Could be better, but not so bad. I'm wondering if yo--"

Before she could continue, the other man, the one holding what she could now see was a green tin of face paint, held up a hand to silence her, grinning and chuckling.

"Wait wait," he said, laughing. "Don't tell me. You're here because you want a gun small enough not to kill someone, but enough to scare em off, right?"



Had Tyr not been around, the man might have been exactly right. But as it was, Christine knew her house was already equipped with a potentially deadly weapon. She grinned, a little triumphantly, and shook her head no.

"Not quite," she said.

"Well shoot," the man said, feigning disappointment. "Then tell me, what do you need?"

"Well," Christine began to say, trying to find the most delicate, unrevealing words. "I have this dog..."

Both men seemed to have light bulbs go off in their heads. The one behind the counter nodded at her understandingly, then at the other man.

"Gotcha. Ya need a Christmas gift."

"That's right."

"Well what kinda breed is he?"

Christine again faltered for the right answer.

"He's mixed?" she said, sounding unsure, then she quickly added. "He has some wolf in him."

The man in front of the counter straightened up a little, looking surprised.

"Much wolf in him?" he asked.

"Oh," she said with a little laugh. "Quite a bit." If only they knew.

The man gave one sharp chuckle, smiling with only the corner of his mouth. He looked her up and down, then shook his head.

"Well shit, lady," he said. "No wonder you don't need a gun."

"Watch your mouth," said the other. "My shop. My rules," he added when he saw the man was about to protest. "Nowthen miss, what did you have in mind."

"I'm not sure really," Christine said with a shrug. "I want something a little unusual. Not some little toy or anything like that."

The other man nodded knowingly and stepped out from behind the counter.

"No dog treats either then, right?"

"Right."

"Well, I don't have much, but I have some training equipment people use on hunting dogs," he said, setting a hand on his jaw and rubbing his stubbled chin. "But you can take a look, you might find something there."

She found collars, leashes, fake ducks, fur toys, muzzles, and a whole mess of other things in the back of the store. But nothing really stuck out to her until she spotted what looked like a large purple slingshot. She pointed to it and tapped the store owner's arm.

"Excuse me, but what's that?" she asked, indicating the purple object.

"That's for throwin' things. Getting a dog exercise and whatnot." He said. "Use food, tennis balls. Near anything."

"To keep them in shape, right?"

"Yeah. You swing it around your head and let go of one end and the food flies out. It's kinda tricky, and new. Falconers use it, so I've heard."

Christine didn't need much time to think about it. Tyr was getting just a little hefty with winter coming on and his lack of exercise. This would get him moving again, maybe hunting even. She snatched it up and turned to the owner.

"I'll take it."

As she was going to pay for Tyr's gift, the other man tapped her arm.

"Sorry to cuss early miss," he said with a shrug. "But if you want something real fun for you and your dog, ya might wanna get a little bottle of wolf in heat urine."

Christine blinked, a little confused.

"Drives em crazy, too funny to watch," the man went on. "And if you use it with whatever you're throwing in that slingshot, you can bet he'll be more likely to chase it. But more than that, the male wolves just love it when you're hunting them, and since yours is part wolf..." The man offered a little glass bottle forward, and very hesitantly, Christine took it.

"Um, thank you," was all she could think to say.

"My treat," he said. "To make up for earlier. Only a couple of bucks either way."

Christine let the man pay for the bottle of urine while she pulled out a few crumpled bills for the slingshot. Feeling a little uneasy in the place. She also found that she didn't have enough. She sighed and pulled out a credit card instead.

"Will plastic do?"

"Long as you have ID," the man said, putting her items into a bag.

She pulled out her driver's license and showed it to him. He inspected the card, then her ID, then stopped, and looked up at her very slowly, squinting hard.

"Tulsa?" he asked. "As in the Tulsa ranch and pony rides?"

"Yeah," she said, smiling a little. Everyone knew about that ranch, didn't they.

"Your father was a good man," the owner said, looking gravely at her. "I was sorry to hear about what happened. You know, I sold him the only gun he ever really owned? I mean, he had one before moving here, but then he bought a rifle from us." The man paused here to squint even further. "Well, I'll be damned," he said suddenly, slapping his hand on the counter.

"Watch your language," the other muttered under his breath. The owner ignored this.

"You're the gal was in here with him!" he said with a broad grin. "Musta been his daughter! You musta been barely eighteen! You were looking to bag some fox had been stealin' your hens. Right?"

"That's right," she said, feeling uncomfortable at being recognized. She picked up the bags and made a move for the door. "Well, nice talking to you, and thanks for all the help!" She turned to exit the store. There was so much to do at home anyway. Christmas was so close, there was wrapping to be done, food to be bought...

"Hey!" the owner called. Christine paused and turned to look over her shoulder at him. The man was grinning, leaning over the counter to watch her go. "So, did ya ever get the guy?"

"Huh?" she called back.

"The fox. Did ya catch him? Give him what he deserved?"

Christine paused, considering the question, then smiled very gently.

"Sure did," she called back. "Thanks again."

She left the store with the little smile still poised on her lips.

Christine arrived back around evening. The sun was still barely hanging in the sky, a blotchy haze of orange and yellow behind the swirling clouds on the horizon when she pulled into her muddy, iced over dirt road and shakily made her way down it back to the house. Tyr was inside, and she heard him barking and howling as she got out of the car and went to the door.

"Ok boy, ok!" she said with a sharp laugh as she pushed open the door and extended a leg to keep him inside. "I'm home, now get back!"

Tyr obliged, whining softly. He appeared to be aware that he was not the alpha male in the household, but he was often very pushy when he wanted her to do something, like feed him. Whether intentional or not, Christine had found that Tyr was a master of the "guilt trip" and she often gave in before he even began whining and howling, just to save herself the anguish. But for now he slowly backed up and allowed Christine to slip inside and shut the door behind her.

She again pushed past him, went to her room and closed the door tightly behind her before Tyr could follow. He scratched and whined, but this time Christine kept her will strong, and found herself smiling a little at his attempts to get into her room.

"Not today Tyr," she muttered to herself as she set down the bag of gifts and looked for a box the right size in her closet. "I have gift wrapping to do."

Outside the sleet rain had turned again to hail, and then into snow. The house went silent as the patter of water and ice ceased, and it was as if a great cloud had swallowed the little ranch whole. The snow fell into the night, as Christine toiled away, unaware of the feet of dazzling white coating her little house and the city farther on. The city was willing to excuse the weather though. After all, tomorrow was Christmas Eve.

When morning came it had stopped snowing. The world was a soft, formless shape, as if everything had been coated in gooey marshmallow sauce and left out to harden overnight. The sky was the kind of bright crystal blue that looked warm under the winter sun, but had a crispness that spoke heavily of winter. No birds were singing, and sound seemed suspended briefly, as if everything was reluctant to leave their beds this morning.

Christine woke up lying in a mass of colored ribbons and empty cardboard paper rolls. It took her a moment to remember where she was and what she was doing before she'd passed out, but once she saw the package lying at the foot of her bed, she remembered and smiled. It was wrapped in a bright colored paper that shimmered with different colored circles of all different sizes. Several colors of ribbon cascaded in curls down from the top where a large, multi looped bow sat. It looked flawless, and would easily be the nicest gift under her tree. She had received a few others in the mail from distant relatives, all wishing her well and sending regards about her father. They now sat lonely under the tree, a few envelopes and two small packages, one of which she was sure contained cooking supplies (her aunt always sent cooking supplies.) All she needed to do now was to add Tyr's, and the tree might look a little more Christmassy.

As Christine sat up, she felt the weight of glass in her pocket, and touched the wolf urine where it sat in her jeans. After a pause, she smiled a little, then pulled it out and dabbed a little of the strong foul stuff on her finger, then on the very top of the ribbon. Now at least Tyr would know which one was his.

Christine nearly tripped over the sleeping form of Tyr outside her door. He was curled into a fluffy black ball very much like a cat, his nose buried under his thick dark paws and was breathing heavily with dream until he heard Christine shut the bedroom door behind her. Upon hearing this, he leapt up with a guttural high-pitched bark and began wagging his tail as he stared up at her with his good eye. She smiled back.

"Good morning," she said sweetly before continuing out to the tree.

Tyr and the tree did not get along. He chewed at the branches, drank from the bowl of water at the base, and even peed on it sometimes, which made the shabby plant reek of wolf musk. The floor around the base was littered with dead and dying pine needles and twigs, nearly concealing the hardwood in a few places. Here was where Christine set the gift, and watched as Tyr's nose sprang into motion and he trotted, ears forward to further inspect the new, but all too familiar scent.

The wolf breathed deeply of the scent, whining softly and all his body wiggling just slightly. Christine watched him with a happy grin, as he seemed to like it, but then, without warning, he tore into the bow with his teeth, almost hungrily. With a little yelp, she jumped forward between Tyr and his gift, barking out a sharp 'no' in protest. Tyr paused, seeming a little surprised at her outburst, but then stepped forward, nose twitching again. Christine watched as he pressed his nose against her palm, sniffing loudly and whining. She jerked her hand away, remembering that she had not yet washed the urine off and rushed to the bathroom, Tyr in tow. She managed to keep him out as she scrubbed with a wet washcloth against her palm and fingers, but she could hear him whimpering from beyond the door. After a moment longer, she came back out and offered her hand again to him.

"See, nothing of interest there," she said as Tyr sniffed at where the scent had gone before. Seeing that he had at last given up, Christine breathed a sigh of relief and nodded towards the tree. "Let's go open that gift of yours, ok boy?"

Tyr followed her back out and again located the strong smelling gift, and began to gnaw and tear yet again, and this time Christine did not stop him. She doubted she'd be able to keep a male wolf away from another wolf in heat, and it was probably useless keeping Tyr away from the package. She watched as the slingshot-like object came into sight, and then watched Tyr's confused expression.

"Want to try it?" she asked. He looked at her and tilted his head to one side quizzically. "Come on," she said. "You'll like this."

Christine put a little of the urine on one of Tyr's toy balls and brought it with them to the front yard. Tyr was, at first, very reluctant to follow her outside into the icing snow, but with that alluring scent so nearby, he soon came bounding out, pulling his paws up high out of the snow as he moved. Christine waited till they were far out in the yard, then swung the slingshot around her head, relieved at the fact that Tyr seemed very interested in what she was doing. With each swing, his head moved to follow the ball. At last, when she let it go, Tyr took off like a shot. She could see right away that he was off the mark by a little, but as it came down into the snow, he quickly corrected. In an eruption of white droplets, Tyr attacked the place in the snow where the ball had fallen.

He could do it. With enough training he might even be able to hunt again some day! It was a hope she hadn't had for a long time, and she felt joy swell within her. Christine laughed to herself, and then patted her knees for him to bring it back.

"Come on Tyr," she called.

But Christine had again forgotten that Tyr was a wolf and not a dog. In a few short bounds, Tyr was under the porch, growling to himself as he gnawed on the ball. As Christine approached him, he growled a little louder, and she stopped, watching him shake and chew the ball into oblivion. She groaned and rubbed her forehead.

"That's right," she muttered to herself. "Wolves don't play fetch. Wonderful."

She waited outside in the snow till he was done destroying the ball before the both of them went back inside for her to open her few gifts.

