

Lords of Nature

Heavy rain and low visibility made me down-shift to third. At this rate I'd never make it to Sandi's place in time for the family reunion. I took the next corner, still moving a little too fast, and didn't get a clear look at the road sign that occupied the fork in the road. I took the right turn going only partway onto the median in doing so, then I was into another straight-away with trees close in on both sides of the road. Maybe there'd be another sign up ahead soon...

Just a short way down this road and it had become pitch black except for the little bit my straining headlights could light up. The force of the rain was lessened driving down this little tree-lined road but along with the rain, the trees screened out what little light remained on what was turning out to be the close to one bitch of a day.

Driving along, I couldn't help but think back on it. First of all, to start my Friday morning off right, Dr. Palmer decided to give us a surprise test in chemistry that I was totally unprepared for. I'm sure I bombed it big time. Afterwards, when I got out to the parking lot, I found the Mustang had a flat tire.

From there we skip forward to lunch. Linda decides to drag me to Taco Hell, which I hate in the first place, then broke up with me to boot. Not that the breakup hadn't been some time in coming but the least she could have done is written me a note instead of dragging me to Taco Heartburn. Finally being rid of her was almost worth it though. Sometimes you click with people and sometimes you almost click. Linda had fallen into the later category. She'd then moved into the don't get along too well anymore category. That had probably just been friction due to us both realizing that we weren't exactly made for each other.

That afternoon brought Mrs. Gilby's history class and an unexpected ten page paper. Back at the apartment I had a message on the machine from PartsTown saying that the gasket cover I needed to finish chroming out the 'stang's engine wasn't going to be in for another three weeks. I also had a message from Sis reminding me not to forget the fam reunion. Reunion? Was it that time again? Oops. With the weekend already preordained to be shot to hell, I figured I'd hop in the car and drive the five hundred miles to Sandi's house back in Podunk Springs and surprise everyone by actually being there for this reunion. Of course thirty miles into the trip it began to rain and had been doing so for the two hours since. Now it looked like I may have missed a turn. Or maybe made one too many. Hmm. With any luck there'd be a sign identifying some nearby town and I could figure out just where on the map my little shortcut had gotten me to.

Lightning flashed and the sky seemed to open up and all the rain in heaven came pouring down. Muttering to myself, I slowed further yet and shifted down into second. At this rate I'd be showing up at Sandi's around two in the morning. While she might be happy to see me, she wouldn't be terribly pleased to be awakened so early. Driving over a low water bridge, I could see water just under the top of the old wooden structure. What kind of sorry excuse for a road was this? For that matter I wondered just which state I was in now.

Lightning flashed again and for just a moment I thought I saw a naked woman standing under one of the trees by the road; then I *did* see the 'bridge out' sign right in front of me. Brakes screamed on wet asphalt as the Mustang slid through the sign. "Hopefully the bumper caught that," I muttered under my breath as enough adrenaline to kill a horse flooded through me. A clear view of moving

water as far as the headlights could penetrate was followed by a titanic splash and a wave of water that went over the top of the car.

Dammit!

I could feel the front end beginning to sway with the current so I popped it into reverse and restarted the engine. Three feet back the engine died again. And stayed dead. The 'stang's a classic '67 so you don't cuss it, you cajole it.

I cajoled sweetly and cranked on the starter.

When that didn't work, *then* I cursed it and cranked on the starter some more. When even that didn't work I shut up and wondered what I was going to do for the night. I'd slept in the car before; not comfortable but I could do it again. At least the front end seemed firmly seated on the road now. All things being equal, I wasn't that upset. The weekend seemed to already be pre-destined to misery so this turn of events came as no real surprise. I had just hoped that by going to the reunion that I might salvage some part of it. Evidently not. I was annoyed about the engine work I'd be doing later, but for now I decided I'd better get that sign back up before some other idiot came along and knocked me and my car farther into the drink.

Just before getting out of the car, the rain stopped. At least something was working my way.

The way this day had gone so far, I must admit to some surprise when my flashlight actually worked. Stepping out of the car, I found that the water reached only a little over my ankles here. Still, the current was moving strongly enough that I'd have to be careful of my footing if I didn't want a late bath. A very, very cold bath. I splashed my way back to shore without mishap; an event which I took for a good omen.

The sign was easy enough to find. White painted board with orange lettering. No reflectors. No reflective tape. Not even a little lousy reflective paint. I counted to ten as getting mad would do no good at this time. Then I counted to ten again - just to be safe. Thusly calmed, I dragged the sign up the road a bit and set it back into the middle of the road. It leaned way off to one side but that wasn't surprising considering that it was now missing a pair of legs.

I heard a splash back towards the car. Startled, I turned around in time to see something large and dark dart off into the woods faster than I could keep the light on it. When I was sure it was gone, I felt my forehead to see if I'd bumped it when I stopped. I could have sworn that whatever I'd seen had walked on it's back legs. Bears simply didn't move that fast; especially on two legs. When my heartrate calmed down again, I remembered that I'd thought I'd seen a naked woman just before my career as a boat captain began. Still no knots or tender spots. I hadn't had a chance to drink anything before I left so that wasn't the answer either. I don't take drugs; not even an aspirin for a few weeks now. Was this what insanity was like? If I'd had a camera, I'm sure a picture of bigfoot would have made me some money with the scandal rags.

"You okay, son?"

The man's voice came from right behind me. I whirled around so fast my feet got tangled and down I went. A flashlight beam shined down on me and a hand reached down with the light to help me up.

"Sorry 'bout startlin' you there. Thought I'd made enough noise to raise the dead trompin' over here. Guess you weren't dead, huh?" He laughed at his own joke and pulled me to my feet.

"Yeah, right." I cleverly replied as I absently brushed some of the road crud off my butt. More adrenaline. Just what I needed. Third time wasn't a charm so far.

"Robert Jones," the big guy said, holding out his big hand again, "but everyone around here

just calls me Farmer Bob." He chuckled at this and I did too just to be polite. I hadn't realized it before but Bob here was built like an all-pro linebacker.

"Oh, Jason Stewart," I replied to his questioning look. "I *was* on my way to a family reunion. Looks like the reunion will be minus a Stewart this time around." Again. Sandi was going to be pissed. Bob released my hand and walked over to my car.

"Radio said that the creeks were supposed to crest at midnight. Looks like we're close to that now. I think your car will be safe for the evening Jason. Why don't you come and stay the night with me and the missus. It'll be a spot more comfortable than the backseat o' your car I'll bet and you won't have to worry about floatin' out t' sea. In the mornin' we can see about pullin' your car clear of the bridge."

"I really hate to impose on your hospitality Bob." I really wasn't sure about farmer Bob at this point.

He waved away my objection. "Nonsense! The wife and I don't have company very often. We'd love to have ya over. If you're worried about your car... well, nobody ever comes this way because everyone knows that the bridge washes out every time someone upstream takes a whizz. Just the occasional lost soul like yourself looking for the interstate. Now come on," he said, trudging back in what I presumed was the direction of his house, "I'd be willin' ta bet that the wife has something hot to drink when we get to the house." I slogged through the water, turned off the mustang's headlights, grabbed my overnight bag, and reluctantly followed Farmer Bob.

We followed a two-laned trail for about a hundred feet off the road over to what looked to be a good sized farmhouse. On the front porch stood a woman with a small tray. She was absently petting a large grey, white and red wolf. Pretty creature. The wolf that is. Janet, that is Mrs. Jones, to whom I was introduced, had a warm, gentle face but it wasn't what I'd call pretty.

As we stepped up on the porch, I could see coffee mugs on the tray and two more wolves just off the porch to my right. Mrs. Jones caught the direction of my gaze and hastened to reassure me that they weren't a threat to anyone but the rodent population.

"...Just the same, Nancy here, is the only one that's really friendly to strangers. Claude and Rene were good little ones but not friendly with strangers," she informed me with a small tight smile. The wolves in question chose to emphasize this by growling at me. Yeah, right... good little ones. Little for ponies maybe. Mrs. Jones gave them both dirty looks and continued to pet the grey, white, and red wolf on the head as she spoke.

Would I like some rum-laced coffee?

Yes. Yes I would.

Thank you very much.

So we all sat down on the porch and talked for a while. Nancy came over and parked next to my chair and suffered herself to be petted. The rum and coffee was good. It helped calm my nerves almost as much as petting Nancy's head. Animals are good therapy. Always had been for me.

Nancy kinda reminded me of my old dog, Franklin. Unlike Nancy, Frank was an ugly old German Shepard-mix but he was smart as my sister. Okay, maybe Franklin was just a bit smarter. Anyway, Frank was always there for the little guy who's father was dead. Very therapeutic. I've always liked animals since then. I wasn't sure about Nancy's intelligence but her timing was every bit as good as Franklin's.

Odd train of thought for someone who's just seen a naked woman by the road, come close to submerging his favorite car of all time, and who had seen some kinda fur-covered, bigfoot thing

run off into the woods on two legs. Oh, and arrived at a farm where the most populous animal appeared to be wolves. Then again, with a precursor like that, maybe it wasn't so strange.

At any rate, despite all the weird stuff, the Jones' seemed like nice enough people. I guess Mrs. Jones decided that I was nice people too because she soon ushered us in. I was directed to the guest room on the second floor at the end of the hall. When I asked, I was informed that there were no phones in the house. I guess this place was located in what I quaintly termed "the sticks". The Jones' went off to turn in for the evening.

The upstairs was as homey as the rest of the place. As they had directed, the room was behind the last door down the corridor. It opened into a cozy little bedroom. Looking out the window, the occasional branch of lightning lit the countryside for quite a ways all around, but I saw no naked women or monsters. Eventually, I fell asleep.

I dreamed of Halloween and masks and wolves. It was jumbled and confused like most dreams and for some reason I was very glad when I awoke at three in the morning. The floorboards were cold as I walked over to the window. Most of the clouds were gone and the stars had taken their place in the sky. Down below, dark shapes moved across the Jones' yard but I couldn't tell if they ran on four legs or two. I picked up the flashlight I'd brought with me but I didn't think I really wanted to find out what had moved across the yard. Somewhere in the night a distant wolf howled. I sat the flashlight back down unused and went back to bed. Sleep took it's time returning.

Sunlight as seen through my closed eyelids told me it was time to get up. I opened my eyes to see a pair of light blue wolf eyes staring at me. The only real surprise, was that I wasn't surprised. I still don't know why. Nancy the wolf sat next to the bed and watched me watch her.

The day before yesterday I had gotten out of bed at the apartment to find a note from Linda saying she'd call me later. I had been fifteen minutes late for my calculus class and wondering how busy the golden washbucket's drive-thru window would be by the time I got there for a breakfast sandwich. Now, two days and two hundred something miles later, I found myself in the middle of the twilight zone. And it didn't feel bad. In fact, being in the twilight zone was a pretty refreshing change from the tedium of the spring semester.

With this attitude fresh in mind I got up, put on a pair of shorts, and went looking for the bathroom. It was behind the door that didn't go into the closet or the hall. Clever these people.

I shaved and bathed with my lupine escort watching as if fascinated the whole time. While drying off, the question of how Nancy had gotten into my room arose. Towel firmly in place I returned to my room to note the closed door. It hadn't been locked but I still didn't think a wolf could open it. I was pulling on my jeans when an apparently bored Nancy yawned, walked to the door, took the lever handle in her mouth, turned her head and scootched back a bit opening the door. Out she went. Hmm. That seemed to poke a pretty big hole in my partially-formed hypothesis concerning wolves and doors. On my way out I noticed that the hall-side of the door had a round handle. Frowning didn't seem to help me figure that one out so I went downstairs to look for Bob or Mrs. Bob.

An hour, one large, wonderful breakfast and a short walk later saw Bob and myself surveying my Mustang. She was now a good ten feet back from the receding water's edge but otherwise exactly where I left her. The bumper had a small ding from where I had taken out the sign and the right front fender had a scrape from said sign bouncing off it but that seemed to be all the body damage. Interior water damage seemed to be non-existent. I decided against opening the hood until we had it pushed back to the Jones' house. With Janet steering, Bob and I began pushing.

With the car now parked under a tree near the house, I ran a little checkup on the 'stang. I arrived at the conclusion that things under the hood weren't so bad. The carburetor needed a thorough cleaning and some water had been sucked up into the engine through the tailpipe but things could have been worse. Actually, I'm not really sure just *how* they could have been worse but I am sure that a way could have been found to make the situation much worse. It's in my karma or something.

Lunch caught me in the middle of dissecting my engine. Mrs. Jones brought me out a couple of napkin-wrapped sandwiches and then went off to find Mr. Jones to give him the remainder of the food she carried. I was so busy concentrating on not getting grease all over my sandwich that I didn't notice the dune buggy until it was practically and almost literally right on top of me. The buggy was all over with mud and the occupants were in pretty much the same shape.

