



Seeonee

As I came out of the tree-line of the forest, I was stopped by a fast flowing river in front of me. Eager to finally take the load off of my aching legs, I sat down on a fallen tree-trunk with a deep sigh. After checking the bruises I got in the car crash, my eyes were caught by various items, carelessly scattered around the forest floor.

Annoyed about the scattered mess of what looked like an abandoned make-shift camp, I shook my head. My eyes wandered off to what seemed to be a cage, about 10 meters from where I was. While wondering how that got here in the middle of nowhere, curiosity got the better of me. I stood back up and shook both my legs a bit, getting rid of the cramped feeling in my thighs and calves. As I approached the structure, I saw that it consisted of barred panels bolted together, of which one had a door with a padlock.

I must have been about three meters away from the cage when I saw two bright eyes staring right at me from behind the barred panels. I froze dead in my tracks.

The afternoon sun caused a soft shine on the pitch-black pelt of a huge panther, locked up in the cage. I clenched my jaw, "Poachers."

The feline predator sat there motionless, staring right into my eyes. Startled and feeling wary, I kept my distance. But the panther didn't show any apparent signs of aggression.

Suddenly, the panther's gaze shifted slightly towards a point to the right of my head.

A hard thud against my lower back made me slam into the steel bars of the cage. Before I could turn around, A second blow hit me against the exact same spot, followed by a third to the back of my head. Numb, my knees gave way and I collapsed onto the forest floor.

A pair of hands grabbed my arms, and a sudden jerk pulled me away from the cage and rammed me against a tree, knocking the air out of my lungs.

A few seconds later, what seemed to be a heavy blunt object struck my ribs at the right side of my torso. The pain in my entire body was overwhelming.

Unable to breathe, I fell onto the ground.

I heard shouting in a language that I could not understand. My head was spinning.

Two arms reached around my waist, and pulled me upright.

A hard slap against one of my cheeks. Another one, followed by words angrily yelled at me.

I opened my eyes. After a few seconds, the world came back in focus.

More yelling. I inhaled, and managed to utter an "I can't understand what the fuck you're saying!" loud enough for the person in front of me to stop his rage.

All of a sudden, the two arms holding my body moved up to my neck.

"Shut up, filthy foreigner!", I heard in a thick accent behind me. The hands squeezed down, making it almost impossible for me to breathe.

"You want to steal our animal, you will pay for that!", the man in front of me shouted. He punched me right against the sore spot in my ribs. I hoarsely cried out.

"You filthy pig. You get what you deserve!" Yet another slap against my face. "Stay awake! Not sleep!"

I saw the blinding reflection of the sun coming off of the blade of a huge knife held in front of me. The arms around my neck squeezed down even tighter.

"Now I will make you awake, pig", the poacher in front of me snarled.

While panicking, I tried to break free from the other poacher holding my neck.

Two quick cold swipes went across my chest, like two bolts of lightning, followed by a stinging, sharp pain. In a flash I saw two long cuts across my chest with blood oozing out.

I tried to gasp for breath, but the grip around my neck was too tight.

A third slash went across my lower abdomen.

"I gut you!", the poacher in front of me shouted in bad English.

"This only play! Here, look at what you tried to steal from us! I cut you open and you can die knowing why!"

Finally, I managed to get air in my lungs as the hands around my neck let go of their strangling grip. My wrists were pulled behind my back, I was bent over, and pushed back towards the cage. The poacher holding me maneuvered me in front of the metal bars. The felines pupils moved back and forth between me and the poachers. His lips curled up in a snarl. Then his eyes met mine. Despite my agony, I could not help but wonder what the feline was thinking. "Time to die, thief!", one of the poachers yelled. I felt a blow to my left thigh. "First your leg, filth!", the poacher in front of me screamed. Looking down, I saw part the blade disappearing into my jeans, and my left thigh. As that happened, time slowed down. The overwhelming pain numbed down to a background hum. The panic and fear were put on pause as if it was a movie. In what seemed to take forever, my eyes went up from my left leg until they met those of the poacher. The strongest, most blinding feeling of intense hate and anger I've ever experienced rose in me. I pushed up with both my legs. In slow motion, I saw both of my feet floating in mid-air as I directed them to my intended target, using the body of the other poacher as pivot. A torrent of immense, adrenaline induced strength emerged from the base of my spine. A split second later, the heels of my boots came into contact with the chin of the poacher. Teeth shattered and bones snapped as the poacher's head slammed against the steel bars of the cage. The lifeless body collapsed onto the ground like a bag of flour.

With a jerk I released myself from the grip of the other poacher. In a haze, I felt one of his fists hitting my neck. Before he could extend his other arm to strike, I launched myself again, with another burst of strength fueled by the adrenaline, and the steel-capped front of my right boot struck the larynx of the second poacher. While I landed back onto my feet, I saw him falling backwards onto the ground. His eyes glazed over as the final lungful of air made its gurgling way out of his bloody mouth.

My heart pounded in my throat and head as I stood there motionless, looking to the lifeless body in front of me. I turned around and looked to the other body on the ground in front of the cage, The head in a twisted, awkward position. Eyes still open, a thick puddle of dark-red blood out of the torn open mouth. The full reality of what I had done appeared to me as the adrenalin rush died away. I felt my heart throbbing in my head, in every limb, and my wounds as the pain came back. Numbed, I staggered to the nearest tree to lean against, and covered my eyes with both my hands, feeling sick. My eyes slowly opened, meeting the felines again. The panther stood there without moving or twitching a muscle. I felt a throbbing in my left leg. There was a four centimeter long wound consisting of torn threads of denim caused by the serrated edge of the blade mixed in with shredded tissue and blood. I staggered towards the knife on the ground and picked it up. I looked at the blade covered in my blood. With an angry grunt, I rammed the knife into a tree. There was no way that I could leave those corpses lying there. At best, they'd be ripped apart and eaten by predators, the remains scattered around the area. At worst, they'd be discovered by locals. I took a deep breath and grabbed the legs of the body near the cage. Without paying further attention to it, I turned around and dragged it to the river. With a big splash, the life-less mass of meat and bones disappeared under the white foam of the turbulent water. Minutes later, the second followed. I walked back to the cage. Despite knowing that the bodies would be discovered sooner or later, I

felt a strange sense of relief. I just hoped it would be after a good few days. They'd be so unrecognizable because of the water and decomposition that identification would take weeks.

The black panther looked at me, and I sighed.

Even if it could mean the end of me, I could not leave the animal locked up.

The odds of my survival in this forest were slim with the punishment my body had received anyway, I figured. I did not know if I had any internal injuries, and the cuts in my chest and lower abdomen would soon get infected. Not to mention the deep wound in my left thigh. If that panther would decide to take its anger out on me, I would at least be spared a slow and agonizing death.

After quickly checking on the padlock, my eyes scoured the area looking for any usable tools that I could use to force it open with. I noticed a crow-bar standing up against a rock. I positioned one end of it between the shank and the main body of the padlock.

I braced myself, and started to pull and yank with my right arm.

Just as the shank started to budge a bit, I lost all strength. A sharp pain coming from my ribcage forced me down on my knees. Cursing and yelling, I sank against the cold steel bars.

After the pain subsided, I became aware of rhythmic drafts of warm air onto the bare skin of my left shoulder.

I looked to my upper left.

Only inches away on the other side of the steel bars, the big black panther stood right over me. His huge paws in between the bars almost touching me.

I wondered what was going on. This wasn't the kind of behavior that I expected from a captured wild animal. For a few moments, I expected sharp claws to dig into the flesh of my shoulders and a set of sharp teeth into my neck at any time. But nothing happened. Again, the cat sought eye contact with me.

I've seen big cats before, in a zoo. Lions, tigers, cougars, cheetahs. Also other panthers. I've been stared into the eye before. But this just felt and seemed different for some reason. Convinced that I was just imagining things, I inhaled, grabbed a bar with my left hand and pulled myself back up onto my feet. I placed the crowbar back under the shank. One final violent jerk by my left arm was more than the padlock could take, and it snapped. I pried the lock further open until it fell onto the ground.

After I opened the slide-lock, I swung open the metal door. With a loud clank, it hit the metal panel. I stepped back a few paces as the panther walked into the opening.

I threw the crowbar away. I had little desire to use it in defense. I was hurting, I was tired, I was done. I didn't care.

The black cat leaped out, and slowly walked in my direction without taking his eyes off of me.

He stopped right in front of me and eyed me over. I followed his eyes. Only now I realized how bad my injuries truly were. The cuts over my chest and stomach were bleeding badly. My entire upper body and my arms were covered in blood. The left leg of my jeans was stained dark red. A huge dark black and blue patch covered the right half of my torso.

If the panther would go for me, it would be over very quickly.

I turned around and staggered away. Nothing happened. I stumbled to where the fireplace was to search for something that I could use to clean myself with and cover my wounds.

"Where are you going?", a male voice asked.

I stopped and turned around in shock, expecting to see another poacher. Or maybe even police or some other kind of local law enforcement. However, there was no one. Just the panther who had followed me and was standing behind me.

"Yes, it's me", the black feline said with a nod.

I took a step back, trying to convince myself that I did hear and see what I just saw and heard.

"How... My mind must be playing tricks on me, right?", I hoarsely said, assuming it was some kind of hallucination.

"No. It's really me speaking to you, in your tongue", he answered. "It's a skill we've mastered in the

past. Now, where do you think you are going?"

I hesitated for a few seconds before replying, "Away from here, and I urge you to do the same."

The panther tilted his head.

"I got you out of that cage. Appreciate your freedom and get the hell out of here, back to where you came from."

Before the feline could respond, I turned around again.

With an agile leap, the black panther jumped past, and landed in front of me.

"And you really think I'd let you simply die here after you've saved my life? You need tending to, and a safe place to heal and rest. And I am going to make absolutely sure that is exactly what will happen."

I cynically scoffed, looking at the feline in disbelief. "You would be wasting your effort. Look at me! If I'm not found and killed by any compatriots of that scum, I'll die here from my injuries. Little you can do about that."

"Listen", he said, "Not too far from here, there's a place where you can safely lay in hiding. I have friends there who'll be more than willing to help look after you", the black feline replied.

I sighed and shook my head, "Humans? A hospital?"

"No, not really. We tend to stay away from human population. For obvious reasons, as you've just witnessed and experienced yourself. Now, please come with me."

I tried to gather my thoughts for a moment, but quickly came to the conclusion that either way, I had nothing to lose. "I have to see if I can find something useful first. Like a shirt to cover my chest with." I walked towards the fire pit.

There was a back-pack lying amongst the rubble. Inside was a black shirt and a worn out jacket.

Quickly, I put them on. I felt how the dry fabric of the T-shirt soaked up the sticky blood on my skin. "This is going to be hard to get off", I grumbled to myself.

A large leather belt with a knife sheath was hanging from the back-rest of one of the chairs. I grabbed it and realized that it was for the knife I was stabbed with. After strapping it around my waist, I pulled the knife out of the tree.

"You humans and your weapons", the panther sighed while shaking his head.

"Hey, I didn't come into this world packed with a set of claws, jaws and sharp teeth like you, you know."

"Well, judging from what I saw earlier, you managed perfectly fine without", the panther replied with a toothy grin.

"Yeah, and if I had this to defend myself with, they might not have been able to almost kill me in the first place", I angrily replied.

The black feline looked at me for a little while and slowly nodded his head.

I sighed, "I just lost it and before I knew it, both of them were lying dead on the ground."

"Survival instinct. Fight or flight response. It's rooted deeply in the instincts of most living creatures. Being a predator myself, I see it every time I hunt for prey. Though what I prey on tends to be a whole lot less lethal than you." He softly nudged my arm with his snout, "Now, let us go."

The entire front of the shirt already was soaked in blood. I zipped up the jacket and tried to put it out of my head. I followed the panther back into the forest.

After what felt like a full hour, I had to stop to catch my breath. My throat was dry, my head was spinning, and my legs almost gave way. I sat down and leaned back against a rock. My body felt like a dead, lead weight. The draft of warm, moist air coming out from the jacket was heavy with the sweet, metallic scent of my blood. In an attempt to make the world stop spinning, I closed my eyes and rested my head against the thick, soft moss which was growing in abundance on the surface.

A nudge of the panther's nose against my right cheek woke me back up. I struggled to open my eyes.

"The scent of your blood is thick. You've lost a lot. We must hurry", the panther said. "We're almost there."

I grabbed a thick branch with my left arm and pulled myself back onto my feet. Though when I was back upright, the blood rushed out of my head, making me lose my balance and fall over. The jolt of immense pain as my body hit the rock-face brought me to. After a few minutes of cursing and grunting, my ears picked up what sounded like wolves howling. I held my breath as best as I could and listened.

With my face in a grimace, I stumbled, "Wolves!?"

The direction the howling seemed to be coming out of was down-wind from where we were. I reached down to my lower left for the knife.

"Please don't. It's the pack", the panther said.

"What? THE pack? They're down-wind. Even I can smell my blood. Let alone those wolves."

"Yes, they've picked up our scent. That is why you need not worry. They know we're here. Even IF you were alone, we all live by a code. No one breaks the code. We do not harm humans. Now put that knife away and don't worry."

I hesitated.

I heard footsteps approach and saw the shapes of three wolves appear from in between the trees.

"Bagheera!", one of them exclaimed, "Where have you been? You had us all worried sick. We thought you died!"

The panther walked forwards towards the large, blue-black furred wolf who had just called out. They both greeted each other, rubbing their cheeks together and licking each other's muzzles.

"Well, you are horribly close to being right, Alexander", Bagheera replied as he sat down in front of the three lupines.

The two others, one with an even red coat and the other being half beige, half black also greeted the black cat.

"Hey Bagheera. It's so good to see you back again", the beige black wolf said.

"The feeling is all mutual, Sura." The panther smiled softly.

"We searched for you for ages!", the red-furred wolf sighed.

"I was captured, Lala" Bagheera said.

The red wolf turned her head and looked at me.

She saw the knife in my hand and smirked, "Do you really think you would stand a chance against us, you silly human? The air is saturated with the scent of your blood!"

She ominously stared at me, and took a few paces in my direction.

"Lala, stand down!", Alexander snarled.

Lala huffed and stopped.

I pushed myself away from the rock-face, and tried to keep a straight and stoic face. But my head began to spin again. Suddenly it was as if the ground sank away underneath me, and everything turned black.

When I came to, A big red furred paw was pushing down on the wrist of my left arm, with which I was still holding the knife. I looked up and saw the red furred wolf and the beige black wolf towering over me.

Alexander, the black and blue furred wolf, calmly walked up and sat down.

"Do not worry. We will not harm you if you won't harm us", he reassured.

I pushed myself back upright. Lala lifted her paw off of my wrist and I pulled my jacket back slightly to sheath the knife.

"Now, what brings you to this part of the forest? The nearest human settlement is days away", Alexander asked.

"I... got lost", I stumbled.

"You surely got that right", Lala smirked.

"It's because of him that I made it back, Alexander", Bagheera replied. "He saved my life, almost at the cost of his own. He's badly hurt and needs a place to lay down low and recover."

The wolf hummed softly, "I see", and he stared into the void for a few moments. "Then you deserve

our deepest gratitude, human. Bagheera has been with my pack for as long as I can remember. He's a much loved and appreciated member. We would be lost without him." He looked back at me, "It's not much further to where we live. You're already in our territory. Come with us."