The fire in the fireplace was growing low now. It was past eleven, but Christine wasn't sure quite how late it was. All she knew was that the old Christmas movies were soon coming to an end. She'd already sat through Rudolph and Frosty the Snowman, and now all that was left was for The Year Without a Santa Clause to finish and she'd go to bed. She took another long deep sip from her mug of warmed eggnog, her fifth cup that evening, and allowed the rummy taste in her mouth to linger a moment before she swallowed it down. She'd never liked eggnog as a child or a teen, but now it just felt like Christmas, even if it wasn't the same flavor that her father had made. Then again, he had added scotch, not rum, and that was a compromise she wasn't willing to make, now or ever.

She wasn't drunk, she told herself. Sure she'd had a sip of straight rum earlier in the kitchen, and sure she'd had quite a bit of nog that evening, but she was still mostly sober. Just warm and toasty was all. No harm at all in that.

Tyr lay at her feet, eye closed, breathing heavily. She watched his broad black shoulders rise and fall in the steady rhythm of sleep and smiled gently to herself. He seemed to have enjoyed his first Christmas with her, eggnog or no, and even if she needed to teach him how to bring back what he hunted before her gift could be put to good use. Overall, she was satisfied with the gift, as well as how things had gone. He'd only gotten a few gift certificates and a new stew pot herself, but it was enough to keep her smiling. Merry Christmas to her.

The TV began to gently sing "Blue Christmas" sent to a montage of a little boy drawing pictures for Santa, and she felt her eyes tear up. Ever since she'd been younger it had been like that, and she was never entirely sure why. Maybe it was how lonely the song sounded, or maybe it had more to do with the idea of a Christmas without gifts, she couldn't be certain. She'd been young, after all, and Christmas meant presents. Now, however, she felt her eyes grow moist and sticky, and she fretfully wiped at them with the back of her sleeve.

"Damn it," she muttered to herself, ordering her eyes to stop what they were doing. "Every time."

The fact that she was drunk probably didn't help.

No, she wasn't drunk, she reminded herself.

She sniffed loudly and heard another snuffing noise in response. On the floor, Tyr had stirred, and he now turned to look at her with an intelligent, questioning golden eye. She stared back, unable to speak or move for a moment, mesmerized by the brilliance of color and the sheer humanity which that eye contained. The moment passed, and Tyr rose to his feet and gently padded over to her, sat down, and propped his muzzle on one knee. Christine stared down at him as he looked back sideways at her from where he rested, surprised and touched. It was as if he knew that she was sad, and he was trying to comfort her. She felt her throat tighten and she allowed herself to run her hand across the solid top of his head and touch the soft parts behind his warm ears. He was so kind, so loving to her.

Even as this happened, Christine felt another, very reluctant part of herself tighten and release briefly. She swallowed hard and tried to forget the array of thoughts that slipped into her head. Tyr brought his head up sharply, nose twitching once. She swiftly pressed her legs together and turned away from Tyr, blushing. But Tyr, being the wolf he was, persisted, nosing at the point where her legs met her torso, trying to find where that recently familiar smell had come from.

"No Tyr," Christine muttered. "It's not....we're not..."

A voice in the back of her head piped up.

Why not?

Because.

Who cares what everyone else says? They aren't me. They don't know Tyr like I do.

But it's wrong.

And there's no shred of evidence to back that up. It's Christmas. Let yourself go. Treat yourself. You need this.

Christine let out a sharp sigh as Tyr's nose pinpointed the origin. Her leg muscles relaxed and spread slightly, and he placed a hand across the back of Tyr's head, even encouraging him to continue the action. He nosed again, and again, whining softly and licking the crotch of her jeans feverishly. She could feel the pressure through her pants and she felt the clammy wet spread over her panties and skin. Christine let out a soft moan of pleasure, and found herself smiling a little, surprised at how much she had missed this sensation. Her hips rolled up towards his searching tongue, eager and ready, then back down and away.

Part of her urged her again to let go even further. After a moment of mental resistance, she agreed.

With one hand she pushed Tyr away from her and stood up, noting how she was still slightly dizzy from the rum. Tyr whined and continued to lick the air in front of her pants, as if he did not want to stop. Christine smiled and laughed a little, then patted the side of her thigh and began to walk towards her room.

"Come on Tyr," she said softly, lovingly.

He followed her into the bedroom and sat patiently in front of her, watching curiously as she

unbuttoned her red Christmas top and let it fall to the floor behind her. She knew stripping for him wasn't going to get him off or turn him on, but it felt right somehow that he should see her naked like this. It felt right. None of this had ever really felt right, but somehow this, standing before a live wolf and slowly becoming more and more naked felt perfect to her. She undid the back of her bra, freeing her breasts to the cold winter air of the room. She shivered, and Tyr rose to his feet, taking a step towards her and whining again. Christine held up a hand in front of his face and he stopped moving but continued to whine. His eye never left her.

Christine went to the bed and lay down on her back. Her eyes flicked to the bedside table where the bottle of urine was still sitting and she smiled suddenly. She knew two smells that Tyr liked. She touched the rim of the bottle and reached under her pants, toughing the inside of each of her thighs, which were already growing wet on their own. Tyr leapt up onto the bed with her and was instantly pressing his muzzle against her jeans. Christine gave a halting, surprised moan and laughed before pushing him back.

"Easy boy," she murmured. "Gentle now."

Tyr seemed to get the idea, because he backed off a little, just long enough for Christine to slide off her jeans. Then he was against her again, his cold nose against her, his warm tongue fighting to be inside her. Christine arched her back sharply, moaning loud and long and the unexpected feeling. It was so good, so perfect. Like his muzzle was made for this very act. Her hot breath turned white as it hit the winter air around her, so that every moan or cry was visible. Tyr continued to lick and whimper with abandon, and Christine caressed the fur along his neck and the back of his ears. She could feel the black fur of his face rubbing the inside of her legs, almost tickling, and she found the sensation irresistible. She moaned again, pulling his muzzle against her as another wave of pleasure washed over her whole body.

Let go, she voice said again, and now she readily obeyed.

Christine pushed Tyr back, enjoying the way he whined and resisted, and turned over, exposing herself to him on her knees. She pressed her face forward into the pillows, breathing hard, suddenly nervous about what she was doing.

Time seemed to slow around her. She could hear herself breathing hard, and could also hear the panting of Tyr behind her, and even the feverish beating of her own heart. Tyr didn't move to jump back where he had been before, and neither did she urge him to continue. The two just sat there, still and breathing. It was as if they both knew what was going to take place, but were both reluctant to begin.

Then, gingerly, Tyr moved forwards. Christine felt a warm soft pressure on her spot, not as eager and desperate as it had been before. It was slow, flowing, and intoxicating. She released a long, breathy moan into her pillow as Tyr continued, moving up and then down the expanse of her loins with his tongue. She could feel him breathing against her too, warm air as a contrast to the cold night that was filling her house. She breathed deeply, and expelled the breath in another moan, this time saying his name, over and over and over, loving the way it rolled out of her mouth with such ease. She didn't allow herself to hesitate as she reached backwards to find him, rubbing at his neck and chest. She pressed her hips back towards him suggestively.

"Come on," she asked him, almost pleading, but not so desperate. "Please Tyr. Please."

She felt him back up then felt the sudden, sharp pressure of his chest on her rear and lower back, then his paws, searching for a handhold of some sort as they paddled against her pale skin. They

found a place in front of her thighs and she felt his body pull forwards, pressing more weight down on her hips and lower back. His claws pressed into her waist and hips and she gasped in surprise and how much they hurt, and how she enjoyed that they did. She could feel his warm chest expanding and falling against her back for a moment, then she felt every muscle in his body tighten as he pressed hard forward, searching.

She moaned in pain and wonderful agony as his hips found hers for an instant and she felt him searching for the entrance, arching his body in sharp, eager thrusts. She spread her legs a little wider and pressed back towards him, just as eager for it as he was. She heard him letting out small grunts with each thrust, panting loudly between.

"Oh god," she whispered to herself.

Then they connected and he was inside her.

Christine sunk her nails into the pillow and buried her face as she screamed. It hadn't been like she'd expected, it was nothing in shape or size like a man was but...but...it felt like some sort of glitter was flowing through her bloodstream, filling her body with a shimmering light. It was like nothing at all she'd ever experienced, and she knew it was possibly the best thing she'd known in all her life. Tyr continued to thrust into her, so fast, so desperate that she let out another muffled scream and gripped the feather filled cloth harder. He filled her entirely, every inch, every part of her was full with him to the point it felt like they were one, like he was connected to her. She thrust back against him, forming a fast and wild rhythm with his body. His soft grunts grew louder till it sounded like he was growling. She moaned long and hard into her bed.

Then it felt like a second wolf was at her as well with the size and the warmth trying to get inside her, and she cried out as he began to press harder, more firmly with each finishing thrust. His paws tightened their hold on her lower torso as she felt something pressing against her entrance. Then that too was inside her and she felt a twinge of pain along with the pleasure. She now let out a soft moan with every breath as she felt her muscles contracting around him, pulling him deeper. He was thrusting more gently now, and she felt so warm, so wet and so warm with all of him in her. She realized she was building up fast, unexpected, even with Tyr being so gentle. She breathed sharply in, holding the breath inside her as she tried to hold her back. Her muscles all tightened, through every inch of her body. She felt hot liquid running down the inside of her legs, too hot to be her own, and she realized with a gasp that Tyr was cuming inside her. This knowledge was too much.

The sparkling light inside her body concentrated to her lower half, as if it was all collecting itself to explode into a million tiny fragments of color. She groaned and pressed back against him with her own rhythm now, loving his warmth, his breath on her back, his claws in her hips, his gentle pulsing movements, his fur covering much of her body like a living, breathing blanket. Loving him for all he was and was not. Loving Tyr. Everything came together in her body and with a cry into her pillow she let it all release in blast of sound and sensation.

She collapsed against her mattress, breaths coming shallow and short as she tried to regain a sense of herself, where she was, who she was. But all she could feel, still, was the filling warmth of the wolf inside her. He had turned himself away from her, his tail wrapping around her thigh, warm and soft, like silk against her bare skin. She could feel from the shudders that connected the two of them that he was breathing hard too. She reached with one quivering hand and gripped the warm fur, loving Tyr with every touch. They lay on the mattress together, connected and breathing in near synchronization. Everything felt so right in her world, like the two of them were meant to be laying there, like she could die at that moment and still have a smile on her lips.



"I love you," she found herself gasping out. But she didn't deny it, didn't hold back. She took in a slow breath and said it again, nearly crying with how good it felt to say it at long last.

"I love you Tyr."

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Chapter 9 - January

The TV was up very loud in the other room, and Christine could hear it blaring through the open door of her bedroom. There was the sound of people cheering loudly, all in random and uncollected volleys. She could hear the newscaster saying something over the din of the people of New York in their celebrations. Then all the voices swelled into unification, and the newscaster fell silent in mid sentence.

"Five, four, three, two, one. Happy New Year!"

The last line exploded in a great scream, followed by whistles, cheering, clapping, and the squealing noise of different sorts of party favors that never came out of the closet till midnight of the first of January, and maybe for the fourth of July. The TV would continue to show these events as they happened in each city, at least till they hit San Francisco, which generally had the quietest party anyway, but Christine had stopped watching the ball drop in different countries and cities long ago. She was celebrating in her own way, and she didn't need the streamers or noisemakers to be happy.