Two guys and two gals with 'attitude' written all over them piled out of the buggy. The fifth and last member was a very pretty redhead who looked vaguely familiar for some reason; she stood inside the buggy looking on with great interest. For some reason I was curious whether or not red was her natural color... and if she was single. After all, I was rather suddenly available again myself and well, she was just downright cute.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here? Could this be an unfortunate out-of-towner who has strayed into the Jones' water-trap?" This from the dark-haired, 6'3" lug whom I later found out was Claude. Interesting coincidence that the wolf had been named after him.

The blonde woman spoke up, "Looks like a townie-boy to me. Kinda cute though. Should we bring him along for you Nan?" Her laugh was nothing but pure malice and was directed not at me but at the red-haired woman in the buggy. I normally don't make snap judgements about people or base my impressions of people on a first encounter. As a general rule I like to give everyone two or three chances before putting them on my shit list. This was the exception which proved the rule. I decided I did not like this woman or her man, which, I assumed from the way they stood, the dark-haired fellow was.

The pretty one, Nan, jumped out of the buggy and strolled over. "He is cute but he shouldn't be talked-over. Oh, by the way Rene, I don't need you to do anything for me again. Ever." The first woman's pseudo-friendliness disappeared like a light had been turned out. Obviously there was some previous unpleasantness between these two that was carrying over into my engine work. Nan walked

over and extended her hand to me. Hastily, I wiped it off on my jeans and shook her hand. She was very striking and I felt an instant connection with her. I had wanted to kiss her hand instead of shaking it, but considering the current circumstances, I prudently decided against it.

"Nan Halloway. Pleased to meet you."

"Jason Stewart. Equally pleased."

"Please allow me to introduce my... acquaintances. This is Claude whom I believe you have already met." I shook hands with him and he predictably tried to crush my hand. I've met the type before. I managed not to wince but it took an effort. Claude was one strong son of a bitch who at the moment looked disappointed by his not causing me to scream in pain.

"This is Claude's... umm... friend, Rene." Nan went on. Rene gave her a cold, steady look of pure venom. I shook her hand and was surprised by the woman's strength. My hands are pretty strong from working on cars and some of the martial arts I practice but Rene was at least of equal strength if not actually stronger. I'd never met a woman with a grip that strong. Her 120 pound frame didn't exactly look to fit. My hand was definitely going to be sore tomorrow.

The other couple, who appeared to be most entertained by the proceedings, were introduced as Rob and Della. Rob was almost as large as Claude but, though equally strong, didn't try to crush my hand - much. Della was more robust than Rene with midnight black hair and a look to her that screamed dark mischief. She didn't try to crush my hand. Instead, while we were shaking hands, she stabbed the bottom of my hand with one of her fingernails. I'd felt the nail scrap bone.

Jerking my hand back, I took a step away from the lot of them as I cupped my injured hand with the other. For a moment everyone except Della looked surprised. Della had this false look of hurt innocence that really would have pissed me off if I wasn't so busy counting to ten. Unfortunately the counting trick really wasn't working. I was really annoyed. Maybe if I counted to one hundred that would give me time to cool down. Somehow, I figured I'd have to keep starting over around four or five due to new infractions against my calm state of mind.

The rest continued to look puzzled until a sudden round of sniffing brought out wide grins on everyone except Nan. She could see the blood and now looked pissed-off too... and she hadn't exactly looked happy to begin with.

Claude stepped forward. "Did big, bad Della hurt the little man? Ooh, I think poor, little Jason's about to cry. Maybe Nan will kiss it and make it all better." Then his tone turned from ridicule to iron. "Nan. Get over here and kiss the boy's hand. Now." I didn't know who this guy thought he was but enough was enough.

"Look Claude," I began. Then he grabbed me by the front of my shirt and picked me up off the ground. One-handed. Hmm. Very strong son of a bitch.

Nan pushed Della aside and moved to confront Claude's left side. "You're not Alpha yet Claude, so don't you go trying to order me around as if you were. Just put him down and let's go. We'll discuss this later... in private where this type of business is supposed to be discussed." Alpha? Once more my weird-factor scale reached new heights. However, I only noticed this in an off-hand sort of way.

There is a place deep down inside myself where nothing can touch me. It is an oasis of calm surrounded by emotion and external feelings. For a moment I hung in that place, suspended in peace and harmony. As if I was a spectator, I was able to witness the adrenaline surging through my veins and the anger swirling around my spirit as if it were a flock of great crimson birds waiting only for the right time to strike. Muscles bound to iron knots for just a second then relaxed fully; the spring

looked loose but it was coiled so tightly around my internal place of refuge that I thought I might explode into fury. Fighting against that loss of control was why I had created this place - with the help of master Cho. I might rage, but never out of control. Never again.

Claude snarled, "Shuddup bitch! You'll do as I say, when I say, or we'll let pack justice see who tells who what."

"Put me down." I told him. Not surprisingly I was ignored. I was a pawn to Claude and his group and nothing more. It wasn't really me they were interested in.

"There is no longer any justice where you're concerned you pathetic excuse for a human being." Nan was into the argument now and probably didn't see the other three quietly surround her.

"I'm not concerned about what kind of *human* I am," he declared with great derision, "I *will* lead. I am young and I am the strongest. Do you think you're in line for becoming Alpha?" His voice clearly said he thought the notion incredible. "Not while I'm around. I am much stronger than you and I will crush you if you push me to it." Back to that note of iron. "Perhaps even if you don't."

"Claude," I told him. "Put me down now. This is your last chance." I was still completely relaxed but those crimson birds seemed to be preparing for one final swoop and the spring somehow managed to coil itself just a little bit tighter.

Claude shook me fit to rattle my teeth. I'm amazed the shirt survived such rough treatment. "You shuddup and keep outta this townie boy. I'll deal with you after I've dealt with this bitch."

I finally allowed my anger to pierce my haven and my muscles blazed into movement. Grabbing Claude's wrist with both hands, I swung my body away from his as far as it would go. Claude budged not an inch from my shifting weight. Make that a *very, very* strong son of a bitch. On the return swing I added the torc from twisting my hips and kicked my right knee into his guts just below the solar plexis. He made a satisfying gasp as the air was blasted out of his lungs. Claude went down to his knees.

He no longer held me but I retained my hold on his arm. I twisted his arm around and kicked him in the back of the head. That should have done it. He should have been unconscious and in serious need of bed rest for a day or two. But he wasn't.

Instead, Claude shook his head and while standing up tried to swing me around in front of him. I jumped into the back of his shoulder with a knee that should have dislocated it. Claude staggered and gave out a bestial yell but that was it. Worry was starting to filter through the anger I felt. Something wasn't right here. The human body simply wasn't designed to take this much and this kind of damage and continue on as if nothing was wrong.

So in quick succession, I kicked him in the head, knee and ribs. Claude howled in pain but wouldn't stay down. About this time it occurred to me that there was a furious fight going on to my left but I was a little too preoccupied to notice details.

Suddenly, Claude started to change. His body began shifting in odd ways and his already hairy arms seemed to be getting hairier. It was at this point that I decided that I was in really deep shit.

I have to admit that I was on the verge of panic and started levering the thing that had been Claude around for a killing blow. As I said, I was panicky and desperate.

Then Bob came running up, only he too seemed to be changing in some odd and deeply fundamental ways. "That'll be about enough of that." He seemed to growl.

Something moved from my right and the pain I suddenly felt under my ear was followed by

a light show to rival the capital's fourth of July fireworks show. Darkness came along leading me down into oblivion's deep well.

I awoke in the upstairs bed I'd slept in the night before. The shades had been drawn but I could still see that it was dark outside. The little table lamp near the door was the room's only source of light.

Sitting up made my head swim and my stomach queasy but I managed to neither pass out nor throw up. The room looked about the same as I had left it. My clothes were folded neatly on the chair next to the table and my bag sat next to it. I wondered who'd undressed and put me to bed.

The circumstances that lead up to me being here suddenly came back to me and since I wasn't doing anything else, I decided to do some thinking about that strange fight with Claude. Had I been hallucinating there at the end? I must have been. That begged the question why. I haven't done any drugs since my sophomore year of high school. One episode of imaginary bugs crawling all over me not to mention the walls and furniture melting had been enough to convince me that hallucinogens were not for me. Had someone slipped me something? Thinking back over the last couple of days I couldn't think of when someone would really have had the opportunity. Of course with all the strange events that were happening to me I couldn't rule it completely out either. Nor I suppose could I rule out insanity. I'd have to think about that later.

Sitting the rest of the way up was accomplished with only minimal dizziness. For some reason my back hurt just below my left shoulder but I didn't really feel like playing contortionist or getting up and walking to a mirror just to see what it looked like. So it was settled: I was now sitting up and planning on going nowhere and doing nothing for the next long while. Good, now back to my problems.

The fight hadn't been a dream nor had the angry bunch from the dune buggy. That I was sure of even without having to look at the cut on the side of my right hand or my bruised knuckles. Okay. Nowhere to go with that line of thought for the moment. So on to something else - like just who had hit me in the head?

At the end of the fight Claude had been to my fore being ineffectively beaten at by yours truly. Nan and the others had been fighting to my left even if I hadn't paid them much notice at the time. Thinking back, I believe Della had been on the ground and the other two up and at it against the red-headed Nan. Bob had come from behind me. I thought about it for a while longer not liking where this train of thought was leading until there was a quiet knock at the door and Mrs. Jones stuck her head in.

"Ah, good. You're awake." She came on in, walked over and put her hand to my brow. "No fever. Very good. How do you feel?"

"Better I think. But I'm a bit confused about just what happened." There are times when I am, simply put, a master of the understatement

"Well, there will be time for questions later. Right now, it is time for recuperation. Do you feel up to eating anything or maybe a little company?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said with growing enthusiasm. "Right now I think I could eat a horse." My stomach rumbled that it agreed with my assessment of the situation. Except... well, maybe two horses were in order.

Mrs. Jones laughed. "Well, I don't think that'll be necessary. How about a tray of eggs, ham, biscuits and gravy instead? I've always found that breakfast food is perfect any time, day or night." She laughed again when I agreed whole heartedly and walked to the door. "I've got to go tend to Bob. He collected a few scrapes and bumps during that little altercation and if they're not pampered and oohed and ahned over he'll sulk around looking for sympathy from the wolves. Enjoy your meal then get yourself some rest. And Jason, thanks for helping our little one in her time of need." With that she left, leaving the door open just a bit.

Little altercation? I also wasn't exactly sure what it was I'd done, if anything, to help Nan. Assuming she was indeed the 'little one' Mrs. Jones had referred to. And she called it an altercation? I'd hate to see her idea of a fight.

A draft chilled my left side. My normal inclination was to grumble about her leaving the door open but the thought of her cooking put the grumbling plumb out of my mind. I got up to close the door myself...and promptly got my naked self back under the covers as Nan came in with a covered tray.

She didn't bat an eye or say anything. Instead, she closed the door with her foot and walked over and sat the four-legged tray down over me. My nose told me that good things were under the cover. Nan pulled the chair over and sat down next to me. She was wearing a long white bath robe and I noticed that she had a black eye and lips that were split at one corner of her mouth.

I opened the top of the tray and sat absorbing the smells. In addition to the earlier items she'd mentioned the tray also included bacon, sausage, hashbrowns, toast (with grape jelly), and tumblers of orange juice and milk.

Picking up the fork, I remembered my manners.

"Umm, Nan, have you eaten yet?"

She smiled which was reason enough for good manners.

"Yes. Just before I brought you your dinner. So go ahead and eat. I can see that just sitting there with all that food in you lap is sorely testing your willpower."

"Mmmph," I agreed around a mouthful of eggs and hashbrowns. Five minutes later I still had a long way to go as far as finishing off my tray but the brunt of my hunger was gone. I decided on some subtle questions to find out about the fight.

"Want to talk about it?" I asked. Okay, maybe the subtle approach was out for now. I'd work on subtle later. I think it's offered next semester as an elective.

"Nope. I'm not going to ruin an otherwise pleasant evening with unpleasant conversational topics. Care to try another?"

"Umm, sure. How about yourself. You seem to be an interesting woman. So tell me about yourself." I took another bite of bacon.

"Not much to tell really. My parents died in a robbery when I was ten. I came to live with my aunt and uncle until I went away to college the year before last. On spring breaks and other odd holidays I come back and visit. I'd just gotten off the bus and was walking out here when Claude and his bunch offered me a ride over to the house via the mudflats. They used to be different. They used to be my friends and we used to do stuff together and we'd have a lot of fun. Now everything's different. For some reason they've changed... for the worst. Six months ago we were all good friends and the whole lot of them didn't have a mean bone in their bodies. Claude and Rob used to compete in all the sports. Rene was a cheerleader and Della was voted most popular girl. Now, they make Darth Vader look lovable and cuddly. Conversation on the way over was... strained and rude almost

from the beginning and... well... you know what happened when we got here. I am so very sorry to have gotten you caught up in this.