"Helping me is a waste of your effort, wolf. You've seen my injuries. Seeing what those poachers did to Bagheera, I am surprised he did not finish me off, since I'm just another human. Not that this matters. In the state I am in, I'll be dead soon anyway."

Alexander shook his head, "You are not dead. You probably would be if we were to leave you here out on your own. But you have saved Bagheera. He now owes you a life debt, so has to protect you. We, as members of the same pack, have to respect that and help him in any way possible. This means that I will not allow you to be left unattended in your condition. So because of that all, and as of now, I declare you a member of my pack. Pack-law dictates that all pack-members must obey the alpha-wolf's orders at all time. I am the alpha-wolf of this pack. So I order you to come with us. Simple."

I looked at Alexander for a while wondering about what he just said was meant seriously or not. I lifted myself back up, loudly cursing at the crippling pain in my right side. Sura nose-nudged at the spot, "What is hurting you so much?"

I pulled up my shirt slightly, exposing the black spot on my right flank.

"That looks very serious", Alexander worriedly said. "Where is that from?"

"I got kicked in my ribs. I think they're broken."

"Kicked?", the wolf asked and turned to Bagheera, "Other humans?"

The feline sighed. "Later, if you don't mind. I suggest we get him someplace safe first."

After a little while, the forest opened up to a clearing. There were a few boulders here and there. Paw prints were everywhere in the patches of sand which were without a cover of grass, or other kinds of vegetation.

Other wolves stopped dead in their tracks and stared at us in surprise when we came walking by.

"Welcome to the pack", Alexander said. "This is where our dens are. I'll get you a place where you can rest later on."

I looked around, "Is there somewhere I can wash? I really need to clean all that blood off of myself."

"Sure, there's a stream with a small waterfall close by", Alexander replied. He walked ahead.

"Come, follow me, I'll show you."

"I am going to check on mother and Akru, father", Sura said and ran off.

We walked around some larger rocks, and through a dense brush. The hole in there clearly was wolf-sized. Barely managing, I had to get down on my knees and slowly make my way through. On the other side, there was a small beach, well used judging from the numerous paw prints. To the left, there was a water-fall, which was not taller than two or three meters. It fell into a narrow stream, which opened up into a small lake. A few big rocks littered the ground.

I sat down on one of them. Lala, Alexander and Bagheera found a spot close by. I bent down over my shoes and took those and my socks off.

While tending to my feet, I heard rustling in the undergrowth. A snow-white wolf came walking through.

"Hey Luri, I want you to meet our latest pack member", Alexander said after greeting her.

"Sura has already told me, yes", the white wolf said as she walked over to me and sat down.

"You look like you've been through a lot. Your arms are all covered in blood! What happened to you?" she worriedly asked.

"I was in a fight", I softly replied.

"Go clean yourself up, my friend", Bagheera said. The cool water will probably do you a lot of good."

I stood up, unbuttoned the jeans and carefully pulled them down. As the wound on my left thigh was still moist, the denim did not stick to my skin. I sighed as I realized that this would be quite

different for the shirt.

After I took the jacket off, the thick, metallic sweet scent coming off of the blood-soaked T-shirt filled the air and almost made me gag.

The dried crusts of blood stuck to the cotton and peeled away when I slowly took the shirt off, releasing fresh gushes of the sticky liquid.

Finally, I took my under wear off and threw it onto the pile on the ground.

I stretched my arms and shivered as a cool breeze made the moist cuts sting.

The wolves all looked at me in silence for a few moments.

"Yes. Other humans", Alexander said with a soft sigh.

I walked underneath the cold waterfall. Unpleasant and even painful at first, but soon the discomfort went away and made place for soothing relief. I gently rubbed my chest, arms and legs and washed away all the dried blood.

After I was as clean as I could get and had quenched my thirst, I walked back to the rock where my clothing was, grabbed the pile, and washed them as best as I could.

The water had energized me and cleared my mind. I felt so much better without the sticky dried blood all over my skin.

I got back into my underwear, socks and jeans and sat back down on the soft grass.

A strange silence fell. I was relieved to see that the bleeding had mostly stopped. I ran my fingers over my sore ribs. I could barely touch the sensitive blackened spot without cringing.

"You must be in pain", Luri said while sniffing the black spot.

Alexander looked at Bagheera and me. "Now, please tell us what happened."

The cat took a deep breath.

"A few days ago, I was out hunting. Suddenly I felt a slight sting in my right thigh, and everything went black. When I woke up, I was in a cage. Two poachers got me with a tranquilizer, I realized. I could hear them discussing about how they would sell me to some other people from a village near by. I used to live with humans as you all know. I know very well what this would mean for me. I'd probably be killed and skinned. After about two days in that cage, I saw him wandering around. He walked up to the cage I was in and we briefly looked at each other before... well... those two poachers got back."

Luri looked puzzled at me. "But what happened then? How did you get so badly injured? You told them to go away and set Bagheera free? Did you scare them away?"

I sighed, "No, not quite", and aimlessly looked straight ahead of me to the distorted reflection of the trees in the water. The sickening realization of what I had done just hit me.

The white wolf seemed to notice, and licked my left shoulder.

"Hey, you've saved Bagheera's life. What's there to be so troubled about?", Alexander wondered.

"Your wounds?", he asked.

"They both attacked me from the back when I was standing in front of that cage", I continued.

"They thought I wanted to steal Bagheera from them. They kicked me unconscious. They sliced my chest. Then they said they'd cut me open and kill me. They stabbed me in my left thigh. It was then that I..."

I balled my fists. "I killed them both. Kicked them to death. I was so angry that I could taste it. The pain just set me off in a rush. I threw their corpses into the river. I hope all traces will be erased by the water", I sighed, "If I'm to be found here, I would wish that I had died back there."

"I owe you my life, Bagheera said. "No one will even damage a hair on your body without having to go through me first."

"You killed in self-defense. Please don't feel bad about that. You were outnumbered", Alexander said softly. "But both... That is quite an achievement, I have to say."

"You should have seen him, Alexander", the black feline said, "I couldn't believe my eyes myself."

Tired, I leaned back against the rock and felt my eyelids getting heavy.

"I think this one is in need of a place to sleep", I heard Luri say in the distance.

I opened my eyes and felt it was getting chillier as daylight was fading away. Careful not to stand up as fast as before, I worked myself back on my feet.

The shirt was dry. The scent of my blood still lingered slightly, but most of it had washed out.

I put it and the jacket on and looked around wondering where I could find a place to sleep.

Digging out dirt, or making any kind of cover would be too much of an undertaking in the state I was in, I realized.

"Looking for a place to sleep?", Bagheera asked.

"Yeah. I guess somewhere under some thick undergrowth might be a good place", I yawned.

"Oh, but you're not sleeping out in the open", Luri concernedly said. "You need looking after."

Alexander smiled, "Yeah, you'll be sleeping in our den. You'll be safe and warm there. Nights do get chilly here, and you have no thick coat of fur like we do. Now, me and Bagheera need to get going. The pack needs us for the hunt."

Before I could say anything, the large blue and black wolf gracefully leaped off.

Bagheera rubbed his head against my left flank "Rest well, my human friend. I'll see you when we get back." And off went the panther as well.

"Come", the white she-wolf said to me. "You're coming too, Lala? We'll all sleep together."

This made me feel uneasy. It all seemed so surreal, as if in a vivid dream. In a moment I'd be waken up by my alarm.

Something grabbed me by my left wrist. Shocked out of the daze, I saw Lala tugging at my arm.

"Come, sleepyhead!", she said with a giggle.

The den's entry was located at the base of a steep slope, partially hidden behind a few bushes. Sura was lying in front of the den in wait and got up when he saw us approaching.

"Where is Akru?", Luri asked him.

"Father came and asked him to join the hunt", Sura disappointedly replied.

"Your time will come, just be patient", Luri said, while licking her son's muzzle. "It's time to go sleep."

Lala and Sura made their way into the den.

I looked at the dark hole in the earth. I just could not believe that I was about to spend the night in a wolf's den.

"Come on, what are you waiting for? Get inside with the rest", Luri urged me, nudging my arm with her nose.

I let myself down on all fours and dragged myself into the dark tunnel. It was a bit tight. But after about two meters it widened up on the sides. I could just about make out the shapes of the two other wolves, who were lying next to each other. Two pairs of glowing dots stared at me. I turned around and found a comfortable spot against the soft dirt which made up the wall of the den. The temperature was pleasant, the scent comfortably earthy. I took off my jacket, jeans and my shirt and lay on those. I'd rather give my wounds some fresh air for a little while. It also would be easier to warm up in the morning if I had some clothing to put on. I slowly stretched out and yawned.

Luri entered the den and lay down against the other two wolves.

My eyes had gotten used to the dark by now. Though grainy, I could see everything.

"You're going to stay there to sleep?" Sura asked. "Come here with us, you'll be warm."

Luri shifted towards and against me. A shiver ran down my spine as I felt her warm and soft fur against my skin.

She raised her head and started to lick me. "Don't isolate yourself. You're part of the pack, remember? You're as much of a wolf as the others now. Even if you look different. Now come and sleep with us", Luri whispered.

I rolled away from the den wall until I was next to Lala and Sura. Luri shifted back over and pushed me further against the two other wolves, who adjusted their position to accommodate me.

I found myself lying with my back against the white wolf, my upper body and head resting against her flank.

From the front, Lala and Sura both sprawled against me.

Warmly hugged between the three wolves, it didn't take long before sleep grabbed me, and pulled me under.

The next morning, the sun already was up by the time I woke up, casting a beam of light into the den.

Disoriented, I wondered where I was. Slowly I realized what had happened to me. A panicking sense of hopelessness got a hold of me. The paralyzing worry of what might happen to me as a consequence of me killing those two poachers got to me again, and made me gasp.

I sat up and looked around. Luri and Lala no longer were there. In stead, I saw Alexander lying next to me on one side, and a brown-beige coloured wolf on the other.

"You're finally awake eh", Alexander said with one eye open and a smile. "You were sleeping so deep that you did not even wake up when Akru and me returned. Luri joked how she wished Akru and Sura slept like that when they were cubs."

I tried to slow my breathing down.

"You're hurting?", he asked.

I rested my face in the palms of my hands for a moment and groaned. My right flank was very tender. I noticed that the spot had grown in size and got darker overnight.

Looking back up, I grunted. "Quite badly."

Alexander raised himself up and stood over me, sniffing at the cuts on my chest and the stab wound on my thigh.

"You're lucky. Your wounds don't smell infected."

"Those cuts aren't what's causing me pain."

The lupine now looked at the big black patch on my right flank and nodded.

"I can feel they're broken", I grumbled.

A few moments of silence followed.

"I just wish that I hadn't killed them", I sighed.

Alexander shook his head, "Look, I wasn't there. But judging from what you and Bagheera told me, neither you nor he would be here if you hadn't done what you did. You would have lost your life, and we would have lost Bagheera. It is how it is. They made the mistake of picking a fight they could not win. You won, they paid the price for losing. Simply the law of the jungle. That's what happens here all the time."

"It's not how I feel about it", I replied.

"Yes. Bagheera has told me all about human packs and their laws quite extensively. It just seems very awkward to me. But you're not there now. You're here, where different rules apply. Now, try not to worry", he said and licked my face. "We got back from hunting not too long ago. We need to rest some more. And you do look like you can use some more sleep too."

Alexander nudged my chest, gesturing me to lie back down with him.

Doing so, I exhaled, staring up to the roof of the den.

Akru crawled up against my right side and licked my cheek.

Alexander lay back down against my left side. I ended up with my head between his front paws. The large black and blue wolf rested his muzzle on top of my head. The soft, earthy scent of the thick fur, the sound of his breathing and heart beat quickly lulled me back to sleep.

"He's so fast asleep. Just like a cub", Lala giggled. Having very little desire to wake up with the comforting warmth of the soft fur all around me, I kept my eyes shut. But the tickling feeling of a warm tongue against my stomach made me twitch. I sleepily looked at Lala, "I don't think that I really look like a wolf-cub."

Luri continued licking my stomach and chest and said with a teasing smile, "Oh, but you can be my cub, even if you're all grown up."

"But I'm not a wolf either."

"Remember what I said before you went to sleep last night? You're here, you're under my care. Which means you're one of us. And besides, you'd not be the first man-cub we've had under our

care"

"Well, this one does look pretty grown up to me, as far as I can judge", Alexander softly said while nuzzling through my hair.

I gave Luri an inquisitive look. "I've heard about this boy who got lost..."

"Yes", the white she-wolf softly answered. "Mowgli... He went back to a human settlement a while ago."

"Seems like he had a lucky break then, stumbling onto your pack", I said.

"You're alright with getting up?", Alexander asked, "I do need to address some matters with the pack and get you properly introduced."

Akru pressed his cold and wet nose right into my face, making me cough and shiver. "Wakey wakey!", he playfully exclaimed.

Both wolves got up and made their way out. Deprived of the warmth of their fur, I shivered, got into my clothes and also crawled out of the den.

Outside, I placed my hand against a rock, worked myself up on my legs and walked out into the open where Akru and Sura were waiting.

A huge brown bear who was standing only a few meters away raised himself up on his rear legs and towering over me made me stop dead in my tracks.

While looking the bear in his eyes, I took a few steps back until my back was pressed against the rock, the fingers of my left hand firmly around the handle of my knife. Bagheera hastily jumped in between me and the bear. "Baloo! Get back down, you big doofus!", he angrily exclaimed.

The feline turned to me. "Hey, stand down! This is Baloo, he's also with the pack. It's alright."

The bear gave Bagheera an annoyed look, "This human clearly has bad manners. He didn't even greet me!", he exclaimed with a deep voice.

"Can you blame him? First thing he sees after getting out of the den is a huge bear standing in front of him. He didn't even know about you!", the panther said while shaking his head. He turned to Akru and Sura, "Why didn't either of you two tell him Baloo was here?"

The two wolves looked at each other. "We didn't even think about it", Sura replied.

While still looking at the bear, I let go of the knife's handle, my heart painfully pounding in my head.

Baloo exhaled, dropped back on all fours and casually sat down.

"Well, to put this misunderstanding out of the way, I am Baloo", the bear said to me in with friendly voice. "Please, come sit down with me. You do look a bit startled."

With hesitation, I slowly walked towards the big ursine and sat down next to him, joined by Bagheera and the wolves.

"Why, you're a fair bit taller than our other human friend", Baloo smiled.

"And also a lot more quiet", he added after a few moments.

"How did you end up here all alone? The nearest human settlement is a few days of walking from here", the bear wondered.

"Well yes. What were you doing in this part of the forest to begin with? You said you got lost", Bagheera asked.

"Alexander mentioned you lived with people for a period of your life", I replied, "So I reckon you have an understanding of how we live and do things?"

"Quite, yes", the black cat nodded.

I continued, "I am not from around here. I actually live on the other side of this planet. I was on a trip. I borrowed a car to do some exploring. And I crashed it. So I had to walk and got lost. That's it in short."

"The other side of this planet?", Akru asked rather astonished. "How many days walking is that?"

"Uh", I stumbled, "I honestly would not know. A few years?"

"Wow", the brown-beige wolf exclaimed, "You've walked that far?"

Bagheera chuckled. "I don't think he did, Akru. He probably flew. Humans can build big machines which can fly like birds, but very, very fast."

While listening to the panther explaining about human technology to the wolves, I tiredly leaned back until I felt Baloo's fur against me.

"Oh now look at you", the bear chuckled, "Just got up, and already sleepy again!"

"I just feel drained", I softly sighed.