Her fingers wound gently around the fur of Tyr's tail, and she let out a long but easy sigh of satisfaction. The tail flicked, a black ripple in the moonlight that filtered into her room, before lying still again. She heard Tyr shift his position somewhere in the darkness and let out a low sigh of his own. They were both lying there in the night, bound together in the way only a woman and wolf can be. Sweat was sticking to her forehead, trickling down her narrow jaw line, and it was cold enough that her breath showed in a white haze before her eyes and face. Beyond the screaming and whistling TV, their breathing seemed to echo through the room, blowing like the wind outside. The bed was still warm under her back, and from the other side of the mattress, she could feel Tyr's warmth flowing under her, as well as the way it flowed through her. Soft fur brushed against her inner thighs whenever the wolf moved, sending a happy, relaxed shudder through her body, and every now and again, the two just pulsed together like the beating of a heart.

"Happy new year," she whispered into the darkness, liking the breathy, lyrical tone that her voice had right then.

Her fingertips again located his tail, the black fur sleek like some sort of dark liquid. Her skin felt different against him, something primal and mystical that she couldn't really define. But it felt like everything fit perfectly, whether it was the way their bodies wove together or the way they seemed to breathe in a steady rhythm. Or even the way they seemed to connect mentally and emotionally. Everything just perfectly fit.

Christine's father had never been a great man, never been a man of many actions and many big world shaking dreams. But he had loved the wolves. When she was younger she had watched him stare out into the pack with soft far away eyes that seemed less human somehow, but more natural for the man. Christine would ask him about the wolves, why he looked that way, why he wasn't afraid to have them on their land. He would always look at his daughter and smile in that gentle way he had, put a hand on her head and muss up that young brown hair of hers, no matter how tall she was getting.

"Your mother loved these wolves," he said, his voice just as far away as his eyes. "When they came she'd run to the front porch with her camera and start snapping photos. I always told her we'd need to catalogue them, not try to get cute portraits."

"Is that why we have all the wolf pictures on the wall?"

"Yes. Your mother took every last one of them," he said. "I can't bare to take one now, but these wolves were very much a part of her. Looking at them, I can be nearer her than at any other time, in any other place. I can see her in these wolves, Chrissy."

Christine didn't know what her mother looked like. She'd died in childbirth, but when Christine looked out into the pack and watched the wolves play and move, she imagined she could see her mother's face. In the stride of a pup, she could see a furtive step from her mother. When an older wolf stood tall and tipped back their head to sound a call, she could hear her mother singing a lullaby. Her father didn't sing, so it was many a night that she fell asleep, a smile on her lips, listening to the wolves calling to one another.

Despite her father being a small time man, he was known to everyone. The pony rides the farm once offered had been a favorite birthday place. Christine herself had enjoyed the ponies on her birthday every year when the ponies had been around. Still, riding was never her biggest past time. They were nice and their soft playful noses always made her giggle when they nuzzled her face, even when she was a around ponies now. But she preferred to treat them like dogs, taking them on walks and trying to make them do tricks. Her father let her do this. He loved the ponies, but they weren't his passion either, that much was obvious enough to her. He cared for them, knew how they worked, as his father had raised horses when he had been younger. But he was still happier when the wolves were around.

Her father had been very friendly, known and remembered the name of every single person he'd met. Christine wondered if she'd gotten her genes from her mother, because she was often anti-social and didn't have many friends. Even as she had grown up and older, she had never really been a social butterfly, and even now, she didn't even know the names of half the people in the town. Most didn't even know that she was the daughter of the man who'd done the pony rides, always had a smile, and studied wolves. She was not her father's daughter, but she had still loved him with everything she was and hoped that someday she could make him proud of the person she was. Maybe even her mother too.

The phone rang.

Tyr and Christine had disconnected from each other but still lay sprawled out across her mattress. She was lying, naked, on her back and had just been slipping off to sleep a little when the blaring clang of the phone had drowned out both the TV in the other room and Tyr's steady breathing. Her eyes had been settling closed, her breathing rate slowing and allowing herself to feel only sensations rather than thinking. But now she opened her eyes slowly and blinked up at the ceiling, groaning to herself. It had to be past 1 AM by now. Who on earth was calling at this ungodly hour.

With a grumble of frustration and sleepy annoyance, she rolled over and searched for the phone on her side table. Nearly knocking the phone off onto the floor, she found it and pulled the receiver off the hook and to her ear. She cleared her throat gently, shaking all sign of sleep from her voice before speaking.

"Hello?"

"Happy new year Chrissy!" came a high pitched girlish voice. Christine pause and tried to put the

voice to a face, without any success. She furrowed her brow.

"Who is this?" she asked, rubbing one eye to try to adjust herself to the near complete lack of light in the room.

"Ah come on Chrissy, you don't remember a fellow Community College Co-ed?"

Christine paused, still unable to find this girl in her memory database.

"It's Marcy!"

"Marcy?" now it came back to her. Marcy had been her only and thus closest friend in college. She'd been the first to know when Christine's father had died, and had given her a very fond farewell and a coffee maker when she had decided to return to the ranch to take over what her father had done. She'd even bought one of the ponies when Christine had sold them.

"Who else?"

"Oh! Oh, God! Marcy hi!" Christine said, sitting up and smiling just a little.

"Did I wake you?"

"Yeah sorta, but don't worry about it."

"I'm surprised. I thought you'd be up. Isn't it wolf season?"

"No, we have a few more months," Christine said. Tyr had raised his head briefly, hearing an unusual tone in Christine's voice, but he now dropped it back onto the bed. "So how the hell are you?"

"Good!" came the excited response. "I'm actually in town! Seeing parents for new years."

"Oh!"

"Yeah, so I was wondering, lunch tomorrow? We'll catch up on all the crazy shit that went on since your dad died."

"Ok, sure!"

"By the pizza place at JC? Around one?"

"Sure, sure Marcy. I'll see you then."

"Ok, go catch some Z's." came Marcy's voice with a little laugh. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah. Bye."

Christine put down the receiver and collapsed backwards onto the bed, disturbing Tyr. He made a low grumbling growl and raised his head to look at her with one softly golden eye. She turned her head to stare back at him and let out a low sharp laugh. She shook her head and gave him a gentle pat on the back of his black hip.

"Oh Tyr," she said with a sigh, staring up at the ceiling. "If she only knew what's happened to me since college..."

The pizza place had always been a meeting place for those who were yet unable to drink. There was a rumor that the place had, maybe fifty years back, sold alcohol to eighteen-year-olds on a regular basis, and the hopefuls still flocked in from different areas of the town, and neighboring ones, afraid to ask, but still willing to give it a shot. Walking to the door in a ratty black jacket and straight-legged jeans, Christine felt herself blush. She felt old. She knew she wasn't really THAT old, but looking at the young faces all around her she felt it.

She wondered to herself how much one of the hopefuls would pay her to get them a beer. That at least put a smile on her face.

Marcy had always come to this place, showed her legs and cleavage and always walked away with a drink in her hand. The man who ran the place liked her, she'd always said. She knew how to work him just right. Christine had never had a taste for beer since her father let her try it once, so politely passed on using her feminine wiles to attain booze. Still, it was always fun to watch Marcy manage it.

Christine pushed the door open, listening to the tinkle of the bell, lower pitched and a little rusty now with the passage of time. People looked up as she walked in. She stood taller. Of all walks of people, these types were NOT going to make her feel uncomfortable. She went towards the back, expecting that Marcy was probably at their old booth, if she was there yet at all. She had a tendency to be very late or very early without much reason. Christine could never guess which it would be.

Marcy was already there. She was sitting with both elbows propped on the table leaning forwards across the blue surface to study a menu. She was sitting on one of the tall red bar stools that the place had, and as Christine had remembered, her feet didn't reach the floor. Her high-heeled shoes swung loosely from her nylon covered toes. She wore a knee length black skirt and a white blouse like she might have just come from work. Her long red hair was up in a very tight bun on the back of her neck, but a few strands had slipped their bonds and curled up in their natural state next to her ear. She looked up slowly, as if not at all surprised that Christine would be there, and then she cracked a wide grin and jumped off the stool.

"Chrissy! It's been years!" she cried, tackling Christine into a tight hug. She hugged Marcy back, though with slightly less enthusiasm.

"Hey Marcy," she said with a laugh. "It's good to see you too."

Marcy released everything but her hands and stepped back to study her, the grin still propped up under her high cheekbones. She looked Christine up and down and then shrugged.

"Wow," she said "And I thought I had changed!"

"You haven't aged a day," Christine muttered good-naturedly. "Even if you do look like a secretary."

"Good guess, but it's actually bank teller."

"Ah, easy mistake."

The two women smiled at each other and then Marcy gestured with her head towards the table and they both sat down. Christine realized her feet didn't quite reach the ground either, though she could touch it with her toes if she really tried. She had forgotten that she was taller than Marcy, and it still seemed so unnatural to her. Marcy was larger than life. She didn't look five foot one and she certainly didn't act it. She again leaned over the menu and eyed it disapprovingly.

"Ordered yet?" Christine asked.

"Nah. They got rid of Al's special, you believe that shit?"

"No way..." Christine grabbed the menu from her and studied it thoroughly, brows furrowed. Sure enough Al's special was nowhere to be found. It had been on the menu ever since they had been freshmen in community college. Al had been old, it was possible he was dead now. But still, it was quite a shock.

"Pepperoni good for you then?" Marcy asked with a sigh.

"Yeah, sure."

Marcy went to the counter, ordered the pizza, then came back and sat down heavily, looking tired.

"Morning shift," she said rolling her eyes. "Absolute shit. What are you doing job-wise nowadays?"

Christine considered for a while, and then shrugged.

"Not much really. Selling eggs and chicken meat at the local store. Doing farm tours for classes in the spring every few years when the schools want it. Mostly just still living off dad's money."

"Ah, yeah...I remember," Marcy said with a sad smile. "Nice guy, your dad."

"Yeah, everyone misses him."

"So you still have the farm?" Marcy said, her tone much lighter.

"Oh. Yeah. Farm. Ranch. I was never sure what it was."

"Me neither."

Both girls laughed.

"And what about men?" Marcy asked raising one eyebrow and grinning. "How are you on the male front of things, so to speak?"

Christine looked down at the table. She had known this would be part of the conversation. Marcy had always been the one with a boyfriend, always been the girl the rumors were spread about. Christine had only had sex with one boy while in college, and no one had ever found out except Marcy. It just wasn't big news. Marcy had thrown her a "happy non-virginity party" when she found out, that involved vodka and large quantities of porno, but it just really hadn't been her thing. She heard Marcy make a hmmm noise and glanced up at her sheepishly.

"What," Marcy asked, raising both eyebrows now. "Gone over to the dark side have we?"

"Oh good god no," Christine said, letting out a short laugh. "I'm just...not really into men right now."

What was she supposed to say? Marcy, I've sworn off men and am now in a monogamous relationship with a wolf I rescued and am now keeping in my house illegally? And that the sex is better than any guy I've ever been with? Somehow she didn't think that would be received too well.

"Oh come on, nobody?" Marcy said. "A cute little thing like you?"