"Listen to myself. Here I said I wasn't going to talk about it and not five minutes later I'm babbling away." She squeezed my hand. "I really am very sorry you got hurt but I guess I can't honestly say that I'm sorry you're here." I finished eating dinner with my left hand as I didn't want her to let go of my right. We sat in a comfortable silence for a while.

Eventually, she asked for and received a summary accounting of my own life away from home. She seemed to understand me when I told her that getting lost and dunking my car felt more like a vacation than a disaster. A couple of hours worth of conversation later saw her kissing me good night. Our first kiss was brief and I wished it could have lasted forever. She was down the hall should I need anything. Goodness, what a day.

I dreamed that night that I was a wolf running through the woods. Rabbits ran left and right but I was searching for something darker; more sinister. Pausing at a stream, I looked into the water and saw not a wolf face but my own. My subconscious thought this would have been the perfect revelatory place to wake up but instead I hunted the woods for some interminable dream time never finding what I sought.

The next morning found me hale and hearty and having a large bandage across my back. I'd felt it last night but hadn't really paid it any attention since I'd had someone much more interesting to pay attention to. However, this morning she wasn't here and now I was paying attention.

Hmm. Maybe hale and hearty was over doing it a little. My back did hurt somewhat beneath the bandage even if my head didn't. Still, it was a fine morning and I wanted to see what it looked like without the bandage. So I stepped into the bathroom, caught a glimpse of Nan stepping out of the bathtub, felt myself blush what was surely a brilliant crimson, muttered something incoherent, and quickly stepped back into my bedroom. Red was indeed her natural hair color.

Snagging a snack cake out of my bag in passing, I went over and pulled on my shorts. I started eating because if I didn't distract myself somehow, I was going to become the first person in history to die from blushing. Then I happened to glance out the window. There at the edge of the woods sat a large, white wolf. I'd never heard of arctic wolves this far south and it was probably actually some other type of wolf. And there it sat definitely a pure, snow-white color regardless of it's species. It was beautiful, majestic... and after a moment's study I really didn't think it was an arctic wolf. There came a quiet knock at the bathroom door followed quickly by Nan's head.

"Umm, I guess nobody mentioned that we were sharing a bathroom, huh? Hope you weren't too embarrassed or anything." *She* didn't look the least bit embarrassed or sorry. She also didn't seem to be wearing anything but a blue towel. Somewhat embarrassed still, I turned to the window and said, "No problem. I can handle it. Not to switch the subject or anything but do you have many white wolves living around here?"

"White wolves?" she asked sounding surprised. Perhaps a bit more than surprised, but that could well have been my imagination. "No. There are no white wolves living around here. Why?"

She walked over to stand beside me. I could happily watch her walk that towel around all day long.

It was difficult but with effort I managed to tear my eyes away from her and back to the window. "Well you've got at least one white wolf right over... there," I finished lamely. The wolf was gone. "It was right over there sitting in the edge of those woods."

"It was probably just a light grey wolf. Jasmin and Walter are both lightly colored." She put a hand on my shoulder and bent over to better look out the window.

Although my mind was definitely on other things, I asked her if all the local wolves had names and if they were named after locals. She seemed surprised.

"Of course, *all* wolves have names. Wolves are people, too, you know." She smiled brightly. "And to answer your second question, 'yes', all the local wolves are named after local people. Have you met my namesake, Nancy, yet? She is such a darling creature."

"Yes, I have. And I must agree - she is a wonderful creature. She reminded me of an old friend I used to have who helped me a lot with my problems."

Nan, I found, had the most amazingly beautiful blue eyes. And she'd either put on makeup right after stepping out of the tub or her black eye had faded away overnight. And while she had beautiful eyes I don't think my own eyes had made it quite that far up her body when I'd seen her stepping out of the bathtub; therefore, I hadn't noticed if her eye had still been blacked or not. For some reason it didn't seem important at the moment.

The white wolf moved out of the woods and sat down again at the edge, apparently looking right at me. I would have shown it to Nan but I already had a plan of action in mind and I can sometimes get tunnel-visioned when I set my mind to something. I took her face gently in my hands and looked deep into her eyes. "I hope you won't consider me too forward," I said just before I kissed her. After a minute we parted slightly. For once I wasn't the one blushing. She looked thoughtful for a moment then she said, "No. Not too forward. Just right," then her arms went around my neck and she kissed me. The towel and the shorts got lost in the enthusiastic shuffling which followed. We were a long time coming down to breakfast.

Mr. Jones would not accept my money. Two nights sleep and several terrific meals and he wouldn't let me pay for any of it. Said he felt guilty for not doin' more to prevent accidents like mine from happening. Not only that but I'd saved his favorite (and only) little niece and damned if he was goin' t' have her savior paying him money for something any decent folk should do out of the kindness of their hearts. I'm not really sure about the accuracy of the saving part but I certainly agreed that more should be done to prevent accidents like mine from happening.

"Well, if you won't take my money, will you at least let me help you with some of your work?" I was feeling faintly guilty for having seduced his favorite niece; or was it guilty for having been seduced *by* his favorite niece? I'm not really sure which, but that and the fact that I'd actually thrown the first punch (so to speak) at the altercation, on top of them being so nice to me, all combined to make me feel as if I should be doing something for them.

As if he read my mind, Bob said, "Look son. If ya feel the need to do something useful, then how about ya figure out what you need to fix your car then take my truck into town to get your parts. I'm sure Ma can make up quite a list of supplies we need if ya feel you just *have* ta do something for us. There's too much around here that needs my attention and Ma, well, she ain't much'a one for

drivin'. Nan's been getting' our supplies since she came back but when you consider she'd have to carry the heavy feed an'... well hell. I guess what I really mean is that she's a pretty girl and crime's moved down out of the cities and down into the country. I just don't feel right any more sending her off by herself for supplies. I know that's old fashioned and all but I guess I'm an old fashioned kinda man. Ya know what I mean Jason?"

"Yes. I do believe I do." I believed that the embodiment of the crime out of the cities that he was referring to had been involved here in a very odd 'altercation' here just yesterday.

"Well good. Now get t' workin' on your car and I'll have Nan check in with you t' see when you think you'll be ready to head for town." With that he turned around and headed off to one of the small barns. I shook my head and went off to change into my work clothes.

Something about what he'd said stuck in the back of my mind. Kinda like a square peg in a round hole. It didn't come to me immediately so I relegated it to my subconscious. It would come to me later.

Remembering the reason why I had started into the bathroom this morning, I made a stop by the bathroom for a look in the mirror to see what kind of wound lay beneath the bandage across my back. And wound it was. There were four, evenly spaced gashes across my back, fairly deep at the top where they were closed by butterfly bandages, becoming progressively shallower as they went down. Very odd. They were dyed yellow by peroxide which made them look even stranger. I couldn't think of a rational explanation for how they got there. Unfortunately, I'd about decided that rational explanations had little or no place in these parts.

A couple of hours later I had finished dissecting my poor engine. Things were not good under the hood. I looked mournfully down at my grease coated list. This was going to run up my credit card again.

At least there are no longer debtor's prisons in America.

Nan walked out onto the porch just then so I went over to see if she was ready to go into town yet.

"My now. Don't we look dejected. Don't tell me you can't save it?" She waved her hand in the 'stang's direction.

"Oh, she can be saved alright. It's just gonna cost. When I tore her apart, I also found a wee bit of damage than can just possibly be attributed to a wee bit of racing I did a couple of weeks ago. Or maybe it was the racing a few weeks before that. Does the local parts store accept credit cards?" She looked so cute in her jeans and tee shirt. Walking up on the porch, I decided that town could wait a little while longer. Therefore, I smeared engine grime on the end of her nose and dodged away.

"Of course it does, this isn't... oh, you snot!" she cried and charged after me.

I ran the length of the porch and hurtled the railing. "Ooh, am I going to get you for that buster!" she called from right behind me.

Still running, I took off between the barns past a startled Bob. I was having a little trouble running because I was laughing so hard. "Just you wait 'til I get my hands on you!" Still right behind me. She was faster than I had expected.

I dodged right which took me into the woods. I found a deer trail and followed it for about

a hundred yards dodging, laughing, and leaping underbrush the whole way. About this time I noticed that I had lost Nan. This wasn't part of the game I'd been making up as I went along and I was about to go back and look for her when I saw a flash of white off to the side. Quietly, I moved that way and sure enough the white wolf ran into a small clearing and stopped for a long moment looking at me. I was a bit surprised to feel no fear at all. Especially when I fully appreciated just how large this wolf was.

Then it ran off in the direction I had originally been fleeing to. After about thirty feet it stopped, looked at me, and started loping through the woods again. This whole trip had been an exercise in strangeness so I didn't really feel too odd following the big wolf through the woods.

It... no, *he* led me through the woods for quite a ways. I crossed two small creeks (nearly drenching myself as I slipped on the mud as I barely jumped the second) and a large open field. I must say I was surprised to move so far and see no fences. Surprised but pleased. Fences didn't belong in these woods.

At last the wolf entered a small clearing in the midst of several huge oak trees. A ring of large stones standing about waist height were in the clearing's center. Oddly enough there were no leaves under the trees, only an odd grey dirt. Sunlight shone brightly on the inside half of the stones while the outside half sat within the shadows of the trees. I walked over and began examining some markings I noticed on the stones. The wolf sat and examined me. On the inside of the ring, each stone had a crude depiction of some aspect of a wolf's life. Birth, hunting, territorial defense, flight, death and a couple of others I wasn't sure of. The artwork appeared to be some kind of native-American work and the paint looked fresh. The grey dirt, which I decided was really ashes, was thick inside the ring of stones.

I started to turn around and nearly ran into a man I hadn't heard approach. I was so startled my feet tangled themselves and I fell on my butt inside the ring. I seemed to be doing that a lot of late. The ash settled down all over me and I sneezed several times. Very dignified.

"The white wolf is sacred," he began without preamble and with a moderately heavy American Indian accent and speech cadence. "It holds the power of salvation and redemption within it. Sometimes it frees this power, sometimes it does not." Chanting and quiet drumming could be heard from outside the trees but I couldn't have told you when the sounds had started. From my prone position I couldn't see anyone else - only the one man.

He was a big man with black hair and eyes. Six foot tall easy and he outweighed me considerably. He was dressed in some kind of Native-American ceremonial outfit and had the facial features which suggested he was of an appropriate ancestry to wear it. I hadn't done enough in the way of Native-American studies to even guess at his tribe. I was rather intrigued by the wolfskin cape he wore and how the eyes of the cape seemed to be alive and looking at me from over the man's head. Actually, to tell the truth I thought it was more than a little creepy.

"The wolf spirits serve the gods as protectors of nature, so are we told. When the white man came so long ago, the wolves were driven away from the places where they built their cities and the balance was destroyed there. The whites and later others spread and as they cleared the land they drove away the wolves they feared and the wolf spirits departed and so too was the balance destroyed there. The spirit Fox was angered by this and decided to mix the spirits of man and wolf to create a new form of protector to restore the balance where the wolf was no longer allowed passage. So we are told. So we believe. You too must open your mind to this belief."

I started to stand up and found that I couldn't. I was too dizzy. I noticed the white wolf

sitting right beside me and this time I wasn't surprised. Up close the fur was as snow white as it had seemed from afar. I still didn't think it was an arctic wolf. His build was too much like that of the timber wolves in all my sister's pictures. Being there was a much more intense experience than any picture could convey. There was a untamed scent, similar to that which I associate with dogs, upon the creature. He was wild and beautiful.

"The wildness of these our protecting spirits must be guided if they are not to do more harm than good. To that end we are most careful in the people we choose to guide these spirits. We are also most careful of the spirits we choose to be guided." Okay, he lost me there. I had no idea what he was talking about.

Fog rolled across the circle chilling me with its cool dampness. The sunlight seemed dulled and brightened at the same time. The chanting seemed louder. The eyes of the cape stared at me all the while. I shivered.

"You have long controlled the beast within yourself and have learned to use it. Now it is time for you to take another within, one more primal and more in touch with nature and the will of the spirits and the gods. Great is the power and the responsibility that goes with this. In your heart you have accepted this already. Now accept with your mind and you will become one with the spirit of the wolf. This beast you cannot control. Only guide. You will live in harmony with the spirit and you will be its guide in the world of the living even as it shall guide you in the world of the soul. The great spirits will watch you and you will be judged." There was a ring of finality to his voice but all I really noticed was that the white wolf was staring at me. I stared back and for just a moment it was as if I could see inside the wolf's mind, feel the incredible vitality of the creature, its primal connection with nature....