"Hmm, come to think of it, when did you last eat?", Bagheera asked as he interrupted his lecture to the wolves.

"Um. That must have been two days ago."

"Two days? No wonder you're feeling weak. Specially after what you've been through. We need to get you something. Didn't you hunt the other night, Akru?"

"Uh, yes", Akru replied, "But there's hardly anything edible left of that prey now."

"Well", Baloo said, "I can find you some berries and some other plants to eat? I do know that a humans' diet does not exclusively exist of meat alone."

"That would be very kind of you", I smiled up to the bear.

"Just wait here then, I'll be back in a bit!" Baloo said as he stood up and walked away.

"We need to get going, we need to discuss hunting strategy with the pack", Akru said. "Father won't like it if we're late for that." Both wolves ran off, leaving me and Bagheera behind.

The feline sat down next to me and rubbed his flank against mine. I leaned into the black panther and felt his rough, raspy tongue scrape over my face a few times before he head-butted me. Playing along, I rubbed my cheek against his. He then flopped on the floor looking at me. "Well, come on then!", he smiled.

I lay down onto the soft grass. The panther quickly took advantage of that and rested his chest on top of mine with my head between his front paws. He lowered his head and gently nuzzled me. "I still can't thank you enough for what you did for me." He looked me deep in my eyes. I embraced the black feline and held him close. He gave my face a few more gentle licks.

"Oh dear, does the evil panther have to put you in your place on your first morning already?"

Baloo stood next to us with an amused grin over his muzzle.

"On the contrary, my fat-bellied friend", Bagheera answered as he raised himself back up.

The bear shook his big head, "Come, human. This panther can only say evil things to me it seems. I've found some berries and other vegetation for you to munch on. Care to follow me?"

Bagheera chuckled and walked off. "If you're gonna steal my friend away, I'll go and see what the rest of the pack is up to for a bit."

"Here are some berries. Those grasses and leaves you see there are edible too." Baloo paused for a bit. "At least, they've never given Mowgli any problems", he added with a sigh.

I sat down and looked at a big pile of berries, leaves and other vegetation.

Despite being rather sour, I couldn't help but to stuff my face with the berries by the handful. After those were gone, I turned to the other vegetation the bear had piled up for me. A little while later, that was gone too. The leaves reminded me of lettuce and rucola.

"Why, you surely are hungry", Baloo said with a content grin. "Here, I have a little treat for you as dessert!"

The bear pawed an opened beehive towards me. "And no worries, I've scared off all the bees!"

I reached inside, broke off a bit and chewed on it. With my eyes closed, I savoured the sweet, rich and thick substance. I could almost feel bursts of energy surging through my body with every swallow.

"Take all you need", the ursine nodded.

After a few more pieces, I felt satisfyingly full.

I meticulously licked my fingers clean.

"Thank you so much. I really feel a lot better now", I said with a content sigh.

He smiled, "You are most welcome. Are you sure you don't want any more?"

"Oh no, I am stuffed. Thanks."

"Good!", he exclaimed. "More for me!"

I watched how Baloo messily devoured the rest.

"Mm. I needed that.", the bear said while lapping at his claws.

I stood back up, which went quite a bit easier now. A bit too easy perhaps, as my broken ribs reminded me.

Baloo curiously looked at me cursing. "What's the matter? Ate too much honey?"

I shook my head and showed the bear my right flank.

"Oh dear", the bear said softly.

I sat back down and a few moments of silence followed.

I heard rustling. I turned around and saw Luri, Lala and Akru walking towards us.

After they sat down with Baloo and me, Luri softly nuzzled my cheek, "How are you feeling now?

Let me check on your wounds"

Reluctantly, I took my shirt off.

"Hmm... I was told you got hurt, but I didn't know it would be that bad", Baloo remarked. "I thought Bagheera exaggerated when he said you were almost killed by those two horrible poachers. And then I was so harsh to you this morning", the bear said. "I am so sorry."

"The only thing really causing me pain now are my ribs. These cuts are nothing", I said

"You do look a lot better", Lala mentioned.

"Yeah, Baloo was so kind to give me some food. That really helped me. I was starving!"

Akru grinned, "Fruit and plants? That is no proper food for a wolf. You need some meat! After the next hunt, I'll see that you get a nice share."

"Oh, I am quite sure most of the pack members won't have any problems with that, Akru", Luri said.

"Alexander told them about our latest addition to the pack", she added with a smile. "Though some don't believe it and think Bagheera fought those poachers himself." Luri turned to me, "Do you think you're fit enough to meet the rest of the pack later today? As a new member, you need to be properly introduced to the others."

"I uh... believe so", I answered with hesitation. I wasn't feeling entirely at ease about being a wolf pack's center of attention.

"It'll be fine", Lala reassuringly said, noticing my hesitation. "They'll just look you over and have a sniff", she giggled.

"OK then, I'm going to to back to that little waterfall and wash the rest of the dried blood off of those cuts", I said.

The water felt colder than it did the last time for some reason. It took me a while longer to get used to at least. While trying to subdue the shivering, I rubbed all the cuts. I was pleased to see that they were all closed. The only thing which still bothered me were my ribs. I've heard about some people taking months to heal up from that kind of injury. Though a fracture was believed to be less painful than bruising.

While giving my shirt another wash, my mind wandered off. I thought about what was going to happen later on. I felt rather uncertain about how meeting the other wolves of the pack would turn out. Everything felt so unreal to me. Talking animals. Becoming a member of a wolf-pack? And then Alexander and Luri. They were so kind.

I really started to wonder if I was lying in a gutter somewhere, totally wasted, and that I would wake up in a hospital bed.

Or maybe I did not get out of the car wreck? Maybe I was still in there, unconscious, dying, burning. And this was all a very vivid hallucination?

I wrung out as much of the water as I could before spreading the shirt out to dry on one of the rocks.

As I turned around, I noticed Sura was there. The wolf walked up and sat down next to me.

"Can you bite my arm?", I suddenly asked.

Sura gave me a confused look. "Uh. Yeah, I can, I guess. But why would you want me to do that?"

"Just something I am wondering about", I answered as I extended my left arm in front of the lupine's maw.

"Well, OK then, if that is what you really want me to do", he hesitatingly said.

He opened his muzzle and took my lower arm between his jaws. I felt the wolf's warm and soft lips on my skin at first. Then the sharp fangs. First gently, but Sura clenched down harder.

"Ow! Ouch! Yes. That is enough please!", I exclaimed as pressure started to reach skin piercing and bone crushing levels. The wolf instantly let go.

"Oof. That hurt", I said. I turned my arm around and looked at two wet rows of impressions in my arm made by Sura's fangs. He even pierced through the skin in some places.

"You silly human. Of course that hurts. Would you expect it would tickle?", Sura grumbled while licking my arm.

I sighed, "Well, at least I know I am not dreaming this all up now."

The wolf gave me another confused look for a few moments before lying down against me. "Why do you think you'd be dreaming?"

"This all is so far away from my normal life. It's almost like a fairy tale"

Sura tilted his head. "What is a fairy tale?", he asked.

"Uh. Yes. Well, it's a story commonly told by mothers to their children before bedtime basically. And they're always surreal."

"Mother never really told me or Akru any stories before sleep."

The wolf laid his head on my chest. I slowly ran my hands through his soft fur.

"I don't know what mother wolves do with their cubs before it's time to go sleep", I said with a smile.

"Oh, mother always washed us", Sura answered.

"Washed? Like how I just did?"

"No, she licked us. We do swim, but never really bathe like you just did", the lupine said.

"Humans don't really lick each other like you wolves seem to do. We tend to wash ourselves using large amounts of water. But we don't really have a thick coat of fur that would take a long time to dry like you do."

"But do humans not lick each other at all? I mean, how do you greet each other then?", Sura curiously asked.

"We do this", I grabbed the lupine's right paw, placed it in my right hand and shook it.

"That is an official way of greeting. When humans know each other for a longer time and they are friends, they can also briefly embrace one another, like this", I let go of Sura's paw and wrapped my arms around the lupine and squeezed him softly.

"Oh, I like that", Sura softly said, and he rubbed his cheek against mine.

"Do you want me to show you how wolves say hello to each other?", he asked.

"Didn't I see that when we first met?"

"Mmhmm", the wolf nuzzled my lips and cheeks and gave my face a few licks.

"That is how we say hi to each other."

"Yes, I knew that", I smiled.

"Well, there's another way how we greet each other. But like your hug, that is more for those we're closer with."

"Uh. Hmm.", I stumbled.

Before I could give any other response, Sura placed his paws on either side of me. Tilting his head, he opened his maw slightly. Before I fully realized what he actually was going to do, I felt a pair of warm wolf lips over my mouth and a tongue licking over my lips. Completely taken by surprise, I gasped. I felt the wolf's warm tongue sliding into my mouth, over my gums and teeth. After a few licks in my mouth, he pulled back.

Slowly realizing what happened, I sat there staring at Sura.

"Are you alright?", the wolf asked, surprised.

I took a few deep breaths, "I.. Eh.... uh.. didn't know wolves actually did this."

"Yes. We do. We taste each other's mouths and breath when greeting each other like this. You humans really don't do anything like that?"

"We... Uh... We actually do. Kind of", I stumbled while trying to put my mind back together.

"It's... When humans are a couple. It's often a way of showing affection and love to one another", I said while looking down.

Sura's eyes widened and he started to laugh. "Are you saying that I just asked you to be my mate?"

"I guess that is a way you could put it", I softly answered.

"You humans truly are awkward!", he grinned as he playfully licked my face again. "But um...

Since you are not a wolf, and not my mate, I hope that I did not make you feel bad."

"No, you didn't. I just wasn't expecting this."

"So, are we mates now then?", the lupine teased with a cheesy grin.

"I don't think that would work out very well, you know."

Sura chuckled, "Well, we can be good friends!"

"Oh, hey you two!", Lala called out as she and Luri walked up.

"Alexander has summoned the pack. Care to come with us?", the white she-wolf asked.

A cacophony of mumbling and chatter suddenly went silent when we arrived at the pack's meeting area.

I swallowed when I saw what must have been over twenty wolves turning their heads and stare at me.

"Come sit here", Luri gestured. I spotted a rock which had the right height and sat down on it.

Once Bagheera and Baloo joined, Alexander walked up to me and sat down.

"As you all might have heard, or seen already, the pack has acquired a new member", the wolf started.

"He has put his life on the line to save Bagheera from poachers and got badly injured. Therefore I found it just to take him in. Does anyone of you have anything to say in response?"

"It has only been a few years since we've been rid of that other human, Alexander", a large blue-black wolf angrily spoke. "And now you bring in another one?! My sister fell victim to that filth! We don't want him here! Humans are foul, cowardly, and dishonest creatures who only bring death and destruction. They hate us wolves!",

"Don't you dare to speak about Mowgli or him like that, you worthless dog!", Bagheera snarled.

"Keep quiet, Bagheera!", Alexander growled. "Let him speak. You'll get your turn later. Do you have anything else to add, Sandah?"

"Look at him. Does any one of you really want to have such a creature in our pack again? I don't believe one bit of that myth that he saved Bagheera from that vermin. He's too thin and fragile! If it was up to me, Alexander, he'd be cast out!.

I sighed and looked down.

Alexander briefly looked to me from the corners of his eyes before focusing on Sandah again. "Your opinion will be respected and taken into consideration, Sandah. Bagheera, anything you want to say in response?"

The black cat stood up. "Sandah, we all know that you hate humans, and why. But is that his fault? Did he personally do you any harm? It is thanks to him that I am still here. He has saved my life, so I owe him mine. I've also been the only one here who actually saw him dealing with those two poachers. He'll be a worthy addition to the pack, I can assure you."

"Pah!", Sandah scoffed. "Weren't you tranquilized, Bagheera? You must have dreamed that up!"

Alexander snarled at Sandah. "Be quiet!" Sandah flattened his ears and hushed. Alexander then turned to me. "Please, have your say."

I stood up, took a deep breath, and turned to Sandah.

"First, I don't think it's very fair to hold me responsible for everything humans have done to you.

Second, I did not ask to be here! After I managed to get rid of those poachers, I was just done. I knew that I would not have stood a chance in this forest with my injuries. So even if Bagheera had chosen to take out his anger on me for what he went through and kill me, I would not have done anything in my defense. I was not my intention to come here at all."

The silence was deafening.

"But he didn't. Bagheera brought me here." I looked Sandah in his eyes, "Why would you even think I'd hate wolves or animals in general? I've never even seen wolves in the wild before I got here. If I was the kind of low-life scum you just said I am, why would I risk my life to rescue a panther? A panther of whom I could have all the reason in the world to believe he'd rip me to shreds the moment he would set foot outside of that cage?"

Sandah curled his lips up in a vicious snarl. "Don't you look at me like that, you bald ape. And don't you talk back to me! You're not worthy to be here amongst us, regardless of what you claimed you have done. Bagheera should have left you there to rot."

"Ah", I softly spoke, "All I needed was a place to lay low and heal. I guess that I'm well enough now. If you're so upset about me, I won't make it any worse." I turned around and walked away.

"Wait", I heard Alexander say. I stopped and briefly looked at the wolf, "I can't let my presence do this to your pack. It's not worth the trouble."

I turned back around.

Distant snarling and growling filled the air as I walked away.

Suddenly Bagheera ran passed me and blocked my way. "Don't let Sandah tell you off like that. He has no right to decide. He didn't see you the other day. I did. Why did you let him win this confrontation?"

I sighed. "I don't want to be the cause of anger and hatred."

Bagheera hummed. "Sandah has always had his hatred. It's because of his past. That was no different when Mowgli lived with us. Now, please come back to the meeting."

I looked the black feline in his eyes for a few moments. "OK, I will come back."

When we returned, most of the wolves were still there. Only Sandah and a few others were gone.

Alexander walked up to me. "Thank you for returning. It is not up to Sandah to decide who is to be here and who isn't. I suspended him from the pack until further notice."

Luri gently nudged and licked my right hand. "Please don't leave. We would not ask you if we didn't want you as a member of our pack."

All the other wolves watched us in silence.

"This meeting is over", Alexander declared.

Luri stood up and gestured us. "Come, let's go back to the den."

"Please stay with me for a moment", Alexander said to me.

I sat back down and watched all the other wolves leave.

"Sandah will remain a problem, and a threat. Even if he's not allowed to be on our grounds now, you'll have to be vigilant", the wolf said.

"You've betrayed your own pack, Alexander."

Sandah stealthily had made his way back and was standing only meters away from us.

"You have been suspended, Sandah! Now leave before I'll have to kill you", Alexander ominously snarled.

"Let me take the human, and you'll never ever see me again.", Sandah replied. "Or let me fight him."

Alexander shook his head. "No, Sandah. He is under the pack's protection. I will not allow you to fight him."

Sandah turned to me, "What's your saying in this, ape? You're probably too much of a coward to face me anyway, aren't ya? Weakling."

I stood up from the rock and looked to Sandah, "You're talking about how humans are aggressive and only bring death and destruction. But here you are, insulting and threatening me. I've not done anything to deserve your anger, wolf. You're not any better than the humans you speak so badly of."

"Don't make me more angry than I already am, primate. I'll gladly face the consequences if that means I'll have the satisfaction of ripping you to shreds first", Sandah said with a deep growl.

The look in my eyes darkened. "Very well then", I said. "You will have your way."

Alexander worryingly looked at me. "Do you know what this means? When you accept this fight, it's the law of the jungle. I can and will not intervene."

