The Anticlimactic Non-Imprintment of Embry Call

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The Anticlimactic Non-Imprintment of Embry Call

by Guns_and_Drums

Summary

"I'd accepted the fact that I was going to imprint just like my other brothers had. I'd been pretty much been waiting for it. Then one day, Sam goes and blows my mind: I might not imprint. So, I have to find a girlfriend all by myself? This sucks…"

This is the piece that will attempt to combat many of the major issues I have with Twilight. Nothing is sacred. Mid-BD AU.
For as long as Embry could remember, which was about to the age of six, his Mother had been obsessed with fairy tale movies. From the time he was about ten until he went to high school, she loved *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Most people might not think that was too strange. Those movies were popular for a reason, right? They appeal to a certain audience… yada, yada, yada.

Except, as a kid, Embry never perceived his Mom as member of that audience.

She and Embry were the only ones in their house. She raised him his whole life and the fact that he still turned into a fully blue-blooded male is – as far as Embry was concerned – a testament to her own hardiness and sort of… atypical female nature. Tiffany Call was a tomboy. She showed Embry how to chop wood for the fireplace. The two replaced the boiler together when Embry was twelve. She showed him how to re-tile the roof when he was fifteen. And - because she was his Mom – he could cook a mean homegrown meal. Embry knew how to separate his whites and colors and to never ask woman how old she was or how much she weighed.

Embry's Mom fused the most important aspects of being both his Mom and his 'male influence' and funneled them into him at a young age. Over his childhood Embry adopted a lot of feminine influences because that was the only thing he knew. The foremost probably being his penchant for color-coordination. Anyways… fairy tale movies were something he thought – even as a ten year old boy – were a bit out of character for his Mom.

One night, *Snow White* had been playing on the old, fuzzy TV in the living room as his Mom put together a roast for dinner and Embry contemplated the irrelevancy of "'i' before 'e' except after 'c'" in his spelling homework. He looked up from his frustrated scribblings and was momentarily entranced by the dwarves as they sang joyfully in their mining work. *Heigh ho, heigh ho, it's off to work we go.*

"Mom," Embry asked. "Why do you like those movies so much?"
"Hm?" she hummed in question. She turned and followed Embry's gaze to the television. "Oh," she replied in understanding as she sat down next to him, wiping her hands on a dishcloth. "Well, it's a fairy tale," she said like that explained it all. "The thing about these stories is that they always end well. That's the job of a fairy tale. There's a really big problem and a little hope from the good people in the story and bit of magic lets it all end perfectly."

"Cept that's just made up, Mom."

"I know it is, Emb," she smiled and patted his forearm before returning to her roast.

Fairy tales. Despite being raised by his Mom it was something he never understood. As a being possessing a fully stiff-wristed Y chromosome, Embry just didn't get it. He didn't understand for a really, really long time. And then he turned sixteen.

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*early October 2006*

"Embry… Embry…"

He had to have been dreaming. Embry had only *just* lay down. He could've sworn it anyways. He rolled back over, refusing to open his eyes. If there was any damn justice in this world, he could get at least another hour or two of sleep.

"Embry!"

"Christ!" Embry finally sat up, so quick – in fact – he gave himself vertigo. His vision cleared from the drag of sleep and he realized it was Quil in his room. "What the fuck do you want, man? I *just* got off patrol."

Quil was momentarily stunned by Embry's language. Embry didn't tend to curse outright. But whenever he swore, it made people pause.

"Will you cover for me on Wednesday?" Quil asked, completely unfazed by the fact that his best friend was near to death or at least a coma if he didn't get some shut eye damn soon.

"Quil…" Embry asked staring at him in amazement. "Are you seriously asking me this now? It's…"

Embry glanced at his alarm clock, "four thirty in the morning. On a Monday. You couldn't have waited until I see you in class in a few hours?"

"I'm not gonna be there," Quil replied as he collapsed in the folding chair near Embry's desk. "I've got patrol. And you're my last option. I'm desperate."

"Obviously…" Embry groaned as he rolled back over, trying to bury his head back into his pillow.

"Please?" he begged. Embry knew that voice. That was Quil's Imprint Voice. He only used it when he was talking about Claire. And because Claire was pretty much awesome, Embry rarely denied Quil any requests related to her. Quil got the benefit only by extension of being her imprinter, otherwise he'd be shit out of luck. "Claire has a doctor's appointment."

"Does she not have parental units?"

"Yes, but I'm the only one she'll sit with through her shots."

Poor Claire-bear… Embry hated shots when he was a kid, too. Now he needed to go to Carlisle for a titanium needle for his updated tetanus shot. Funny how things change.
"Fine, now get out or shut up. And don't wake my Mom up."

"Thanks, man! Bye!" And a series of door slams accompanied Quil's exit from Embry's house.

It was odd what a pile of mush a three-year-old girl could turn Quil to. It seemed more reasonable to Embry with Sam and Emily or Kim and Jared – at least the thing was mutual. Hell, even Paul and Rachel coexisted as platonic partners in crime. Claire adored Quil, but it was clearly not the same. That wasn't even starting in on the Nessie and Jake scenario...

Embry was pretty torn about the whole institution, honestly. He didn't want his genes to force him on some girl – because that was awkward and Embry had never really been smooth at all. But Sam, Quil, Jared and Jake corroborated that it changes once it's happened. It doesn't feel awkward or strange. It's just how things are supposed to be. And it's the best feeling in the world.

That would be nice, Embry thought. Being set in who you'll love for the rest of your life. Knowing you'll always be together and you'll always be happy must be pretty cool. Then again you could get imprinted to a psycho and your whole life could spiral into oblivion. Embry didn't like to think about that option. Part of Embry was just kind of waiting for it to happen like it was an inevitable thing, though there wasn't really any evidence to suggest that. The Pack didn't know what kind of frequency it happened with. But every couple of months, someone else had imprinted on a local girl and it looked more and more like an all or nothing game.

But what were the odds of that? Embry's logic kind of got thrown for a loop that day he was on his way home from school and experienced and total species shift in the middle of the road. But every now and then his reasoning liked to come back and say "Wait a minute…". Embry usually tried and push it back because nothing really made sense anymore. But it was pretty persistent about that imprinting business – which Embry thought about a lot. His logic told him that it couldn't be guaranteed for everyone. Maybe some will mate au naturel. And he wanted to be able to make his own decisions – their were very few of those left.

But he also didn't think it was worth the risk to date. Like he even had time. And that was one thing that no one in the Pack would readily offer their two cents about. It was a pretty touchy topic. No one was going to tell someone who hadn't imprinted to go paint the town because they all know what happened to Sam and Leah. But discouraging it just seemed really depressing and lame.

Mostly the Pack didn't think about it like that, especially in the communal Pack mind. Which left Embry at a really weird impasse. He noticed girls. Like all the time. But he would panic, because he was afraid he's going to imprint (he's had more than a few false alarms), or he would panic because he'll fast forward through life potentials and see himself having to hurt someone like Sam did to Leah.

Do you see where I'm going with this? He told the others.

Part of him wonders if they're all under the effects of some genetic hallucinogen. He didn't want to lessen the bond between any of the imprint pairs but he couldn't help but wonder what triggers such a change in the minds of the Quileute Pack. The only analogy he could find is drugs.

It's pretty ironic actually. Actually, maybe it wasn't. He just couldn't think of a better word to describe it. But drugs? That's what he was pretty sure his mom thought he was doing. As much as she helped Embry out in raising him, she had been very hands off. Maybe it was because she trusted him. Maybe it was because she didn't want him to do that 'acting out' thing and gave him some pretty loose reins.

Yeah. Well, after Embry phased and disappeared for two days and couldn't offer his Mom any
explanation she pretty much lost most of her trust and faith in him. She really laid into him that first night. And he just sat there and took it. What else could he do? Pack law said no one who doesn't need to know is told the secret. Embry credited her with helping him learn control. He couldn't help getting angry as she was yelling but he couldn't risk a phase and hurt her.

Now, she checks in on him every night. But those three nights a week he has night patrol? She checked in on his empty bed. Sometimes he got Seth to sleep in his bed for him. It was easier because Sue knew. Embry's Mom doesn't lay into him anymore like she did that first time, but he knows she's disappointed. And he knows she thinks he's up to no good. And he knows she's connected the dots to Sam, Jared, Jake and now Quil. Embry's still good around the house and he still helps her out, so mostly she just looks at him all sad and disappointed. That's the worst. Sometimes he wished she'd yell instead of being disappointed.

Sam saw how much stress it was causing Embry and actually told him that it was kosher to tell her. Sam knew Embry's mom wouldn't spill and knew it would help out a lot.

Embry decided not to.

Jacob told Embry he was a masochist for like three weeks and Quil just thought he was batshit. Easy for you to say, he told them, you have family on the council. Their families knew.

Embry decided not to tell his mom because he wasn't square with it yet. He knew the Pack was made for good. They protected people. It was their job. But they could also do a lot of damage. They scared a lot of people. Every now and then when they got reckless and were glimpsed by a passing hiker… well, Embry saw those faces. Mouths wide and faces bloodless. All he could think of was her stint in the world of fairy tales when he was younger. The Pack was the scary part of the fairy tale. And this story didn't always end well. Embry didn't want his Mom to think he was even worse off than she already did – which he might have been. The Pack wasn't her type of magic.

His mother existed so much in the world of reality. She believed in the inherent good of people. Embry didn't want to disappoint her anymore than she already was. His lying to her for months would only be the tip of an iceberg about the size of this planet. Forget the whole being in a wolfpack thing.

And once she'd realized all the stories were true, she'd know Embry could figure out his bloodlines. She'd realize he knew she lied about his Dad. There were only three bloodlines left: the Black, Uley and Ateara bloodlines. All the Pack members were somehow related. Second cousins, mother's sister's nephew. Somehow they were all connected by blood to the same three people in generations past. There was no way around it. That was not a conversation he was ready to have with his mother. Or a mental dialog he was ready to share with the entire Pack.

They all assumed it was Sam's dad, Joshua, because he was kind of a loser dad anyways. But what if it wasn't? What if it was Billy? Or Quil's dad? Embry was not going there.

So for now, he'd rather her think he was going through a rebellious stage. That he was still human and just being a typical teenager. He didn't want her knowing he was a mythical beast capable of so much damage and responsible for so much more. And mostly, he didn't want his mother opened up to the shame and ridicule of the reservation because of half his genetic material.

Color him retarded, but he just thought things were better the way they were.

Embry worked part time at the corner store on the edge of town. He was about 87% sure the old man dealt hard drugs out of the back room. But he learned a long time ago that it was sometimes best to
just not ask. So he doesn't. Yeah, he's a coward. He's only seventeen, now, and eight months into this shapeshifter business. It's all adults he sells to, anyways. No kids.

At any rate, Old Mr. Carlson was really paranoid and he was about the size of one of Embry's arms and a totally crotchety old dude so he didn't ask too many questions about why Embry chose to work weird hours or randomly disappeared at times. It worked out well. Embry knew Mr. Carlson though he was a screw up. That's how Embry's pretty sure he was dealing crap. The guy had not so subtly hinted at Embry that he can help him out. Embry tells him all the time no thanks, but he's a persistent old bugger.

Now, normally the only people from La Push and Forks that came into the store were pretty shady. Normal people stopped by sometimes but it was usually only to get a newspaper or a gallon of milk or a bag of ice or something you didn't have to penetrate too far into the place to find. It was a slow business and Embry's basic economic skills didn't know how it stayed afloat. But the old guy paid him on time every week and that was good enough for him.

Embry needed the money, so he just didn't ask questions. Now that he was old enough to seriously work and was on the cusp of expulsion – he was trying to help at his house. His really shoddy attendance record had got the administrators all bent out of shape, even though when he as there he didn't cause any trouble and got all his work done but whatever! He's not Paul or something. All he does is start crap. Embry liked to lay low. And if all panned out, he'd actually pass his senior year.

Plus, Embry was not totally ignorant to the fact that a one-income household was really hard to squeeze. Especially when he ate the way he did (he was seriously glad Emily was so willing to feed everyone all the time). His mom was already angry at/disappointed in/worried about him. So as if that was like the worst possible combination of guilt-inducing parent vibes ever. And Embry knew it was hard to swing life on a weekly paycheck. He figured it was the least he could do. And maybe the fact that he held a steady job helped convince his Mom he wasn't a total screw up. Maybe.

So, he worked in a shady corner mart where the wizened old prune of an owner dealt meth out of the back storeroom and earned some cash. He didn't choose to be here. Most people didn't. For those who shopped here it was an act of desperation. So, you could imagine Embry's surprise when a perky redheaded girl walked in off the street like it was no big thing.

He stood behind the counter and watched her browse the aisles. She was a redhead, a really dark kind of redhead. She had pale as hell skin - a tell tale sign of a Forksian - and was kind of short. Actually, from his six foot four stature he really had to reevaluate that last statement. He guessed she was kind of average height. She was wearing mesh shorts and appeared a bit out of breath. The iPod strapped to her arm lead him to believe she was probably on a jog and not in the run from the Mob.

Embry had an overactive imagination.

The girl was pretty built. Nothing bulky but she was obviously an athlete. Embry realized he was staring and returned to restocking the cigarettes behind the counter. He kept finding himself drawn to watch her. Her earbuds stuck in, she bopped her head to the music. Every now and then she would hum a verse or get really into it. Embry couldn't help but smile. It was endearing watching her. A small smile played over her lips as she mouthed the words to whatever she was listening to and shopped along.

Stop staring, Embry. You're gonna freak her out.

"Embry!"

He was so startled he almost landed on his butt. Old Mr. Carlson was hobbling towards him from his
office and hollering his name like it was going out of style.

"Stop eyeballing the customers, you no-good pubescent puke!"

"God..." he mumbled to himself, rubbing his back where he'd jumped into the counter. He was also keenly aware of the only customer's hiding place behind the rack of Doritos as she tried to contain her laughter. Well, this was embarrassing.

"Yes, Mr. Carlson?"

"Boy, we got a run on all Pepsi-Cola products next week. That means I want your behind labeling all of those," he pointed to the cooler full of Pepsi, "with these," he slammed a few pages of '2 for $2' stickers on the counter. Old man had some power when he wanted.

"Yes, sir."

"Before you leave today!"

"Yes."

He turned around and made for his office and shouted - "And stop harassing the clientele!" - before slamming the door. Embry listened to the racket of the Venetian blinds against the door and let his forehead fall against the countertop. Mr. Carlson was worse than his Mom. He was sure whoever Poor, Energetic, Redheaded Lip Syncer was, she didn't want to come anywhere near him now. She probably wanted to file a restraining order.

It was then that he heard a small throat clearing right above him. Embry picked his head up and Poor, Energetic, Redheaded Lip Syncer was now standing on the other side of the counter with a large bottle of water and an apple in her hand. She'd taken her earbuds out and they were now slung over her shoulder.

"We sell fruit?"

Embry was not too suave.

Part of him was really surprised the store stocked fruit because he hadn't seen it since he'd worked there. And part of his was slightly terrified and mesmerized by this girl being so close to him. She reached towards Embry, because he was still leaning over the counter from his head thumping. She bit the edge of her lip as she peeled a '2 for $2' sticker off his forehead.

"No," she replied. "It's my apple. You do sell water, though," she pushed the water towards him. She had a low, sweet voice; slightly scratchy in that old-world jazz kinda way. Embry was far too fascinated by the way her mouth moved when she talked. He'd never seen anything like it before. It was wonderful. It took him four tries to actually scan the UPC code because he was so distracted by her.

"So," she continued as the cash drawer opened. "Does your boss always yell at you like that or do you have a history of ogling the customers?"

"Yes... Wait! No!" He was seriously screwing this up. He took a sharp breath and straightened up as the girl suppressed a laugh. "Yes to the first; no to the last."

"Gotcha," she nodded with a smile as she retrieved her water bottle and change.

She turned and made for the door. Embry found himself wanting to say something to make her stay,
even just for a few more moments. Almost heeding his mental call, she stopped halfway to the door and turned. Her face twisted in thought for a moment before she spoke. "What time are you guys open until? Y'see my dad went food shopping today, so I'm bound to realize he didn't buy something really important later. I don't want to go all the way back into town."

"We're open until nine o'clock today."

She nodded with a happy smile as she replaced her earbuds. "Maybe I'll see you later..."

"Embry," he supplied filling her pause.

"Jezzie."

About five minutes after Jezzie left, Embry was torn out of his own mental montage. He kept replaying her course through the store and remembering every detail of her appearance, her face, her smile, her hair. How she had a smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose and her eyes were green and flecked with gold...

Then Mr. Carlson knocked something over in his office and Embry was forced out of his reverie. He half came back to the real world and realized he was obsessing over a girl he had just met. His mental dialogue must've sounded like a preteen girl. He couldn't stop though, he was just so fixated on her and the more he tried to stop the harder it got. And it gave him this weird feeling in his gut and—

_Holy shit._

"Mr. Carlson," Embry shouted as he ran around the counter, "I'm going on break!"

He distinctly heard Mr. Carlson hobbling out of his office and mumbling something about when he decided that breaks happened at this job. Embry ran across the street and silently thanked God that it was nothing but woods and before he knew it, he was in doggy shapes.

!  

Embry? he caught the tenor of Sam's voice in his head. He might not have been his Alpha, but Embry still got the joys of hearing Sam whenever he was phased. At least only Jake could order him around. It was Sam's turn for patrol; Embry didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. _Is there a problem?_

_Holyshit, ohmyfuckingod, Sam, Sam! SAM!_

Embry's use of excessive expletives must've worried Sam because he immediately decided he was coming to find Embry. As he ran across town, all Embry could do was whine and roll around. He was rustling in the leaves and dirt, trying to scrub his brain but it wouldn't work. He kept seeing Jezzie come through the store and he couldn't help the feelings either. As Sam could see and feel what was happening in his head he slowed down, realizing that no major catastrophe was actually happening to Embry.

Embry? he asked cautiously.

_Sam, I think I imprinted!_

Cue the laughter.
Embry was constantly falling into this trap of thinking he'd imprinted. The issue was that every female he saw who he found even remotely attractive made him wonder... And he knew from the guys you got this pulling feeling in your gut when it finally happened. But he couldn't tell the difference between the pulling feeling in his gut and the pulling feeling in his pants. He couldn't tell the difference between hormones and imprinting. It was either that or he felt some emotion in a twenty mile radius of sympathy or kindness or compassion and he was convinced he was bonded to a girl forever.

It was a problem.

This actually hadn't happened to him in a month or two because Paul swore on pain of death that if he had to come out and help the others calm Embry's needlessly strung out woofy ass from a fake imprint high, that Paul would gut him and mount Embry over his mantle.

Embry was pretty sure Paul didn't have a mantle, but he wouldn't put it past Paul to beat the crap out of him.

Plus Jared, Sam, Paul, Quil and Jake wouldn't stop laughing at him every time it happened. Because it wasn't embarrassing enough to realize he just pulled another false alarm. All the guys that have had the experience got to take turns enjoying the comic relief.

*Embry, you haven't imprinted.* Sam repeated to him in his exhausted and methodic fashion. Embry could tell he'd stopped and resumed patrol. He wasn't coming after him anymore because there was no reason.

*Are you sure? I can't get her out of my head!*

*I'm sure. If you'd imprinted, you'd know about it. Trust me.*

*Ugh,* Embry growled in frustration. *This is so freaking lame. Can't this chick just show up in my life already so we can stop the madness!*

*Embry, Sam interrupted his diatribe with a pensive thought. Have you ever considered that maybe you won't imprint?*

The cacophony of Embry's mind came to a grinding halt right there and finally the only thing he could hear were the natural noises around him.

*What?*

What did Sam *mean* maybe he wouldn't imprint? Was that some kind of sick joke? After Embry turned sixteen, his whole world got put through a blender and he learned life by a whole new set of rules – spoken and unspoken. One of those unspoken rules was that there was some girl out there who was his perfect match and some day he would see her and fall head over heels. But until then he had to wait.

He had the new rules down pat. And *now* they were gonna change them again.

*What are you talking about, Sam. It's only a matter of time, right?*

*Who knows, Embry,* he sighed. And Embry could tell that Sam was leveling with him. He didn't have his Alpha voice on. This idea must've been new to him too, because they were just talking. It was kind of weird.

*I mean, imprinting makes sense from a biological standpoint, but maybe it's like a last ditch attempt.*
What do you mean? Embry didn't know where he was going with this.

I mean, that imprinting for the wolves is not a way to put a bulls eye on the perfect mate – maybe the legends were only part right. Think about it, Embry could hear his mental shrug, Jared barely knew Kim's name. Emily and I... And Quil and Jake's imprints don't really make that kinda sense. And Rachel's gay and her and Paul are just relentless nutcases. We're batting 2 for 3 on potentially mated imprint pairs. Biology is usually more efficient than that. Especially for reproduction.

Yeah, Embry agreed. I get it.

Exactly, Sam continued. Mating is a legends thing. We don't know who we'll imprint on.

So are you telling me I'm going to imprint on some totally off-the-wall chick?

Maybe. You never know. But there's also a possibility that you can pick your own mate. None of the imprinters would've picked their imprintees, but maybe you – or even Seth or Collin or Brady or Leah or any of the other guys – can do the picking yourself. If you can find the right person on your own, you won't need to imprint.

So what am I supposed to do about Jezzie?

You like her right? Ask her out, take her on a date. Be her friend. Do the normal teenage thing.

I don't know how to be a normal teenager... Embry offered pathetically, rolling back over in the pine needles. And how am I supposed to explain everything that's so bizarre about my life?

Ha! Sam laughed. If she cares enough about you, it won't be a problem. Further down the line... we'll see how it goes. As far as being a normal teenager goes, I'm sure she can help you with that. You've already done wonders to impress her, I'm sure. Embry whined as Sam watched his word vomit at the register earlier.

Shouldn't you be getting back to work?

Embry returned an hour later. Mr. Carlson was out back so he didn't think he knew Embry was gone so long. The old guy looked him up and down on the way back to his office. "Did you change your clothes, boy?"

"No," of course not. Because it's not like he had a mental break just outside the store and shredded his clothes as he transformed into a giant dog.

What are you talking about you crazy old man? Get off the dope.

Embry just rolled his eyes and Mr. Carlson went to his office.

True to her word, Jezzie was in fact back that evening. She walked in at about seven o'clock, no longer dressed for a run but simply in jeans and a Harvard sweatshirt on. Either this girl was a damn genius or she'd just moved clear across the country. Or both.

She offered Embry a wave as she picked up a hand basket on the way in. "Anything I can help you with, Miss?" he asked from his spot behind the counter.

She quirked a brow at his formality, "I think I'm all set, sir. But I'll be sure to let you know." She picked a loaf of bread off the shelf and continued talking. "You haven't happened to have seen a tall and awkward dark-haired guy around have you? I met him in here earlier."
"Nope, sorry," Embry grinned. "The only dark-haired guy I know is a blueprint for awesomeness and good looks."

"Hm… too bad. He was really nice. I was hoping to talk to him again." Embry didn't know what kind of game she was playing with him, but it wasn't so bad. Though he did resent being called 'awkward'. She finished her shopping and approached the counter.

Embry only just began ringing up her basket of bread and salt and pepper and butter and napkins, when her phone rang. She pulled it out of her pocket. She looked at the caller ID and took a deep breath before answering it.

"JEZEBEL!"

"Dad?" she held the phone at an arms length. She took the few steps to the door, obviously trying to be polite in the most gritty, run-down joint the town had to offer. She came back a moment later, flashed Embry her index finger to indicate that he should wait. She then proceeded to the cooler, pulled out two gallons of milk and came back. "These, too."

"That's a lot of milk," Embry offered.

She leaned on the counter and rested her head in her hand. "I know. My father, bless his heart, is a bit bumbling. He stood down wind of his bear-spray experiment."

Embry couldn't help the grimace. That would hurt. A lot. "Well, I don't want to keep you then," he replied. "That sounds like a pretty painful accident."

"It's not the first. My dad's eccentric. Since we're new in town and my dad hasn't met many new people yet, he's been doing lots of experiments. He likes to tinker."

"New?" Embry totally just found himself a segue. Score for Embry, on the rebound!

"Yep," she popped the 'p' as took her bags. "Just moved in early this week."

"Well, maybe I can show you around sometime. Don't want you thinking this is the best spot in town."

She flashed her shining smile at him and her eyes lit up. "I'd like that."

Maybe being a normal teenager wasn't so hard after all.

Chapter End Notes

That there is my mental image of Jezzie.
Who's Seen Jezebel?

Thursday, October 12, 2006

Ring! Ring! Ring!

Three rings followed by a shouted "HELLO!" Whoever the hell picked up scared the ever-living crap out of Embry. He seized up and almost dropped the phone. The shouting was startling enough when one was human, the hypersensitive doggy ears really didn't appreciate the bamboozled old man on the other end.

Or at least that's what it sounded like.

Before Embry even had a chance to respond, the shouting began again. A series of hello's and colorful cursing. He'd never heard someone curse to the tune of something like 'tulips and daisies'. What did that even mean?

At any rate, Embry managed to hold onto the phone but it sounded like the person on the other end did not. There was some fumbling and grunting and crashing.

"Hi, is Jezzie there? Can I talk to Jezzie?" Embry repeated this about three times before the cosmos aligned and the name 'Jezzie', the phone and the man's ear all met together at the same time.

"Jezzie?" the man asked.

"Yes! Please..." anything to stop the racket. There was a harrumph and a series of significantly quieter shufflings.

"Hello?" the voice that ruffled over the receiver was way more relaxed - and possibly more confused - than the one that had picked up.

"Jezzie?" Embry asked. Praise the Lord, finally. "Hi! It's Embry. From the store, remember?" He really hoped she did. Otherwise this was about to get really uncomfortable.

"Of course I remember you, Embry," she replied like her forgetting the random convenient store clerk was beyond the pale of human decency. "You're one of five people I know on this whole seaboard."

"Five? No way. You get around quick, huh?" Oh god... he couldn't believe he just said that. Maybe he should just hang up now.

Jezzie actually laughed good-naturedly though, and didn't read too much into his unintentionally crude attempt at humor. "Sure, there's Trisha the real estate agent who sold us the place, Tracey Randall from Peninsula College who filed all my paper work, Dr. Cullen in Forks Community Hospital ER, my dad and - of course - you."

Despite the calming tone of Jezzie's voice Embry's teeth ground instinctively at Cullen's name. Even if it was the one he disliked the least. But Jezzie didn't know...

"What are you doing in the ER?"
"Remember all that milk I bought?"

Oh yeah… her dad had mased himself. Between that and the man's phone skills Embry developed some really interesting conceptions about this man. Mostly involving a four-foot long beard. "Oh your Dad, that's right. He okay?"

"He'll be fine. I just figured I'd better be safe than sorry." There was a brief lull in the conversation and Jezzie spoke again. "So was there something I could do for you Embry?"

*Oh. Duh.* The whole reason he'd called in the first place. Shit, this girl was going to think he was completely stupid. Or inbred.

"Yeah, well, considering you're new in town and you admittedly know a grand total of four people in the area with no genetic ties to you, I figured I'd offer to show you around. I mean it's a pretty small area, but maybe we can show you better stores than mine. Maybe even push your acquaintance numbers to the double digits."

"Really?" her chime of a voice was breathy with excitement. Geez... Embry didn't realize she'd be so jacked about driving around Forks. Girl really *didn't* know anyone…

"Of course. Consider me the welcoming committee and tour guide."

"I would love that, Embry! I really would! How's day after next? Saturday? I imagine you have school tomorrow and I have to sort some more of the house before I'll be lucky enough to reach the front door."

"Saturday works."

"Great! Swing by any time. I'm the old yellow colonial on the main road inbound. Just after the town line." She chattered quickly letting him know where exactly she lived. He was surprised she didn't give him the latitude and longitude as well.

"Oh and Embry? Random question but how'd you get my phone number?"

*Busted.*

"You live in the Old Gage house, right?"

"Yeah..."

"It's the only house in Forks that's been for sale in the past two years," he supplied. "I used to know Old Mrs. Gage; mowed her lawn and stuff. I hazarded a guess. I also know where you live. Not like that's creepy at all."

"Oh," Jezzie said like that explanation was perfectly fine. Like he didn't possess mad stalker potential. "Just curious. Like I said, stop by anytime Saturday morning."

From his brief conversation with Jezzie, Embry realized that she was one of those individuals that took people for face value. Like that phone number question? She didn't think or even sound remotely like she thought Embry was a total creep. She just accepted it and moved on.

He wondered how she survived like that up until this point.

Also, he guessed she was either really lonely or got really excited about the simplest of things. Like tours of Forks. If it was the latter, she'd probably flip out on Saturday if he offered to show her La
Push too. He didn't know for certain, he was just assuming. All he did know for certain was that he was really way too excited for Saturday and had no idea how to hide it from the others.

**Saturday, October 14, 2006**

Embry managed – he was sure by the grace of God alone – to avoid thinking concretely of his upcoming Saturday with Jezzie. No, it wasn't a date; he was just showing her around. However, he didn't think he would be upset if he did one day get a date with Jezzie.

But Jezzie was an outsider; and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Embry knew the repercussions of bringing a non-imprinted person into his life and his Pack were bound to fuck a few things up. Leah was sure to beat the ever-living crap out of him. This is why he spent the majority of his patrol shift on Friday alternating between humming the tune to the Fanta advertisements and replaying the E-Trade baby commercials. At least Leah and Jake didn't think it was too odd that go-go women and talking babies kept dancing through his head with soda, though they did find it obnoxious beyond belief.

Embry was mulling over futures and how he could possibly broach the topic of being emotionally invested – even as a friend – with someone who wasn't Pack. As he drove the leisurely route to Jezzie's house that Saturday, he felt that even having to plan something like that was pretty awful. It wasn't that the Pack wasn't accepting of new people – in fact, Quil would make friends with a moss-covered log if given the chance – no, that wasn't the issue. It was that the Pack was so entrenched in the dysfunctional imprint, that each of them was wary of befriending anyone of the opposite sex. Between Leah and Sam, Quil imprinting on a child, and Jake with a child that wasn't even his species, well they were entitled to some wariness...

And that didn't even cover the council...

But, as Embry listened to the diesel engine growl at a complacent 45MPH, he couldn't help but remember what Sam and he had thought about that first day he met Jezzie, during his most recent imprint-false-alarm-panic-attack moment of hysteria. What if he wasn't going to imprint? It's not like he could ask that of someone and get a definitive answer. This was, unfortunately, not a Google-worthy situation.

The way Embry saw it, Sam was probably right. Imprinting was to produce better wolves. The vampire population had been in such flux in recent months that not only had middle schoolers started phasing, but the already phased wolves had begun imprinting. Imprinting, perhaps, in an attempt to prepare for the creation of more wolves as the gene realized it was running out of of-age bloodline descendants. A phasing in anyone younger than thirteen, would probably be lethal. And the gene was not designed to be fatal to the carrier.

Sam, Quil and Jake had mapped out the genealogy of almost the entirety of La Push. There were no more descendants of the original Pack left in town above the age of thirteen. Phasing had almost killed Brady and Collin and after they phased back human the first time, their systems went into overdrive growing and morphing at hyper speed. In an odd turn of events, neither could phase wolf again until the human growth spurt finished.

"Probably so you don't die," Paul had said, rather bluntly. He'd startled the two young wolves a bit, but he was also most likely correct. Biological pups didn't stand a chance to defend the res; it was bad enough that they were newbie's in mentality, they didn't need to be dealing with physical maturation as well. So they had to wait it out.

Ergo, the imprinting. The gene, in attempt to not kill its victims, began the imprint cycle. Sure, Claire
and Ness were hardly ready to start popping out kids, but Kim, Rachel and Emily were certainly biologically mature and ready. The wolfy gene had set itself up nicely for the production of at least three more generations of wolves. The current Pack, the offspring from of-age imprints, and eventually the offspring of the child imprints. Gross? Yes, Embry thought emphatically. Pragmatic? Definitely.

But Sam was right: there was a lot they didn't know. There had been a few generations between the last Pack and the current one. True knowledge had been lost in favor of legends during the interim. It didn't help that the Quileute people had almost been wiped out with the arrival of Europeans. Yeah, the culture death certainly didn't help matters.

But maybe – just maybe – Embry had been able to catch a lull. Embry laughed half-heartedly thinking that hell would freezie over before the world actually cut him a break on something. But there was a first time for everything, right? The vampire population in Forks was steady, now that Bella had changed. The nomads and the newborn army had been offed quite cleanly. Maybe this lull was just the opportunity Embry needed to find his mate on his own terms; without pressing need, but just because he liked a girl.

What a concept, he scoffed as he pulled into the drive of the Old Gage house. The gravel was thankfully even. He imagined the place had been polished up a bit for its sale, though Embry only knew the Gage driveway from behind the blade of a plow as he rattled around enough to bump his head off the ceiling of the truck and rupture a kidney.

The old colonial was nice, a bit beat up, but still a good solid home. Embry had liked it, had liked helping old Mrs. Gage with her snow and her lawn mowing and cleaning out her gutters. She was nice and always made him feel like he was some superhuman teenager because he could carry in four bags of groceries at once. Granted, they were full of cat food…

All too quickly, Embry was torn out of his calm inner ramblings by a whole crap ton of sensory overload. He smelled something distinctly dead, as he climbed the steps to the porch and knocked on the screen door. However, given the insane amount of boxes and furniture still on the porch, that might've been possible.

The smell of death, was quickly accompanied by the barreling of a four legged somebody, who scratched to a bellowing, growling, barking halt on the other side of the screen. Embry wasn't afraid of the black and tan coonhound, but he didn't want to have to kill someone's dog either. Then, Jezzie came running around the corner of the hall. She carefully side-stepped the floppy-eared animal. "Hush, Archie," she muttered as she batted him on the nose. Embry's nose wrinkled in annoyance, he hated when that happened. The dog growled but receded further down the hall as Jezzie swung the door open. She stood there, covered in organ and tissue matter up to her elbows and Embry looked a tad horrified.

"Jezzie," he said. "You smell like death…"

She carefully side-stepped the floppy-eared animal. "Hush, Archie," she muttered as she batted him on the nose. Embry's nose wrinkled in annoyance, he hated when that happened. The dog growled but receded further down the hall as Jezzie swung the door open. She stood there, covered in organ and tissue matter up to her elbows and Embry looked a tad horrified.

"Jezzie," he said. "You smell like death…"

She looked confused for a moment before she followed his gaze to her hands. "Oh! It's dinner, Embry. Venison? Not death. Though, I guess it's both… Come on in," she waved her animal covered hand at him. Judging by the gun closet Embry saw half packed in her living room and the smell of death and blood, Jezzie had shot that deer herself. Or maybe her crazy dad.

If Embry thought that was unexpected, he almost swallowed his tongue when he turned to follow Jezzie in the house and saw the craziest most colorful half sleeve tattoo crawling from Jezzie's elbow up past her shoulder. He sure as hell didn't see that one coming.
What was he getting himself into?

Jezzie found Embry to be slightly adorably overwhelmed on her front porch. In retrospect, she should've warned him that her house was well-intentioned chaos even on the best days, never mind when she was in the process of moving. Embry was taking it all in stride though, and for that she applauded him. But did he just... "Embry, did you just growl at my dog?"

"He started it," Embry mumbled in response. Jezzie just laughed and continued to the kitchen at the end of the hall at the back of the house.

Archie didn't think it was very funny. Archie was having enough trouble with all these new scents. He also found it highly upsetting that Jezzie would bring home new dog friends without him knowing. Embry's wolf had been nice enough so long as Archie kept his head down. Archie saw no reason to be submissive to the new dog in his own house.

"Archimedes," Jezzie spun on her heel as she heard his last irritable grumble. "Now you be nice to our guest or you can wait in the yard."

Archie chuffed once and resumed his post, laying in the dim sunlight in the front room.

"So this is the scene of the crime," Embry noted as he stepped into the old kitchen.

"Yes," Jezzie said, "It's where I take care of all my victims. You can have seat or help yourself to something while I finish up with this one."

"Psha," Embry scoffed. "Let you fatten me up before you sacrifice me? Please, you act like this is my first serial killer abduction."

Embry collapsed in a sturdy chair at Jezzie's huge washboard kitchen table and watched as she tended to the final prep of her meat.

"Really," she insisted, "I just made some scones and I'm afraid I over estimated quantity sizes. You're more than welcome." She nodded her head in the direction of a foil-covered platter on the table.

"Are you sure?" Embry asked as he lifted a small edge of foil. "Because I'm pretty sure I'm more than well equipped to take care of excessive quantities of food."

"Have at it," she smiled. "I've been trying to learn how to bake – I'm pretty terrible at it – but Lord knows my dad doesn't need the sugar."

Embry was through his second scone when he planned on pausing to ask Jezzie to move in with him and never leave. That wasn't too caveman of him, right? He would let her out for sunlight and stuff...

There was an almighty racket and bang from the opposite end of the kitchen and Embry was blown slightly back before he sprang up to his feet, ready to protect Jezzie and her temperamental Archie from the wild boar apparently in her house.

Instead, Embry was greeted by a short wizened older man. He had kicked the swinging door in, to no surprise of Jezzie's – apparently her father constantly sounded like a derailed freight train – and hobbled his way towards Jezzie. He was stooped, maybe a few finger breadths shorter than Jezzie's 5'6". He had the beard – just as Embry had imagined – though it was gray and gristly and significantly shorter, only covering his jawline. He donned a well-worn cap and his suspenders kept his gray slacks from receding too far down his skinny frame. Despite his frail appearance, he was rather spry – seeming to hop from one foot to the next with each step. That, in addition to the man's obvious gift for dramatic entrances and ear-splitting noise, led Embry to believe he was not frail at
"Jezzie," he shouted as he trotted towards Jezzie at the counter. "Have you seen my tool belt? The old leather one. I can't stand none of this new fangled nylon shit. Gives me a rash."

"It should be on the porch, Dad. I think we packed all your work stuff in the same box, right?"

"Excellent, m'dear. Most excellent," Jezzie's dad turned to leave when his spin gave him a glance of the startled youth in his kitchen. Jezzie's dad drew himself up to his full – yet still seemingly hunched – height and placed his hands on his hips. He observed Embry appraisingly with narrowed eyes.

"And who's this strapping young lad?"

Embry had calmed in the time since the door had been nearly kicked in, and remembered himself enough to manage an introduction.

"Embry Call, sir," he extended his hand and Jezzie's dad shook it vigorously.

"Alfred Sullivan, but you can call me Al. Sir is my father."

"It's a pleasure… Al," Embry tried the name on for size as he reclaimed his seat. Al, being metaphorically much larger than his name, was a very dominant if not physically huge individual and Embry could feel that. In his own peculiar way, Al demanded respect, especially in his own home.

"You're damn right it is," Al nodded vehemently and Embry tried not to laugh. "So what brings you round these parts?"

"I met Jezzie yesterday in La Push. Figured I'd show her around since she stumbled on the sketchiest store around."

"From the res, are yeh? I spent my teen years here on the Olympic peninsula working a boat run by a Quileute and Makah pair. Great couple of guys; taught me a lot about fishing, including the key to keeping raw fish from coming back up." Jezzie made a gagging noise from the oven as she slid the venison in.

"It's all about breathing through the mouth," Al murmured around a mouthful of scone, while elbowing Embry in the ribs. "So, what brings you to our humble abode, Mr. Call?"

"Embry's going to show my around town, Dad. He's the one who sold us all that milk."

"Ah!" Al gasped. "So he was? Bless your heart, my dear boy. I thought my eyes were going to melt out of my head before Jezzie got home."

"Yeah, that sounds pretty painful. I have a friend who got skunked in the face, once. Was pretty terrible. His older sister ended up thinking we did it on purpose, almost skinned us alive, but milk did the trick."

The next five minutes were passed in rather companionable conversation as Jezzie finished picking up her mess and Embry got more comfortable with the fact that Al Sullivan probably wasn't going to try and kill him. Shapeshifter or not, Al scared the crap out of Embry. Finally, Al had propped himself up and hobbled back from whence he came, murmuring about rain slickers and needle nose pliers and Jezzie reminded him to take the venison out of the oven when the timer went off.

"Sorry about that," Jezzie said with a wrinkled nose as she plopped down in a chair next to him. Embry thought she was cute when she wrinkled her nose. It just emphasized her freckles.
"So am I decent for a jaunt about Forks?" she asked, glancing down at her own tank top and flouncy skirt.

"I think as long as you wear shoes, flower child." Embry grinned at her bare toes as she tossed a scone at his face.

"Your ride or mine?" Embry inquired as he and a fully shoe-clad Jezzie stood in her hallway. She had groused a bit about shoes being overrated.

"You're showing me around," Jezzie replied. "The least I can do is foot for transport."

"Sweet," Embry replied. "I would have steered you in that direction anyways; with my truck you might not have any decent kidney function left after a ride around town."

"Suspension much?" Jezzie grimaced as she rifled through the hall table's drawer contents. "Let's see," she mumbled to herself, "Keys… wallet…"

She stood there for a few moments, knowing she was forgetting something. She clicked her fingers against the tabletop and Embry noticed her look of intense concentration. "Phone?" he offered, aiming for the most obvious.

"Phone!" she agreed with a snap of her fingers. "Thanks! I have the worst memory," she ran back into the kitchen and was back a moment later. "Phone, keys, wallet. Okay, anything else I can live without. Let's start this tour shall we?"

Jezzie hopped lithely off the porch and Embry followed her around the side of the house where a 90s era Jeep Grand Wagoneer and a similar aged Ford were parked. Embry didn't know what to say about the white and wood paneled beast Jezzie trotted up to.

"Emmett would keel over if he saw this," he muttered to himself as he slid in. Granted, the beast was old, but in decent condition. It was obviously well cared for, didn't smell funny or make weird noises. And even though Jezzie had just moved from God knows where, the car was free of junk and trash. The only thing in it appeared to be a sports bag and a backpack in the back seat.

"Who's Emmett?" Jezzie asked as she turned the engine over and backed out of the yard and headed for the street. Damn, girl had good hearing.

"Someone I know. He's a Jeep buff. Has one of his own. It's like a Jeep on 'roid rage."

"Ha!" Jezzie barked a laugh. "Well this is like a Jeep on bong hits, so I'm sure he'd be thrilled to see it. So is this someone I'm going to meet?" Jezzie asked as she pulled on to the main road towards town.

Embry suppressed the growl that threatened to rumble from his chest. "Probably not," he confessed truthfully. Jezzie would get enough exposure to Carlisle in town or in the ER; the rest of the 'family' was holed up in their Forks home and as far as anyone knew – with the exception of the Pack and Charlie – the Cullen kids and Bella Swan were all 'at college'. But in reality, they just stayed in their ridiculous mansion most of the time.

Embry didn't know how they hacked it. He couldn't stay at home or inside all day – especially if he was awake twenty-four-seven? He'd go stir crazy.

No, there was no way he was letting Jezzie in on that little Forks secret. It was the Pack's job to keep humans as far away from that as was realistically possible. Allies or not, they were still born and bred predators and the Pack still had a job to do.
"He's away at school," Embry explained following Jezzie's startled look from his initially rough response. "Somewhere clear across the country, I guess."

"That's all right," Jezzie nodded. "Wouldn't want to offend his sensibilities with the stoner Jeep. So where to, almighty tour guide? You're navigating this vessel."

Embry took her in one large loop around what was known as 'Forks'. She was amazed that what she had seen on her way in and the few times around town really was all of it. Embry learned that she was from Detroit and before that Boston and that probably had a lot to do with why she thought Forks was nearly nonexistent as a municipality. Because it pretty much was.

He showed her a far safer – albeit further away – place for her to buy her food. He assumed she'd enjoy the better store, but she confessed to being terrified by all the moms and their SUVs when they finally returned to her Jeep. Embry reminded her she at least had a better chance of not being sold meth while she was in this store. That she conceded to.

They stopped at Tilicum Park where Embry showed Jezzie what he called 'one huge old train' – a very old locomotive with an unusual crankshaft setup. It was one of the historical attractions in Forks. Embry was pleasantly surprised when Jezzie listened through his whole explanation of how it functioned differently than other engines. She actually seemed interested.

Jezzie got a kick out of the tiny Forks cemetery and airport. She recognized Forks Community Hospital when they drove by and Embry insisted on showing her the best places to eat in town, because that was really all that was important. They stopped at Sully's Drive-In for lunch and Jezzie – who had remained mostly quiet and listening – finally voiced some of her musings over her bacon burger.

"Does it ever stop raining here?"

"Absolutely not. How do you think we Quileutes grow like weeds?"

"This place isn't so bad. I mean, I'm kinda used to crazy weather, just not this kind. Detroit was a different kind of crazy."

"Isn't it really cold there?" Embry asked as he finished his second burger. He'd ordered four and Jezzie gave him a curious look, but didn't say anything.

"In the winter? Wicked," she nodded, letting her east coast slip through. "We get lake-effect snow. There won't be snow predicted in the forecast, it just comes off the Lake – because it's so big – with no warning. Bury the city with a foot of snow in a half hour. It's insane. New England was the same way. They just used to get these beastly storms that would have the whole state going underground for days."

"Well, I don't know how you feel about snow, but we don't get too much here. It never gets quite cold enough for it to freeze into snow. It's mostly ice and rain."

Jezzie thought that over as she picked up a dropped piece of bacon. "I think I'm okay with that for now. That means I don't have to shovel."

The two paid for their food and when inside the Jeep, Jezzie spoke. "So that's all of Forks?"

"Pretty much. You doing anything the rest of the day?"

Jezzie offered a one-shoulder shrug as she continued to stare out the windshield. "Probably just unpack or something." She was quiet for a bit as she stared and Embry found himself drawn to her
tattoo-covered arm. With her as the driver, he had a perfect view of her art and was quite amazed. It was black and blue and green and pink and yellow. Graying waves covered the whole expanse between her elbow and shoulder, fading in and out providing depth to the image at perfect intervals. Over top were laid brightly colored flowers, pepperling the water's surface and bleeding in and out of the waves like they might've been floating on top.

"My dad's a fisherman," Jezzie spoke quietly. "Or now a mechanic, an engineer. The ocean's been such a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Not only have I lived on it, but it's literally the thing that gives us life, it's where our family's income has always come from."

"That your only one?" he asked.

She smirked. She liked watching people's reactions to her tattoo. Girls usually wanted to know the story, boys thought it was hot or scary and the mainstream 45+ crowd just didn't know what to say… even though some of them had ink of their own. "Nope," she grinned.

"Really?"

She nodded. "This whole outfit is an illusion, it's really just a full body tattoo."

Embry rolled his eyes. "Hilarious."

She glanced up to meet Embry's eyes, a smile playing on her lips. "It's my first one. I got it about a year ago," she nodded towards her arm. "Just as a way to celebrate and remind me where I come from."

"Well, in that case – if you're not opposed to maybe putting off your unpacking plans for a few more hours – I have something pretty cool to show you."

She smiled in response and put the Jeep in gear. "All right, you're the second mate. Where to?"

Embry grinned at her enthusiasm. "Take a right out of here and just keep going."

The road to La Push was long and mostly isolated. It was a single thoroughfare; one lane per direction of traffic and the trees had this habit of encroaching and arching over the roadway like flying buttresses. After driving down this lonely stretch for a solid seven minutes, Jezzie spoke.

"This has all the makings of a horror movie," she commented as she glanced around. "Is it really all forest around here?"

"Pretty much. Yeah. We're surrounded by national park on all sides. It's a big hiking and camping destination. This is the 110. It's about the only direct way to the res."

"Oo, oo, are we going to La Push?" Jezzie perked up at his giveaway. Embry hadn't mentioned previously where he was taking her. She just let him lead her blind into unfamiliar territory. She was awfully trusting for someone out of a big bad city like Detroit. Then again, she might also be able to drop Embry like a hot potato if needed. He thought that was quite possible.

"Yes, I'm gonna show you La Push," Embry replied.

As they rattled into town, Jezzie gawked at the shoreline. "You guys are like… a geological time warp." She glanced towards the islands out further in the sound and the craggy beach cliffs. "It's like Jurassic Park here…"

"Yeah, Jezzie. Jurassic Park. Good observation. We Natives like to capitalize on the earthy
surroundings for tourist reasons. That right there down the coast is our resort area. It's got a ton of cabins and motels and bits of campground. A lot of the local kids work there…"

"That's one of the many seafood places. I hope you like fish because we have a lot of it."

"My father's a fisherman," she smiled, continuing to cruise slowly.

"If you take a right down here, there's Lonesome Creek Store – my mom runs the place. Further up is chartered fishing trips and the marina."

"Wow…" Jezzie marveled. "You guys have quite the setup here. Mind if I pull off?" she asked indicating a line of parking spots along the water. Embry nodded and the two pulled out of the small drip of traffic. "How many people live in La Push?" she asked looking out to the waves as she bunched her knees up.

"Maybe four hundred."

"Good lord…"

"It feels like more during tourist season," Embry acceded. "It's good and bad. I know everyone, but then again, I know everyone."

"That is definitely a double-edged sword," Jezzie agreed. "Can I ask you a question, Embry?"

"You just did."

"Hardy, har. That's funny. I just… don't want it to come out wrong. Actually, I guess it's not a question. It's an observation."

"Jezzie," Embry said glancing at her intentionally. "The Indian boy has heard it all. Lay it on me."

"When I was driving here, I passed through another reservation further south. I got really, really lost in the tail end of my drive. The Quinault Reservation? It looked… terrible in spots. I wasn't necessarily expecting that here. I know it's different everywhere, but this is just so much different."

The res further south shared a lot of similarities – similar homes, similar municipal set up; they were both right on the water. But the big difference was in the ecological carnage.

"Yeah," Embry nodded. "I think the top of any Pacific Indian's hit list – after the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the IRS – is probably those damn loggers. They're not so suave in their techniques. And they're not – in so many words – actually allowed on reservation land most times. The loopholes they find in Indian-related law are pretty ridiculous."

Jezzie nodded thinking over Embry's response. "It was really too bad; I'm glad you guys seem to have been spared so far."

"We're small. We're better off than some. So, Little Red," he tugged a lock of her red hair, "You said you love the sea – wanna take a gander?"

Jezzie grinned, flashing her bright smile and hopped out of the Jeep without further invite.

Jezzie actually had about a thousand questions for Embry about the beach and all the islands she could see. She eventually started in on the marina and the kind of fishing that was local. Leave it to seafarer to get to fishing stories eventually.