I woke up in an old circle of stones. Traces of what might have been old paint were only barely visible. Leaves covered the ground and vines covered most of the rocks. I saw nothing to indicate that anyone other than myself had been here in a long, long time. I shook my head and after getting up, started back the way I had come. Hallucination? Dream? Was I crazy? Three out of the four voices in my head voted a resounding - yes! Hell, I didn't know. But... if I was crazy, well, crazy still didn't feel half bad.

Walking aimlessly for a while, I tried to absorb what had happened and eventually got myself back to the second creek I'd crossed. That's when Nancy, the wolf, found me. She seemed to want me to follow her too. The last time I followed a wolf was still very much with me and I wasn't sure I could handle another weird experience so soon after the first. I was going to head on back to the house when Nancy very gently grabbed my hand in her mouth and started pulling me along. I shook my head at my own foolishness and followed anyway. She ran on down a trail which smelled only faintly of deer and out of sight. I jogged after her following the trail, which paralleled the edge of the creek, automatically watching for low hanging branches as I went.

Around a sharp corner and there in a large pond in a wide area of the creek was a sight I felt sure I would never tire of - Nan sans cloths. I didn't blush much this time as she slowly lowered herself 'til only her head was out of the water.

"Hi there," I said brightly. "I seem to keep running into you without your clothes on."

"Umm hmm. One might think you planned it that way. I got kinda hot chasing you and then

there was that smudge on my nose so a bit of skinny dipping seemed in order. Care to join me?" The jury was still out as to whether I was crazy or not but that didn't mean I was stupid.

"Oh, I don't mind if I do," I told her, moving around and down to the water's edge where I piled my clothes beside hers. "How long you been swimming here?" I wondered just how long my strange... hallucination... had lasted. Or if it was really over. One might be interested to note that I wasn't really surprised by Nancy the wolf leading me to Nan and then conveniently disappearing. Partly, I think this was due to having seen so much that was strange of late and partly because my subconscious had been doing a lot of thinking and had come up with some odd answers that fit the peculiar clues my mind had been keeping track of. Maybe it was because Nan and Nancy had the same underlying scent to them. Hmm. That was a strange thought. Perhaps later I would wonder where it came from. But probably not anytime soon.

"I've been swimming here today for about thirty minutes but in general several years - since I was a little girl. 'Course back then I wore a suit more often than not." I walked into the water and when I was up to my shoulders Nan came over and gave me a long, sweet kiss; then she dunked me.

I came up sputtering and she touched the end of my nose and said, "Gotcha love." From there we wrestled around and dunked each other for a while then the wrestling turned into another, more interesting aquatic sport. Later, I realized this was the first time she'd said she loved me and I got a truly wonderful feeling just thinking about it.

Eventually, we actually made it into town for groceries and auto parts. Nothing exciting. Nothing dramatic. Nothing mystical. Just two lovers enjoying each other's company.

While at the parts store, I took the opportunity to call Sandi and let her know that I was still alive and that as usual I wouldn't make it to this year's reunion. She extracted a promise from me that I would be there for little Jessica's birthday party next month. I promised and had her hug and kiss everyone at the reunion for me.

As I was hanging up the phone, I noticed the bus schedule. The last bus passed through town five days ago. I put this down as something to think about later. We went back to the farm and I worked on the 'stang studiously not thinking about the bus schedule or anything regarding wolves or Indians.

That evening was quiet. We had a nice dinner with Bob and Janet after which Nan and I sat on their porch swing and spent a long while looking at the stars and discussing hopes and dreams. I silently noticed that Bob and Janet seemed to heal just as quickly as Nan but in keeping with my theme for the evening I didn't allow myself to think about it and I dang sure didn't say anything.

Later still we met each other halfway as we were sneaking to each other's room. After a bit of stifled laughter we decided on my room where we spent the remainder of the evening.

Next day we went for an afternoon walk. For me it was a nice break from working on the car and she was glad to get out of the house; and it gave us an opportunity to be together. Alright, so I'm a hopeless romantic - sue me.

"So," she began, "just where did you run off to yesterday? I must say, not many people can

outrun me *and* then lose me in the woods. My father taught me quite a bit about tracking when I was a girl, but I must say you lost me completely. I'm impressed city boy." She leaned against me as we walked back and I in turn leaned against her."

"Actually, I'm more of a suburb boy. As to the other, when I lost you - and I must say it was entirely an accident as no sane man would want to lose you," she blushed prettily, "I decided to do a little exploring. What can you tell me about a circle of stones about a mile or so back there?" I waved an arm towards the woods and thus only thought I saw a quick look of surprise pass across her light freckles. It could have been the light although I didn't think it was. Regardless, I made no comment upon it.

We walked for a while in silence as she thought over her answer. Somehow I knew that she was framing an answer not ignoring the question. A few minutes later, she began, "They were a peaceful people. Back before the civil war there used to be picnics and trade fairs between the Indians and the villagers who lived where our very own town is now. Then something happened and the townspeople just went out and killed them. Even the children. Later that year they had a big town fair which featured a great hunt and wolf kill." Her voice was very quiet and sad. "They say that over five hundred hunters came from all around and that when they left there wasn't a wolf left alive within fifty miles." She sighed quietly.

We walked a bit further until we got to a big oak tree near the edge of Bob's cleared land. There I sat down and she sprawled herself comfortably across my lap.

"The wolf had been the tribal totem of the Indians. I don't think it was coincidence that both were slaughtered for no reason within such a short time of each other. The town library has several personal diaries of the townspeople who lived back then as part of the civil war collection. Back when I was in high school, I studied them as part of a paper for my English class. Most of the journals mention knowing someone or in one case several somebodies who had suddenly turned mean. These people who 'turned mean' were the ones who lead the way to slaughter the natives.

"A circle of stones set within a circle of trees was a holy place for them. They buried their dead around it to facilitate the recently departed's trip to their afterlife. When the villagers murdered the tribe, their bodies were burned and the ashes were dumped into the stone circle as a final insult.

"Today it is a sad reminder of what terrible depths people are able to sink to. Few go there except kids out for a thrill to see if the place really is haunted the way it's said to be. Most of them don't go back for a second trip."

I sat under the tree for a long while, just stroking Nan's hair and thinking about my own encounter at the ring of stones. Eventually I asked, "How did the wolves come back?"

"My great-grandfather, Jacob, brought four pairs of timber wolves with him when he moved down here from Canada. At the time it wasn't a very popular thing to do but he owned enough land and had enough pull at the bank that things went his way whether it was popular or not. I think he must of have been a great man." Ah, timber wolves. I had been right. Good for me.

"It sounds like it," I agreed. I bent over and gave the end of her nose a quick kiss and then gave her lips a much longer kiss which she quietly returned. We were quiet a while, absorbed in our own thoughts.

"If Claude succeeds in becoming the Alpha, the leader of the pack, what will the other werewolves do?" I held my breath waiting for her to tell me I was crazy and ready to make a joke of it when she did.

Instead she said, "The others will follow the pack leader and we will become... I don't know

what we'll become; but it scares me. It scares me more than anything I've ever felt. Except maybe falling in love with you - but that's a different kind of scared." That part of me that thought I was going crazy added another mark to its rather impressive tally sheet. The rest of me was too busy being enraptured about her falling in love with me to give a crap.

I took a deep breath, "Well beautiful lady," I said, stroking the hair away from her forehead, "Claude worries me a bit but as for falling in love - it doesn't scare me. The thought of falling for the most wonderful woman on earth," I paused to take another deep breath, "and have no doubt that is exactly what is happening; it just fills me with anticipation of what tomorrow might have in store for us. It also brings a new appreciation for what I have and hold today." I gently kissed her forehead.

She sat up and held her face between her hands. "I do love you Jason Stewart. I don't know how it happened so fast or so suddenly but it did. Until I met you, I never believed in love at first sight," she said, looking deeply into my eyes, into my soul. "I do now."

"And I love you Nan Halloway," I said, returning her look. I hugged her to me and we kissed deeply as her arms moved up around my neck.

I heard a small sound and turned just in time to see a very large creature, half-man half-wolf, who must have been running *very* fast, touch the ground one last time and fly through the air straight at us. I tried to push Nan away but it... he... was moving too fast. His extended forearm hit me in the cheek with roughly the force of a semi-truck. Stars exploded before my eyes and I felt my head bounce off the ground. Faintly, I seemed to hear Nan yelling my name as though from a long way away.

Darkness swept in taking away sound, pain, and everything else.

Awareness came but not wakefulness. A most peculiar condition, I assure you. I wasn't quite sure what had happened; if I was dreaming or not. Suddenly, I was aware of another presence, a strong presence totally foreign to anything I'd ever felt or experienced. Out of nothing formed a cleared area which seemed to be mostly red rock. Everything else remained black but now I stood in this space upon the rocks. The presence was everywhere around me.

"What is this place," I asked or tried to ask anyway. I'm still not sure if I spoke but I did somehow manage to convey the question.

"You are in the spirit realm," came the reply from all around me. "The world of souls. With the help of the spirit whose charge you have been given and given unto - I can communicate directly with you. There are certain things you need to know in order to do the job you were sent to do correctly."

"Who are you? Why am I here? What was I sent to do?" Odd as the prior events had been, they hadn't fazed me half so much as this brief encounter already had.

"I am usually called Fox in this place at this time. On occasion I answer to Coyote as well. You are here so that you may learn. You will learn so that you may set straight what was corrupted. That is why you are here. To stop the darkness that is being spread across my... special children."

"Oh." That didn't help much so I decided to hazard a guess in the form of a question.

"By the darkness I guess you mean the change for the worse that seems to have overcome Nan's former friends?"

"You are correct. I am glad to see that my choosing you was not in error." At least one of

us was pleased.

Fox continued, "A great evil is moving across the land like a rouge shadow. It is seeking out my special children and turning them counter to what they were created to do. Where they once protected, they now destroy. Like madness, it starts slowly and with time gathers strength. Those who are perverted by this evil spread the evil to others. A most deadly cycle. It must be stopped. Now.

"This evil was devised by my own hand. A creation from the days when I was more the trickster than I am now. Indeed, my past has come to haunt my future - your future."

This was followed by a long pause. A bit hesitantly I began, "Well... who or what is this evil from your past and what can I do to counter the evil that it's leaving in it's wake?" I had a pretty good idea where all this was leading but it was his show and I didn't want to ruin any surprise he had in store for me. I'm sure it had nothing to do with me putting off the inevitable end I now foresaw.

"The source is a being that I pulled from the far, dark edge of the spirit realm. A being that was given the power to mold it's form into anything that it wishes. A being with a will for destruction, death, and mayhem. A being I set loose to strike fear into the hearts of your invasive ancestors. It has grown subtle over the centuries and it's evil influence grows by the day. Although no less destructive, the creature now mostly uses others to do it's bidding. It's powers have grown but the specter of mortality has fallen upon it, for although it was made for a long life that span allotted to it is drawing to a close. It now grows more dangerous than ever for it's ambitions have reached new heights: now it thinks to make itself into a god.

"It is attempting this by gaining the knowledge of entities that are tapped into the spirit world. With this knowledge it hopes to find the key that will allow it to open the door to immortality instead of merely a very long life. With this knowledge it hopes to master the secrets of the spirit world and in doing so gain dominance over the world of the living. Already it has gained much of this knowledge.

"This is the evil that you face."

After that had an unpleasant moment in which to sink in, the next question became obvious, "What can I do to stop it?" I had a very strong feeling I wasn't going to like the answer.

"You may counter the perversions it creates in one of two ways. First, you may destroy the tainted ones. When they die, their knowledge is lost to the Dark One. Alternately, you must destroy their link to the spirit world. This is done by removing the guardian spirit or performing the Rites of Exile which blocks the person from the spirit world. The spirit you are paired with has the power to remove another's paired guardian. You have the power to perform the rites. Either option will return them to a life of normal mortality and will sever the link that allows the Dark One their knowledge.

"Killing is easy when dealing with normals, requiring little skill or finesse... as your ancestors knew so well. When dealing with the supernatural it becomes much more difficult. Be assured that the rites are equally difficult and at times soul wrenching to perform. A battle between guardian spirits is also a most difficult task to undertake for the spirit will drain your energies to gain the power it needs. Nothing about this will be easy but it must be done. This is the task that awaits you. This is your destiny."

"Oh," I said from the midst of being dumbstruck. It seemed my feeling about his answer had been justified. At least insofar as I understood it.

"Of course, there is a choice," Fox continued. "There is always a choice. You may still turn your back on all of this. The spirit bond is not yet permanent and I believe Bob has finished repairing

your automobile as a surprise gift. You may simply drive away and leave all of this behind.