Sandah showed off his fangs in a menacing grin. "This will be over quickly."

Alexander sighed softly, and slowly backed away.

Bagheera saw what was going on, and tried to make a dash towards me. He was stopped by Alexander.

"No Bagheera, it's his own choice."

"What?!", the panther exclaimed in disbelief. "I can't let that happen."

"You have no choice, Bagheera. No intervention until it's all over", the wolf said.

The black panther sighed.

Alexander shook his head. "Sandah is strong and vicious. I fear that he has no chance."

Sandah circled around me, his fangs bared.

Awaiting his first move, I turned on my feet to stay face to face.

Unexpectedly, the wolf leaped up and threw himself against me with a hard thud. The sudden impact caused me to lose my balance and I fell backwards onto the ground, with Sandah landing on top of me.

I managed to avoid his strong, snapping jaws twice. A third time injured my right shoulder. A fourth one I stopped with my right arm. His sharp fangs sank into my flesh and I clenched my jaw. I balled my left fist and slammed it into the wolf's rib-cage. Sandah yelped and let go of my arm. With both arms free, I placed them under the wolf's chest, pushed him up far enough for me to maneuver both my legs under his stomach and threw the wolf off.

I got back onto my feet. Staggering for a few moments, I tried to ignore the crippling pain from my right flank.

Sandah went for me again. This time I saw it coming and I dove out of the way. The wolf, not expecting this, landed back on his paws and rolled over because of the remaining momentum. He recovered quickly, and with a powerful leap, he threw himself back onto me. I fell back onto the ground.

Sandah now had me pinned down with both his front paws on my upper arms, immobilizing me. He growled and snarled at me, strings of his viscous drool dripping onto my face. Then he locked his jaws around my throat.

I struggled and could just reach his paws with my hands. I tried to push them up as hard as I could. Doing so, I managed to push him off of me again. Startled by the loss of balance, the wolf let go of his grip on my neck. Rolling back over, I tried to get back up on my feet, but the lupine was faster. He leaped onto my back, biting my neck from behind. With my left elbow, I hit him in the back of his ribcage, causing the wolf to roll off from my back with a loud yelp. I stood up and staggered. Blood was dripping from the wounds on my shoulder, neck and arms.

Sandah struggled to get back up, gasping for breath.

"We can end this here, Sandah!", I yelled.

"And why would I accept that? Why would I stop a fight that I am winning? You're the only one here who's really injured, you coward!", the wolf snarled while panting heavily. He slowly walked towards me until he was a meter away and leaped up vertically this time, trying to go for my throat. But this time I was faster. I grabbed his throat with my hands, pushed him backwards and slammed him with his back against a tree. I squeezed down on his neck while looking him in his eyes. I felt the wolf's body violently twitch as he struggled to get air into his lungs. After a while I violently pulled him away from the tree and threw him onto the ground.

Sandah coughed and spluttered loudly.

"Give up. You have lost. I could have strangled you. Quit this pointless fight!", I hissed.

With a loud growl, Sandah got back up and went for me again. I didn't hesitate one second. I jumped up, and kicked my right foot into the wolf's flank as hard as I could. With a muffled thud, the wolf fell back onto the ground. I grabbed his paws. With all my strength, I lifted the lupine off of the ground and with a scream both out of anger and pain, I flung him against a rock. The wolf collapsed onto the ground.

After a few moments, Sandah raised his head and looked back at me. I pulled my knife out of its

sheath, walked towards him and kneeled down.

He closed his eyes, sighing. "Go ahead, do what you have to do. That is what you want, isn't it?"

"No!", I exclaimed with an angry growl. "I did not want this fight. This is your doing. You sought this out. I won't gain any pride or accomplishment by killing you, acknowledging this twisted and prejudiced opinion you hold of me."

I stood back up, sheathed my knife and walked away.

"That was noble of you", Alexander said.

"Please, don't harm him. Don't cast him out either, it will be the end of him. I don't want him to die", I hoarsely said without looking.

Alexander gave me a nod. "I will make sure that it'll be respected by the pack."

I walked, ran... Until I could go no further.

I yelled, screamed out of anger and frustration, slammed my fists against a tree and kicked until my shins were bleeding and my knuckles were raw.

Out of breath, I collapsed on the ground.

Hours passed. Night fell.

I looked up to the stars through the forest canopy.

"A wolf pack has taken me under their wing. Me as a human. A complete outsider. And now I've hurt one of them", it echoed through my head. "Why did I fight him? Why didn't I just leave. Why did I face him?"

I felt low. Like filthy scum, biting the hand that had fed me.

A moist and cold breeze carrying the scents and sounds of the nocturnal forest through the air made me shiver, and kept me from sleeping.

Sandah's words pounded through my head. I thought about how he must've felt when his sister was brutally murdered. How it would have made me feel if that had happened to me.

I started to feel sick to my stomach. I rolled over and threw up.

With a burning pain in my throat and cramped up stomach, I got back up and started to walk further away, without knowing where I was going.

After only a few minutes, I had enough and sat down on the forest floor. I grabbed my knife and let it reflect the moonlight into my face.

I slowly ran my thumb over the smooth and sharp edge. I wondered what my life was worth to me. What difference it would make if I would end right here and now. I wondered if I could even do such a thing.

I rubbed the blade over the callouses on my hand, cutting away little slices of the dead skin.

After a long while of contemplation, I shook my head, put the knife away and sprawled on the soft soil.

"Hey, you", Baloo said as he sat down next to me. "Seems like we've found you just in time. We didn't suspect you being so far away already."

Dazed, I looked up. In the diffuse morning light, I could vaguely make out the shape of the brown bear. My vision was all hazy and blurred.

"Come sit with me for a bit." I felt how two strong paws grabbed me.

"Are you alright?", Baloo asked.

I just buried my face into the bear's fur and sighed, "No, I am not alright. How's Sandah doing now?"

"He's being looked after. You got him quite badly. Why didn't you finish him off?", Baloo wondered.

"Because he's human", Bagheera answered as he joined us. "Humans are just different."

"What would have been the point?", I asked Baloo. "I've ended two lives. I don't want to experience that ever again."

"We do need to kill prey to live off of, you know", Bagheera replied.

"That is different to me. And no, I've never done that either."

"But Sandah wanted to kill you?", the bear said puzzled.

I shook my head and just stared at the trees.

Bagheera leaned against me. "You spared his life when you had all the right to take it. You've shown your true colours."

The black panther rubbed his cheek against mine. "Now, let us go back. You have wounds that need looking after. And not just on your body."

"Come here", Luri said to me in a motherly manner after we got back to the den. I sat down on the ground next to her and she started to lick my face and chest.

"Never run off like that again. We were worried you wouldn't come back."

I looked at her. "You're mothering me as if I'm a cub. I'm fully mature and can look after myself, you know."

Luri softly sighed. "Oh you. Age has nothing to do with it. I still do it with Akru and Sura. And Lala too, even if she's not my offspring. We all look after each other here. Also, I saw how you slept last night. Do you think you've had that much sleep if you were somewhere exposed and all by yourself? Remember that you are in a place you are not familiar with. You needed a bit of mothering and looking after. And you still do, especially now. Mother-instinct isn't limited by a species boundary", she whispered in my ear.

"Now, Akru, Sura and Lala are out at the lake. Care to go join them? I am sure they want to see you. I'll see if I can find Alexander. He might be out hunting again now."

I embraced the white wolf. "I need some time on my own. I'll join the others later."

Luri gave me a few licks in my face and nodded. She, Baloo and Bagheera walked away.

I wandered off, to a denser and more secluded part of the surrounding forest. Mindful to keep my bearings in check so I could find my way back, a little hidden patch caught my attention. I walked towards it, and leaned against a pile of rocks.

"Came back to finish me off?", Sandah said with a low and growly grunt, lying on the ground in front of his den's entrance.

Startled, I looked at him. I sighed and walked to the nearest tree, pulled my knife and rammed it into the bark. "No", I answered.

I walked down to Sandah and sat down on the ground next to him.

He sighed. "Please. Tell me. Why?", he asked.

"I've taken two lives", I answered. "I hope that you now believe that it really happened. It's something I never want to do again. Most certainly not to a wolf from a pack which has taken me in as one of their own so kindly."

"But I hated you. I wanted to kill you.", he said while looking down.

I put my arms under the wolf's front paws, and carefully pulled him up against my chest to hold him close.

The wolf's body trembled and shuddered a few times. I let my fingers slide through his fur.

"You hated humans because humans killed your sister, as you said so yourself. But I hope you now see that I'm not evil. I do not wish you any harm. And I really wish we hadn't fought."

Sandah's eyes met mine and I looked away when mine started to burn.

"I know why humans cry", he said softly.

The wolf reached up and licked the tears off of my cheeks. "I am sorry", he almost whispered. He gave my face a few more soft licks before resting his head back on my chest. I slowly stroked the wolf's cheeks and neck. I felt his body shudder again. His bright eyes went dull and I heard a long and deep sigh. The muscles in his body spasmed a few more times, and then relaxed completely.

Footsteps approached. Through my teary eyes, I saw Alexander standing in front of me with a torn off buffalo leg in his muzzle. He dropped it, "Oh... No. I.... don't think he needs this any more."

The wolf sniffed Sandah's remains. "Help me put him to rest in his den."

With my face in a bitter grimace, I stood up with Sandah in my arms.

I laid his body on the ground at the entrance of the den, and pushed it inwards, until it was all the way against the rear wall of the den. I gave him a final embrace before crawling back out. I looked at Alexander. "Can I have that leg?" The wolf looked at me for a few seconds before nodding softly. I carried it back inside. I placed it in front of Sandah's muzzle and made my way out again.

"Let's cover the entrance up", Alexander softly said.

After a long while, we had completely sealed off the entrance with rocks and sand. I was both physically and emotionally exhausted.

"This place is now his tomb", Alexander said. "We should leave."

I retrieved my knife. "I'm going back to the lake", I said.

I made my way back to where the waterfall was. Lala, Sura and Akru were there snoozing in the grass in the late afternoon sun.

"Oh, there he is! Our two-legged wolf friend!", Lala exclaimed. "You surely showed Sandah! Now everyone of the pack knows not to..." Lala stopped mid-sentence after she saw my face.

Without saying a word, I walked past them, took my clothes off, threw them into the grass and dove into the lake.

I swam around for a while and dove under water. When I resurfaced for air, Alexander and Luri were standing next to Sura, Akru and Lala.

I made my way out of the water and dried myself off with my shirt.

After putting my clothes back on, I sat back down.

More tears.

"We'd better go", Luri said to the brothers and Lala.

Quietly the wolves walked away, leaving Alexander and me behind.

"I didn't want him to die", I sighed.

Alexander sat down and leaned against me. "You were there during his last moments."

"He told me he was sorry."

"It's OK. He is at peace. Sandah knew what losing this fight would mean for him", the wolf said.

"Life is rough here. In his case, death simply was postponed. Instead of being slain right after losing the fight, he was given the chance to make things right with you before passing on. And he did."

Alexander looked up into the sky. "Daylight is fading. We should go back to the den."

The wolf gently took my hand in his muzzle and tugged me along.

After getting back into the den, Luri and Alexander both hugged up against me, together with the others. Despite being all snug and warm, I could not sleep because I kept on seeing Sandah's eyes in the darkness.

During the later part of the night, I drifted in and out of sleep constantly until finally, first daylight appeared.

"You didn't sleep a lot, did you?", Luri said to me after she woke up.

"I just couldn't get to sleep", I answered with a yawn.

Alexander placed his big paws on my chest and licked my nose "You know what, you go to Bacchus. He looks after our cubs. You should be able to get some more sleep there in his den. You'd be all alone here."

Lala giggled, "Our brave Bacchus. Oh dear. He'll turn you into a cub alright"

"Now Lala", Luri said, "He might not be agile and good with the hunt like you are, but he's doing his part by keeping the young looked after while we're hunting or doing other things."

The red-furred she-wolf looked down, "I'm sorry. He's just... so silly."

The wolves left to start the day. Luri waited outside of the den until I crawled out. My eyes were sore and tired.

"You're looking very run down", the white she-wolf remarked.

"Yesterday was just too much", I sighed, avoiding her eyes. "I wish I hadn't accepted that fight."

"You did what you had to do", Luri said. "And you've shown everyone what you're made of."

"He died in my arms."

"I know", Luri replied. "You have to let it go. Let it rest." She sat over me with her front paws on either side of me. I held her paws and exhaled. The wolf licked my ears and cheeks. "I'll take you to Bacchus. He will look after you so you can get some more sleep."

Luri took me to a lushly grown area where a chubby wolf was playing with a few wolf cubs.

"Oh hey Luri!", Bacchus exclaimed. "Oooh, you brought someone with you I see."

"Would you mind looking after him?" Luri asked. "He's had a very rough day yesterday, and little to no sleep last night."

"Yeah, I saw him fight! Sure, no problem."

"Thanks, Bacchus", the white she-wolf said with a smile. She turned to me "Now, go and try to get some sleep, alright?" She gave me a quick nuzzle and walked off.

"You look very tired", Bacchus said. "Come, I'll take you under. It's nice and warm there. You'll be asleep in no time", he added with a kind smile.

My mind still being hazy and dull, I followed him down under a part of thick undergrowth into a spacious den under a mound.

"Just have a lie down here", Bacchus gestured with his head. I sat down and took my shirt and jeans off.

"You just wait and make yourself comfortable. I'll go and fetch the other cubs so that we can all have a snooze."

A bit later the chubby wolf returned with the four cubs he was playing with earlier.

"Hmm", the wolf hummed "Say, Luri did bring you here for me to cubsit, but aren't you a bit too grown up?"

Bothered, I looked at him tiredly and shook my head, "I am not a cub."

Bacchus chuckled softly. "That is what they all say. Well alright, cub or no cub, you're here now and I'll look after ya."

The chubby wolf playfully pushed me over and lay down next to me.

"Oh, before I forget. I do tend to take the cubs outside and help them a bit with a nature call before sleep time. The cubs here all went. I'll quickly take you outside and help you out."

Despite my dark mood, that made me chuckle. "No, I do not need any help with relieving myself. But thank you very much for your generous offer."

Bacchus chuckled, "Alright, have it your way, little one. Time for sleep."

For a moment, I was wondering if he called me a little one out of habit, or just to tease. But I felt dead and just didn't want to think any more. Bacchus and the four cubs snuggled up against me, and I drifted off.

"Now now, look here. Fattywolf, and a weird looking over sized wolf cub", Lala joked

"Lala!", Bacchus exclaimed. The red she-wolf giggled loudly.

Groggy, I opened my eyes.

"You've woken him up!", Bacchus exclaimed disappointedly.

Bacchus licked my cheeks, "Want to sleep some more?", he asked.

"Mmhmm. Little wolf cubs need a lot of sleep", Lala grinned.

I gave the red she-wolf a blank stare, "Oh, am I a wolf cub now?"

"Well, you are in Bacchus' den. He looks after the pack's cubs. So yes, I guess that makes you one!" I just shook my head.

"She's just teasing you", the chubby wolf reassuringly said, "You're all big and strong!"

"Uhuh. You didn't see him sleeping the last two nights, Bacchus", Lala continued, "Just like a little cub."

She flopped down and sprawled beside of me.

"Who doesn't like being hugged and kept warm?", Bacchus wondered.

Lala licked my face. "Luri quite likes looking after you. Just like she did with Mowgli", she said softly.