"I tried seeing this one guy," Christine said haltingly. "A few months ago. But he ended up...being...kind of shady. Not a good man."

"Oh." Marcy said, then reading more into the look Christine had on her face: "Oh. I'm sorry. Oh god, Christine."

"He didn't do anything to me."

"I'm glad, but still...are you ok?"

"I'm fine."

There was a long uncomfortable silence.

"So, what about you?" Christine said at last, disliking the quiet between them. "How's the man-life for you?"

"Well," Marcy said, brightening up. "I tried both sides for a while, actually."

"And?"

"And I'm sticking with men. Women may be more artistically beautiful than men, but lord almighty are they crazy!"

The two women laughed hard, Christine shaking her head hard. That was just like Marcy alright! Her being bisexual didn't surprise Christine much. Marcy had always been so open, so willing to try new things. She knew that Marcy had tried pot in college, even though no one else did, and she knew about that time Marcy had swum naked on front campus right after a flood. She was always wild. Why should it be any different now?

"Actually," Marcy added with a sheepish smile. "I'm married now."

"Oh!" Christine said with shock. Only now did she notice the gold band across Marcy's left ring finger. Well, THAT was a change!

"Don't look so surprised."

"I'm sorry it's just...gosh," Christine rubbed the back of her neck with one hand. "It's not what I expected! You were always just kind of a free spirit and...wow!"

"Well, this free spirit finally settled down. We live in San Francisco, you should come visit us sometime if you get out of this place for a while."

"Congratulations Marcy. Really. That's so wonderful."

"Thanks."

A man showed up carrying a pair of beers and set them down on the table. Christine looked up, confused, but Marcy just smiled.

"Man at the counter says he recognizes you," the man said with a thick accent that Christine couldn't define. "Says it's on the house."

"Well tell him we say thank you!" Marcy said, throwing Christine a wink. After the man had left, she

leaned across the table, smiling broadly, voice a low whisper.

"See?" she said, bubbly laughter filling her words. "Married or not, I've still got it."

Christine unlocked the door to her house slowly, feeling the cold slip through the folds of her jacket to seek out bare skin. It was fairly light, and a rosy pink touched the horizon as the sun set. They'd talked well into the mid afternoon, but Marcy had told her that she had to get home and pack. She was leaving the next day to go back to her husband in California, and after a tearful hug and kiss she left. Christine didn't go right home though. She drove around the town, watched the shops close, examined people as they huddled on the street corners. They all looked just so alive, so real to her. She didn't feel it. She even drove past the old butcher shop. It looked locked up tight but she still felt her stomach turn as she passed, and she turned away and pushed down a little more firmly on the gas. Eventually, she let herself find the corners and turns that lead back to the snowy dirt road to her house. It was almost night, it was dinnertime. She didn't feel like eating.

There was scrabbling on the other side of the door and whimpering as Tyr realized she was home. Christine opened the front door and shoved Tyr aside without looking at him. Still Tyr continued to follow her, whimpering and pawing at her pant legs.

"Knock it off Tyr," she muttered.

She went to her room and tried to close the door, but the wolf followed her inside, still attempting to win her attention. She sat down, trying to ignore him, but failing as he leapt up onto the bed beside her, pushing his nose into her face.

"I said knock it off!" she said, giving him a gentle push. Still he insisted.

Christine suddenly felt angry, so angry. At Tyr, at life at everything around her, at her Father for dying, at her mother for never being alive when she was. Everything. She found the side of Tyr's head with one hand and gave him such a forceful shove, almost a slap, so hard that he scrambled then fell hard off the bed with a low yelp.

"Just stop! Just stop it!" she screamed. "You're a wolf! You're not a man! You're not a man!" Then, all at once she was crying. She pulled her knees up into her chest and pressed her forehead against them, tears dampening her jeans. She could hear herself sobbing, hear how pathetic it sounded. She was just so pathetic...

"Why her," she was crying. "Why her? I find someone I like and he tried to rape me, she finds someone I've never met and he marries her? Why don't I find anyone? Why..."

Her voice trailed off. There was a thud beside her, and a cold touch against her cheek. She heard the soft warm breath as it touched her skin, and then a very gentle warmth spread over her cheek where her tears still hung. A soft tongue, comforting, tender. A sweeter kiss than she had ever been given by a man. She let herself turn and collapse over Tyr's warm black fur. She cried loudly into his shoulder and neck, just as she had that night, letting everything flow out of her into him, hugging him tight while he let her.

"I love you Tyr," she whispered between sobs, kissing his black body. "I love you."

She knew she hadn't really felt alive much these past few years, hadn't felt real. She felt like a shadow, a fake, like she was going through empty motions with no end in sight. Now, as she hugged Tyr close to her body, she realized that only when he was there did she really feel alive. Only when she touched him did she feel whole. She heard him whimper and she held tighter, and in the back of

her mind she could feel loving, black furred arms holding her back.

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## Chapter 10 - February

Christine threw the ball hard out of the slingshot and watched it shoot across the snow patched red dirt of the yard outside her house. She had gotten better at using the thing, knowing when to let go of one strap while it was in rotation. She could feel her right arm growing stronger, feel muscles flex when she did this. Even if it had been originally bought to get Tyr back into shape, she was finding that the toy was doing the trick for her just as well.

Tyr too was getting better at the game. After many tries over the previous month during which he would overshoot to one side given his poor depth perception, the wolf was finally beginning to correct himself and aim more directly at his prey. Christine no longer needed to make long arching shots so that he would have a longer time to correct, and she waited, smiling, as Tyr located the straight hard shot, aimed his sleek black body still bristling with a winter coat, and attacked with open jaws. He looked more wolf-like when he was on the hunt, she noted, more in his natural form. But then again, she told herself, in her head, she always saw wolves howling or running. Only when they were doing one of those two things did they really seem natural.

With a scuffle of icy red dirt, Tyr snatched up the freshly fallen ball and spun in a tight circle to again face Christine. She patted on the tops of her knees, calling his name as he ran towards her. She knew this was foreplay though. He never let go of the ball directly, always worried it and chewed, and ran away from her playfully whenever she got just within reach. It was his way of getting back at her perhaps, she wondered. She made him run to get the ball, and then he made her run to get it. An even trade. This time she guessed correctly and veered to the left with him as he broke from his course towards her.

"Oh you just try it Tyr!" she called to him. "You know I'll get it eventually!"

Tyr stopped short and broke in the other direction, prancing with his front legs as she scrambled to change direction with him. Then he slowed, lowering his head and growling at her challengingly. She lowered her head too as she approached him, crouched, and let out a higher pitched, human growl. They continued to growl at each other for a moment or two, and then Christine lunged at him, grasping and reaching and eventually brushing black fur before Tyr pulled away again and leapt just out of reach. Christine, however, had lost her balance and with a yelp toppled forwards onto her stomach, then onto her back, laughing as she wiped red earth off her cheek.

"Ok!" she coughed out between laughs. "Ok, ok you win! You can keep the damned ball!"

Despite her surrender, Tyr bounded over and then dropped the ball by her hand.

"Oh," she said, rolling her eyes. "Gee, thanks."

Tyr ignored the sarcasm and began licking her face furiously. Christine spit and shoved at his face, shaking her head as his warm tongue washed over her nose and lips. Tyr continued and, despite her protests, Christine began to laugh again.

"Ew!" she giggled, "Good God Tyr, what did you eat!?"

His breath wasn't really all that bad, but it was a fun excuse to protest a little. The wolf continued to lick at her, and Christine soon gave up protesting altogether, and just stroked the back of Tyr's neck



with one hand while he worked her cheeks and mouth, tail dusting the ground happily. There was no point really in denying that she loved it when he did this, and she even gave his nose a gentle kiss back and watched as he licked his own nose in confusion then pleasure before returning to what he had been doing. It wasn't exactly a make-out session, but it was a great way to end the day.

The snow patches were fading. It was late afternoon now, and the noon sun had shrunk them even more than it had the day before. More and more red appeared in her yard every day, and while the air was still crisp, it let Christine know that spring was just around the corner, and that soon this ghastly winter would be done. It was nice to spend nights curled up in her bed next to Tyr for warmth, but she also missed being able to breathe without seeing it as a white cloud. Now, as she breathed out her occasional laughs, she watched as they became mist. She sat up and wiped the moisture off her face before it began to feel icy against her skin and gave Tyr another loving scratch against his ears.

"C'mon boy," she said, nodding towards the house. "We should be getting inside for dinner. And maybe you'll get some nice desert after?"

Tyr looked up at her and wagged his tail fervently as if to say yes. The coy innuendo was more to excite Christine than it was for Tyr, but she still got the feeling Tyr got the message when she said it. She gave his nose another kiss as he lapped at her pursed lips before grabbing the ball and standing to brush off her coat. She patted her leg for Tyr to follow, and together, the two of them went into the house.

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Christine lowered her panties to her knees where she sat on the bed, watching as Tyr sat patiently, whining and licking his mouth. It was after dinner, and as promised she'd lead the wolf to her room where he now watched her undress. It had become a ritual that he waited to touch her till after she was naked, some sort of mental agreement between the two, and Christine was sure that Tyr enjoyed drawing out the moment before they touched just as much as she did. She laughed from deep in her throat as she let the white cotton underwear fall to the ground, then laughed aloud as Tyr trotted forward to sniff and lick at them.

"Oh, the real thing not good enough for you?" she muttered as she pulled up her shirt over her head and began finding the clasp on her bra.

Tyr, now fed up with the scent rather than its source raised his head and pressed his nose between her legs, whining again and licking at the already wet insides of her thighs. Christine had been so focused on unclasping her bra that this caught her off guard. His warm tongue coupled by a cold nose was so shocking that she let out a soft yelp which turned into a moan as his tongue found softer flesh higher up. One hand drifted down to touch the soft fluff of his wonder coat where it parted right behind his right ear, then pressed gently, encouragingly forward as Tyr licked a little more enthusiastically. She felt a rush to her head, and her eyelids fluttered as they closed, enjoying the sensation. She swayed a moment, just letting Tyr nuzzle and lick before at last, with a little moan, she pushed his nose away.

"Easy," she breathed out. "Just let me get positioned. That's not what I have in mind for tonight."

Christine had never been a tease or very dominant in bed. In fact, she'd always just layed on her back, closed her eyes, and tried to enjoy it rather than be nervous. Somehow, she didn't feel so uncomfortable being naked around Tyr, and she posed a moment on the edge of the bed, spreading her legs for him, before crawling towards the pillows. Tyr watched, panting as she climbed onto the

bed, and it was only a moment before he leapt up with her, lapping at her rear and backs of legs.

“Easy,” she said again, but she could barely make out the words as she raised her rear high into the air and positioned her face against her pillow.

She felt a sudden pain against her hips as Tyr’s paws found a hold, his nails scraping red marks along her pale skin. His chest expanded against her lower back and she felt a wet drop on her back where he was licking. Christine reached back with one hand and touched one of his paws as he pulled her body back towards him, searching with his own hips for her opening. She never helped him find it, she instead let him press and jab till he found it on his own. There was more suspense that way. Now she felt hot, furless flesh stabbing against her skin, zeroing in on its mark inch by inch. She held her breath, pressing back into him, desperate for him to be inside of her. And then...