"Well, well. Who've we got here?" Embry cringed inwardly – maybe just a little – when he heard the
voice of his best friend behind him. He hadn't heard him coming – he'd been distracted by Jezzie's million questions. He turned and thanked god that at least Quil and Sam were fully clothed. Or as fully clothed as the Pack got. He really didn't want to explain the naked Indian problem that was blanketing La Push.

"Sorry," Sam shrugged. "I couldn't stop him."

"Quil," Embry replied. "Sam… what a surprise. Jezzie, this is Quil," Embry indicated the smaller guy, "and Sam," he pointed to the significantly larger and scarier looking one.

Jezzie nodded and waved, feeling only slightly intimidated being surrounded by large men. "Hi. I'm Jezzie Sullivan. I'm new to the area."

"Where from?" Sam asked. It was an innocent enough question, but his face didn't seem particularly friendly. But she decided not to be intimidated by people she barely knew. Particularly an overgrown boy.

"Detroit," she nodded.

Quil whistled long. "Geez… the red headed Sullivan from Detroit? Let's not cross her."

"Yeah. Fightin' Irish and all that. But I left of my own free will. Not too many 'No Irish need apply' signs left it that city, but plenty of taunting the white girl. Maybe we can sit down sometime and swap stories of our mutual minority oppression?"

For a moment Quil and Sam just looked at her and she wondered if she'd been too forward. Then Quil let out a peel of laughter that had him bent over in moments.

"Oh, she's great," Sam smiled, which made Jezzie feel better.

"Can we keep her?" Quil asked. Embry was only shaking his head with a hand covering his face.

"Well, Detroit," Quil continued, "if you wanna join us racial rejects, we're gonna be hanging out here on Wednesday night. Feel free to stop by and meet some more people. Don't want you thinking Embry here is all we have to offer the world."

Quil slung his arm over his friend's shoulder and smiled good-naturedly; Embry slapped him in the back of the head but he seemed unfazed… "Yeah, I mean – what about good ol' Quil Ateara here? Interesting guy; we go way back. And man have I got plenty of embarrassing stories to share with you on the ride home."

Jezzie bit down on her lip to keep from laughing as Sam reached out to pull Quil back towards him. "All right, Rico Suave. We got work to do. C'mon. It was good to meet you Jezzie." Sam nodded in Jezzie's direction and the two left as quickly as they'd come.

Jezzie quirked an eyebrow at Embry. "Your friends?" she smiled.

"Yeah," he affirmed as he looked at the pebbly beach.

"I like them," she said decidedly as she plopped down on the rocks beneath her.

"Well, that's good… they like you too. They have a weird way of showing affection."

"My friends back in Detroit were weird like that, too," she smiled up at him, squinting into the rare Pacific sun. "It's okay."
"One weird group to another. Guess it's fate, huh?" Embry sat down beside Jezzie's laid out form.

"Fate?" she laughed. "What a crock that is..."

"Not a fan?" Embry ventured. He could totally level with Jezzie on that one. He was not a fan of fate lately either.

"No, I just don't believe in it."

"Really?" Embry replied skeptically. Weren't girls supposed to be all about fate and destiny and all that everything-happens-for-a-reason crap?

"No way," Jezzie continued. "Fate is just a cop out for people that don't want to take charge of their own future, their own lives. You can't control everything, but you can control a lot."

"I think some things are just inevitable," Embry mused. He was pretty sure there was no way that he could have avoided becoming Pack. Unfortunately he couldn't wield that argument.

"Definitely not," she giggled. Her laughter went further at his puzzled expression. She rolled over on to her stomach and propped herself up on her elbows. "Okay, well some stuff," she ceded. "The sun will probably rise tomorrow and it'll probably be rainy here and it'll probably be hot in the Sahara. But things involving people?" she shrugged. "I dunno. Almost everything around us is a product of the human mind. A conscious decision to act or do or invent. So it logically follows that the human mind has the capacity to undo it's own machinations if we try hard enough. Calling everything 'fate' is just cashing in your free will."

Embry was pretty sure he was in over his head at this point. This girl was going to philosophize about the meaning of life and the most prophetic he'd ever been was when realized that generic cereal was pretty much the same as brand name.

But he wasn't about to give up yet. At least he still (mostly) understood the words she was using. And she seemed to be enjoying the conversation.

"Well," Embry replied. "Some stuff is just biological, y'know? Some stuff can't be helped." Because if he had known about this wolf thing, he was pretty sure he would've tried to avoid it. Embry didn't get to pick his gene pool. Heck, he had a freaking half brother in his Pack! It would've been choice to grow up normal.

She pursed her lips in a funny little way at his point and glanced downwards. "Touché," she replied. "Like, I know what you mean," she began trying to find a way to sort out her thoughts. "You couldn't will away a terminal illness and you can't help who your parents are."

"Nope," he agreed.

"But," she continued, "I don't think fate is a viable excuse if you get sick or come from an unconventional family. I just think it shows a person who has given up. That makes me sad."

She was quiet for a while before continuing. "There's a lot people chalk up to the inevitable. But if a person wants something bad enough — to really break free of something they feel is thrust on them as 'fate' — and work at it, most people would really surprise themselves."

Embry was pretty sure Jezzie just mindfucked him. He thought she unintentionally gave him the Step 2 continuation of that talk Sam had with him in the woods that day he first met her. The whole time she'd been arguing against fate and the inevitable, the only thing Embry could think about was phasing and imprinting. Both seemed pretty damn unavoidable to him.
But he never thought about it in Jezzie's way. Rejecting what a perception of fate has given you?

"So," Embry clarified, "you're saying that if something happens to a person, even if it seems so huge and unchangeable, they can still work their way out of it?"

"It's with a shot. And if it doesn't work, it doesn't mean it's because it was meant to be. It just means that's the way it is for now. Things change. They always do."

No one in La Push had ever rejected being Pack. No one had refused the phase. No one had ever rejected an imprint either. Emily tried for a while, but no imprinter had ever attempted it. Was that possible? To reject the wolf or an imprint? To refuse so adamantly that you could just psyche yourself out of it?

"I'm sorry," Jezzie interrupted Embry's fiery pits of revelation. "Am I boring you? I get off on some of the strangest tangents sometimes," she explained with a dismissive hand. "Don't be afraid to snap me out of it. This is hardly decent smalltalk."

"No it's cool stuff to talk about. The future's important. Taking the bull by the horns and all that. Carpe diem." That's all Embry needed. He needed to stop worrying that fate would force an imprint on him and that if he wanted to be friends with Jezzie, he had to go after it. If he didn't want an imprint maybe it wouldn't happen. If Embry could make his own life happen - like Sam had said - the imprint became unnecessary. Cue second revelation; can I get an 'Amen'?"

"Amen," Jezzie sighed as she laid back again in the rare Pacific Northwest sun.

On the way out of town, Embry – just to make a point – stopped by another less creepy store than his own and showed Jezzie another place to buy her water and basic supplies. "You really don't want to see me ever, huh?" she noticed as they crossed the parking lot.

"Yeah, that's it," Embry nodded as he held the door open for her. He noticed she seemed thrown by the gesture. The same had happened when they went to get food and when he showed her the less-creepy Forks establishment. He wondered if guys didn't hold doors where she was from or if she thought it was an indicator of something.

He didn't have long to think about it before the two of them ran into Anna Ateara – who was more or less a female carbon copy of her brother. At least in regards to attitude. "Embry," she nodded in his direction as she yanked a loaf of bread of the shelf. "How goes it? Wait who's this?" she amended when she realized she didn't recognize Jezzie.

Anna appeared to be shopping in between activities. She had a bag slung over her shoulder and a distinctive sort of shirt Jezzie would recognize anywhere. "Rugby?" Jezzie asked pointing to the jersey.

"Yeah," Anna nodded. "I play rec. You?"

"I just moved here. I used to play, but that was a few years ago…"

"You should come check it out sometime," Anna smiled. "We also let adults come play, so it's mostly weekend stuff. Oh, I'm Anna by the way. Anna Ateara," Anna shifted her basket to her opposite arm and extended her hand.

"Jezzie Sullivan," she smiled. "And if I'm not much mistaken, I just met a relative of yours…" Jezzie glanced towards Embry for confirmation and he nodded.
"True fact. Just saw Quil on the beach a while ago."

"Really?" Anna asked. "You see him again, tell him to swing by the house after…” her eyes flickered to Jezzie momentarily. "Work. Mom says it's his turn to clean the house. Finally."

Before Anna stepped away to leave, she pulled a pen out of her hair. "Oh, here," and she scribbled her phone number on the back of an old coupon. "What do you play, by the way?"

"I'm a traditional scrum-half," Jezzie smiled. "Small, fast and agile. You?"

"Right wing," Anna replied, turning so Jezzie could see the large number '14' emblazoned on her back." Jezzie nodded in appreciation. Anna was definitely tall and sturdy – built like an Amazon, she could probably withstand breaking up tackles. Jezzie, however, could live without it. "Give me a call when you wanna swing by," she said before leaving for the checkout.

Jezzie chatted all the way home about rugby, Wednesday night and her intent to drive up to Forks Community Hospital to look for a job. Embry learned she was an EMT, which amazed him because she was so young. "How'd you manage that one?"

"I'm twenty-one Embry. I'm not that young. They offered an after school program to get first responder certified at the end of my junior year of high school. It was pretty much just a glorified first aid course," she waved her hand dismissively, "but I really liked it. When they started up a community action program with a local hospital to get kids interested in healthcare based career opportunities I begged my dad to let me do EMT training as an early birthday and Christmas gift after I turned eighteen when I was a senior."

"So you were an EMT before you graduated high school? That's pretty sick."

"Yeah. I really like it a lot. I like the challenge – never knowing what you're gonna get – and I like that it's on the move. I love medicine. I intern at a school in Boston during the summer, too. It's also decent money for a student. I know this is a small town, but I'm hoping whoever provides ambulance services for the area can give me a few full shifts a week."

"So you've been doing this for a full year?"

She nodded with a smile. "Two, actually. I had a year long 'apprenticeship' of sorts. I'm a little wary, though. I'm thinking the Clallam County use for ambulance and emergency services is slightly different than what I'm used to."

Embry glanced at her carefully. "What exactly are you used to?"

Jezzie shrugged. "I work second shift. That's three to eleven at night. So there's always the usual older person who fell, someone with chest pains, kids with split lips and broken bones from playing around outside, drunken college antics. But there's also a lot of violence related stuff."

"Are you telling me you don't think there are enough shank wounds here on the Olympic Peninsula for you?"

"No!" Jezzie insisted. "That's terrible! I mean, I don't want people getting hurt – even if it gives me a job – but I just wonder if your ambulance demographic around here is something I'm not familiar with."

"We still have plenty of kids splitting chins open and old ladies falling down, Jezzie. I'm sure you'll be fine. It'll just be way less exciting."
Before Embry left Jezzie's driveway that afternoon, with the promise to see her again on Wednesday, he advised her to bring an extra set of clothes. She eyed him warily, but nodded. "Just trust me."

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**Sunday, October 15, 2006**

"You went out with a boy?" the tall, curly haired girl on screen shrieked. Jezzie had been Skyping home to her friends faithfully since she'd left. Carla and Liz were her closest friends and the one's she knew she'd miss the most, but they were nothing but optimistic about her going to Washington; they didn't want her to be miserable about it.

"You're such a whore," Carla remarked as she dipped her head into the frame and edged Liz out of the way momentarily.

"Says the girl who's slapping on a face to go out on a school night," Jezzie retorted after a yawn. It was 7PM on a Sunday in Detroit and already 10PM in Forks. Liz and Carla had both worked all weekend and Sunday was the first they'd seen of each other since the previous week. "Who is this again? Roger?"

"Yes," Liz confirmed as Jezzie watched Carla Rivera buzz around in the background getting ready for her date. Carla was a little on the short side, but her ample curves made sure everyone knew she was not that young. She finally sat on the edge of Liz's bed and swept all of her long dark hair over her shoulder, brushing it to a smooth and impossible shine. Her coffee-tinted skin glowed with her expert make-up application and Jezzie knew she'd be out the door in about ten minutes or so.

Elizabeth Jones was every bit the physical antithesis of Jezzie. She was tall and dark as ebony. Her hair was ferociously curly and that – along with the height – seemed to help Liz ooze 'it girl' without even meaning to. She was too shy to ever want the attention. "So dish!" Liz insisted.

"It wasn't anything, you guys. I've been here for only a few days. I met him when I went for a run. I stopped to buy some water and he was working the cash register. He agreed to show me around."

"Girl," Carla crooned as she ducked back into the frame, inserting an earring into her right lobe. "You are way too naïve for your own good sometimes."

Liz just rolled her eyes, but insisted Jezzie keep going. "We ran into a couple of his friends, who seem like normal guys," she smiled with half an eyeroll. "They invited me to hang out with them on Wednesday. Like some kind of party on the beach or whatever. Should be fun."

"Honey," Carla called from out of the shot. "That's called a date."

"It's not a date, Carla," Jezzie sighed. "I'm bringing myself. It's called me making friends. Some of us are able to befriend specimens of the opposite sex."

"What a sad day that is," Carla remarked. There was a buzz and the tell tale jingle of Carla's ringtone and Jezzie heard her snatch it off the table. "That's him, I gotta go." Carla squatted down so Jezzie could see her fully. "All right, West Coaster, I gotta go. Love you so much. We can definitely debate your boy escapades later. But you have a good day at school tomorrow and I'll talk to you later!"


"My love to your Dad," Carla blew a kiss and was gone.

Liz wheeled back into the frame and waited to hear the door click closed behind her roommate before she spoke. "So, really? What's up, Jezzie?" Liz had – without a doubt – way more agility
when it came to talking to Jezzie about guys in general. Maybe it was because the two still viewed them as human beings. Jezzie was sure that Carla used boys for more selfish reasons.

"Well, Embry is the one I met at the store. And I met…” her mind flashed back to earlier at the beach. "Quil – apparently him and Embry go way back. And Sam, who was a little scary. He seemed older than the other two. And I don’t know what it is, Liz, but these boys are like… built." Jezzie even did her best Hulk impression with her arms.

"What do you mean?" she laughed.

"I'll have to get you guys some picture at this party," Jezzie insisted. "It's really hard to explain. They just look so much bigger and older than they should be."

"I've yet to hear of anyone OD'ing on washboard abs, Jezzie," Liz remarked as she leaned back in her computer chair. "All right, I've got homework to do and you've yawned ten times in as many minutes, dear. Talk to you tomorrow? I want to hear all about small-town America, okay? So make sure to make as many witty and disparaging observations as possible?"

"Night, Liz," she smiled. Jezzie went to bed that night with thoughts of old friends in Detroit, possible new friends in Washington and hoping that the cliché of starting at a new, close knit college was not nearly as bad as most 80s movies would have her believe.

Chapter End Notes

The glory of the Jeep Grand Wagoneer!
Monday, October 16, 2006

Monday - Jezzie's first day of school at Peninsula College – was… interesting. She had never ever been to a school so small. She was pretty sure there were more kids in her kindergarten class when she lived on the East coast, then were in her busiest class in Peninsula. Her Physics 101 class topped out at eighteen. *Eighteen?* Every other local community college in Michigan would’ve needed a 100+ person lecture hall for the same course.

She had arrived that day already knowing the secretary in Admissions, thanks to filing her paperwork personally already. Jezzie had arrived early enough that she hadn't missed too much of the Fall semester, for which she was grateful. But October was pushing it…

She spent the morning in Academic Advising and her Advisor even directed her to her first class. Jezzie appreciated the help but thought it was mostly unnecessary given that the school was small in the extreme. She had no idea what so few people did with three whole buildings. When she arrived in her English class – a mandatory General Education requirement she was unable to weasel out of – she found the small numbers were clearly going to be the norm. She took a seat in the back of the small room.

Jezzie wasn't particularly shy, but she had reservations about being around so many new people. The rest of the class filtered in around her and the door to the class was shut with an unceremonious bang.

The professor rang through the roster to check attendance. The class was halfway through *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Jezzie had never read it before. One member of the class – and the only English major – was particularly enthusiastic and spoke quite often and at length. As Biology student, she was no more out of her depth than if she was put into a ballet class.

Jezzie was mostly glancing through the few notes penned into the margins of her used paperback when a folded square of paper landed on the Vonnegut. She blinked once and unfolded the square.

*Welcome to Peninsula, Jezzie Sullivan.*

*I'm Kyle Sullivan.*

*Sincerely, the guy sitting in front of you.*

Jezzie wasn't sure if it was bad form to be writing notes to other students on her first day. Her first class of her first day. Not even taking into account the fact that they were in college; but sitting in the back of the room made her feel a bit brave.

*Are you yanking my chain?*

*Sincerely, the girl sitting behind you.*
She flicked it back over his shoulder and it landed quietly on his desk. She could hear him unfold the note, a few moments passed as he read it, then she watched as the-boy-named-Kyle turned his head just enough for her to see him smiling and he shook his head.

When the course ran through until it's duration and students began filtering out, Kyle turned around to face her as she put her used paperback in her back pack. "I never yank chain on a first note," Kyle insisted. "I have far better manners. Kyle Sullivan," he extended his hand.

Jezzie took it as she stood. "Jezzie," she replied. "I was just checking. That's quite a coincidence is all."

"You're telling me. Especially in a college this small. Good thing you're not a few years older. You could have graduated with my brother, Jesse Sullivan."

"No offense to your brother," Jezzie prefaced. "But that would have been the worst."

"Probably," he nodded. "Where you headed?"

Jezzie checked her computer print out. "Evolutionary Genetics. BIO 350?"

"Now that sounds like fun. I can show you where it is without being obnoxious about it, if you like? I've got Organic Chem; they're in the Sci/Tech building."

Kyle seemed nice enough, by Jezzie's standards. At first, he stuck out a little bit in comparison to the other students. His hair might've once been brown or black, but now it was blue. She appreciated his choice of t-shirt, having a bit of admiration for The Cure, as well. Maybe it was the studded belt or the eyebrow piercing that really set him apart. Maybe it was both.

"Now that's a heck of an offer, Mr. Sullivan," Jezzie smiled. "To Evolutionary Genetics it is."

Jezzie followed Kyle out of the room and found that the halls were remarkably crowded for such a small institution, though she thought she was getting the hang of the lay out. "So where in Michigan are you from?" Kyle asked, making small talk. "I got family in Ann Arbor."

"That's cool. Nice college town," Jezzie nodded, edging past a group of students standing in wait outside the building door. "I'm from Detroit, actually," Jezzie offered as she and Kyle crossed a road that cut through campus.

"No shit?" Kyle asked and Jezzie nodded in reply. "You're a straight up, hard ass chick, then, huh?"

"Do I strike you as the knock down, drag out type?" she asked as he pulled the door to the well-labeled Science and Technology Building open.

"Definitely," Kyle affirmed as he paused outside a classroom. "This is your stop, long lost cousin. Don't let the geeks intimidate you."

She offered her thanks and slipped inside the room. The professor let them loose fifteen minutes early but only after assigning pairs for a semester-long project and Jezzie met another person. The girl was friendly and seemed well meaning. She asked how long Jezzie had been in town and explained the pattern of the course and the idiosyncrasies to expect from this professor. All of this Jezzie was grateful for – she hadn't been here long enough to know anyone to ask about certain classes or professors.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," Jezzie asked before the class ended.

"Wow. The school has a volleyball team?"

"Intramural," she nodded. "We're petitioning the school to consider entering us into the area's intercollegiate circuit. Hate to chat and fly, but I've got to get to Applied Microbio."

"Applied Microbiology?" Jezzie asked. She pulled her schedule out of her pocket. "With Pankey?" Veronica nodded. "Me too. Mind if I creeper follow you?"


"Biology," Jezzie answered. "For pre-med. It's the closest program I could find without having to leave home. I'm lucky they're letting me polish off a B.S. this year. A lot of my gen ed pre-reqs didn't transfer very easily."

"I'm Biochem, we'll probably be seeing a lot of each other. Where do you live?" Veronica inquired.

"Forks. I just moved from Michigan, but I didn't want to move to such a new area to go to school. Plus, it's so much cheaper to stay at home. Gotta save the money for the advanced degrees."

"Amen," Veronica nodded. "I'm from Forks, too. We'll have to carpool sometime."

Veronica was remarkably good at small talk and had even discerned that Jezzie had met Kyle before they made it to their next classroom. "Kyle's a cool kid," Veronica nodded. "Been my neighbor since we were seven."

Jezzie was amazed at how much history some of the students of the college were entrenched in. A lot of them were from the same towns and the same neighborhoods and had slowly started befriending those of other towns when they'd come to Peninsula. It was a very local-oriented college.

Veronica invited Jezzie to lunch for some food and to show her the library. Veronica pointed areas of gathered students by their town. For this reason, she ended up eating lunch with Kyle and Veronica – who were both from Forks – and a plethora of half a dozen other students of varying ages from the same area. It all felt very 'high school' and Veronica informed her that small college life had that tendency.

Embry was laying at the edge of the river, his head on my paws, watching these weird little fishes that he was sure Billy or Charlie knew the name—**patrolling**… he meant patrolling. He was **patrolling**. Patrolling the land of make believe where vampires and werewolves were friends and no enemies ever came onto their land anymore but he still ran regular shifts all the freaking time and—

**Pack meeting...** Jacob's mental tune popped into his communal consciousness. After the Great Quileute/Cullen Treaty of 2006, running patrol got to be really tedious and for a while Embry used to snap to attention when Jacob or Sam (because Sam being the other Alpha still had the luxury of hearing the other pack, if he so chose) phased into Embry's consciousness. This dual Pack thing was a real pain in the ass. Embry didn't want them to think he was **totally** slacking off. Now, however, he'd just to close his eyes so they couldn't see what he was doing. And he thought about abstract things. Like time. Or lunch.

And for all his Alpha qualities, Embry had known Jacob since he was three. He had been with the idiot when he threw up in class in first grade, fell down and broke his arm in third, asked girls out and failed in seventh. They'd learned the fine arts of vehicle mechanics together and decided that Quil was kinda cool, too, that day in second grade when he dressed as Spiderman for Halloween.
It was really hard for Embry to take that moron—his Alpha—seriously. But he tried most of the time, because he and Quil didn't need to set a bad precedent for the likes of Seth or Brady and Collin. Or friggin' Leah… who was older than all the rest of them and made that point quite well known on a daily basis.

Leah was patrolling miles up the res and hadn't really been thinking anything concrete either – which was really nice for a change – Embry'd only felt pure emotion off her for about an hour. And it was tranquil, if a little hungry. It was prime.

_Please not on leech land. Please not on leech land. Please not on leech land._ Besides Embry's inborn, genetically required hatred – he didn't mind the Cullens. Because after the Newborn War with Victoria? Well… shit could've been a lot worse. It also could have been a lot better, but 'not-worse' was a state of being everyone in the Pack had grown to actually celebrate. The Cullens were okay in small doses. And he totally got the need for Jake to be with Nessie _all the damn time_ (actually he didn't get it all), but he really hated being over the treaty line for meetings. And having to smell them the whole time.

…_at my place._

_You're out of food. Hunger. Meat._ Leah's insistence at meeting not at Jake's house was interwoven with her hunger – one of those emotions Embry'd been feeling this past hour.

The thing about Pack Mind was that it was messy. It wasn't like a news ticker, Embry learned. It wasn't like he could just choose the convenient and coherent thoughts to share with everyone. Oh, no way. Whatever was passing through his head at the time, passed through everyone else's. So everyone knew when he got food poisoning from that Taco Bell in Neah Bay. And that was before he'd even been able to redirect his own attention – so the whole Pack got to see _all _of it.

And he learned awful quick that the brain doesn't move in a line. It was like a tree or a water balloon. Or a verbal shit bomb. There were words, sure, but Embry learned that there were also emotions and there was stuff that he and his Packmates would try really hard to suppress that thereby just made it more obvious. There was also sensory information, like smells and sounds and sights. There was all the new wolfy senses, too.

And there was always a lot of each going in seventeen directions at once. Instead of having five people talk to him at once – it was like twenty five – and they were all talking about different things and it didn't necessarily make sense.

The worst was the emotive stuff. Sure, Embry heard what the rest of the Pack was thinking and he could hear and see and smell the same stuff, but the emotions were what got messy. Those would stick with you.

Embry couldn't tell how many times he'd phased back and made it all the way to his front porch before realizing he was a) seething over the oppressive patriarchal mechanisms of the modern world and the inherent inequalities even in municipal and pack hierarchy… _Leah… _b) pulsing with anxiety and he couldn't even remember why he was going _home _when he should have been heading to the Cullens because he hadn't been there in four whole hours and… _Jake… _or c) just so excited about life and wondering if he would finally get to run a solo patrol and was Mom making casserole again tonight? Seth…

Quil was more or less the same as Jake, most days. Jake just reeled it in better. Leah was a lot less… how could Embry phrase it? _Insane._ Leah was a lot less insane since the Packs had split and she told Jake that – as Beta – she was not spending any more time within 5 miles of the Cullen house than was strictly necessary. She wasn't happy; Embry didn't think he'd ever known Leah happy. But she
wasn't threatening to shank anyone anymore. She was a lot calmer. And Embry tried to be nice to her. Quil was as much a dope as ever, he had just mostly stopped trying to smooth talk all the women they ever encountered. And Seth was always happy or excited to either follow his sister or Jacob around. It didn't even matter that he still lacked the coordination to scratch his own ears in wolf form. Kid was shitting rainbows most days.

So, it was this mental connect between all of the wolves that allowed Embry to know that Leah was hungry and seriously craving red meat, Jacob was pissed because he didn't want to go too far and was nursing a serious headache. There was also an undercurrent of anxiety in Leah's thought-o-sphere but Embry wasn't even going to go there.

*Fine. Quil's place then.*

*Cool. I smelled Joy making breakfast this morning, some should still be left over.*

*Seriously? Because Embry finally realized that not only was Leah starving but so was he. He wasn't just feeling hers anymore. And Joy Ateara made some good breakfast. Embry would know, he'd spent enough nights on Quil and Anna's couch…*

Embry started at a jog, making for the Ateara place. *Better save me some damn food. Were those squirrels mating? Furthest away. Stupid river.*

*Did Seth go to school today?*


*Did he really call you a bitch?*

*Shut up, Embry. At least he'll graduate.*

At this point, they'd reached the woods outside the Ateara's place and Embry phased – pulling up his shorts as he stomped out of the woods. "I will so graduate!" he shouted as Leah headed into the house. Embry was a year shy of finishing high school. He'd phased for the first time a little more than a year ago. His meager 2.5 GPA was in the process of dying a slow and painful death, but he at least had it worked out so he would most likely graduate. Embry could at least hold that to his name. And it would please his Mom to no end.

Embry was one of the only ones who would make it through high school from the first phase cycle this generation. Sam and Leah were lucky – they'd already graduated when they phased. Jared made it by the skin of his teeth, because Kim helped him. And by help, he meant cheat. Paul was way too unstable for way too long so the idea of finishing school was shot to hell; Rachel and her fiancée Addie were helping him get his GED. Jacob was pretty much an incoherent train wreck from the time he first phased until a month ago when Ness was born. Boy never had a chance, but he groveled to the school board with enough conviction that they decided they'd just make him repeat his Junior year. Quil imprinted and that was a lost cause; he was in the same boat as Jacob.

Embry had just managed to scrape by thus far. He was so damn close. At least he'd passed his Junior year. He only had to make it to May… So friggin' close.

Seth went on threat of pain of death courtesy of Leah, though Embry was pretty sure Jake would make him go even she didn't. When the Pack's split he made it clear he wanted as many new wolves to graduate as possible. Because… hopefully… this wouldn't be their whole lives. If the Cullens stayed, then new wolves would come through and then the first generation would eventually retire
and be real human adults. That was always easier with a high school diploma.

Embry stomped up the stairs to the Ateara's trying to remember to pretend to be civilized in front of Joy – though he didn't even know why he bothered at this point – and decided against throwing one of his shoes at Leah. It was his last pair besides old cleats and leather dress shoes.

"I'll graduate, just to spite you," Embry insisted as he came inside and eyeballed her couch. It was just begging for an occupant.

"Who's spiting who, out here?"

Joy Ateara came down the hall, a picture of mock sternness. Joy was a godsend. Since Embry had chosen not to tell his Mom about the Pack even when Sam – and later Jake – said it was fine, he had required some serious neutral territory. For one, he'd needed food. Like a lot of food. And even though Joy was already cooking for a wolf she practically made Embry stay on the days that he'd stop by. And times when he knew his Mom was really mad at him or when he just couldn't keep the charade up during those weeks the Pack had been battling vamps – he'd totally crashed on the Ateara's couch.

"Mama A," Embry pronounced. "I've heard rumors of breakfast?"

Leah was rummaging through the fridge and pulling out leftovers as Joy went to the counter and picked her cup of coffee back up. The wolves would help themselves. "Have whatever you kids can find, but I want the dishes cleaned! I have to go to work."

Joy Ateara was a rock. She'd hosted both Embry and Leah on her couch more nights than she could count – when Embry couldn't go home some nights and for Leah in the weeks after Sam imprinted on Emily and Sue Clearwater passed the buck and tried to claim neutrality.

Joy may or may not have stormed down the street to her former friend's home when her children were in school and tore into her with a variety of curse words her own son and daughter had picked up from her all too quickly in their younger years. Joy didn't think the passing of Harry gave Sue the right to stand idle while the whole town made Leah a pariah.

She didn't have the heart to give it to Tiffany Call. It really wasn't her fault her fool-ass of a son wouldn't wise up and say anything. Actually, Joy spent the better part of Quil, Jacob and Embry's elementary school years punching the men that were crude enough and staring down the women catty enough to comment on Tiffany's sexual exploits. Tiffany was nice, if a bit quiet and solitary.

Joy had name status in town and man did she exploit that like hell. She made it quite obvious when she did not approve of behavior. She mothered the hell out of everyone in town.

None of the wolves were complaining.

"So when do we start, dear high leader?" Leah asked as Jacob came through the door.

"When Seth and Quil get here. I want all present."

"God," Leah scoffed laying wrapped pancakes, sausage, and fried eggs on the counter. "Who died?"

Jacob rolled his eyes and pulled up a seat at the counter. "No one. Five minutes of Pack-free life isn't going to kill anyone."

"Speaking of which," Quil came banging through his back door – Embry hadn't even heard him in the yard, "I talked to my sister yesterday." Leah had looked ready for a retort but only ducked back
into the fridge. Jake didn't miss it either.

"She said you," he pointed at Embry, "came into the store girl with the same girl from the beach?"

Everything in Quil's voice dripped with insinuations that didn't even need to be there. "She said it looked like a date!"

With that one, Leah's head popped right out of the fridge and glared at Embry. Jacob choked on his bite of pancake at the same time. Awesome. Really awesome.

"You went on a date?" Jake asked astonished.

"With a girl!" Quil added.

"Are you insane?" Leah seethed.

"Are you retarded?" Embry deadpanned as he stared at his best friend. "Really? You saw me with her. You talked to her. It wasn't a date."

Embry had to admit he hadn't really thought through all the ramifications of deciding to throw the imprinting concept to the wind and go out and find his own way in life, dammit. But his going on a 'date' which was technically not a date, was bound to cause some ripples. Hell, he shared a Pack with the most relationship dysfunctional people on the friggin' reservation. Leah had been the victim of imprinting gone totally awry. Quil had imprinted on her second cousin – who had been two at the time. Jake's imprint wasn't even the same species. Embry probably had a half-brother in his Pack. And Seth… well, he was only fifteen. There was still plenty of time for life to throw him for another bender.

So, Embry could see why it might have been an issue to all present that he might have shown the new girl around the area. Didn't mean he appreciated it.

He was saved the round of twenty questions and oppressive waves of guilt and confusion as Seth burst through the door in all his uncoordinated glory. "God!" he shouted as he threw his back pack on the coffee table and reached onto the table to grab one of the sandwiches Joy had pulled out of the fridge. "I am freaking starving. I swear I grew another few inches today. And way to call me in the middle of class."

Embry held his arm out level. As of last night, Seth just grazed the tope of his arm. Today, when Embry swung my arm out, he smacked Seth in the face. "Ow!" Seth winced through a mouth full of food. "Does this ever stop? I used to be 5'3". I don't even know how to walk anymore."

"Well you're probably about six feet even now," Jake evaluated. "Maybe a few more inches and you should be good. All right, let's start this meeting." Embry was glad Jake interrupted and was eager for any reason not to have to discuss Jezzie right now. He was born with a really terrible lack of finesse. That was a conversation he really was going to have to rehearse.

"Okay," Jacob said, raising his voice and spinning in the chair to face his Pack. "Meeting called to order. Everybody shut up now." Embry remained at the counter and Leah in the kitchen, while Quil and Seth sprawled out in the living room. For once they all quieted down. "First order of business: this will probably be our last separate Pack meeting. Sam's pretty much officially stepped down."

There was a low whistle from Seth, but Leah was the one who spoke. "So you're in charge now, your Excellency? That's it?"

"I have no freaking clue," Jake shrugged. "Sam just told me he's stepping back. I think he's just giving up control by not doing anything. So... we're gonna start assimilating Jared, Paul, Collin and
Brady into our hierarchy. I know we see them so much it feels like stuff hasn't changed but our order might get jostled around a bit and I don't want to hear any bitching. They might be on edge for a few days because they'll be between Packs and that isn't good for any wolf's psyche."

The Pack separation had never felt full or complete. Each wolf was so personally entwined with the others that the only difference they'd come to find is smaller Pack meetings and fewer people in their head.

"So, why'd we go through with the split in the first place?" Quil asked after a swallow. "Wouldn't it have just been easier for Sam to do what he's doing now?"

"Again, I don't know," Jake shrugged. "I've haven't been doing the Alpha thing for very long, but I bet it's easier with less wolves answering to you. The bigger a Pack, the more power the Alpha gets – the more power we all get. Maybe he was just weaning himself out. I really don't know. Plus… our issues with the Cullens are pretty much over."

"Mostly," Quil added.

"Isn't this, like, your thing Jake? Wasn't this the way it was supposed to be?" Seth asked. "You as Alpha?"

Jake shook his head but Leah spoke first. "Ha! That's hilarious. All that crap the Council's been spewing? Really, they should know better. You don't get that kind of position genetically like that. Rank moves through social class. And anybody who had proper rank could be chosen as Chief – as in, they needed approval from the tribe. We're not a monarchy and never have been. That's why we're not inbred like the Europeans."

"Really?" Seth asked.

"Really," Jake nodded. "The Council just thought that I wouldn't play as nice with the Cullens because they 'stole' Bella and I'd have an axe to grind… run them off the land finally. They thought Sam took too soft a line on them."

"But Bella left on her own," Seth added. "And Sam threatened to kill her like a month ago before all that crap with Ness happened!"

"Yes, she did. But Jake's not a fucking cave man," Leah affirmed. "And, yeah, Sam did threaten to kill her. But thank God, Jake's not enough of a moron to actually go to war with a bunch of vampires we don't particularly care for but can probably get to leave without violence. That's just bad politics."

"That doesn't explain the merger," Embry interjected. "If anyone could be elected head of the tribe and even our ancestors never did the lineage thing, then why you now? Just coincidence?"

"Sam's really starting to drive the others crazy," Leah commented quietly. "It's getting to him. He needs to step down before it eats him alive."

Jake nodded. Surprised at Leah's honestly and still lack of total cold-heartedness. Maybe she was getting better too?

"My wolf's just naturally dominant. So yeah, I guess it's coincidence. So that's that," Jake announced in a louder tone of voice, signaling a subject change to something slightly more optimistic than Sam potentially losing his mind. "We're pretty much one Pack again after this. But we have other shit to talk about… Now, here's the deal. Since, most of our territory issues are behind us, hopefully, and we're no longer viewing the Olympic coven as a threat, it's time we put some logistical sense in our patrols."
"Freedom!" Quil shouted with a loud whoop. Leah proceeded to throw a plate at him, narrowly
avoiding Embry on its way by.

"No, not freedom. There's always a possibility but we can certainly lower the panic level a bit. So for
now, we're making shifts. There will be two of us on patrol at all times. That should make guarding
the borders leisurely. Sam's hasn't brought the new phases in – Brady and Collin – because they're
not even in high school."

"What?" Embry groaned. "Still? He wasn't such a stickler for education when we all first phased." Brady and Collin were ordered to stay in school. No one had a real need for the young wolves; they
more or less had no responsibilities. Not finishing high school messed things up a bit, not finishing
eighth grade fucked you for life. Which admittedly sucked a lot, but those of the first generation
who'd torn down vamp ass at the tender age of sixteen were slightly miffed.

"Do you want to train the new phases?" Jake asked. Embry grimaced and shook his head. He never
was good with the new phases… Brady and Collin seemed to be taking to it all right, though. Jake,
however, in the very near future would be the one in charge of Brady and Collin and he was well
aware of it. Embry thought it was hard enough being Seth's mentor. Sure, making 'Pack families' had
made life easier. Sam had taught Jared and Paul to be wolves, and each of them had to get a handle
on Jacob, Embry and Quil when they first phased. Now, the likes of those three had their own pups
to handle.

Seth had christened Embry 'papa wolf' very quickly. Jared threatened to break his knees if he called
him grandpa. Seth was pretty easy to wrangle most days. Embry liked Collin and Brady, but he
wasn't upset to have missed the boat on training the middle school pups.

Confused about being thirteen years old was bad enough; now Jacob and Quil had to teach them to
be teenagers and how to control the wolf and the phase – and somehow make sure they never had to
kill anything. As much of a thrill as any of them got from hunting bloodsuckers down, it wasn't long
before they took back human skin and none of them reacted well to it. Quil had thrown up for hours
after they dismembered Laurent and Jared hadn't slept for a week and a half.

"So we've got day, evening and graveyard shift. Three shifts, with our numbers is about four shifts a
week. We can rotate or you guys can just hang with one if it works out. Seth: no day shift for you,
you understand? I want your ass in school."

Seth just rolled his eyes and didn't even bother arguing. "Shifts?" Embry gasped. "You mean, like,
we can have a schedule and I can get a real job?"

"That's the idea," Jake replied like it was rather obvious.

"Ballin'."

"Can the plebe take second shift?" Seth grumbled. "I can't stand going from patrol to school. I'm a
teenager, I need some damn normal sleep."

"Yeah, I think that's where I put you," Jake pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. "Le's see. All
right, first shift – that's seven in the morning to three in the afternoon – is Paul and Jared. Seth it's you
and me from three until eleven. Embry and Quil from eleven until seven in the morning again."

"Super…"

It wasn't a full minute before their meeting had officially disbanded before the others had descended
on the food and Leah had marched around the island counter and socked Embry square in the arm.
"Ow, Leah," he grimaced. She had literally backed him into a corner and he couldn't escape.

"What are you doing on a date?"

Of all the people to be sensitive about dating outside the Pack, Embry begrudged Leah the least. Feelings between her and Sam had leveled out, even if their interaction was minimal. Leah was somewhere closer to a place called 'better' and having Sam slowly edge his way out of Pack life and into a fully human one had certainly done wonders. But that didn't mean Leah was prepared to watch one of her brothers play déjà vu – especially when he knew the consequences.

"It wasn't a date, thank you very much. I showed the new girl around town," he lightly shook his sore arm, refusing to give Leah the satisfaction of knowing that her punch had kinda hurt. He edged out of range of her deathblows, and closer to the fridge. He pulled out the lunchmeat and stole two slices of bread from Jake, Seth and Quil's ravenous feeding.

"Looked a helluva a lot like a date," Quil remarked around a mouthful of food as Embry constructed his sandwich. Embry placed a well-aimed kick towards the leg of Quil's stool and gave him a swift jolt.

"She's new. She came into the store. I agreed to show her around. You saw her; so did Anna. How does that make a date?"

"Did you get food?" Leah asked with narrowed eyes.

"I showed her where to get food that wouldn't poison her, yes."

Quil turned around and stood, leaning on the counter on the other side of Embry. Embry felt distinctly like being boxed in and he didn't quite appreciate it. "Did you meet her family?" Quil asked as he tossed a hunk of pancake into his mouth.

"Her Dad kicked the door in when I went to go pick her up—"

"You picked her up? Dude that's so a date!"

"She. Doesn't. Know. This. Town. She drove; I can hardly have her meet me somewhere. You guys are reading way too much into this."

"Leah, Quil," Jake said peering around Seth, "Heel. For the love of God…"

Quil just smirked at Embry, and Leah growled at the Alpha. "Are you just going to let this happen?"

"Let what happen, Lees?" Jake looked at her. "If Embry wants to talk to people, that's fine. I'm hardly keeping any of you bound and gagged."

"But a date!"

"Leah," Jake plunked his elbow down on the table, clearly not too pleased with being distracted from his meal. "I know you feel strongly about any of us screwing around with people outside of the Pack, but I'm not going to make us all hermits. Embry's a big kid. That's his decision."

"No it's not," Leah growled. "This girl doesn't know what she's getting into. It's his decision only because she doesn't know. What if it goes wrong? I know Embry Call thinks he's invincible and has decided that he's so beyond imprinting," she mocked, "but what if he isn't? Then we destroy another life. We're here to help, not to hurt."
"I'm not hurting her," Embry stated. "You people act like we're getting married. I showed her around."

"Don't you think you're a little biased, Leah?" Jake pointed out. "I know your position on the matter, but not every story will end like yours."

"You know, Lees," Seth spoke up for the first time since the topic had been brought up. It shocked the hell out of the rest, that's for sure, and they all shut up really quick. Seth didn't talk much about imprinting or Leah and Sam. He'd idolized Sam for so long, and Sam had been good to him. Played pick up basketball games with him, showed him how to reattach his bike chain, helped him perfect his right hook and talked about video games endlessly. And Seth was as blindsided by the imprint as Leah was. He'd lost his father to a heart attack and a big brother figure overnight. Sam ignored Seth, just as much as he had Leah. Now, Sam just didn't know how to act around Seth; not many people blamed him for that, but it still stung. Coming into the Pack had been equally strange and upsetting for both Clearwater siblings. So when Seth spoke, they listened.

"I was actually paying attention in Bio today. We learned about imprinting." Leah's eye's bugged, and Jake's hand slapped over his face. Whatever the hell this kid was about to spill it was bound to be interesting. "No, seriously. I guess it happens to real animals all the time. Pretty much an animal imprints on another one, and the imprintee uses the imprinter as this sort of guide through life. The imprinter is supposed to help them learn how to do stuff in the wild. Like a role model or a buddy system or something."

"Or a mate," Leah spat.

"Well, yeah, there's that too. But we always assumed that imprinting in the Pack was just a mating thing. But it could also be the other kind, where the imprinter just kind of helps the imprintee through life. Like Yoda. I mean, all cases are different, right? And hell knows someone like Ness is going to need a built in friend in life – no offense Jake," Seth glanced back to his Alpha.

"None taken," Jake sighed.

Seth bent over and fished his biology textbook out of his backpack. He cleaved the massive tome in two and pointed to the paragraph section titled 'Imprinting'. "See," he pointed. "There's sexual imprinting and then there's filial imprinting."

Jacob took a moment and spoke again. "Maybe the kid's right. I mean, obviously Quil and I aren't mating with our imprints. And if we were going to in the future, we wouldn't still be attracted to other women. Or the imprint would have waited."

"The book says," Seth continued wisely, "that imprinting takes a variety of roles and forms, even among the same species. So maybe Embry imprints one day. But if he does after he gets a girl, then wouldn't it just be one of those Mr. Miyagi imprints? Because his wolf already has a mate."

Jake, Quil, Embry and Leah just watched Seth as he explained biological mechanisms to them. They were all still and rather stunned. It was like the kid had just delivered them the word of God or something. Seth would've really liked it if they all just stopped staring at him. It was Jacob that broke the silence.

"Seth's got a point. I say we take this theory and run with it. There's less likelihood of it ruining our lives, and it's less psychologically traumatic. Flexibility in imprinting will probably be nice for all involved. That being said, I stand by what I said earlier. If Embry wants to show the new girl around or fuck her senseless, it's his business. Seth, pass the syrup."
"Jaaaaaaaaake." The synchronized calls of the two youngest wolves just outside of the Ateara's kitchen window broke the rhythm and stride of Leah's impending rebuttal. The joys of female Packmates meant that they existed on their own plane of hierarchy. It took a lot for Jake to make Leah do anything and making her shut up wasn't worth summoning the energy required.

Instead, her head snapped towards the window behind her as Brady and Collin hopped in tandem up and down into range of view of the Ateara's kitchen window. Collin grabbed a hold of sill and pulled himself up with a grin and Brady followed suit – though Collin tried to shove him out. Brady issued a well-placed elbow to Collin's eye, the one that wasn't sporting a new shiner. There wasn't a lot that could damage a shapeshifter, but Collin was definitely damaged. His eye was purple and yellow – though not swollen – and he had a cut across his cheek that was closed, but still healing. The boy looked like he'd been in a fight.

"We have a door," Quil reminded them as he watched from his spot, ignoring Collin's battle wounds.

"Thing 1 and Thing 2," Leah spoke. Despite her outward sarcasm, she was actually rather fond of Brady and Collin if only because they were so young and generally well-intentioned. Generally.

"So, Jake," Brady spoke first. "Sam says we're your responsibility now."

"Oh, did he?" Jake replied as he emptied the orange juice container.

"Not in so many words," Collin rescinded. "So, are you gonna let us actually do something? Sam was so lame about that."

"Define 'something'?" Jake asked slowly, knowing he was messing with the pups' heads.

"Anything," they replied in unison.

"Who the hell wants you two overgrown Pomeranians protecting the borders," Quil wanted to know as he brought his plate back to the living room. "Damn, you too are still fresh out the womb."

"My balls have fully descended, thank you very much," Brady intoned.

"I think that calls for a party," Embry replied sarcastically. It was difficult sometimes to decide what was crossing lines with Brady and Collin around because they were only thirteen. Apparently, however, nothing really fazed them. Embry forgot quite often how young they actually were.

"Wait… you mean they're supposed to have been up in the first place?" Seth sat up from the couch and looked over the back. He seemed confused.

"They phased a little younger, Seth. Unless you were stunted hopefully your balls were already where they were supposed to be when you phased."

"Can we stop talking about balls in my kitchen?" Leah requested. "Otherwise I pull the equality card and we can talk about uteri, too."

"What's a uteri?" Quil asked from his spot on the chair in the living room, flicking through TV stations. Leah, Embry and Jake just stared. Leah shook her head.

"Seriously, man?" Brady asked.

"It's okay, Quil," Seth added as he rifled though the pile of x-box games and tossed Quil a controller. "I'll lend you my Bio textbook."
"So, do we get to do stuff?" Collin asked again. "Like more than just come to the meetings?"

"Why the hell do you two want to pace the borders of La Push for eight hours a day?" Jake wanted to know. These two were persistent and as much hell as he, Embry and Quil had given Sam, he felt he was going to get part of that back in Brady and Collin.

"Because," they replied like the answer should have been obvious.

"If you're hell bent on patrolling I can give you weekend and vacation time," Jake began as the two fist bumped. "That'll lighten the weekend load for the rest of us. But not at the expense of school. I don't need you two repeating the eighth grade."

"Awesome!" And with that they dropped out of the window and could be seen disappearing into the woods abutting the Ateara's lawn. Jake sighed and his shoulders visibly slumped, Leah's focus glazed over and Quil and Seth were officially in a Call of Duty-only world.

"I forgot to mention that Tommy's back in town," Embry commented quietly, now that the ever-inappropriate Brady and newly-battered Collin had left earshot. "He came into the store yesterday." Tommy was Collin's significantly older and far more aggressive half brother. He didn't share enough of the same genetics that Collin did with the Blacks, so he had never risked a phase, but he had certainly inherited enough to still be able to beat up his little brother; he was abnormally strong for a human.

As a kid, Jake had always wondered why his younger cousin was so quiet and bumped around all the time. He also wondered why his older cousin was always so mean. It hadn't changed with time, and as Collin and Tommy had gotten older their altercations had worsened. Ragging on your younger brother when you were eight was fine, but it could be an issue when you were twenty-five.

Tommy lived in Hoquiam now and dealt in a less than legal lifestyle. The Pack assumed that it was his business ventures that had driven him to more infrequent yet more brutal lashings against his little brother. So far, it appeared Collin was the only one in the family to feel the brunt of Tommy's anger. A black eye was a good day.

"Do we know how long he's back for?" Quil asked, over the sound of cut-scene explosions. Embry shook his head. The Pack liked to anticipate Tommy's arrival at least to the point where they could keep Collin out of his path. Collin had put the kibosh on letting the Pack 'deal' with Tommy from the get go. Sure he was a jackass but the fact was that Collin could take it now, without being seriously hurt. His black eye was probably only a few hours old and would be gone just as quickly. And letting Pack take care of him risked exposure. It was the only thing Collin ever put his foot down on.

Jake was more worried about the mental and emotional part of it.

Tommy wasn't stupid and he knew Collin was involved in the new La Push gang. Part of his hostility was thinking that his stupid baby brother and this new gang were going to overrun his territory. Collin didn't want the Pack to retaliate back because it would only confirm his suspicions, plus Tommy had more than enough of his own bad dealings that he could easily implicate the Pack; they could hardly afford a legitimate investigation.

Pack usually ran interference. They never told Collin about it, because he would have thought it totally unnecessary. They didn't want him to feel embarrassed or indebted – because he would – but the Pack protected their own regardless. It was easier for them to make sure the Littlesea siblings didn't cross paths for the rare day or two that Tommy would drift through town every few weeks.
"Well, it'll be easier to keep track of both of them now that we're one Pack again. Embry, go find out where he's at…"

**Tuesday, October 17, 2006**

Tuesday was the first day Jezzie'd been in Forks and experienced what she was assured was typical Forks weather: random torrential downpours. She carpooled with Kyle to Newton's Outfitters after class when he told her it was the only place around for her to get decent footwear. She felt wearing her fishing boots outside of a sea-based vessel was inappropriate. How ironic was it that she spent her life surrounded by water but was, as of yet, unprepared for rain? She made sure to stock up and bought a pair of rain boots and snow boots when Kyle confirmed what Embry had alluded to and told her that winters were mostly ice.

Liz and Carla sat together with rapt attention that night as she explained how tiny Forks was and how the social groups worked within the equally tiny college in Port Angeles and how they didn't have any security detail outside of metal detectors at the front doors and people didn't even lock their cars and they all drove to school because the area didn't have public transportation. Jezzie approached it all like an anthropological experiment so the culture shock didn't get to her. She locked her front door that night regardless. That was not a habit she was about to drop.