I exhaled, "Even when I ignore the fact that I am not a wolf, I'm definitely too old to be a wolf cub." Bacchus looked at me. "You don't have to be a cub to enjoy being kept warm. Or enjoy being looked after."

"Humans are just different", I said, "Yesterday for instance, Sura showed me how you wolves greet each other. I was in for a surprise."

"What is so surprising about that?", Bacchus wondered.

"He licked me in my mouth", I said to Bacchus, "That is why."

"Yes? And what's with that? Wolves do that often", Lala answered. "Don't tell me humans never greet each other?"

"Oh, we do", I replied, "But not like that. We'll only do that if we're mates and want to show affection, or er... When we're mating or something."

"Awww. So Sura wanted to mate with you then? How cute", Lala said while giggling almost uncontrollably.

"No, you silly wolf", I frustratingly replied while face palming.

"Gee", Bacchus said, "When Luri brought you here, I briefly wanted to do that to make you feel welcome here."

"Oh, good thing that you didn't. He'd get cooties and bad breath!", Lala teased.

Bacchus folded back his ears, "My breath isn't bad, Lala!", he protested. Suddenly he mouthed her muzzle.

Lala ominously growled first, but she soon calmed down and started to lick inside Bacchus' maw.

I watched the two wolves' affection for a little while. Already knowing what would probably happen next, I reached for my T-shirt and jeans.

"You're leaving?", Bacchus asked.

"Uh, yeah. I need to relieve myself, and wash myself", I quickly answered.

"Oh, I can help you with that?", the chubby wolf suggested.

"Eh, No thanks", I replied.

Lala just grinned, shaking her head. "What bad manners, leaving before greeting your pack mates."

I gave Lala yet another blank stare, put on my shirt and got out of the den.

Back outside, Luri came walking up.

"Managed to get some more sleep?", she asked.

"Yeah, I did. I was just about to go to the lake for a swim."

From the the corner of my eyes, I could see Lala and Bacchus coming out of the den.

Just about when I was to walk away, Lala shamelessly blabbed, "Luri, do you want to know what he did? He left without greeting me or Bacchus!"

"Uhuh", Bacchus nodded, "He was gone before we could."

"Oh? Well, it's not very polite to walk away when pack mates are greeting each other. It's our way of bonding", Luri explained to me.

"Yeah", Lala added with a teasing grin, standing next to Luri. "I think we need to show him proper pack etiquette", she mischievously said to the white wolf.

Luri looked at Lala for a moment before getting her drift.

I started to back away after both wolves took a step in my direction.

"Yeah riiiiight", I said. I turned around and quickly walked away.

I heard Lala's giggling, and she and Luri showed up on either side of me. Luri bumped into my right side and pushed me, trying to topple me over. However, I managed to keep my balance. Lala reached up and tried to cling her paws around me from the other side. I saw what was going on, and quickly ran off, despite my right flank protesting against this sudden change of pace.

"Oh, we get to hunt down a human!", Lala exclaimed. She and Luri giggled, chasing me.

I suddenly changed direction and tried to run faster. But it wasn't long before a huge rock face blocked my way.

"Now this was an easy hunt, Lala", Luri said while they closed in. Both wolves weren't even panting.

"Now, I'll claim my prey and subdue it", the white she-wolf said as she gave me a kind, but also menacing stare.

I exhaled and looked at the rock. It was pretty much vertical without any proper crevasses or edges to grab.

Luri stood right in front of me. She raised herself onto her rear legs and placed her front paws onto my shoulders. Her head was at the same height as mine.

Suddenly she pushed me sideways. I was able to remain upright. But Lala joined in. I stood no chance against two strong wolves pushing me sideways, so I fell onto the ground.

Luri lay down on top of me, pinning me down with her weight.

"Now then, much better", Luri said, "He's all yours, Lala", she grinned. She stood up and sat at my left side.

The red she-wolf took Luri's place, her front paws on either side of my head.

She lowered her head and eagerly locked her muzzle onto my mouth. I felt her tongue over my gums and teeth just like Sura's earlier. After what seemed minutes, Lala moved back. She gave my mouth a few more licks before standing up.

"Now, that wasn't so bad, was it?", she smiled.

Thinking that it was over with, I tried to raise myself up from the ground. But Luri pushed me back down. "Now now, you're not going to greet me?", she grinned.

The white wolf lay down and licked my cheeks softly and slowly. I waited for her to lick me like Lala just did. But instead, she gently clamped down her muzzle over my mouth, nose and cheeks. I realized that Luri was doing the same with me as what Bacchus did to Lala.

I tried not to inhale, but I was still out of breath from the chase. After a short struggle, I just needed air and could do little else than breath through her muzzle, taking in her warm breath and scent.

After a little while longer, I felt her lips slide off of mine. She gave me a few more licks over my nose and mouth.

My head was buzzing.

"Are you alright?", Luri asked, looking at me in great amusement together with Lala.

While getting myself back upright, Bagheera landed next to Lala and Luri with a graceful leap.

"I see you are being shown some wolf socializing, apparently", the black cat said. "Surely that must be erm... a revelation to you.", he continued as he lay down and rubbed his head against my flank.

Luri turned to Bagheera, "What do you mean by that?"

"Humans don't really do that when they greet each other", he grinned.

Luri looked to me, then back to Bagheera. "How do they greet each other then?", she asked the feline.

They grab each other's paw, and shake it. Or when amongst friends or relatives, they can briefly hug each other.

"Oh... I... eh", she looked to me.

I looked to Lala, "Why don't YOU explain."

"I uh. Er. Well", Lala stuttered and looked away.

"Yes?", I continued, "You were so eager to chase me down together with Luri after I told both you and Bacchus about it when you two were doing that in his den? So speak up!"

"He told me and Bacchus that humans lick each other like that when they... eh....", Lala went quiet and looked away in embarrassment.

I leaned back against the panther's flank with a content grin. Now it was my turn to be amused.

Luri looked to Lala and shook her head. She had a suspicion about what the red wolf was about to say.

I idly played with Bagheera's sharp claws, watching the red wolf struggle.

"When they like each other..... a lot," she almost whispered.

"Oh my. But if you knew that, why did you?", Luri said.

Lala flattened her ears and remained quiet.

Luri rested her head on my chest, "Sorry for that. I didn't realize that this would mean something else to you than simply greeting and bonding."

"Well", Lala said, "He didn't seem to really mind either."

I felt my cheeks glow and I worked myself out from between Luri and Bagheera. "And what choice did I have, pinned under two big wolves. Now it's really time for me to go and wash", I said and walked away.

I washed myself and still felt a rush from Lala and Luri licking me like that. I also thought about Sura. It just felt right. It had something magical to it as well, like a connection was established. My thoughts wandered off further, to my other life and what happened.

The people who lent me the car would wonder where I was. Where their car was. Since I should have returned the vehicle yesterday, they probably would start looking for it, and find the wreck, my bags, passport? Or what was left of it. It might have burnt along with the rest of the car. But if not, it would become known. They have my details. A search party? What about if I were to be found here? What if they were to find this wolf pack? Nothing good would come of that. My presence here is a threat to their survival. Bitterly, I realized that Sandah was right after all.

I took a deep breath and dove under. For almost two minutes, I enjoyed the sense of micro gravity as I swam around under water.

After I felt the urge for air, I resurfaced and got out of the water. Without drying myself off, I put my clothing back on.

I walked to the area where the meeting was earlier and saw most of the pack was there. Alexander, Luri, Lala, Akru, Sura, and the other wolves were feasting on a large kill.

The scent and sight of it was revolting. I'd never seen a kill. I'd never seen a large animal being dismembered. This was both. Any trace of hunger I had disappeared.

"What are you standing there for, silly. Come join us!", Akru exclaimed, his muzzle completely covered in blood.

"I need to talk", I said to Alexander.

"Please, have your share first. Chat is easier on a full stomach", he replied, a bloody tendon hanging from the corner of his muzzle.

I did my best to man up and squat down in front of the bloody, smelly mess. While trying to suppress my urge to gag, I drew my knife and had a look. I drove the blade into the hind-leg of the slain animal. The wolves watched how I cut away what was about half a kilo of meat. I reached into the still lukewarm leg and pulled out the slab.

"You're not going to eat your share with us?", one of the wolves asked.

"I'm sorry, but I can't eat raw meat like that, wolf. I hope I am not being impolite for not doing so. I'd get ill. My stomach isn't as strong as that of a wolf."

Luri and Lala also arrived and started to eat. After watching the scene for a second, I wandered off with the dripping slab of steak in my right hand, trying to ignore the brick in my stomach.

To my delight, there was a flint hidden in the hollow handle of the knife. Using that and some twigs which I tore and split into small fibers, it didn't take me very long to get a fire going.

I took a bigger branch, broke it into three pieces and sharpened the ends of it. I stuck them into the meat and I carefully placed it over the flames. I watched the meat sizzle and bake for a few minutes.

"So you wanted to talk. What is on your mind?", Alexander said as he sat down next to me.

"My presence here."

"What do you mean?"

"I am putting your pack in danger by being here."

Alexander gave me an inquisitive look. "Please explain."

"How much do you know about humans?"

"Well, like I said earlier, Bagheera has told me quite a lot about how your kind lives."

"I'm not from around here. My home is on the other side of this planet. I was only to be here for a

short visit."

"The other side of the planet?", Alexander asked, "How did you get here then? Bagheera has explained about this world to me. That must have taken you years if you've walked all this way?"

"I flew in a machine. It goes very fast, cutting down those years to only two days."

"I've heard about those. And that they also fall out of the sky at times."

"Uh yes. Sadly that does happen. But anyway. Here, I borrowed a car."

"Car?"

"Yeah, big metal box that makes a growl-like noise, smells bad and moves. We sit in them and use it for going places."

"Ah yes. Automobiles is how Bagheera calls those."

"I crashed it. It caught fire, and I narrowly escaped being burnt to death. Now I do not know whether all my belongings in there were burned, or survived the flames. The people who lent me that car will come looking for it. If they find it and my stuff, they will report me as missing. That means a search will be organized. They most likely will be able to trace me back to here."

"In these parts of the forest? Unlikely", the wolf answered. "We have never seen a human here. Except for Mowgli, and now you."

"But what IF", I worriedly continued, "Those poachers came close, didn't they?"

"Well, those humans would find what is left of that automobile thing. They would think you died along with it."

"Not if they don't find my burned remains."

I exhaled, thinking about it for a moment.

"Don't let the fire burn your share.", Alexander said as he nudged my arm.

Quickly I grabbed the sticks and lifted them away of the fire. With my knife. I sliced off a little bit and took a bite. It tasted remarkably good. Eagerly, I started to eat the rest.

Alexander sniffed the air, "That surely smells interesting."

"Here, try some", I sliced off a bit and offered it to the wolf.

"Being hand-fed by a human", Alexander smirked, "What on earth will be next."

Carefully, the lupine clamped his jaws around my fingers, and grabbed the meat.

"Mmm. It certainly is more chewy. And it tastes different too. I like it."

After I took the last piece, I grabbed the stick and dispersed the embers, putting them out with a few rocks.

"About your worries. OUR pack will never be in danger, my friend. If our scouts spot humans getting too close, we'll either scare them away, or just go into hiding. And you with us."

I looked the wolf in his eyes. "What I've been wondering ever since I got here. Why be so kind to me? I know I saved Bagheera, but still. You could have walked away after we met. But making me a member of your pack? Letting me sleep in your den? Feeding me?"

Alexander shifted so he sat next to me. "Forgetting about Bagheera's life-debt I explained to you about earlier, you almost gave your life for one of my pack's members. Asides of being thankful for that, it also means that we watch over you in return. And yes, you're a pack member. That means you're under our protection regardless. You didn't have anywhere to sleep. Do you really think I'd let you sleep out all exposed in the condition you were in? You needed to be looked after. And besides, isn't it better to sleep together with us than all alone?"

I looked to the charred remains of the branches. "I am just not used to it. Where I live, I live alone. I eat alone, I sleep alone."

"Well, you better get used to how things are here then.", Alexander said with a smile. "We're a pack, we bond. We need to work together to be able to survive. Speaking of bonding. You've never really done any of that with us, have you?"

"Uh", I stumbled.

"Well, as a wolf, you need to know how we greet each other and bond. It's very important", Alexander continued.

I couldn't help but chuckle and shake my head.

"Hmm? What's so funny?", the wolf wondered.

"I've been shown extensively. First by Sura, then Lala and Bacchus, and afterwards Lala found it necessary to chase me down with Luri for yet another demonstration."

"Aha! So you know it then. So if they all got to bond with you, I should as well."

I sighed, as I didn't really feel like embarrassing myself by having to explain it yet again.

The wolf looked at me. "What's wrong?"

I took a deep breath, "It's something humans only tend to do when they're either mating, or showing to the other one that they want each other."

"What? You humans are so silly", Alexander said with a grin.

I muttered, "Yes, I've been told that extensively too."

"Oh, I am sorry", the wolf apologized. "I shouldn't call any behaviour which is unknown to me silly. That's very unkind. I just really want to bond with you", he softly added.

I stared to the sky, "I guess it's not very nice of me not to, since I did do it with the others. Even if I didn't really plan to."

"But did it make you feel bad or weird when they did?", the wolf asked.

"No, it didn't. Again, it's just something I am not used to because of what I just said."

"Well, don't worry", Alexander said with a chuckle. "Luri and me are very happy together. I won't be after you in that way."

The wolf leaned against me and I thought about what I felt earlier.

"It... It made me feel a connection when they did.", I mumbled.

Alexander looked at me. "Of course. That is why us wolves do it. To re-establish our bond with each other."

He rubbed his cheek against mine. "Please, let me be a part of that with you as well."

I hesitated for a bit, but gave the wolf a slight nod.

Alexander placed his front paws on my shoulders. I let myself sink onto the ground with his weight on top of me. It wasn't long before I felt his soft and warm muzzle over my mouth and nose. Like Luri did, he held me like this for a while, letting me smell his breath and muzzle. My head started to buzz again as I inhaled.

Alexander let go of the gentle grip, and pressed his lips right onto mine. I gave in and felt his tongue curl and slide over mine as the wolf took his turn in tasting me.

After what seemed forever, Alexander moved back, and raised himself up from me.

I extended both my arms, "Please", I almost whispered.

The wolf gave me a warm smile and lay back down on top of me. I embraced him, and buried my face in his fur.

A few blissful moments later, the lupine stood up. "I am very glad we did this. Thank you. Now let us go back."

The carcass was completely dismembered, all that left were meaty bones.

"We'll have to hunt again tomorrow. Not all the wolves have eaten yet. The pack is too big for that", Alexander said as he sniffed at a few of the ribs. "I should assemble the hunters and discuss the strategy. There is a herd of buffalo feeding near here now. Too good of a chance to let slip."

"I'll go to Luri and the others then", I said.

"No, wait here, I won't be long", the wolf said and he ran away.

I sat down next to the stripped carcass and looked at it. "Raw nature", I said to myself. I grabbed my knife and I slowly moved the blade back and forth to capture the rays of the afternoon sun.

Thinking about the fancy moves and tricks in the movies, I started to play around a bit with it.

"Yes. You humans and your weapons.", I heard Bagheera say again. The panther came walking up.

"It is how I know you never wanted to kill Sandah. You could have used your knife the first time he leaped onto you, and be done with it. Sandah wasn't crazy. He saw that too, but yet he still kept on coming", Bagheera said with a sigh.

I clenched my jaw, tightened my fist and rammed the knife into the blood stained soil.