"Of course, that will mean leaving Nan in her present predicament. It will mean you will never again feel the extraordinary vitality of being bonded with a primal spirit. And that will mean that since you've already become sensitized to the spirit world, you will never be able to ignore the spreading evil. You will see it everywhere you go and have to live with the knowledge that you could have done something to stop it. Either way... the choice is yours."

"What do you mean Nan's predicament? Is she in some kind of trouble?" I was no longer dumbstruck or intimidated by my odd surroundings as a new sense of self-confidence blossomed within me - and a growing sense of anger that she could be in danger while we just stood around and talked.

Memory started to trickle back. Nan and I had been walking in the woods....

"Does that mean you've made your decision?" Fox asked amused.

"Is she in danger?!" My shouted question came out half bestial growl as I found myself suddenly in a fury. I could feel the spirit within me now - it seemed a part of me or perhaps myself a part of it. I wasn't quite sure how I'd missed detecting it earlier. Now, it was boosting my emotions, catapulting my anger into the rage that engulfed me now. I could suddenly 'remember' the white wolf spirit meeting with the spirit Nan carried and realized that the spirits were in love just as Nan and I. Soon the spirit and I would be melded into one being. We would have to be to rescue Nan and destroy this creature of darkness that Fox had loosed upon the world; and I realized that was just what we were going to do because suddenly, I also remembered the unpleasant conclusion to our walk.

But first the rage had to be managed. So I decided to take my new friend, who shared my mind and by body, on a walk down memory lane; back in time to my early teens. Dad hadn't been dead for too long and puberty still hadn't released its hold on my body. I sat in my room with the stereo turned up loud... mostly to aggravate my sister, Sandi. And that was when Sandi waltzed in with a pair of insulated wirecutters and clipped the power cord. I went into a rage. No real reason other than my aggravating her had been one-upped. It just welled up from inside me and out it came. I still remember it in horrible detail and even all these years later I still get this hollow feeling in my stomach and a terrible sense of guilt. These are feelings I justly deserve. The strongest part of the guilt lasted for a long time because I had to see the cast on her arm every day after she got out of the hospital, see her flinch every time her broken ribs grated together, and watch her eat through a straw until her jaw healed and her teeth firmed back into their sockets. See the fear in her eyes when she looked at me.

After that, I had counseling, martial arts classes, meditation courses and assorted other means of dealing with my emotions, my actions, and who I am. This was when master Cho came into my life and why I worked so hard to keep my emotions on an even keel... and more importantly, how to control them when they weren't so even.

Of course Mom and Sandi also had to have counseling but for vastly different reasons. There were a lot of long-lasting ripples caused by the stones that I had thrown into the puddle of life. Those closest to me were hit by the biggest waves. The guilt has never gone away but it has faded. A little anyway. Eventually, Sandi and I even became close and the fear is no longer there when she sees me. And for that, I thank God whenever I think about it. Later Sandi went off to school and got married and had Jessica. After that, I headed off to college as well.

Now, once again, here I was in a position where I need to be able to use anger. I'd been

learning for the past eight years how to control it so that it does my bidding instead of me doing it's. Weekly sessions with Master Cho. Quarterly visits to a psychologist. I have sworn to never again be burned by the heat of my own anger or to let it burn someone I love. Fortunately, the spirit seemed to see the wisdom of this and with a suddenness that surprised me I found myself in that place of safety that I had so painstakingly crafted in my head over the last eight years. The only thing different was that now it held a ring of familiar stones. Beside me sat the wolf but here it seemed as large as myself. I looked into it's eyes once again and saw agreement with the thoughts that ran through my own head. We merged together and became greater for it.

My senses seemed to expand in all directions and a great, endless strength seemed to fill me. I suddenly *knew* that I was in a realm of spirit and that Fox was nearby. That Fox and Coyote were just a couple of the many names this trickster spirit/deity used. And that Fox was suddenly apprehensive. This was all secondary to the need to get back to help Nan. Power surged throughout my head and suddenly I felt as if I was falling.

Faintly I 'heard' another ask, "Aren't you worried that putting together so strong a spirit with such a mortal might lead to worse harm than you've already done? Already their bond is much stronger and deeper than normal, what if...." I heard neither the rest of the question nor Fox's reply.

Coldness closed over me and I realized it was nightfall and I still lay under the tree. I slowly sat up, dizzy and aching all over from lying for hours in the same position and the rough treatment I'd suffered. The part of me that was now pure spirit brought out a tiny portion of the fire that burned within my heart and spread it throughout my body. Almost instantly I was warmed. Soon the aches were replaced by a restless energy and the dizziness had completely passed.

I could still smell Claude's reek and Nan's sweet scent. There was also another scent I couldn't quite identify but which seemed familiar. There was also a lot of blood which had recently belonged to me. Feeling the back of my head and my mouth, I quickly figured out where it had escaped from.

Starting in the direction that he'd taken her, I realized that despite my nose's new sensitivity, I was having trouble following the trail. Another tiny portion of energy and my body shifted and flowed into the form of a wolf. No pain. No strain. I was faintly curious about where my clothes now were but only faintly. Things suddenly looked brighter to my eyes and I became aware that I was a bit off of the track. I took to the trail trusting instinct and my new awareness of nature to help with the awkwardness of my new shape. A shape that part of me has worn for some time but the rest of me was still adjusting to. I ran and learned to rejoice in the speed and power of this new form.

The trail lead me away from the woods that I had wandered earlier. I ran through Bob's wheat fields and soon I crossed the creek which had turned my 'stang into a boat. It was much smaller now and with a running start I could now jump a very long way indeed. I sailed over the creek and landed well past the marks Claude's half-form feet had left in the bank. Tracks that deep meant he had been carrying Nan. His trail wasn't noticeably warmer. Running through the woods, I made up some time but the trail remained hours old.

At last I came to a large log cabin. It smelled strongly of wolf and of corruption. It made my hackles rise. I could sense many spirits within the cabin... Nan's was one of them. Silently I began stalking around the lodge. Faintly the sound of arguing could be heard from within. As I moved

around in a wide arc towards the back of the cabin, I found what I'd hoped to find: a rear door. Just as I was about to step out of the woods I heard another wolf growling. Freezing in place, I reached out with my senses trying to find the other. From the sound, the other was only twenty or thirty feet away.

Silently I moved back into the woods and moved quickly through the heaviest brush so that none could see my approach. The undergrowth seemed to move away from me as I wove my hurried path towards the growling sentry.

Another feather light touch of power and my wolf form flowed into the half-form I'd seen Claude wear. I felt amazingly strong with claws fit to tear steel and fangs fit for nightmares. Crouching down, I was just about to spring when I caught the wolf's scent. It was the same scent I had smelled earlier. Puzzled, I slid silently forward until I had a clear view of her.

She was a wolf I hadn't seen before but something finally clicked and I knew who it was. I am sometimes amazed by how easily the obvious hides. Very clearly, her scent said that she was Janet Jones - Mrs. Farmer Bob and the world's best cook. There was no one else around and she hadn't detected me yet so her angry growling puzzled me... until I saw through the trees the wolf skins nailed to the lodge wall. A growl rumbled from my own snout seemingly of its own accord. Janet yipped in surprise then spun around to face me. As she turned, her body flowed into the half-form that seemed the best suited for fighting. We didn't move for a long moment; me crouched down waiting to stop her attack, her waiting to stop mine.

The moment ended when she stood up and changed back into her human form. She was naked but that didn't matter. "Jason? Is that you? But it couldn't be... we never got a chance to even ask you, much less perform the ceremony."

I changed back into my human form after finding out just how poorly equipped the half-form's mouth is for talking. My *clothed* human form. For some reason it was no longer 'my' form. Now it was *one* of my *forms*. That line of thought felt very strange. However, strange was the new normal.

"You didn't need to perform any ceremony," I whispered. "Some long dead Indians and one of their spirits took it upon themselves to do it for you. Where's Bob?"

"Your clothes changed with you? Could it be that you are..." She trailed off into silence then began again with renewed purpose, "Bob and Nan are inside - prisoners of Claude and his followers. At sundown they came to the farm and several of them overpowered Bob. I was just returning from collecting berries when I saw them. They were bragging about Claude's ascension to alpha... and about how Nan and you weren't going to be a problem any longer. I found your body over by the trees and smelled that Claude had Nan. I'm so sorry Jason, I thought you were dead or I never would have left you." She paused a long moment before continuing.

"Somehow Claude has convinced, by one means or another, over half the pack to go where he leads. I don't know why but I think at midnight they plan to do something horrible. They've already killed poor Walter and Jasmin. Yesterday I heard rifle shots but I never suspected..." I wondered for a moment why the names Walter and Jasmin seemed familiar. Then it clicked - they were the palest wolves. The ones that Nan thought might be mistaken for a white wolf. Janet spoke again and this time there was fire in her voice as well as purpose and determination, "Someone or something evil has come to guide Claude down this dark, twisted path. Something that knows what silver does to embodied spirits. Something that knows how to turn the minds of good people to darkness. Claude is not smart enough to do all this on his own. Whatever this evil is, it is *not* in the

hunting lodge - but I fear it *will* be before midnight."

Her last words had a haunting ring of truth or maybe prophecy about them.

Out of the cabin came a piercing scream... Nan's scream of pain. In an instant, I was back in half-form and almost to the cabin. Then Janet ran in front of me in wolf form and quickly changed back to human. As I dodged around, I heard her whisper, "Not even the white wolf can defeat them all alone. If you charge in like a mad bull you will accomplish nothing more than causing Nan the agony of watching you die before her eyes." I stopped with my hands raised to smash the door. Turning to look at her, I saw the pain in her eyes as well as the purpose. She wasn't going to just wait and see what happened; she had something in mind.

Suddenly the door opened and I had just enough presence of mind to step behind it.

A male voice spoke from right beside me, "I tell you I saw something move... there!" Janet was back in wolf form and high-tailing it towards the woods. "It's Janet! Let's go get her before she has a chance to disrupt the evening's festivities." The door was flicked shut as two werewolves in half-form charged across the clearing into the woods. If they'd shut the door a second earlier they would have had a tough time not seeing me.

Scents of blood and pain came to me with the closing of the door. Anger bloomed anew as I silently chased the two into the woods, now in wolf form. Maybe the white wolf couldn't take them on all at once... but he sure could take them on a few at a time.

As I followed them, I was a bit surprised to have Janet run up beside me. She'd circled around with the same idea I'd had in mind. We came upon the two of them as they stood beside a creek apparently searching for Janet's trail. Their backs were to us so we took the opportunity to change into the more deadly half-form. Then we charged. Unfortunately for them, they didn't notice us until the last moment - far too late.

Just as he turned to face me, I struck mine with two stiff arms to the solar plexus. My momentum carried us across the creek where I landed on him in the same position. As he was clearly stunned, I took a moment to see how Janet was doing. She was holding hers by the throat with one very beclawed hand; the threat was clear. After a moment, he took the hint and changed back into human form. Janet clubbed him in the side of the head just under the ear and out he went. That brought back a few memories as well as a phantom twinge but we would have to talk about it later.

My prisoner seemed to be coming around. The taint of evil was upon him. A part of him. It wove through his scent like an infection of the spirit. Actually, that described it pretty well. An infection of the spirit. Hmm. Could this infection be treated in a less radical way than Fox had described? I echoed Janet's maneuver and clubbed him under the ear sending him into a truly unconscious state.

Predictably his body shifted back into that of a man. "Janet, I'm going to try something. Keep watch for a minute." Then, before she could ask any questions, I gathered my will and with a twist of my lifeforce, shifted my awareness from material existence into the spirit world.

Here, the spirit that powered the man's supernatural abilities was very much awake; so was his buddy's spirit but that was anchored some small distance away by his material body and for my immediate purposes was of no consequence. Both were busy healing the bodies they were attached to back in the mortal world. Red waves of rage strobed out from both. The taint of hate and worse caused the red to blot out the other colors that should have been present. Anger at being bested, anger at what was happening to it in general. The entire spirit seemed corrupted with hate and poison. But it wasn't only a tainted rage that came from it. There were undercurrents of fear and self

pity and a sick feeling of glee at the dark transformation that was proceeding even now. Maybe, just maybe, I had even caught a faint whiff of hope from it. Hope that help was here. Unfortunately, there was all that anger in the way; it very effectively blocked any chance I might have to root out the dark infection.

Unwilling to engage it in lengthy psychic combat and unable to directly help the spirit, I settled for radiating a calming blue and began thinking upon that which I now knew. When I'd melded with the spirit to become... well... me... I gained a great deal of information that I needed to consciously think over again. For starters I now knew what Fox's drastic ideas for solving the problem entailed.