She was able to tell Carla and Liz about her few new friends. Kyle and Veronica, plus Kayla – who was in her eighteen-person Physics course and had been homeschooled until high school. There was Kayla's boyfriend, Ricky, who was the counter cultural guru. And Anthony, who was crippling socially inept but seemed like a nice enough kid if you didn't try and make him sustain conversation for too long; he was in Jezzie's Adult Psychology class.

Overall, Jezzie found that assimilating into small town life wasn't nearly as traumatizing as she'd thought it would be. Maybe just moderately uncomfortable. New and strange. Her, Liz and Carla wondered if that was a good or bad thing. Jezzie shrugged, and spent the rest of the night on her homework and printing out the requirements for graduation. If the curriculum wasn't too hard and the school accepted her credits from back home, she hoped to graduate at the end of the year.

Wednesday promised to be dry if not completely overcast. "Dad," Jezzie asked after listening to the radio's weather report. "Is it really always like this here?" Because she just couldn't believe her two sources. There had to be sun at some point.

"So I've been told," he nodded as he slid into his chair at the breakfast table. She sighed and her lip wrinkled back a bit. She'd kind of hoped Embry was being sarcastic. Maybe sarcasm was an urban thing?

"Dad I was invited to hang out with some people tonight down at the beach. So, I'll be heading out after dinner."

"On a school night?" her father asked leadingly as he sipped at his coffee.

"Dad, I'm in college," she laughed. "I just drove halfway across the country alone. I think I can handle a weeknight gathering. When will 'school nights' be acceptable for social gatherings?"

Jezzie's father had let loose the reins quite a bit since she'd graduated high school, however, she still liked to pass things by him. She didn't want to make him feel like he was totally cut off from her life. But sometimes, he forgot that she was a responsible adult.

"When you're old enough to want to stay in on a school night," her father replied with a small grin.
"My school work is fine, Dad," she said raising one of her hands in promise. "I really haven't missed much. Besides, this is a chance for me to get out and mingle with the mundanes and meet some new people."

"Who's going to be in attendance at this soiree?" he continued as he snapped the daily paper open, peering through his coke bottle glasses.

"Embry, the boy you met this weekend? He showed me around town. It'll be him and some other girls and boys I met when we drove around. Nothing crazy, Dad. Just kids hanging out."

"Bring your pepper spray," her father reminded her after a brief silence.

"Yes, Dad," she placed a peck on his cheek and went back upstairs to get ready for class.

Jezzie took extra care to make sure she didn't waste any time in between classes earlier in the day. Any spare few moments she had she made sure she chipped away at her homework pile, which was not unreasonable given that most of the professors had granted her a degree of amnesty on past assignments. Kyle and Ricky stared at her in wonder as she simultaneously ate a bagel and did her English Lit homework at the study table they'd commandeered in the library. "Where's the fire, Detroit?" Kyle asked.

"You keep writin' like that, your hand's gonna fall off," Ricky remarked slowly.

"I've known you for three days, Ricky," Jezzie said after a bite of her bagel. "And I'm surprised your hand hasn't fallen off with how much you play that little guitar."

"Ukelele, Litte Red," he corrected her, looking offended. "This is an instrument of calm and peace. The kind of tune that resonates inside your soul. Without music there can be no perfect knowledge, for there is nothing without it... the very heavens revolve under the guidance of harmony."


"You're making that up," Jezzie insisted.

"Hell no," Ricky shook his head. "Google that shit."

"Not a rock and roll kinda guy, then?"

"He tried it last year," Kyle replied propping his boot-clad feet up on the chair on the other side of the table. "Couldn't have lasted. Fool can't even pull off a decent 'hawk."

"Surfer chic fits you better," Jezzie decided nodding towards Ricky. "I want to get my work done, because I'm going out tonight. And my last class goes until 5PM."

"Oo, where?" Veronica asked, breaking off her conversation with Anthony about a research assignment.

"La Push?" she supplied. "I was invited to a beach party earlier this weekend. It sounded like fun, so I figured I might as well – I need to meet some more people. Though this doesn't seem like a beach party latitude."

"With the La Push boys?" Kayla asked.

"I'm assuming some females will be there too…” Jezzie nodded warily. Maybe at least Anna. "You
guys know them?"

"Know of them," Kyle supplied.

"They like to keep to themselves mostly," Ricky added leaning back in his chair and strumming his instrument idly. "Peaceable bunch of dudes."

"You're only down with them because you think all Indians use medicinal peyote, Ricky," Veronica pointed out. Ricky only shrugged in response.

Kyle shrugged. "It's not like we don't know them. Just not that well. There aren't that many people around. But the guys I think you're talking about... they haven't really... socialized... in a few years."

"That sounds like the making of a horror movie or a bigoted polemic," Jezzie quirked a brow.

Veronica tried to assure her with a small smile. "It's just that... the last person to hang out with them did some real damage. She hung out with them a lot. And I had already graduated, but most people were thinking she was dating this guy who went to Forks High. He left and she started spending all her time in La Push with another boy. Guy #1 comes back and she drops Guy #2 and marries the first, like that," Veronica snapped her fingers. "There was some fall out."

"It's the same group that always has the beach parties," Kyle added. "They haven't been so receptive of new people, now. Not just 'white people!'," he supplied with complementary finger quotes, trying to assure Jezzie – in opposition to their statements – that she wasn't about to experience a whole new kind of racial divide in her new home. "Just people they don't know in general. I don't blame them."

"We kinda always just assumed that this Bella girl left a lot of emotional baggage," Kayla said.

"They can't all be like that," Jezzie supplied. "I met a few people and they seem fine." It surprised her to think of a whole group of friends being that reticent to let anyone into their bubble. The area was so small; these kids had to know each other. The ones she was talking to couldn't be without their own biases.

"Ever since that incident – when was it? – last year?" Kyle glanced to Veronica, "we don't see them much. I think they're all out of school now. And I'm assuming they work or whatever, but they're usually pretty busy or gone."

"I guess it's not so much that they're not accepting of new people," Kayla backtracked. "It's more like they disappeared off the social radar. It's like they're too busy to make new friends."

"Well, you guys have filled me with lots of hope for good times for my upcoming evening," Jezzie said, closing her textbook on her finished homework. She didn't want to think of her new friends as bigots, but she wasn't blind to the fact that the municipal divide was also conveniently racial.

"Don't let these knuckleheads get you down, Little Red," Ricky said in his slow cadence. "La Push kids are some nice people. I don't know about the womenfolk, but I played in Little League with some of the guys when we were young. They's all right."

"Thanks Ricky."
"Everyone sit down and shut the hell up."

"So good to have you back, Jake," Paul muttered sardonically as he walked past his new Alpha and sat next to Brady on the couch. "Move over, punk."

"This is starting to happen way too often," Embry muttered.

The rest of the room quieted. Leah stopped arguing with her brother and Quil's joke halted half way through and his look of disappointment accompanied his sitting on the floor. Collin thanked Emily for the plate of food and was relegated to the kitchen counter since the living room was packed full.

"All right, so I don't think we're going to do a lot of these because we officially don't fit anywhere anymore… I'm assuming the new new patrol schedule is working out for everybody? I haven't heard too much complaining so I guess that's a plus. You three getting to school?"

Brady, Collin and Seth all nodded in unison. They were the only ones left that anyone cared about graduating. It would've been cool if Jake, Quil and Embry managed but they weren't making any guarantees. Jake had Alpha ordered the three youngest wolves into school. He knew they didn't like it. Most of the time they went to school tired or without homework – sometimes both – but at least they were there. And there was no way in hell Jake was watching the two youngest pups drop out of eighth grade.

"Leah, does patrolling work out with your class schedule this semester?" She nodded wordlessly.
"Good." The least they could do was let Leah take care of her gen ed requirements while still patrolling. Leah was the first one Jake planned on cutting loose when they could afford to. He didn't know if she'd take it, but Sam had already begun working himself out of the hierarchy and was engaged. He could figure his own educational options out. Jake knew Leah hadn't given up on school.

"Now the reason I called this thing so soon after our last, I assume you've all heard that Noah Whitehorse died last week?"

"That old prune on Council?" Brady asked.

"Yes, so that means Council's down to four members. And the Chairperson has called for an election."

"Annd Old Quil, Billy and Sue want a member of Pack to run?" Jared ventured with a smirk.

"Yep," Jake nodded. "There's a couple other folks in town that are running but they're all over fifty and I actually think – Pack BS aside – a young person wouldn't be a bad idea."

"And the obvious choice is Leah," Quil added. Leah's eyes bugged as she glanced up at Quil, before punching him in the shoulder. "What? You know everything there is to know about this place – from legends to legal issues."

"You're only volunteering me because you don't want your grandfather to make you do it!"

"I'm sixteen. I don't even think that's allowed."
"Election's in January, as usual," Jake spoke a little louder over his bickering wolves. "Any takers?"

There was a resounding silence as all nine wolves stared back at him.

"I'll do it."

All eyes popped and jaws dropped when Paul Lahote volunteered. "What? Makes sense, right? Hardly anyone's old enough. Leah doesn't want it – and probably can't because her Mom's there. Jared doesn't really care and Sam's name is mud after these past few years. That leaves me. All I gotta do is run, right?"

"Well, then you actually have to be on Council if you get elected," Sam pointed out the obvious. "It's actually a job after the election."

"So, what? I gotta go to meetings, make sure the old folks don't do any whack ass shit, keep Old Billy in line and make sure no one else tries to shit on us? I think I can handle that."

"Paul Lahote, Council Member-at-Large," Embry tried it out. "You're gonna run a helluva campaign, huh?"

"Fuckin' right. How long after I get elected can I stage Old Quil's coup?"

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**Wednesday, October 18, 2006**

"So besides a change of clothes, master of impending doom, what else should I bring to this shin dig?" Jezzie held her phone up with her shoulder as she typed up a quick Wall post for both Liz and Carla to remind them that she would talk to them tomorrow.

"That should be fine," Embry assured her.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I don't want to upset local sensibilities with my complete alien ignorance."

"You'll be fine, Jezzie," Embry repeated. "Do you want me to pick you up or are you all set?" He figured he'd offer, considering Jezzie was going to be in for quite the surprise tonight. What had gone from him, Jake, Quil, Anna and possibly Leah had springboarded into an entire Pack affair. Because Quil's head was louder than his mouth, so the entire reservation – Pack and human alike – was crawling with new girl news. The Pack had latched onto Quil's date accusation and now they all wanted to meet her.

Embry held the same opinion as he had throughout most of his time as Quil's best friend: he was going to kill him and bury him in the forest…

Quil hadn't said anything further about seeing her that night, but Embry had a sneaking suspicion about what he was up to. His warning Jezzie about the clothes, was actually pretty nice of him.

"I think I'm good," Jezzie replied and Embry heard a clatter as it sounded like she dropped her phone. "I have to stop by the hospital and get an job application beforehand anyways. So I just drive until I hit ocean and follow the fire?"

"Pretty much."

"Okay," she replied. "See you in a bit."
Jezzie had been lucky enough to stop into Forks Community Hospital when the Director of Emergency Services and the guy that managed the small batch of EMTs were present. Jezzie did a small internal victory dance.

"I know that I have to look into Washington state certifications and rollovers and whatnot. But I'm licensed and have been working for a while. Basically, I would just really love it if you guys would be amenable to throwing me a few shifts a week."

The Director of Emergency Services looked like a nice enough woman. "Well, Jack," she turned and looked to the man next to her – still uniformed and direct off an ambulance from first shift. "You been nagging me for more staff to get another full unit on, so you all don't have to run doubles? What do you think?"

"I'm game," he nodded to the woman before looking towards Jezzie. "Swing by on Saturday about this time and we'll give you a test run. See how you do. You know, formality and all that."

Jezzie tried not to hop and skip with joy as she filled out all the right paperwork for employment. She even came hopefully prepared and they made copies of all her relevant licensure.

She definitely skipped on her way back out to her Jeep.

Jezzie was still riding high on her possible job acquisition that she forgot to be nervous about a new social situation until she parked along the edge of what was labeled "First Beach" behind a line of cars for what she hoped was the party she'd been invited to. Otherwise, this evening was about to get ten more shades of awkward.

She took a deep breath and refused to allow herself to become nervous. She double-checked her backseat – she had remembered that extra set of clothes. Though she was curious as to why she was going to need them. She thought that could have been foreboding. Instead of dwelling and turning herself into a nervous wreck she hopped out of the Jeep and opened the back door, pulling her leather jacket with it's high collar and warm, furry lining out. She pulled her arms through and was glad to see that this jacket still had a purpose in her new home; it was her favorite.

She slipped her phone in her pocket and made her way carefully past the cars and down the rocky beach. She was thankful that she was first sighted by someone she knew.

"Jezzie the scrum-half!" Anna called. She stood from her spot on a downed log and ran to greet Jezzie. "Just so you know, I told coach about how I met you today and she's really excited now. You pretty much have to come."

Jezzie couldn't help but laugh at Anna's enthusiasm. "Okay, definitely. Just let me know where and when to be."

"C'mon I'll introduce you to the mongrels," she nodded over her shoulder and took Jezzie by the hand. The group only appeared to be about a dozen strong – and just like Forks High – the ages definitely varied. They were all grouped around a large bonfire, sitting in lawn chairs, on coolers and downed logs. Variously engrossed in food, conversation, and fire tending they seemed like a relaxed group. That made Jezzie feel better. Though she'd hardly been expecting to confront an armed guard.

"Okay," Anna whispered. "So, you know my brother, and that's Sam's fiancée, Emily, over there at the table – try not to stare." Anna added the last as an aside and Jezzie didn't understand Anna's warning but she didn't pause to explain any further. "That's Jared on the green chair and his girlfriend Kim. The taller girl – the one punching Embry – is Leah. That's Leah's little brother Seth. And Collin
and Brady. Oh, that by the fire is Rachel. So far we're still missing Sam, Paul and Jake. They should be around eventually."

"Who's the little one?" Jezzie asked as she noted the small dark-haired girl running through the sand and singing to herself behind the furthest downed logs.

"Oh," Anna laughed. "How could I forget Claire-bear. She's Emily's niece – comes to visit a lot. She's really taken to my brother, so he's kind of the nanny du jour."

Jezzie nodded, taking it all in and trying to commit everyone's name to a mental picture inside her head. She smiled a little bit, thinking of Quil as a small girl's nanny. Before a moment passed, Anna took a breath and announced. "Everyone, this is Jezzie. She's going to fill a major hole in the rec team's back line, so be nice!"

Jezzie cringed a little bit and waved to all the people now staring at her. "Hi, nice to meet you all. Thanks for having me."

"Welcome back, Detroit," Quil shouted from across the circle as Jezzie and Anna made it into the firelight.

Jezzie flushed, wondering if that was her new nickname and waved. "Hi Quil. Long time, no see."

"You're telling me," he scoffed. "Grab some tree," he patted the expanse of log next to him and Anna led her over, letting Jezzie sit between her and her brother.

"Want some food?" Anna asked. "You really have to be quick about it, otherwise the guys will eat all of it. The second batch is already on the fire."

Jezzie glanced up to the two tables set up on the other side of the fire. The surface was covered and piled two feet deep with all manner of campfire food. Hotdog buns, hamburger buns, potato salad, pasta salad, garden salad, brownies, chips, baked potatoes, hamburgers, hot dogs and that was just what Jezzie could see around the fire's burning. "They're going to eat all that plus a second batch?"

"You'd be surprised," Anna nodded. "Quil save these seats, us peons are going to get some food before you people starve us."

"What am I?" Quil asked spreading his arms in question, "your manservant?"

"Yes," Anna replied immediately. "And if you be nice I'll bring you back a hotdog."

"Emily doesn't let the boys get up to eat until all the girls have. Part manners, part practicality," Anna explained as they stepped in at the end of the line, behind Rachel, Kim and Leah.

"Why the hell is Leah in line?" Brady demanded to know.

"Because even though I have more balls then you, Brade, I'm still a girl," Leah snarked as she speared a hamburger.

"You're exploiting gender differences to gain an advantage," Brady accused. "That is not fair!"

"How old is he?" Jezzie asked. She'd never heard anyone talk that way, let alone in an argument.

"Thirteen. Brady's the local whiz kid," Anna supplied.

"Consider it payback for millennia of male hegemony," and with that Leah stuck out her tongue and turned back around.
Sam's fiancée – Emily – handed Jezzie a plate and smiled. "Welcome, Jezzie. Sam told me about meeting you and Embry on the beach earlier this weekend. I'm glad you could come."

Jezzie was startled immediately by Emily's appearance. *That's* why Anna told her not to stare, though she supposed the warning helped very little. Emily might've once been beautiful, but she was scarred beyond recognition along one whole side of her body, cutting her into asymmetrical halves of beauty and beast. Three thick, jagged lines began at her hairline, turning it haphazard and uneven; they dragged down the corner of her eye and the other half of her smile into a static expression of sadness. The lines were thick and much lighter than Emily's naturally dark skin. They were puffy and uneven as though they had difficulty healing.

And as Jezzie glanced towards the food, to prevent herself from staring, she noticed the same tears traced down Emily's neck and bloomed out the bottom of her sweatshirt sleeve. The lines curled around her hand, bending a few of her fingers in an almost arthritic manner. She was missing half her pinky.

Emily's voice was low and a little scratchy – like she was recovering from laryngitis. Jezzie wondered if she was sick or if the damage to her neck had cut in far enough to affect her throat.

Jezzie plucked a hotdog bun from the pile, using that as her excuse to collect herself before glancing back to Emily with a smile. She had been genuinely nice to Jezzie. "Thanks for your hospitality," Jezzie nodded. "Did you make all of this?"

"Most of it," half of Emily's mouth pulled up into a small grin. "When you have this many boys in and out of your house all the time, you become really good at mass production."

"Bless your heart," Jezzie shook her head. "I can't bake for the life of me. Too many measurements."

Emily laughed and it was a pretty sound, a vestige of what she might've looked and sounded like. "Well, come by some time and I'll show you a few tricks," Emily offered before stepping out of her way. Anna stayed at the end of the line, talking to Emily, and Jezzie returned to her seat next to Quil.

"Anna's got your treaty hotdog hostage," Jezzie told him. "But you can have this cookie."

Quil took it from her offered fingers. "You're really good at this diplomacy thing," he noted through a bite. Jezzie only laughed. She was enjoying her flame-broiled hotdog when a whoosh and a thud landed Embry in Anna's spot next to Jezzie. "I take no responsibility for the loss of that seat," Quil forfeited as he glanced to Anna.

"Me neither," Jezzie insisted after swallowing her bite of hotdog. "I'm new here. I don't know the social seat dynamics yet. But you're her brother, so you might lose that battle."

"Good point," Quil acceded. "The line's finally dying down and I'm starving, so I think I'll just get the hell out of dodge."

Jezzie watched as a group of the four boys descended upon the table like starved refugees. "Save some for your brothers!" she heard Emily intone. She also thought she saw her whack one of them with a set of tongs.

"How do you people eat all that?" Jezzie asked Embry.

"Growing metabolism and all that?" he shrugged as he swallowed half of a hamburger in one bite. Jezzie could only laugh. "So no one's eaten you alive yet?"

"Were you expecting them to?" Jezzie asked as her eyes widened.
Embry thought for a minute before shaking his head. It was kind of hard to think around Jezzie sometimes. She smelled really good. Clearly, he’d been spending too much time around a bunch of people that didn’t shower enough and spent too much time in the woods. "Maybe Leah. But that wouldn’t be your fault. Want something to drink?" He offered her the small cooler that had slowly made it's way down and around the circle.

"Oh," she said quietly. This was always the weird part for her at parties. And she never learned how to respond normally. She didn't drink. She couldn't drink, she…

"Earth to Jezzie," Embry waved a hand slowly in front of her eyes. "Coke? Mountain Dew? Have a preference?"

"Oh!" she started. "Sorry. Um, Coke. Yeah. Thanks." She pulled the can out of the cooler and stood up and brought it over to Jared and Kim. She was glad she was spared the awkwardness of having to refuse alcohol. Most people just thought it was because she was a stick in the mud. But Embry hadn't even offered her the beer the cooler housed with the soda. She noticed that only a few of the party goers had even indulged in the local Redhook. Maybe they weren't big drinkers? Maybe one of the older ones was a stickler for legality. Jezzie wasn't sure.

"So how was your day? Did you get your job?" Embry interrupted her stream of consciousness.

Jezzie's face split into an immediate grin. "I think so! They're taking me on a test run this Saturday to see how I do. If all goes well, I'm in! School's okay, I guess. Same stuff, different day. I've met some nice people, so that helps."

Embry nodded, listening as she spoke. He noticed that everything she said was spoken with intentional emotion. Her voice had highs and lows and dips and lulls and a certain cadence to it. Like everything she said was set to score. She never tripped on a word. He could practically hear her oozing exclamation points. He watched her mouth a lot, the way it moved when she talked. He didn't have a lot of experience with women – phasing had kind of cut him down in his prime – but he wondered if all girls talked like this.

"How about you?" Jezzie asked, reciprocating the casual attention to caring for another person's day. It was sticky territory though. Embry wasn't about to tell Jezzie he'd skipped school because he slept for four hours – since he hadn't slept for the day prior – and then went on patrol.

"It was good," he replied.

Jezzie spent the rest of the evening getting acclimated to people she had just met or didn't know at all. She found Kim to be particularly energetic in a Tasmanian Devil sort of way. Anna and Jezzie spent a solid half hour firing Cheez-It's at Seth while he caught them in his mouth. Jezzie thought that might've been the only way to keep him quiet. Seth was an otherwise neverending stream of communication and talking. She was sure he couldn't give a one-word answer.

"So you're from Michigan?" Kim asked. "Or at least, that's what Quil's antics would lead us to believe. Unless his geography is as bad as his math and he thinks Detroit's in Ohio or Tennessee or Germany or something."

"Detroit, Michigan," Jezzie nodded. "His geography is spot on this time."

"With the love Embry, Jake and Quil share for anything car, I wouldn't doubt they know exactly where Detroit is."

Their conversation was interrupted by a series of melancholy wailing and the two spun around from
the table. There was a flaming pile of tin foil laying in the sand, slowly incinerating the once delicious contents. The second batch was a goner.

"This," Rachel shouted, "is why you morons need to leave the fire to me! I light the thing. None of you can cook over open flame worth a shit. Leave it to the Chemical Engineer, next time. God."

Jezzie looked a little stunned, but Kim just laughed as Jared and Quil looked forlornly at the lost food. Rachel then proceeded to shove the two men off on Claire – insisting that she could keep them in line and out of the way – while she tried to salvage some remnants of dinner without their interference.

Claire – in all her frolicking fury – roped Jared and Quil into chasing her around the pebbly beach as she ran away screaming in her sing-song voice. Jezzie couldn't help but smile as she watched. She'd never seen teenage boys take to playing with a small child – and a girl, no less – with such enjoyment and enthusiasm. Kim picked up on her gaze and smiled too. "The guys love kids, especially Claire. Don't let your guard down, because she'll crawl right under your skin and stay there forever."

"She's cute," Jezzie nodded. "Does she ever stop?"

"Singing? Or moving?"

"Either?"

"No. At least I don't think so. Emily tells me she sleeps, but I don't believe her."

Jezzie, Seth and Anna had offered to help Emily bring out the heavy guns for dessert. She'd stealthily hidden them in her car until this point. Jezzie no longer thought this was paranoid overkill. When she and Anna managed to bring the multiple pans of baked goods to the table together, she performed a double take – glancing again at the boy who was restocking plates and utensils. Collin, yes she was sure it was Collin. One of the younger boys, but she hadn't really seen him speak much at all.

She hadn't noticed earlier in the darkness, but the bonfire cast enough light on his face for Jezzie to see a vicious black eye occupying half of Collin's face. Anna noticed Jezzie's gaze linger over Collin just a fraction too long. When Jezzie looked back, the two girls shared a brief look.

Collin and Brady were a package deal the way Quil, Embry and Jake were. The two did everything together. And just as the three of them all balanced each other out well, so did the younger boys. Brady was the more gregarious. He reminded the others of what a younger Quil had been like. He was also always watching out for Collin. Brady's eyes would wander briefly during conversations and joking to find his friend. Visual confirmation is all he seemed to require.

Jezzie wasn't sure how to interpret Anna's look, but something told her Collin didn't have a sports-related injury…

The last hour of her presence at the La Push beach party seemed to spiral out of control quickly. Somehow, she'd gone from talking rugby tactics with Anna, laughing with Embry and throwing food at Seth with Kim, to being hoisted over Quil's shoulder and being carted determinedly towards the rolling Pacific. When Quil was ankle deep, she shrieked and scrambled up his shoulder until she was safely wrapped around his head. "Quil Ateara, don't you dare! This is hardly first date etiquette!"

"Who said we're dating?" Quil laughed through the muffling effects of having Jezzie's arms wrapped around his head.
"I consider myself dating the circle of friends you run with. This is not very nice at all! Look," Jezzie pointed to the pitiful waves, only inches high in the lowering tide "you're upsetting the ocean." Jezzie's teeth were chattering just looking at the frigid water sloshing back and forth – now up to Quil's knees. "Aren't you freezing?"

Quil shook his head inside of her psychotic embrace, and realization dawned on Jezzie. She turned around to face the crowd that was still gathered around the fire but watching with interest to see how her future played out. "Embry Call!" she disentangled one arm to point an accusing finger in Embry's direction. This is why she needed a change of clothes. "Why didn't you tell me I was going to get tossed out to sea? You no good liar!"

Embry continued to laugh and Jared shoved him good-naturedly. Embry was actually having a lot of fun watching Quil and Jezzie harass each other at equal intervals. But Jezzie was good, and he actually thought Quil liked her a bit. Maybe he was just psyching her out. "La Push tradition," he shrugged. "Can't spoil the surprise."

"Consider it an honor," Quil spoke. "We only toss the keepers. It's an ancient Quileute tradition dating back a whole year. The rest get to go home and aren't part of this awesome club."

"Club of what? Hypothermics?"

"Ha!"

"You should've seen when they threw Leah in!" Seth shouted from the group ten feet away. "She almost took out Quil's front teeth!" For that Seth earned a dope slap from his sister.

"Please," Jezzie begged. "Quil I don't want you to throw me to my icy death."

"You get thrown, or you gotta jump, Detroit."

"Jump?" she asked in confusion. With that Quil turned and released one of Jezzie's legs long enough to point to the cliff face that abutted First Beach on the north side. "How far's that drop?" she asked after a swallow.

"From where we'll let you? Thirty feet. Any higher and it's like landing on concrete."

"Fine," Jezzie replied instantly. She wasn't sure what possessed her to agree to jump off a thirty foot cliff. But somewhere in her mind she thought it was more courageous to jump willingly off a cliff than it was to get tossed into three feet of ocean water by an overgrown manchild. The first option at least left her the dignity of accomplishing something. The latter would do nothing for her credibility when her face finally surfaced out of the water with her butt in wet sand.

Was she caving to peer pressure? You better believe it.

"Are you serious?" Quil glanced up towards her. "Jezzie I was kidding. We're not going to make you jump off a cliff."

"Is it safe?" she amended. She wasn't going to jump to her death, that was for sure.

Quil nodded. "Not any less safe than driving a car." Jezzie gave him that one.

"Then quit talking smack, and let's go." Quil retreated from the ocean and Jezzie slowly disentangled herself from his head, neck and shoulders. She gave Embry her best stink eye and followed Quil as he made towards the line of cars. "I cannot believe you let that one slip. So unfair," she grumbled as she climbed into what she assumed was Leah's Chevy. She was driving it at least.
Embry, Quil and Seth got in the back. "So, it's Jessie?" Leah deadpanned.

"Jezzie. With a 'z' sound," she corrected her.

"That's weird," Leah said point blank as her four wheel drive rumbled off the main road and onto a dirt packed road with a steady incline through the trees.

"It's short for Jezebel, which is even weirder."

"The defenestrated whore Queen?" Leah asked, sounding genuine in her interest for the first time.

"Defenestrated, yes," Jezzie agreed. "But I would call her an assertive woman, who was attacked and finally murdered by the fanatic representatives of a male-dominated religion because she was independent and did not let men dominate her, and continued to defy those men to her last breath. Or a whore Queen. There's that too."

Seth, Embry and Quil shared similar looks of extreme confusion and bewilderment as the vehicle made easy if not bumpy work of the rocks that had begun to crop up in the path. The three of them looked rather comical all grouped together in the bed. Leah actually laughed once. It was a scary sound, Jezzie noted. "You're all right," Leah decided. Jezzie got the impression that that was as close to a compliment as she was going to get from Leah.

She parked the Chevy in the path and there appeared before them an opening in the trees, the top of the cliff. The three boys in the bed piled out as Jezzie undid her seat belt. "What the heck is defence-rated?" Seth asked.

"It means she was pushed out a window," Jezzie supplied as she stripped off her leather jacket, her sweatshirt, and her shoes.

"There's a word for something like that?"


Jezzie walked carefully to the edge of the cliff where the other four had gathered, feeling her toes grip the pine needle-strewn rocks. She shivered, convincing herself it was from the chill in the air and not the fact that thirty feet was a lot bigger in person. "Okay," Quil began, "see how it's all dark and calm down there?" Jezzie nodded as she peeked over the edge. "That's because it's deep and rock free. The cliff actually extends over the water, so you won't hit anything on the way down."

Jezzie nodded again. Why did this sound like a good idea?

"See you punks at the bottom," Seth grinned before vaulting off the cliff-face. "Bonzai!" Jezzie watched his path the whole way down and as he hit the water. It was a scary few moments before he resurfaced.

"Once you hit the water," Embry pointed out, leaning ever so slightly over her shoulder, "make back for the beach. It's a pretty easy swim."

"Gonna chicken out, Detroit?" Quil asked. "The offer to toss you in still stands." Jezzie shook her head. There was no way she was going back down this cliff face without having jumped. Backing out was worse than accepting her original fate of being ceremoniously thrown in. "What a champ," Quil grinned before jumping.

She backed up a careful few steps until she hit a solid mass of warmth. "You don't have to jump if you don't want, Jezzie," Embry told her as he braced her shoulders, so she didn't stumble. Embry
was extremely warm and Jezzie quite liked it. "Don't let my idiot friend sway you."

"Is it cold?" she asked quietly.

"You'll have too much adrenaline pumping through your system to really notice until you hit the beach."

Jezzie nodded in determination. "I'm going."

"Right behind you."

Those last words before she jumped were more encouragement and reassurance than she'd ever expected them to be.

Jezzie threw herself off that La Push cliff with relative abandon. It didn't make sense to jump meekly. No matter how she left that cliff, she'd inevitably hit the water. She figured she'd do it in style.

The air rushed quick and cold between her limbs and through her hair. It bit at her face and chilled her nose and lips, making her eyes dry up and sting. She blinked once more and held her breath as she pencil dived into the dark, freezing Pacific water. The rushing splash in her ears was overwhelming and the shock of the water felt like full body slam rather than a temperature change. Embry had been right.

She kicked her feet and forced herself to the surface. She broke through to air and took a grateful gulp. Quil and Seth were wading in shallower water half way to the beach. Her face split into a huge grin, feeling the adrenaline still pulse through her limbs as she continued to tread water. The water disturbed further and three feet from her Embry emerged.

"Bravo," he conceded with a smile. Jezzie grinned back smugly and began to swim a path towards the beach, Seth and Quil.

"Oh just wait for the retribution, my good man," Jezzie teased. "You will pay for this."

"Oh, yeah? How so?" he inquired. "Sic your dog on me?"

"That's a good idea," Jezzie agreed. "I just might…"

"This was all your idea," Embry pointed out. "I just thought you were going to get tossed into a tide pool. I didn't know you were going one up us all and jump off a damn cliff. That's totally your fault."

Jezzie issued one last glare before turning and making back for the beach

Ramifications.

Jezzie wasn't good at thinking those through. If she was, she probably could have seen her current predicament way before she climbed into Leah's truck. She was cold, yes, that much was true. Her fingers and her toes were chilled to the bone, and her skin couldn't shake its icy sheen. She had dried and redressed in the back of her Jeep in plenty of thick warm layers. The cold was making her shiver and the cold was giving her those reverberating pains. In her back and up and down her legs like little shocks and tweaks, pricks, tingle and pins and needles to her nerves they made her jittery and painful.

In retrospect, it was not a good idea. Given the givens. If she was lucky, the extreme temperature change wouldn't wreak long term havoc on her system like last time... She hated that. She hated
waking up and feeling those tingles and shocks for days or weeks...

She couldn't help but wince as she shivered. It was a vicious circle. It made her feel edgy, like a heroin addict.

She had unabashedly inserted herself between Embry and Leah's incredibly large and overheated side, upon returning from her Jeep. The rest of the group was mildly amazed or thought she was crazy. Either way, she earned a bit of respect from them all. She didn't regret it. It was actually quite fun. Jezzie would consider doing it again, though in much warmer weather.

She shivered as she felt the fatigue wrack her body. *Okay, maybe this was a stupid idea,* she thought. But it had been fun, she argued. She wasn't going to stop doing fun things… Chill didn't normally bother Jezzie, but freezing was something else entirely. Then Leah stood up and went to talk to someone else. Dammit...

"Jeez, you are friggin' freezing," Embry observed. "Are you okay?" He sounded concerned. He didn't have any opposition when the girl had sidled up to him. Because she still smelled really good. But after a while of being in direct contact with his 108 degrees, she continued to shake like epileptic. Maybe they shouldn't have let her jump.

"M'fine," she muttered. "Just really, really cold."

"Seth," Embry called to the boy across the fire. "Get over here." Seth stood and came over and Embry instructed him to plop down. Jezzie felt a wave of relief as Seth sat down beside her – just as warm as Embry.

"Salvation," Jezizzie intoned as she was fully sandwiched between two of the warmest people she'd ever met. "I don't know why you two are this hot, but I love it."

"Well, we are pretty sexy," Seth grinned. Jezzie reached up to slap her face, realizing what she'd just said.

"Nice blush," Embry commented.

"You guys," she whined in embarrassment as she futilely tried to burrow into her sweatshirt. "I meant temperature; I don't know why you're both so warm and toasty!"

"Well, that's far less of a compliment than calling us hot," Embry decided.

"But glad to see you're here for more than the man meat," Seth added.

Jezzie ducked her face into her sweatshirt determined never to come out. Or at least not for the next twenty minutes until she had to go home.

The series of teasing sexual harassment that Jezzie had brought upon herself was soon interrupted by an ear-piercing, howling scream. Jezizzie's head perked up out of her cocoon of warmth and embarrassment. Well at least the blush had kept her warm. She listened as the wailing continued. Emily's head spun to look around and she sprung up from her seat beside Collin and ran across the pebbly beach towards the sounds of a screaming Claire. She returned moments later on the heels of absolutely distraught looking Quil.

Claire was screaming and crying fit to burst, but for the most part it appeared she'd only sustained a single cut across her forehead. Emily forced Quil to sit down in her old spot and when he refused to let go of the girl, Emily crouched down in front of Claire in his lap and peeked through to the gash.
"I don't know," Emily shook her head, as Quil tried to calm Claire. "This might need some stitches."

"What?" Quil gasped. It sounded like he might've wanted to yell but at the expense of not upsetting Claire further, he lowered the volume.

Jezzie carefully disentangled herself from Seth and Embry's heat box. She missed the warmth immediately, feeling the cool breeze redouble through the fabric of her clothes and on her warmed skin. She moved over towards Emily, Quil and Claire and crouched down. "Would you guys like me to take a look? I have my med bag in my trunk?"

At Emily's momentarily confused look, Jezzie explained. "I'm an EMT." Emily nodded and Jezzie lead the way back up the beach towards her Jeep. She turned back once to see Emily all but tugging Quil up the beach. Claire's screeching had mostly subsided. Jezzie had learned from working on enough kids that they were fairly resilient and mostly screamed and cried from the sheer terror of having fallen – not from the injury itself. Their continued panic usually stemmed from their parents'. Or their teenage, cliff-diving babysitter's.

When Jezzie reached her Jeep she put the keys in the ignition so the interior lights would work and she dropped the back gate. She sat cross-legged and pulled her bag towards her. She found the disinfectant, antibiotics and butterfly closures. Forehead wounds usually weren't too deep, because you could only go so far before you hit bone. She didn't think Claire would need stitches, but it was always safe to check. When Emily rounded the passenger side of the Jeep tugging Quil after her, Jezzie smiled. Quil's level of concern was endearing, even if it was causing Emily to roll her eyes.

Jezzie patted the open tailgate space next to her and Quil sat down with Claire on his lap. "Hi Claire," Jezzie smiled cheerfully.

"Jezzie, you a doctor?" Claire asked through a small sniffle as Jezzie snapped a pair of gloves on.

"I'd like to be someday," Jezzie nodded as she leaned forward to clear Claire's bangs out of the way. Jezzie smiled at Emily's offer of a bobby pin to keep them held back. "I'm an EMT. I help people in ambulances, for now."

"Amba-lances are real loud," Claire nodded decidedly.

"Definitely," Jezzie nodded. "But it lets everyone know we're on our way to help." Thankfully, Claire hadn't fallen on a sandy part of the beach so there was minimal debris for Jezzie to clear out. "So how did this happen, huh, Claire?"

"Me and Quil and Jared was playing wolves and I fell and my head hit on a rock real hard."

"Wolves?" Jezzie asked as she carefully wiped the blood from Claire's unbroken skin and cleared her forehead. "How do you play that?"

"You get chased by Jared and Quil. And they growl a real lot. Like this 'grr'," Claire adopted the meanest face she could manage and scrunched up her hands into claws near her cheeks. "Show her Quil. You's a very good wolf."

"Maybe later, Claire," Quil replied quietly; Jezzie was surprised that Quil was more bent out of shape about this ordeal than Claire was.

She checked the depth of the cut and it was big but it wasn't terribly deep. It looked worse than it was. "And what happens if you get caught?" Jezzie asked. "Quil and Jared seem very fast."

"They are!" Claire nodded vehemently inadvertently causing Jezzie to wipe down her nose. "If I get
caught I *bite* them. Like this," and again she illustrated her best gnawing actions. "Jezziejezziejezziejezziejezzie!" Claire quickly intoned and Jezzie detected a subject change on the horizon. "You jumped off the big rocks with Quil and Embry and Uncle Seth!"

"I did," she nodded slowly as she opened the butterfly stitches. "Did you see that?" Jezzie only now thought about how bad of an example that was for Claire. If she so easily smashed her head against beach pebbles, what would it take for Quil and Emily to keep her from cliff-diving?

"Mhm," she hummed. "It looks like real fun and real scary. Quil and Auntie Emily says I can't try until I'm older."

"I think that's a good call on Emily and Quil's part," Jezzie agreed "This might sting a little bit." Claire resumed what must've been quite the toddler chokehold on Quil's hand as she bit on her lip. Jezzie applied the antiseptic and Claire didn't even flinch.

"He says I have to be this," she poked a spot on Quil's side as she half turned, "tall before I can try."

"I would have to agree," Jezzie nodded. "That's a very good height. Can I ask you to hold real, real, super still for one minute while I put these on?" Jezzie asked.

Claire remained obediently immobile. "Wha's that? A band-aid?"

"Sort of," Jezzie replied as she leaned in close and applied the three butterfly sutures to Claire's forehead. "It's like really small band-aid. It holds your skin together so it can make a scab and heal. They're called butterfly stitches."

"I love buddaflys… I got a real big scab last summer when I fell off the swings! I had to go to see a doctor in the hos-dible for that! 'Member Quil?"

"Prone to wipeouts, aren't we Claire?" Jezzie noted as she applied antibiotic to the closed up wound.

"Mhm," she hummed.

"You have *no* idea," Quil offered.

"Well, mademoiselle," Jezzie spoke with a flourish as she sat back. "You have faired well through this mighty task. May I offer you a reward for your hardship?" Jezzie pulled two lollipops out of her bag. "Pink or green?"

"Pink is for babies," Claire said decidedly. "Green, please!"

Jezzie offered the girl the candy and Emily carefully pulled her from Quil's lap. "Why don't you take a break, Quil. So," she continued turning to Jezzie, "no stitches?"

"Nope," Jezzie shook her head. "It's big, but it's not deep. Do you guys have some general antibiotic cream at home? Neosporin or anything like that… If you apply that regularly it should keep from getting infected and help with the scarring."

Emily nodded and thanked Jezzie for her help and kindness. She also patted Quil on the cheek in a maternal sort of way as she brought a green-mouthed and eternally chattering Claire back down to the beach and her shrieks of "Uncle Sam!" could be heard the entire way.

Quil sighed and slumped back against the wall of Jezzie's Jeep. Jezzie pulled her gloves off and tucked the trash and inside as she folded the pair in on itself. "Why do I get the distinct feeling that was harder on you than it was on Claire," Jezzie noted idly.
"Because it probably was," Quil replied. "She's never fazed when she gets hurt."

"Kids are like that," Jezzie nodded. "They're very resilient and tend to bounce back easily. They panic when the adults panic."

"I'm really good at panicking," Quil decided.

"You just tossed me off a cliff with no qualms about it, but Claire trips on the beach and the world's gonna end?"

Jezzie had been expecting a snarky comment but Quil only nodded. "Yeah."

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**Thursday, October 19, 2006**

Jezzie was buried under a pile of new Physics homework in the library's common area, when her phone rang.

She didn't think to check who it was before she picked up. "Hello?"

"Hey whore Queen."

"Oddly enough, I think I that's cooler than 'Detroit'."

"Damn right it is. Because getting your choice of the man meat and still ruling a country is way more awesome than people calling you a has-been rust belt city. No offense."

"None taken. What can I do for you Leah?" Jezzie found herself smiling after her quick exchange with Leah. She had a tough exterior but seemed like a cool enough of girl – she was smart and funny at least.

"Anna says you play rugby?"

"Yeah, scrum-half. Why?" Jezzie adjusted the phone to her shoulder as she dug her equation sheet out of her folder and tried to keep her calculator from falling on the floor.

"Local rec team needs a scrum-half. Tiffany blew out her knee last week and won't be back. You game?"

"When?"

"Next practice is Saturday at nine. Forks High football field."

"I'll be there," Jezzie grinned.

"See you then, whore Queen."

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**Wednesday night-Thursday morning, October 19-20, 2006**

Whatever pull that had woken Embry up had also torn him completely out of his bed. He was out of the house, in the woods and in wolf skin before his conscious mind realized he was responding to his unconscious one. To his wolf. Embry's wolf felt that it was rather unseemly that it had to inform its human that they had received an Alpha order. Sleep was no excuse.

He could feel Jake's enraged demand rippling through the Pack power structure and Embry could
feel Leah as well as Paul pulling at the edges of his mind with the same order. *Here. Now.*

He could feel the panic, hear the paws of his pack against well-trod forest paths like drums. He could hear snarling and indecipherable emotions of a wide array that served more to make him angry and less to identify the cause. Embry felt the steady hum of presence – like pulse – from Jared and Seth. Whatever they were all out for and running fit to make their hearts beat out of their chests – it wasn't good.

*Leeches*… the thought of the finished newborn army from last spring tore through Jared's mind and Embry distinctly remembered the ravenous demons and that acrid choking smoke of their funeral pyre.

Brady and Collin popped into the collective consciousness. They both appeared to be suffering from the same summons as Embry. Torn from their beds in the middle of the night by an Alpha on the warpath, the new pups might as well have been having night terrors having both woken up running and phased - with no idea how they got that way.

*Brady, Collin. Stay at the treaty line. You wanted something to do: you guard the res – no holes. No one goes in or out.* Jake's order stopped the two pups dead in their tracks and Embry could hear the scuffing of Earth as the two tried not to topple over with the sudden forced change of direction.

Finally Embry was able to articulate something that wasn't pure emotion. *What's going on? I was dead asleep! That was insane. That's never happened before!* Embry thought and he got sparing visions from both Leah and Jake. It seemed that they we're at...

*The Old Forks Cemetery?* Seth tried to confirm before his thoughts were cut off and the entire Pack Mind was consumed with both Jake and Leah's visual.

A beast that possessed qualities of both man and wolf hunched over a freshly white granite gravestone. The hind legs were high at the ankle and the knees bowed out with a certain lupine quality. The fore paws were gnarled, knuckled and brutal yet far more articulate in their task of digging up the recently deceased individual beneath the soft piled earth. With the head of a wolf and the eyes of a man, the jaws salivated and ground together with the realization of the nearness of its goal.

Covered entirely in a bristling, wiry coat - patches of fur matted or torn away at sparing intervals - the beast would have been terrifying to behold in calmer circumstances. For the Pack to discover this monster unearthing the Forks dead and feasting on their preserved flesh, added not only disgust but an instinctual and deeply seated rage. The sort of rage that pushed the Pack to kill, kill, *kill*. Born for protection, they would not allow harm to befall humans. Even in the after life.

Jake and Leah were already upon the creature, having heard it quietly edge through their patrol lands with its quick and awkward gait. Paul and Jared had been pulled from their respective evening activities just as Embry had and they could all feel Jake holding back as much as he could and trying to keep the order from reaching Sam. The unthought idea hung in all their minds in abstraction. What if they needed Sam?

Quil phased in to the collective mind in Neah Bay and Jacob insisted he stay phased but not come quite yet. Eight on one should have been good enough odds. Jared, Paul and Embry's paths met as they crossed into Forks.

Whatever it was that had broken the areas lines, it was fighting back with remarkable damage. Its bite and claws didn't act like normal altercations with shapeshifters. This was not the Pack's first hint that this wolf was not a normal shapeshifter. The slashes administered by articulate arms and paws stung
like acid and receded further into the wound, deepening injuries at Leah's side and across Jake's back. The two quickly learned this was a dangerous new prospect and they all felt Leah's roll of anxiety as she realized the havoc its jaws might wreak.

Pushing against his own mind and his own capacity for speed, Embry followed Jared and Paul through the town to the far side that housed the only cemetery. Where the hell are the leeches? Paul roared.

I don't know. It's not important right now! Jake fired back.

We've broken the treaty, Jake. Jared shouted. We crossed the border without escort or permission. The whole Pack will be here in less than two minutes! They're gonna kill us!

FOCUS!

Embry happened to agree that now was not the time to discuss supernatural politics and foreign relations. As Leah lunged at the rangy monster that seemed bent on killing her, taking her or continuing its meal - it turned about, made off and into the woods. Even further into town.

Jared, Paul flank left! Jake ordered. Leah and Embry with me on the right! Seth, you cut through town and watch the line – back up Brady and Collin. I do NOT want this thing on La Push land, understand? There was silent acquiescence as Jared, Paul and Seth could be seen drifting quickly outwards into the surrounding tree cover.

Jake I can catch the bastard; I'm fast enough! Leah insisted.

You're already torn to shreds, Embry noted as he joined her. Leah was bleeding heavily from the side leaving traces as she ran and Embry's ears could detect easily the female's altered breathing pattern. She might've also been missing an ear.

It'll turn on any of us and be done before we could think. It's too smart to be chased. But it's slow. We have to outflank it. Now, go!

Jared and Paul bowed out and soon only their minds could be heard. Jake, Leah and Embry soon faded into the woods on the right and Seth arced through Forks and past the scent and sound of the beast stumbling through the woods. Leah resisted the urge to tear after it and soon she, Jake and Embry had closed into the slowing creature on the right.

Jake ordered Jared and Paul to fall in from behind and spread out while he, Embry and Leah did the same from the front. Brady, Collin and Seth moved their paths steadily closer towards the circling wolves and out from the La Push line.

The six wolves closed in on the monster and cornered him in a parking lot outside the local supermarket. They were all thoroughly happy that 3AM in Forks, Washington was an absolutely desolate affair. Normally, they would have never seen the town proper while in wolf skin. Even at this hour. It was too high a risk to run. But now, whatever creature that had found its way into the Olympic peninsula proved more of a threat than the small chance of being sighted.

The creature seemed disoriented by the pavement beneath its ragged claws. It alternated between stumbling around bipedally and running on an uneven four paws. It snarled and hissed and lashed out as the Pack emerged from the woods a collective growl reverberating from their throats.

The monster seemed to recognize its own imminent demise and began to crouch lower and lower but never fully submitted. Turning in circles it refused to face away from Jake, Paul or the closing in Leah for very long.
It senses the Pack hierarchy, Jake explained. Embry? Jared? You're closest. You ready? he indicated to the wolves on the far side of the loop watching the creatures back.

Damn straight, Jared crooned. 'Bout time Emb and I got some action out here!

Let's do this, Embry agreed. And with unparalleled synchronization, the two wolves leapt upon the monster, crashing into it and tearing at limbs. The creature yelled in pain and fear and the rest of the Pack descended upon it. Killing and dismembering it in a fashion reminiscent of the only enemy the Pack thought they had, they burnt the remains.

As Seth was assigned to watch the pile of embers burn down and Jared, Collin, Brady and Leah set to patrol Forks as well as La Push, Jake took Paul and Embry to the Cullens.

Jacob Black is there a reason you're not taking your Alpha Female with you to confront the asshats that totally disregarded a trespasser on their land and let us fight their battle for them? Hm? Leah raged.

Yes, Leah, Jake confirmed as he and Embry and Paul ran to the Cullen home. There is. Number one, you're bleeding frickin' everywhere. And number two, you hate them enough on a good day. I'm no master diplomat but tearing a limb off one of them is probably not going to make the situation any better. Heal up. Guard the borders. And with that the tripartite phased human at the edge of the Cullen property.

Embry felt at least marginally vindicated when he saw that the coven was in a minor state of disarray. None of the Pack knew what could cause such a serious oversight for the coven. They also didn't appreciate being forced to cross treaty lines in defense of the population due to that oversight. It was not a happy set of ambassadors that stomped up the porch steps.

Jake gave them the courtesy of knocking even though they would have heard and Alice would have anticipated their coming. It was a shock to have Emmett open the door and appear suddenly surprised by their arrival. Their unkempt, harried, sweaty and irritated arrival.

"Boys…" Emmett began, seeming confused by their arrival and disheveled state. Hell, they probably didn't even know the whole Pack had broken the treaty. Embry could see and hear inside and sounded as if their smallest coven member – Alice – the clairvoyant was in a great deal of pain. She could be seen on the living room sofa, curled up, surrounded by her husband, mother and sister. Her face was pinched and scrunched and she emitted a constant stream of whimpers interspersed with occasional loud cries. She also kept clutching her head.

Emmett noticed both Embry and now Paul's direction of focus and glanced quickly back to Alice before returning to meet the Alpha's angry glare.

"Do you have anyone out in Forks right now? Anyone running the area?"

"No," Emmett admitted. "We're kind of in the middle of a crisis," he nudged his head back in Alice's direction as she whimpered.

"You're goddamn right we're in the middle of a crisis," Jake growled.