Christine couldn’t help but let out a cry of surprise and pleasure. It was always such a shock to her how big he was, and how swiftly he got his full length inside of her. It was always so sudden, so desperate, and she could hear him let out a short breath, perhaps of relief, when he at last found her. It was so intense, so unexpected.

And then he was thrusting into her, hard, relentless, in a rhythm she could not have matched if she tried. The first time it had been a little more gently, more loving, but this kind of sex had it’s appeal as well. His nails dug into her as he moved in and out, breaking skin till she bled in small, red droplets. His paws forced her jerkingly against his lower half with every pulsing thrust, and she spread her legs a little wider, trying to keep herself steady against his force. She cried out for a second time, feeling him swell inside her, filling her with himself and now with hot, wonderful liquid. She tried not to scream as she felt the knot beating against her then pushing forcefully inside. It was painful, but she forced herself back against it, wanting it inside, deeper, bigger.

This had to be heaven. There was no other way to explain how she felt. A mixture of his cum and her own wetness streaked her inner legs and the area around where Tyr was still driving. She heard the wet squishing noise they made together as his rhythm quickened. She also felt herself tighten as her own pleasure built. She was moaning nearly constantly now, the tone rising with every press of Tyr’s body, and she her legs began to shake with the anticipation of what was to come. She felt even fuller, and more hot liquid ran down to stain her blankets and mattress as Tyr began to finish. His pulses slowed a little, just as Christine felt her ecstasy reaching a peak. She thrust back against him with his new rhythm, desperate, needing that release which only he could give.

Everything tightened, and she threw her head up away from the pillows in a final cry. Every part of her, mental, emotional, physical, all released in one swelling wave and with a shudder, she reached climax.

Tyr stopped moving and brought his legs off of her, turning around to face away. He lowered his body slowly, and she allowed herself to collapse, still joined with him, down to the mattress. She breathed hard, shaking, unable to remember a time when she’d finished quite that hard. It was so amazing, and she let out a long, breathy sound as she again reached back to find Tyr’s tail and haunches.

“Ohhhhh, Tyr...” was all she could manage to say for now.

Words just didn’t come to her. She couldn’t think. All she could do was breathe and feel the rush still fading in her mind. She had needed that, and by the feel of how he continued to swell inside her and the continuing flow of hot wetness against her thighs, he had needed it too. She wasn’t afraid anymore, and nothing felt so right to her as when they lay connected like this, breathing and pulsing together until he was done and she was better rested.

As she tried to catch her breath basking in euphoria, Christine smiled, unaware in all her bliss, that tomorrow would be valentine's day.

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Valentine's day woke very quietly. The sun rose over the cold little ranch without waking the chickens or Christine and glowed very brightly, high in the sky, before any birds even started to sing. Sunlight slipped between the shutters of her window, tilting and slanting before at last they rested on Christine's cheeks. She shifted, eyelids fluttering for an instant before they lifted and she took in the day. She smiled lightly and sighed, then turned her head to look at the sleeping wolf beside her.

Tyr was snoring gently, and as she watched, his ears twitched and his paws flinched while he slept. He was still a moment, then flinched again, a little more violently, and made a huff noise like he was trying to bark but couldn't. He didn't seem panicked to her, rather excited. She smiled a little wider and giggled quietly to herself.

"Always the dreamer, right boy?" she whispered to him as he continued to flinch. She wondered if he was running outside with the pack, or perhaps hunting down a rabbit solo. Either way he looked happy enough lost inside his own fantasies.

Christine decided to let the wolf sleep, and she slipped silently out of bed and pulled on her clothes for today. As she crept out of her room, she looked over her shoulder at the great black form sprawled out over her unkempt sheets and grinned. He looked peaceful there, but she was vaguely reminded of the story of little red riding hood. After all, who else had a wolf in their bed?

"Sleep well Tyr," she whispered through the door as she closed in quietly behind her.

It took a few blocks through town for Christine to figure out that there were heart shaped decorations everywhere for a reason. She couldn't help but laugh, thinking of her night before, and pulled over to the side of the road to keep from crashing as she laughed. Valentine's day. Of course. How could she have forgotten? Truly, she and Tyr would have to find a way to celebrate. They were lovers now, after all, and today was a day to celebrate all lovers, regardless of type, right? So today was their day. She had already gone through the turmoil of finding a gift for Tyr on Christmas, so now she figured a nice dinner would be plenty of celebration for the two of them. It had been a while since she'd cooked anything besides meat and vegetables anyway.

The grocery store was only a few blocks ahead, and she figured why not walk there? Sure, it was a little cold, but not as cold as it had been before. More than that, she felt light today, free. She felt honestly, irresistibly happy. And a walk seemed like just the thing to improve her already good mood. She exited the car, being sure to lock it, and strode down the sidewalk, hands stuffed into her pockets against the mild cold.

She had always heard that strawberries were an aphrodisiac, but she somehow doubted that this applied to wolves as well. Despite this fact, she threw a package of frozen strawberries into her basket along with the other goodies she had found so far. Ice cream was more expensive, and besides, these had the kind of crunch she'd really been craving the last few days. She steered away from the chicken and turkey, remembering that she'd read somewhere that the bones could really give dogs problems. Sure, a wolf's digestion was probably different, more rugged or something, but she wanted to be safe, just in case.

There were a big set of beef ribs on display, and she eyed them closely. They were very expensive, but this was a special occasion. She knew the money she had received after her father's death had

been extensive, and that she still made a little bit of money from the eggs she sold to the local markets, but she also knew it would someday run low. It was best to live frugally off of it for as long as possible, she had decided right after the funeral. However, these ribs, precooked in barbecue sauce, simply made her mouth water. She was sure they'd have the same effect on Tyr. Telling herself that Valentines Day was a special occasion enough, she threw them into the basket as well.

The teller at the front looked over her wares with a cocked eyebrow as she put them up onto the conveyer belt. She looked down at the different food, fit for a whole feast, and then grinned sheepishly up at him. He smiled politely back.

"Planning a romantic evening?" he asked, scanning the different food and handing it to the teenager bagging it at the end.

"Something like that," Christine muttered with a blush.

"He's a lucky guy," the man said. Still, Christine couldn't help feeling that she was the lucky one.

The bags of groceries felt light in her hands as she walked, and she let them swing freely from side to side against her legs as she walked. It was cold out, brisk, as her father had called it when he was alive. She didn't care though. It just felt nice. The sunlight seemed brighter, as if it was shining through thinner air that day, and every breath stung her throat and lungs in a way that reminded Christine that she was alive.

She was enjoying all these sensations so much, she didn't notice when she walked past her car, down the sidewalk, and then absentmindedly around a corner. Only when she saw the sign outside of the butcher shop did she stop walking.

Christine felt her throat tighten and the cool, refreshing air in her lungs seemed suddenly to become solid. It was like she was filled with ice, unable to breathe, unable to even think or speak. She wanted to run, God how she wished she could turn and run from that spot. But she couldn't. She was completely frozen in that moment with her own thoughts and memories. She felt his fingers on her skin, she blood as it flew in tiny missiles from his crumpled hand, the hot breath on her cheek, and the searing growl that cut the night as Tyr leapt...

The blow of a hammer broke the trance, and she stopped feeling her memories. They faded, and the cold winter day faded into focus around her. There was a man standing before her at the butchers shop, and he was bringing a hammer down hard across the wooden sign out front. One corner dislodged, peeling forward like cardboard with his blows. She blinked, and tried to make sense of the scene in front of her. She'd never seen the man before...but he didn't seem to be attacking the store illegally. He was calm, collected. Like this was his job.

Christine stepped forward to view the store window, curiosity overcoming her fear. It was dark, and the shelves inside were empty. The place looked utterly deserted, the more she looked at it.

"Can I help you with something miss?" the man with the hammer suddenly asked her. She turned, startled at hearing another human voice. It had been like she was living inside of her own head for a moment. She managed to find words.

"Um...yes," she said softly. "The butcher shop that was here. Has it...has it gone out of business?"

The man sighed and leaned against the now partially ruined wooden sign.

"Yeah. Owner got his hand real hurt in some sort of hunting accident."

"Oh...really?"

"Yeah," the man went on. "He was trying to make a go of it after it happened, but the work was just too hard with his hand all messed up like it was. He couldn't keep up with business. Had to sell the place."

"Oh."

"Yeah, it's a damn shame."

"Isn't it," Christine listened to herself say.

"Well if you need another butcher, I know a place over on fi--"

"No no," she said quickly. "I know another place. But thank you for telling me."

"No problem miss."

Christine turned away from the butcher shop, holding her groceries close to her body as if for warmth, and walked swiftly back towards her car. She brought her head low, focusing on the sidewalk in front of her, trying to keep her face a mask of little or no emotion. But even with the effort, after a few steps she had to pull up the front of her jacket to hide the smile spreading quickly across her lips.

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Christine would never have called that night's dinner a feast, but it somehow felt like a regal meal, and she ate as if she hadn't had dinner in months. It tasted, to her, like victory. Tyr gulped down the food just as eagerly, and she wondered if maybe he senses some of the satisfaction she was currently feeling. He even, much to her pleasant surprise, swallowed down a few frozen strawberries, mouth smacking loudly against the shockingly cold food. She was also happy to see that he did not drag the meat-stripped bones away from his place at the base of the kitchen table. He had, for a long time, been hiding with any bones she would give him, only to let her discover them later when they began to smell. The fact that he was willing to stay beside her meant something, though Christine couldn't be entirely sure what. Perhaps that he trusted her? That he was sure she wasn't a threat? It did make her happy, whatever the reason.

She finished her dinner before Tyr did, and contented herself with watching him gnaw at the bones. She wasn't sure what it was about the way he bit into the bone fiber, tearing and crunching, but awakened something in her. Something almost primal. It made her feel warm in the very center of her chest and, though she was reluctant to admit it, between her legs as well. It was like watching your boyfriend work out. You weren't sure why you suddenly wanted them. They were hot, smelly, sweaty, but they were suddenly so attractive you would be willing to throw yourself at them. As Tyr drew back his lips to reveal strong white teeth and she heard them scrape against bone, she felt much the same sensation.

"Mhhh," she murmured. "Tyr, you have no idea what you do to me."

This seemed to prove true, for Tyr continued to gnaw on the rib bone, unaware of Christine's advances. She sighed happily, shaking her head at him. He reached down with a hand, tousling the fur between his relaxed but always alert ears. Tyr paused and eyed her warily, but after a moment he began to wag his tail and continued chewing, deciding she was not after his rib.

"Nope," she said with half laugh. "Not after your bone boy...well at least not that one."

She laughed a little harder at her own joke. She hadn't made those sorts of jokes since high school, and it felt good to let loose. Tyr continued to wag his tail, looking up at her with a golden, curious eye.

Christine struck a match against the brick of the fireplace and held it to the small bundle of logs in the hearth. She knew that everyone talked about how bad wood smoke was for the environment, but she hadn't lit a fire since Christmas, despite the cold. She wasn't even sure the smoke would be able to get through the chimney now, and suspected that soon a plume of grey-black would funnel back into the room. To her great relief, this did not happen, and the flames spread over the logs, crackling as they burned off sap and moisture still collected in the wood. She breathed in the warm smoky scent before going back to the couch to collapse in a relaxed, happy heap on the cushions.