"I am sorry", Bagheera stumbled, and he gave me a reassuring rub with his head. "I just miss him."

He was a good friend, and a good member of the pack. It's a shame his hatred blinded him."

"He died in my arms, Bagheera. I stumbled onto his den shortly after we fought. He made things right with me. I feel so horribly bad about it. I wish he hadn't died."

The black panther smiled faintly. "He made things up with you then. That is all that matters. He died with honour and in peace. He took his chances when he challenged you for the fight. Please do not dwell in sorrow."

I leaned against Bagheera. The big cat lifted his left front paw and I slid in between.

"A thing which is around in abundance here in this pack. Affection. I've taken a liking to it", the cat smiled. "Oh, and the muzzle-licking", he added with a loud chuckle.

"What about felines? Do you do that with each other?", I asked.

"No, not really. We like to cuddle and press our bodies against one another, more or less like we are doing now."

"But didn't they ask you to?"

"Yes they did", the panther answered. "And yes, I did. I wasn't opposed to it at all. It's a bit different than just a hug or a cuddle, but it feels very nice to be so intimate. It gives friendship a new dimension. But sadly after a few times, they found that my tongue was a bit too rough, so I stopped partaking. Though the wolves still quite happily lick me in my maw and let me sniff theirs. I just can't lick back without hurting them."

"I uh. Well...", I stuttered.

"Why yes. That evil Lala, eh?", Bagheera grinned, "Specially after she knew what it means to humans."

"Alexander just did that with me too", I said. "It just felt right."

The feline rubbed his cheek against mine. "Very good. The fact that they want to share that with you is a sign you're a welcome member of the pack. Speaking of which, it looks like Alexander is assembling the hunters. Means I'll get to eat soon. I am starving!"

Alexander, Sura, Akru and five other wolves came walking up and sat down with me and Bagheera.

Sura smiled at me, "Seems you're all nice and comfortable".

I crawled out from between the panther's paws. "I will leave you all to it.", I said.

I got back on my feet, grabbed my knife, and walked away.

"Wait", I heard Alexander call out behind me. "We want you to join us for the hunt", the wolf said.

Puzzled, I walked back to the group. "What do you mean? Do you want me to help you hunt down a buffalo? I've never done any of that before."

"We have seen you fight Sandah", one of the other wolves said, "You are strong and fast."

"I don't think that I can be of any use", I replied. "I've never hunted before. I can't even keep up with you running."

"No need for that, or for you to get within reach of its horns to kill it." Alexander reassured me,

"We'll take care of that. You walk up to the buffalo and try to make it run to where we are. When we take over, get yourself out of the way and to safety. We'll then chase it down. Sura, Akru, you two will cover the flanks. Whenever the buffalo decides to change direction, you guide it back. With our human friend pointing the buffalo towards us, we'll be with greater numbers to subdue it. They're dangerous enough as is. Bagheera, you chase with us and grab it by its neck when you can."

The black cat nodded.

"Alright then, let's go!", Alexander said.

While walking along with the wolves and Bagheera, I was wondering how on earth I was going to pull that off. I'd never even been close to a cow. Let alone a wild buffalo.

After a little while, we got to an open field. Bagheera nudged me, "Get down."

I crouched.

"You wait here and count down from sixty", Alexander said to me. "Then walk into the field towards that buffalo on the right side. That one seems to be of age. We'll leave the fit ones alone."

You try to get it to go to where we are, which will be on the far end. Once it's on the move, we'll move in and take over. OK?"

The other wolves nodded.

"Good hunting", Alexander said and gestured the others to follow.

Bagheera, Alexander, and the others disappeared in the forest, and I started counting.

After I got to zero, I shook my head and made my way out into the clearing. I expected an instant failure, and the herd of buffalo to run away the moment that they spotted me. However, to my surprise, they didn't.

I got closer and closer, and went for the animal Alexander pointed out to me. After spotting me, the buffalo started to walk away, but in the other direction than I intended.

I realized that for the animal to turn back around, I had to get in between it and the rest of the herd. Nervously, I made my way up to its left side. I made sure not to turn my back towards the herd, who were standing still and watching me with great interest.

When I got right in between the targeted buffalo on my right, and the herd on my left side, I started to walk towards the now isolated animal. It didn't move an inch. It didn't even recognize me as a threat.

I stretched both my arms out and wildly waved them up and down while walking further towards the animal. That seemed to be more effective. The buffalo got startled and ran for perhaps 20 meters before stopping again.

I now started to run while still waving my arms. I inhaled deeply and yelled out some kind of grunty raspy scream. This made the buffalo finally run off. I ran as fast as my body would allow me to, but the distance between me and the buffalo grew bigger and bigger. Suddenly I saw Sura and Akru coming out from under the undergrowth. It wasn't long before the rest of the wolves joined in as well. I slowed down and quickly turned around to see if I wasn't being followed by any buffalo from the herd. To my relief, all was clear. At half speed, I kept on running forwards. I saw how the wolves chased the buffalo around. From a safe distance, I stopped to watch the captivating spectacle. Often I've seen wolves chase down prey on television. But now I wasn't just watching it with my own eyes, I was part of it.

The buffalo kept on changing direction in an attempt to lose its chasers. I noticed how the hunters kept it within reach, but didn't move in for the kill. They were letting the buffalo wear itself out instead, so it would be less of a struggle to kill afterwards.

I decided to walk back towards the tree line, in case the animal suddenly decided to come back in my direction. To my horror, the buffalo did just that. I started to run again, but soon came to the realization that it was too late. The animal was coming in too fast. When the buffalo was almost upon me, I jumped into the air as high as I could while pulling my legs up. I felt the sharp horns of the animal rubbing past my calves as it passed underneath me.

I landed back down on the ground and rolled over to dissipate the impact. I cried out in agony as my ribs were compressed. Startled by my cry, the wolves all halted. The buffalo turned back around and made a mad dash back towards me.

"Shit!", I yelled as I got back upright.

The wolves quickly ran for it. I made another leap, again managing to stay clear of the horns.

Shocked, I saw the animal suddenly turning towards Sura, who was waiting there to move in if the buffalo were to get to me.

I yelled "Jump out of the way!" as hard as I could, but it was too late. Sura yelped loudly as the buffalo took the beige-black wolf onto its horns and threw him into the air.

With a muffled thud, Sura fell onto the ground. As fast as I could, I ran to the wolf him and crouched down over him.

Bagheera suddenly ran past us and threw himself onto the buffalo's back with a high pitched growl. Swerving wildly, the buffalo managed to throw the panther off. Alexander, Akru and a few other wolves stood on the other side, watching us in horror, unable to do anything with the buffalo in between them and me. Two of the other hunters stood next to me and Sura.

The huge animal ran towards us again.

"What are you standing here for? Get Sura out of here!", I yelled to them.

"But you don't stand a chance against that buffalo by yourself!", one of the wolves exclaimed.

"Get him out of here NOW!", I exclaimed. The two wolves each grabbed one of Sura's paws, and dragged him away as fast as they could.

The buffalo didn't change direction and continued running towards me. With an agile leap, Bagheera threw himself onto the animal's back and buried his fangs in the neck. The buffalo desperately tried to throw the black panther off again. Bagheera could not hold on any longer and had to let go.

Dazed, the animal stood still for a few moments. With a grunt, I ran towards it from the side, jumped up, and kicked both my feet against the animal's head, which caused it to stagger for a few seconds, lose balance, and fall onto the ground. I grabbed my knife and without hesitation stabbed it into the animal's neck.

With its carotid artery cut open, it didn't take long for the buffalo to lose consciousness. I exhaled, placed my hand on its neck and felt its heart beat fade away.

Bagheera and a few of the wolves walked up.

"This whole predatory thing really is not for me", I said while panting heavily.

"But you did succeed in killing a large prey on your first ever hunt", the panther remarked.

I pulled my knife out of the buffalo's neck. "At the cost of WHAT!", I angrily snarled and walked away.

Alexander and Akru were standing over Sura, who was lying on the ground.

I sat down next to them. "This all went horribly wrong", I sighed.

Alexander looked down, "I've misjudged. This wasn't a weak member of that herd. I almost got you and Sura killed because of that."

Sura carefully got up. I held his shoulders to support him. "I'll be alright", he softly said.

He walked around a bit, limping badly. His right thigh had a deep puncture and a cut.

"You've had a lucky escape", Alexander said to Sura, "If his horns had stabbed your abdomen, you'd probably be dead."

"We both probably would be if it wasn't for Bagheera". I said.

Other wolves came walking up. "Go on, human. You've made the kill, claim your share", one of the hunters said.

"I'll let Bagheera do the honour. His part in this kill was as big as mine."

Bagheera gave me a grateful nod.

I cleaned the thick blood off of my knife with a few leaves and some grass, and sheathed it.

"You don't want to feed?", Alexander asked.

"I'm alright for now", I answered.

"You, Sura and Akru go back then. Daylight is starting to fade, it'll be dark and colder soon. I want both Sura and you in the den for the night."

I walked to Sura, reached my arms under his belly, and lifted him off of the ground.

"Hey! I can walk myself!", he protested.

"Oh, I know", I said, "But not now."

Carefully, I placed Sura back on his paws in front of the den.

"What happened?", Lala worriedly asked, as she and Akru ran towards us.

"The buffalo was stronger than Father thought it was", Akru replied. "It got Sura on its horns."

Luri softly licked Sura's wounds. "Inside with you", she said.

The beige-black wolf crawled inside, followed by Lala.

I sat down next to the den's entrance and leaned back against the dirt incline.

"I screwed up and should have known better", I said. "I should have known that the buffalo wouldn't recognize me as a predator or a threat. He turned on me, and in the resulting chaos, Sura got hurt". I rubbed my calves where the horns rubbed against.

"But thanks to you nothing worse happened. And you killed a big prey! Something me and Sura

haven't been allowed to do yet", Akru said.

"That wasn't how it should have happened", I said to Akru.

"Oh? You made the kill?", Luri said to me in surprise.

"It came dashing for me, and Sura was hurt, lying on the ground in front of me. Bagheera managed to jump onto the buffalo's back and hurt it enough to distract it. I had no other choice and got lucky. I could've ended on its horns just like Sura", I answered.

"Don't give me all the credit", the black feline said to me as him and Alexander walked up.

Alexander held short at the den's entrance. "Sura's inside?", he asked Luri.

The white she-wolf nodded, "Lala is with him."

Akru and Alexander went inside.

"The buffalo didn't hurt you?", I asked Bagheera.

"Nah. I was able to stay out of harm's way", he answered. "Sadly he was too strong for me to subdue. But you did a very good job in taking care of that."

Alexander came back out. "Sura is sleeping. We should as well."

"The den isn't big enough for all of us", I said. "I'll find someplace else to sleep. Or I just won't sleep at all. I have a few things to think about."

Alexander looked at me. "Don't blame yourself. If there is someone to blame here, it's me. It was my misjudgment. It's partially thanks to you that it didn't end up much worse than it did."

"Are you sure you don't want to sleep?", Luri asked.

"You know what?" Bagheera said, "Come along with me. I'll keep ya company during the night."

"Alright then", Alexander replied. "Then get back here in the morning. You'll be able to catch up on sleep together with Sura."

Bagheera and I walked away into the dark forest.

"He's so much different than I how thought a mature human would be", Luri softly said to Alexander. "It makes me wonder how Mowgli would have turned out if he was still here."

"Different. A lot different", Alexander replied. "Mowgli was a little man-cub when we took him in. We tried to raise Mowgli as a wolf, while he's human. Mowgli never really learned the ways how humans live and go about with things. Him however... We saw how he fought Sandah. And I saw how he killed that buffalo. I now believe every claim Bagheera made of him. I just hope he wants to stay and live here amongst us. He has a good heart."

"Yes, but that's a lot to ask, isn't it? Put yourself in his position", Luri said.

"I know", Alexander said, "I know...All we can do is ask, and hope."

"Tell me. Where did you learn to fight and defend yourself like that?", Bagheera asked. "All the humans I've seen so far were rather harmless with their bare hands."

I stretched my arms out, leaned back against a tree and looked at a new moon. "I started to learn when I was young after I was beaten up one time too many. I didn't know how to defend myself."

"When you went to school?", the panther asked.

I looked to Bagheera for a few moments. The cat chuckled, "I know a lot about humans. Like I said before, I lived with some for quite an extended period of my life."

I answered, "Yes. In school."

"Humans can be so vicious towards one another."

I shrugged. "Life in the wild isn't much better, as I've found out rather harshly the past few days."

"Hmmhmm", Bagheera hummed.

"Why did you leave your previous, human home?", I asked.

The panther looked away and sighed. "I was beaten and kicked by one of the humans. It got too bad for me to cope with in the end and I fled. Alexander's pack was so kind to take me in. Though back then, Akela still was the alpha."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But since a human beat you up, and two others captured you to kill and skin you, why don't you hate them?"

"Oh, I've seen bad humans. But I've also seen good ones. Every one is different. It only took me a

two second look in your eyes when you were in front of my cage to see you weren't one of the bad ones", the feline said with a kind smile. "Now tell me, why don't you want to sleep with Alexander, Luri and the others?"

"I figured to leave them alone for a bit. Sura is injured and needs their care and attention."

"Their? Shouldn't that be OUR?"

I sighed. "I don't know. It's all so weird and unreal to me. I've only been here for a few days, and so much has happened. I am not a wolf. I come from a different, alien place. But here I am, a member of a wolf pack, and wolves treating me as if I am one of their own. I can't process it."

"Can't you accept the fact that they might just like you? You're so doubtful all the time while it's so obvious. They let you sleep with them, sleep with their cubs, join in on the hunt? Come on, how blind and ignorant can you be!", the black feline exclaimed.

"I saved you. That is why I was offered a place to stay."

"That is how it started yes. But we're way beyond that point now. Admitted, I wondered why Alexander made you a pack-member right after he first met you. But I guess he did that because you needed a bit of persuasion not to wander off all alone like you wanted to do right after you rescued me. Allow them into your heart. Allow ME into your heart. Alexander, Luri, Lala, Sura, Akru. They all love you. Don't you see that?"

I quietly stared into the darkness.

After about a minute or two. I looked at Bagheera. The penetrating dim moonlight cast an eerie, blue haze over the feline's pitch black fur.

I leaned against him.

The cat placed one of his big paws on my left hand. "Isn't this what humans do on moments like this?", he said with a smile.

"I would really want to do something else now", I softly said.

"Oh really now?", Bagheera said. He pushed his flank against me with force, causing me to roll over onto the ground.

"Well then" he said as he lay on top of me, "This better?"

I embraced him. "Very much so."

The cat rubbed his cheeks over mine, giving me a few gentle licks. "You want to sleep?"

I nodded.

"Alright. Let's go to Baloo. A bear-hug should put you right in dream land."

The feline guided me through the dark forest to a place a bit away from where the wolf-dens were.

"Bagheera! Is that you! At this time of the night. You evil cat!", Baloo muttered as he walked up.

"Oh, and our human friend! Shouldn't you be asleep at this hour?"

"That is why we are here", Bagheera said.

"But doesn't he sleep in Alexander's den?", the bear asked.

"I decided not to", I replied. "Sura got hurt during the hunt today. I decided to give my place away for the night to allow for more space."

The brown bear shook his head. "You should've stayed there. You're a member of the pack and Alexander's den is where you sleep, right? That means you're as good as family to them."

I was without words for a few moments. "I have a lot on my mind", I replied.