"Not so loud," Rosalie insisted from Alice's side on the couch.

"I'm loud because I'm pissed. We had a border crossing today! We had some monster tearing ass through Forks eating your dead and none of you knew it! I had to send my wolves across the treaty line into Forks proper to defend your land because you weren't paying attention!"
"What?" Emmett replied in amazement. As Jacob inhaled to speak again, Carlisle entered the room from the kitchen followed by Edward. Paul reached up to grasp Jake's shoulder and halt his impending tirade. Alpha or not, Jake was still a kid and Paul knew thing or two about when to shut the hell up.

"Jacob, what's going on? I'm sorry – but I just overheard. I'm afraid my family's been terribly distracted; Alice has been extremely ill."

Jacob took a breath, embracing the well-buried manners his mother taught him. "Carlisle, there was some kind of… creature… roaming around Forks. Leah got a whiff of him as he came from the North just outside our land and dipped East into Forks. When we found it, it wreaked of human blood and was eating the remains of a gravesite in Forks Cemetery."

"Is everyone all right?" Carlisle asked.

"Except for that ash pile of a rangy bastard? Yes."

"Did you get a look at this… creature?" Edward asked slowly.

Jacob nodded and he could tell Edward was grazing over his mind for an image of the monster as his eyes momentarily flickered. "Yeah. At first we thought it was a shapeshifter. A lone wolf. But it wasn't. It was longer, rangy, missing whole clumps of fur, still built really human. It ran upright half the time and had these weird hands. It wasn't one of ours."

Edward nodded and soon disappeared as Jacob shook off the creepy air of the now-dead monster and continued to lay into the local coven for its breach of security. "I don't know how you run things here Carlisle, and frankly it's none of my business, but we have an alliance. If I can't trust you to guard your own land from crap that could hurt and kill humans, we're going to have some serious problems. I won't risk the lives of my Pack on your land. You have to have some responsibility in the security detail, as well."

Carlisle watched Jacob thoughtfully and glanced to Alice who – despite the racket of three angry shapeshifters in her living room – had quieted and stilled significantly. "Alice," Carlisle spoke. "When was it that the pain first hit you this evening?"

Alice disentangled her wrist from the unnecessary blanket on top of her and consulted her wrist. "Only about an hour or so ago," she chirped quietly. "It was terrible. Worse than when the Pack's around. They give me headaches because I'm so used to seeing but this was like something was pushing back, not just blocking me."

"The creature probably crossed the US border little more than an hour ago – especially if it was running the whole time like we believe," Paul added. "Maybe that's what's been the cause of this."

Edward returned then with a small book in his hand, he handed it quickly to Jacob and returned to the coven leader's side. Jake cleaved the small, old book open at the bookmark placed inside.

*Lycaon is turned into a wolf,* the top of the page read. A black and white portrait of a man with the head and features of a wolf was imprinted upon the page. *Beast of Gevaudan* read the next, with a print of even more lupine quality following. The preceding pages were filled with similar appearances: *Yeux Rouges, Skinwalkers, Asena, Vârcolac.*

"This is a book full of werewolves," Embry remarked as he watched over Jake's shoulder.

"Exactly."
"We're not werewolves," Jacob pointed out.

"No, but it sounds and looks like this thing was. The Pack doesn't share a lot of characteristics with any werewolf lore outside of La Push. And even then, you are considered shapeshifters, a controlled force for good, not werewolves."

"You think we just encountered a werewolf?"

"The pictures fit your description, do they not? And it certainly explains Alice's condition. You block her visions because your life and your job is unpredictable. A true werewolf would block her visions because it is vicious and volatile and completely uncontrolled by the human mind."

"Children of the Moon were hunted to near extinction by the Volturi and others of our kind in recent centuries," Carlisle supplied. "They're immune to vampire venom and travel mostly solitary. Caius is absolutely terrified of them."

"Near extinction?" Jacob hedged.

"These sorts of things are very hard to confirm when the lives we lead are so unorganized and undocumented. There hasn't been word of any for several decades. We assumed they had all been purged."

"Well, I guess you assumed wrong! That's great and all Carlisle – real werewolves – that's really and truly fantastic. We can deal with whether or not we're gonna have a new vendetta from another species on our hands later, and I'm really sorry about Alice's headache, but right now my Pack is patrolling your land. I'm calling them off once this meeting's over. I expect you to hold up your end of security, since apparently these things pose as much of a threat to your kind as ours."

"Absolutely," Carlisle nodded in peaceful agreement. "I'm terribly sorry for all of this and am glad to hear that your Pack is unharmed. Emmett, Esme, myself and Edward will follow you out and will take over for your Pack. We let our guard down, but we'll keep a steady patrol from now. We truly appreciate your work and do not hold the act against you, regardless of treaty demands."

"Thanks," Jake muttered quietly. "We'll talk more in the morning, but I got a sixteen year old with a pile burning remains I need to shoulder through some emotional trauma."

Embry suppressed a laugh – which came out more like a cough – at the thought. Far from traumatized, Embry very much thought that Seth cared more for the fact that he was trusted enough to have a job all to himself (even if it was just watching a burning pile of rubble in the woods). The fact that the burning pile of rubble was once a human was largely irrelevant.

"One of you can take cemetery detail – I'm not making one of my wolves rebury a half eaten Forksian."

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed in a way that Paul found extremely obnoxious. Jacob lead the other two out of the Cullen house. They stayed in the yard on the edge of the trees waiting and watching for the expected Cullen patrol before wordlessly disappearing into the woods.

Shouldering Seth through the burden of emotional trauma? Paul laughed as the three ran to rejoin the Pack. That's rich.

What about emotional trauma? Seth piped in from across town. Can I leave yet? Not that this isn't like a really friggin' interesting job and all – I'll watch a campfire for extended periods any day of the week – but I'm getting really tired and I have a Biology exam tomorrow that I do have a snowball's chance in passing. And this thing smells worse than burning vamp. I mean, this isn't even technically
my patrol time – I get that it’s an ‘emergency’ and ‘extenuating circumstances’ and all that but a
growing boy needs his sleep and if this becomes a regular thing I’m starting a union.

Seth! Jared shouted from across the reservation. Can it; you’re giving me a migraine.

You can head back when a Cullen shows up. Should be anytime now. Everyone else meet me in my
yard in ten minutes. The Cullens can patrol lands for a half hour Pack meeting.

"All right, everyone shut up!"

Jacob seemed to be starting many Pack meetings this way.

The entirety of the La Push Pack had assembled and Jacob was quickly reminded of why he hated
Pack meetings. Besides not having anywhere to fit, anymore. The noise was deafening. Sam, Jared,
Paul, Leah, Seth, Brady, Collin, Embry and Quil all sat in a loose circle in Jacob’s backyard. At
4AM. Leah wasn't bleeding anymore, at least; Sam was half-asleep; Quil was still trying to catch his
breath after running down from Neah Bay; and Jake was pretty sure Seth was collecting names to
start that union of his.

"Okay," Jake sighed after the roaring turned to silence. "Let's get this started. I don't like not having
any of our bodies on patrol after an attack. So, we seem to have gathered that this creature was a
bonafide werewolf. Children of the Moon, is what Carlisle called it."

"Legit werewolves?" Quil asked skeptically. He'd only just arrived from Neah Bay in time for the
meeting after sensing Jake’s order for everyone to meet in his yard. Jake hadn’t meant quite everyone,
which is why both Sam and Quil were awake and in the Black’s yard at such an unholy hour, but
Jake was still getting used to finessing his Alpha orders.

"Legit werewolves," Paul nodded.

"Carlisle says they’ve been hunted to near extinction, but apparently there was still at least one out
there. My confidence in that being the only one left is really minimal. They mostly travel solo, so we
shouldn't expect too much backlash – except from a possible single running partner – but it’s not
something I'm leaving to chance. The new patrol schedule goes into effect this morning with first
shift. Paul, Jared? That's you."

"Joy," Jared sighed. "Sleep is overrated anyways…"

"I'll run with all first shifts for today," he added. "Just for extra numbers. Just to be safe."
This AN is longer than Russian literature and I'll understand if you don't read all of it. Just know I screw with a couple wolfpack age ranges.

So I recently realized a serious issue I have with canon aging in the Saga and have blatantly tossed canon to the wind in order to fit logic. So sue me. Here is an age breakdown as far as this fic is concerned. Changes to canon are noted with an asterisk (*).

21 years old = Leah, Rachel, Jezzie
20 years old = Sam, Emily
19 years old = Jared*, Paul*
17 years old = Embry
16 years old = Jake, Quil
14 years old = Seth, Anna
13 years old = Brady, Collin

We are not given actually birthdays for any Pack members except Jacob (he's born in January). We must survive on years alone.

Leah, Rachel, and Sam are born in 1986 (we know nothing about Emily besides that she's born in the late 80s). The way numbers work out someone is inevitably twenty-one before someone else and we come into this story in October, so we're part of the way through the year – ergo Leah and Rachel are older. Same deal with Embry being a few months older than Jake and Quil.

Jared and Paul are billed as the same age as Jake, Quil, and Embry. I call bullshit. We are told that Jared and Sam are casual friends through school. These two have no friendship connection to J/Q/E. And Paul is apparently not friends with any of the Pack at all before phasing (three times those six degrees separates him from Kevin Bacon).

None of this makes any sense. The reservation population of La Push is just under 400 people. Grand total. There are less than 200 in the entire K-12 Quileute Tribal School system. That's about 11 people per grade.

It makes no sense to me that Jared and Sam are casual friends after sharing only a year of high school, but neither Jared nor Paul has any association with J/Q/E whatsoever (or each other), regardless of all five them being the same grade. Regardless of all five of them being about half the grade.

Ergo, I bump Jared and Paul up a few years in life. That way a Sam/Jared friendship makes about as much sense as Jared and Paul not giving two shits about the three boys two years younger than them. And quite honestly, I always felt like they were billed as closer to Sam's age in the Saga.

/rant over.
"Hi, Mrs. Peters," Jezzie crooned as she rounded the corner into the small office. She hadn't even gone further into the campus before stopping to visit the secretary.

"00000467124," Mrs. Peters said with a smile without looking up from her pile of paperwork.

Jezzie was in the IT office to have Mrs. Peters look up her student ID number so she could log onto the school's servers almost every other day. Jezzie mostly laughed it off and tried to be as polite as possible. People were less worried or annoyed when you were polite about it. Jezzie made a mental note to maybe write it down in her phone as she marched toward the computer lab to print her homework. Her dashboard was already covered in post-its. Her memory was getting worse. Never a good sign.

"Jezzie," came a call from down the hall before a large body crash landed in step next to her.

"Kyle," she smiled and called back in the same tone as she swung her bag around and reached for her English book. Kyle was definitely more outspoken and fit the brand of extroverted personalities Jezzie seemed to be befriending in the Pacific Northwest. She wondered if Kyle knew Quil. She felt like they'd get along.

"You hear about what happened in the Old Forks Cemetery last night?" Jezzie felt her brows knit together. She'd left the house in a bit of a rush today – her morning run had gotten her a bit lost and she hadn't passed by the cemetery – she also hadn't flipped the radio on.

"No," she shook her head. She decidedly did not know what Kyle was talking about.

Kyle leaned in a bit with a serious expression. "Someone dug up Reverend Hatchett," he said quietly.

"What?" Jezzie responded with a small hike in the pitch of her voice as she slammed her locker door.

Kyle only nodded. "Swan and his Deputy were there his morning when I drove by. Someone dug up Old Reverend Hatchett."

Jezzie couldn't pick her jaw off the floor as she shuffled along to class with Kyle. She knew Reverend Jeremiah Hatchett was one of the town's most important figures. He'd helped erect the first Christian Church in town and had also served as mayor for a few years. He'd presided over the laying of a lot of infrastructure during the town's boom years, and was - apparently - very charismatic. She'd read enough of the visitor's center pamphlets to remember that much. That and the fact that everything in town was named after him. Someone digging the hundred year old corpse up was a big deal.

"Who was it?" Jezzie asked through a whisper. "Why?"

Kyle shrugged. "Who knows why. People are whack. But my money's on the La Push gang," he said slowly and gave Jezzie a small elbow to the side.

"La Push gang?" Jezzie asked dubiously.

"Yeah, Jezzie," Kyle said like it was obvious. "Haven't you noticed those boys you hang out with on the res are kinda shady?"

"They're not shady," Jezzie retorted as she stopped at the entrance to the girls' restroom. Kyle had another class to go to this block.
"Jezzie," he paused long enough to lean against the wall. "They only spend time with each other. They're seen coming and going all hours of the day and night. Half of them don't have regular jobs and the other half barely ever make it to school."

"So?" she shrugged. "They all have their reasons I'm sure. Life's not a cake walk for everyone."

"Have you ever asked?"

"No," she replied aghast. "It's none of my business."

"And they keep recruiting," Kyle added. "Last I heard they now had middle schoolers running with them. A bunch of sixteen and seventeen year olds, and now younger and younger kids - who start to follow the same patterns?"

"Kyle," Jezzie snapped in an uncharacteristic move. "They're not a gang. I think I would've noticed by now."

"I've got to get to class. Just be careful, Jezzie, okay? Don't get hurt."

Jezzie swallowed and nodded soundlessly before pulling the bathroom door open. It was a moment before she heard someone come in behind her. "What the…" she glanced in the mirror. "Kyle! Do you have a vagina?"

He glanced down at the crotch of his pants. "Nope. Pretty sure this morning's leak was penile."

"You're in the girl's bathroom!"

"Jezzie," he crossed his arms and looked at her. "Kyle," she imitated him. When he didn't respond immediately she just marched into a stall. She really had to pee.

"Look," she heard him speak from outside. "Could you just do me a favor and not completely disbelieve me? You give your friends in La Push an ounce of credit give me one too."

"And how do you propose I do that?"

"Just be smart, Jezzie. Use your judgment. You're a city-dweller, aren't you supposed to be good at that kinda stuff?"

"I like to think so…" she replied. "Look, I'll promise you to stay vigilant if you promise to leave the girls room so I can pee?"

She didn't want to let Kyle's words get to her. For the rest of the day she concentrated on her classwork. This was a rarity. It wasn't that Jezzie was opposed to school necessarily but sometimes she was far too hipster philosophical for the whole affair.

She paid attention with remarkable effort that day but Kyle's theories still bled small trails of doubt into her head. In theory, he was right. The group of La Push boys was an odd gathering of humanity. And those young boys - Collin and Brady - were starting to gravitate to the group. Even Seth was awfully young to be hanging out with guys like Sam, Paul and Jared. Jezzie had always chalked that up to his sister. Leah was their age and Seth must've just tagged along. Except Leah - despite spending time with those boys - seemed to think they were a bunch of idiots.

Jezzie didn't know how much truth there was to what Kyle said about them being a bunch of
dropouts. She knew that Seth, Embry and Quil were still in school. Sam was definitely past graduation point - as well as Jared and Paul. She wasn't sure about Jake. And to be honest she had no idea about any of their employment situations besides that Embry worked at a local store. Because it was none of her business.

Saturday, October 21, 2006

As she drove to rugby practice that Saturday (the blue post-its were for reminding her about sports-things; god bless those blue post-its), she had no school work to distract her and her brain ran wild. At least, though, she could be sure they didn't dig up Reverend Hatchett. Gang or not, they were not malicious, bad or mean guys. That Jezzie knew. She had lived plenty of places and known plenty of people. She knew a bad person when she met one. The La Push boys were immature, confused and confusing, foul-mouthed teenagers. But they weren't bad people. That much Jezzie knew.

It didn't give her much in the way of reassurance. She hopped out of her Jeep and immediately regretted the aggressive action as it reverberated pain up through her feet and shins. "Ow," she grimaced as she trudged to her trunk to pull out her bag. She glanced down at her lower half and behavie, she growled internally. She heard and felt a thunk as Anna plopped down on her bumper. "What's eating you, Detroit?" she asked as she tossed her tape in the air.

"What's your brother up to?" It was a moment before Jezzie realized she'd said that aloud. She clapped her hand over her mouth. "Oh my goodness. I can't believe I just said that. I'm so sorry."

Anna only uttered a single laugh. She didn't appear insulted. "You mean like this instant or in general?"

"No," Jezzie shook her bead pulling her bag out of the trunk window and resisting the urge to close her head in it. "Really. Ignore that. You don't have to answer that."

Anna glanced inquisitively at Jezzie as the two walked towards the field beyond the dirt lot. "Well now I'm curious. Were you like... asking because you're interested in him? Or are you asking because... I don't know? You heard something? There's a lot of ways to take that question."

"No!" Jezzie gasped as her eyes bugged. "Goodness no, I'm not interested in your brother. No offense or anything. But I'm not. I just..." she paused, unsure of how to phrase her concern without insulting Anna. Although, where her brother was concerned, that seemed impossible.

"It's not just Quil. It's all of them. And the fact that you and I both know exactly who I'm talking about when I say the phrase 'all of them'."

Anna paused before the grassy field and looked at Jezzie. "I follow," she nodded for her to continue.

"It's odd. All of them. The way they... It's just... They're not up to anything bad, are they?" she finally blurted out.

Anna smiled reassuringly at Jezzie. "You've heard the La Push gang rumors, huh?"

"I'm sorry," Jezzie's face collapsed into a mask of defeat and sadness. "It's not that I think that. I'm just worried."

"Chillax? Look, there are only three hundred people in this town normally. Four or five during tourist season. We're pretty much the only kids around. Everyone else is too young, too old or really is doing stupid shit with their lives. We're kind of the leftovers, you know?"
"New concept for the city girl," Jezzie offered a grin apology, even though Anna seemed to think it was unnecessary.

"Was wondering when you punks would get here," called a tall woman with short dark hair as Anna and Jezzie entered the high school's locker room. Jezzie remembered that this was Rachel. She had yelled at the boys for burning the food at the bonfire. "Jezzie, right?" the girl confirmed, seeming to follow a similar mental track.

"Where's Addie?" Anna asked dumping her bag on a bench.

"Hell if I know," Rachel replied, sitting down and pulling her jersey over her head.

"She's your girlfriend," Anna rolled her eyes.

Jezzie sat down and got ready for practice – a ritual she hadn't gone through in years but still felt like a recent pastime. She listened to the chatter and noise of the locker room as other women got ready and as Anna and Rachel talked. They were soon joined by Leah – who gave Jezzie a smirk and a nod. Then, someone came in the door like a freight train.

"Someone's laaate again," someone out of sight sang as a small, curvy woman darted around the corner and into their small block of the locker room.

"I am not!" the woman shouted as her bag crashed to the floor and her short hair swung around her waist. "And so help me, if coach hears you and makes me do those ridiculous ballet stretches from her daughter's dance class I am taking you out."

The girl sounded serious, but the laughter in the locker bay over indicated that she might've been exaggerating. The woman huffed and paused looking down at her bag and then around to the gathered eyes watching her. She paused on Jezzie, obviously not recognizing her. Jezzie noticed that she was physically similar to the Quileute women around her, but also quite different. Her hair was long, dark and black as anything and her skin was a deep natural tan. But she didn't look Native.

Leah noticed her pause on Jezzie and spoke up first. "Addie, that's Jezzie."

"Oh!" the woman nodded in recognition. "Okay, yeah. The girl you and Rach mentioned? The freshmeat that went cliff-diving?" she smiled with that last one.

Jezzie nodded in confirmation, unsure if the comment was directed to her or not. "I'm Jezzie. It's nice to meet you."

"Same. Adrienne Patel," the woman smiled. "Call me Addie."

And with that, Jezzie learned to fall into the swing of things with her new rugby teammates. A few more were from La Push, some were from Forks and there was a handful from neighboring towns. The age range was varied and they only let Anna in because she fit the weight and build for an eighteen year old, not a fifteen year old, and no school in the area offered rugby to the female students. Joy Ateara had to sign a lot of waivers.

Jezzie spent the remainder of the morning watching the Pacific mist settle into the earth and pounding her muddled up thoughts into the half torn gridiron at Forks High. Jezzie wasn't surprised to find that Leah played forward and enjoyed the hell out of mowing people down. And despite being a bit young, Anna was a pretty good lock. Jezzie reveled in the feeling of the lactic acid burn in her muscles as the pain and ache set in.

Nothing like going home covered in mud with a bloody nose to make your troubles disappear.
Jezzie decided that school was beginning to fall into a regular pattern. Boring? Sure. But Jezzie would take boring over feeling totally isolated. Despite how very rarely new students came into town according to Kyle, Veronica, Kayla and Ricky they fell into an easy pattern. There was a lot that Jezzie didn't understand – mostly about the area and some inside jokes. Patterns were good. Patterns made things easier for her to remember and it meant less post-its around her dashboard and her house. She didn't feel quite so incapable…

It could have been worse. At least she only had to drive her Jeep up to PA a few times a week. Veronica and Kyle were great about carpooling. Ricky tended to forget a lot. He got voted out of the driver's spot in their sophomore year, apparently, after they were all late so often.

So since she could label college a moderate victory thus far, it was time to move to her test run for her job prospect that night. After she showered all the mud off, of course. The test shift on the Forks Community Hospital Emergency Response Team was… uneventful. She knew it was going to be different that back home – she wasn't totally stupid. But she'd at least expected a scraped knee or some false alarm heart attack.

Jezzie spent the majority of the shift sitting on the back bumper with the doors open – the ambulance wreaked of old vehicle and burnt plastic – and talked with Jack.

"So this is my training?" she asked lightly, swinging her feet above the pavement of the local supermarket. The same one Embry had shown her.

"Yep," Jack replied from the front. "Normally we get at least one decent call a night. I was planning on letting you handle it and see how it goes."

"You spoiled the surprise, Jack," Jezzie smiled. "How is it a test if I know the answers?"

"Well, god only knows if we're going to get a call from an overly drunk teenager or four car pile up," Jack replied. "You know the test, not the answers, my dear."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. Jack was only about twenty-five and he looked even younger – though distinctly weather worn. Jezzie didn't know how anyone took an EMT with a mohawk seriously. What was it with the people in this town and weird hair?

It was only five in the afternoon and Jezzie could at least content herself with watching the sun dip below the tree line and make interesting shapes and streaks of light. She wasn't used to so much tree cover and when it got truly dark out, she'd hop fully into the ambulance with Jack. Because – truth be told – the woods scared her a little bit at night. But until then, she'd enjoy the fresh air.

"What if nothing happens?" Jezzie asked Jack.


Jezzie rolled her eyes. "But what if it doesn't?"

"Then," Jack said with a small grin that dimpled his face. "I decide if it's entertaining or tedious to keep the girl who asks a million questions throughout the course of an eight hour shift."

Jezzie offered a winning smile. "I can ask more interesting questions if you like."

Jezzie made it all the way until 7PM before she scampered back inside the ambulance and closed the door, as a series of rustling movements startled her in the nearby woods. The nine o'clock hour did bring about a call to a residence where a middle-aged man had tripped and tried to break his fall with
Jezzie did have to point out to the gentleman that the longer he discussed with his family the costs of driving to the hospital in an ambulance versus taking himself, the greater likelihood of his needing a blood transfusion. Not necessarily true for his circumstance, but it definitely got him into the ambulance a lot faster and probably saved his car's upholstery. Jezzie could see Jack smiling from the front seat as she adjusted Mr. Chadwick's arm to the proper elevation. Apparently he was Chem professor at Peninsula. That's why he looked so familiar.

Jack showed her all the inner workings of Forks Community Hospital paperwork when they'd arrived with a significantly light-headed but fully stable William Chadwick.

"All right, well you're good to go," Jack stated when they both finally leaned against the counter. The paper work in Washington was a lot different than Michigan.

Jezzie checked her watch. "It's only 10PM," she replied.

"I know," Jack nodded. "Trial run and all that. Technically you're not on the clock – but I'll make sure you get paid for a full shift. Do you mind working Halloween weekend?"

"Does this mean I get the job?" Jezzie grinned with a small hop.

"As long as you keep asking the interesting questions," Jack rolled his eyes. "Go home and get some sleep or do some homework, kid." And with that, Jezzie was left to hop maniacally around the triage desk. She bounced in her seat all the way home, while she told her dad she got the job and only fell motionless when she finally collapsed in bed asleep.

The rest of the weekend passed in a much similar state. Jezzie agreed to work weekend days with Jack so she could get acclimated to a more active shift, even though she'd end up working nights eventually.

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**Monday, October 23, 2006**

Jezzie's ecstatic delirium over being gainfully employed – and with a living wage! – overshadowed the fact that she had a physics exam. Mondays were never her style. She only remembered when she was five miles out from her house on her run. She had stilled to a complete stop, issued a very long-suffering sigh and stamped her foot before starting back home at a quickened pace.

She scampered up to both Kyle and Kayla that next morning. "I forgot we had an exam!" she wailed as she collapsed down on the bench at the table they sat at in the library. They both stared at her as she cleaved open a textbook and then proceeded to face plant into the middle of it. "Help me," she muttered helplessly.

"Jezzie," Kyle spoke first. "You've been here for less than two weeks. You can totally play off the new-kid excuse."

"I can't," she confessed. "I only missed one unit and the professor is making me a special exam," she pouted.

"Well," Kayla lifted a lock of Jezzie's hair to see the book beneath her. "You could start by not studying from your Calculus book."
Kayla was a solitary studier – Jezzie thought that might've been a carryover from her homeschool days – but Kyle had the same exam an hour after the two girls and Jezzie spent the half hour before class began with a pencil between her fingers and her legs tucked underneath her as Kyle showed her how to analyze circuits.

Ricky insisted they should all 'chillax' because the test hadn't been that bad. No matter how many times Jezzie explained formal mathematical language, Kyle was sure he was going to bomb most of the applied problems.

Jezzie wondered if it was bad form to fail the first exam you took at a new college?

The test was hard but she survived it, and after conferring with Kayla after the day was over on the phone, she determined that she at least squeaked a C+. Jezzie simply hung up her phone and let it roll a few tumbles across her porch as she lay on the woodwork. She closed her eyes and just basked in the cool, crisp autumn air. She let her body relax, as she focused only on her breathing. She was suspended between peaceful wakefulness and something akin to sleep when her phone buzzed against the floor. Jezzie finally rolled herself over and flipped the phone to see the screen.

Before she could click the button, Embry's incoming call turned to a missed alert and Jezzie frowned. When she tried to call him back he didn't pick up. She shrugged it off and went inside to listen to the baseball game and have some dinner with her Dad. Because a C+ might be okay, but falling asleep in front of your own front door was definitely bad form.

"Jezebel," her Dad spoke as the seventh inning stretch began. "I've got to head to Seattle tomorrow afternoon to do some pre-season work. Gotta meet with the Captain and the Deck Boss."

"Okay, Dad," Jezzie nodded. "How long will you be gone? Do you want me to pack some food?"

"Don't trouble yourself too much, my girl," Al waved his hand with a small smile. "I wouldn't mind a sandwich, but I know you're very busy. By the way, a young woman stopped by today with those," he pointed towards the counter.

Jezzie turned and looked. The wrapped platter had been tucked out of the way and not on a counter top where Jezzie and her Dad prepared their meals. She could see the enormous cookies through the cellophane. She glanced back at her Dad and quirked a brow.

"Who was it?"

"Said her name was Emily Young. Nice girl. Pretty, with some bad scars... Said the cookies were a thank you for your help the other night."

"Oh," Jezzie's mouth dropped into an 'o' as her memory finally recalled Wednesday night's events. "I met Emily at the beach on Wednesday. Her niece, Claire, tripped and I bandaged up her head. Quil was more worried than she was, but Emily seems okay."

"Ateara?"

"Quil? Yeah, he's the boy who invited me in the first place. He's sort of Claire's babysitter. How'd you know?"

"I met a Quil Ateara today when I went to the game shop for some line. This definitely wasn't no 'boy' though."

Jezzie shrugged as she stood up and snuck one of Emily's cookies for her and her father from beneath the plastic wrap. "Maybe they're related. Doesn't sound like a common name. So when will
you be back home?"

"Sometime this weekend, I suspect." Al nodded as he pulled Jezzie's dinner plate aside and stacked it with his. "You staying around for this Halloween weekend?"

"I hadn't planned on doing anything really. We're so remote, we probably don't get any trick or treaters anyways. Jack asked me to work."

"I know you hate to miss a good reason to dress up, but I'm sure you'll survive. If your plans change, let me know please. Leave me a message. I like to know whereabouts you are."

"Of course, Dad," Jezzie agreed. She hardly planned on throwing a ripper the moment he stepped out of the house. Jezzie was a little more low key than that.

"And feel free to call your old man every now and then," he chided. "I don't like feeling like I've missed so much when I come home."

"Always, Dad." Jezzie called her father at least once a day when he was gone. And not even out of any sense of parental obligation. She just missed him. But he liked to remind her that he missed her as well.

"These cookies are divine," Al mumbled through a bite. "Emily Young is allowed around here anytime she'd like." Jezzie could only roll her eyes at the prospect of her Dad and Emily confined together for any length of time. "So, how'd that Physics exam go today?"

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**Wednesday, October 25, 2006**

Jezzie was beyond exhausted when she got off work on Wednesday night. The fact that she knew she had a pile of homework to get through didn't help matters. At all. She made the decision to stop at the only other store between Forks County Hospital and her house. Her soul wouldn't stop chanting coffee, coffee, coffee… She was going to need something to get her through her homework. There was no way in hell she was getting up for a run tomorrow morning. Pity, really, she'd been hoping to push it to seven miles…

She was surprised as anything to end up in the only checkout line (an actual line at half past eleven at night?) behind Seth Clearwater.

"Seth?" she asked and the tall, muscled, narrow shouldered boy in front of her spun around.

"Jezzie? What the hell are you doing here at midnight?"

Jezzie looked down at herself, still in her uniform – clearly emblazoned on all surfaces as some kind of medical professional. "Work," she supplied obviously. "I just got off my shift. What are you doing here?"

"Oh," Seth nodded, realizing she had a stethoscope slung around her neck. "Yeah… I, uh… just got off work too," he fumbled through his lie. Seth supposed it wasn't too much of a lie. Patrol was definitely a job, just not that kind of job. "But now I have to go do homework," he grumbled. That part was unfortunately not a lie. A majority of the Pack was lucky enough to be in the latter portion of high school. Sam and Paul and Jared were already out. Lucky bastards… And all Embry had to do was keep his heads out of his ass for a few more months and he'd be home free.

Seth had the unfortunate luck to be a freshman. Again. By some stroke of God, QTS had let the 'tard trio of Quil, Embry and Jake slide through their sophomore years, but Seth? Nope. His three D's, a
C+ and an incomplete had been enough to land him in his ninth year of education for the second time. It was a small consolation knowing that Quil and Jake would repeat their junior year, anyways.

There was no way in hell Seth was doing freshman year a third time; everyone already thought he was as dumb as a stump. But now, Seth had it so it just might work… Second shift patrol left him all day for school (because Jake was more of a hard ass about people in school – especially with phasing middle schoolers – than Sam had ever been) and he had all night for sleep. Or homework. Because apparently you needed to do your homework to pass ninth grade. Whatever.

Homework meant no sleep. No sleep meant caffeine. Caffeine meant eleven thirty trips to the store right off his patrol route to stock up on Red Bull. He hadn't expected Jezzie to be there. Though, he did remember her saying something about getting a job and extra money and all that. Maybe that was when he was falling asleep at that last bonfire?

Jezzie only smiled at Seth. He looked tired. And even though she wanted to demand why a boy as young as him was working a full second shift when he hadn't even done his homework, she knew better. Maybe he and his family needed help like hers did.

"I'm in the same boat," she confessed. "I'm buying this coffee and going home to English Lit homework."

"Ew…" Seth commented. "At least you're not disturbing anybody when you do yours. I feel bad flicking the kitchen light on at midnight. What with my Mom sleeping and all…"

"Oo… that's rough," Jezzie acceded. "I don't want this to sound weird or anything, but you're more than welcome to come by my house. I mean… doing homework together at midnight has to be better than doing homework alone at midnight. At the very least, we can both be selfish and appreciate that there's someone else in the room to keep us awake until it's over."

Jezzie hoped the offer of having a younger boy by her house at night didn't seem too criminal. Or strange. Seth nodded appreciatively of Jezzie's logic, as well as her offer. "All right, I can dig it. Thanks, Jezzie. Homework buddies, it is."

Jezzie smiled real big and she nodded. "Cool, well I can drive if you want? I don't want this to seem too much like I'm influencing and abducting you…"

"Influence and abduct?" Seth laughed as he slid his Red Bull onto the counter and handed over his money. "Unlikely!"

"I am older, and from an area much more sophisticated in morally bankrupt behavior. I could very easily influence you."

"Ha! Jezzie, I don't think I've heard you swear, I don't imagine you trying show me how things roll on 8 mile. I am taller and devilishly handsome, thereby creating more surface area and opportunity to absorb the world around me – including bad behavior. I think it's me that would influence you."

Jezzie handed over a single bill for her own coffee. "That logic made no sense, Seth. We're telling your mom tomorrow where you spent this part of your evening, capiche?"

"Yes, ma'am," Seth saluted her and marched out of the store ahead of her. In his haze of exhaustion he knocked the side of his head into the Jeep's doorframe as he got in. He would find the one soft-spot on a shapeshifter's head.

"Ow…" Seth groused.
"Are you okay?" Jezzie chirped in concern. The same bump could've given a human a serious blank spot for a few seconds.

"Sure, sure," he replied. "No permanent damage." Seth was too exhausted to debate the degree of embarrassing he was subjecting himself to. Hopefully he hadn't dented the frame. That would be an awkward explanation.

Jezzie felt less and less like a kidnapper as her and Seth discussed their mutual homework loads and their impending fatal qualities. Seth talked a lot, Jezzie noticed. And he spoke in major run on sentences. Jezzie found this endearing. He made her laugh a lot with the weird things he said and he was feeling more like a friend… and less like an abduction victim.

Jezzie assured Seth that her father wouldn't mind, especially since they'd be on the first floor of the house and not in any bedrooms and that he slept like the dead. Seth snorted once at the irony of this one. If only the dead did sleep…

Jezzie went to Peninsula College, and Seth realized her homework load was terrible. They both set to work in mutual caffeinated silence. Jezzie made it through her English Lit homework before slumping back in her chair for a breather. Seth had to snap his fingers right in front of her nose to get her to stop spacing out.

"How long was I out for?"

"Three minutes. I decided to intervene when I saw your eyes glaze over."

And Seth was only one problem shy of polishing his Geometry assignment when his face drooped precariously close to the counter top. Jezzie used a single finger to his forehead to prop him back up and awake.

However, the pair found that homework was accomplished in half the time because they were able to keep each other awake. It also didn't help that Seth bet Jezzie – who had a clandestine competitive nature – that he could finish his homework faster than she could.

"This homework buddy thing seems to have been a good idea," Seth conceded laying his face against his now-closed math textbook. Jezzie yawned and nodded in agreement as Seth prepped to leave.

Jezzie refused to allow Seth to walk home. "Seth, you live nowhere near me and it's a really awful hour. No, I'm driving you. Now be quiet and get in the car."

Seth couldn't argue too much with that logic. From Jezzie's perspective, Seth would have been a fifteen-year-old boy, walking home alone down a dark abandoned stretch of road for about an hour. He supposed it was normal she would protest. He felt bad he couldn't save her the forty minute round trip for her sleep, but she didn't know he'd make the journey in less than ten in wolf skin.

A greater concern was whatever was wandering around in the woods of the Pacific Northwest. The Pack had decimated that one rogue werewolf, but further patrolling had turned up evidence – from both the Pack and the Cullens – that there had been more than one in the area. Odd and disconcerting behavior, Carlisle had called it, from an unpredictable species.

It was because of this he'd just rather have Jezzie stay safe in her house. Now, because he actually liked her so much, he'd feel guilty if he didn't follow her home after she dropped him off. Because she was a friend now.

Seth couldn't wait until she figured this Pack thing out… She was too observant not to, he guessed.
He was just wondering when she'd spill. Because as observant as she was, she never said anything. Jezzie was good at discretion. It kind of amazed Seth who definitely viewed 'finesse' as completely beyond his reach.

Seth slung his bag over his shoulder and followed her outside. The motion sensor lights illuminated her Wagoneer as the two of them stepped into range. "Ugh," she sighed. "I hate those things… They're blinding. Anytime anything any bigger than a squirrel runs through this yard that thing snaps on. No matter what time of night! That gets so old."

"I think you're spending too much time with me, Jezzie," Seth remarked as he slid into her Jeep (without hitting his head against the doorframe this time, thank you very much). "You're ranting."

"Seriously, Seth," Jezzie glanced at him as she flicked the heater on and turned around in her yard. "My house is almost all windows. I get woken up anytime some confused fox, skunk, deer or whatever ambles through my yard."

"It's there for security, Jezzie," Seth replied through a yawn as he slouched into the seat. Two was such an awful time of night. "It's so you know if anything sketchy comes into your yard. It's probably a good idea since you're so far off the street and surrounded by woods."

"When did you become the voice of reason?"

"When did you start ranting?" Seth countered.

"One thirty," Jezzie decided. "Clearly we're both too easily influenced," Jezzie muttered as she turned her face back towards the road. "Are you sure your mom's not going to mind that you were at a girl's house until all hours?"

"Considering I have finished homework to show for it? Probably not. If it makes you feel better, you can come and meet her sometime. In daylight. She's really chill and nice. Like me. Hell knows where Leah gets it from…"

Jezzie seemed slightly mollified and agreed to meet the famous Sue Clearwater she'd heard so much about and comfortable silence fell in the Jeep. Jezzie liked Seth; he was a very easy person to be with. He had his own very definitive personality, but was one of those people who embraced interacting with people who were different. Some people's unique characteristics were intimidating or made you feel like you had to be like them. But Seth truly was – as he put it – ‘chill and nice’. Jezzie could appreciate that.

Jezzie was wracked by a full-body yawn and she was pretty sure Seth was dozing in the passenger seat as she crossed the town line and rounded the bend into La Push. Just before the bend straightened to reveal the small town ahead, something in the woods off to the right bolted out of the cover of the trees and across the road.

Seth snapped upright and fully awake the moment the creature left the trees. Jezzie shrieked and steered the truck to the right and into the soft shoulder, narrowly avoiding hitting the large, rangy animal. Seth swore and reached out to the wheel, ready use his lupine reflexes and steel cage of a body to protect Jezzie in case her Jeep decided to get too friendly with a hundred year old pine tree.

The reach was unnecessary, as Jezzie did a good job of swerving but still maintaining control of the car. Though Seth's arm had blocked her sight and limited her view of the strange creature that had put them here in the first place. Thankfully.

For a beat, there was stillness and silence in the car as the two stared out the windshield. "What in
"God's creation was that?" Jezzie demanded.

"I don't know," Seth replied mechanically, leaning over across the Jeep to lock Jezzie's door. Seth reached over the back of his seat to do the same to the two doors behind him. Seth knew damn well exactly what had just cut across their path; he was a bad liar and glad he had a task to hide his face. "Phone?" he asked Jezzie before she had a chance to reply. "Did you bring your phone?"

She blinked a few times and then fished in her pocket, handing him the beat up device. "Do not get out of this car. Under any circumstances, okay?"

"But Seth—" she protested, before he got out, pushed down the lock and slammed the door shut. He walked about fifteen feet from the hood of Jezzie's Jeep dialing Jake's number as he walked. Seth made sure to stay in range of sight. Through the fog, he couldn't go much further without Jezzie losing sight of him. And probably panicking and getting out of the damn Jeep.

Two rings, followed by a less than pleased "What?"

"Jake? Seth. They're back. One just cut across the road just inside the res, heading southwest. Smells similar to the last one."

"Fuck," was the mumbled reply. Seth heard a lot of background noise and was pretty sure Jake was trying to make it out of the house without demolishing any of the infrastructure.

"I'm with Jezzie, Jake. She's taking me home. I can't phase. What do I do with her?"

"Act natural. Make sure she gets home safe."

The line clicked dead and Seth hung up the phone and turned back towards the Jeep. He hadn't even completed the turn when – for the second time in a week – he felt as if he had been hit by a moving car. All the air sucked out his chest, and for a moment his feet connected with the pavement trying to drag him to La Push. The wolf inside his head rustled awake and could feel the rage pulsing from Jake's Alpha pull. Seth was dizzy and lightheaded. The wolf was angry and ready to kill.

Seth stumbled haphazardly back towards the Jeep and paused his hand on the door handle. He took a moment to convince his wolf that he wasn't running from Jake's order. He had another order to tend to. He couldn't leave Jezzie here on the side of the road – alone, confused and in danger.

Jake, sensing that Jezzie and Seth were not moving deeper into the reservation, issued Seth a direct Alpha order. Seth could feel the magnetic pull towards La Push ebb out of his body and was replaced by an impetus that aligned more with his human brain. Seth's wolf finally hopped back into that Jeep. "Thank you," he muttered to himself as he shut the door.

Jezzie looked over at him with much the same expression she had when he left. "What was that about?"

"Just… uh," Seth stammered running his hand through his too short hair. He had forgot to formulate a decent and calming excuse on his way back here. He had been too preoccupied with not phasing in the middle of the road. "Calling…" yes, he had called someone. "Animal Control!"

Sometimes, Seth amazed himself with his own brilliance. He hoped it didn't show.

"You know," he shrugged, continuing to talk to a stunned Jezzie. "So they know there's a stray dog or coyote or whatever near houses and people and stuff."

"Seth," Jezzie deadpanned. "That thing was bigger than me. That couldn't have been a coyote."
Shit, she was right. Play it off, Seth. Play it off.

"Okay, Detroit," Seth rolled his eyes. *Play it off?" I know you're from a different part of the world, but the wildlife grows a little bigger 'round these parts."

"Seth that thing was massive!"

"Jezzie," Seth tried in his most reassuring voice. "Trust me when I say you don't have anything to worry about; it'll get taken care of. Shadows do weird things to your vision at night, believe me."

She just pursed her lips and glared at him, clearly miffed that he was giving her the brush off. Seth could tell she knew she was being bullshitted. But, in true Jezzie fashion, she let it go. Seth was convinced this girl was the Mother Theresa of letting weird shit happen around her without asking questions or making it awkward. Was that too long of a title? Instead, she shook her head and put the car back in gear.

Seth wondered when she was going to stop taking all this Pack BS with a grain of salt. Because before long she'd have enough to throw in all their eyes…

Jezzie didn't know what she'd seen, but she more or less let it drop. Seth was right: she didn't know the area – but she sure as heck hadn't thought something that big could have been natural. And Seth had almost disappeared out of her sight with her phone. She had plenty of service in the cab. Regardless, they were both safe so she let it drop.

She'd wanted to call Seth and make sure all was well when she got home but her brain reminded her that it was terribly late and that would've been rather overbearing. So she let the issue lie.

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**Friday, October 27, 2006**

When Jezzie skidded over the frosty pavement Friday morning on the way to class, she knew it was high time to get her balding tires changed. After conferring with Kyle and later Veronica, she discovered that Dowlings' was the only garage in the area unless she wanted to drive to a whole new zip code.

She was already in a bad mood having woken up with those nagging tingles in her back. The same ones that had started on Saturday when she hopped out of the Jeep at rugby practice. Those never boded well for her. She pleaded with her own body internally to just stop. She was admittedly irritable for the remainder of the day.

She shlepped out of the class that day with Veronica in tow. Jezzie agreed to take Veronica to the only sports shop in town on the same stretch of road that also housed the only garage in town. Veronica was recounting the importance of knee-pads in volleyball and the sheer amount of shattered kneecaps she'd seen and how could she need a smaller size, did a person's knees gain and lose weight?

Jezzie liked Veronica's talkative nature. It wasn't overwhelming and she was nice enough to pause at intervals and allow Jezzie her due. Mostly, Veronica seemed very energetic and talking was her outlet. She was very good at talking and still including others in conversation. She was very personable and Jezzie was glad for it, otherwise, she might not have made such easy friends.

Once they'd turned onto Old Beacon street, Veronica hopped out and agreed to meet her back at Dowlings when she'd bought her new kneepads. Jezzie pulled into the garage's ground up parking lot and threw the Jeep into park. She huffed as she hopped out and trudged to the door. Jezzie was a
frugal person and she'd really banked on getting through at least the winter with her tires. However, she wasn't a corner-cutting type either. She knew that – since she was here – her car would need a new air filter, an oil change and possibly some new brake pads. Quite a hit to her first pay check, she thought morosely.

She was distracted by her own internal ramblings about the overpriced nature of mechanical work and almost tripped over the small child on the other side of the garage's office door. As she stumbled, trying to prevent herself from mauling some poor child, the girl started hopping and squealing.

"Docta Jezzie! Docta Jezzie! Docta Jezzie!"

"Hi Claire," Jezzie smiled looking down at the girl jumping around for all she was worth. Claire's smile was huge and the cut on her forehead was healing and barely discernible beneath her bangs. It was amazing what a week's worth of healing could do.

"Who's the friend, Claire?" Jezzie glanced up to the counter to see Claire's entourage and apparent handler of the day. The guy might've been older than Jezzie, judging by his size, but his face still held the last vestiges of childhood. What was it with all these overgrown Quileute boys? He was accompanied by a girl who looked to be a slightly older than Claire. She was as fair as Jezzie and had violently curly strawberry blond locks. They were the only three in the garage's office and there appeared to be no one manning the counter.

"Jake! Jake! This Jezzie! She's my friend! She fixed my owie!" Claire pointed to her forehead and ceased her hopping. "From the bumfire! She jumped off the big rocks with Unca Seth and Auntie Leah and 'Mbry!"

"Oh did she now?" Jake glanced up from Claire to Jezzie and she got the distinct feeling she was being analyzed, gauged, reviewed and evaluated.

"She did," Jezzie nodded. "She has a pair of salt-hardened jeans in the back of Jeep to show for it, too. Hi," Jezzie extended her hand. "I'm Jezzie. And you're Jacob Black?"

"The others told me we had a new jumper, but didn't believe it." He took her hand and smiled. "And I am. My reputation precedes me?"

Jezzie laughed. "I gathered that you're long time friends with Quil and Embry? Powers of observation."

"Excellent observations," he conceded. "Three of us have been raising sand since we were their age," he pointed to Claire and the other small girl. "I see you know Claire. This is Nessie. Ness, you wanna say hi?" Jake asked the small girl that had taken refuge partly behind the boy's leg.

Nessie peeked out far enough to be considered polite and waved. "I'm Renesmee, but you can call me Nessie. I like that nickname."

"Hi, Nessie," Jezzie responded quietly. "I'm Jezebel, but you can call me Jezzie. I like my nickname too."

Jezzie suspected that Nessie was a bit shy about her name – a point Jezzie understood well – and was glad to see her smile perk up a little more when Jezzie shared her own less-than-common name.

"So what brings you to Dowling's?" Jacob asked as Claire proceeded to suspend her self from his forearm like he was a jungle gym.

"Ugh," Jezzie sighed. "My Jeep needs some TLC. I was kind of hoping I could get through the
winter but my tires are junk. And it's gonna need an oil change and air filter, at least."

"And you came here?" Jake asked in a surprised tone. Jezzie nodded. "I'm offended."

"Sorry?" Jezzie replied in confusion.

Jake didn't get a chance to respond as the side door swung open and a tall wiry man in navy blue coveralls came in from the garage itself. "Sorry, man. No dice. Should be in by Monday though."

"All right, was worth a shot," Jake shrugged. "Call me when it gets in, Greg. I need that last part like yesterday."

"Sure thing, dude," the grease covered man glanced past Jake and towards Jezzie. "Something I can do for you, Miss?"

Jezzie opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted. "Nah, she's with me today, Greg. Have a good one."

Greg nodded and Jezzie sound found herself herded out of the small dingy office by Jake, Nessie and Claire.

"Uh… I kinda still need some tires," Jezzie remarked once they were outside.

"I am offended," Jake spoke. "Because Emb, Quil and I happen to be some of the best mechanics in this county and you're going Dirt Bag Dowling for a set of tires he's bound to charge you double for."

"Oh?" Jezzie said at a loss. She wasn't stupid, but not knowing the area hadn't helped.

"Got time to come back to La Push?"

"Sure," Jezzie nodded. "I'm just waiting for a friend."

"All right," Jake nodded then glanced to Claire and Nessie. "Ladies, to the vehicle. And Claire, so help me, you call my car 'The Bunny' again you'll be tickled senseless until your next birthday."

"SHOPGUM!" Claire screamed as she pelted towards the beat up VW parked several yards from Jezzie's Jeep.

"Car seat!" Jake shouted in reply, following after her. Jezzie watched in mild amusement as Jacob managed to strap both Claire and Nessie – who seemed far more cooperative – into their respective car seats.

Veronica returned halfway through the car seating debacle and watched for a moment. "So, you still waiting?" she asked, putting her bag into Jezzie's back seat.

"Nope," Jezzie shook her head. "Apparently there's a better option on the table. Mind a jaunt to La Push?"

"No, ma'am," Veronica acquiesced. She hopped in the Jeep and Jake told Jezzie to follow him, it was an easy ride. The trip took them all through town past Jezzie's area and when they reached La Push Jake turned the opposite way Jezzie knew the beach to be. Veronica's talk was only momentarily interrupted by the jolt from pavement to pressed dirt as they continued down the long stretch towards a small house and similarly sized garage.

"How long have you known Jake?" Veronica asked.
"Since I walked into Dowling's office," Jezzie laughed. "Claire's a mutual friend."

Jake parked, freed the crazy children to run around in the grass and signaled Jezzie through the lifted garage door.

"So, engine-whisperer Black," Jezzie said as her and Veronica hopped out of her Jeep. "How much can you do my old beast up for?"

Jake feigned a hurt look. "I'm **offended**."

"I seem to be doing that a lot," Jezzie replied. "I wonder if I'm being mean or you're just oversensitive. Or maybe it's just the clash of personalities."

"I'm not charging the girl who cliff dived in October on a dare from Quil Ateara."

"Well, I'm certainly not letting you do this for free, my good man."

"We can work out the terms later, but I'd be grateful if you at least make sure Claire and Ness don't set anything on fire or crush themselves with machinery."

Corralling Nessie and Claire was like herding cats. The only thing that seemed to quell them – or Claire, mostly – was the proposition of learning a new game. Veronica fished a pack of playing cards out of her backpack and the four of them played an experimental round of Crazy Eights on the top of Jezzie's Jeep as it was suspended a few inches off the ground – mid tire replacement.

"And Imma be a **devil** for Hallowe'en!" Claire enthused, making little horns with her fingers and smiling maniacally. "Me and Nessie are gonna go trick-a-treating together!"