After a moment, Tyr padded in from where he had been lapping up meat juice spatters from the kitchen floor. His nose twitched as he raised his muzzle into the quickly warming air, smelling the fire and smoke. Christine was sure he had smelled it before in the wild, when there were forest fires, or when people had campfires. Or did they have campfires in Yellowstone? She couldn't remember what the law said about that. Either way, she suspected that fire had always been a negative thing in Tyr's past, and she watched him closely now to see how he would react. At first he was still, then he lowered his nose and padded over to where Christine was sitting. He dropped down to his stomach at the base of the couch, flopping his head over his crossed paws and staring straight ahead towards the front door.

Christine followed his gaze with her eyes and sat staring at the entryway as well. She remembered how Tyr had lain across the front mat, many months ago, head on his crossed paws much like he was now. She remembered that she'd felt safe for the first time in...she couldn't even remember how long. Blood had stained the tip of his muzzle, as well as the area around his paws. But more than anything else, Christine remembered the way she had fallen to her knees the moment the door had slammed and thrown her arms around the great black wolf, sobbing into his thick fur. And the way he had stood so still and let her do it, as if he knew exactly what she was feeling.

She gently slipped off the couch to join Tyr on the floor. For a moment, she just listened to the wolf breathe in and out, hearing the soft strain of his chest as it expanded and contracted. Then, very gently, she put a hand to the back of his large solid head and stroked the soft fur where the back of his ears met his neck. She drew her index finger around the seam and watched as Tyr's tail gently moved back and forth across the dusty floor, raising small hazy clouds. His body was lean and strong now with all the working she'd been doing with him, and his black coat now covered most of the scars that she had noticed when she had first seen him with the Druid wolf pack. His torn ears hadn't exactly healed, but the scars looked fainter, and the edges looked softer and more natural. The hole where his eye had been now was dark like the rest of his skin and had fur regrowing around the edge. From far away, a person might not even be able to tell he was missing an eye. He felt like he belonged there now, and Christine hesitantly admitted to herself that she had never been closer to another living thing in all her life.

Her throat tightened and she swallowed hard but it did not go away. Her finger curled where it was stroking Tyr's ear, pushing a little harder than she had intended. The ear twitched and she pulled her hand away, letting it drop lifelessly to her side. She stared down at him in reverence and adoration, searching for something to say, something to do that could make Tyr understand what she was thinking right now, what she was feeling. She parted her lips to say something, but only a long sigh escaped her mouth and she shut her lips again. She swallowed hard and this time she felt herself gain a little courage. Perhaps barely enough to express what she was feeling in words.

"Hey," she said, but it came out in a shaky, hoarse whisper. She cleared her throat and tried again. This time the word came stronger "Hey."

Tyr raised his head and turned to look at her, snuffing loudly as if he'd been half asleep the moment before. Christine locked her gaze with his, staring into the perfect, glowing gold that shone boldly out of Tyr's head. They were silent, just staring at each other, Christine mesmerized and Tyr curiously waiting to see what she was doing. When at last Christine spoke again, her voice had lost a little of its strength.

"Hey...Tyr?" The wolf's tail began to move briskly across the floor again at the sound of his name. Christine smiled in spite of herself.

"Uh," she began a little unsteadily. "Tyr?"

He continued to stare at her.

"I love you."

She had said it many times before, romantically, jokingly, in every form someone could possibly imagine. But now, as she blurted it out, breathy and nervous, it sounded different. It just meant different things. Tyr watched her for a minute or so, and then slowly lowered his head back onto his paws. Christine paused, confused, then quickly shifted around to be in front of him. She slid a hand under his head and brought it up to look at her. He stared back with one golden eye and one black, empty socket. She found herself losing words once more.

"Tyr, I love you," she said again, forcing out each syllable.

The wolf again made a move to loose his muzzle from her grasp. Christine knew he didn't like his muzzle held like that. It was a sign of dominance on her part, and while Tyr admitted openly with his actions her dominance over him, he didn't stay in this position very long. He pulled back his head and tossed his muzzle to the side, but Christine held tight. She needed to say this. She needed Tyr to hear it.

"Do you understand?" she asked, voice shaking. "Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Tyr sat up in front of her, nose still clutched in her small white hand. She was suddenly aware of how big he was in comparison to her. Her arm was in front of her head now, and she raised her chin to stare up into his vast black face. He was like a massive shadow, looming over her, in danger of engulfing her entirely if he would only take a step forward to absorb her tiny form. She worked her mouth, trying once again to force words out. When they did come, tears inched down her face, reluctant but glistening in the firelight.

"Tyr I need to you understand," she pleaded. "Please Tyr, just look me in the eye and give me some sign, let me know that you can least hear me and acknowledge when I am telling you. I love you Tyr."

Suddenly it was all she could say. I love you Tyr, over and over again, traces of tears making their way across her cheeks and chin. She desperately repeated it, at last throwing herself towards the black shape, now praying it would engulf her, make her a part of it. She pushed her face into his coat, breathing in deeply and letting out the air in sobs, in I love you's, again and again. Tyr sat still and let her do this, but made no sign he understood more than her embrace, and even that calmly and steadily, but not nearly as tenderly as Christine had hoped.

Against her will, she herself began to understand. He did not know what she was saying. He would never know. She doubted love, in the human sense, was even a thing wolves or other wild animals could grasp. And that was what he was, after all. A wild animal. She cried all the harder, realizing this, and only when her sobs dissolved into little hiccoughs did she allow herself to loosen her grip. She sat back, facing him, and looked into his eye. Now she saw a wolf's eye staring back at her. Not a prince charming, not a man, not an ideal, perfect soul mate. Just a wolf. A wonderful, protective, and charming wolf, but also a wild creature, which she had kept in her house. Perhaps too long. She released his neck entirely and stood up, bitterly wiping the still clinging tears from her eyes and face with her palm. She sniffed hard and turned away from the wolf.

"Goodnight Tyr," she told him, knowing that he could not even understand that.

She heard him shuffle on the wooden floor, and knew he must be laying back down, now that this confusing and meaningless ordeal was over. It didn't matter, she told herself. Let him get some sleep here tonight, where an animal should sleep. It was the right thing to do, after all, if she was going to try to release him someday. He shouldn't be this close to humans; it would make it harder for him to stay away from them. She'd given him food, and that was bad enough, so letting him sleep with her was right out.

She walked stiff legged to the door of the family room, then thinking better of it, went back to the hearth and put out the fire. When she reached the door a second time she paused, but did not turn around.

"Happy Valentines day Tyr," she whispered into the dim room before continuing towards her own bed.

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Christine lay on her side unable to sleep for the next few hours, unable to find sleep, or for it to find her, she wasn't sure which. She allowed herself to cry a little, but not too long. She would cry over a wolf like this, as if he was a man. He wasn't worth these tears out of heartbreak. Hell, he wouldn't even live twenty years, that would be the only reason he deserved those tears of hers. It was nearing midnight when she finally began to feel the slightest bit drowsy, and she tried closing her eyes to sleep.

There was a noise at the door to her bedroom. She opened her eyes but didn't turn over. She knew what it had to be. Tyr. There was a squeak of hinges as the wolf nosed the door open, and she heard the very soft thud of footfalls as he trotted into the room. She felt the mattress shift and strain as he leapt up onto the bed behind her, a valley of cloth opening up at her back suddenly under his weight. She told herself to ignore it, that he'd leave eventually if she did, but she soon felt a rush of hit air as he lowered himself onto his belly beside her. She grumbled under her breath and made a secret wish that he'd just leave.

Instead, she felt a warm, wet pressure on the back of her neck, right where her hair met skin. She flinched, not expecting the "attack" and opened her eyes in surprise. He nosed at her again, and the hair along her spine stood on end. What did he want? Sex probably, she admitted to herself. Well he wouldn't have it. Never again. It wasn't what animals like him were supposed to do. And besides, he didn't love her. Probably only thought of her as a mate. She felt the warm soft wash of a tongue where her neck met her collarbone, and heard a pleading little whine escape the wolf's throat. Christine suddenly felt her blood begin to boil, and she turned over to yell, to smack him across the nose, to get him to leave her along.



She stopped, mouth open, as her eyes connected with Tyr's gaze.

He lay beside her, staring at her intently, ears forward and alert to any response. He wasn't afraid of her, wasn't needy, or wild or mean. She saw the humanity, the emotion in his eye, and she felt something touch her at her deepest parts, something unfamiliar. This wasn't love. No. Not human love in any sense of the word. But she could feel the connection, the bond. As clearly as if there was a rope strung between the two of them to keep them together. Air caught in her throat as he pushed his muzzle forward, whining softly, and lapped a tear from her cheek with his broad pink tongue. Affection. It was affection he was showing now, as he knew that something was wrong with her. Christine put out a hand and moved it in a caress down the wolf's face. This was emotion. Not just sexual attraction. This was a bond, an affection, and a spiritual connection that could not be defined in human terms or feelings. It was strong, and it was real. And she knew that Tyr could feel it, which was enough.

Tyr would never be able to express human love to her, nor would she be able to express it in full to him. But the emotion and caring felt between them would be something no one else would be able to touch or understand. It didn't need words, or a name. It just was.

Christine, fresh tears starting from her eyes, moved her face forward until her nose was touching Tyr's, then gently gave him a kiss on the soft part of his muzzle. He licked the spot where her lips had been, and stopped whining. She smiled at this and sighed. When she lowered her head to the pillow and closed her eyes, listening to Tyr breathing softly beside her, sleep came far more easily.

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Chapter 11 - March

Things were completely different for the next week or so. There wasn't as much of an intense fire or passion between the two, as there had been before, but Christine ceased to care about that aspect of their relationship. If the sex happened, it happened, and when it did she enjoyed it thoroughly, she didn't deny that. But most of the time, it was just them being naturally together, eating together, playing in the yard, or sitting by the fire while Christine read to the wolf. She loved how he listened, ears perked, as if he was intently interested in the story. And that was all she really needed.

What had settled into place beside, or even over, the raw sexual desire that had been there before, was one of content. It was if Tyr and Christine had broken down a wall, and although the two could not communicate as human lovers would, they had come to accept it and were all right. They were happy to simply be in each other's presences and enjoy the time they spent, and for a week of Christine's life, she was happier than she had ever been in her life. When she lay down to bed at night beside her wolf companion, she was overcome by a feeling of connection and safety that she had never known before. She always slept with a smile on her lips.

But spring was coming, and the snow was melting quickly away. Mud took place of dusty white, and the hail and sleet became cold rain. Christine could distinctly feel the change in seasons with each passing day, and somewhere deep in the pit of her stomach, for what reason she knew not, she dreaded it.

Things were changing.

It was windy the night she heard it, so she wasn't completely sure at first what the sound had been. It may have been that somewhere in the back of her mind she knew right away what it was, but she

hadn't wanted to admit it. She had been eating dinner with Tyr lying by her feet lapping at a rib bone she had tossed him as a treat, listening to the wind whistle by the windowpanes. Then, it seemed to her, the wind changed slightly, like it got lower in tone. It was a strange haunting sound, and she stopped eating to listen, trying to guess what in the world she'd just heard.