The Rites of Exile blocked a person from touching the spirit world. Performing the rites created a null area around the body which essentially made a person cease to exist in the eyes of the spirit world. If a spirit cannot find you or touch you, it cannot link to you. No link, no powers or superhuman abilities. For one who had spent time bonded to a spirit it would be akin to being blinded and having multiple amputations. The spirit would also remain alive and would rage through the heavens bereft of it's link to the material world and the special bonuses thus gained, searching desperately for another who would act as host all the while tainted by an foulness that would only spread with time. No favors there to either of them.

I could also perform essentially the same operation but on the spirit. By destroying it's link to the material world it would be unable to further taint the mind of it's host. And it would likely spend eternity trying to reestablish contact while rotting away from within. In this case too, the host would lose their powers but there was a chance they could be regained if the host were to be bonded to another spirit. If they were still a suitable host. If they didn't go insane in the meantime. Fox had certainly been right about one thing. Neither choice was an easy one.

Could there be another way besides these choices or simply destroying the person or the linked spirit? To find another way I would have to know more about the nature of the problem. Okay, so what was this taint that drove these spirits and therefore their hosts to evil? Looking closely at the spirit, I could see thin black lines running over what should have been a bright, clean light. That was the manifestation of the taint. Could the taint exist without a host? Would it take on a dark life of it's own if removed? I thought it over a moment. No, that would make evil an outside object rather than what I knew it to be, a fault in the behavior of sentient creatures. Unless it was some kind of evil symbiote. Or parasite.

Moving closer, I took another look. Still strobing out red anger, the spirit nonetheless shied away from my approach but was unable to flee - trapped by it's link to it's unconscious mortal body and too loose a tie between spirit and host. Had their link been more perfect or had I let the man remain conscious then they would have been able to travel virtually anywhere within the spirit realm and I would have lost this great opportunity to study my enemy.

A shift in it's dominant color from red to yellow indicated that it was now more afraid than angry. I could now see faint undertones of brown beneath the taint. Brown was the mark of nature and it seemed to be rather badly faded for a spirit of the wild.

As I backed away, the color again changed. This time to a sullen red. Hmm. That seemed to leave me right back where I was before. Unless....

The spirit world touches both the higher realms and the lower realms. For those wandering the spirit world these places are kind of like the ultraviolet and the infrared spectrums - they exist but not to the naked eye (I realize this is not a very good analogy but it's the best I can come up with now - maybe later I'll have a better one). These other realms are not visible unless you happen to have

something to help you see. In the material world you use special light filters or glasses and stuff to see into the nether ends of the light spectrum. Here you concentrate on what you want to do and then dedicate a certain amount of your life energy to it. Lifeforce in the spirit realm is kinda like falling stars to the material world. More than tiny bits are rare but when there's a large chunk, it really does some spectacular things. My concentrating and tossing my life energy about wasn't going to make a crater here in the spirit world, but it *should* allow me to glimpse the gates of heaven and hell - more or less.

So, I dedicated some energy and focused my will upon it along with my desire to see into the coexistent realms. My vision rippled and I could suddenly into fourth or fifth dimensional space. Tiny black lines seemed to lead from the two spirits down into the dark realms. From there they seemed to loop about and drop back into the material world somewhere....

Somewhere not too far away from where my material body was.

I used a tiny spark of my life energy to cut one of the dark strands on the spirit. There was a moment when the severed end just floated about randomly then it snapped back into place in the spirit. The spirit strobed through several colors so fast it was hard to tell what they were before settling back into a dull, sullen red.

A few moments later I formed my energy and will into a blade and cut all the lines leading to the spirit. Fast as I could I wove energy and will into a shield to block the lines from reattaching to him. It succeeded but it was an effort to maintain the block. If I cleansed the spirit, then theoretically those black lines would have nothing to hold on to. But cleansing takes a goodly amount of time and energy (or so my newfound knowledge told informed). There was no way I was going to be able to do this for all the afflicted werewolves - not and save Nan before midnight too. But if the person or creature on the other end of the black linkage was to die... then the black lines would drop away and I wouldn't need to maintain the shield any longer while each spirit was cleansed. Which would make the thing do-able. I let the shield drop. A moment later the black lines speared into the spirit again like so many arrows. The spirit flinched and turned a sickly yellow for a long moment before turning bright red. There would be a time for cleansing him of the evil later. I smiled a wolfish smile.

Now it was time to go hunting.

Another twist of lifeforce and I was back in the world of the material still wearing my wolfish smile. Janet was not around and I noticed that I was in my human form which was not appropriate for what I had in mind. That was still a very strange thing to think - my human form. I guessed it would take some getting used to even if it seemed wholly natural to part of me.

I shifted into wolf form and set out after Janet's trail. As I trotted along, a breeze brought two more unclean scents to my nose. Trying to ignore my rising hackles, I slowed my pace. Her scent said that she couldn't be more than a short ways ahead but my eyes showed no such thing. Perhaps she was stalking the newcomers.

Pausing to sniff the air, I found the scent of the dark, new arrivals grew stronger while Janet's scent stayed the same. Shifting into half form, I climbed the nearest large tree and waited. It was a short wait.

Into the clearing slunk two half forms I didn't recognize by either sight or scent. One was a brown while the other was grey with light and dark patches. Since the half form is sexless, I had no clue as to who they might be. I saw the dried blood on their hands and claws at almost the same time I caught Nan's scent upon them.

That was the last rational thought I had for a long time.

Eventually, I found myself back in human form kneeling down with a slowly quietening stomach and Janet holding my shoulders. My mouth tasted of vomit and the stench of blood was all over me. We were in thick woods that didn't look familiar and it was nearing midnight if my guess was right.

This time I noticed that I too was naked and again that small part of me was again curious as to where my clothes had gotten off to. I didn't wonder long because memories started to filter back into my consciousness. Faintly I remembered flying through the air and landing upon one of them. After that, frantic fighting with tooth and nail tearing flesh and bone. The remembered taste of flesh and blood in my mouth sent my stomach reeling again but I had nothing left to throw up.

Hmm. I also seemed to remember two more of the tainted, a red and another grey. Janet was running a hand over my hair in a comforting way and was crooning something too low to make out. I had to take a deep breath as the memory of literally tearing the red in half came unbidden and very clearly back to me. I clenched my jaw to prevent myself from throwing up again.

I tried to be upset with myself for allowing my uncontrolled rage out, but I couldn't manage to do so. What I had done seemed right even if it had been extreme. My mate was in danger and those who hurt her had to pay. My mate - now that was another strange thought. I had a feeling I was going to be having some long discussions with myself over my current states of mind. Later though.

"Are you alright, Jason?" Janet asked standing up.

"No. Yes," There was a long silence as I sat there perfectly still getting control of myself, "I will be once we free Nan and Bob. Let's get to it."

She stood there a moment looking down at me. Then she nodded her head and started down a trail to our left. I followed. "When you first found me by the cabin," she began, "I was thinking of making a suicide attack in the hopes that I could trade my life for Bob or Nan's freedom. When you showed up you strengthened the small spark of hope I held to but not by much. Now seeing what you can do to even another werewolf - I am renewed in hope and faith. We *will* succeed and Claude will fail."

"Yes." It was all I could think of to say. I was still feeling a bit sick over what had just occurred but at the same time I knew that I would do it again and much more to boot in order to save Nan.

And I had no illusions that doing exactly that was just around the proverbial corner.

Wolf form now. Silently gliding through dark woods. Heavy clouds overhead kept the moonlight from us as we stalked steadily towards our goal.

What seemed an eternity later but was in reality only a few minutes, we arrived at the cabin. A group of men and women with lanterns were approaching the front of the cabin from the opposite woods. From this group came a sickly black aura. One of the group was the source of the evil and the darkness of it's soul blotted out the lesser darknesses around it. Meaning, I couldn't tell which one was the cause of my current problems.

Of the group that was even now knocking on the front door, the only two I recognized were Rob and Della, Claude's flunkies. I studied the rest of the group as I was able. Two women, one young, one with greying hair. Three men. One young and skinny, one in his thirties and of a medium

build, and the last a large older man who reminded me of Bob if only by his build. They were met at the door and immediately invited inside by Claude.

"Well," Janet whispered, "Our time is up. What do we do now?"

I smiled my wolfish smile. "Now we take the battle to them."

Concentrating I spent another small part of my life force and found two minor wood spirits nearby. I summoned them to me and told them of my need. They were disgusted but sensed the urgency of my need and they obeyed my wishes.

One brief discussion with Janet and all was ready. Motioning her to follow, I walked quickly towards the south wall of the cabin changing to half form as I went. This wall was devoid of windows and doors. For the moment.

Stepping into place before the large expanse of blank wall, I took a deep breath and let out a cry that was part wolf howl, part primal rage. For a moment all was silent, then the front and back doors burst opened as werewolves rushed out to meet my challenge.

As soon as the doors opened, I signaled the wood spirits who had taken up temporary residence in the wall before me. Their palpable disgust of being inside dead wood made my stomach churn anew. The sensation they felt seemed somewhat akin to being forced inside a decaying corpse. Thankfully the sensation faded as they warped the logs of the wall into a large archway and then quickly retreated back into the living woods.

Janet had started from the woods at a walk. When I howled, she sped up to a jog and switched to half form. By the time the spirits warped the walls open she was at a full run and almost instantly inside the cabin. I jumped in after her.

Smells of pain, hatred, madness and other soul sicknesses were magnified now that I was inside the room. That my mate had not only been trapped in here but was at the center of all that horror turned my anger instantly back into rage. For a while I could let the rage flow through me. Let the cleansing anger boil into cleansing action. Janet needed a minimum of two minutes to free the others. For that long I could let the anger flow completely unchecked. Perhaps in that time I could make some progress towards purifying this blight against the way the world should be.

There was little in the way of conscious thought. I saw someone who smelled of the evil and suddenly they were before me. Claw and fang, bone and muscle. My attacks were whatever would clear them out of my way as quickly as possible so that I could get to the next. Claws to the face. Raking the foot claws down the belly taking intestines and such with. Bone jarring martial strikes backed by a strength such as mortals only dreamed of. I moved quickly and mayhem moved with me I as I took the fight to those who'd perpetrated this atrocity.

At last I caught a whiff of something that truly repelled me. It was a smell so foul that it brought me out of my hot rage and set me fighting with a cold determination. An iron resolve to find the source of such foulness and destroy it forever.

It always seemed two steps away but it's minions were only one step. I couldn't see who it was... only those who were between it and myself. Those I dealt with quickly and harshly but there always seemed to be more behind them. I think that at one time Rob and Della stood before me but the smell had been behind them. Something painful happened to them. Something bad, but I can't remember what it was. They were replaced and I fought on.

Eventually, I noticed that I wasn't fighting alone. There were others fighting with me. I didn't know their names but they still smelled of the residue of fear. Perhaps Nan and Bob hadn't been the only prisoners. At any rate they fought well and they gave me a better chance of isolating the source

of the evil.

I was only slightly surprised when the evil one found me instead. After all, the way I was moving through these others, I supposed it had become only a matter of time.

Turned out he was the thirty-odd man of medium build. He fired his pistol from point-blank range striking me in the shoulder. The impact swung me around but I managed to use the momentum to add force to a spin kick. My kick shattered his arm and sent the pistol flying off into the melee. The man screamed. About this time I started to notice that all was not well with me either.

For a moment the combat stilled. The man pointed at me with his good arm and yelled, "Destroy him or face the Dark Master's wrath!" With that his features began to flow at the same time that he dove backwards out of my sight. Then suddenly werewolves were coming at me from all sides.

They jumped, ran and dove at me from everywhere. Without conscious thought I jumped up into the rafters. When I tried to hold onto the rafter with my right hand I finally figured out what was wrong with me - the arm that the creature had shot wasn't healed like my other wounds had almost instantly done. In fact, it didn't seem to be healing at all. Fortunately my left arm was up to the immediate task of holding on.

From up in the rafters everything looked different. It was immediately apparent that I had been right in the middle of the bad guy's section. The good guys were over there holding the area by the big hole in the wall. I also noticed two large, heavy tables that had chains across them but were otherwise empty. The floor to the right had several sets of very heavy chains somehow attached to it as well. No sign of Nan, Bob or the source of evil; that being the shapechanger or whatever he was. Then I noticed Claude because he was suddenly in the rafters with me.

"Time to die townie boy." At least that's what I think he said. With the large number of long fangs in his mouth and the long muzzle which was meant more for howling or chewing, it sounded more like "Rrhimme ru rhiie rhounie roy." But then I've always been good at understanding dumb animals. Or maybe it was just all those years of watching Scoobie Doo.

At any rate, while he was making his speech, I shifted my weight and kicked him into the next rafter. The heavy rafter beam cracked and Claude dropped back down to greet his constituents.