"Wow," Veronica said slowly. "That is scary," she agreed as she dropped down a card.

"What are you gonna be Nessie?" Jezzie asked.

"I'm not quite sure yet," Nessie's brow furrowed. "My Mom is going to take me to look at costumes tomorrow. But my Aunt Alice might make one. She really likes to make outfits."

"I think you'd be a good mermaid," Jezzie decided. Nessie looked at her quizzically and Jezzie was slightly unnerved by the sophistication of Nessie's language and expressions. She sounded much older than she was. Maybe she was one of those kid geniuses.

"What makes you think so?"

"Ever see that movie *The Little Mermaid*?" Jezzie asked.

"Oh," Veronica nodded. "I get it. That would be a good one, Nessie. You've got the red hair."

"I don't know how your Dad is gonna feel about a seashell shirt," Jacob laughed once from his spot on the floor.

"Well, it doesn't have to be completely true to life," Jezzie looked down and rolled her eyes. "Ariel had bright red hair and twelve inch waist. Who would want to look like that? What are you going to be, Jacob Black?"

"The big bad wolf," Jake said idly as he made quick work of the sticky lug nuts on Jezzie's front driver side. Nessie only giggled to herself. "Nothing too interesting," Jake added. "I'm allergic to that cheap costume polyester. Believe me when I say I'm no fun with a full-body rash."
"I think we'll take your word for it," Veronica nodded watching her hand of cards.

"Have you two carved your pumpkins yet?" Jezzie asked. Both girls just looked at her with wide eyes. "Pumpkin carving?" she supplied. "Like… you make a face on a pumpkin and you put a candle inside so it lights up?" The two shook their head. "Where do you guys even buy pumpkins around here?" Jezzie asked. "Now that I think about it, I haven't seen anything in the way of a farm stand around here."

"No, you wouldn't," Jake agreed.

"They do have that farm stand in the Thriftway parking lot during the summer," Veronica added.

"True," Jake ceded as he slid underneath the chassis of Jezzie's Jeep. "But I don't think I've ever seen them sell pumpkins. August isn't exactly pumpkin season."

"I usually just buy one at the supermarket," Veronica shrugged glancing at Jezzie.

Jezzie's childhood in New England couldn't process that information. Even though she'd lived by the sea, her and her Dad had always made a trip inland for a bit and bought a pumpkin, and even some apples and cider from the local farms that peppered the entire region. "You guys don't have farms?"

"Well, we've got ranches – for like chickens and trees and fish."

"Lots of fish," Jake's muffled voice came from below a couple tons of metal. Jezzie wondered if their being atop the Jeep was necessarily safe. "You're on a peninsula, dear. We specialize in fish, not pumpkins."

Jezzie was trying to wrap her mind around possibly not having a pumpkin for Halloween. She had kind of figured that her isolated house had not endeared her to local trick or treaters, but no pumpkins either? And she was working all day?

"That," she replied morosely as she flopped back and lay on the roof, her head dangling over the edge of the back as she stared out to the garage door into the misting rain. "Is so depressing."

"What's depressing?" sounded a voice that preceded its body.

"The lack of pumpkins in this town!" Jezzie sulked just in time for Embry and Quil to round the corner. Embry paused momentarily, taking the sight of two women and two girls playing cards atop a car that Jake was working underneath. And, of course, the one woman draped over the back edge with her face pinched into an endearing pout.

"That's your primary issue with this place? Where are your priorities, Jez?" Embry shook his head and ruffled Jezzie's hair as he walked by. He then proceeded to dump a rather large textbook and bulky folder on Jake's exposed abdomen. "Do you have death wish, man? What part of missing a Trig exam seems like a good idea to you?"

"I've been a little busy," Jake replied in annoyance. Veronica quirked her brow and glanced Jezzie's way as Nessie laid down her card on the pile. Jezzie's face twisted into one of thought as Claire played her card and she continued to lay sprawled on the Jeep.

Quil was mostly quiet – which was odd – and took a seat on the much abused couch against the wall.

"Jezzie! Is your turn!" Claire poked her in the hip.
"Jezzie proffered her eight of hearts. "Spades," she decided. "So where does a person get a decent pumpkin around here?"

"If you're looking for a pumpkin, Jez," Embry replied leaning his back against her Jeep. "It's gonna be a drive."

"Done!" Jacob declared as the board slid out from underneath her Jeep and he stood upright next to Embry. He smiled facing Jezzie. "Your chariot is finished."

Jezzie smiled and extended her hand to wipe the one stray grease mark from his forehead. "Wonderful! How much do I owe you?" Jezzie's Jeep had new tires, oil, air filter, oil filter, her brakes were confirmed fine and Jacob refused to accept any kind of compensation. Jezzie didn't want to be pushy about the matter, but she felt it was unfair to take advantage of the kindness of a relative stranger – regardless of the fact that he had the parts on hand.

Jacob rolled his eyes once again and even Embry turned around to look at her quizzically. "I'm offended," Embry said.

Veronica laughed and Jezzie sat up to stare at the two boys. "How is my being willing to pay for labor and parts offensive to the two of you? It would have run me $300 at least anywhere else. And you clearly did way more than give me tires. At least let me pay for those."

"I'm not taking $300 from you," Jacob shook his head.

"Two," Jezzie countered.

"Seventy-five."

"One hundred and I take these two trick or treating so you don't get a full body rash."

Embry couldn't contain his laughter for that one. Jake considered for a moment. "Seventy five, you take them trick or treating and we'll show you where to buy a pumpkin."

"Deal," Jezzie extended her hand for a shake.

Veronica had the pleasure of going home to churn out a paper she had due the next day. Quil offered to give her a ride before the rest of them set out on their gourd-related adventure. Claire and Nessie weren't going to let the issue go, so it was a good time as any to go get one. Jezzie had been a little nervous about tagging along with Jacob – a guy she didn't know – which is why she was glad when Embry decided to come along. At least she knew him a bit better.

"You kids have fun," Veronica smirked to Jezzie as she walked out to Jezzie's Jeep to retrieve her stuff. Jezzie narrowed her eyes and followed under the auspices of helping Veronica with her volleyball bag.

"What was that about?" Jezzie hissed as she followed Veronica to the Chevy that had newly arrived since they had. She assumed it was Quil's.

Veronica continued to walk, but Jezzie could hear the smile in her voice. "You and Embry have a fun ride. It's about an hour and a half to Nash Huber's farm."

When Jezzie didn't reply Veronica turned around. She could see Embry in the garage still and she turned herself around so he couldn't see her talking. "I think Embry Call likes you, Jezzie."

Jezzie immediately flushed a brilliant shade of red and Veronica took that as response enough. "I'm
not that close with the kids of La Push, but I know them well enough. We all do. Embry's always been very quiet and reserved. He's a lot more outgoing around you."

"I've known him for two weeks. This is the third time I've seen him."

Veronica simply shrugged and took her volleyball bag from Jezzie's shoulder. "Suit yourself. Bring me back a pumpkin?"


The ride was long. And even though the Jeep and the Rabbit had lost sight of each other, Embry assured her he knew where they were going. Jezzie was determined not to make the ride awkward at all, especially given Veronica's newly disclosed observations. Jezzie didn't know if she'd categorize Embry as either shy or extroverted. He seemed pretty middle of the road. He certainly didn't talk as much as Veronica did, but he kept up decent conversation the whole way there – even through the pounding of the rain.

"I'm so glad I have new tires for this adventure," Jezzie stated gratefully as she switched lanes. "This morning I skidded over frost. Frost."

"If you're skidding over frost, that is a serious problem," Embry nodded with a smile. "How the heck did they get that bad?"

"I don't know," Jezzie shrugged. "I figured the drive to Forks wouldn't have been too brutal, because my tires always wore really well in the past, but I guess the added weight and towing a trailer didn't help."

"Wait…" Embry paused glancing at her confused. "What? The drive from where?"

Jezzie's gazed flickered over momentarily before returning to the road. "Michigan…" she supplied like it was obvious.

"You drove halfway across the country in this thing?" he asked in wide-eyed wonder.

"Don't sound so surprised," Jezzie smiled. "You're upsetting the upholstery. Yes, I drove here. My Dad's night-blind and he had to fly out ahead of me to finish all the closing stuff on the house. So it was just me, Archie and a trunk and U-Haul full of belongings."

"How long did that take you?" Embry asked in amazement.

"I stopped in Chicago, Minneapolis, Spokane and Seattle. So about three days. It was a pretty drive. But also kind of boring. I'm so used to the city, so North Dakota, Montana and Idaho got a little too serial killer setting for me. I had to listen to some really good music."

"Wow…" Embry nodded appreciatively. "You really are far from home."

"I am," she replied quietly.

"No wonder you needed new tires."

Thanks to some of Embry's diversionary tactics they were able to avoid some congested parts of their route and arrived at Nash Farm Stand an hour after leaving La Push. Jezzie saw the big sign on the highway before the turn off and got very, very excited. Embry loved watching her change in demeanor as she began to hop up in down in her seat. "Keep us on the road, there, Mexican jumping bean."
Jezzie stretched appreciatively when they parked in the muddy lot, stretching her back and thinking maybe the pain was subsiding. Hopefully? She was thankful that the rain had stopped and her drive from Detroit had altered her perception so that an hour for a pumpkin was really just a short jaunt. Distinctly unprepared for the terrain, it was decided when Jake arrived that Nessie and Claire should not be allowed to tromp around in new sneakers in inches deep mud.

An interesting predicament for Embry who got to hold Claire… she seemed mostly content with sitting on his shoulders to get a bird's eye view of the produce. This prevented her from crawling all over him like a monkey. There were a few large tables made by the grouping of large crates and each was full to bursting with pumpkins.

"What kind of pumpkin is best?" Nessie asked. "They're all very different."

"Well, what are you gonna put on it, Ness?" Jake asked.

"I'm not quite sure; I haven't thought about it very much."

"I always go for tall ones. I feel like they're easier for others to see," Jezzie supplied. "My Dad always likes to buy the ugliest, wartiest one and carve a silly face on it – it just makes it even sillier."

"THAT ONE'S AWESOME!" Claire shouted from Embry's shoulders as she almost catapulted herself off in her enthusiastic pointing. "'Mbry, can you reach that green one?"

Jezzie helped and reached forward so Embry could maintain his grip on Claire. "This one?" Jezzie asked.

"Yeah!" Claire squealed. "I wanna carve a Frankenstein on it!"

"I like that idea," Embry laughed. "Please remember to keep your hands and arms inside the vehicle at all times."

"You're silly, 'Mbry."

Jezzie took the task of child holding, when Jake agreed to carry three of the five pumpkins. Jezzie wasn't quite sure how to react when the nice older woman at the register under the tent assumed that Nessie was her child. Jezzie politely explained that Nessie was actually just a friend of hers and Nessie kindly answered the woman's additional question by telling her she was about three.

Jezzie buckled Nessie in her seat while Embry buckled Claire into hers. She could still feel the traces of her blush in her cheeks and she could see the distinct smirk on Embry's face even when he wasn't looking at her. With pumpkins and children buckled in – because Jezzie didn't want to ruin a good trip and actually strapped all five pumpkins into her back seat with seat belts. Just in case. Embry and Jake just watched.

Jezzie slumped and huffed in her seat as she finally climbed inside the car and out of the renewed drizzle. "Are you still embarrassed about that?" Embry asked with a grin.

"Yes," Jezzie nodded decidedly, not even bothering to question Embry about how he knew what she was thinking.

"Do you have any idea how many people think Claire's mine anytime I leave La Push with her? Just because we're both Indian?"

"Probably a lot," Jezzie conceded.
"You can't blame her," Embry added. "You and Ness do look alike. Though her red has nothing on yours," Embry reached and pulled at a piece of Jezzie's hair that had curled in the rain. Jezzie smiled and reveled in the warm atmosphere that seemed to emanate from Embry, just like when she'd been sandwiched between him and Seth the night of the party. And with that, she was reminded of just how cold she was. She didn't want this day to end like her cliff-diving day had. She made sure to turn the heat on before they left.

Jezzie felt her phone vibrate in her pocket once she came back in range of cell service.

[Veronica You]: Quil just asked me out.
"Hi Dad, how're ya?" Jezzie chirped into the receiver as she placed her leftovers in the microwave to heat up.

"I'm good, my girl. How are you? How was your day?" It sounded like Jezzie's Dad might've been in the relative comfort of the ship. Sometimes, preseason work on the boat would force him to find a motel room as they worked below deck, as well. Calls filled with background noise from the docks or cramped restaurants on the pier were frequent on those occasions. But Jezzie could only hear the rumble of a handful of other voices in the background and the strange sort of echo that always told Jezzie her father was below deck.

"Pretty good. School was all right. I got a B+ on that physics exam, so that's good. Got my tires changed out today."

"Did ya, now? Hope that jamoke didn't rob you blind."

"No, Dad," Jezzie laughed as she walked into the living room to draw the blinds on the setting sun. "I actually met someone in town who did them for me on the cheap. He's a friend of the kids I went to the beach with last week. I practically had to force the money on him."

"There's no such thing as too proud to get paid," her Dad supplied sagely.

"Agreed," she nodded as she rounded the corner and twisted the knob on the front door, double checking that it was locked for the night. "We settled on seventy five bucks and me taking two younger girls trick or treating for him so he doesn't have to find a costume he isn't allergic to."

"Well, that sounds like more an enjoyment than a payment for you, Miss Jezebel," her Dad chuckled. "For being so righteous, you sure slipped that one on in."

"Just because I enjoy the form of payment," Jezzie supplied in a huff, "doesn't mean it still isn't payment. So I'll be gone this Saturday night – I guess that's when the area is doing their trick or treating. Do you want me to call when I get back home?"

"Sure, I'm not sure where we'll be by then, but you can leave me a voicemail at least."

"Can do," Jezzie nodded returning to her steaming leftovers. Ziti was always better as leftovers.

"Stay safe and bring your pepper spray."

"Yes, Dad," Jezzie smiled. At least he wasn't trying to convince her to go around with a handgun strapped to her ankle anymore. The small town atmosphere had very much calmed his nerves about the dangers of the outside world.

"Doors locked? Shades down?"

Well, sort of calmed…

_Saturday, October 28, 2006_
Embry wasn't sure what to expect when Jezzie showed up at his house. He'd only begun to really think about it when Anna, Leah, Rachel and even Addie – whom he had always assumed was on his side – had begun messing with his head and telling him she wasn't even changing from rugby. Given that the latest werewolf to breach the treaty line earlier in the week had escaped (and had cut right across Jezzie's path), it was hardly at the forefront of his mind; but Saturday morning dawned bright and early and so did the psychological torture from almost all the other women in Embry's life. She was just doing Halloween as a mud and sweat-covered zombie rugby player. He didn't necessarily think that was a bad idea, if he didn't have the distinct impression that they were all screwing with his head. He didn't cross any of those girls though, they could all kick anyone's ass. Even if only one was a shapeshifter.

Jezzie had agreed to meet him at his place, because the Clearwater place was in the boondocks and Jezzie told him she didn't want to get lost on Halloween – that was too horror flick, even for her. Embry could tell that Jezzie got really into Halloween – could tell from talking with her about it. And if that didn't give it away, then her strapping her pumpkin into the back seat and naming it Ernest certainly did. He very well thought that she seemed the type to throw herself into most holidays.

"Girl probably plants a damn forest on Arbor Day," Seth remarked as the Jeep's headlights illuminated the darkening road.

"Get the heck out of here. Don't you have patrol?" Embry issued Seth's shoulder a shove.

"Yep," Seth nodded. "But it's a Saturday and Lee's agreed to taking over. She hates all the screaming children and sugar of Halloween."

"Leah would," Embry shook his head. "Well, then get home already; go help your mom for once."

"You just want to be alone with your girlfriend," Seth crooned, from his spot on the floor.

"Do you want to be here and have to watch me get her back out before I'm forced to introduce her to my Mom?"

"That is a seriously awkward turtle situation," Seth contemplated. "But the creepy clay people just started singing about their Halloween town – this is the best part… Fine!" Seth finally acquiesced after a particularly unfriendly growl from Embry.

Seth peeled himself off the floor and Waltzed behind Embry on the couch, making kissy-face noises the entire time. The remote only just missed his head on the way out the back door. "Bye Mrs. Call!"

Moments later there was a polite knock on Embry's front door. He tried really hard to act like a mature individual. He even sat on the couch and counted to fifteen, to make it seem like he didn't already know she was there.

"I am the one hiding under your bed; teeth ground sharp and eyes glowing red!

Embry opened the door and knew it was going to be a helluva night. It looked like the 80s had puked all over Jezzie. She had a bright purple, puffed up dress on with green striped tights. She was also carrying a wand, but that might've been the most normal part of her outfit.

"What are you?" Embry asked, without even saying hello. He was taken aback by her outfit when her normal appearance was rather conservative.

"I'm a fairy princess," she rolled her eyes. "Duh," and she tapped him on the nose with her wand. "I didn't know if I should go for sparkle or gore – because I've never been particularly fond of the provocative Halloween look – but I decided sparkle was less likely to scare the kids I was taking
trick or treating. And that terrible make up makes me break out and no one wants to see that the next
day, let me tell you."

*Say it once, say it twice – take a chance and roll the dice*

"Whoa," he couldn't help but blurt out as he noticed what he'd previously though was a shadow
coloring her neck and down through her shoulder onto her back. It was, in fact, a brutal bruise that
spotted her fair skin before it started to blend with the coloring from her tattoo. "Jezzie what the hell
happened to you?"

He couldn't help the movement as he bent down, a hand carefully on her shoulder. If someone had
hurt her…

"Embry chillax," she laughed. He felt the muscle beneath his hand work itself out of his grip. Jezzie
was a hell of a lot stronger than she looked, he realized. And she hardly looked like a waif. "I had
rugby practice today. I bruise like a peach," she shrugged.

"What are you?" Jezzie asked Embry, changing his path of thought. The torn jeans and red plaid
flannel shirt didn't really give it away.

Embry picked up the mask from the table next to him and pulled the cover over his head. "Rawr!" he
feigned.

"Lumberjack gone werewolf? I can dig it," Jezzie smiled.

*Our man Jack is King of the pumpkin patch, everyone hail to the Pumpkin King!*

"I love this movie!" Jezzie perked up hearing the TV, sending waves of that poofy material swishing
around.

"Maybe later, Jez," Embry laughed roping an arm around her shoulder and steering her away from
where her gaze was locked on the TV. "But we got places to go and people to see."

"Embry?" a small soprano sounded from the other room. "Who's that?"

"Just a friend, Mom."

"That's your Mom?" Jezzie asked quietly as Embry turned them around.

"I didn't spring fully grown from the earth. Yes, that's my mom. C'mon let's go."

"Wait," Jezzie interrupted and stopped their progress. "It would be rude for me to just drop into your
house and not even say 'hi'," she hissed.

"Jez, it's no big deal. Really."

Jezzie just looked at Embry like he was loopy. "Yes, it is! That's very impolite. And I am *always*
polite."

This was true. Embry sighed in a long-suffering sort of way. Jezzie was polite to a fault. He hadn't
heard her say a mean word yet. Embry was kind of hoping he'd be able to get her out the door
quickly. Originally he had thought about just meeting her in his yard when she showed up, but he
thought that would come across weird.

But he didn't want his Mom getting any ideas… Ever since Embry had phased, she was desperately
looking for something to latch onto. Some kind of positive influence that Embry brought into his
own life that she could tie him to concretely. And the last thing Embry wanted was for his Mom to think he was dating poor, precocious, polite, fairy princess Jezzie Sullivan. He had been wary of introducing his Mom to anyone – lest she think them a bad influence (and get ideas) or a good influence (and get even worse ideas).

Was Embry blocking her out? You betcha. But he was running blind and so far, it was a better option than telling her he was a shapeshifting wolf and that meant his dad was either Billy Black, Joshua Uley or Quil Ateara IV. There was no way in hell he was going there anytime soon. There was enough turmoil in the Pack; Embry wasn't about to rain down anymore on them. Especially his Mom. He was going with the Virgin Birth theory, for now.

"All right," Embry let his arm slide down and tugged Jezzie's hand. "Let's go meet my Mom."

Since Embry very much looked like he was going to the gallows, Jezzie skipped ahead a bit to precede him into the kitchen. "Mom?" Embry spoke once they'd entered the small kitchen, lit only by a single lamp hung above the breakfast counter. Embry's mom sat beneath it, surrounded by piles of receipts, her fingers poised over an adding machine and a pair reading glasses perched on the end of her nose.

"Oh," she glanced up and appeared a bit shocked to see Embry and the girl in bright purple in her kitchen. She stood up and walked around the countertop. Jezzie decided that she was really rather pretty. She had long dark hair that was starting to show signs of silver streaks tied back in a long braid. Her eyes were warm and kind and creased at the edges, like she was always laughing or smiling. Her grin was natural and despite looking a bit careworn, she seemed a warm and gentle soul. Very much like her son.

"Mom," Embry cleared his throat in an embarrassed sort of way. "This is Jezzie. She just moved here a few weeks ago. She's coming to a Halloween party tonight."

Jezzie took Mrs. Call's hand – warm and dry from a life of labor – and smiled. "Tiffany Call," the woman offered. She was one of those people that had a way of working from a handshake to a full body embrace. Because before Jezzie knew it, she was hugging the woman.

"It's nice to meet you Mrs. Call," Jezzie laughed a little at her enthusiasm. She liked it.

"Oh, please. Call me Tiffany. Mrs. Call is my mother."

"It's nice to meet you, Tiffany," Jezzie tried it on for size.

"New to town, Jezzie?"

"I am," she nodded happily. "From Michigan. My Dad's a fisherman. Works out in Seattle. You work at the hardware store?" Jezzie asked pointing to the insignia on Tiffany's Call's sweatshirt. It was the same place her Dad kept buying his supplies.

"I'm the General Manager," Tiffany smiled. "The owner's out of town the better part of the year so I get to run the show."

"I bet that keeps you busy," Jezzie replied. "What with all the clueless people with busted plumbing or those that assume you don't have any idea what you're doing working in a place like that."

"Haha!" Tiffany's laugh was deep and heartfelt. "More or less. How'd you guess? Work in a lot of hardware stores?"

"No, ma'am," Jezzie shook her head. "I'm an EMT. But I have spent enough time on fishing vessels
to know what it's like to work in a male-dominated environment. Fight the good fight, my sista."

Tiffany smiled at Jezzie's raised fist of solidarity. "So you two are going out?"

Jezzie had noticed that she was far more socially adept and open to the current situation in general and took the lead, letting Embry just observe. "We're meeting some others across town. I was worried I'd get lost – so Embry offered to show me the way," Jezzie smiled. "I offered to take a few younger girls trick or treating and maybe enjoy a few too many fistfuls of Skittles – I really like Skittles," Jezzie wrinkled her nose with a grin. "If that's okay?" she asked.

Tiffany Call seemed momentarily stunned but nodded. "Sure, you kids have fun. Try and get home at a reasonable hour. There's just too many reckless drivers on the road on Halloween night."

"Yes ma'am," Jezzie nodded with a grin. She then proceeded to take Embry's hand – as he seemed mostly dumbstruck – and tugged him out of his kitchen, through the living room and outside.

"What," Embry began slowly as he crossed the yard a few steps behind the fairy princess, "was that?" Embry was pretty sure that Jezzie had just manipulated the hell out of that situation in his kitchen. And to what ends, he had no idea. Jezzie more or less introduced herself to his mother and small-talked her way into her into his mom's responsible, mature, adult head – completely reassuring her of their intentions and general well-meaning and completely kosher evening while never giving her the impression that it was a date. In less than five minutes.

"What?" Jezzie asked innocently, spinning on her toe to face Embry once she reached his truck. The black Converse took away a bit of her edge as a fairy princess, Embry noted. She hopped lithely onto the hood of his car and held her chin in her hand. "Don't seem so surprised, Embry," she shook her head kicking her feet lazily. "It's amazing what a few lines of communication can do. I take it you don't talk to your Mom very much?"

Embry shook his head.

"That's okay," Jezzie replied. "Everyone as their own unique relationship with their parents. I get that. But it makes life easier sometimes if you include them on some things. Even if it's just the superficial stuff, like introducing your friend on the way out for the evening. Did you see how much different she looked on the way out?"

Embry nodded. "You're a Wonder Woman."

"I was always more a Batman fan, but I don't think I have the guns for it," Jezzie flexed her small arms and observed them with a mock serious face. "Nope, too much string bean."

Embry couldn't help but laugh. "All right, in the truck, Thumbelina."

Jezzie smiled big before sliding off the opposite side of the hood and hopping into the Chevy's cab. "What is all this?" she asked Embry about the boxes of paper and receipts that covered the cab's seat and floor.

"Sorry about that. I do most of the books for the store for my Mom. I've fallen a bit behind lately."

"Really?" she asked in wonder as she picked up a box, took her seat and placed it on her lap. "You deal with all this financial stuff?" There were a lot of numbers in that box.

"Yep," he nodded, pulling out of the yard. "Numbers are the easy part of life."
Jezzie wasn't entirely prepared to enter the Clearwater house. She kind of wished she'd had a little warning.

"Jezzieeeeee," was all that rang through the same girl's ears as – out of nowhere – two toddlers were hanging from her arms. Claire seemed to be shaking with enthusiasm and Nessie was giggling with uncharacteristic silliness.

"You are a pretty fairy princess," Claire commented in wonder as she poked at the tulle in the short dress.

"See," she poked Embry in the arm. "Normal people get it."

"Who let you two into the candy early?" Embry wondered. Jezzie could hazard a guess.

"LEAH!" both the girls replied. Claire latched onto Jezzie's leg and Nessie managed to scramble up into Jezzie's arms so that she was holding her at her side. Then Jezzie saw a small, slight older woman enter the living room from the well-lit kitchen.

In Jezzie's humble opinion, Sue Clearwater was… a force to be reckoned with. She was a good three inches shorter than Jezzie's five and a half feet and she moved like a blur.

"Embry Call!" she shouted once he'd ushered Jezzie into the house. "What are you doing holding my son hostage?"

Embry held up his hands in surrender. "I'm the one that sent him home, Sue. Practically had to throw him out bodily."

"That boy sticks to you like glue, I swear!" she muttered. "Can't get him here long enough to even mow the lawn. And this," Sue shouted, "must be the girl who has my son doing homework!"

"Yes ma'am," Jezzie smiled as she was being clung to for dear life. She was glad Sue talked loud so Jezzie could hear her over the reverberations of little girl giggles.

"Ma'am?" Sue replied in amazement. "Well this one's a keeper, isn't she? Are you single, honey?"

Jezzie's eyes bugged and she thought she heard Embry choke on the air. She wasn't really expecting that one. "I—uh… I'm—"

"Mom!" Seth groaned as he entered the living room from the kitchen. The Power Ranger mask on his head would have made Jezzie laugh if she could get control of her tongue. "Stop trying to sell me off to people! Besides, Jezzie's too old for me."

"Seth," she rolled her eyes. "I'm twenty-one. You don't have to put me in the home just quite yet."

"If you insist," Seth shrugged. "Mom, this is Jezzie. Yes, she's the one that I did my homework with. Jezzie, this is my Mom – Sue. Now you can stop worrying about her thinking you're abducting me."

"It's nice to meet you," Jezzie said as she tried to disentangle an arm to shake Sue's hand. Sue just opted to pull the girl – and the other two attached to her into a full body embrace.

"You are welcome by anytime my dear, just you know that."

"Thank you," Jezzie replied in surprise. "I thought you might think I was a bit strange for having your son out so late."

Sue merely brushed the comment off. "My Seth can't lie worth a damn, so when he came in the
house that night and told me he was late for homework I will say I did a double take, but I knew it was true."

"Anything to help out," Jezzie smiled. "All right, ladies: who's ready for trick or treating?"

While Embry stayed at the Clearwater's with Anna, Seth and apparently Jake was around somewhere to prepare for Halloween festivities Jezzie took the two girls trick or treating around the neighborhood.

They went over hand holding rules, always staying together, using kind words like 'thank you', and portion control. After the better half of two hours the two young girls dragged their bags back across the Clearwater lawn through the eight o'clock darkness. Jezzie followed behind the two up the stairs and arrived inside to an entirely different house.

There were blue and green lights illuminating the living room and kitchen, a cottony spider's web material covered the entirety of the walls and most surfaces were covered with something Halloween themed. There was also some extremely Gothic music coming from somewhere.

"Wow…" Jezzie mumbled as she looked around.

"I get really into the Halloween thing," Leah announced as she jumped the small step from the kitchen. Her face was painted pale white and she'd slicked her hair back. That, plus her cloak and the fangs gave her right away. "Minus the screaming children, of course."

"Vampire?" Jezzie asked.

"Bleh!" Leah imitated as she wrapped the cloak around her. "I come to suck your blood!"

"Why are you covered in glitter?" Jezzie asked. Leah only shrugged.

"Mommy and Daddy are gonna love that," Nessie giggled.

"I want you to tell them all about Nessie, okay?"

"Deal," she giggled.

Jezzie and Leah picked through the two young girls candy – tossing out opened pieces and checking for anything out of the ordinary – while the others continued to set up. It was a clear enough night and Jezzie could see Seth, Anna and Embry setting up stuff outside in the backyard.

Not long after others started to trickle in. Quil arrived and then Paul and Rachel and Kim. Brady and Collin came tearing in eventually too. She greeted Rachel and got to meet Paul. It was less nerve-wracking being around everyone this time around – especially given that she was getting to know the girls in rugby. It also helped that the Clearwaters lived nowhere near open water.

Jezzie went into the kitchen to offer Sue some help with replenishing food supplies. There were only about a dozen or so people, but those boys ate with abandon. As she followed Sue out of the kitchen, weaving their way through Nessie and Claire chasing each other through the living room, Jake arrived with two men about Sue's age. Jezzie could easily tell that one was Jacob's father. The two looked so much alike it was uncanny. He was older, more weathered by time – and either age or illness had left him wheelchair bound. The other man looked even older. The color had left his hair and his skin looked like worn like leather.

"Who's this?" asked the younger of the two.
"Billy, Quil," Sue nodded as they arrived. "It's about time you two got here. This is Jezzie Sullivan, she's new in town. She's got my son doing homework, do you believe it?"

"Jezzie," Jake smiled interrupting before Sue really went off. "This is my dad, Billy. And this is Quil's grandfather – Old Quil."

"Hi Mr. Black. Hi Mr. Ateara. It's nice to meet both of you," Jezzie offered a small wave as she placed a bowl of potato chips and a stack of napkins down. She wasn't quite so enthusiastic as she had been with Mrs. Call. Or even Sue for that matter. Billy Black and Old Quil were leveling her some serious death stares.

"And you too," Billy nodded towards her. Old Quil only harrumphed.

Jezzie chewed her lower lip and took a step back. "I'm... gonna go get that last plate of food, Sue."

Sue watched the young girl retreat into the kitchen, and then as Jake leveled a serious glance towards the Council member before following her. She turned her penetrating gaze onto Billy and Quil. "Billy Black, so help me, you will be nice to that girl or I will slash those tires of yours. And, Quil, I swear I'll lace your oxygen with 'shrooms."

"Sue," Billy pretended to look offended. "When are we anything less than cordial?"

"Bullshit," she murmured.

"Last thing we need," Old Quil muttered, "is some Mick Catholic running around these parts."

"Quil!" Sue hissed. "Watch your mouth. She's a young girl, for Pete's sake!"

"Don't you start in on me, Sue," Old Quil groused. "You know as well as I, we run a quiet community here. I met that girl's father the other day. We don't know 'em. Irrational bunch. Don't need to start that Irish virus running around these parts. 'Specially this girl with her city education. Almost as bad as the crystal twinkies..."

"Irish virus?" Billy questioned. "What are you talking about, old man? You lost me there."

"Fond of the drink, they are."

"Quil," Sue shook her head. "What has gotten into you? I will not have you talk like that in my house." Sue leveled Old Quil her own glare and he was silent. She peeked discreetly into the kitchen and thanked her stars it was empty. Hopefully the poor girl hadn't heard anything.

Two hours later had seen Leah covertly dousing all the men with glitter, a Paul/Seth wrestling match (because while Paul was strong, Seth was fast) and Quil and Embry had discussed how they got Teflon to stick to pans if nothing would stick to it. Claire and Nessie had a candy war. Anna, Jacob and Jezzie had mostly watched.

Jezzie was a bit distracted. She wasn't stupid. She could have guessed from everyone else's behavior that Billy and Old Quil were not acting how they normally did. When she met them, she didn't know if they were just crotchety old men or if maybe they didn't like her. Earlier she'd been in the kitchen long enough to hear the word 'mick' before making her way back outside and shoving Jacob down the stairs with her. He looked down at her questioningly, but she said nothing and plastered on a smile as she set the food to the table. It was hardly the worst she'd ever heard, and she wasn't about to let it get to her.

She didn't know that both Jacob and Embry had good enough hearing to discern the remainder of the
conversation from their spot ten feet from the closed door.

She stayed rather quiet until half the party had left and Sue, Seth, Leah, Embry, Quil and Jake had moved inside out of the upstart drizzle. The rest had gone home. Seth convinced them that a viewing of The Nightmare Before Christmas was an absolutely necessary right of passage for all present. After Claire had assured Nessie that it wasn't scary, she had curled up in Jezzie's lap – because she had the best spot to see the TV on the couch – and made it through half before falling asleep. It actually made Jezzie feel a lot better.

"She's really taken to you," Jake commented from her right side as he watched the small girl's head rest on Jezzie's chest. Jezzie glanced down and grinned slightly. She'd felt better with Nessie sleeping calm and adorable on her. Maybe it was just because Nessie's comfort with her proximity reassured Jezzie that she didn't have social cooties.

"She's really shy around new people. Always has been. And I don't know if it's because Claire likes you so much or what, but I've rarely seen Ness take to someone so fast let alone fall asleep in their lap."

Jezzie grinned even fuller then. "I'm like Jesus. The children just come to me... She's a nice girl, Jacob. Hesitant, but very nice."

"If you can win over Ness, you're golden."

"One can only hope."

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"Do you think she heard them?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think so?"

"She practically launched me off the back steps in her attempts to get out of this kitchen when they were talking about her."

"That's a pretty good giveaway."

Claire and Nessie were asleep on the couch in the other room and the TV played lightly in the background. Sue had yawned one too many times a half hour ago and gone to bed. Only the Clearwater siblings and Embry and Jacob remained.

"Bastards," Leah muttered from her spot sitting cross-legged on the counter. "I swear, if any of those high and mighty Council fucktards give that girl a hard time, they're gonna get a fistful of sugar in their gas tank."

"That would suck."

"It'd be great for business though. Imagine how much it would cost to replace the whole engine?"

"I could go metaphorical and put a severed wolf head in their beds?" Leah smirked. "You know like the Godfather but with a Quileute twist. I could be a Godfather."

Jacob laughed. "Your mind is a helluva place, Lees."

"Why not Godmother?" Seth asked, swirling idly on a stool.

"That sounds too much like a fairytale. I want to be a Godfather. Don Clearwater, you may all call
me. Embry, what are you doing?” she glanced up to Embry who's attention was on the phone in his hands.

"Finding out whether Jezzie heard them?” he shrugged and flipped his phone closed.

"You did not ask her that, did you? Oh, I swear Embry Call…” Leah hopped off the counter and lunged the kitchen, reaching for Embry's phone. He tried to pull it out of her reach. He should've learned long ago that fighting Leah was useless.

She pinned his spare arm to the counter with her hip as he tried to hold his phone out of harm's way behind him. She stepped on one of his feet and put an elbow to the side of his head before snatching the phone from him ungracefully. She snapped it open and clicked to his last message.

[You Jezzie ]: *u ok, little red?*

Leah nodded in approval. "Okay. Good. You're not exactly known for your subtlety, Emb."

"Neither are you Leah,” he replied.

He heard the phone vibrate in her hand. She glanced down to the closed screen and tossed it back to him. He was glad she didn't read the text. It wasn't that it would contain anything he didn't want to share. It was more about privacy. None of them got very much these days. Leah was good at reading signals and respecting boundaries, though.

[Jezzie You]: *of course, wolfman. i had a lot of fun tonite :) just tired. nbd. i'll ttyl.*

"Aw," except that one was from Jake. "Wait… what?"

"Don't you fucking start with me," Embry warned. "And she's talking about the mask." He nodded towards the werewolf mask on the counter.

"I like Jezzie, man," Jacob shrugged. "She seems cool. She's always so happy."

"Except when she hears the local fossils talking shit about her," Seth yawned.

"She's not gonna hear anything," Embry insisted sliding his phone into his pocket.

Jacob only watched him appraisingly and Leah smiled in that obnoxiously knowing way.

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**Tuesday, October 31, 2006**

"Oh, Jesus Rollerblading Christ! Thank God! Jezzie! I need help!"

Jezzie had been sitting in her house alone – except for Archie – without power for four hours now. She'd locked all the windows to prevent drafts and even closed all the doors between the rooms. She had mostly contented herself with watching the storm from her porch, but when it got too dark outside, she gathered her candles and flashlights and braced for a long night. As of 7PM she had been working through her Physics homework by torch light. Physics made even less sense in inclement weather, she found.

She was making little progress on her second to last question when her phone buzzed to life on the table beside her. She was pretty sure Seth had been babbling long before she picked up the phone.

"Seth… Seth! Seth!"
"Yeah?" he said, finally pausing for breath.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" Jezzie tried to remain calm; she hoped she didn't have to rush to La Push in the storm of the decade to administer medical aid. She'd like to leave that to Josh and Kevin the other second shift crew – she was glad to be off tonight.

"I'm home alone because Leah's at school and it's not safe enough for Mom to come from the hospital because the roads around the hospital are flooded and the only thing I know how to do is feed myself and there's standing water in my backyard and the lights have been flickering for a half hour and I don't know what to do – I'm only fifteen. Why don't I know how to do things?"

"Seth!" Jezzie shouted cutting off his ranting. Seth talked a lot, quite possibly more than Quil. And definitely in longer consecutive breaths. "Seth, listen to me: do you have town utilities?"

"What does that even mean?"

"Does your electricity come off a pole from the street?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a septic tank buried in your yard or do you have town water?"

"We definitely have well water. I know that one."

"Seth," Jezzie said clearly. "I want you to go into your bathroom and fill your bathtub as high as it'll go with water."

"What—"

"Just go. Right now."

"Fine."

There was a thunk as Seth put his phone down on the table. Jezzie heard some indecipherable shuffling and then a loud curse. Then came some scrambling and Seth was back on the line. "Jezzie. My power's out. The water doesn't work. There's two inches of water in the tub. I think I'm just going to go outside with a metal rod and wait for the Lord to take me."

Jezzie couldn't help it as her hand reached up to smack her own face. She checked her watch. 8PM. The full brunt of the storm wasn't expected until 9PM. It was mostly rain now; the wind was soon to come. "Seth?"

"Yes," he whined miserably.

"I'm coming to get you. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"But it's dangerous!" Seth shouted.

"It's a straight shot from your house to mine down a wide, newly paved road. I have four-wheel drive. It'll be fine. I'm not leaving you home alone in your house with no power or water while you work yourself into hysteria. Call your Mother, tell her where you're going."

And with that she hung up. She slipped her phone into her pocket and grabbed her keys. Archie followed her to the foyer as she pulled on her big yellow rain slicker and boots. God bless the life of a fisherman; she had more than enough waterproofed belongings to make it through Noah's flood. She took the Mag Lite flashlight off the top shelf just for good measure.
She pulled open the door and was greeted by all of the ruckus of two inches an hour. Archie followed her outside and she decided she might as well take him with her. She locked the house and her and Archie ran to the Jeep. She unlocked the driver side and Archie leapt right in ahead of her. She was never so glad that they interacted and read each other so well.

Jezzie took a moment to collect herself and Archie settled in the row behind her. "Lord, give me strength," she muttered and turned the Jeep on. She locked in the four wheel drive and whispered a quiet Hail Mary as she turned left out of her driveway. The drive to the Clearwater's wasn't bad overall, it was just long because she had to go so slow for lack of vision. The rain beat down so hard against the metal frame that Jezzie couldn't hear anything else. Although she could feel the vibrations of Archie's whining from behind her.

She pulled up into Seth's driveway after a whole twenty-five blind minutes on the road, and honked her horn. A blur of tanned humanity came jogging out of the Clearwater home and was inside Jezzie's Jeep faster than she thought was really possible.

Seth was soaked from his fifteen second jaunt across his yard and looked slightly frazzled. He reached across the space between them and pulled Jezzie into a very wet, very warm hug. "Oof," she gasped in surprise.

"Thank you so much," Seth insisted. "And I apologize in advance, but the next time you see my mother she's going to try and convince you to marry me again, because she's fully and rightly convinced that I probably am not capable of surviving without you or her or Leah or a combination of both, even though I told her child grooms are frowned upon in this country and we live nowhere near Utah and Quileutes and Irish just don't roll that way, she's just hedging her bets. But regardless, I love you, Jez."

"Hah!" Jezzie laughed. She was pleasantly surprised by how warm Seth was and found that his body heat counteracted the gnawing pain the storm's cold caused her. "I'm too young to die or get married. I say we peace out and go to this joint across town. I hear they have running water still."

"Right on."

Archie was all for staying with Jezzie if it meant she didn't leave him in that noisy, noisy house. Archie didn't like noises when he couldn't tell where they were coming from. But he might have preferred the noisy house to having another new dog along. But this one seemed a little better than the last…

Another half hour and a near miss with a downed tree later and Jezzie stumbled gratefully out of her Jeep. Archie bounded out after Seth and they all piled inside her thankfully quieter, drier home.

Jezzie found – more or less – an exact replica of Seth's now soaked flannel shirt in her father's chest of drawers and even set his poor backpack (and its contents) out to dry. There didn't appear to be any permanent damage, but that History textbook they were sure would never dry back to its normal size. Seth thought that was okay. He didn't like history, much.

He agreed to make Jezzie a sandwich, since she – as he put it – 'saved his damn inept ass' and after a cold reuben each, the two soon fell into their same odd homework rhythm. Jezzie still tried to finish her physics homework and Seth had more geometry problems than things to say.

"Urgh," Jezzie ground her teeth and smacked her pencil down on her textbook. Seth looked up wide-eyed. She just couldn't wrap her head around this material for the life of her. And if she didn't pass this class she was in deep academic trouble. It was a requirement. The subject interested her, sure enough. But when it came to the practice of physics the science was lost on her. She just
couldn't manage it.

"Everything okay over there, Detroit?" Seth asked carefully as Jezzie's forehead slapped against the island's countertop. She only grunted in response, not feeling very polite in that moment. "Mind if I take a look?"

"Be my guest," she mumbled to the laminate.

Seth slid the large and more than slightly intimidating textbook towards him. Jezzie was a senior in college. But Seth always been pretty good with math – which he knew was a big part of physics.

He looked at the problem she'd circled in the textbook and for a moment he didn't blame Jezzie for giving up. Then he noticed the equation at the top of her notebook. "Is this equation correct? All you have to do is plug the right numbers in?"

"Yeah," Jezzie replied glancing up. "I know the equation's right and I know what numbers go where, but after that I get lost. Right there," she reached over and indicated her spot on the notebook where her efforts went awry. Seth followed her work down from the top. Oh.

"Are you a good or bad news first kind of person?" Seth asked.

Jezzie quirked a brow. "Good?"

"The problem you're having is really easy to solve. You're messing up your order of operations. See," he pointed to a line of math about halfway through Jezzie's progression. "You squared your numbers before you completed the stuff inside the parentheses. P.E.M.D.A.S. Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally. Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication/Division, Addition/Subtraction."

"But that's a fraction – a division problem – so doesn't that come after the squaring?" Jezzie replied looking utterly confused.

Seth shook his head. "But the fraction is inside a set of parentheses. Which comes first. Parentheses always first. Here watch." And he jotted his chicken scratch in the margins next to Jezzie's abomination and circled the final number.

Jezzie flipped to her post it marking the answer key in the back and her jaw dropped open. "You're a genius, Seth."

"The bad news is, if you did that one wrong. I'm thinking you did all of them wrong."

Jezzie's shoulders visibly sagged and she rolled her eyes. "I hate my life."

The remainder of the evening passed as tamely as possible for two young adults alone without electricity. Or maybe even tamer than that. Both Jezzie and Seth finished their homework. Jezzie stayed on the same side of the counter as Seth after he showed her how to do physics properly; the sheer amount of warmth that boy emitted negated any of the aches that the raw cold was setting into her legs. For that she was thankful.

The cold ached her joints and bones to the core. The extremes from the weather only exacerbated her problems. Normally, when she was inside it was fine, because homes in the developed world were rather temperate. But not when they weren't heated. Jezzie had done all she could to keep the warmth in her house and in her body. But much of it didn't seem to help as the bone-numbing ache traveled slowly but surely from her lower back and downward. If it continued for long it would soon be hard for her to walk. Seth's warmth slowed the progress of that ache. Between self-respect and potentially coming off as really creepy if discovered, Jezzie chose the latter.
Seth didn’t seem to notice.

Seth ate a lot of food, Jezzie declared his history textbook saved, they watched the storm radar on Jezzie’s phone and somehow ended up on the living room's fold-out couch playing Truth or Dare like third graders.

This is how Seth found out Jezzie had a very twisted mind when she wanted to. Seth had already consumed a whole cup of white vinegar. Mostly because Jezzie was truly amazed at what Seth could consume without making himself sick. It was admittedly gross, but Seth’d had worse dares.


"Are you gay?" Seth asked without skipping a beat.

"Are you?"

"That's not how it works," Seth rolled his eyes.

"No, I'm not. But I wonder why you ask in a game of truth or dare?" she shrugged. "I feel like you can ascertain that just by knowing me. Or," she rolled her eyes. "You could ask any old time. But, no – I'm not gay. Truth or dare?"

Jezzie had a pattern for favoring the 'truth' option and Seth really couldn't help his fifteen-year-old mind. And Seth seemed to be favoring sex-related questions. Fifteen-year-old minds and all that.

"Am I a virgin?" she asked, repeating his question after she dared him to try and lick his elbow. She rolled back over so she was no longer lying upside down. "We need to get your head out of the gutter. No," she replied smartly. "I am not a virgin. I had sex for the first time when I was fifteen. And I may not be gay but that boy is now."

Seth just stared blankly at her. "You turned a guy gay?"

"No, Seth," she shook her head. "I don't think so. I think the socially accepted norm for boys at age fifteen is to want to sleep with anything with two legs and pretty hair. He was gay before that, but society made him think chasing girls was normal. And sex helped him realize he didn't like girls."

"Wow…"

"Truth or dare, Sethie?" she smiled.

"Truth," he muttered without thinking. He was still wrapping his head around Jezzie's previous answer.

"Are you a virgin?" she asked with a catlike grin spreading across her face. She enjoyed torturing him; she had to. Seth nodded. "Really?" she asked sounding a bit shocked.

"You seem surprised?" Seth noted.

"It's the socially accepted norm for boys at fifteen to want to sleep with anything with two legs and pretty hair," she repeated quietly as she traced the patterns in couch's fabric.

"I agree," Seth nodded again, leaning against the back of the couch where Jezzie's legs were extended. "But if that was true for everyone, we wouldn't be playing truth or dare right now." Jezzie simply rolled her eyes as she smiled. "I like girls. I like girls a lot, but I kind of talk too much around them and I think that weirds them out. I'm also really, really paranoid about getting someone
pregnant. And I don't want to be seen as a teenage manwhore. I know the things they say about Paul around here."

Jezzie nodded as Seth spoke. "That's an honorable reasoning. That you respect yourself and your abstract partner enough to think about the consequences of your actions beforehand."

"Jezzie," Seth sighed. "You're making me sound like some kiss-ass responsible little shit."

"Sorry," Jezzie laughed. "I forgot you got a reputation to maintain."

And that was how Seth learned that Truth or Dare with Jezzie was entertaining because she got the biggest kick out of the simplest things – like being given a piggy-back ride to her refrigerator while he told her about that one time Leah convinced his five-year old self that Superman learned to fly by jumping off things in his underwear because it made him more aerodynamic.

Friday, November 4, 2006

Quil had been gone on his date with Veronica for a few hours and Claire had been fine, but – as Jezzie expected – when bedtime rolled around, Claire was wailing for either her Mom or Quil. She had managed to coax Claire back to normal breathing patterns and asked her to pick a movie she liked to watch with Quil or her Mom. She'd pulled Happy Feet off the shelf next to the television and Jezzie wrapped her in her blanket and let her sit on her lap.

Jezzie had met Joy Ateara, who was by far the most outspoken mom she'd met from La Push. Given her children's mutual dispositions, she supposed it made sense. Joy had shown her where all the important things were located – diapers, toddler foods, emergency sources of entertainment, the good potato chips – and insisted on having Jezzie for dinner at least a few times when she found out her father was going to be gone for the winter months. Anna was supposed to be the first back home after strength and conditioning time for rugby.

Claire fussed a bit, but after forty five minutes was finally on the cusp of sleep. Then there was a rapping on the front door. "Shoot," she muttered. She shifted Claire's weight carefully to her hip. She made her way to the door as quietly as possible trying not to rouse the fussy Claire.

She propped the door open about a foot and was greeted by the sight of a tall, wizened old man.

"Who're you?" Old Quil grumbled.

"Hi," Jezzie replied quietly. "I'm Jezzie, Mr. Ateara. I met you on Halloween? I'm babysitting Claire. Come on in, just let me put her to bed."

Jezzie brought the little girl to the small setup in Anna's room. She mumbled a bit as Jezzie laid her down and tucked her in but didn't wake. She returned to the living room to find Old Quil still standing in much the same place. He seemed to be appraising the home like he didn't spend copious amount of time in the place. He seemed to be appraising the home like he didn't spend copious amount of time in the place.

"Is there something I could do for you, sir?" Jezzie asked trying not to appear nervous.

"Where's my grandson?" he spoke to the room in general. It always unnerved Jezzie when people wouldn't make eye contact with her. And Old Quil Ateara didn't seem to have the excuse of a physical impairment or disability for his not ever looking at her.

"Quil's out for tonight," Jezzie replied quietly, as she scratched at the back of her head absentely. She didn't know if it was her place to tell him Quil was on a date with her friend, so she didn't. The man's disposition unsettled her, but she wasn't about to let him scare her off. She hadn't done anything to
him, she had no need to feel anxious.

"I heard no such thing." Old Quil turned around and replied gruffly.

"I'm sorry, sir," Jezzie shrugged. "He… he didn't mention you'd be coming by." Why was he giving her a hard time about this? She was babysitting Claire, not Quil.