If she wasn't sure what she had heard, at least Tyr was certain. His ears stood straight up on his head and he left off licking the bone. His gold eye locked on the front window by the couch, and with a hasty scramble of claws on hardwood, he leapt up and bounded to the other room. Christine too stood, as the sound came again. A strange, ghostly swirl of noise that echoed up from somewhere deep and meaningful, blending with the wind, but now discernable as what it was.

It couldn't be...this early?

"What is it Tyr?" she asked him, already fairly sure what the answer was.

She went to the other room to find Tyr standing up on the sofa; his front paws on the windowsill and his breath making a white cloud on the glass. Occasionally, she could see his chest stop moving, as if he was holding his breath to hear better. She knelt on the sofa beside him and put a hand to the cold misty glass. It was raining outside, she hadn't noticed before, and there was a soft tumbling drum beat sounding outside from the raindrops. Above it rose a call.

A wolf call.

Another answered it, then another, blending and writhing together like beasts in death throws of agony. It was absolutely beautiful.

Christine heard Tyr whine helplessly next to her and she put out a hand, without looking, to rest on the back of his head. Her fingers found the black fur and she wound them into it, holding gently and loving the warmth in her palm from his neck. He shifted a little under her hand and her grip loosened. He whined again and looked at her with a pleading gold eye.

"I know boy," she murmured. "I know."

She brought her fingers down the window glass, watching the clear streaks they made against the mist. She remembered sitting in her room, doing this exact thing almost a year ago. Alone. A strange feeling caught in her throat and she swallowed it hard. Things had changed so much in a year.

Again came the call and she could hear that they were closer now. That they were coming, calling to each other to show the way. They were early and perhaps the rain was driving them on, forcing them to seek shelter by her house. Ignoring the cold, she put her forehead to the glass and strained her eyes into the darkness, wishing beyond wish that she had the eyes of her canine companion. Tyr too was making a small clear spot on the glass where he was pressing his nose to the window, snuffling loudly and shifting his weight quickly, nervously, from paw to paw like a racehorse at the starting gate.

"Where are they?" whispered Christine, voicing both her and Tyr's feelings. "Where are they..."

In the darkness she saw a shadow shift. Nothing more than moonlight playing a trick on the eyes, nothing more than her porch lights glancing off the rain. But it was there. Every muscle in Tyr's body went taught and she could feel the raw power and tension coiling up beside her. She had no doubt in her mind that if he leapt forward he would break through the glass. Christine too felt something awaken inside her. Something primal. It was very much the way she'd felt when her father had first pointed out the wolves to her. She felt magical.

Wisps of moonlight continued to dance across her front yard, weaving in and out, searching for dry ground. One stopped in the center of the yard, and she heard Tyr whimper a needy and reverent whimper. A set of gold green eyes fixed on the window, staring at the two small faces on the glass. Christine met those eyes unafraid, knowing that she did so with another, gold eye. She put her palm flat against the glass, trying to absorb more of that magic she was feeling.

The moonlight spirit's eyes broke from her gaze as the head tipped back, far back, and the mouth opened to release that chilling call, that flawless, mimic-less howl. Other wisps stopped and more calls flew into the sky, swirling around her house like a drunken melody. Tyr, without hesitation now, let his ears flatten against his neck and pointed his nose towards the ceiling. His mouth opened his white teeth protruding below his upper lip. A sharp, gut wrenching howl, the lonely, strained one that Christine had first heard, exploded from his throat till it was all Christine could hear. She had never seen him call like that, and she watched him, envious but also so proud. The touched her face to find tears on her cheeks but a smile on her lips.

"Welcome back," she whispered into the dying tones of Tyr's howl. "We've missed you."

In the next month, Christine knew that the wolves' return could mean a million and a half things, or more. Tyr could rejoin them, or they could reject him, or he could reject them. Tyr's presence could drive them away, and she couldn't even begin to guess what their being there could do to her emotionally. But at that exact moment, none of that mattered. Not even a little. None of the turmoil, none of the future or possible problems were important at that moment. All that was important was that they were here now, and that they were calling...and that Christine and Tyr were both so happy.

The year before, she'd felt ashamed to call with the wolves when they howled, and had blushed deeply when one had caught her at it. It hadn't seemed right to her, hadn't been her place to join them. But now, as the pack again called into the night, and Tyr answered them, Christine mingled her voice with theirs in absolute abandon.

Christine sat on a small bench on her front porch. The rain had stopped some time during the late morning, and when she had awoken, she found the world in a state of rebirth. The sun, dormant behind clouds for so many days, had emerged to give life to the wet red earth of the ranch. The chickens were squawking and making generally nervous noises from their place over in the barn, and the faint sound of meadow birds floated across the world to meet Christine's ears. Dew and remnants of last night's rain dripped steadily from the edge of the roof, collecting in little puddles on the edge of the porch.

She had not slept much the night before, but that was generally to be expected. There was a lot she had to think about, now that the pack had returned to her home. Their presence, while it made her nervous, was exciting because it meant so many new things. It meant a change was coming, and as scary as that could be, it also gave her the kind of thrill she might have gotten had she been a child about to board a roller coaster for the first time.

For now, she was content to sit on the front porch by herself and keep Tyr inside. Once she'd calmed herself a little, gotten a better idea of what the pack was like now, she might let him out to reunite with his old family or friends. She had realized that she did not know if he was actually related to anyone in the pack, or if he had just joined them on a whim, lonely and in desperate need of food. If the latter was true, it was unlikely that he would be so readily welcomed back. He could be attacked, even killed! And that was not a chance she was willing to take. So she waited there, absolutely still, waiting for the group to become accustomed to her presence and venture out to the yard.

Tyr scratched at the door, from the inside, and Christine heard him whine pleadingly. She smiled sadly and glanced to the shut door, glad now that she had not installed any sort of dog door as a gift for him during Christmas.

"Sorry Tyr," she said with a sigh. "But you gotta stay in."

Another whine.

"I know I know," she said, arguing more with herself than with him. "They're your pack, I know. But it's safer this way. I'll let you out to meet eventually, and then everything will be fine."

She hoped desperately that this was not a lie.

It was getting on towards noon, and Christine was considering going to get eggs from the chicken coop for a breakfast or lunch, when at last the pack began to emerge. Christine had forgotten, till just that moment, that a year had past and that this meant the pups would now be grown up. But when she first saw a white, regal head appear above the line of red clay, she remembered.

Marie had been fluffy, catlike, delicate, and very very small when Christine had last laid eyes on her. While the catlike delicacy remained, the fluffy little puffball was no more. A long legged, thick-pawed wolf rose into her view, amber brown eyes shining out from black rims. Her ears, large and softly outlined twitched, searching for signs of danger before proceeding a little farther. Her long tail hovered barely an inch above the ground, unwilling to be marred by earth. Her coat was a shockingly gleaming white, and Christine wondered how on earth she kept it so clean, especially after the previous night's rain, but somehow she seemed to manage it. After a few steps more into daylight, Marie turned around to look behind her, waiting for the others to emerge.

A little breath caught in Christine's throat.

A shabbier white form, that of Tortuk, rose second into view. Christine was shocked at how old she looked in comparison to her daughter, and she noted to herself that Marie stood higher than her, in a place of power, and that Tortuk lagged behind a little. It was true that Majesty had not yet showed up, and Christine worried that, perhaps, he had not survived the winter.

Barley was still there, and he trotted up to sniff the ground in the nearby area. Close at his side was what Christine realized must be Teaspoon. He was bigger now and had long lean legs like his sister. His nose was narrow and long, like that of a fox, and his tongue still rolled out to one side when he moved. He looked as if he was in training by Barley on how to properly operate in the group, which wasn't a surprise. Teaspoon, once the grey rolling little klutz, now looked simply built for the hunt. Christine never would have guessed it upon first seeing him as a pup, but then again, she told herself, if there was one thing she had come to learn about both wolves and people, it was that appearances were absolutely deceiving.

She searched out the last pup, the one who had once looked like Cocoa. Perhaps he was with his father, she mused, remembering that he had seemed very similar to his father in personality at least. But he was absent as of yet. Sierra, still with her bent tail trotted forward to follow the sniffing barley and teaspoon. After her, Cocoa came forward, standing a little behind Marie, whining softly. Then, at long last, he was there.

A slim brown form, now visible gray highlights in his coat that he had likely inherited from his father, appeared. His eyes were set, calm, and stern, and his body stood high on thick strong legs. His tail moved briskly as he trod towards the group, a swish of brown and gray in the sunlight of the still wet day. His ears were tall and tipped with small tufts of brown fur like a bobcat, and when he

moved forwards, they lay flat against his neck, making his body seem streamline. He was beautiful.

But he was also alone.

No matter how she strained her eyes and waited, Majesty did not appear. She hoped, and waited, and wished, but it was no use, and she knew it all too well. He was gone. He had been very old, ancient even, she told herself, as she felt tears push their way into her eyes. And no wolf lives forever. It didn't matter so much that he was dead now, he'd had a good life! But no matter how she tried, how she wiped at her eyes, she couldn't keep at least one tear from falling for his loss.

"Who's that one dad?" She had asked one morning, pressing small hands against the glass of the window. Even as she had grown, even in to adult-hood, her hands had always remained so small, those of a child.

Her father came to the window and squinted into the yard.

"Where?"

"The big puppy, with the long legs."

He scratched at his stubbly chin and took a long hard look at the awkward puppy falling over legs and paws that were far to long and far to big for his body and chuckled.

"I dunno Chrissy. He seems to be growing fast though. Well, at least part of him is growing fast." He added the last part with a little more of a chuckle.

"Don't call me Chrissy dad," she said. "I'm not a little girl. I'm eighteen, call me Christine."

"Right, sorry Christine," he father said with a roll of her eyes. "I'll try to watch that."

Christine would have done anything to hear him call her Chrissy again now.

"So who is he?" she asked, leaning back against the window.

"I told you, I dunno," her father said.

"No number yet?"

"Nope," he said. "Have to check the radio tonight to find out. Promise I'll let you know tomorrow though."

"Ok."

The pair watched the pup trip over himself as he frisked about the legs of the older wolves and fell onto his face. He stood up slowly, a small brown smudge staining the gray of his nose and around one of his eyes. He licked his nose and shook his head sharply at the bitter taste of dirt. Christine's father laughed.

"Goofy little thing ain't he?" he said turning away from the window.

"I dunno," she said softly, smiling at the clumsy little wolf pup. "With those colors and his size, when he grows up, I bet he'll look kind of...you know...majestic."

Christine's father snorted and looked towards her with a grin.

"Majestic? That little screw up?" he said with a laugh. "That'll be the day."

The memory flooded out of her in another tear. She could have said she was being stupid, and that he was just a wolf and nothing to cry over, but she knew that wasn't the case with her anymore. It had been several nights where she had cried over a wolf in the past year, and she now felt some stronger, more personal connection to him, and found herself bitterly missing him now that he was gone.

Looking out onto the form of Freddie, Christine could see some of Majesty in his manner and stature. It was somehow comforting, and she felt the pain in her chest subside a little, and the tears stopped pushing forward in their desperate onslaught. At least he was carried on in some way, to his offspring, into the new alpha of the pack. Much to her shock, however, Freddie trotted right over to Marie and lowered his muzzle to lick under her chin. It was a sign of subservience, and as if that wasn't a clear enough sign, Marie took his muzzle in her mouth and he allowed her to do it.