The hole through my arm was really starting to hurt. It was also bleeding a great deal. This seemed to be both good and bad. While I was getting weaker due to blood loss, I was also losing all the little tiny particles of silver which were preventing me from healing myself. Slowly, the wound was beginning to close. Until it did a good deal more healing, my right arm was going to be next to useless. Physically, I was going to be weaker for a while even after the wound had closed until I had a chance to eat and rest. Weaker in this case meaning that I was still a good bit stronger than any individual werewolf here but not stronger than an entire pack or even a sub-pack. Mentally on the other hand, I was still ready to perform the labors of Hercules... metaphysically speaking of course.

Therefore, when a thoroughly enraged Claude jumped up at me again, I didn't just kick him in the head... I also hit his spirit where it lived... so to speak. The spiritual equivalent to a kick between the legs. Claude's entwined spirit gave a voiceless shriek as his corporeal self crashed back down into two others who had been on their way up to join us. There followed another momentary silence. The brief break in the action gave me a quick view of a werewolf who, instead of fighting, was running around looking at the floor. I didn't have time to analyze this odd behavior (as I mentioned earlier I can be a bit tunnel-visioned when I have a plan of action in mind). Taking advantage of the momentary surprise that Claude was so kind as to provide, I attacked.

Leaping down into a couple of Claude's followers, I hit both their physical bodies and their guardian spirits. A wonderful new combination punch. Then I hit another and another. This was working out quite well. With their guardian spirit momentarily stunned, they were normal mortals again for a brief second. A simple tap was all it took to lay them low. Unfortunately, while my body and spirit had been successfully engaged, my brain had failed to solve the puzzle of the werewolf searching the floor... until it resolved itself to my great dismay.

I had just knocked a brindle colored half-form into a wall with my new combination punch. She had started to change back to human for a brief moment during which I gave her a gentle little tap that sent her flying several feet off behind me. Like the others, she was on her way to finishing her return to an unconscious human form. Unfortunately, this created a clear shot for the shapeshifter who had finally not only found the pistol he'd been looking for but had also healed his broken arm. Now he was back in human form. A shot rang out. I dodged a little too slow and managed to stop yet another bullet. Dammit!

My right collar bone this time. Unlike the first bullet, this one hurt right from the start.

I dodged to the left and he fired twice more missing both times. I was almost upon him when the next one hit me in the left leg. The leg immediately stopped supporting my weight and down I went. Fortunately, my fall was so precipitous that his next shot missed completely. Unfortunately, I was now so close to him that the next shot couldn't help but hit - and he was aiming at my forehead. To compound matters my right leg was tangled with the shattered remains of a couch or loveseat. I was going nowhere fast.

"The master will reward me well for getting rid of you and stealing your knowledge. Tell Fox, 'bishop takes knight'. With your power my master shall become a god so very much more quickly...."

Suddenly a beautiful, red-headed mass of bruises appeared before my eyes. With a shouted, "You leave my mate alone!" she swung an axe down severing the pistol-bearing arm from the rest of the body. The arm fell to the floor still holding the pistol. Regrettably, the arm still seemed connected to the will of the doppelganger because the gun pointed up and fired off it's last round into my belly.

Which landed me back in the spirit world. There were a lot of anchored spirits here. Immediately, one particular spirit caught my eye. It was not a spirit of nature but rather something else. Something that had never been natural... or a least not for a very, very long time. From this unnatural spirit radiated black lines of control. Dozens of lines radiated into the dark realms and out of my immediate sight. Those were connected to tainted creatures some distance away. Far enough away that the lines had to warp up into and then out of, extra dimensional space in order to reach their victims. About twenty victims were close enough that the lines of control went directly from spirit to spirit.

Fortunately, (unlike those around me) even unconscious I am not bound to my material body. The shapechanger's spirit was paying attention to the material axe that my lover was wielding back in the 'real' world and not upon me or the spirit world. Gathering up my power and my sense of the apropos, I formed myself into the form of a knight with a large glowing sword (there's a lot of neat stuff you can do in the spirit realm) and moved over to the doppelganger's dark spirit.

This close he had to realize I was here. He tried to split his attention in two directions in two realms and failed. His poor attempt to dodge the blade of force I had created was not up to the task. It severed several of his lines of control and wounded him badly. With his attention still divided I continued to attack, severing lines and wounding his spirit with ever more critical blows. By this time I had realized that although he wasn't able to formulate a successful defense, he was protecting one particular line of control. It was a thicker line than the others and it went off into the far reaches of hell to some unknown location.

I began attacking towards this particular line. It moved to defend that line by placing the rest of itself in greater jeopardy. Three more attacks on my part plus whatever havoc that Nan was wreaking back in the hunting lodge had drained so much life from the spirit that all its colors began bleaching away and even the few remaining lines of control withered away to nothing. It was dying and indeed almost dead.

Suddenly, the line that it had protected with so much of its essence bulged out from this end. I guessed that it was going to try to send itself down the line in some kind of spirit transfer. Quickly I dodged around it and made a desperate cut at the line before the swift moving bulge could get beyond my reach. A bright spray of colors spewed from the severed end as the remains of the spirit faded away to whatever comes after this world.

Knight takes bishop. I've always enjoyed a good game of chess.

I dreamed of bacon and eggs and biscuits. Eventually I awoke to find a large tray filled with these delectables plus a whole lot more was sitting on the table next to my bed. If I was going to keep going unconscious during fights, I certainly hoped that this was how I was going to keep waking up.

Halfway through demolishing the contents of the tray Nan peeked in. Seeing that I was not only awake but busily stuffing my face, she came on in. Her white robe served as a reminder of another conversation we had here not so very long ago.

"Hi there, cutie pie," she smiled.

"Mumph," I replied, gesturing with a half eaten slice of bacon for her to sit down. It was odd. Now I could sense both Nan's spirit and her guardian spirit. They were linked more tightly than most but not as tightly as my own merger. I loved them both and gave them a wee little nudge closer together. Neither seemed to notice.

"How ya feelin'?" she asked quietly.

"Pretty darn good, gorgeous. Here, have a slice of bacon. How are you doing?" She still had some bruises about her but they seemed to be fading.

"Much better... thanks to you. Are you going to make a career of coming to my rescue?" She asked around a mouthful of bacon.

"As I recall, that first time you actually came to *my* rescue. But to answer the question, I can think of worse careers to have. Would you like to fill me in on some of the parts I missed? There are several bits that I'm really curious about."

She moved up from the foot of the bed to sit next to my arm. She then proceeded to take my last slice of bacon and to run her other hand through my hair. "When that horrible shapechanger thing shot you that last time...." She paused for a long moment and I didn't think her eating the bacon had

anything to do with it. "When you were shot, I kinda went a little nuts with the axe. I chopped on it for quite a while and eventually it stopped healing it's wounds. Just before I chopped it's head off, it screamed this really horrible scream. Funny thing was it seemed to looking somewhere else instead of at me. Know anything about that?"

I nodded that I did and that she should go on with her story. The food had run out so I began licking her bacon greased fingers. She rolled her eyes and continued, "When it died the opposition died with it. We spent quite a while helping the wounded and gathering the dead. Aunt Janet was a wonder. She actually made Uncle Bob sit down and rest instead of straining himself further. She organized the first aid, the cleanup, the evacuation and even went out to find some others she said had been left out in the woods." I had a pretty good idea who they might have been. "She even dug the bullet out of your stomach." She ran her finger over the small scar on my belly for a moment.

"Uncle Bob had been in pretty bad shape. Claude and his flunkies worked him over pretty harshly after they dragged him to the hunting lodge. I certainly got my fair share of abuse as well but it wasn't my job that they were after so they spent most of their attention on him. Then, when you and Aunt Janet showed up and we'd been freed, he immediately went head first into the fight. Stubborn old fool," she said with more than a little pride and fondness in her voice, "He's still downstairs recovering. Aunt Janet is probably still cooking. We have a barn full of wounded who are taking their own sweet time recovering. I think that they just can't get enough of Aunt Janet's cooking." Smart people.

"Oh Jason," she hugged me tight. "I thought I'd lost you. Don't you ever do that to me again."

"Never darling. Never." I didn't know if that was a promise I could keep but I planned on trying very hard.

Some time later, after a more intimate reunion and a brief explanation of events in the spirit world, we went downstairs. Janet was indeed still in the kitchen. While chatting with her about nothing we managed to eat another breakfast. There were several others in the kitchen either helping cook or helping with the eating. I was eventually introduced to them all. None of them said anything but I could see that amongst other things they were wondering how it had come to be that one of the most seriously wounded (me) had come to be the most healthy so quickly. Personally I attribute it to living right, Janet's cooking, the love of a good woman, and very good sex - not necessarily in that order.

At any rate, I spent the rest of the day cleansing the guardian spirits of those who had been tainted. In most cases only minor traces of the evil remained and it was only light work removing it. A few of the cases such as Della's and Rene's had taken more of an effort as the taint ran deeper. Probably due to the fact that it had been there longer. In Claude's case the taint seemed to be trying to link up with the enemy again by forming another one of those black lines. I did a thorough cleansing which took considerable time and effort. In the end the spirit was cleansed but I'm not sure the man could ever be. His fate would be determined later. Most of these people still had wounds - some of them severe. I probably could have helped them heal faster, but since I put most of them there in the first place, I felt very little inclination to do so. On the other hand I doubted that Nan had noticed yet that all her bruises were gone (or Janet's or Bob's either for that matter). I'd done that

while they'd slept.

Whole lot of neat things you could do in the spirit world. It would take me a long while to relearn them all.

It turned out that there had been five others who were being held prisoner in that terrible cabin. No one was sure if they were to be sacrificed as Bob and Nan were or not and Claude certainly wasn't telling. While they had been beaten, it certainly hadn't been to the same degree as the others. Still, they'd had a rough time of it. They had also been the first ones to join me and Janet in our efforts at liberation and I made sure they all knew how much I appreciated their efforts. This seemed to put them a bit more at ease around me and that pleased me greatly.

Later that evening we held funeral services for those who had not made it through the fighting. Bob made a nice speech and it was very evident that no one was now disputing his authority as Alpha. There was a lot of crying, especially over Walter and Jasmin. Officially (as far as the papers and local law enforcement were concerned), all casualties were attributed to the explosion at the hunting lodge where a barrel of fuel oil had been stored too close to a fireplace. The resulting fire burned all of the hunting lodge and its occupants to ash and fragments. Unofficially, I killed most of them. There were a lot of people who didn't want to meet my gaze and a lot of gazes I didn't really care to meet. Among those was Della. Rob's head had very nearly been ripped off. No one knew who the red was that I'd killed in the woods. A popular theory was that he'd been a drifter who'd first shown the shapeshifter where Bob's pack was. There were a total of seven who had died not counting the shapechanger. I wasn't proud of having killed him and the others... but I wasn't sorry I had done so either. It had been a dirty job that had to be done. Maybe I'd cry about it later when I had more time on my hands to feel guilty. Maybe not - time would tell.

Four days passage saw the last of the stragglers loping across Bob's fields on their way back to their own homes. I was now familiar with all surviving wolves in the area and knew most of them on a first name basis. Most of the elders had gone into hiding when things started going bad. Only one elder had supported Claude and we buried him with the others. The others claimed neutrality but that didn't excuse their standing by and allowing everything to go to hell in a hand basket. Bob was very polite in his dealings with the remaining elders (not counting Janet of course) but it was plain that he had neither use nor respect for them. Three more days would bring a pack meeting at which time Claude's fate would be announced.

In the mean time Nan and I were sitting out under that oak tree again - this time watching the sun set. The tree was big enough that it completely blocked the view of house from where we were sitting.

"Tell me about how I came to be here," I requested quietly.

She stretched and rolled around so that her head was on my legs and looked up at me. "You mean how you originally came to be here? Or how you came to be out here in the dark, alone with a pretty girl?"

"How I originally came to be here. I think I can figure out how I came to be here with you this evening," I said with a smile, bending over and kissing the end of her nose.

"Okay," she agreed, scootching her way up my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and after a few moments she began again, "About two weeks ago - in fact the very night I returned from

school - I had a dream. Not an ordinary dream mind you but a special dream. I dreamed that I was in the Indian circle of trees and stones that you asked about the other day. In my dream all was fresh and the stones had painted scenes of the life cycle of the wolf. Then this old indian woman came to me. She said, 'The one you have waited for is on his way. With the next rains shall he come. He will bring new blood and new ways. One day he shall be Alpha. However, there is a choice in all things. Nature will revel with his presence or die with it. Through his actions darkness shall be brought to light or darkness shall reign supreme and all of the world laid low. It is for you to influence which way this shall be. In the end, your blood shall mix with his and you shall be one. Your choices will decide not only your own fate but his and many others as well. Remember the prophecies of the white wolf.' Then she walked away and then I woke up. It was very real and very weird.