Just then, Jezzie was saved as Anna came barging into the house – an apple in her mouth and her gym bag over her shoulder. "Oh, hey grandpa. How're you?"

"Where have you been?" His tone with Anna was a lot less hostile, Jezzie noticed.

"Strength and conditioning, grandpa," Anna replied, slinging her bag onto the floor. "We have a game next week. How long have you been here? You're not torturing poor Jezzie are you?"

"No," he shook his head. "Of course not."

"I want to know exactly what you think you're doing, boy?" Old Quil was less than pleased and it could be heard in his voice and seen in his posture. He was rankled.

Jezzie had left soon after Anna had come home; Anna could see her crawling in her skin and gave her the green light to leave if she wanted. She could sense that all hell was going to break loose when Quil got home. She hadn't come out of her room since he had – under the guise of homework. Yes, that was it. *Homework.*

"You want to know," Quil countered. "Or the Council wants to know?"

"Don't give me that tone," Old Quil warned. "I am still your grandfather."

"Exactly," Quil emphasized as he kicked off his shoes and stomped into the kitchen. "So shouldn't you be on my side for this one?"

"I am only looking out for your best interests," Old Quil said slowly, sitting down at the kitchen table.

"And what the hell do you think those interests are?" Quil asked, dumbfounded.

"It is foolhardy in the extreme for you to be seeing other women socially, right now."

"You mean," Quil remanded as he opened the fridge and pulled out the leftover macaroni. "That you don't want me to date, especially outside the Pack. That's medieval. Just so you know, we frown on inbreeding. And I've already imprinted. So, no worries."

"Quil," the older man said quietly. "You have other people – other responsibilities – to be thinking of."

"I know that," Quil said flatly. "Thank you for the reminder. But last I checked I showed no sign of slacking and the only way you found out I went on a date was because you came over here and scared the crap out of my friend and babysitter. I'm seventeen in a week; I reserve the right to date people."

"You have limited time with Claire," Old Quil said sitting up a little straighter. "You should be spending your free hours with her."

Quil turned slowly. "Is that what this is about?" He nodded in understanding. "That's what this is
about. You know… I always thought it was weird that the Council glossed over the child imprints. You guys never said anything about Jake or I – you just acknowledged that that's the way it was. I mean, for the love of all things holy… Paul – *fucking Paul* – was the only one to ever talk to me about it because he's in charge of my ass. Not Sam, not the Council… no one else said a word. Are you telling me, you expect me to be with Claire? Like… like that?"

Quil was beyond disturbed, beyond horrified and beyond even trying to understand what was going on in his grandfather's head. Imprinting had sent his life into spiraling oblivion like nothing else. He'd take a new phase all over again if he meant he'd never have to relive the first few months of his imprint with Claire. But Seth's Biology lesson had helped… a lot, actually. Quil never felt anything for Claire other than total pride. Every time she learned a new word or mastered a new motor skill, he was elated. It was nothing like Sam had dealt with. Nothing like what Jared had dealt with. Hell, it was even different than what Paul went through with Rachel.

That didn't change much. Everyone had still thought he was a creepy ass pedophile. And because he didn't want that stigma on Claire – he didn't want her to feel any of the residual stress from the Pack tension – he'd left her alone. Long enough that he almost lost his mind and Claire cried nonstop for three days before Emily called him – bitter and resigned.

Quil had thought long and hard about Seth's notion of filial imprinting. He and Jake talked about it a lot. Best friends and imprinted to children. They had a very small club, and when it came to toddler-related matters they conferred a lot. Neither was sure if the exuberant Claire making fast friends with the quiet Nessie was a good or bad thing. The jury was still out on that. But regardless, the notion that an imprint that was entirely designed as a parent/child relationship lifted a burden off Quil so heavy he thought he might just skip.

And things had gotten better. It took some time, but he stopped working himself into near anxious hysteria. Claire was perfect. She was two. She wanted to play games and sing songs and just do things. Two year olds loved to just do *stuff*. Like collect leaves or climb on rocks or walk places or dig holes in the sand. It was surreal to have someone in his life that just wanted to do things with him. Sure, Jake and Emb were still his best friends but no one had time for anything anymore that wasn't Pack, food, sleep and – if you were lucky – school. Quil also had the joy of dealing with a crazy grandpa – whom had quickly fallen in his regard since the year he turned thirteen.

That summer everything went haywire and until Quil phased, he thought it was because Old Quil was going senile. Why the hell else would he be constantly recounting tribal legends and telling his grandson to brace himself for greatness? Quil hadn't exactly thought his grandfather was preparing him for anything, he thought he had lost it. Now he realized he was being forcibly groomed for myth-status since he was thirteen and he resented it more than just a little bit.

Jacob got slightly less crap from Billy until he'd phased. It'd taken a long time for Jacob to explain that he was Alpha only because Sam didn't want it. Sam was a good Alpha, but he wasn't a natural. He'd been too traumatized by his own first phase. Jacob was just the next in line. It was never a family thing, only a coincidence.

And then Nessie came along. And both Jacob and Quil were clueless as to why they were bonded to children.

Sure, Quil would be around to help Claire through life but so far Claire was the one helping Quil through life. Simply by climbing things with her and helping to find all the red legos, Quil had someone who expected nothing unrealistic of him and wanted nothing more than his company.

Claire was perfect.
"It's not good for a wolf to defy the imprint bond," Old Quil said with finality.

"I'm not defying anything. I'm allowed to care about more than one person. And I will never," he said, pointing with his fork for emphasis, "think of Claire that way. That is so… no. Just, no. She's a little girl!"

"She will mature," Old Quil nodded.

"Yeah," Quil replied, now fully distracted from his food. "And when she's twenty I'll be in my mid-thirties and have helped raised her. What part of that sounds like the making for a good romantic relationship? She is going to grow up and date whomever she wants. It's called being normal and that's what I want for her."

"You are neglecting—"

"With all due respect, sir," Quil interrupted. "I love Claire more than just about anything else on the face of this planet and I will not have someone – especially my own family – question that, just because I want to give her a healthy, normal life. I can love her without ever having to marry her."

"Well, you seem very set in this," Old Quil replied after a moment's silence. "I wonder how your Alpha feels about this?"

"I am," Quil nodded, his jaw set. "And I'm pretty sure everyone is fine with my never dating Claire – Jake included."

"I suppose this conversation is over then."

Monday, November 7, 2006

"I think I'm going have Carlisle get me tested."

"For what?" Sam asked with a look of utter confusion from the couch. His shock was such that he actually turned away from the television for a moment to look at Embry in his kitchen. Making a sandwich. That kid would need a sandwich engraved on his tombstone.

"Well, definitely not for VD," Quil insisted as he turned the volume up. "Because Lord knows you actually need to get laid to contract that shit."

"So…" Jake questioned. "Are you knocking Emb for his nonexistent sex life or thinking that Jez has an STD? Because I'm pretty sure neither one is going to end well for you."

When Embry didn't respond to any of his Packmates they all just glanced back at him. They were at least expecting something to get thrown at Quil. Embry wasn't even going to touch the connectedness of him, STDs and Jezzie right now.

"Paternity," he said.

"Shit…" Quil muttered.

"Yeah," Embry nodded. "I'm done with not knowing. And since all of you told me you don't really care, I figured why the hell not. Not to sound completely heartless, but, Sam your Dad's gone and Quil's is dead. The only way I see it making a serious issue is if it's Billy."

"Yep," Jake nodded popping the 'p'. "Those could be some interesting family reunions. I'm behind
you, man. But... you know the bullshit that this could bring, right? You're prepared to deal with that? At least within Pack and Council."

Embry nodded.

"Have you asked your Mom at all?" Sam inquired.

"And how would I explain that?"

"How would you explain a desire to know who your dad is?" Sam shrugged, "rampant curiosity?"

"But it's a question that comes totally out of left field. Especially when I don't have phasing as a logical reasoning. And we have narrowed it down three ways. I figured I might as well just have Carlisle test me and then my Mom doesn't need to know. She told me when I was a kid that it was a guy from the Makah rez that she never knew very well. I don't want to parade the lie in her face. I just want to know."

"So you don't want her to know that you know?" Quil asked. "You'll both know without knowing the other knows? You're bound to fuck that up somehow, man."

Jacob and Sam exchanged mutual looks of frustration before shaking their heads. "You know, Emb," Jacob spoke. "Unrelated to your parentage – but you are allowed to tell your Mom about Pack. You've been greenlighted on this on for a hell of a long time."

"Some of the other wolves would kill for that," Sam pointed out.

"I know that. Feel free to pass on that 'Get Out of Jail Free' card for me, because I don't want it. The whole idea of my not asking my Mom, is not having to bring up unnecessary crap for her. I know I could get it out of her if I wanted, but at what expense? She's worried enough. I don't want to make her miserable. And then have her find out that I'm Pack because I'm one of your half-brothers? I'm totally fine with not ever bringing that kind of shame on her."

"All right," Jacob nodded, knowing that Embry was set in his decision. "As long as it's fine with the others than go ahead; I just don't want this tearing a rift through the Pack."

"I think it's only an issue if we make it one," Sam decided. "Have at it, kid."

"Fine by me," Quil shrugged. "Let's see how it turns out and then we can decide if we want to tell the Council. They don't have to know. It's not vital information."

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**Tuesday, November 8, 2006**

"All right, boys. We're going to start with a basic kinship test. It's the easiest for this case because any of you could possibly be Embry's half brother, there would be a high incidence of common DNA. As half siblings, you'll have about 25% shared genes."

The three nodded in unison and Carlisle grinned. "Now, there is a lot of... randomness... that occurs in genetic distribution to offspring. And the closeness of Quileute DNA could either prove to be a boon or a stumbling block depending on the results we get. This won't be a definite yes or no, but it may very well help narrow the playing field."

He handed each of the wolves, sitting side by side on his couch, a vial. "Each of these is a sterile swab. I need you insert into your mouth and scrape it along the inside of your cheek. And then back inside the container without touching it. Do each of you have the properly labeled vial?"
More synchronized nodding. Carlisle thought the four of them might as well have all been biological brothers for all the difference it made.

"Good," he watched the four sitting in his office, made sure none of the samples were compromised in their collection. He collected the samples and placed them inside a ziplock bag. "I'll take a look at these and give you a call tomorrow."
Fighting with the Wolves

Sunday, November 5, 2006

It was by unlucky chance that Jacob discovered Jezzie was an absolute crack shot.

Jacob, Embry, Quil and Sam were on their way back from their DNA testing with Carlisle and Embry's wolf would just not shut up about Jezzie Sullivan. Truth be told, Jake wanted to know for himself how far outside the treaty line she was and Embry just wanted to know how she was doing, because she wouldn't call Embry back.

Jacob insisted that it had been barely a week and that he maybe shouldn't blow things out of proportion quite yet. But Quil and Sam were not willing to continue listening to Embry's wolf whine petulantly in the communal mind. Because Embry's human and Embry's wolf were almost never in sync about that girl. But they were all pretty sure that if Paul told him to "just tap that" one more time, Embry might just lose his shit.

Jezzie was outside that day, enjoying the rare Forks sunlight and capitalizing on the dry air by hanging some clothes on the line. Her and her father had yet to get a dryer and were contenting themselves with hang drying. And the gentle upward motion of hang-drying laundry did wonders for her muscles, sore from a few Saturdays worth of rugby practice.

Archie lay next to the wicker basket full of clothes and Jezzie felt the whole affair was nice and properly post card perfect. She picked a scarf out of the basket and was shaking it out when Archie lifted his fawn head out of the grass and glanced into the woods. Jezzie assumed it was a small animal; Archie was still getting used to the abundant wildlife in the area.

However after a moment of staring he raised himself to his legs and trotted to the tree line. He stared into the woods that bordered the Sullivan's yard on all sides and growled. Jezzie held on to the scarf and walked towards him. When she was almost an arms length away, Archie darted into the trees.

"Archie!" Jezzie called before trotting in after him. "Archimedes!" she stomped through the thick underbrush as gracefully as she could, following Archie's path of crushed foliage and bellowing growls. After a few minutes, Jezzie lost sight of her property behind her and was running out of breath as she had to haul over downed trees and big bushes that Archie made much quicker work of. She supposed she at least wouldn't have to go on her run today.

"Archie," she called again, pausing with her scarf-laden hand against a tree. She caught her breath and looked around for any sight of Archie or his path. She finally spotted a shivering patch of ferns about twenty feet ahead of her. She made careful work towards the spot and when she reached it, she discovered Archie, her precocious bloodhound, crouched in the dirt growling at something unseen in the thickening wall of trees ahead of them.

"There you are, Archie," she said rubbing his head and hoping he'd be wiling to forgo the possum hunt for today as she was going to have a hard enough time finding their way back without having to physically drag a dog that weighed more than her.

When Archie not only refused to stop growling, but refused to stand, Jezzie's lips pursed in consternation. What had her dog in such a huff? She glanced up as the trees ten yards in front of her shifted as something moved within them. Jezzie watched as whatever it was progressed to the left and the trees moved with it. She froze in terror.
Archie began to emit a small whining noise and Jezzie was sure her eyes were wide as saucers. She swallowed thickly and clutched at the scarf in one had and Archie's scruff in the other. She followed the shifting trees without blinking. Was it coming closer or moving away? It was hard to tell... Jezzie slid her hand from Archie to the earth beneath her feeling around. With eyes unmoving she grasped onto a rock the size of her fist and tucked it into the loop on her scarf as she held both ends. She slowly stood and muttered to Archie, who unwillingly followed with his tail between his legs.

Jezzie began to slowly back up when whatever was in the woods made a step obvious enough to prove to both Jezzie and Archie that it was a rather enormous being. Jezzie was fully convinced she was going to get eaten by a bear.

Jezzie swung the scarf quickly like a baseball bat, let one side of the scarf go and sent the large rock zinging through the air and into the trees. It hit a soft body with a thud, a crack, a growl and an earthy thump.

Jezzie heard the growl and both her and Archie turned tail and ran full speed. With the adrenaline pumping through her system, Archie was only a hair faster than Jezzie. He ran ahead and thankfully took them right back to their yard. The two vaulted the last log before open grass and sprinted up the back steps and Jezzie jumped ahead to wrench the door open.

It wasn't until the doors and windows were locked, the shotgun was loaded by the door and both Jezzie and Archie had had a gratuitous sip of her dad's single malt that their heart rates returned to normal.

They honestly had not been trying to scare her, but judging by Jacob's shattered right shoulder, they might as well have threatened to kill and eat her. What the hell was she doing in the woods anyways? Jake sat on the hospital bed in the Cullen's second floor infirmary room – having sent the others home so he could go back to the Cullen place – and was trying not to wince as Carlisle set his shoulder to heal.

Edward was peering at the x-rays across the room - Jake didn't know who the hell had digital x-rays in their house, but he'd long since stopped asking those kinds of questions.

"Jacob," Edward began cautiously, "If you don't mind my asking, what precisely was this? It would have probably killed a bear."

"Jezzie Sullivan," Jake grumbled as Carlisle rigged the sling. Edward spun in the computer chair and Carlisle quirked a blond eyebrow.

"The new girl in town?" Carlisle inquired. "I just treated her father in the ER a few weeks ago..."

Jacob noticed that Carlisle's statement was only slightly leading. Edward didn't miss it either. "Yeah, he's a little fruity. They seem like good people though. Jezzie got me with a rock."

"She threw it?" Edward asked skeptically glancing back at the fractures on the computer screen.

"Nah," Jacob snorted. "She frickin' slung it at me. With a scarf. Right out of some David and Goliath story. I seriously didn't think it would hurt that bad."

"Your shoulder is broken in four places," Edward shook his head. "That rock must've hit at a hundred miles an hour. Girls quite a shot."

"And quite an arm," Carlisle added.
"Tell me about it," Jake grumbled.

Jacob spent the afternoon with Nessie, teaching her how to make tacos good and proper while her Aunt Rosalie complained incessantly of the scent of food and dog making her nauseous.

After a few hours and a strong recommendation from Carlisle to remain human while his shoulder healed, Jacob called Embry, yelled at him about his crazy ass girlfriend and how he could be the one to creep on her since she apparently guarded her property like a deranged Amazon, and to come get his crippled ass.

Wednesday, November 8, 2006

There was a loud clatter as Jezzie's front door swung open. She recognized the jangle of her Dad's keys and didn't glance up from her work. Kyle had just finally gotten through to her and she wanted to see if she could finish one teensie problem – "Jezebel!" – maybe not.

"One sec, Dad." She polished off the equation and laid her pencil in the book. "Be right back," she mumbled to Kyle, still fully absorbed in trying to understand Faust.

"Jezebel!" her father shouted again from the kitchen.

"I'm coming, Dad," she insisted as she pushed the swing door open that lead between the kitchen and the living room. "Dad? What gives?"

Alfred Sullivan was a loud man. There wasn't a lot of getting around that. However, he'd never been prone to yelling and usually only did so on special occasions. When Jezzie stopped inside the kitchen, she found her Dad pacing back and forth between the island and the kitchen table, rubbing his gristled beard fiercely. There was a plastic bag on the counter top. She peeked inside: an adjustable wrench, a roll of fishing line, electric tape and plumber's tape.

When her father didn't answer her first question she tried for another. "Where have you been Dad?"

"Hardware store," he responded gruffly. He paced a few more laps before stopping. He turned at the kitchen table and looked at Jezzie. "On edge of the reservation..." He shook his head, trying to find a way to organize his thoughts. "Do you know any of the council members? In La Push?"

It wasn't an accusing question but it was a serious one. Jezzie didn't know if she liked where it was going. "Yeah, Dad," she nodded. "It's a small place. It's kinda hard not to know people."

"Hmph," he grumbled before continuing his pacing and beard rubbing. Jezzie slumped against the counter, her forehead in her hand. The only local hardware store was in La Push. It was starting to make sense.

"Jezebel, you know I've never made any fuss about the friends you make. You're a good girl and you run with good people. Besides, I have quite liked all the kids that have been by: Kyle, Veronica, that mute boy. The reservation kids included: Embry, Leah Clearwater, that kid brother of hers Seth - even if he's only here between midnight and sunrise - that Anna, too. All nice kids. But," he shook his finger in consternation. "And this is a big 'but' m'dear. If I hear that anyone has been less than civil to you in your time there, so help me I have still got the twelve gauge behind the seat of my truck."

"Dad?" Jezzie sighed trying to sort her responses out. She leaned against the counter, catching her face in her hand. "Number one: I'm pretty sure that's illegal." Her father only snorted in rebuttal. "Number two: no one in La Push has been rude to me." Rude? Well, at least not to her face. Mostly.
Cold-hearted to the point of social discomfort? Yes. Small differences. Some people just made her crawl inside own skin. But it was hardly the majority.

"If that changes I want to know the instant it happens," her father insisted forcefully.

"Dad..." she had to ask. "What'd you hear?"

"Not important," he said evasively. "I want you to promise to tell me if anyone gives you any lip."

"So you can go down there and crack skulls? You said yourself, I'm an adult, Dad."

"And you're still my daughter. And you still live under my roof. I don't care how old you are. Whether you're twenty-one or ninety-one I'm not prepared to hear any bull spoken against my child."

"Dad, if that happens - and that's a long shot if - I will promise to tell you so long as you don't do anything irrational that'll just make the situation worse. But no one's going to hurt me, so I think you need to let me learn to fight my own battles. You've taught me well."

Al stared at his daughter pensively, mulling over her offer. He wasn't sure. He did have an itchy trigger finger. "All right," he finally agreed. "So long as you stay honest with me Jezebel?"

"Of course, Dad," she replied. She felt a small shoot of guilt when she thought what she'd heard on Halloween. "And you too?"

"You bet your bottom dollar!"

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**Thursday, November 9, 2006**

"Jacob? It's Carlisle. I think you boys should come back over."

"Did you figure anything out?"

"No, actually. And... bring another wolf. Someone you know is related to any one of you. Cousin, full siblings or anything like that."

"Okay."

A few days later and Carlisle had dissected the entire genetic make up of the whole La Push Pack. Seth and Leah were apparently doomed from conception because they had all three major bloodlines in their system in hefty quantities – Black, Uley and Ateara. Their cousin Brady, only had traces of Ateara blood.

Sam and Paul seemed to be the last holders solely of Uley blood. The two were related through some grandparent.

Collin had almost as much Black blood as Jacob did – which given that they shared a line of grandparents up through Ephraim Black made sense (and further debunked myths of inherited Alphadom). And if Quil wasn't related to you directly, you probably had his family's blood in your veins.

"Okay, Carlisle," Jacob sighed. "I get it; we're related as hell." He'd spent too much time on this doctor's overexpensive office furniture with too many packmates. It had now thankfully dwindled back down to just him, Quil, Embry and Sam. The room got awfully crowded as Carlisle dug deeper. "Who the hell is *Embry* related to?"
Carlisle glanced back down at his results for the tenth time, wondering if the data could've possible rearranged itself. It hadn't.

"Emily."

"What?" Sam reacted almost instantaneously.

"Remember about two days ago, I took samples from Claire and Emily as constants? They were the steady variables. There's also no commonalities between him and any of you as representatives of the Quileute tribe's genetic material. Not only is he not any of your half-brother, he's probably not even related to any of you. There are other bloodlines on the reservation but none – you say – that carry the ability to phase. I haven't tested those bloodlines, though they do intersect at points with most of your Pack. None of the Pack is of a 'pure' lineage."

"So…" Embry tried to reason out. "I'm related to some family that has no history of phasing? How does Emily figure into that?"

Carlisle shook his head. "You share absolutely no common genetic matter with any of the members of your Pack. None whatsoever, therefore, the odds of your having any Quileute DNA in a quantity that matters is slim to none. It seems that substantial amounts are required for the phase. Since your mother is Makah, you'd need a father with a strong genetic tie to the phasing bloodlines. You and Emily share about 10% DNA. You share 5% with Claire. That's substantial."

"So he's related to the Youngs?" Quil asked.

"This would be hard to prove but, Embry, it looks to me like you're full blood Makah. You don't have any Quileute DNA in your system."

"But I still phased," Embry said. He glanced to each of his sides to Sam and Jake. "What does that mean."

Sam was the only one that spoke. "It means Makahs phase."

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Sunday, November 12, 2006

Embry was patrolling from the coast, along the river, and to the gorge where his path used to overlap Jared's. He saw him a few times and they nodded to each other in canine acknowledgement. Further down, Sam was also on patrol. Ever since that true werewolf had come within Forks, the new schedule had been shot to hell. Instead of regular one and two man shifts, Jake had at least three wolves running the borders for the next two weeks. Just in case.

They'd been running this new schedule with regular shifts for about a week now and Embry was starting to feel this sort of weird tickling in his head. He'd brought it up at dinner once and Leah corroborated it. Not only could she hear Quil but she was starting to get whispers of Paul and Brady's mind again as they patrolled the land just south of her. While the meetings about the werewolves had forced their heads together, bringing Pack Mind back into sync had proved to be a lengthier process. Jake could only shrug. He heard all of them whenever he wanted.

"It's just a way for us to sync up," Leah mused. "To be able still patrol the best way we can. Staying in communication is key. If we keep the schedule we might be able to communicate just like we used to.

"But I can't hear Paul or Brady. I only hear Jared vaguely. It's not even Jared. It's like, I feel whatever's foremost on his mind. Usually it's Kim... But still."
"I think it's because Sam is phasing out," Jake offered. "It doesn't make sense with our numbers to have two separate Packs running over the rez. Neither Jared or Paul want to Alpha Sam's Pack once he can finally fully phase out. They're assimilating back into us the better Sam gets at it."

It was hard enough having the smaller Pack inside a person's head on a daily basis.

Today was mostly normal, though. Jared was definitely exhausted and Embry was getting way more attuned to his brain then he'd been in a while. He was ambling from the cliffs and bumping along, swaying and leaning from tree to tree and killing time. He couldn't wait until they went back to the new schedule they had so quickly abandoned. That had been a nice schedule.


Jared's mind was still hazy at best and it was pretty peaceful. Embry was making a half assed effort to chase a fox that had stumbled out of the underbrush when his mind exploded.

Out of nowhere there was blood curdling screaming. It scared the crap out of him and he was momentarily bowled over as he yelped in pain. Embry's paws flew instinctively over his snout trying to block out the screaming in his head, when his wolf reminded him that this was probably important. The screaming was not one of his brothers. It was way too high pitched. It was like a banshee screeching.

And then the realization hit him.

_Ana. Anna Ateara._ He perked up and tried to focus, to find out where she was.

_Ana! Anna! Don't worry! Anna, it's okay. Calm down. Please stop screaming._

Embry heard a whine escape his snout, it was almost too much to handle. He had to find Anna; he couldn't handle her screaming and her unbridled panic for too much longer. All there was was screaming, panic, anger, fear and pain. It was total chaos and it made him nauseous.


His thoughts and emotions were blurring with Anna's. Hers were too all encompassing, too enormous and chaotic.

_School._ Embry got a glimpse of Forks High from Anna's mind. The dumpster and the back of the cafe.

_Ana! Anna, I'm coming. Stay where you are. Stay in the woods._

Embry started off at a run southward. He crossed into Jared's territory and could feel him acknowledge him mentally but he felt no different. Embry hoped he picked the chaos out of his mind, realized it was not time for a shift change and could put two and two together. Embry figured if Anna had shifted and was screaming in his mind and not Jared's, it probably meant she had Black Pack loyalty. At least Sam would hear.

Embry made it closer to QTS and could hear Anna begin to howl. Well, that certainly saved him from having to issue the distress call. She probably would have everybody from both Packs in wolf skin in minutes.

_Ana!_ Embry shouted as she took a breath and finally made it to where she was.
Embry? Embry, is that you? Why can I hear you? Why are you in my head?

She was still screaming but the mental talk lessened that. However, the fact that she could hear Embry in her head seemed to be upping the panic.


Embry steeled myself and separated his own emotional plane from Anna's. Hopefully, she could catch the calm. Doubt it. Shut up, subconscious.

Embry made his way carefully into her line of sight. Communicating the whole time as she'd have no way of knowing the disembodied voice was coming from the wolf in front of her.

Anna, it's okay. It's just Embry. I'm coming in. You can see me. See the wolf? That's me. You've just phased, Anna. You're not insane. It's totally normal.

Anna had known about the wolves. It was hard to keep it from her when she was so close to Quil's age and both his mother and his grandfather knew. But she didn't know much – of her own choosing. She just knew that her brother and the rest of the rag-tag group were the real life manifestations of the legends she'd heard since she was a kid. She admittedly didn't want to know much else.

MY FUCKING SISTER

Hi, Quil, nice of you to join us. Please remain calm or go back to being human. You're not gonna help if you're panicking too.

I'm not panicking. Panic. Anxiety. Nausea.

Embry could hear other wolves moving through the woods and see them coming through the trees. Then he heard Sam.

Anna. It's Sam Uley. You are all right.


Jake, we're behind QTS.


Sam and Embry made a loose circle around Anna when Quil and Jake finally arrived. Anna was looking absolutely manic and ready to make a break for it.

Quil, she's gonna run; either you jump her or I do.

Quil, talk to her. She knows you best.

Where's Leah? We need another chick.

No Leah now. Class. She's not back until tomorrow.

Dammit.


Guys, we're psyching her out. Quil and I have this. The rest, fall back.
Permission to phase? My head's gonna explode.

Someone needs to get Claire from daycare.

Fine, just let me get human!

Uh… Embry? We have a situation on the main side of QTS…

Fear. Fear. Fear. Accompanied by lots of screaming that Embry was just now realizing was not the right pitch to belong to Anna. He was hearing it in her head, but it wasn't her voice.

Define 'situation', Jake…

Embry was around the front of the school and hidden from sight along the edge of the treeline before Jacob could even pull out a mental image. Embry probably wouldn't have believed what he saw in Jake's mind anyways. On the pavement in the parking lot of QTS, Jezzie sat frantically clutching at her hair and screaming for all she was worth.

A helpless Jared Cameron – who had only met Jezzie a handful of times – was crouched at her side, trying to slow her hyperventilating and preventing her from making a scene. Apparently, he figured out what was going on, Embry thought momentarily. He looked as terrified of the small girl as Jezzie was of what she'd just witnessed.

It was Jezzie's screaming in Anna's head. Sure, Anna was terrified about what was happening to her, but the fact that she might've hurt Jezzie was also there. She knew about Quil. Knew about the Pack. Her phase was unanticipated, but not a complete shock.

Is she okay?

Jake was shocked into silence, his stream of attempted calming words stopped, as Anna formed one of her first intelligible thoughts as she caught the visual of Embry's sight. Embry focused quickly on scanning Jezzie's form. No blood. She smelled like terror, but not pain or blood.

She's horrified, but she's fine.

And Embry phased human, barely pulling on his shorts as he crossed the parking lot. He skidded to a halt in front of Jezzie on the ground, skinning his knees in the process.

"Dude, she won't stop screaming," Jared supplied from just over her shoulder. "You need to shut her up before she draws a crowd. Crazy white girl is making a scene."

"Jezzie?" Embry tried, reaching slowly to remove her hands from her tear-streaked face. That didn't go so well. Jezzie just screamed louder at the contact and lurched backwards, fists and elbows flying. When she crashed into Jared's chest, she caught him in the solar plexus and her screaming spiked again. She began to scramble around looking for a way to escape. Girl was damn strong and Jared coughed as she knocked the wind out of him.

"Back up, Jare," Embry nodded before firmly, yet gently, grabbing Jezzie's wrists – forcing her to make eye contact with him and also not punch him in the face again. Embry assumed it worked, because she stopped screaming. Embry was glad for that; he was thinking his eardrums might be hemorrhaging. "Jezzie?" he said softer. "Jezzie, it's Embry. It's Embry and Jared. You're okay. Everything's going to be all right."

And then – out of nowhere – Jezzie launched herself at him. Embry just kind of froze as her arms and legs wound around him and her tears began to soak his skin as she buried her face against his
shoulder. This was not really what came to mind when he imagined having any girl – especially Jezzie – wrapped around him.

"Awesome," Jared said. "She's wrapped around you like a spider monkey. Let's capitalize on this moment and get her the hell out of here." Embry closed his arms, his hands finding Jezzie's back and he and Jared made for he and Kim's place – by far the closest to QTS.

When Embry burst into Kim's living room babbling "What do I do? What am I supposed to do?" with a hysterical redhead clinging to him for dear life and sobbing, Kim became a bit concerned. Kim stepped around the counter and grabbed one of Embry's ridiculously flailing hands. She guided him to her couch and gently forced him to sit.

"Talk to her, Embry," Kim intoned, sitting on the coffee table across from him as Jezzie continued to sob and hiccup uncontrollably. "What happened?" She looked up at Jared as he came to stand next to her.

"Anna phased," Jared said around a bite of leftover meatloaf. "In front of Jezzie."

"Oh god…" Kim grimaced. That must've sucked.

"Yep," Jared nodded. "She's been like this since I found her. She only recently attached herself to Embry like a sea urchin. He hasn't been much help though. At least she's not puking like Rachel did. Remember that?" Kim looked up, and Embry looked terrified. "Get it together, man," Jared offered unsympathetically before returning to the kitchen.

Jezzie's hysteria still showed no signs of relenting and Embry was sure her tears were probably going to hit Kim's carpet soon.

"Embry," Kim continued in a measured and more helpful tone. "You need to talk to her. You know her better than Jared and I. She's just going to work herself into shock or a panic attack."

Embry nodded wide eyed and swallowed. He steeled himself momentarily and his hands found her shoulders. "Jezzie… Jez? You're just fine. You're okay."

Kim mimed taking a deep breath and was thankful Embry caught on. "I need you to calm down. Take a deep breath, okay?" She wasn't exactly following instructions and Embry could feel her lungs and her heart beating a rabbit's pace against his own chest.

"Jezzie, you're gonna make yourself sick. I can feel you breathing. Here, breathe with me." Embry lowered a hand to her back and took a large intentional breath, "Inhale." There was a small stall in Jezzie's crying, a small hiccup, and Embry felt her make the conscious effort to inhale.

"Exhale," he instructed her as he did the same. She let it out in one giant puff, but she also repeated the pattern with him for the next few minutes. When Kim felt comfortable that Embry and Jezzie could symbiotically breathe together without issue, she made to stand and fetched a cup of tea from the kitchen. Tea fixed everything. She sent Jared for a sweatshirt of hers in their dresser and when she returned to the coffee table, Embry was actually making progress in disentangling Jezzie from him. She moved stiff and mechanically but progress was progress. Finally secured in a corner of the couch, a hunched and tearful – though significantly more coherent – Jezzie glanced at her hosts.

"Kim, right?"

Kim smiled good-naturedly and nodded. "You remembered."

"Jezzie remembers everyone," Embry intoned lightly, recalling his similar reaction the first time he'd called her house. Jezzie smiled. She may have needed post-its to remember everything else in her life,
but she forced her often disabled brain to remember the people she met.

Kim offered her the cup of tea and Jezzie took it with grateful thanks. After a few sips, Kim watched her glance over her shoulder. Jared stood behind Kim with her old, comfy U-Dub sweatshirt. "Thanks, hon. Take a seat, wouldja? I think you're weirding her out."

Jared plopped down in the armchair behind his fiancée, closed his eyes and sighed in relief, thankful that the emergency had passed. "Thank you, Jared," Jezzie said quietly. Jared's eyes snapped open to meet Jezzie's green ones. He wasn't expecting that. Though he was sure Embry mentioned something about Jezzie doing that every now and then. "For back in the parking lot? I know it was a mess… but thanks, for staying with me."

Jared nodded, accepting her thanks and he noticed how she dipped her head ever so slightly to him. An unconscious show of submission.

"And you too," she said quietly as she patted Embry's knee. "Thanks. You did good, Embry. So, when are you guys having me committed?"

Embry's pace of recovery seemed to be mirroring and highly dependent upon Jezzie's. Jared thought that was really ridiculous considering Jezzie, y'know, had to reason to be absolutely crazy right now. Embry didn't.

Embry had been pretty screwy about this girl for a while. At first, Jared just thought it was because Embry was sexually retarded. This was mostly true. Embry hadn't been nearly the smooth talker Quil had been pre-phase. Exploding into an overgrown man in the course of a few weeks hadn't helped that. He was worried Brady and Collin would go the same way, having phased so young. But at least they had time to adjust. And Jake? Well that was a whole other clusterfuck entirely. Jared supposed that at least Embry was very lucky he wasn't Jacob.

Regardless, Embry was pretty female-illiterate. But Jared suspected only a small part of his issues stemmed from his lack of experience. Embry could at least talk to girls, didn't moon over them or worry constantly. Jezzie was different. Jared had slowly but surely picked up the tenor of Embry's mind now that they shared patrol and he knew that Jezzie was always on the periphery. Mostly just wondering what she was doing or how she was. Jared was pretty sure Embry didn't even realize it. If Jared wasn't much mistaken, Embry liked Jezzie a lot and wasn't even aware of it.

Not only did that seriously screw with Jared's perception of Pack relationships, because he stood on the total other side of the imprinting debacle – also a whole other clusterfuck entirely – but it was definitely problematic that Embry didn't even recognize feelings he had for another human being.

Well, that was a bizarre man talk for another time. Right now, they had to convince Jezzie she wasn't insane.

"Jezzie," Jared replied. "We're not having you committed."

Kim reached from her spot on the coffee table and took Jezzie's hand. "I'm pretty sure I just experienced a total psychological and mental breakdown in the parking lot of QTS."

Jared thought it was odd that Jezzie was more concerned about her reaction to Anna's phasing and not Anna's phasing itself. Kim picked up on the misaligned concern as well. "Jezzie, what do you remember?" she asked quietly.

Jezzie took a deep breath and sifted through her recent thoughts and memories. It took her a moment to sweep aside the panic and the worry that she was absolutely losing her mind.
"What were you doing at QTS today?" Kim helped.

"Um..." Jezzie's eyes glazed as she tried to remember. Remembering. Not her best strength. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the calendar in it. "I was with Anna going to rugby..." Then Jezzie's memory jogged. She remembered walking across the lot and offering to drive Anna home afterwards. She remembered thinking that the strap from her bag was seriously digging into her shoulder and that she wasn't sure if she remembered her tape. She had just mentioned to Anna that they were late when... "Oh my god," and her hand snapped over her mouth. "Oh my god!"

She could feel the anxiety wash back into her system once again. Gray and black fur popping out of nowhere, snarling, barking... "Where's Anna? Where's Anna?" She shrieked. "Is she okay? We were attacked! By— something! A wolf or a bear!"

Kim held tight onto Jezzie's hand and Embry prevented her from standing up. "Jezzie, she's fine. No one was attacked."

Her memories of the incident were so foggy, she doubted them immediately. "I am crazy," she moaned as her head crashed down towards her knees.

"Jezzie," Jared continued with an arched brow as she curled up – convinced of her own insanity. "We're going to tell you what happened. But there's a catch. It doesn't leave these walls. It's really important – for the safety of the Pa-people involved – that you keep it a secret."

She peered up slightly and looked quizzically at Jared. "Secrets don't make friends."

"This secret makes you friends by default, actually. Look, once you know, I'm sure you'll agree – but please don't rule it out as the preferred option." Jared, having met Jezzie on a few occasions, had learned that she was a good person and generally had people's best interests at heart. And he got the sense that she quite liked Embry. He thought this was something the Pack could trust her with. Not like there was anything they could do about it at this point.

"Is this a gang or a cult or something?"

"Not quite," he replied with a sly grin. "So, here on La Push we're a pretty tight knit community. And within our gene pools there's this trait that only manifests in some of the people some of the time. It's a protection mechanism and something you shouldn't be afraid of, because it's only used to help people."

Jezzie continued to watch Jared with her mouth slightly agape. "Dude," Embry supplied. "You are way better at explanations than Sam ever will be..."

Jared rolled his eyes and continued. "Jezzie, Anna's a shapeshifter. You two weren't attacked; Anna just phased – as we call it – for the first time. The first phase is usually unpredictable."

"A shapeshifter?" Jezzie responded unconvinced. "And what – praytell – shape did she shift into?"

"The Quileute people assume the form of a wolf."

"Werewolves? You guys are a bunch of werewolves."

"Shapeshifters." Kim, Embry and Jared all spoke simultaneously. The Pack had developed a bit of a sensitivity to the term 'werewolf' after recent events.

"Sorry," Jezzie muttered. "Wait... People, you said? Quileute people? As in plural? As in she's not
the only one?"

Jared shook his head and Embry continued. "It's a Pack, Jezzie. There's a handful of us and we protect the reservation and parts of Forks. That's why you see us at random times of the day in the middle of nowhere, because we're just coming off a patrol shift."

Jezzie blinked a few times and tried to think of a logical question to ask or something to say. Jezzie nodded, swallowed once and licked her dry lips. "Prove it."

"What?" Jared replied.

"I don't believe you," she shook her head. "You want me to believe something like that you need to prove it to me."

"Anna exploding into a giant dog in front of your very eyes wasn't enough?" he asked in a half laugh.

She shook her head again. "I don't remember it. It happened way too fast and I panicked."

"Fine. Proof the woman wants, proof she shall get. Embry," he nodded his head towards Kim's back door, "let's go."

The two disappeared out the back door, shedding clothing as they went. Jezzie felt that was really strange and didn't want to know why those two boys were stripping down in the backyard. Maybe it was a cult.

Kim had all but read her mind. "It's so they don't ruin their clothes," she supplied, having followed Jezzie's line of sight. "The clothing doesn't shift with them and that – along with shoes – turns into a really big expense really quickly."

"That's why none of them wear shirts?" Jezzie asked. Kim nodded in confirmation.

"Okay, so we're gonna go see some shapeshifting wolves. It's okay if you're weirded out – because that's totally normal. But please try not to super freak out? They're not gonna hurt us…"

Jezzie nodded. "I'll try, but no promises." Kim smiled and stood, leading Jezzie towards the back of her small house. She didn't even open the back door, she simply pointed out the window next to it. Jezzie gasped when she peered out and saw two absolutely huge wolves sitting in Kim's backyard as if it was no big thing. There was one wolf – a bit smaller than the other – with gray fur and darker patches across its back. The other wolf was even more gigantic than the gray one, but with brown fur that blended seamlessly with the tree trunks that abutted Kim's property.

Jezzie watched in amazement. She'd never seen wolves so big in her entire life. Their paws must've been the size of trashcan lids. They were bigger than bison. The smaller gray wolf chuffed at the bigger one, and the bigger one reciprocated by batting the gray one's nose and biting his ear. The gray wolf whined and tried to tug his ear back but only ended up rolling on his back, while the larger wolf followed suit and continued to chew on the gray one's ear.

Kim shook her head. "Boys…" she muttered. "Seriously," she continued when she noticed Jezzie glance up at her. "They're such 'tards. Come on? Want to come see them?"

Jezzie shook her head shyly, still far too wary to forgo the safety of having a full building between them. The two wolves soon caught sight of the girls peeking at them from the window. The gray one trotted up to the spot and sat down. At their height, Jezzie could just see the wolf's nose when he extended it upward. There was a chuff and the doggy breath fogged up the window immediately.
"Ew!" Kim whined. "Embry Call, that is disgusting! Don't you dare defile my house with your dog snot. Jared, bite him!" Jared did nothing of the sort, but still came over and laid his head on Kim's steps and Jezzie could see him through the screen door. The gray wolf – Embry – at the window began to whine pathetically. "What a ham," Kim muttered as she rolled her eyes.

Jezzie took a careful step closer to the now de-fogging window and peeked out. She could see Embry's face and his whining immediately stopped. Instead, his mouth opened wide and his tongue lolled out. The teeth were a bit terrifying, Jezzie had to admit, but that action didn't seem menacing. In fact, it appeared down right goofy.

She couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped her lips. Kim joined her at the window and peeked out through the glass. "He's smiling at you," she said through her own toothy grin. Jezzie reached down and grabbed the window's sash and carefully but purposefully yanked it up and open. She rested her chin on the windowsill and smiled as Embry yipped in what she assumed was happiness and Jared groused in what she assumed was annoyance.

Jezzie shrugged. "Well, if I'm honest with myself that means I know the truth. And that honesty lets me see things not quite so subjectively, I guess. So I know when lying to someone is for their own benefit. Like not telling my Dad that you and Embry are here? I'm pretty sure I'm safe with you lot. Why cause undue stress?"

"So you're a good liar in the moral sense," he replied. "Not necessarily that you are a skilled liar?"

"It's both," she grinned to herself.

"Slippery slope," he nodded with a wise look. "That's a hell of a lot of power. What makes it so fair your deciding what truth people should know?"
Jezzie quirked her lips in thought and hunched one shoulder. "I don't know. I guess that's what makes it hard. I don't tend to lie when it makes me feel really uncomfortable. That brutal honesty comes with a conscience about the size of Texas."

"Wow," Jared nodded as he propped his feet on the coffee table and turned on the TV. "You got a preference for viewing pleasure, spider monkey?"

Jezzie rolled her eyes, not taking too kindly to Jared's new name for her. He was using her panic-stricken reactions against her. She was pretty sure she preferred 'Detroit' to 'spider monkey'. "No," she shook her head. "I don't really know what's on; I don't have a TV."

Jared glanced at her slowly. "You don't have a television? You know it's the twenty-first century, right?"

She nodded. "Not worth the cost. My Dad can never figure it out and he prefers the radio. I just watch stuff online. I have an old laptop. I also don't have a dishwasher or a clothes dryer."

"Holy hell," Jared muttered as Embry returned with three plates of food. "And I thought we were behind the times."

"Dude, your making me a sandwich while I watch TV does nothing for the case for your manhood…"

"Embry, this sandwich is bigger than my head!"

"You," Embry pointed at Jared. "Shut the hell up. I made that as an act kindness for explaining Pack BS to Jezzie. You," he pointed to Jezzie, "could use it. Now eat up. Let's put some meat on them bones."

"Are you calling me scrawny?"

"I'm calling you 'girl who had a spaz attack earlier and has not eaten since'. It's been a long day. Have some calories."

Kim had left for her shift at the local grocery store in Forks. That left Jared, Embry and Jezzie alone for four hours. Granted, Kim had left a half hour late and only after total reassurance that the boys wouldn't terrorize or haze Jezzie.

"So, wolfy traits?" Jezzie asked in reference to Jared's earlier cat-like reflexes.

"Hm?" he glanced at her pulling his attention from the TV. "Oh, yeah. Now that we're phased, we have heightened abilities. It's why we look older than we are, why we're stronger than we should be. We're also really fast and have awesome reflexes. And I definitely have the best eyesight in this whole damn Pack."

"Okay, Batman… we get it," Embry groaned.

"You two rag on each other a lot," Jezzie observed.

"We're brothers," Jared shrugged as if that explained it all. "It happens."

"Really?" Jezzie replied after swallowing her bite of sandwich and looked towards Embry. "I thought you were an only child?"

Jared glanced hesitantly at Embry. He'd meant 'brother' in the Pack kind of sense. Because they were
all family now. No matter what. But Jared also realized that his statement dug up some seriously ambiguous territory for Embry. Jared might not have been his biological brother but lately they weren't quite sure who Embry was related to…

"In the Pack sense," Embry supplied. "We all consider ourselves family. And when we first phase we sort of tag along with another, older, more experienced Pack member. Jared was my 'big brother' of sorts."

Jezzie continued to eat – this really was a good sandwich – and watched Embry speak.

"Sam couldn't teach all new wolves at the same time and once we got control over the phasing we were sort of relegated to another wolf. Jared has taught me all I know, god help me. The same thing happened with Quil and Paul."

"Quil Ateara?" Jezzie questioned.

"Yep," Jared confirmed. "And Paul Lahote. We're ten strong. Sam's the old Alpha, then there's Paul and Brady and Collin. Jake's the new Alpha, then there's Embry, Leah, Seth, Quil and now Anna."

"How do you have two Alphas in one Pack? Isn't that just asking for trouble?"

"Two Packs," Embry corrected. "We split after—" he caught himself just in time. Neither of the boys had explained vampires, hybrids or imprinting to Jezzie yet. The look in both their eyes said they weren't ready to go there yet.

"We split after some personality clashes between Jake and Sam," Jared supplied, catching Embry's dangling statement before Jezzie could make too much of it. "But Sam's starting to phase out of Pack business. He was Alpha because he phased first, but he hasn't had a good experience with it. He's slowly pulling himself out. It's pretty much just Jake's job now."

"We're pretty much one again, now, though. It's the mental part that's taking longer than the meetings," Embry continued after stealing the remote from Jared. "I can start to hear you again on patrols. That's been the first time that's happened in weeks."

"Same," Jared agreed. "If Sam is having trouble phasing out, he's certainly not having any trouble giving up Alphadom. Though I don't know how much I like the prospect of answering to Jake, so far."

"He's not too bad," Embry acceded.

Jezzie just listened, trying to piece together information as the two boys spoke – mostly to each other. It was a long and interesting night, to say the least. Kim eventually came home and was surprised to find that Embry had made her a plate, too.

Jezzie was mostly quiet and content to listen to the boys discuss Pack life. She discovered – through observation – that the Pack seemed to communicate in their head somehow. They were also very wary of something that had happened recently but didn't anticipate more trouble. They ragged on Jake for overcompensating and there was a lot of discussion of a 'them' – a group who it sounded lived in town and was giving the Pack a bit of a hard time.

"Wait," Jezzie interrupted after her own prolonged silence. "Is there only one other girl in the Pack?" She'd heard them mention about ten names so far – that's how many there were supposed to be, right – and only other one girl, Leah Clearwater, had been mentioned.

"Just Leah and Anna. And Leah's not gonna be back until tomorrow – she goes to school in Seattle
with Rachel and Addie."

"Leah isn't here?" Kim asked looking from the TV. "Who the heck is with Anna then?"

Jared and Embry shrugged simultaneously. "When I went outside to supervise shift change?" Jared supplied. "It sounded like Quil and Jake. Don't think they're making much leeway, though."

Kim and Jezzie's jaws dropped in unison. "What?" Jared replied looking confused.

"Jake's her Alpha," Embry supplied. "He's got it under control."

"Like hell he does!" Kim stated flatly as she sprung off the couch.

Jezzie leaned forward to help clarify. "So Leah's your only other female wolf?" she double-checked.

The two boys nodded.

"And Anna just phased for the first time?"

More nodding.

"And Jake and Quil are talking her back to sanity?"

Nod.

"Well," she sighed in exaggerated consternation, "How could that dynamic not lull her into calmness. You guys," she huffed standing up. "She just experienced a total shift of species. And I'm admittedly the last person to offer advice on such wolfy matters, but having her brother and his best friend talk her down sounds about as good an idea as having them explain menstruation to her."

Both Jared and Embry took turns staring at her – mouths agape. Jezzie stood and made her way towards the kitchen where Kim had dropped her bag after kindly retrieving it on her way home from work.

She pulled her raincoat out and was tugging it on when Kim rejoined her. "Where are you two going?" Jared asked as he and Embry followed Jezzie to the kitchen.

"To get Anna!" Kim shouted like it was obvious. "I cannot believe you dopes left her out there with Jake and Quil! She's probably horrified and embarrassed!"

"Whoa, whoa, wait!" Embry said, stepping in front of the kitchen door and blocking the path to the front door. "There is no way you two are going stumbling blindly through the La Push underbrush at 10PM in the pouring rain with an unstable new phase out there."

"Embry Call," Kim growled as she stepped forward. "Get out of my way in my house before I turn your furry ass into a throw rug."

"Listen," Jezzie said more calmly as she placed a hand on Kim's shoulder. Kim seemed like a scrappy girl and she didn't want a brawl to erupt in her kitchen. "You guys can come, but we can't – in good conscience – leave her alone out there."

"Girl code and all that," Kim supplied with a smile. Jezzie saw their opportunity and gave Kim a small push and the two powered under Embry's outstretched arm, past Jared and towards the front door.

"What kind of girl code extends to shapeshifters?" Embry whispered to Jared.
"I have no fucking clue."

A short jog to QTS and a few flashlights later and Jared, Kim, Embry and Jezzie were under the slightly drier cover of the trees. Jezzie clicked on her flashlight and Embry lead the way. Having arrived during the first few minutes of Anna's first phase, he assumed they hadn't gone very far. It didn't take very long to begin to hear the tell-tale noises of the Pack and find them based on sound alone.

When their party of four arrived there were already three wolves in the small thinning of trees. Jezzie's flashlight revealed one reddish wolf and a dark brown one. The two were standing and admittedly put Jezzie a little on edge. She imagined getting used to the Pack took a while. Further away there was a smaller wolf – blonder through the legs and belly and darker on the back and head. The fur was particularly long and shaggy, making the wolf look more like a water buffalo. Jezzie recognized the fur from the flashes of her memory.