"That is another reason why you should be there, but alright. That being said, please come. Feel welcome to sleep with me. And maybe wake-up cat here wants a warm spot to sleep as well?", Baloo asked with a yawn.

"Oh hush, you", Bagheera grumbled.

Baloo chuckled, "You weird nocturnal creature."

The bear sat down under a bit of thick undergrowth. "Here, come lay down", the brown bear gestured to me.

I sat down next to Baloo, who suddenly rolled over on the ground, grabbed me with his strong paws and pulled me tightly against his chest.

"This is what I always did with Mowgli. He loved it."

I yawned as I rest my head against the bear's warm fur.

"Yes. We're all the same, aren't we? Wolves, bears, humans. We all love to be held and hugged", Baloo said.

"I do. I do a lot", I admitted.

Bagheera let himself flop down against both me and Baloo. "Yes, I guess I shall ignore being nocturnal for a bit, and snooze some", he said with a big yawn, "Sleep well, you two."

I opened my eyes. First thing that I saw was one of Baloo's huge paws over my chest.

The bear and the black panther were still sleeping. Dawn was in the sky and I contemplated going back to sleep when I saw Bagheera's ears perk up, followed by distant rustling getting closer. It was Akru.

"Oh, finally I've found you!", the wolf exclaimed to me, panting.

"Why hello there Akru", Baloo yawned. "What brings you here in such a rush? And at this time of the morning?"

"It's Sura. He's not doing very well. Father asked me to go look for you. Please come, hurry!"

Still half asleep, I crawled onto my feet and followed Akru in his tracks.

After a few minutes, we got back to the den. Lala sat outside with Alexander.

"It's bad", Alexander said. "He doesn't want to wake up. His wounds are infected."

Quickly I made my way into the den.

Luri was licking Sura's wounds. She gave me a sad look and sighed. "It's infected."

I put my hand under the beige-black wolf's shoulder to feel his temperature. He was panting heavily. Bagheera entered the den.

"He's running a fever, Bagheera", I said. "He has blood poisoning."

The black panther looked at me shocked.

"What does that mean?", Luri worriedly asked, "That sounds very bad."

Bagheera sighed and leaned against the white she-wolf. "It is very bad. It means there's not much hope. I am sorry, Luri."

The panther turned around and walked out.

I ran my hands through Sura's coat. Seeing the young wolf in misery hurt me a lot more than I was prepared for.

Luri leaned against me. "You didn't have to leave. There's always room in our den for you", she softly said.

"Bagheera told me how bad it is", Alexander said as he walked into the den. "He probably won't live longer than a few more days at most." He lay down and rested his head on his son's shoulder.

I cursed under my breath. "He needs antibiotics", I said. "That's the only thing of which I know will save him."

Alexander looked up. "And you know where and how to get that?"

"A human town or village."

"That means you will be putting yourself in danger, I won't allow that", the wolf replied.

"If I don't at least try, Sura will surely die."

"I don't want to lose two...", Alexander stopped mid-sentence and sighed.

"Please, go", Luri urged. "And be careful."

"Bagheera, we don't have much time. We need to get to the nearest human settlement", I said when I got back outside.

"What? Wait! Why? What do you think to find there?", the panther exclaimed.

"Antibiotics. Medication which will kill Sura's infection. It's his only chance."

"But won't that mean you're....", Bagheera replied.

"Yes! No time to think about that. I need your help to show me the way."

"Very well", the feline said. "The quickest way is to the place where we first met", Bagheera said.

"The camp site where those poachers were?"

"Yes."

"Please be careful!", Lala exclaimed as we both ran away.

I tried to keep up with the black panther as best as I could. We got back to the place where I freed Bagheera a few days ago. Everything still was as we left it. I started going through the rubbish again.

"What are you looking for?", Bagheera asked.

"Anything. Maybe they kept some kind of first aid kit with medication. They were out camping. It's something I would bring along with me."

After a few minutes of frantic rummaging, I stumbled upon a leather pouch.

I zipped it open and found two hundred U.S. Dollars in twenty dollar notes, car keys, and a GPS receiver.

"This truly is a stroke of luck", I said as I held the GPS receiver in my hands.

"What kind of a thing is that?", Bagheera asked.

"If this works, it will show us where we are. And it also might show where the nearest town or village is. Those bastards might even have marked the location of their car."

"Hmm. Human ingenuity keeps amazing me", the panther nodded.

I pressed the button on top of the GPS receiver. After a few electronic bleeps, the screen lit up.

"The dense forest might prevent it from getting a fix", I mumbled to myself.

"Well, whatever you say. We need to get a move on", Bagheera said. "I roughly know in which direction the nearest human settlement is. Follow me." And he ran off again.

It wasn't long before I had to slow down to catch my breath. "Hey!", I yelled. "Slow down! I can't keep up with you!"

The panther halted, and waited for me to catch up.

"Well, I can't carry you", he said to me. "We have a long way to go, and the sooner we get there, the better."

I took the GPS receiver out of my jacket's pocket. I checked the display, and saw that it had a fix on our position. There was a rocker-switch under the screen which I could use to pan the map. I also discovered the buttons for zooming.

I scrolled the cursor to the right until it hovered over a green car symbol.

"What are you doing?", Bagheera curiously said as he walked up and looked at the device in my hand.

"They've marked the position of their car. We'll have to find it", I replied while trying to find a menu and navigation function.

"How do you know how to use that? Have you ever seen this device before?", the feline wondered.

"I had something exactly like this", I answered. "Ah, there it is. Eh. Twenty kilometers to where it is parked? That is going to take a day in this terrain."

"But when we have that automobile, we'll go much faster, yes?", Bagheera asked.

"Yes, we will. And we won't have to walk. Follow me."

Hours went by as we both walked in silence. Thoughts shot through my mind about Sura, lying in the den fighting for his life. I regularly checked the GPS receiver as we got closer.

Daylight was starting to fade, when the forest got noticeably thinner. I saw a recognizable shape in between the trees and tyre tracks in the grass. I recognized the car as being a late 1990's model Nissan Patrol.

I took the car keys out of my pocket and pressed the 'unlock' button. I saw the indicator lights blink, and heard the doors unlock.

I opened the two rear doors of the car to see what was inside. I froze.

A big pile of animal skins were stacked one on top of the other. "Those bastards", I hissed between my teeth.

I quickly went through a few of them. I recognized some skins to be of wolves. One of a tiger. And some others which looked feline.

Bagheera shook his head in disbelief, "My skin could have been on top of that pile."

In anger, I grabbed the pile and threw it out of the car onto the forest floor. "I don't want that anywhere near me." I looked back inside, and saw a large metal toolbox. I opened the metal lid. Scalpels, knives, razor blades.

The black panther gave me a sad look. "Still feeling troubled about killing those two now?"

I balled my fists and slammed the box shut.

"Come, jump in!", I exclaimed as I opened one of the back doors.

"Are you sure you know how to operate this?", the black panther hesitatingly asked.

"I told you, right?"

"You told me that you crashed, yes."

I gave the feline a rather annoyed look.

With a chuckle, the panther leaped into the car and sat down in the middle of the back seat.

After slamming the doors shut, I made my way to the driver's side and got into the car.

I opened the glove compartment and threw the content out into the foot-well of the passengers side.

A USB cable with a twelve volt socket on the other end, and a cradle to mount the GPS receiver to the windscreen where amongst the various items. I mounted the GPS receiver and connected it to the car's twelve volt power supply.

To my relief, the warning indicator lights on the instrument panel lit up after I turned the ignition.

With two turns of the starter, the V6 turbo-diesel sprung to life.

I selected what looked like the nearest town on the GPS receiver.

"Hmm. Another fourty kilometers according to the GPS", I mumbled. I pushed the seat back a bit and eased myself down.

Bagheera lay down and rested his paws on the arm-rest in between the front seats.

I shifted into first gear, turned the headlights on, and carefully let go of the clutch to see how the traction would be. Feeling confident, I disengaged the differential lock, and the low-range gear lever. I gently accelerated up to third gear.

Bagheera looked at the trees moving by. "This has been quite a while", he softly said. "Though I never was actually inside one of these. I was always out on the back, in a cage"

I rested my right arm onto the panther's paws and held one of his claws. "We'll have to find a place where we can get the medication. A hospital, or a doctor. I just hope they won't have any problems with giving or selling it to me."

After what must have been twenty minutes of careful, bumpy driving, the narrow trail widened up to a gravel road.

The GPS indicated thirty-two more kilometers. I pressed down on the accelerator and heard the high pitched whistle of the turbo-charger. A huge dust cloud developed behind us. The loose gravel made the car bounce around a bit, as the wheels lost traction every now and then.

"You won't be able to see very clearly in the dark. Please be careful. Someone could cross the road", Bagheera worriedly said.

My eyes scanned the instrument panel. Above the light switch, I noticed two dimly lit tumble switches.

After pressing them, two rows of four rally-lights mounted on the roof rack and the bull bar lit up.

A wide, bright beam of light illuminated the gravel road for almost as far as I could see.

After a good few more kilometers, I could make out the silhouette of a person in the far distance.

"Huh? Who gets it in his mind to walk here at this time of the night?", I wondered.

After we got closer, the figure turned around.

"Oh, look, the human is carrying a man-cub in his arms. It looks like it's hurt!", Bagheera exclaimed.

"I'll have to stop. I can't leave someone without help in a place like this. And we have to find a hospital anyway. Maybe that person knows this area."

"Very well", the panther nodded.

After slowing the car down, I opened the driver side window. The child who the man was carrying was covered in blood.

"Can I help you?", I asked.

"Oh, thank GOD. Yes! Please, drive us to the hospital! My daughter was attacked by a tiger!", he exclaimed in fluid English.

Quickly, I threw the scattered things back into the glove compartment and opened the passenger side door. "Get in!"

"Oh thank you, thank you!", the man said as he quickly walked to the other side of the car.

After he got into the car and closed the door, he gasped, "No! A wild cat! Please!"

"Hey, relax! It's fine, he's my friend. He's alright".

Frightened, the man stared at the black panther.

I couldn't help but notice a slightly amused expression on Bagheera's face after he saw the reaction of the man. He pulled his paws back from the arm rest and made himself comfortable on the back-seat.

"Do you know where the nearest hospital is?", I asked after I drove off.

"Yes, yes, I do. I am a nurse there. It's about thirty minutes away", the man answered, without looking away from Bagheera.

"Please give me directions, I am not that familiar with the area."

The little girl had a gaping wound on her belly and bleeding claw marks over most of her body. I could even spot her intestines poking out slightly. "Hmm. Not much time to lose", I mumbled.

"What happened?"

The man sighed, "We were out camping. We were just done eating and were making ourselves ready for the night when that tiger suddenly appeared. It went straight for her. I managed to scare it away by throwing heavy rocks. Just in time."

After giving Bagheera a quick glance, I looked back at the man. "I'll drive as quickly as I can."

"Ah, now that's better!", I exclaimed as I saw the dusty gray gravel make way for the dark gray, smooth surface of asphalt.

"Do you know if there is much traffic on this road at this time of day?", I asked.

"There should be none", the man answered.

"OK, I need to stop briefly."

I firmly applied the brakes and brought the car to a full stop. "Would it be easier for the girl when you would sit with her in the back?"

"Yes. My girl would be more comfortable. But what about the panther?", the man worriedly asked.

"He'll be alright", I replied. "Don't worry!"

The man stepped out and opened the right rear door. I turned around and helped the little girl in. Bagheera quickly shifted further to the left to make space. I reached out and slammed the front passenger door shut.

I switched from four wheel drive to two wheel drive. Then I firmly planted my right foot into the carpet. The engine roared as I accelerated through the gears.

The girl woke up and leaned against Bagheera, who gently nuzzled her cheeks.

"Can I ask you for something?", I said to the man.

"Anything!", he responded.

"I am in desperate need of strong antibiotics. I've a family member out in the forest who has a bad case of blood poisoning. He is under the care of our expedition's physician, but sadly he ran out of that type of medication. That is the reason why I am heading this way. I want to ask you if you could get me some when we get to the hospital."

"May I ask why you didn't bring him in the car then?"

"He can't be transported. He has a very painful back and can't tolerate being in a bumpy car."

The man gave me a investigative look through the rear view mirror.

"Please", I said, "His life depends on it."

"Normally I can't. I am not allowed to give that kind of medication to someone who isn't a doctor", he replied. "But you're saving the life of my daughter. I'll get you supplies right after we get to the first aid, yes?"

"I can't thank you enough", I said with a sigh.

The trees made way for a more built-up area.

"Slow down, We are almost there. Just follow this road until the second major junction. You'll see the hospital on your left side, the ER will be signposted first", the man said.

With screeching tires, I drove onto the ER driveway and stopped in front of the entrance. I quickly stepped out to help the man move his daughter out of the car, so that the hospital staff would not see Bagheera.

"Park your car there and follow me inside. I'll get you supplies so you can be on your way again", the man hastily said, pointing to a parking spot on the far side of the entrance. "Wait at the first desk inside on your left."

A few nurses came running outside with a stretcher. After carefully placing the girl onto the soft mattress, they quickly made their way back inside.

I parked the car and turned the engine off.

"That little man-cub was badly hurt. I hope she will survive. I liked her", Bagheera softly said.

"She's in good care now. I'll go in and fetch the medication, and then we'll be on our way back."

After taking the belt with the knife off from my pants to avoid questions, I ran inside to the desk the man had pointed out to me and found him there filling in paperwork.

"Thank god, she's in surgery", he said with tears in his eyes. "Again, I can't thank you enough. She has a good chance of surviving now, thanks to you. I'll get the supplies for you, hang on a minute."

After a little while, he got back and handed me a bag. "Here, these are a few doses of intravenous antibiotics. One or two shots of that should be enough to cure a severe case of blood poisoning."

"Thank you very, very much", I said.

"You're looking awfully tired. Please be safe. I would not want something to happen to you. Are you sure you don't want me to ask for assistance? We've an airplane and a helicopter on standby for life threatening cases", the man kindly offered.

"We are in the middle of the forest on an expedition. It's almost impossible to get to any way else than on foot", I answered. "I must be on my way now. The best of luck for you and your daughter. I hope she'll make it."

Before he could ask any more questions, I turned around and ran outside.

Without wasting more time, I drove off.

With a sigh of relief, I switched the rally lights back on as we left the town limit and planted my right foot back down.

"Are you alright?", Bagheera asked. "You look very tired. Maybe we should stop so you can get some sleep."

"There is no time for sleep. I won't be able to rest for a second as long as Sura isn't safe. I will sleep when we are back."

After a little while, the brightly lit trees flying by were starting to have a hypnotizing effect on me. My eyes sank down to the instrument panel and I stared at the needle of the rev counter, when violent bumping caused by the rough gravel snapped me out of the daze. I quickly took my foot off of the accelerator to let the car slow down, before locking all four wheels to stop so I could switch it back into four-wheel-drive.

Bagheera gave me a rather worried look through the rear view mirror.

"Hey, I would go a lot slower if there wasn't someone I care about in danger."

"I know", he replied. "It's just that I'm not very used to going this fast, this wild. The times I've been in an automobile, things went much slower and gentler."

We got back on the narrow forest track. The GPS receiver produced a loud bleep when we arrived where we found the car.

I stopped next to the pile of discarded skins. Another quick search through the car produced a flashlight. I clipped the belt with my knife back around my jeans, put the flashlight, car keys and GPS receiver in the plastic bag and let Bagheera and myself out.