"Well I'll be damned," she whispered in awe. "Marie....an alpha."

There was no denying it. She stood higher than all the others, did not whine or show fear or subservience. She was the queen of that pack, higher than her brothers, and the other members. It was such a shock that Christine just sat there a moment or two, watching the pack move about their surroundings, and then start to slowly move away from the yard.

Then she felt as if she was forgetting something and she snapped out of it. She looked after the retreating pack and counted them carefully. One other was missing. But who? Who else could have died or been separated from them while they were away from the ranch? It took a moment or two for her to realize her very blatant mistake.

Tyr. She was forgetting Tyr.

She laughed at herself briefly for having forgotten a wolf so important to her for so long. The loss of majesty still left a low burn in the pit of her stomach, though, so it would be understandable if she were distracted, but still. He was the wolf in the Druid pack most close to her own heart, and it had seemed unnatural to her mind that he not be out therewith the pack. She blinked, surprised at herself, and went over that thought again.

It was unnatural that he not be with the pack.

She had denied it, rethought it, and held Tyr back behind a door to keep him safe, she had said to herself. But no. It wasn't entirely for his safety. She knew she could scare the other wolves off fairly easily if things got bad, so there was no excuse there. It was because she was afraid of what it meant if the pack accepted him back. Honestly, it was a little frightening of a concept, simply because it was so unknown. But, she told herself, it was his life she was toying with by being selfish here. His family was there. Whatever happened with them, she would still love, him, and should not be protecting him from what could be a very good thing in his life. Besides, he loved her too. After a year, there had to be some loyalty there. She had fed him, cared for him, been a friend and even lover. So why not let him out into the sunlight? To his family?

As if on cue, she heard a pathetic sounding whine from her door. She stood, impulse pushing her forward, and walked forward. A little ways out, the pack stopped and turned ear and nose towards

the house, sniffing and focusing on the strange sounds and smells coming from that area. Christine put a hand on the front door, feeling the vibrations of Tyr scratching the wood behind it. She hesitated only a moment longer, then put her hand on the knob, swallowed hard, and turned it.

As if firing from a loaded gun, Tyr came springing out into the muted daylight. His first instinct, it seemed, was directed at Christine, and he leapt up around her knees, whining and licking the air. She realized, with a small wistful smile, that outside time for Tyr had come to mean playtime, with a ball smelling strangely of meat or bitch in heat (She had ended up using the urine she'd bought for Christmas for the suggested purpose.) But she knew this would soon wear off, and she did not respond to Tyr's friskiness. She counted quietly backwards from three, and sure enough, the other wolves caught Tyr's attention before she had reached one.

Tyr's body went stiff and his ears thrust themselves forwards atop his black head. His tail stopped wagging and seemed to point straight backwards, and his nose began to twitch violently, the only part of him still moving. He hardly seemed to breathe. The other wolves too had gone still. Upon Tyr's initial presence they had all simultaneously winced and jerked towards the open earth, as if to run away. But perhaps a wolf smell, even a familiar wolf smell, had made them curious, and now they all stood together, silent, observing the newcomer with wide eyes and open ears. Marie had her head down, shoulders up, and her entire body seemed to be bristling, but she made no direct move or attack...yet. Christine felt her chest tighten.

Every person involved remained still for what felt like an eternity, testing the airwaves and vibes of the situation, before anyone acted. When at last there was movement, it was from Tyr.

His posture drooped, and his tail began to wag gently, and a low whine escaped him. His ears lay down, relaxed, against his head, and licking his muzzle, he trotted forwards towards the group. While Marie still stayed utterly still, a few other wolves, Barley for one, trotted out to meet him, also whining and licking. They sniffed each other, and tails went up as the "Who are you? What's that interesting smell?" instinct spread through the group. In truth, Christine smelled something too, but suspected she was just getting drawn in and living vicariously through her black furred friend. There was no biting, though a few made passes at Tyr's muzzle with their mouths. He allowed none of them to take hold, and while he did not make any aggressive assertions of authority, he was subservient to no one.

Christine noticed, with mild satisfaction, how different he looked compared to the other wolves. While they looked leaner, probably fitter, his coat was glossy, thick, and unmarred by dirt or wound. He looked so much healthier compared to the lot of them, now that she had something to compare him to. She had done her job well, she thought to herself with a smile. The only mark on Tyr, besides his jagged ear, was the dark empty hole on one side of his face. But, she told herself, scars were sexy anyway.

A flicker of white appeared, streaking across her vision, and her smile dropped. Marie came forward in two short bounds, standing tall in front of the other wolves. They licked under her chin, whined, and wriggled their bodies and backed away slightly as she came. Hail to the queen, Christine thought. Marie stood, nearly nose to nose with Tyr, looking him squarely in the eye. A challenge, in wolf speak, Christine said to herself with a gulp. And she looked in peak condition. However, Tyr stared right back with his golden eye, and when she reached for his muzzle, to tell him she was boss, he tossed his head away with a short growl.

Christine held her breath and prepared to rush in to stop the fight.

But to her surprise, Marie did not attack, and neither did Tyr. They observed the other for one moment longer, and then Tyr's tail slowly wagged into motion, his nose moving too, smelling something interesting. He took a short bound back and let out a muted growl, lowering his upper body, before darting out to nip at one of Marie's ears. Marie too took a stride back, but seemed less than annoyed. She snapped at his cheek when he did it again and spun away from him, rearing up on two legs briefly before dropping into more of a crouch, her tail wagging too. This was not fighting behavior...play?

Were they really playing?

After a few seconds more, there was no doubt in Christine's mind that they were merely playing with each other. Marie was little more than a year old, and Tyr had gotten so used to play by now that she probably should have expected it. She watched with an ever growing smile as the two romped around her yard, barking and snapping, slipping and falling down only to get up and lunge at each other. Some of the others joined in too, playfully attacking Tyr or each other, caught up in the spirit of the moment. Christine couldn't help but laugh.

It had been far too long since Tyr had been away from his own kind, and she could only imagine the joy he was feeling right now. That, and the dignified little Marie, acting in such a manner, was a sight she had thought she would never see. These two things alone brought her joy.

Then she began to notice something that made a sort of slithering sensation in the pit of her stomach and she felt the joy leave her. Tyr, in his nippings, was slowly growing closer to the back of Marie's ivory neck, and his front paws often left the ground to rest briefly on her shoulders or back. The memories of her father's teachings rushed back in an instant, dragged up from the pits of her mind by what she was seeing. This wasn't just puppy-like play. It was the equivalent of flirtation, of foreplay. A mating dance. Something black and cold wove itself around her heart, and she suddenly felt very sick, as if she were about to throw up. She watched, unable to say or do anything, as the two continued their alluring play.

"No..." at last she murmured, but still made no move.

Two halves of her brain stirred and readied themselves for battle inside her. Logic, emotion, both armed to the teeth and ready for a fight. It began instantly, as Christine realized the situation she was really in.

In a very human sense, she was watching her lover hit on another woman, something that was considered and inexcusable taboo in society. But she had strayed long ago out of that world, the moment she had made Tyr her bedmate, so she would have to consider it differently, with different rules. Of course, her initial instinct was to rush in and tear the two apart, post haste! But there was another thing to consider here, and that was Tyr's welfare. The fact was, Marie was a wolf, and Christine was not. As far as the natural order of things went, the answer was pretty clear. Tyr's natural instinct was to mate with Marie, and nothing more could be expected from him as far as loyalty to Christine. Still, there was a part of her still nagging.

Tyr was her lover. HER love. Well, if she loved him, wouldn't she want what was best for him? What about THEM, what about their relationship, their bond? It had existed, truly and deeply, and it likely still did exist, but here was what she had been hoping for all along. The pack accepting Tyr back, him even getting a chance to mate with the alpha female! If she loved him wouldn't she want that for him? And besides, Marie could give him something she never could.

Puppies.

Christine had mused over the idea of giving birth to Tyr's young one day, and had very much liked the concept. She had always wanted to be a mother at some point, and was deeply in love and devoted to Tyr, but she knew it was impossible. She could never give him an heir, never know that the two of them had children to go after them. On some level, they were from entirely different worlds, and as much love as they shared, the distance between them in that respect would never change. She looked over at the happy, playing couple, feeling her eyes grow hot and wet.

So what was this? Goodbye? Was she really saying goodbye to Tyr, who she'd spent the better part of the last year with? Just like that? She didn't say it, didn't admit it, but she could feel burning, like acid, all through her body, and she didn't need words to tell her what the answer was. She blinked hard and sniffed back any sign of the sadness she was feeling. Be happy for him Christine, she told herself. Pick yourself up and put on a smile. This is a happy day in his life, even if this is a sad day in yours.

Just as she thought this, Tyr made another small leap at the back of Marie's neck and this time one paw crossed over the shoulder and his jaws found gentle hold just long enough for Marie to get the message of what was going on. She stood still, braced her two legs apart, and shifted her tail away, to give him better access, and stopped nipping back at him. Tyr pawed at her with the other foot, trying to find hold, then swung his lower body around behind her, the pink tip of his eager member already visible. Christine watched, somehow unable to look away from the spectacle, a feeling of sickness spreading slowly over her, as Tyr thrust his hips forward again and again, with surprising force and rhythm, trying to find his mark, that sweet spot amidst the snowy white fur.

At last, he found it.

Christine had never been in front of a mirror or video camera when she and Tyr had mated, and some sense of morbid fascination took over as he observed the black wolf at work. His tail came up, bobbing like a black victory flag as his hips worked, flying forward and back with incredible and almost terrifying speed. She could see the muscles of his lower back and legs working hard beneath the black fur, and noted the way Marie leaned back into the thrusts with something like relief spreading across her face. Christine briefly allowed herself to imagine herself beneath Tyr, what it must have looked like that night, the first time the two had ever been joined in that way. His legs digging into the sheets while his front paws firmly gripped Christine's hips. Him, thrusting into her while she moaned his name endlessly, Tyr....Tyr...But then she was back, watching Tyr breed Marie, mouth open and laid happily across the other wolf's white back. She felt sick.

After another moment, Tyr's strokes slowed and he straightened up a little on her back. Marie yelped and spun, trying to lick at the source of her pain. Christine remembered the pain of tying with Tyr, and envied the younger wolf, as she knew, somehow, that she had never been bred by anyone before. Tyr dismounted, raising his back leg expertly over Marie's back and setting it down so they were rump to rump. They both stood there, panting, connected. Mates.

It was done.

Christine turned, not saying a word to her companion, but letting him bask in the afterglow of his deed. There was no sense in ruining it for him. She now felt the unwanted tears stream down her cheeks, relentless, hated with every drop that fell. She was so weak. She already missed him. She went slowly into the house, not looking back, leaving the pair well tied in her backyard.

Later that night, she heard a faint scratching, a whimpering outside the house. She lay in bed and listened a moment to the urgent, insistent whine from the front door with an odd mix of emotions filling her. Sadness? Longing? Bitterness? It didn't matter.

"I'm sorry Tyr," She whispered into the air. "You're a wild animal now, and wild animals sleep outside my love."

She heard another whimper in response to this silent refusal.

"I'm sorry," she said again, and turned over to face the closed window, urging herself to sleep. "Goodbye."