"That's Jake," Kim indicated the red wolf. "And that's Quil," she flashed her torch to the brown wolf.

"That's definitely Anna," Jezzie supplied, watching the much smaller wolf lay very low in the pine needles. She was emitting lots of whining and grousing noises, occasionally she chewed on her right paw and she kept trying to dig her snout into the dirt.

"They don't want you near her," Jared offered.

"How do you know?" Kim retorted.

"Because the waves of Alpha mind control rolling off Jake are kind of overwhelming. It's hard to ignore. In fact it's giving me a headache." He offered that last pointed remark in Jake's general direction.

"I thought Jake wasn't your Alpha?" Jezzie asked.

"He's not, but Sam isn't fighting him on the matter. Having a new wolf in Jake's Pack makes him more powerful and makes it easier for him to assume the rest of the original Pack. Regardless," he shook his head, "Anna's too unstable, too dangerous. They don't want you near her."

"Fine, we won't go any closer," Jezzie compromised looking towards a wolfy Jacob. "Stupid question but can you still keep track of her if you can't see her?"

Quil looked quizzically towards his Alpha. Jacob nodded slowly. "Of course," Jared offered. "But he wants to know what you're getting at."

Jezzie glanced at Anna then back towards Jacob and steeled herself. She took a few precarious steps and crossed the distance between the humans and the wolves. When she reached Jacob she tried to concentrate on her task and not her heart trying to punch itself out of her chest. She waved her hand at him, indicating for him to come closer so she could whisper.

His head cocked to the side, but she didn't care if he thought she was crazy. He obliged anyways, extending his enormous ear towards Jezzie's height.

"Jake," she whispered, cupping her hands to direct the sound only to him. "She's probably embarrassed. I know that this is something that your Pack is getting used to handling but a girl and another Packmate's sister is a slightly different circumstance, don't you think? If what I've learned about you guys these past few hours is true, she's probably really embarrassed. You can read her
mind and her phasing back is going to mean she's gonna be sitting out here in the woods naked and horrified. Just do the poor girl a favor and turn around."

Jake sat back up after Jezzie was done speaking. "Please?" she asked using her best pouty face. Jake turned to Quil and nodded his head. The two stood and turned around, facing into the woods. Quil sighed audibly. "He doesn't like this," Jared offered.

"Tough," Kim replied.

Jezzie sat down in the leaf layer in her spot, only an arm's length from Jacob. "Hi, Anna," Jezzie offered, facing the newest wolf and still complying Jake's request not to move any closer. She was pleased to at least see that Anna was no longer burrowing into the earth but mostly still. "You really scared me half to death today. I'm okay, though," she smiled. "Would you believe I thought you and I were attacked by a bear? I was babbling like a crazy person. Embry and Jared can tell you about it sometime. It's really embarrassing."

Kim walked over to Jezzie's side and sat down beside her. "The key to phasing back is control," Embry offered. He seemed to be speaking more to Kim and Jezzie than Anna. Though at several hours in, this was information Jezzie was sure Anna had.

Jezzie turned in her spot and extended a hand to touch Jake's hip. "Could you guys, like… crouch down?"

Jake issued a small growl at that request. Jezzie sighed. "I doubt she's gonna challenge you for rank, Jake. But I think you're making her nervous."

"You two turn around as well," Kim nodded towards Embry and Jared.

"Actually, can you guys go up to my Jeep – it should still be in the QTS parking lot from earlier – and grab some clothes from my back seat. For when Anna phases back?"

"Sure," and the two left soundlessly.

"So control, huh?" Jezzie offered as she picked up a leaf to play with.

Kim nodded. "That's the key. It took Paul so long to phase back, that dork." Kim laughed once. "He's so out of control all the time. I bet Anna beats them all out for quickest phase." She checked her watch. "She's still made way more progress than any of the rest of them at this point."

There was a light crackle of leaves and a bundle of clothes was dropped into Jezzie's lap from above her. "Thanks," she responded, looking up to see Embry followed by Jared. "Now go sit with the others. No peeking."

"Girls," he muttered shaking his head, but the two joined Quil and Jake.

"That's cool though, even if it's a little scary," Kim continued. "That's one more girl on our side. And Anna can definitely talk sense to these morons."

"Hey!"

"Hush! It's totally true. I swear they're like cavemen sometimes. I can't wait to watch Anna and Leah tag team them!"

"Girls rule," Jezzie admitted, feeling a bit like a twelve year old again.
"Boys drool," Kim laughed.

"Although, I dunno. Embry makes really good sandwiches. He would be a good housewife someday. Does that mean he's on our team?"

"What? What is going on over there?"

Kim and Jezzie covered their mouths quickly to stifle their laughter, forgetting the boys standing sentinel behind them. "Female empowerment and all that," Kim choked out around laughs. "Could you just imagine him in an apron putting a roast on? 'Excuse me? Where have you been? Dinner's been ready for over an hour!'" Kim imitated and Jezzie rolled onto her back with laughter. Kim did a very funny Embry impression.

"Look!" Embry stated, "I can make a good sandwich because I've spent my whole life with my Mom. It comes with the territory. If you spent your whole life with a woman you might learn how to cook too! Now quit calling me a girl; it took so long to get Paul to stop calling me gay! He was gonna have me advertised as a house boy."

Kim rolled into the leaves along with Jezzie, both of them unable to control their laughter. Imagining Embry as a gay house boy was down right hilarious. And through the fog of all their laughter, Jezzie heard a scuffling of leaves and glanced up momentarily to see a fully human – and very naked – Anna on her hands and knees in the leaves laughing herself to tears.

Kim and Jezzie glanced up at each other with mutual smiles. Anna was back. "Boys, no one turn around, got it?"

Quil chuffed once and he and Jacob moved into the woods, ahead of them presumably to phase back. From her spot Jezzie tossed Anna the bundle of clothes Jared and Embry had brought.

"Thanks," she said as her laughs subsided. She slipped on the gym shorts and t-shirt easily.

"Is everyone decent?" there was a call from Quil in the woods beyond. "Because I'm really not okay with having my sister's visuals of my best friend as a gay house boy floating through my head."

"Same here," came Jake's addition.

"You guys can come out," Jezzie turned around. "Embry? Jared? You can look now, it's safe." Jezzie stood up and approached Anna. She smiled and carefully brushed the few leaves off her shoulders. Jezzie offered her a hair tie when Jake and Quil reappeared.

"Anna, thank God," Quil muttered. Quil marched up to his little sister and hugged her rather forcefully. She seemed to reciprocate the act.

"It's good to be human," she sighed into her brother's shoulder.

An hour later found their whole delegation – Kim, Jared, Embry, Jezzie, Jacob, Quil and Anna – in Kim's house, which seemed smaller and smaller with each Quileute shapeshifter that ducked through her front door. Jezzie was perched on Kim's counter nodding her head to the radio as she trimmed Anna's hair to a length that was reasonable for phasing.

She had been giving herself and others haircuts for years now, and she promised to make sure Anna still looked like a girl in the end. She opted for a pixie.

"You're kind of an edgy type, anyways," Jezzie commented as her legs swung in time to the music.
"I can't believe you're letting her cut your hair," Embry remarked from over the back of one of Kim's kitchen chairs as he watched Jezzie work. "I wouldn't let her touch my head."

"Oh ye of little faith!" Jezzie replied, pointing the scissors at him. "Your hair's easy. You don't even need scissors, just a good set of electric razors. Bzzz!"

"You," Embry stated flatly, "would cut my head off."

"Psha!" Jezzie said, brushing him off. "You are done, Anna! And looking Rihanna red carpet ready, if I do say so myself." She offered Anna the handheld mirror and she peeked carefully. "I left it a little longer in the front, but not too much. If you find that it becomes an issue let me know and I'll trim it up higher."

"No! I like it," she smiled. "I like it a lot actually. I was really scared, not gonna lie, but this is good. Thanks!" Anna put the mirror back on the counter and hugged Jezzie forcefully.

The Ateara's liked to hug, Jezzie had learned. Not that she really minded much, but one of them was going to suffocate her one day. "Air, Anna. Can't… breathe…"

"Right! Sorry… that's gonna take some getting used to." She carefully released Jezzie and picked up the plate of leftovers Kim had heated up. "Does Mom know we're here, Quil?"

In an odd turn of events, Kim and Jezzie ended up spending the night in Kim and Jared's bed, while Embry, Jacob and Jared slept in the living room.

Jacob and Quil put the kibosh on a true sleepover, because Anna was such a new and unpredictable wolf. So they wouldn't let either human sleep with, near or around her without a barrier. Anna didn't want to go home yet, and was feeling claustrophobic so she decided to sleep under the stars, since the rain stopped. Her brother joined her and the two Ateara kids slept phased and curled together like puppies, their presence guarded by the trees on all sides of the yard. That left the boys in between and in the living room.

Paul clearly stated that he didn't even want to know when he arrived the next morning. He was just instructed to be here. Seth turned on his heel and went back down the stairs yelling, "my virgin eyes!"

"Virgin, my ass…" Jake mumbled as he sat up and knocked Embry's feet off the couch. He'd spent the whole night on the floor and felt entitled to something softer than hardwood under his ass after several hours.

"I'm fifteen," Seth said aghast as he reentered the house.

"Are you arguing the case for your not getting laid?" Embry asked.

"Yes? You guys are older than me. Aren't you supposed to be setting an example for my fragile psyche?"

"We're all equals here," Jared offered in his most serious voice around his toothbrush as he stepped out of the bathroom and stared.

"Exactly," Seth agreed as he sprawled out on the floor.

"The day Jared turns into our life coach is the day I eat this cushion," Embry yawned.

"Get Anna and Quil, let's start this Pack meeting…"
Jezzie woke up to the tones of what sounded like important business-y things. She contented herself with rolling back over, noting that she was still extremely tired from yesterday's activities – which were many and varied – and she really enjoyed whatever fabric softener Kim used.

She was on the cusp of drifting back to sleep when her and Kim were unceremoniously dive-bombed. "GOOD MORNING, MAMA WOLF!"

Jezzie was all but jostled upright as Kim fell off the bed entirely. Seth had landed directly between them. "Ugh… good morning Seth…"

"So, word on the street is your part of the club now?"

"Mhm," she mumbled groggily, burrowing back into the sheets.

"Embry," Seth called into the living room. "Does this mean I get a Mom now?"

"Excuse me?" Jezzie asked opening a single eye.

"Embry's my Daddy Wolf. When I phased he got to train me up; he's been my Yoda, my Mr. Miyagi – that kinda thing."

Oh, that was right. The Pack had 'families'. Hadn't Jared been the one to do the same thing for Embry? "Does that make Jared and Kim, grandpa and grandma?" Jezzie asked.

"Chyeah," Seth insisted.

"It most certainly does not," Jared said matter-of-factly from the open bathroom across the hall while Kim laughed climbing back on the bed.

Seth leaned in closer so the whole house couldn't hear, "I'm pulling for you to be Mama Wolf." Seth's following smile was huge and Kim's giggling from the other side of the bed was none too obvious, as well. Jezzie just hid her blush behind a pillow.
Hi kids! I'd like to offer a bit o' clarification about last chapter as suggested by the ever-discerning StealthLiberal. (I happen to agree with her logic.) I take major liberties with SM's interpretation of her own canon. For example: the strength and resilience of vampires and shapeshifters? If vampires are anything like 'marble', as they are described in canon, they're far from unbreakable. Marble is used as stone for carving magnificent pieces of art because it's an easy mineral to carve. It's not that strong. The Venus de Milo's arms got snapped off for a reason.

Similarly, the shapeshifters are carbon-based, flesh and blood animals - albeit very large animals - and therefore I'd argue that even with super strength they can be injured with some powerful human force. That's why Jezzie's able to crack Jacob's shoulder to bits. She's not superhuman, but I contend that the supernaturals are not all-powerful enough to be completely impervious to all human attempts at offense/defense. That's just too lame. And let's give the humans (and those of us with any logic) an ounce of credit, mkay?

Thanks for all the kind words and reviews!

Monday, November 13, 2006

By far the hardest thing to adapt to within the Pack, or so Embry thought, was hierarchy. It was the most difficult thing about being a wolf besides, probably, being a wolf. Maybe when it had first been Sam, Jared, and Paul and none of them had imprinted (which Embry was sure had only been about the course of, like, eleven hours) Pack hierarchy was simple and linear. Now, it was a giant clusterfuck. Rank was way more stratified and spread out. It made a better net than fishing line.

Embry and the others learned once Leah phased that Pack was more dynamic than numbered ranks. Because Leah never assimilated into Pack hierarchy. The rest could never feel her in relation to themselves the way they could with their brothers. But they knew she was still there. She was assertive as hell. She was the Alpha female.

Confusing as hell.

When Anna phased, she didn't figure into Pack hierarchy either. Just like Leah. But Leah knew exactly where she was in relation to her. The female wolves, it seemed, had formed their own Pack within a Pack.

It got worse when Paul imprinted on Rachel. She held some pretty hefty blood status simply thanks to her genetics – much like her brother. But she wasn't Pack. She was human. However, she still managed to work her way into Pack hierarchy. Embry distinctly remembers the day he woke up and it felt just a little more crowded in his head. No new phase, but Rachel had – by her own assertive nature and active participation – assimilated herself into the Pack.

This was new, something Emily had certainly never done before and Kim only dabbled in when she
felt the situation called for her attitude. As the only human in the Pack, Rachel became the Alpha Human. It was still a hell of a sidewinder when Jezzie started pulling herself into the Pack. Jacob thought it was mostly subconscious, because it didn't make sense otherwise. At least Rachel was imprinted with Paul. Because Kim only sporadically demanded status, Jezzie was – unbeknownst to herself – carving out her niche as Beta Human.

Sam didn't even register in the order of things anymore because he just didn't want to. He pulled out of Alpha position easier than refusing the phase. He still phased, he patrolled, he was Pack – but he orbited the hierarchy like a satellite.

This was exactly the reason the Pack held so few official meetings. Meetings in the official capacity meant having to deal with those constantly shifting dynamics inside your head while human and while closely surrounded by everyone. They weren't fun. Meetings tended to confuse new phases.

Anna was mostly distracted. She kept looking around like there was a fly buzzing around her head.

Embry was seriously hoping – for entirely selfish reasons – that the Pack got no bigger. No one's living room was large enough to house them all anymore. Jake, Leah and Paul were stuffed onto the couch, Sam in the armchair. By the grace of God, Embry and Quil had managed to both fit on to the loveseat. Anna sat between their legs on the floor. Brady and Collin sat on the floor against the wall. Embry was thinking all hope was lost for Seth who was going to the bathroom. The sheer amount of people, coupled with the size that they all were individually, made Kim's living room feel like a clown car.

"Why are Jezzie and Rachel in my head?" Anna had asked, looking around into space. Her first official welcome to the Pack had begun after she'd agreed to peel Seth out of Kim and Jared's bed and make him stop embarrassing Jezzie; and Kim had agreed to explain vampires to Jezzie, because that was never talk any of them were very good at.

"They're Pack," Paul explained, stretching and cracking his back. Maybe because he was Beta, or maybe because he was imprinted to a whole other tract of the hierarchy, Paul had a remarkable grasp of Pack dynamics. Not only did he know exactly where everyone was at all times (most wolves did) but he could sense impending shifts and changes and seemed to possess an intrinsic understanding of the process.

"They're human," Anna replied.

"Excellent observation," Leah rolled her eyes.

"Rachel's been Pack for a while now," Jake explained. "Jezzie's doing it unconsciously. I think it's just because she's so absorbed in the Pack members as individual humans that it's starting to bleed through."

"How long has she known?" Anna quirked a brow, stretching her legs out straight.

"About the Pack? Well, as of yesterday. You were her first exposure," Paul smirked and then shook his head. "About her role in Pack? She doesn't; but she'll know when it happens fully. At least, Rachel supposes she will."

Embry could feel Jezzie moving closer into the web of Pack every week. He had joined her and Leah when he ran into them at the local pizza place after their rugby practice. Leah had made some crude joke and Jezzie had laughed - her head back, she had clutched at her stomach for air and Embry could feel the happiness from her as it reverberated like a gong inside him. He'd been in bit of a bad mood - having just come off patrol and knowing he was going to go home to his Mom's
'disappointed' face - and that pizza and Jezzie's laughter echoing around inside him just made it all better. Something about knowing you carried your Pack family around with you was soothing. Embry didn't think he'd mind carrying around Jezzie's happy aura along with his brothers' and sisters'.

Leah had only looked at him after Jezzie left. You really like her, don't you?

I like hanging out with her. And seeing her laugh and smile.

That means you like her, Embry. Get with the program. Are you mentally challenged? You have a crush on her.

Embry had never been very swift on the uptake.

"Humans ranking in a wolf pack?" Anna queried, bringing Embry back to present. "How does that work?"

"If you think of the male wolves – and don't hurt me for this – as the protectors of La Push, the brute force behind it all, the machine, then the humans are the moral compass."

"So, while the wolves are the action, the Pack Humans are the ones to make sure our ends and means are matching up the right way," Jacob elaborated. "Because, apparently, we're not known for thinking things through."

"If the wolves are the body, the humans are the soul," Paul summarized.

"And where does that leave us?" Anna indicated Leah and herself. "You said male wolves."

"Have you noticed you don't figure prominently into Pack hierarchy?" Embry spoke for the first time. Embry was a quiet Third and decidedly the mediator of all the shapeshifting tempers. Jake wasn't so good with the diplomacy. Neither was Leah; that was Embry's job.

Anna nodded.

"Because the female wolves are the brains," Jacob stated. "The go-between. You're girls, so you just seem to think about things differently. You two can empathize with Rachel and Jezzie's opinions and decisions, but you know the realistic side of phasing and knowing when you need to just get shit done."

"And as we get larger, we can't really do much or make decisions out of sync with the Alphas, unless Jake orders it," Paul added. "So that means Jake, Rachel and Leah. At least."

"That's insane," Anna replied point blank.

"Tell me about it," Jake yawned. "So if anyone didn't witness Anna's phase, hear Jezzie screaming half way across the reservation or listen to her and Kim emasculate us all yesterday in the woods – Anna's finally with us."

"About damn time," Leah muttered. Quil issued her a sideways glance. "Oh, don't even play, Quil. You were the only one that didn't realize she's been bound for it for weeks because you don't want her to have to deal with your senile grandfather's tribal voodoo."

"Anyways," Jake interrupted what he knew would spiral into a ridiculous sparring match. "So we officially have one more set of legs on the land, now. Which will help soon enough. Leah's agreed to take the responsibility for helping Anna as she gets used to all this. This is gonna require some
shifting in patrols."

Jake paused for the collective sigh, mumbled curses and internal bitching. "Even though Anna's not on patrol alone yet, I'm using this opportunity to take you off, Sam."

"All right," Sam nodded.

"Lucky bastard," Brady grumbled.

"Feel free to cut loose anytime, kid," Quil gave Brady's head a shove from his spot on the love seat.

"I want Embry, Jared, and Paul on first shift. I'll leave Seth, myself and Collin to second. So that puts Leah, Anna, Quil and Brady on third. Until the week is out and I can strong arm the Cullens into pulling some weight on a regular basis. With that last werewolf getting past us, well, it looks like whoever they are they're looking for the Cullens - not us - but it's still not worth running the chance."

"Isn't putting Anna on third shift a bit risky?" Leah questioned. "If we get another breach from the werewolves, it's gonna be at night. These things don't run in daylight. Isn't that putting some unnecessary stress on all of us?"

"Yeah, but it's not us their after. The last one only accidentally stumbled onto our land before making a hairpin turn back to Forks. It poked around there before the sun rose and none of the Cullens were patrolling to run it off. And, well, Anna's gotta go to school. She's not dropping out because of the Pack. Do you want me and your brother teaching her the ropes during second shift? I thought you called dibs?"

Leah glanced quickly to Seth who was oblivious and appeared to be reliving a rock concert as he rocked and bobbed his head to a silent beat. "Never mind."

"Exactly."

"Jake," Jared spoke for the first time. "What's the deal with the Cullens? Are they staying? I assume so if you have to bitch at them to watch lands too. But... there are two more of them now between Bella and Nessie and we still have pups popping out of the ground like daisies."

Jake's face was impassive and stony. He knew what Jared was getting at. Multiplying the Pacific coven by almost thirty percent had thrown the Quileute gene pool into a tailspin. The well of humans with relevant phasing genetics had all but run dry. It was miracle Anna made it human as long as she did. And everyone was silently hoping that Brady's ten-year-old brother was just too fucking young. If the phase almost killed Brady and Collin they didn't want to think about what it could do to a child.

And if there was no one left to phase, they had to make more wolves somehow. And pronto. That meant imprinting. Jared knew the implications of that, more than almost all the other wolves younger than him. He was concerned. The first generation had all imprinted. The break off point had been Embry, but both his friends and all of the older wolves had heeded the genetic call. Even if they accepted that Embry could defy the imprinting imperative, what did that mean for the rest? Would it just move down the line of wolves by age? If so, that meant Seth was next in line. Seth was fifteen. Fifteen and imprinted?

Paul and Sam – as happy as they were with their imprints – echoed Jared's worry. Imprinting hadn't been an easy road for any of them. Were they about to watch history repeat itself?

"I don't know," Jake swallowed. Jake couldn't pick a good side on this argument. He was imprinted and knew exactly where the older Pack was coming from, but he was imprinted to an object of their
genetic turmoil. Risk the Pack to keep his imprint's family (and by extension his imprint) around? Or test fate and send the coven off and hope for the best for his sanity in Nessie's absence? Because he sure as hell wasn't leaving the Pack. What genetic imperative thought that letting the dominant wolves imprint was a good idea?

"Leah and I have to go talk to them," Jake elaborated in a tone that rang of exhaustion. "They're really good for our numbers. It's nice to have more bodies on the ground and eyes on the land, especially now. Unless we run them all off, we can't patrol on their land – so that just leaves Forks with fewer guards."

"But if we keep going at this rate, we'll outnumber them two to one," Sam added solemnly. "That means a prospective eight more wolves. Nine if I stop phasing. I don't plan to," Sam added to calm the few panicked looks. "Don't get me wrong, I want out, but not ranking and not patrolling is good enough. I'm not phasing out just to have some twelve year old wind up an unstable furry mess the next day."

"Some of them I know have been talking about leaving the area. Carlisle and Esme are not showing their appropriate age and Rosalie and Emmett are tired of never being able to leave the house because everyone thinks they're in New Hampshire. That's a special talk Lee and I get to have really soon," he nodded towards Jared. "Don't think I haven't been running over that issue lately…"

"What does the werewolf threat do to our numbers?" Embry asked. The thought had struck him in passing but presented an issue he hadn't thought of before. "We only ever focus on the vampires as a source for the phase, because that's been our foremost issue. What about the werewolves? If we have them running through the area, they present a threat to the rez. That could contribute too."

"Shit," Quil mumbled. "The whole damn reservation's gonna phase at this rate. We don't have those kinds of population numbers here. The gene just doesn't go that far," he said in exasperation.

"All the more reason to keep those fuckers off the land," Paul replied harshly. "They don't get close to the rez, then we don't have a problem."

"You think it's that simple?" Jared questioned. "With Forks just to the east and the leeches being slightly less than on their game most days, we have limited range. We can't make them patrol better and we can't step phased onto their land. We're stuck. We could have a werewolf halfway through Washington state before we know about it."

"That's why Jake and I get to crack skulls," Leah replied with a smile.

Jezzie climbed extremely warily into her Jeep that morning.

"Jezzie, I'm not going to make you give me a ride if you're terrified of me," Embry insisted, refusing to step any closer to the vehicle. "I can run, it's fine."

"No," she shook her head stubbornly. "I'm not terrified. But, you know, allow a normal human some time to adjust? You transform in a buffalo-sized wolf, Embry. Give me a few days, okay?" She had texted Veronica to tell her not to bother picking her up today. Jezzie was going to force herself to get used to this.

"I'll run."

"No!" she insisted, her voice pitching a little higher. "I'm not making you run all the way up the coast. We're going in the same direction. Get in. We have to talk anyways."
Embry climbed in and spent a good few moments staring at Jezzie's post-it covered dashboard. "That's a lot of post-its."

"I forget a lot of things," she noted.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. Like a lot, a lot."

They were a full ten minutes into the drive and cruising at an easy 55MPH when Jezzie reached to turn down the radio. Embry knew there was a whole slew of awkward conversations that they could have right now. He wondered which one she'd bring up first.

"So, Kim said that because you all were mean enough to make her explain vampires to me, that you got to explain something called imprinting."

"She told you about that?" Embry asked.

"Vampires? Yes. I cannot believe I more or less work with one." Jezzie shook her head, keeping her eyes on the road. "Imprinting? No. She said it was another wer—shapeshifter thing, but that it was your job to explain."

_Great._ Embry would have to thank Kim for that later.

"Imprinting is a biological thing," Embry started. He was going to do this right. He only had one shot to explain this and Jezzie was already emitting an undertone of nervous tension since she'd climbed in the Jeep with him. "In the wild, certain animals will imprint on another of the same species. Usually it's between mates or parents and offspring. Some members of the Pack have imprinted."

"Like who?"

"Jake and Quil—"

"On each other?" she quirked a brow and offered him a glance.

"No," Embry actually laughed a bit. He guessed he walked right into that one. "Jake and Ness, and Quil on Claire," he offered slowly. _Please don't let her flip, please don't let her flip, please don't let her flip._

"But Ness isn't Jake's daughter, right? And Claire isn't Quil's? Kim said Nessie was one of the vam—Cullens. The… vampires."

"She is. Imprinting isn't an exact science. It's different for every wolf. Humans don't need imprinting to know which kid is there's. We've gotten pretty good at that over the years. But we're thinking that kind of imprint is supposed to point out the individual that helps you through life, you know? So, like, baby geese know who to hang out with so they can eventually learn to fly. Obviously, with humans it's a little different."


"Paul and Rachel."

"Really?" Jezzie nodded slowly thinking over that unique pair of people.

"Yep. Rachel's getting married at the end of the summer. You've met Addie; they both go to school
in Seattle. But Rachel and Paul are really good friends. Don't get on their bad side. They filled Jared's car with shaving cream once."

Jezzie smiled. "Is that it?"

"Jared and Kim. Sam and Emily." Like a band-aid just do it quick and then pain will be over, right?

"Kim?" Jezzie's voice climbed a few keys. "Well, geez, she certainly let that one slip. And Jared and Kim are dating, right?"

Embry nodded. "And Sam and Emily are engaged."

"And it can happen just... whenever?"

"It happens when the wolf first sees the imprint after the first phase.

"Wow," she shook her head. "You shapeshifters are so weird."

Jeze had sat through the entirety of the history lecture with a dangerously full bladder. It was a class and a subject she couldn't afford to miss. History was not her strong suit. So when the course hour finally finished made a hasty path for the ladies' room.

"Ow, ow, ow..." she winced with each step she took. It was getting harder and harder for her to move about with the ease her age should have warranted. She really hoped she would be able to get through next week's exams before it became too much. Nothing was worse than making up testing.

She slid into the bathroom, dropped her bag on to the floor and graciously locked the stall door. *Salvation.* Two other girls who she recognized by sound and not by name soon followed her into the bathroom. She thought they might've sat behind her in physics. They did, that's right... They lived in Forks, too.

"Well, how else did she manage it, huh, Meg?" There was the distinctive clatter of several articles of makeup sprawling onto the counter. "Did you see the hunk of man meat that dropped her off in the commuter lot, today?"

"I don't know, Michelle. But I'm pretty sure she didn't swing it by systematically bedding the entire group of them."

"Every female with an ounce of heterosexuality has been throwing themselves at those La Push boys for two years with no luck. Then all of a sudden the new girl from the big city rolls into town and she's like *this* with them? She must be a good lay if she can handle all of them. Some of those boys definitely demand extra attention." Michelle's voiced dripped with innuendo.

"Well, when you put it like that... No. You know, it could just be that they like her because she's chill. She seems nice. Besides, half those La Push boys are off the market. I don't see her spreading her legs like a slot machine. I think she's older anyways... I think she's a senior. She's closer in age to the older ones anyways. Your just jealous because you're a freshman."

"She's a city girl, Meg," the one called Michelle said like that explained it all. "They teach them weird things there. Like anal and how to swallow. And just because they're taken doesn't mean they don't have needs."

"That's sick," Meg replied. There was a distinct click of a compact being closed and the suction of gloss being capped and the two girls left the bathroom.
Jezzie didn't realize until the door back swung closed that she was staring at the stall door in shock. They'd never said her name, but she was the only one that fit the bill. The only new girl. The only one from a city. The only one who ever crossed the reservation line for the people instead of the beachfront.

It wasn't something she was unaccustomed to. Mean girls were an institution no matter how old you were or where you lived. And Jezzie had heard much worse. But she hadn't been expecting that at all. She didn't think she'd lived here long enough to start stirring that rumor mill. And they were in college, wasn't this all a bit high school? But Jezzie had learned the small-town college life wasn't much different socially from small-town high school life. And this marked the first time she'd heard talk of her sexual exploits.

Did she strike people as that kind of person? She looked down at herself. Her jeans were tucked inside her duckboots and she had a zip up sweatshirt – borrowed from Kim – pulled over her long sleeve thermal.

She didn't feel like she gave off the vibe of the town slut. Why would they think that of her? She was mostly quiet and had a few new friends. Wait… why was she even caring about this, again?

She stumbled out of the stall and washed her hands clumsily. Finding herself more upset and her back and legs aching even more as she approached the dining hall, she performed an about-face and made for the front door of the Student Center. She pushed it open, thankful that no one noticed her exit. She flopped down on the bench outside the door. She took a deep breath and relished the feel of the cool mist against her hot - and surely red - face. Shapeshifters, vampires, imprinting and anal? No… it was all just a little too much for her to process in one twenty-four hour time period.

She didn't need this. She didn't need any of this. Jezzie might've been able to handle some of the load being dumped on her, but she felt like it was all coming at once and now even the small things were cracking her veneer. Since when do twenty-one year olds get upset about nasty rumors?

"Ow," she sniffled petulantly as she swung her legs up and onto the bench with her. She rubbed down the length of her legs and decided that she was so over going to lunch or her last class. Especially when she knew what her fellow students were whispering about her. She'd had enough for today.

She pulled her phone out of her bag and scrolled through the numbers, ignoring Kyle's text message about how he'd been a nice friend and swiped her a piece of pie from the line (it went something along the lines of "i g0t u sum PPPPiwwWWEEEzzzzz!").

Who to call? She was stuck in Port Angeles because Embry drove her today and she'd let him use her truck since otherwise it'd just be parked, and all her school friends were actually planning on going to the rest of their afternoon classes. Her first instinct was to call Leah, before she remembered she'd also be in school right now. In Seattle. She scrolled further down and dialed Kim's home number.

"Hello," came a voice several octaves below what she was expecting. Shoot, that's right: Kim was probably at work by now.

"Hi," Jezzie spoke up, trying to make her voice sound normal. She hadn't realized it was wispy and cracking. "Is Kim home, Jared?"

"No," he replied. "Work. Jezzie aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"Lunch," she amended before continuing on. "Do you know when she'll be back? I was looking for
"Not until later," Jared said slowly. "Jezzie are you okay?"

"Fine," she squeaked. She could feel herself falling apart at the seams and the quicker she ended this conversation the better.

"Jezzie, I go on patrol in a few but why don't you call Embry? Isn't he around PA? He dropped you off."

"No, it's—" she insisted before she was interrupted.

"Unless you want to go back to class?"

"No," she whined miserably.

"All right," he finished resolutely. "Knock 'em dead, Jezzie."

She nodded in response, never realizing that Jared couldn't see the gesture, and hung up the phone. It buzzed moments later with another message from Kyle.

[Kyle - You]: you okay, bbg? Where you at?

[You - Kyle]: not feeling good :P gonna head home and sleep it off.

[Kyle - You]: this pie's gonna get awful lonely...

[You - Kyle]: it's all yours, Kyle :)

[Kyle - You]: NOM, NOM, NOM. Thanks, bbg. Call if you need anything.

Fifteen minutes later, just before the bell rang to signal the end of lunch, Jezzie watched as her Jeep turned into the lot. Jezzie picked up her bag and walked dejectedly to the curb.

"Don't you have class?" she asked Embry belatedly as she slid in the passenger side. She only realized this after half his school day would have finished up.

"Nope," he answered simply. She knew she should've called Leah. She nodded, accepted the probable lie, and slumped down, holding her backpack in her lap. "You wanna drive?" She shrugged one shoulder then shook her head. She appreciated him asking.

The two of them were quiet on their way to Jezzie's house. But she could feel Embry's gaze - silent but obviously concerned - flicker over to her often.

By the time Embry pulled down her driveway Jezzie was visibly upset. Embry noticed and turned towards her. Her forehead was crinkled and her brows folded together in the middle. Her mouth had a funny set to it. It looked like she was thinking way too hard about something.

"Jez," his hand went to her shoulder, wanting to comfort her somehow but sure he was going to be way out of his league if she started crying. Maybe they should've sent Seth... "What's wrong? What happened?"

She sniffed once in an ambiguous sort of response. Embry had never seen her so upset about anything. Ever. She looked ready to kill someone. She'd panicked yesterday when Anna phased, but he'd never seen her so... miserable. He wanted to choke whoever did that to her.
"I'm the town whore, Embry," she said unevenly.

Embry just looked at her, unsure of what to make of that. He had kind of been anticipating her snapping with all the recent events and the way the Olympic Peninsula seemed to breed mythical creatures like bunny rabbits. He wasn't prepared for whores. He blinked once. "What?"

"The people at school..." she clarified, trying not to let the tears of exhaustion overwhelm her. "My classmates from Forks... They... They think I'm only friends with the Pack because I'm sleeping with all of you. Because apparently," she continued viciously, "you're all so damn hot and untouchable and no one else has been able to penetrate the inner circle. Ergo I'm fucking all of you."

Embry swallowed. He'd never heard her say a mean thing about anyone before, let alone drop a casual 'fuck' into conversation... His second train of thought was even less helpful. Oh. Oh. He tried to beat back the uncalled barrage of images of Jezzie having sex with any of his brothers, let alone himself—stop it! She was pretty hot when she swore. He wondered how soft her skin would be and the smell of her belly... The kinds of noises she'd make... NO! NO... There was no way he was going to be able to hide a hard on while he consoléd Jezzie about the bitches of the world. But it was difficult. Even Seth was having a whole clusterfuck of mixed hormonal signals regarding what he coined his "hot maternal figure."

He thought platonic thoughts. Dead kittens, nuclear war, syphilis, AIDS, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the manly lunch lady QTS, that time he saw Old Quil without a shirt on... That last one did the trick.

He gently tugged Jezzie towards him until she was pressed into his side as she slid across the bench seat. He draped an arm over her shoulder. "Jez, hon, I'm sorry," he offered sincerely. Despite Embry's deranged imagination, Jezzie was by far the nicest, funniest, and good-hearted person that he'd met in a while. He wasn't surprised that such a rumor upset her so badly. She was definitely not the girl crawling under every guy she encountered.

Jezzie burrowed contentedly into Embry's side as she refused to let any tears leak down her pretty face. It was mostly just from being overwhelmed. It wasn't the rumors. It was the rumors, plus the shapeshifter news, plus the vampire news all rolled together into giant ball of too much to handle at once. Embry hated seeing Jezzie miserable. More than just about anything.

"Aw, c'mon, Jez," he tried. "I know it's a bunch of BS when people say don't let them get to you and all that, but I don't want to see you upset. Besides," he began an alternate approach. "I'm pretty sure sleeping with Paul results in almost immediate death."

Jezzie snorted a small laugh.

"I'm sure he's got enough disease to start his own biological warfare." Embry felt a small vibration of laughter echo through Jezzie's chest.

"And god help Quil. I know he's my best friend, but I'm sure having Paul as a guardian is gonna screw him up long term. Those two will hump a downed log," he shook his head.

An audible laugh came from Jezzie and when Embry looked down at her she might've been grinning. "See," Embry insisted, "You can't have slept with my brothers because they're all out banging foliage. You're just not their type. You're way too soft and pretty."

"You boys are so gross," she mumbled around a growing smile. "No... I know that it's stupid; it just caught me off guard. After everything that's happened I just really didn't need that. I'm really not normally such a wimp about these things. I'm really not. I just didn't think I'd been hear long enough
to stir *that* rumor mill. So playing hooky seemed like a good idea."

"Jezzie do you know the rate at which Forks people come to La Push or vice versa?" Jezzie only shook her head. "They're few and far between. And I don't want to be an emo prick when I say they don't understand us, but the fact is I don't know Forks people very well and Forks people don't know Quileutes too well. We only interact through commerce; we buy and sell stuff from each other. We do the tourist and beach thing, they have the good grocery store. I don't want to scare you off – because the Pack all really likes you a lot, Jez – but it's the truth."

"Are you telling me that you're both, like… cultural ignorants? You live so close together and you never intermingle?"

"It's sad and kinda weird, but that's how it's been as long as I can remember. Forks – from my perspective anyways – has always felt like it was better than us, because it was bigger. We've got a really, *really* small population in La Push. And the Council on the res has been wary and resentful of Forks."

"I guess you can't really blame them," Jezzie shrugged.

"No, but it doesn't mean that things have changed much," Embry agreed. "And town politics and race issues trickle down through generations and families. It's not right, but it is what it is. You're not meeting some expectations, Jez."

She nodded, seeming to absorb everything she'd told him. "So do the people on rez who aren't Pack, do they talk about me too?"

*Ohhh shit*, Embry thought. There was no way in hell Embry was going there.

"Embry?" Jezzie repeated. "Tell me," she said firmly. There was no trace of sadness left in her eyes, just a determined set to her mouth and a seriousness about her expression. He wasn't going to lie to her, though. She definitely didn't deserve that.

"They do," Embry nodded.

"What are they saying?" she asked.

"They're wary of you," Embry supplied. "A lot of people still think the Pack is a gang – even in La Push. So a lot of people are wondering if you're just one of the 'women' of the gang or something. Others that don't buy the gang thing… I think they just doubt your sincerity. We get a lot of people that poke around Indian reservations because they're curious or they want to 'give back' or 'do their part' or some other crazy ass philosophical thing like that. They want to apologize for stuff they didn't do."

"Whites?" Jezzie clarified.

"Yes," Embry confirmed. "And you are new in town, Jezzie. You come from a city where you get a different kind of education. White folks from the city are almost never good news. You're lucky your car hasn't been keyed. They're usually up there with anthropologists and the government. I don't know if they're as mean about it as your classmates, but I've heard my Mom's friends and I've heard some people that come to different Council events – they don't trust you."

"Because I'm white." It wasn't a question.

"And Catholic," Embry added.
Jezzie rolled her eyes. "Super. Because I'm going to force-convert everyone."

"And your classmates think your cheap because you're hanging with the Reds," Embry countered.

"That's totally unfair," Jezzie groused.

"Welcome to Indian life," Embry noted bitterly. "It could be worse. At least you're not Russian."

After a moment of quiet, Embry ducked down to get a look at Jezzie's face. "Just do what you do, Jez. I know your intentions are good; others will pick that up and some people just won't ever see reason. So you've got some potential to screw with local stereotypes, but just know that it's a shitty road."

Jezzie closed her eyes and nodded. "Thank you, Embry." she sighed and smiled a little, looking around for her backpack and pushed the door open. "I'll let you go. Don't want to keep you with a crazy girl in her driveway. I hope I didn't interrupt whatever it was you were doing in Port Angeles. Keep the Jeep for the day, I don't need it."

Embry wrapped his hand around hers before she exited the car. She turned back to him. "Thanks. And it's not a problem, Jez. The truth is always good and I like making you laugh." He leaned across the seat as she looked out the windshield. Her hair was mussed from being under Embry's arm, her makeup was lightly smudged and her cheeks were flushed pink. Embry was sure she'd look in a mirror when she got inside and be horrified. But Embry thought she looked absolutely priceless. He leaned in and placed a kiss on the arch of her flushed cheek as she got out. "I gotta go pick up Anna and Seth. Quil's back up in Neah Bay."

Her eyes popped, her mouth formed a small 'o' and her cheeks flushed impossibly more as she nodded mechanically and kept moving out of the car like normal. Embry gave her a big smile and waved as he pulled out.

Jezzie stood there in shock as Embry pulled out of her driveway and headed back to La Push.

\textit{Friday, November 17, 2006}

Jezzie could feel that tell-tale creeping when she woke up that Friday morning. Slow and steady it would come, radiating from her back. For days – maybe even weeks – it would seem peculiar, but innocuous enough until one day she'd wake up feeling absolutely constricted. A deep, restrictive pressure would radiate up her back. Usually starting down low, it would come to her in waves. Initially it would be uncomfortable, make walking around a tender task but the longer it lasted the more painful it would become and the more restricted her movements would become.

Starting in her back, she'd feel weakening, then tingling that would slowly move to numbness. Sometimes numbness to the point that her walking was impaired because she couldn't feel her hips moving.

After about two weeks, if the phase didn't pass, she'd experience other dysfunction. She'd start to forget to things – small, short term matters – like what she had for breakfast or where she put her phone or that she had an appointment somewhere. She'd forget words; stuck on the tip of her tongue, she wouldn't be able to verbalize them. Her house would be littered with post its as things happened and she – determined not to forget them – would write them down and stick the note in a relevant area. Sometimes, when she was feeling pessimistic, she would preemptively place post its around the house. She wondered what living in a new house with a shoddy memory would be like.
Her vision blurred. In the last flare she’d missed a week of school because she’d been relegated to feeling her way around her own house.

The memory loss is what she feared the most. Sure, her back would hurt her for a few days or weeks but her mobility had always snapped back. Her head hadn’t. It wasn’t until her second flare that Jezzie experienced her memory issues, but she learned that even after the flare finished – there were small capacities of her memory she never got back.

In order to ward it off, or maybe just to reaffirm in her own mind that she was a fully functional human being, Jezzie ran. A lot. Sometimes upwards of ten miles in a day. She would run before class. She loved the feeling. She loved the burn in her legs as her muscles constricted and relaxed, relishing the lactic acid pulsing through her limbs. Jezzie loved the pounding of her heart as it synced with her breathing. The cool sting of the Pacific air as it hit her sweating skin was a pleasant shock to the system. Running made Jezzie feel normal. Running made Jezzie feel capable. She’d take pain over numbness.

Whenever Jezzie woke up to the tell-tale creeping in her back, she would go for a run. Sure, she ran every morning mostly. But on those mornings she ran with a purpose. There would be no leisurely jog. No, today she would push herself to go faster, longer, farther, harder. Pushing her dysfunctional body to its limits. Part of it was a vain hope that maybe she could fix herself simply by never giving her system a chance to breakdown. Part of it was abject frustration.

Today was one of those days and Jezzie woke up quietly and crankily. She put on shorts and a t-shirt and pulled her running sneakers out from under her bed. She scribbled "phone, wallet, keys" on a post it and stuck it to the lamp by her desk in case she needed it later. She crept down the stairs slowly, trying not to disturb her father. She knew he was leaving in the next few weeks and could use all the sleep he could get. He'd worry enough about leaving her here if he knew how she was feeling.

She shook the thought from her head, insisting she could deal with it later when he was up and continued out the door. She stretched on the front lawn – not wanting to sustain an injury she could prevent from ever happening in the first place. She jogged up the driveway, gaining speed as she climbed the gentle hill and decided to turn left out of her property today. Usually, she'd hang a right and run some loop around Forks as it seemed to always make a nice convenient circuit that would eventually spill her back in her part of town without much thought for the matter.

But today, she decided to jazz things up and would run towards La Push. As she ran, she wondered how far she'd get. She knew La Push was a decent ways off and was assured she probably wouldn't make it entirely to the coast. She checked her watch; nope, she didn't have time before school. She kept her breathing controlled as she continued down the moist, barren stretch of heavily wooded asphalt that connected Forks and the reservation. Jezzie picked up her pace once again as she began to climb a gentle but long hill. She enjoyed a momentary victory hop as she reached the top.

The sun was just now beginning to burn through the clouds of the Olympic peninsula and Jezzie smiled slightly. The sun began to warm the air. The brisk snap of the moist air against her bare skin began to dissolve as she worked up a good sweat.

Jezzie was thinking that she would have to jog the western route more often – as it was way more scenic and less depressing small-town suburbia – when she rounded a sharp bend in the road that she knew began the transition from Forks to La Push land. Her feet crunched beneath her as she ran over ground down pavement on the side of the road. Her next step landed her foot unsteadily and it slid from beneath her. Jezzie was taken by surprise as she slipped and couldn’t slow the fall, instead her feet came from beneath her and she hit pavement and gravel on her right side. She skidded a few feet
– the inertia from her running speed continuing to propel her forward across the pavement – and cringed as the aggregate tore the skin on her right arm and leg to shreds.

Her body finally came to a halt about ten feet from where she initially slipped. The pain radiated entirely up her right side – to hell with her back. She was breathing rapidly and could feel her chest press against the pavement as she inhaled. She cringed again when she tried to move ever so slightly. She knew once she moved off the wet filthy pavement and exposed her wounds to the air, the pain would magnify tenfold. But she also could not – in good conscience – let her road rash stay in direct contact with the same filthy pavement.

Just as she steeled herself to roll over and take a gander at the damage, there was a very loud exit from the woods just off the road. "Jezzie! What the hell did you do?" The boy ran up to her, barely coordinated enough to pull his shorts all the way on before dropping to his knees beside her.

Quil was in the last hour of his patrol when he'd heard hurried foot treads coming onto the reservation. His eyes and his nose told him that it was Jezzie. He had let well enough alone, knowing from Embry and Seth and his own powers of observation that Jezzie ran like a woman on the lam. However, when he heard the tell-tale sounds of a stumble and then a long skid he got worried. When he didn't hear her get back up, Leah agreed to watch his portion of the line while he went to check on her.

"Jezzie? Shit, are you okay?" He carefully placed a hand on her undamaged left side and she took the moment to roll onto her back.

"Ow," she winced as her face pinched with the full body burn.

"Holy shit…” Quil muttered. "We need to call an ambulance."

Jezzie couldn't peel her eyes open for the sting and burn. "No," she managed to grind out.

"Jezzie," Quil said measuredly. "You're missing all the skin on this half of your body. I think we can give your co-workers a ring."

"Any exposed bones or tendons?" she ground out still with her eyes squinted closed.

"Ew... No, just dirt and some blood. You're starting to bleed."

"Okay," she winced. "Then I don't need an ambulance. I do need to go to the hospital though. Road rash tends to look worse than it is."

"If you're ruling out an ambulance ride that means I have to carry you."

"If you don't mind," Jezzie nodded slightly, still not opening her eyes.

She felt Quil's arm gently shift beneath her - one across her shoulders and neck and the other sort of haphazardly around one of her legs and butt. She could tell he didn't want to touch her torn up flesh. She appreciated that.

"If I don't mind..." he muttered to himself as he gently lifted her from the pavement. He started at a run off towards Forks and after a few moments the light changed and she could tell they were in the tree cover. The air against her open skin was both biting and relieving. She tried not to concentrate on that. Or the fact that she'd have no explanation for a nearly-naked Quil escorting her to the ER.

After a few minutes she felt Quil slow and the light began to brighten again. She finally peeled her eyes open and watched as Quil glanced both ways before crossing the main road to Forks
"Okay," Jezzie said quietly. "Let me down in the parking lot. I can walk in."

"Are you sure?" Quil checked, but he obliged and gently placed her feet on the pavement. She nodded and winced as control of body weight was put back on her terms. She took a few deep breaths - which hurt a lot - as she rested her hands on her knees. She just needed to make it in the ER.

"Jezzie?" Quil said warily.

"I'm good," she nodded. She wasn't going to ask him to accompany her into the hospital. She didn't know if he had more pressing issues to attend to, but he followed after her anyways - his hand only a few inches from her lower back as she made her ungainly way through the sliding doors.

"Name?" the distracted receptionist asked before looking up.

"Jezzie Sullivan," she rasped out.

"Jezzie!" the woman chirped as she finally looked up. "What happened?"

"Small running accident. It looks worse than it is. Stinging like the dickens though."

The receptionist clicked away through Jezzie's vital information and printed her a wristband. Quil helped her to a waiting room chair and she collapsed into it gracefully. The waiting room was mostly empty. There was an older couple sitting ahead of them watching the CNN broadcast and on the other side of the room a young woman sat with a small toddler as the boy dozed in her lap. The room was quiet and plainly decorated. It reeked of antiseptic and plastic. Definitely familiar.

It was times like these that Jezzie thanked high heavens she wasn't queasy or uncomfortable in medical environs. Quil also didn't appear to have a hair out of place. Despite being half naked. Jezzie elbowed him gently and pointed down the hall that lead to the Main Entrance of the hospital. "Third door on the left, top shelf."

Quil quirked a brow at her ominous suggestion, but returned a few moments later with a set of scrubs – now making for a fully clothed teenager in the ER.

"Thanks," she told Quil quietly. "For getting me here. I really appreciate it. You don't have to stay if you don't want to."

Quil rolled his eyes. "It's fine, Little Red. Really. Waiting alone in a hospital ER is pretty fucking lame. Besides, someone's gotta keep Emb from kicking the exam room door in," he checked his watch, "T minus forty five minutes until he gets on patrol and sees what Leah and I saw."

"Shoot," Jezzie groaned. And she definitely would die of embarrassment if he came blasting in here - which he most certainly would - if he found out. "Should we... Call ahead and warn him?"

"Hah!" Quil uttered a single booming laugh. "Definitely not. Leah will break it to him gently. She might even keep him from making us both wish we didn't know him."

Jezzie could feel the flush radiate up her neck and into her face and ears. Die of embarrassment indeed. Quil just grinned at her.

Jezzie was never anything but amazed at how Quil could take any situation thrown at him. Quil the Cucumber. Because he was always cool as a cucumber. When she told him about the new nickname
she'd decided for him, he laughed again.

"Did you hit your head on the way down, too, Jez?"

"No," she smiled shaking her head. "I just really appreciate having someone who can stay calm and collected. You're almost never taken by surprise. And if you get to call me Little Red, I get to call you Quil the Cucumber."

Quil was quite sure that after imprinting on a child, nothing was ever going to surprise him again. Ever. But he could understand where she was coming from. Quil was definitely the most level-headed and relaxed between his other two best friends.