"Oof... Now that long walk back", I yawned as I stretched out my arms.

"So, how come you crashed your automobile?", the panther curiously asked while we were walking back to the camping site.

"I uh.... fell asleep while driving", I mumbled under my breath.

"Oh, did you now", the feline sarcastically said.

"Any idea why that tiger attacked that girl, Bagheera? Shouldn't it keep to that law you're all talking about as well?"

"Shere Khan", the black panther said in a bitter voice. "Or at least I've a strong suspicion it was him. He has been an outlaw for as long as he has been around, and was a constant threat to the pack a while ago. He doesn't acknowledge the law, and basically does whatever, and however he pleases. Ever since Alexander and Luri adopted Mowgli, he was after the man cub. Mowgli made a truce with him. Shere Khan agreed to stay away from the pack's territory in exchange for Mowgli leaving the wolves to return to the human world and never to come back." The panther sighed. "A high price to pay for both Mowgli and us. Alexander and Luri pretty much lost one of their sons.

"But what if he finds out that I am there?", I asked.

"No one knows. If he keeps to the truce, he won't find out, since he's to stay away from the pack's territory and hunting grounds. He would know if Mowgli was to return though. Mowgli went to live in the same settlement we were just in and that tiger would surely pick up his scent if Mowgli would walk through the area. If he were to find out about you in some way, he'd probably come after you. He would be more cautious though. You're a mature human being. He fears them because he has seen what they're capable of doing."

"I hope that won't happen. I'd rather not fight a fully grown tiger."

We both fell silent as we walked on. My body started to ache as exhaustion started to get the better of me.

The panther noticed me slowing down. "Are you alright?", he asked.

"I will be when Sura is", I persisted.

At the crack of dawn, we finally made it back to the camping site.

Bagheera saw me struggling. "We're almost there", he encouraged me.

"They're back!", I suddenly heard Akru call out. I came back to my senses when I saw both him and Lala running towards us. I felt a hard thud on my chest, and the next moment I was lying on my back in the grass getting my face licked by both wolves.

"How is Sura doing?", Bagheera asked after the wolves greeted him too.

Akru and Lala went quiet.

"He didn't eat or drink anything since you both left yesterday. He's very quiet and has hardly moved", Lala replied softly.

With a grunt I got back up and ran to the den as hard as I could.

Alexander was sitting outside, next to the entrance, an empty stare in his eyes.

I ran up and stopped in front of him. The wolf stared at me for a few seconds, before looking down and shaking his head. A sick, nervous feeling got a hold of me.

Without saying a word, I crawled into the den.

In the dim light, Sura was lying on the ground, his dry tongue hanging out of the side of his open muzzle.

"Please, don't tell me that it's too late", I softly said.

Luri quietly sat down beside me.

I leaned forward and placed my hand under his shoulder, like I did earlier. An immense load fell off of my shoulders when I felt the wolf's heart pounding. I reached for the plastic bag and took out the flashlight and a small box containing the two syringes with antibiotics. With a click of the flashlight's rubber button, the den was bathed in an eerie pale, blue light.

I pushed the back of the flashlight into the sandy wall and aimed the beam of light onto Sura. With my hand over the wolf's wrist, I located his artery. I took one of the syringes out of the box and placed the needle on Sura's skin. Very carefully and at a narrow angle, I pushed it in about a centimeter, then slowly pulled back on the plunger. To my relief, I saw the bright, red colour of the

wolf's blood appearing in the barrel.

I squeezed the plunger all the way down, forcing the fluid into Sura's bloodstream, and pulled the needle out. With a finger, I pressed down on the spot for a short while. After placing the empty syringe back into the box, I turned the flashlight off and put everything back into the plastic bag.

"Will it help?", Luri worriedly asked.

"I hope so. Only time will tell."

While looking at Sura's motionless silhouette for a few minutes, I felt a lump in my throat and wrapped my arms around the wolf to pull him close in a tight hug.

Luri lay down next to my right side and started to groom her son's fur. Alexander and Bagheera also came into the den.

The blue-black wolf walked up and softly licked Sura's and my face.

"Did you give him that antibiotic thing?", the black panther asked.

I nodded as I took my jeans and shirt off.

"All we can do is wait and hope then. I'll make myself scarce so that Akru and Lala can join. I need some sleep after last night's adventure."

"Please Bagheera, stay with us", Alexander said as he lay down against me. "There is enough room in the den."

"Thank you, I will. I'll go ask Akru and Lala to join."

A few moments later, him and the two wolves walked in.

"Will Sura be OK?", Akru asked.

"We need patience", the black panther said.

Akru and Lala lay down, and Bagheera sprawled against them. Alexander softly rubbed his muzzle over my mouth and cheeks. "We are so glad you both got back safe and sound. Now go sleep. You look exhausted."

A sudden pressure on my chest, impairing the ability to breathe made me wake up out of a shallow slumber.

I opened my eyes half way, but all I could see was beige fur. I raised my head slightly and found Sura lying on top of me. The wolf saw that I was awake and gazed into my eyes.

Alexander and Luri woke up and started to lick Sura after noticing he was conscious, soon joined by Akru and Lala, welcoming their brother and friend back.

It wasn't long before the wolves turned to me. The relief of Sura coming around, and feeling all the wolves' affection and love was too much for me and I broke down.

All their caressing, mouthing and licking blended together into one continuous, warm, blissful sensation.

My mental defenses crumbled away. Every sense of being and feeling human temporarily ceased to exist. Every part of my mental self turned lupine. I felt like a wolf, I breathed like a wolf, I thought like a wolf. I was a wolf. Everything suddenly was right.

Fully at peace, I fell asleep.

I was so tired that I slept through the day and the following night.

When I woke up the next morning, I found that I was alone in the den with Bagheera. The black feline softly bumped his head against mine. "Finally! You're as bad as a feline! Are you rested now?", he said with a chuckle.

I stretched myself and rested my head back onto the panther's soft fur. He licked my face with his rough tongue, "Nonono, you're not going back to sleep", Bagheera grinned.

I sleepily exhaled, my mind still hazy. I pushed back against the feline's head, rubbing my cheek against his.

"I was very moved by what I saw yesterday. You've finally let them into your heart, haven't you?", Bagheera softly asked.

"Much more than that", I dreamily replied. "But I don't know how to explain."

"Then don't. I saw enough to understand."

The feline chuffed softly when I kneaded his chest fur with both my hands. He extended both his paws and folded them over my shoulders to pull me close into a hug. "You know how thankful I am because you've saved my life. But I also want to tell you that I love you. I love you like I love Mowgli."

My hands ran down Bagheera's shoulders and back and I shivered, enjoying his strong embrace for a few moments while searching for words. "I love you too, Bagheera. More than I can find words for now."

The black panther pushed himself back a bit and looked at me. "We've head-rubbed like felines, we hugged like humans, now I want to bond with you like a wolf, at least for once."

"Please... do", I replied.

Bagheera placed his muzzle over my lips. Very carefully and tenderly, he curled his rough tongue over mine. I drifted away as the black panther shared his warm breath with me.

After a little while, Bagheera broke the kiss. Even with him having been very careful, my mouth was sore and raw, and tasted of blood.

"Hm, yes. I know why you don't really join in on that part of socializing", I said while rubbing my sore gums with my tongue.

"I hope I didn't hurt you", Bagheera worriedly replied.

"No, it's quite OK. It is only a bit sore."

"Well then. Let's get outside. I want to stretch my muscles for a bit. Alexander called for a pack meeting this morning to tell the pack about our little expedition into the human world, and Sura's recovery as the result. Of course he would've preferred the both of us to be present, but he figured you needed sleep. And he asked me to watch over you and make sure you were warm."

With a loud yawn, I stretched and savoured the morning sun shine and the fresh air.

"You're not coming along to the others?", Bagheera asked as he was about to walk off.

"I'll be at the lake for a quick dive. I will join in a bit."

"Alright. I shall notify the others that you will join a bit later."

The panther gracefully leaped over some rocks, and disappeared between the trees.

Back at the little lake and waterfall, I realized that it only had been a week since I came here first, bloody and hurt. All that had healed up to red scars. Only my broken ribs remained a constant annoyance.

But apart of that, such a world of change.

I so much felt like a part of the pack now, after everything that happened. If I were to choose to leave and go back to my normal life, it would not be easy. My flight back home would be a few days from now. After shaking my head, I spread my arms and dove into the water.

A quick swim later, I got back out of the water, sat down, and let myself slip away for a little while.

"Yes, you've pretty much claimed this area as your territory, I see", Luri said.

The snow white wolf stood in front of me.

"My fligh... er... journey back to my home would start a few days from now", I said while idly staring into the distance.

"Yes", the she-wolf answered softly. "We all would really love you to stay", she continued. "Though we can never expect you to. You're a long way away from your home. It would be selfish of us to just assume that you would."

I looked in Luri's bright eyes. "I've come to love you all like family over the time I've been here. I really do not have that much to return to."

"Then please, stay with us. You mean so much to us", the wolf smiled, "Come sit with me."

After I sat down next to her on the ground, she placed her front paws on either side of my shoulders, and rested her head on mine. Enjoying her scent and warmth, I closed my eyes and held her paws.

"Would you want to become part of our family?", she suddenly asked.

"Part of your family? But I'm already a member of the pack. Isn't that the same?"

"No, I mean as a brother of Sura and Akru", Luri softly answered.

"Oh...Uh...", I stumbled, "And as a son of...?"

"Well, if you would want to. I do miss looking after a little cub", she teased with a giggle while grooming my hair.

Dumbstruck, I stared at the reflection of the trees in the still water.

I slowly exhaled and leaned back against her chest. "Yes", I finally answered, almost inaudibly.

Luri licked my face and stood up. "Come, let's join the pack. They're eager to hear about you and Bagheera."

All the wolves, Bagheera and Baloo were socializing and chatting when we joined.

Lala and Akru leaped up against me, causing me to lose my balance and tumble backwards. Sura also walked up, and elaborate tongue bathing followed.

"Ah, and there he is, the savior of the day!", I heard Baloo's deep voice rumble.

After I managed to get back upright, I looked at Sura, "You're feeling better?"

"Lots. My leg still hurts, but that is not very bad. I can't thank you enough", he replied.

"If you start to feel feverish again, tell me right away. I have more of what I gave you", I said while taking the wolf in a tight embrace.

"And if that one has to be used and there's need for more, we'll just FLY to that human settlement again", Bagheera smirked.

"Yes, you two were back very quickly", Alexander said, "Much sooner than any of us dared to hope. It's a two day walk for us. How on earth did you manage that? Did Bagheera carry you and run all the way?"

The feline laughed, "I would have been exhausted even before we'd be out of our territory."

"Yes, you would have been. You're a lazy cat who only sleeps", Baloo remarked and down next to me. He patted his belly. "Here, come make yourself comfortable. Those wolves are too flimsy to sit on, and that cat would probably break in half."

I leaned back against Baloo's warm fur. The bear rested his big paws on my chest and held me close.

"Oh, now look at his majesty there", Bagheera smirked at me. "The only things Baloo is good for. Flattening plants, scaring bees away to get their honey, and playing chair for humans."

The black panther turned back to Alexander, "We went back to that place where those poachers locked me up, and found the keys to this automobile which used to belong to one of them. It was placed a few hours walking from there. And then I was given a rather breathtaking demonstration of how fast one of those things is able to go."

"But you were in one of those before, Bagheera", Luri said. "You've told us."

"Yes! But that always was much more gentle and slow. Nothing like this! But he surely knows how to steer one of those."

"Hmm. Interesting. You should show me that thing some time", Alexander said to me. "I've never seen one or been in one."

"We also stumbled across an injured human cub and her father", Bagheera continued. "We took them to a hospital. That is where we got that antibiotic thing which saved Sura. The father said that the cub was attacked by a tiger."

Alexander squinted his eyes. "A tiger? Shere Khan?"

"Must have been. He's the only tiger left in this part of the forest to my knowledge. We didn't see him though. And if he was close, we were inside that automobile. He would not have been able to see us", the panther replied.

Alexander sighed, "I was hoping Shere Kahn would stick to the law. His behaviour puts us all in danger."

The wolf looked at me, "If he finds out you are here, he'll come for you."

"Not if it's up to us", one of the other wolves stepped in. "That tiger may be strong, but he won't be a match against four or five of us."

"Let's just hope it won't come to that", Luri softly replied.

I grabbed my knife and stabbed it into the soil. "If he wants to come and kill me, he'll pay a toll for

that."

"He's much too strong for you to face alone", Akru said.

Bagheera looked at me. "As I said before, Shere Khan will think twice before picking out a fight with you. You're a danger to him with your knife. He knows very well that if he were to jump on you like he would with one of us, you'd simply gut him."

"And if he does get here, we'll all chase him away!", Bacchus suddenly exclaimed.

Some of the wolves chuckled.

"And what are YOU going to do then, Bacchus? Sit on him?", Lala smirked.

The chubby wolf stuck out his tongue to the red she-wolf.

"I don't think he'd get the mad idea to ever challenge me", Baloo said.

"Speaking of sitting, that's what you would do, sit on him, wouldn't ya, Baloo", Bagheera chuckled.

Alexander stood up next to Luri. "Before this meeting is over, I have an announcement to make."

Everyone went quiet.

"Sura and Akru will have a new brother", the wolf said with a smile.

The two brothers looked astounded to their father and mother.

Murmuring arose from the pack. "But how? It's not even mating season yet", one of the wolves wondered.

Alexander walked up to me and Baloo and gave my face a soft and warm lick before sitting down next to us.

The wolves all looked at us in silence.

Bacchus came walking to me and gave me a soft nuzzle, "So you're their cub now then? That means I'll get to cubsit you again!"

Luri laughed, "No, he's not a cub, Bacchus."

I just wrapped my arms around the chubby wolf and hugged him close.

Baloo smiled, "So that means you're staying here with us then?"

"Yes, I am", I answered.

"That is some very good news", the bear replied with a big smile.

Bacchus licked my face, "I'm going to tend to the cubs. Great to hear you're staying. Remember, there's always a place for you in my den", he added with a smile.

One of the wolves I recognized as being one of the hunters came walking to me, and gave me a friendly lick and a nuzzle, "Welcome home, human. Or should I say wolf? I hope you'd like to join in on another hunt with us some time. You showed some amazing skill last time."

"I don't think that I want to kill another animal, even if it's for food. But I can help out in other ways", I replied.

"All the same, my good friend. It's good to hear you're staying with us. You've proven yourself more than worthy", the wolf said and rubbed his muzzle over my nose and lips.

The others of the pack came up for a quick lick, hug or a nuzzle before walking off, leaving Baloo, Bagheera, Akru, Sura, Lala, Alexander, Luri and me behind.

"You're our brother now!", Akru exclaimed, throwing himself against me. Lala and Sura both pounced me as well, licking and nuzzling me enthusiastically.

I laughed, rolling around and playing with the wolves.

Luri and Alexander both lay down next to Bagheera and Baloo, watching us.

"Just look at him playing with the others", Alexander smiled. "It's almost as if he's a wolf."

"Maybe he is on the inside", Bagheera said. "He's very different from any other human I've met in my life. Most don't even think about coming this close to creatures of the wild. It is quite amazing. Well, except Mowgli of course. But Mowgli was here from when he was a little cub. Our friend here is mature and has lived in the human world for his entire life. But here he is, as if this is where he belongs."

It's nice to have a human friend around again I can truly say", Baloo said.

Luri leaned against Alexander, "I hope he'll be happy here with us."