"I told Aunt Janet about it. She told Uncle Bob and he discussed an edited version of it with the elders. Bob was sure it was a good sign and he seemed positive that my dream was prophetic. He also seemed to feel that prophecy needed some help. Four days later, when it started raining, Rene, Della, Rob, Claude and I all were put to work building a new *bridge out* sign - one without any reflectors or anything so it would be hard to see in the dark. It was the first time I'd seen them since returning from school. Anyway, after fixing the sign we also went and took out the *low water bridge* sign and we painted over the road sign on the main drag so that it would be impossible to read at night. I was a bit surprised at how Claude and the others acted. They were all so quiet. They probably didn't say two words to me the whole evening. Just last semester Della and I had been close to being best friends. It was a really weird reunion. On the way back I'd tried to talk to them but they weren't in the talkative mood. When I made one last attempt at speaking to Della, she and the others just ran off. We were in wolf form then and I was so frustrated I changed back to human form.

"Then this car goes blazing by so quickly that I got caught standing by the roadside without a stitch of clothes on. It's a good thing you kept going because otherwise I would have just died."

I took the opportunity to show her that I was glad it hadn't come to that, then she continued, "I got back just in time to see that idiot Rob almost get run over. For a minute there I thought he was just going to let himself be caught in your flashlight beam. Then, when he changed to half-form I thought he was going to attack you. Fortunately, his common sense finally caught up with him. Poor Rob, he never was too bright. He always relied on Claude to do his thinking. Poor choice that."

"Why all the subterfuge?" I asked, "I guess I can understand Janet's sneak attack during the fight... it was too early to reveal your true natures... but why did you lie about how long you'd been back in town? Why did you run around as Nancy half the time? Is there something simple that I'm missing?"

She laughed for a second. "I lied because I didn't want you thinking I was in cahoots with Claude and his bunch. I don't guess I should have bothered with that, huh?" Since she couldn't see my smiled agreement, I kissed her hand and told her.

"As for me running around as Nancy; I do that a lot anyway. But I did want to keep an eye on you, according to my dream you are rather important, and Della and the others had been acting so strange lately that I appointed myself your bodyguard. I also wanted to get an idea of what kind of person you are. You can tell a lot about a person by how they treat animals." I squeezed her to me this time to show my agreement. "You may think me terrible for this," she continued, "Despite being frazzled from wrecking your car that first evening, you were so handsome I even noticed while in wolf form. So I decided to see what you looked like without any clothes. It was a natural reaction to the situation," she said just a bit defensively.

I couldn't help laughing then. "Darling, *you* are the dream come true. As for natural reactions - I'll show you a natural reaction...." I could really get to like that tree.

Two days later Claude escaped. Sorta. Actually, Bob made the decision to allow him to escape. Claude didn't know that his finding the wire to pick the lock to his door was all Bob's idea, I wasn't supposed to know that Bob had snuck up to the cell late one evening and hidden a length of stiff wire within arms reach but under some dirt and straw. I disagreed but I wasn't ready to become Alpha yet and that was the only way that Bob's mind was going to be changed on this particular matter. He'd hinted around that Claude had overstayed his visit for several days now. Most assumed that he meant to kill Claude. Evidently Bob thought otherwise. At any rate, Claude's trail lead to the main road and then disappeared. Some poor fool probably picked him up. For some reason I doubted that we'd seen the last of Claude.

At the big meeting I was formally inducted into the pack. Since Claude's disappearance had removed the unpleasant business from the gathering, it pretty much turned into one very big party. The total number of Bob's pack was just over a hundred. I think the party went a long way towards closing some of the gaps that had formed. Bob went out of his way to be nice to the elders and the elders did quite a bit in the way of butt kissing. Capturers and capturees talked about what happened and how it happened and how to prevent it from happening again. After that we ate, talked some more, danced and generally had a good time.

The next morning Bob asked me to come help him move some hay in the barn. I was wondering if this was building up to one of those 'what are your intentions towards my niece?' conversations. We'd moved about forty bales when he asked me instead, "Where're you off to from here?" I knew he wasn't asking about my schedule for the day.

I sighed and sat down on one of the bales. "I have a job to do. There was a reason I was made into what I am and your troubles were only a part of it. My job is to find the creature behind the evil and destroy it. By depriving it of the shapechanger I've made a start but only a start. Pretty soon I'm going to have to go and finish matters."

"Are you goin' ta take Nan with you?", he asked. Okay, so Bob was farther along in his thinking than I'd guessed. It was still a good question. There were pros and cons either way. And I didn't really know myself.

"I'm goin' ta give you some advice," he said into the silence, "Don't feel obligated ta follow it, only ta listen to it. Nan has never been one ta be protected. She's always been something of a tomboy and she's always had a knack for getting herself into trouble... and for getting herself out of it. If you leave without her, she'll likely just follow ya anyway and she'll be mad as hell to boot. If ya take her with you, it *is* likely she'll end up in a sticky situation from time to time... but she's going ta do that anyway and at least you'd be there to help if she's with you. Besides, I think maybe *you* could use *her* help. You seem to have the same knack for getting into sticky situations. Keep in mind, that girl wields a mean axe - just ask that shapeshifter!" He laughed for a moment and I couldn't help but smile. A few moments later he said, "Well that's the end of the sermon. You'll do

what ya think best and I have faith in your judgement. Now let's finish moving this hay." He chuckled to himself off and on as we finished moving hay occasionally muttering to himself, "A mean axe."

When we'd finished moving hay, he motioned me over to his workbench. "I know you didn't approve of me not killing Claude or tracking him down after his escape. He needs to be cleansed on the human side if that's possible and he should be punished for his crimes. Hell, maybe he already has been punished. At the moment the question of punishment is of secondary import. Claude wouldn't talk about what happened or why it happened or who'd helped it happen but I do believe that he's still managed ta make himself useful." I looked the obvious question at him. Bob smiled brightly and handed me a small, plastic box. "This is the locator for the satellite tracking beacon I stuck in his right boot heel. This button zooms the scale out and this one zooms it back in." He pulled out a large area map while I quickly came to the conclusion that Bob was every bit as wily as he was strong. "Figurin' that we are right here on the map and at the moment Claude is about 230 miles to the south, southwest - that would place him somewhere around... here... in the big city. I shouldn't doubt that would be a good place for you ta start looking for your next lead on this creature you have to kill.

"Now I'm pretty sure you're not rich. I would also be willin' ta bet that you're plannin' on droppin' out of school to pursue this thing. Normally, I'd advise a young man of your potential to stay in school but I guess normal don't really apply here. Instead, I'd like ta hire you." I'd done a pretty good job of keeping up until that last bit.

"Hire me?"

"Yes, hire you. I know I don't look like I got money but the outside don't always show truth to the inside. I farm because I enjoy it. It keeps me in touch with the land and that's very important t' me. But what you don't know is that I'm also in charge of the Chandler Foundation. It's a non-profit group dedicated to preservin' the environment. The Foundation would like to hire you to keep us informed on important environmental issues and to act as our field agent. Of course you would have a small expense account and would receive a regular paycheck. Your duties would be essentially to do what needs to be done, where it needs to be done, as you feel it needs to be done." I was overwhelmed.

"You're too generous...." I began.

"Bullshit," he snorted, "This is what I call enlightened self-interest, not generosity. The Foundation is based off my great grandfather's moneys. There are currently several million dollars at it's disposal. Even if there weren't, we would still pay you to do what you need to do. First of all, you are a member of the pack now and we stand behind each other. Second, prophecy is revolvin' around you which means that your fate is important. Damned important. Third, I keep in touch with some of the other packleaders. Ours is not the only pack to have troubles. There is a blight moving across the land and it has ta be stopped. You are the most likely candidate ta stop it. You'll have a better chance of stoppin' this blight if you have the resources to be where you need to be with what you need ta have. We can't leave ta go with you so you'll have ta take a little part of us with you. The smallest part of that is going to be your salary. No arguments."

"Umm. Okay."

"Good. I knew that you were wise beyond your years." He paused a moment to make sure I wasn't going to try and say something less than wise. When I remained silent, he nodded his head and continued, "I've already taken the liberty of settin' you up a bank account at one of those branch

banks. Here's your charge card and this envelope has your account information." I looked through the papers and discovered that I already had a nice bit of money in the account. I couldn't think of anything to say but I somehow managed a "Thank you."

He smiled a broad smile and went off about his business. I stashed the stuff he'd given me in the 'stangs' glove box and went off to think about the future.

That evening passed quickly for me. We ate supper that evening but I couldn't tell you what it was. There wasn't much conversation either, not that I would have noticed then, but later as I was getting ready to go to bed I realized that everyone had been more quiet than usual. Perhaps they sensed my mood, perhaps it was more a shared sense of waiting - I couldn't say.

I lay in Nan's bed staring at the ceiling with my thoughts in a tangle when she came in. We hadn't bothered hiding the fact that we'd been sleeping together for several evenings now. She didn't say anything as she climbed into bed nor for a long time after. I had been working my way through various dark scenarios ever since my talk with Bob. What if I took her and.... What if I didn't take her and.... I was going around in circles and each revolution was showing me different angles of the same view.

This was actually fairly typical of me. I tend to be a perfectionist and it pisses me off when I can't do something right the first time. Therefore, I tended to dither around about doing something until I'm sure it's right. I did the same thing when choosing my car and when choosing my major in school (graphical engineering in case you're curious). In the end I think I made the right decision in both cases. Both fit me like a glove.

But this was different. This wasn't just about me. This was about the woman I loved and her *life*. This was about a monster that destroyed people's souls and the fact that I might be putting Nan's very *soul* at risk fighting this monster. Could I do that? Could I live without her? Was it even my decision?

There was only one person I felt I would be comfortable talking to about this. Unfortunately, I'd already seen in her eyes that she planned on leaving with me one way or another. The Indian woman in her dreams had told her that we would be together. I know I certainly wanted to be with her. She'd made it pretty plain that she wanted to be with me. Was I making a mountain out of a mole hill? Damn. Why can't the important decisions be easy? And why did I always seem to overthink the easy ones?

"Jason?" She asked quietly.

I turned to her but didn't say anything.

"I want you to promise me something. I know you haven't made up your mind yet. Uncle Bob said you would worry over it for quite a while before you made a decision and your eyes say that you're still worrying at it.

"I told you that my parents were killed when I was young. What I didn't tell you about was the years that I lived with survivor's guilt. I know it's silly but it was still there. I felt guilty because I had lived when they hadn't. I was a real mess for a long time afterwards. Uncle Bob and Aunt Janet inducted me into the pack early because of the vitality they knew the spirit-merge would give me and the feeling of family that the pack inspires. They had become rather fearful that I would commit suicide. My parents had been the core of my life. Bob and Janet tried to carry on in their place but

they never could fill in that hollow around which my life had been built and they knew it. "I have waited most of my life for someone to come along and fill in that hollow. It wasn't until I did some soul-searching the other night that I realized that you *have* filled in that hollow - and I hadn't even noticed. When I'm around you, I feel like I'm a whole person. When you're away, I feel like a part of me is missing. I probably shouldn't feel so strongly about you so after so short a time but I do. When you're close I feel that electric shock that romance novels have made so cliché. I can see in your eyes that you feel the same way about me.

"Deep down inside I know that when one of us dies that the other will feel it no matter how far away the other is. I don't know about you, but if you die first I know that your body won't even have time to get cold before I join you. I won't leave you... ever... not even in death. Maybe especially not in death." Tears were running down both our faces by this time. "Please, please promise me that you will never leave me."

I had never really dared plumb the depths of my feelings for her before. Our relationship had come about so fast I'd never really stopped to examine it. Love is frightening enough to start with but loving someone as intensely... and as deeply... as we so obviously loved each other - it is beyond words. When she talked about how she felt, I realized just how true the words were for me as well. I also knew that all my obsessing over my decision had been a way for me to avoid this realization. I can hide the truth from myself but only for so long. The truth of the matter was that we were already bonded together in ways that normal people simply cannot imagine. The truth was that we would always be together. My heart had known this for some time now. It just took my head a little while to catch up.

"Nan," I choked out, my voice on the verge of breaking, "My beautiful Nan. I could no more leave you than I could my own heart. I should have realized it a few days ago but I couldn't see the forest for the trees. I am sorry I made you worry. Next time I'm so blind just slap me upside the head a time or two." I hugged her to me so strongly that her ribs creaked.

"Count on it," she replied, as she caused my own ribs creak. "But I have delicate hands and you have a hard head so make sure I don't have to very often."

"Count on it," I told her in between impassioned kisses. "Count on me."

"Forever, my love."