A lot of people assumed Embry was the placid one because he was generally so quiet – but he got the better of himself oftentimes. Between overanalyzing everything and imagining things that weren't there, Embry was the wolf most likely to go crazy and turn into something akin to that blue-butted monkey in the *Lion King*. And now that Jezzie had moved into town? Embry was definitely on the fast track to a loony bin. All self-imposed, Quil liked to remind people.

Jacob – as was proven by his most recent few years of life – had the nagging incapability of living life with his heart firmly in place inside his chest. Where it damn well belonged. He was a good leader, but definitely prone to emotional ups and downs that would have him flying off the handle without any notice.

Quil was definitely the talker of the group. He was also the one who had previously never left the female population alone. But it certainly couldn't be blamed entirely on him if his charisma was a magnet for people. He never shut up and that's the way he liked it. Especially now that he was Pack, he found that everyone took life *way* too seriously. They all would have wallowed in pools of their own self-pity and depression if wasn't for Quil almost constantly making really off the wall comments about everything. If anything, it gave Seth, Jared and Jake something to laugh at; Leah and Paul an excuse to pummel him; and Sam and Embry something else to think about.

By most standards they were all a little screwed up – himself included – but they were alive and healthy and that was their general prognosis for the near future. Things could've been worse. And that's what Quil reminded himself of on an almost daily basis when things got screwy.

"Things could be worse," Quil voiced his mantra aloud. "You're definitely in bad shape, but you're walking and talking and there doesn't appear to be any permanent damage."

"Nope," she shook her head with a small smile.

"Sullivan, Jezzie?" The triage nurse stepped through a set of double doors and looked up from her clipboard. Quil stood with Jezzie and followed her and the nurse to Exam Room #3.

"All right, get yourself comfortable Miss Sullivan the doctor will be in a moment."

The nurse clicked the door shut on Jezzie and Quil and she looked at the intimidating gurney. "Quil, do me a favor?"

"Yeah?" he replied, turning from his previous task of rifling through the contents of all the drawers behind her.

"Put me on this bed. I can't get up myself."

"Your wish is my command. Turn that tight ass around."
Jezzie turned around and stuck out her tongue at Quil. He placed his hands carefully under her arms – the only place on her right side not scored open – and gently picked her up and deposited her on the bed. She flopped back onto the reclined back and sighed. Salvation.

In true hospital fashion, it was well over three quarters of an hour before another soul even stepped inside Exam Room #3. She was eventually carted by wheelchair into the ER's radiology department. Jezzie insisted that she hadn't had that rough of an impact, she simply slid grossly over pavement. They x-rayed her head, neck and back just to be sure – and they ascertained that she didn't have a concussion.

The technician glanced over her x-rays and concluded that if anything was wrong with her bone matter, it wasn't life threatening. The nurse brought her back to Exam Room #3 for another half hour wait. In that time, Quil had run the gamut of animals able to be constructed out of latex gloves. He had now moved onto shadow puppets with the exam light.

"A'right, a'right… how about… this one? Guess."

"Um…" Jezzie began intelligently. She wasn't sure who was worse at this game – her guessing or Quil's shapes. "A… uh… a wildebeest?"

"A wildebeest? A wildebeest? Detroit, I don't even know what the fuck a wildebeest is! It's an elephant."

"Oh," she nodded wide-eyed. That had been one heck of an elephant. She just looked at him for a moment before the laughter bubbled to the surface and she couldn't contain it. She didn't feel too bad when he laughed along with her.

Her giggles persisted for a few more minutes and when she checked her watch – for what had to be the tenth time – she sighed. "Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" she asked Quil.

"The bad," Quil said decidedly as he leaned back in the rolling chair.

"We've been in Forks Community Hospital Emergency Room Exam Room #3 for two hours."

Quil nodded measuredly – his hands behind his head – as if assessing the information. "And the good?"

"Patrol change happened a while ago and Embry has yet to judo chop the door down."

"This is a plus," Quil agreed. "Because no one wants to explain that to maintenance and security. I bet Leah gave him some of that beta whammy of hers and didn't let him leave. He's probably having a conniption just behind the La Push line."

Before Jezzie could respond there was a brief knock on the door. Quil's face took on a slightly confused look before changing to annoyance. "Great," he mumbled as the door swung open.

"Jezzie," Dr. Carlisle Cullen greeted her with a smile as he entered the room with a tray of supplies. "And Mr. Ateara," Carlisle nodded in Quil's direction. "What brings the two of you here today?"

"Running accident," Jezzie explained shortly. She was trying to stay calm and not think about Carlisle's dietary choices. She hadn't thought this all the way through when she came to the ER. How could she forget Carlisle was a… vampire? "I wiped out. Got some pretty decent road rash."

Carlisle nodded and sat in the other available chair, wheeling the tray of supplies along with him. "Whereabouts?" he asked as he slipped Jezzie's x-rays out of their envelope and snapped them onto
the wall light.

"Not sure, exactly. On the road to the res, more towards La Push than Forks."

"Right at the line," Quil offered.

Carlisle glanced up and nodded. "Well, Jezzie – it looks like you're fairly lucky. This is only surface damage. No spinal or head trauma."

Jezzie nodded, appreciating not having to be stuck with road rash and some obnoxious brace for the near future. Carlisle wheeled the stool next to Jezzie's gurney, along with the tray of supplies, and went to work. He gloved his hands and began by rinsing and tweezing small sections of Jezzie's wounds, making sure all the gravel was gone.

She kept an ironfisted grip on Quil's hand, not because the procedure hurt – well, it did sting a little – but because she was absolutely terrified having a blood-drinking vampire so close to her open flesh. Sure Kim had told her they were 'vegetarian' – even if there was nothing 'vegetarian' about it – but this was the first she'd seen of any of the Cullens since she found out. And she was terrified.

Quil actually admired Jezzie's effort and found that she had a decent grip when she wanted. He could also smell the fear and anxiety rolling off her like a fucking tsunami. He wondered if the leeches picked up on that kind of thing – if they could smell body chemistry like that. He didn't think they could. Otherwise, Jasper wouldn't have been so valuable. He had to admit she had a good poker face and the only reason Quil hadn't left the room was because he was sure Jezzie wouldn't have let him.

Carlisle answered all her questions so thoroughly that there was little need for a whole medical debrief at the end. Carlisle stood as the last of Jezzie's bandages had been set and he asked Quil if he could step outside for a moment. Doctor/patient things and all that. Her panic spiked briefly but Quil gave her a reassuring grin. Carlisle's control was pretty much solid, and Quil could easily knock the door in before he even sank a bicuspid into the girl.

"So, Jezzie," Carlisle began as he looked over her entry paperwork. "Based on your condition and the medications you're already on, I'm wary of giving you any prescription pain relievers. I'm not your PCP and I'm not familiar with your case…"

"It's okay, Dr. Cullen," Jezzie sat up gingerly. Remain calm, no sudden movements, keep breathing... "I don't want anything. I'll be fine with the Tylenol at home."

"How are you feeling?" he asked leadingly.

Jezzie rolled her eyes. She worked with Dr. Cullen and he'd helped her Dad out when she first moved here. Ever the doctor. "Relapsing," she offered simply.

"My concern," Carlisle offered simply, "is that without additional pain relief the road rash – which is extremely painful – is only going to make your life less pleasant until it or the relapse passes."

"Carlisle," Jezzie replied, swinging her feet over the edge of the bed. "I don't take the half the meds my regular doctor gives me. The anti-convulsants for the partial paralysis during my relapses and the interferons for holding the relapses at bay, I take. But I don't like being doped up. So anything you give me, I probably won't take. You should save it for someone that will."

"Fair enough," Carlisle nodded. He then went over treatment for her road rash, explaining how to undress and redress the wounds. "Come back and see me in a week, so we can check your progress. We'll keep it brief."
"Thanks, Carlisle," Jezzie smiled. She carefully hopped off the bed. "Am I clear for class?"

"If you're comfortable with it, yes." And she proceeded to run from the room.

Ten minutes later, Jezzie was filling out a small batch of paperwork and talking with the receptionist when Carlisle took a seat next to Quil in the waiting room. "You know, it's a rarity when anyone from the outside befriends our kind. Jezzie's only been here a few months..."

"Tell me about it," Quil replied with a nod. "Girl infiltrated us like a Russian spy."

"Really?" Carlisle asked in surprise.

Quil offered a one-shouldered shrug. "Yeah. She's observant, but doesn't ask too many questions. It's a godsend. Not like your freakin' daughter-in-law, no offense. I like Bella, but man did she ask a lot of questions."

"Does Jezzie know?"

"As of a few days ago, yeah. It was kind of unavoidable."

Carlisle nodded as Jezzie finished up her paperwork. Quil still had the task of getting Jezzie home without Embry noticing. Great.

Quil did manage to get Jezzie home and later when Embry found out he didn't tweak. It was surprising but kind of nice. What was surprising and not nice, was how quickly thereafter Jezzie disappeared off the face of the Earth.

Leah had called her the next day to make sure that she was okay. She didn't hear back from her until the day after. She'd texted her to let her know she was fine. The smiley face was only partially reassuring.

When she'd called Joy Ateara on Wednesday to cancel dinner that night – because Joy insisted that if she helped talk her daughter back to her human shape, she deserved some homemade pot roast. Joy was rather tight lipped about any other details and Leah thought she smelled a rat but let the girl be. Maybe the Pack thing was finally starting to freak her out. That was the general feeling that began to radiate through the ranks.

None of them really blamed her. Her first exposure was Anna losing control not three feet away from her. They didn't blame her, but they sure as hell missed her. She'd become a fixture around the Pack. At least three times a week she could be seen, flitting around the reservation, her bright red hair sticking out like the Irish thumb she was. If she wasn't playing rugby with Anna, Rachel, Addie and Leah, she was doing her homework with Seth or being begged for information on Veronica by Quil or having girl time with Kim or playing with Claire or doing anything with Embry.

And it was difficult to tell if Leah or Embry was more worried about her. Embry showed it more, but Leah always seemed to be the one to learn more information about Jezzie. She stopped coming to rugby practice the day she slipped and fell. Leah learned from teammates that she hadn't been in classes on Friday. Being constantly on the receiving line of second hand news about her friend made her edgy.

Seth was not doing nearly as much homework as he used to. Whenever he actually got down to the task – which was a rarity – he couldn't concentrate, because his head went right to Jezzie. And he thought it was insane to be thinking about Jezzie the Mama Wolf when he needed to be studying the underlying causes of the Cold War.
And if Kim had to go another Pack get-together without an ally she was really going to lose it. Emily was nice and all, but she was way older than Kim and they didn't have much in common. Besides being imprinted. And what made Kim sad, made Jared sad.

Most of them had assumed that Jezzie was trying to figure how to tell them that she thought they were all crazy and she wanted nothing to do with them. She was too nice to say something like that, so it would've been hard – and taken her a long time – to figure out how to say it kindly.

And then she sent them all for a bender when – out of the blue – she called Leah. It had been a week and a half since the day she'd wiped out and Quil took her to the hospital.

Leah wasn't prepared for what she found at the Sullivan home when she ran over after hanging up with Jezzie. She had changed her earlier presupposition that Jezzie was bailing. She'd decided something else was definitely wrong; because Jezzie sounded like absolute shit on the phone.

When Leah opened the door, she was almost run down by a very agitated coonhound in his attempts to simply make it out the door. Apparently, nature had been calling for a while. Leah headed up the stairs, propping the door open for Archie. When she reached the landing she could see Jezzie's room was right in front of her. The girl looked so small sitting on the edge of her bed.

"Leah," she smiled without looking. "Thanks for coming by. I assume Archie charged you down as you came in?"

"Jezzie," Leah gasped coming into her room and sitting on the edge of her bed with her. "You look like hell!"

"Thanks," Jezzie grinned as she rolled her eyes. She winced a bit as she sat up a little straighter. Leah noticed that she looked wan and paler than usual. She had on a huge sweatshirt and Leah didn't know how she wasn't sweating to death. She moved like every inch cause her pain. "I was really only going for looking like crap, you think I over did it?"

"Look," Leah said. "I'm going to go fill Archie's bowl. I'll be right back, okay?"

"I love you," Jezzie grinned.

"Don't tell Embry that," Leah chided as she stood.

"Shut up," Jezzie growled as Leah headed back downstairs.

She was back less than ten minutes later with a whole box of cereal. "So are you going to be hanging here or..."

"Actually, could you help me get to my living room?"

That had only taken five minutes and some quick thinking on Leah's part when Jezzie almost fell face first down the steps. The girl moved and walked - holding the wall - like both her legs were asleep. No wonder she called her over to let her dog out. Once they plopped on the couch, Leah handed over the cereal. "Eat something and make me feel better."

"Mm," Jezzie hummed in pleasure as she opened the box of Reese's Puffs.

"Your Dad gone for the season?" Leah hadn't heard or smelled Al around since she got here.

Jezzie shook her head around a mouthful of cereal. "Gone for the day. He doesn't have to leave, leave until the end of December. I think he leaves the day after Christmas."
Leah nodded, glad Jezzie wasn't totally alone for whatever it was that was going on with her. "So, what's up?" Leah asked, sitting back down on Jezzie's couch and leaning against the arm. "Is it still the road rash?" she could see the few healing scrapes on the side of Jezzie's face. Maybe the burn down her legs made it hard to walk? Leah had never had road rash.

Jezzie swallowed a bit of peanut butter and chocolately goodness. She needed to tell someone what was going on. She felt horrible not letting her friends know what was going on and she was desperately hoping they wouldn't all hate her for bailing on them without explanation for almost two weeks. Jezzie felt the most comfortable talking to Leah. She knew she wouldn't blow it out of proportion and had the best shot at preventing it from becoming a feeding frenzy. She liked talking to Leah.

So talk she did.

Monday, December 4, 2006

Embry was pretty sure he was going to have to kill a girl. Regardless of the fact that Leah was his friend and could probably take him, he was going to turn her into dog food. This was even worse than having Quil tell him Jezzie had 'fuckawesome' legs – admitting he was checking Jezzie out while she went up her porch steps when he brought her home from the hospital. This was definitely worse than that. Why was his Pack determined to fuck with him like this?

"Boun-da-ries!" Leah shouted at him with unnecessary enunciation. Embry wasn't deaf. Or stupid.

"Leah!" Embry shouted back at her.

The two of them bickered like siblings and Quil was quite tired of having to listen to them. "Would you two please take this outside?" He yelled from the living room. "This is the first time I've watched TV in five whole days. For the love of God!"

Leah stormed outside and Embry followed after her. "Leah, you can't just disappear over there and not tell me what's going on!"

"Did you ever consider the fact that she doesn't want you to know? That it's not your business?"

Embry stopped short. He hadn't seen Jezzie in almost two weeks and she hadn't responded to anyone trying to talk to her. Even Anna. Embry was sure she loved Anna. No one had heard from her, when out of the blue she called Leah. Wordlessly she went to Forks and wordlessly she came back. "Did she say that?" Embry asked, feeling a bit hurt.

"No," Leah said more calmly. "She's too nice to ever say that. She told me to tell you to stop worrying."

"How did she—"

"She assumed," Leah cut him off. "Rather accurately too. Listen Embry, you guys are so used to knowing absolutely everything about absolutely everyone you know. Jezzie is not one of us. She still has a concept of personal privacy. Give her space. She likes you. She will talk to you; just not right now. Okay?"

"Is it bad?" Embry hedged, scratching nervously at the back of his head.

"I'm not playing twenty questions with you Embry Call," Leah replied, placing her hands on hips.
Embry shook his head. "You look just like your Mom," he muttered.

"Shut up," she ground out as she punched him in the arm and stormed back into the house. Embry didn't miss her massaging her knuckles; Embry didn't miss the fact that her impact actually caused pain either.
"I Will Make You Fishers of Men"

Tuesday, December 5, 2006

"Dad, I'll be fine," Jezzie whined. "I promise."

"I don't like this." Al stood obstinately in the foyer, his burly arms set on his hips as she shook his grizzled head. "I don't like this one little bit."

"Dad," Jezzie implored. "I'm twenty-one. I'm a little sick. It's nothing I can't handle. What are you gonna do? Cancel the whole season and your salary so you can watch me hobble around the house for a few days? It'll pass..."

"You don't know that, Jezebel," Al replied firmly and Jezzie continued her slightly off-kilter pacing. It hurt, but she needed some way to expel the tension from her body. "There isn't a thing I can do for you once that ship leaves harbor. Not for the next three months until the Dungeness season is over."

"Both Veronica and Ricky live in town," she reminded him. "And if anything goes really wrong, I can call Mrs. Ateara - she'll help me out. Or even Sue." Jezzie couldn't just stand here and let her Dad throw away an entire year's worth of pay. Sure, the season paid well, but it had to get them through the other nine months of the year that her Dad didn't fish. He'd missed the local season once, when she was younger, because he broke an arm in the pre-season set up. He'd had to go north for a completely different kind of fishing in much more dangerous waters for a longer period of time. Jezzie was fifteen; she'd spent half the year with an Aunt. She would be quite all right if they didn't have to live through that again.

Al sighed and pulled his duffel bag from the floor. "I want you to call me, Miss Jezebel," he pointed a knobbly index finger towards her. "Besides the usual. I want to know if anything gets any worse."

"I swear, I'll tell you, Dad – I just don't want you missing the whole darn season." Jezzie finally plopped down on the bench in their foyer. She tried not to wince at the way the sitting gesture made the constriction reverberate up her back and into her chest. Her Dad was finally caving. He knew as well as she that they couldn't forgo a whole season's worth of pay. "That wouldn't be good for either of us. I've got friends here, Dad. We're not total new kids anymore."

"All right, then," Al nodded. "That's a deal. I'll call you when we finally make it out of the Sound and get into open waters. Then you'll have the boat's number. I love you, Jezebel."

She stood and gave her Dad a hug. "I love you, too, Dad. Stay safe. 'May God be good to you: for the sea is wide, and the boat so small.'"

"'God give me strength to catch a fish, so big that even I, when telling of it afterwards, have no need to lie'," Al smiled as he hugged his daughter back. "I love you too, Jezebel. I'll see you in February!"

Jacob and Leah traipsed up the steps of the Cullen home. Jacob glanced back to Leah and she put her most diplomatic face on. This wasn't going to be an easy talk…

"Where are the others?" Jacob asked after a few minutes in the house had turned up a few missing leeches.

"Edward and Carlisle are on their way to the Denali Coven," Bella said. "They're trying to find out what they can about the local werewolf populations. Apparently, they're more common at colder
"Was there something else you two stopped by for?" Jasper asked, redirecting the conversation to stay on track. Leah didn't know if she wanted to respect Jasper for his tendency to keep his family on task and on an even keel, mentally, or if she wanted to choke him for seeming to feel like he was the only one with a grip on anything.

"Not a fun mission, but… we need to know what your family's plans are. For near future living situations. We had a new phase recently – Quil's sister – and we've now officially run the gamut of everyone with the phasing gene over the age of thirteen on the reservation."

"Got another chick on board?" Emmett asked. Leah glared but Emmett only clarified, "hey, I'm thinkin' someone's gotta keep the canines in line." He was right, but it was a knock on her brothers. Only she was allowed to make fun of her brothers.

"Anna makes our second shewolf," Jacob nodded. "But we've kinda been expecting her to phase for a few weeks now… But we can't run the risk with anyone else. All the others with the right DNA are still in grade school. Phasing almost killed my two youngest wolves – I don't know what it would do to someone younger."

"Our concern is," Leah continued, "that we don't know when or if our population numbers are going to stop increasing. We don't know if the Pack will grow until we're a certain percentage larger than your coven, or if we'll just keep growing until you leave. Either way, we can't afford to have anyone else phase."

Neither Leah or Jacob mentioned the imprinting issue. Still a sore spot for the Cullens, given Nessie, but the Pack didn't much feel like airing all of their concerns to the local vampires. They wouldn't have cared much anyways.

"Emmett and I were talking about traveling for a while," Rosalie offered. "Anything not to be stuck in this house all the time."

"And Jasper and I have some catching up to do – it's been ages since we've seen Peter and Charlotte," Alice chirped.

"I think we'll have to talk about it," Esme concluded. "Once Edward and Carlisle return from Alaska, we'll discuss it and let you know. Some of us will inevitably stay in the area, though, I would think you would prefer that – that way Nessie can stay close by. But some of us dispersing is not an unreasonable request."

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**Thursday, December 7, 2006**

"Jez?" Embry asked hopefully as her house phone finally picked up. "Hi, look, I know you're pissed at me or whatever, but can you please come down to the rez? Seth's sick and neither Carlisle or Edward are in town. You know we can't take him to the hospital. Please? I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency.

"Sure," Embry heard her mutter and then a dial tone. *Well, Embry thought, at least she wasn't going to leave Seth to die.*

Jezzie rolled off her couch and pulled on her zip up sweatshirt. She pulled the bag of wolfy medicine – as she called it – that Carlisle had given her from her hall closet. He had prepped her with a few things that he had found he commonly needed to help treat the wolves of their various maladies that
wouldn't self-heal. Mostly a shotgun casing's worth of penicillin; titanium stitching needles, syringes, IV lines; and steel splinting mechanisms. She locked the house up, read over the checklist post it note on the door that helped to make sure she remembered the basics, and left.

She tossed the supernatural bag next to her normal bag of normal medic supplies from back when she was a normal paramedic into her normal Jeep and grumbled the whole way La Push about how Seth better be dying. She didn't care if he was pretty much her favorite at this point. Though it would be awfully mean to let him die out of spite.

It was getting late and Jezzie drove to La Push in the blinding sunset. When she pulled up to the Clearwater place. She hopped out and left her bags, unsure at this point what was even wrong with Seth. She stomped up the stairs and didn't even bother with knocking. Sue's car wasn't in the driveway and whoever else was here wouldn't care. She made her way to the back of the house and followed the sound of voices.

"I feel like I'm shriveling up and dying," a thoroughly ill and irritated Seth Clearwater growled. Jezzie stepped inside the doorway of his bedroom and found him lying, sideways, on Batman sheets, with Leah seated at the head of the bed shaking her head and Embry just looking concerned.

"Jezzie, thank God," Embry murmured without looking at her. That stung. "Can you help him?"

"What's wrong with him?" she asked as she took a seat next to Leah.

"Lots of puking, lots of stomach pain, I can't pee or spit, and for the first time in months I'm not hungry," Seth groused from his cocoon.

"Not being hungry isn't a symptom of much, Seth."

"And he won't stop sleeping. It's a bit much, even for him," Leah offered.

"I thought you guys didn't get sick like this?" Jezzie looked between Embry and Leah.

"We don't usually; that's what's kinda worrying. Our body temperature usually burns everything off."

"Well, while you all discuss that, I'm just going to…" And Seth sprung from his bed at lightning speed and Jezzie could hear him being sick down the hall.

"How long's he been like this?
Leah shrugged. "Since yesterday. He couldn't even patrol."

Seth trudged back up the hall moments later, into his room, and collapsed sideways on the bed. Jezzie returned to her truck for her bag and dropped it in her seat next to Leah. She took her stethoscope and penlight and crawled across to the far side of the bed near the wall and Seth's head. She peeled back Seth's eyelids and looked, made him open his mouth and say 'ah', listened to him breathe, and finally checked his pulse.

"I know you guys have an increased body temperature, but what about heart rate? Is that the same as humans?"

Embry and Leah glanced between themselves and shrugged. "When barely sentient?" Leah offered, "Yeah. Seth's pulse should be human normal at this point."

"Seth, what have you eaten lately? Anything out of the ordinary?" She pressed her hands to his forehead and his cheeks - trying to decide if his temperature was elevated above his normal 108°F.
Jezzie was starting to learn that shapeshifter medicine was part medical professional, part improvisation, and part maternal instinct.

"I've eaten a lot of cereal, some lasagna, tacos, a steak, a loaf of bread, a gallon of milk, a jar of peanut butter…" as Seth ran through the copious amounts of food he'd eaten in the past few days, Jezzie couldn't pick out anything abnormal. Sure it was a lot of food, and it was really random, but nothing that should make him sick.

"What about on patrol or while phased? Do you eat or drink at all then?"

He thought for a moment before speaking. "I drank from the stream a lot this weekend; Jake's been running us into the ground since that--Ow!" Leah smacked him just in time. No one had given Jezzie the rundown on the existence of werewolves yet. And given that two of three shapeshifters present were fairly convinced Jezzie thought they were all crazy, now might not have been the best time for Seth to spill those beans. Unless the kid wanted to die of dysentery or whatever. Seth managed to figure out what his sister's whack meant. "I had to run a double and I was dying. I didn't eat anything though."

"The stream through the hunting grounds?" Jezzie asked, her brow furrowed in thought. She wasn't fazed by Leah's assault. She must have been used to it by now. Seth nodded in response. "Glassy eyes, accelerated pulse, dry mouth, vomiting and I'll assume you've spared me the gory diarrhea details?" Jezzie let out a breath and tried not to laugh. This wasn't funny. Okay, maybe just a little bit. "Seth, I think you have a salmonella infection."

"What?" Embry, Seth and Leah all spoke at once. "Isn't that something you get in, like, Africa?" Seth queried. "Sometimes in the developing world, yes. But there's plenty of ways to get it stateside," Jezzie replied. "If it's not salmonella it's something of the like; drinking untreated water will affect you if you weren't phased long enough to pee it out of your system. Can you imagine the sheer number of woodsmen relieving themselves in that outlet of the river?"

"That," Leah said as she stood and raised her hands, "is so gross."

"So what do we do about it?" Embry asked as Leah left for the kitchen. "Why didn't it get burned off in the first place?"

"Fluids aren't gonna hurt a kid that's been puking his brains out." Jezzie shrugged. "Have Carlisle confirm when he gets back, just in case. I have no idea how it happened. I mean, you guys can't fight off everything. Maybe he got enough of it in his system that it couldn't all be fought off. You guys burn a higher body temp while phased, so my suggestion is to feed a wolfy Seth lots and lots of Gatorade. The fluids and electrolytes need replacing and the boosted temp will just help. He should be fine. If that doesn't work, I'll hook him up with some fluids intravenously."

"I'm a lot bigger when I'm a wolf," Seth mumbled. "Does that mean a lot more vomit?"

"We're about to find out."

Jezzie went with Leah to the corner store in La Push and bought all of Mr. Carlson's Gatorade – and Powerade, too, just for good measure. When they got back to the Clearwater place, Seth was lying down in the back yard – his head resting on his paws as he whined quietly – and Embry had dragged a plastic storage container out of the house and was rinsing it with the hose.

"Don't drink from that hose, Seth," Jezzie said when she caught him eyeballing it. He let out a small
whine and laid a paw over his muzzle. "It'll just make the runs worse," she warned and Seth chuffed once and shook his head.

Leah, Embry and Jezzie then spent the next twenty minutes filling the 50-gallon Rubbermaid tote with Gatorade and Powerade. Seth didn't seem to care that his flavors were mixed up, he drank all twenty five gallons at a fairly steady pace. Embry, Leah and Jezzie sat on the back steps and watched.

"So when does Carlisle get back?" Jezzie asked, resting her chin on the tops of her knees.

"He and Edward are supposed to be back before the week's up," Leah replied.

Embry tagged along with Jezzie on her way home on his way to the Cullens. Ever since the latest werewolf that had come through – the second one, the one the Pack had missed – the vampires and the wolves had been coordinating patrols. That meant operating between the Treaty Line and the Cullen home. Which was grossly unpleasant to the canine olfactory glands. Embry didn't actually need the ride, but he hoped to use it as an excuse to just be near her for a little while. She was too polite to make him run from her house, so she drove to the foot of the Cullen's driveway. She put the beast in park and let out a small sigh.

"I'm sorry about all of this, Jez," Embry said slowly.

She glanced back up at him, caught off guard by the simple fact that he'd spoken her name. Jez. She missed that. So much that it made her insides curl in one themselves just to hear it. But she didn't want it; she didn't want Embry trying to make her feel better when there wasn't any time to feel better in sight. So she didn't like him using her nickname. The nickname for her nickname, because it made it sound like everything would be okay.

"Don't call me that," she muttered shaking her head.

He nodded, processing her request. "Okay… But I just want to apologize for freaking you out. I mean, I know that what we're dealing with here is really screwed up, but I just couldn't handle not telling you – not having you know. You needed to know, Jezzie. And you haven't said a word since – you won't even look at me – so I don't know if you're mad or scared or nervous or totally ambivalent, but I just need something to go on. Please."

For a moment, Embry remained still because he recognized the look on Jezzie's face. He knew she was organizing her thoughts, planning to speak. So he paused and gave her a moment.

"Embry, I have MS," she said, apropos of nothing. "I'm not mad or scared or nervous or any of that. I'm sick. What you told me doesn't have anything to do with the way I've been acting. I have barely had the energy to get up and get to school. I probably won't next week. I can barely walk. It's not you." She emphasized her last statement slowly.

"MS?" he repeated dully. He didn't know what he'd been waiting for but it sure as hell wasn't that.

"Multiple sclerosis," Jezzie nodded. "I was diagnosed my senior year of high school."

Embry knew what MS stood for. And he knew it was bad. That was the sum total of his knowledge on the subject. And being totally oblivious made him absolutely terrified.

Embry couldn't even speak. He had no idea what to do. About the speaking or the MS. But he sure as hell wasn't leaving quite yet. The engine had grown almost entirely cold before she spoke again. "I'm sorry Embry."
Again with the saying things he wasn't expecting.

"What?" Embry stuttered. "Why are you apologizing?"

"I'm sorry for just dumping that on you. It's just... I really like you..." that's a totally logical reason for what just happened, Embry thought. "I know you like me. So it's only fair I tell you. I'm sorry I've been weird around you lately. I've just been in a relapse. I'm forgetting things, my back is either in pain or totally numb. It's just... my brain and my muscle's are fried and there's nothing I can do about it. I don't want you to feel like it's your fault. It's not, so... I'm explaining."

Whoa... Wait. Was Jezzie that bad off? Embry wondered. He was in full panic mode, trying to keep his emotional range under control in the cab - because he was pretty sure phasing out of fear and grief would probably scare the girl to death. But was she sick? Or was she dying?

"Jezzie," Embry said trying to think of the most sensitive and tactful way to say this. "Are you okay? I mean, I know you're not okay, obviously. But like, how not okay are you?"

"On a scale of 1 to 10?" She knew his rudimentary mind far too well. "Right now, a six. I'm not dying, if that's what you're asking. It will probably kill me, yes, but not anytime soon. I'm just really uncomfortable right now."

Embry released a breath. Okay, she wasn't on her deathbed; he could relax marginally. Six. Rage phasing unnecessary. Think logically, Embry. Logic... Logic...

The only thing he could really process was how calm she was. She just looked kinda sad. She wasn't upset or angry. She just laid it out there like it was a fact of life. Well, he guessed it kinda was... Maybe that's why she was so level headed; she knew there was nothing she could do about it.

Embry felt he was not cut out for this.

"Please don't hate me," she muttered quietly, staring out the windshield.

"Jezzie," Embry reached down and took her hand, feeling instinctually compelled to offer her any degree of comfort. "I definitely don't hate you. But it's been quite a day, wouldn't you say? I think you deserve some chill out time."

Jezzie swiped at her hair, looking tired, and nodded. "I'm sorry for dumping this on you. It's really not that bad, I promise. It was just so nervous about telling you."

Tact, Embry. Tact.

"Don't ever be afraid to tell me anything," he insisted. "I'm always here. And I like to think I'm pretty level headed and trustworthy."

"You are," she smiled. "And one other thing?" He was quiet waiting for her to continue. "God, I'm such a terrible person for this... Could you guys, like the Pack, could you just... not throw me out in the ocean or the rain anymore," she stumbled her way through her request nervously and began babbling in explanation. "It's just that the cold makes it way worse, and it makes my legs go numb and heavy and my vision gets all blurry. It exacerbates the symptoms I'm having. And I'm not that bad usually; it doesn't bother me on a normal day, but in the throes of a relapse it just makes it hurt more and takes longer for me to back into remission."

"Jezzie!" Embry shouted to get her attention. Her mouth clamped shut instantly and her eyes hung open wide. It made so much more sense to him, now, why Jezzie looked and acted so tired and lazy lately, why she didn't want to come out or do anything, why she kept her physical distance. It didn't
mean Embry liked it, but it certainly made more sense now.

"It's fine. We don't want to do anything that's going to make you sicker. I'll let the others know to let you be."

She nodded, only looking half way miserable.

"All right," Embry sighed looking down the Cullen's drive. He couldn't see the house from here, but he could feel Jake inside his head, nagging him about what was taking so long. "I feel terrible leaving like this, but Jake's going to skin me if I don't get on patrol like right now. Are you gonna be okay? I can have Leah drive home with you?"

Jezzie shook her head. "Don't worry, Embry. It's really not that bad. I was just worried about telling you. And my weird request. I'll be just fine. Nothing I can't handle."

And Embry stood at the top of the local vampire coven's driveway as he watched Jezzie drive out of sight and Jake's Alpha ricocheted its irritation around his head like a superball for being late for patrol.

"Oh my god… Oh my god…" Embry hadn't even realized he was muttering to himself until Quil came and looked over his shoulder as he continued to eat his sandwich. The Wikipedia page for "Multiple Sclerosis" was admittedly terrifying. There were charts and graphs and signs and symptoms and life expectancies. He felt like he was gonna hurl.

Embry gave up even looking at the page and just tried to not phase in the middle of the Cullen's living room. "This shit is legit," he murmured. He hadn't managed to keep Jezzie's recent revelation out of his head at all during patrol. He was only thinking emotively, so the whole time Quil just knew something was wrong. Embry finally told him, figuring he'd probably have to give the Pack a decent explanation as to why he was quickly losing his mind.

After patrol, his curiosity got the better of him and Bella let the two of them use a laptop for research purposes. She didn't know what they were researching, so she just made them breakfast and told them to hush when they got too loud.

Quil took the computer from Embry and began scrolling. "'Autoimmune disorder'… wait, like… AIDS?"

"No," Embry shouted back. "Not like AIDS! What the fuck is wrong with you? Last I checked she wasn't born in Africa and was not a regular heroin user! Not like AIDS."

"Okay, okay! Not like AIDS!" As Embry smacked his head against the wooden coffee table, Quil continued to scroll through the page. "It's… it's a brain disease."

"What?" Embry replied intelligently. He was not really feeling up to being cooperative or helpful at all.

"It does something to her brain that makes things start to misfire. It's like shoddy electrical work. Blindness… balance problems… spasms… 'Autoimmune', that means – it's like her body's doing it to itself."

"Well that's just fucking wonderful—"

Quil interrupted Embry before he could continue his rant. "Dude, it says on here that most people make it until their seventh decade with the disease. She could easily live into her seventies. Hell, you
probably won't even live that long… This isn't a death sentence."

Embry stood up and started pacing around the Cullen's living room and Quil took his seat, clearly way more able to focus than Embry. "It has relapses and remission."

"Like cancer?" Embry turned. That was the only time he'd heard of relapses and remission.

Quil shrugged. "It looks like there could be times when she has symptoms and they affect her a lot, I guess that'd be a relapse? Like now. And time where she's fine."

Quil was quiet for a while as he continued to read. "It doesn't look like one of those diseases where your mind goes… y'know, like Alzheimer's or whatever. It just looks like it seriously fucks with her ability to control her own body. The only thing it mentions about that kinda stuff is attention span and forgetfulness."

"Awesome," Embry collapsed on the couch, "she forgets everything."

"Really?" Quil asked surprised. "She seems pretty put together."

"Yes, really. Whenever we go anywhere I make sure she has her keys, wallet and phone, at least. I just thought she was a scatterbrain."

"Who woulda thought you'd be the responsible one in the relationship. That's a fucking trip."

"Shut up, dickhead." "All right… well, from what it looks like here, this disease is not going to kill her anytime soon." Embry whined as Quil used that horrible 'k' word. "Hey, man, at least you're not imprinted."

"Why the hell should that matter?" Embry barked.

"Boys…" Bella intoned warningly from the kitchen.

"I'm just saying that if someone told me Claire had this," he pointed to the screen, "I wouldn't be human."

"Well, clearly I just have way better control than you. And an unyielding respect for the fact that Rosalie will tan my hide and make me into a handbag if I phase in her house. What the fuck does imprinting have to do with it? Just because I'm not imprinted doesn't lessen how much I care about her. That I value her well-being."

Quil just gaped at him. "You really like this girl…" It wasn't so much a question. Embry thought maybe it had just finally hit Quil.

"Yeah!" He shouted. Sure, he's only just realized it when Jezzie dropped out of his life, but better late than never, right? "I mean a person doesn't need genetics to tell them who or when to care about someone. That's great for Jared and Sam, but the rest of us can probably do it like the other six billion people on Earth – au naturel. I care about Jezzie. A lot."

"Well," Quil said, putting that wise face he got from his grandfather, even though he was sixteen and knew nothing more than Embry did. "I think this is probably something you want to talk about with her rather than me and this Wikipedia page."

Embry heaved a long-suffering sigh and tugged at the hair at his temples. "She could barely even get the words out to tell me today. After that she just startled babbling. I'm pretty sure she's not ready to
"Well, you've got a pretty short list of people you can talk with about this," Quil pointed out helpfully. "I think we can take Google off the list, because it's just stressing you out more. So there's Jezzie – which is the most logical and best choice, there's Carlisle – the man is an M.D. a few times over, there's Edward – who's also an M.D., and maybe Jezzie's dad. You said the guy's crazy, but at least he can't read your mind."

"No offense," Quil added as Bella entered the living room.

"You can talk to Carlisle when he gets back, Embry," Bella offered. "You don't have to tell him it's about Jezzie. He's good with discretion."

Embry shook his head. "I can't go behind her back like that. And I don't want to upset her anymore. I think I'm going to have to go see her crazy-ass father. Tell him she told me. I have no idea how that's gonna go… He might use me for cod bait."

"Isn't he a crab fisherman?"

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**Friday, December 8, 2006**

Jezzie was sure she was going to have to break out her mean pants the next morning. She didn't do it often. There was a knocking on her door and she figured it was a panic-stricken Embry, thinking Jezzie had up and died in the few hours since she left him at the Cullen driveway.

She didn't like being mean, but she didn't want Embry to hover over her either. This is why Jezzie was always so hesitant to tell people that she was sick. Sure, she had a disease that progressively ate at her brain and sent things short-circuiting, but she wasn't just going to drop dead, either. She knew Embry cared, that he was well intentioned, but she absolutely hated the worry. It was almost as bad as pity. Because when people worried, they hovered and they tried to limit her – not always out of ill intent, mostly they acted out of that worry and care. But Jezzie hated being limited. Her MS set her with enough limitations enough of the time. She didn't want any more.

Jezzie steeled herself, and took a deep breath – ready to sternly turn Embry back to his responsibilities and nip this in the bud. She needed to set a precedent. When she opened the door, she was greeted by a significantly different character.

"Seth?" she let out in a puff of air, reserved for a more stubborn individual.

"Hi, Jez," he crooned with that big goofy smile. "So, Embry sent me over to apologize again for his weirdness and grovel my thankfulness at your saving me from eating shitwater. He also wanted me to check up on you, but I know how much you'd hate that. But if you agree to accept the apology and my thankfulness and not mindfuck me, I'll go back later and tell Embry to stop being an overbearing dickhead and won't tell him a thing about my time here. Deal?"

Jezzie blinked once, amazed at the way Seth could say so many words in one breath. "Mindfuck?" she asked, stepping aside and letting him into the foyer. Seth always wiped his feet, and Jezzie respected him for that.

"Yeah," he nodded. "You're really good at making us realize when we're being assholes about something, except you do it really nicely. Like you don't say a single mean thing, but at the end we feel like the assholes that we are acting like. That's a mindfuck, girlfriend."

Jezzie nodded. She hadn't really realized she'd been 'mindfucking' the Pack. She just talked reason to
"Talk softly and carry a big stick," she quoted. "It's just logic Seth," she explained. "Considering how much you channel an instinctual and straightforward animal, you all tend to over think everything and forget your logic." She led him down the hall towards the kitchen where she'd dumped her backpack earlier.

"And I accept your deal," Jezzie offered Seth a light hip check. "Boyfriend," she mocked his earlier epithet for her.

"I like the sound of that," Seth mused, scratching his chin in thought and Jezzie grinned. He took a seat at Jezzie's island counter. "I wouldn't mind marrying someone like you, Jezzie. I mean, hypothetically. I am only fifteen. My mom might be kinda pissed. I should probably polish off my sophomore year of high school first."

"I would say so," Jezzie agreed, as she rooted around the fridge for sustenance she knew wasn't there. Seth was always running over hypotheticals. Sometimes they were outlandish, sometimes just for fun or laughs, every now and then they were serious. But mostly he had a very active imagination.

"However," Seth emphasized, "If I was – hypothetically – on the market for a wife, I would definitely use you as a wife-blueprint. You're nice, you smell good, and you tell me when I'm wrong without being a bitch."

"It seems you have all the important qualities in a life mate figured out." Jezzie laughed as she pulled the gallon of milk out of the fridge. She liked talking to Seth. He was always light-hearted, never shallow, and still an honest and genuinely nice boy. Maybe it was because he was still so young. Jezzie hoped he didn't end up paranoid, bitter or jaded like his brothers. She hoped that Seth would be spared.

"If you're still on the market when I'm not jailbait, I may – hypothetically – have to carpe that diem. I think we'd get on pretty good, Jez. We'd look damn good in those wedding pictures."

Jezzie laughed as she walked around the island, patting Seth on the back and proceeded into the pantry.

"It's true," Seth called. "My bad ass Indian genetics compliment your albino appearance quite nicely."

"Well I have far superior hair," Jezzie countered. She observed the cereal selection and only two boxes were left entirely full. Jezzie knew Seth would eat an entire box. "Lucky Charms or Fruit Loops?" she asked.

"Is that a trick question?" Seth replied confused by her subject change. "I think we'd get on pretty good, Jez. We'd look damn good in those wedding pictures."

"Just a possibility, Seth?" she mocked as she placed the Lucky Charms in front of him and prevented him from tearing the box open before she got him a bowl and spoon. "I'm insulted. If we're hypothetically marrying, I want a decent hypothetical commitment. If you can manage, then I hypothetically accept."

"Awesome," Seth murmured around a mouthful of food. He plucked through the cereal still dry at the top of his bowl, pulled out a marshmallow and offered it to Jezzie.
A pink heart. The smile that crept up her face was inescapable. Officially the favorite, she thought. "Aw, Seth," she crooned. "That's so sweet. But," Jezzie said pointedly placing the pink heart carefully out of reach of consumption and pouring out her own single portion of Cheerios. "We name the first-born after me."

"What if it's a boy? Love you, Jez, but I'm not naming my son after a Queen that got pushed out a window. 'Jezebel' is not a very masculine name."

Jezzie narrowed her eyes and Seth returned the gesture. They were fully engrossed in their staring contest for a few moments before Jezzie released a breath into Seth's eyes, forcing him to blink.

"Fine!" Seth finally spat out, "The first-born gets your name. Sheesh…"

"Hi Mr. Sullivan—Al. Sorry, hi Al…" Embry stumbled haphazardly through his greeting as he finally managed to track Al Sullivan down on a Seattle fish pier. He'd caught him – presumably – on his way back to one of the many ships docked in the harbor.

"Embry Call, right?" Al replied slowly. "From La Push? One of Jezzie's friends?" Apparently remembering people was a family thing; Embry was glad he didn't have to go through an awkward reintroduction, though. "Is there anything I can do for you, Embry?"

"I was wondering if I could talk to you, actually."

Al looked over Embry once from head to toe with a scrutinizing eye. Embry was seriously hoping the man would not kill him, and agree to talk to him. "All right then Mr. Call; what would you care to chat about?" Embry was a bit amazed that Al was actually willing enough to stop and talk to a friend of his daughter's in the midst of his work.

Embry opened his mouth a few times, trying to figure out how to say the jumbled up crap inside his head. Because he didn't want it to come out like jumbled up crap. Eventually, Embry was just opening and closing his mouth like a fish and gesticulating wildly and not making any noise. Al nodded slowly, with a placid expression. "She finally told you, huh?"

Embry's shoulder's caved as Al guessed at exactly what he was trying to get across. "Yeah," he hung his head.

"C'mon," Al gestured over his shoulder and Embry followed the tottering old man further down the pier to the Eliza Finch — a big white and red fishing vessel; Embry recognized them from Jared and Paul's descriptions who had each spent a few seasons out to sea to earn a living.

Al stopped next to a pile of waterproof dry sacs and proceeded to heave them onto the boat's deck with more agility and strength than his stature belied.

"I was wondering when she might," Al continued as he moved towards the next pile — which appeared to constitute mostly food and required slightly gentler handling; Embry offered his help and Al continued. "She's been talking about it for quite a while now. She was real worried about it."

"I just… I got really worried. I didn't get time to talk to her when she told me, and I only know so much and then I Googled it — that was a really bad idea — and I don't want to make her upset by asking her, because it isn't really any of my business, but I'm just worried and I don't want her to think I'm a hovering psycho, because I'm not but not doing anything or knowing anything or talking to anyone just makes me feel like I'm gonna puke."

Al listened as Embry emptied the contents of his mind in one breath and led him to the galley below
the Eliza Finch's deck. "All right, well, first off *calm down, son*. Jezzie is sick, but she's not dying on us, all right?"

"She mentioned that..." Embry muttered.

"So... a brief crash course in MS, shall we?" Al offered. The 'brief crash course' turned into an hour long explanation and conversation of what, precisely, was wrong with Jezzie – which apparently seemed to be along the lines of 'everything'. Embry learned that the nerves in Jezzie's brain that regulated communication with the rest of her body, were slowly being destroyed. Jezzie had only been diagnosed in high school and the severity of her case – thus far – seemed moderate.

He also hauled his body weight in beef jerky and coffee into the galley of that ship before sitting with Al atop a pile of rope thicker than his arm.

Embry learned that Jezzie's 'relapsing remitting MS' was – in the grand scheme of things – a relatively steady, if progressive, strain of the disease. When Al explained that it was possible for her to develop the more severe and debilitating 'secondary progressing' strain in the next ten to thirty years, Embry had to prevent himself from growling or whining or phasing and contented himself with slowly slumping into the pile of rope.

Al explained that Jezzie's symptoms were mostly mild thus far – she was lucky. She was a bit forgetful and was sensitive to extremes of cold during her relapses. She had pain in her back and her eyesight came and went.

Most of what Al told Embry corroborated what he and Quil had looked up, except with a personal Jezzie twist. And despite how much Al put Embry on edge, he found that the older man was really actually quite skilled with conveying the information without making him panic.

"I don't find it odd that you're worried about her, Embry," Al said. "It's quite a quirky and worrisome disease and just about anything can go wrong. But I do have to wonder..." his eyes narrowed and Embry understood his meaning.

"I was just concerned, Mr. Sullivan—Al," Embry corrected himself. "I mean, I kinda thought we were friends and then she ignored me for like two weeks until yesterday when Seth was sick and needed her help. So she wasn't even really answering *me*. She's just too nice to let Seth die of dysentery or whatever. And then she just kind of... spilled it on me and left. So, I just wanted to check that she was... okay."

Al nodded. "Ah, I see. Yes, well Jezzie's been going through a relapse these past two weeks. It's her first since we moved here and it's been worse than her previous three. The clammy climate doesn't help too much."

"Y'see, Embry," Al went on, swinging his short legs over the side of the rope pile where they didn't reach the ground, "when you make the choice to tell a person that you are sick – you have an incurable disease – you take a leap of faith. And I don't want to suggest that my daughter doesn't trust you, because that's not my intent. But it's a hard and selective process, deciding who to tell, because inevitably they are going to view you differently."

Embry thought for a moment, wondering if he now thought of Jezzie differently. That hadn't really crossed through his mind yet. He'd been too preoccupied with panicking and not phasing uncontrollably.

"It doesn't make you – or anyone else for that matter – a bad person. It's just a simple fact of life. And I think my daughter has rather enjoyed the new group of friends she's made here. She doesn't want to
lose them and most of all she doesn't want them to treat her differently. Sick she may be, but Jezzie is far from a fragile soul."

**Saturday, December 9, 2006**

Jezzie had taken the time and fortitude to at least move herself downstairs. She figured it was easier. There was TV – even without cable – it was closer to the bathroom, the food, Archie's food and the front door. Also, since she'd gone completely blind in the middle of the night in her left eye and her right was blurred beyond usefulness, she figured it would be best not to fall down the stairs.

The hours slowly turned to days and Jezzie forced herself off the couch and to wander around the first floor every four hours she wasn't sleeping. The pain was too much for her to move much more. Every step was harder and the pins and needles shot through her back every time she landed a step. She could feel her chest constrict like there was a full body squeeze that wouldn't release.

A full two days after she had clawed tooth and nail out of her house and over to help Seth in La Push there was a tentative knock on her front door. She couldn't see the person on her porch, but had a sneaking suspicion she knew the identity of the caller. She fumbled around for her cell phone, pulling it out of its spot between two couch cushions where it had wedged itself. She flipped it open and dialed the number she knew by heart – because she sure as heck couldn't see the screen. She heard a ringing from the porch and then a curse and some muffled pocket digging.

"Hello?"

"The key's taped under the rock with the house number carved in it," and she hung up.

Jezzie was surprised that Embry had made it a whole day - almost two - before trying to get in touch with her again. Judging by the amount of missed calls and the his inability to be reassured via text message for the two weeks prior to Seth's illness, she knew he was worried.

She wasn't sure if she was ready to see him - or anyone - again but the lock had turned and the door opened slowly. Jezzie kept her quilt wrapped tight around her for warmth but sat up fully.

"Come in and close the door," she called when she didn't hear Embry move more than a step or two. "Your Mama didn't raise you in a barn."

Jezzie relied entirely on her hearing to determine where Embry was; she kept her eyes locked on a point that she thought was the edge of her coffee table and focused on listening. She hated not being able to see. And it worried her to no end. She'd had blurry vision during flares for as long as she'd had the MS, but she's never gone completely blind like this. She couldn't see anything out of one eye and the other only made out vague shapes and colors.

It had gotten drastically worse in two days time. She'd had no peripheral vision the day she'd helped Seth. That wasn't so bad; she could see everything else just fine.

She heard a small snort of laughter and the door closed before Embry entered the living room. He sounded exhausted. Jezzie immediately felt terrible. She knew the Pack didn't get enough sleep; she would feel so mad if she knew she was robbing even one of them of the little they got.

She could hear Embry finally sit in the armchair positioned perpendicular to Jezzie's couch. She was glad she didn't have to invite him to do that too. Her mouth slid into a sad little smile as she was sure Embry was staring at her. She could just feel it.

"Stop staring at me," she said, not removing her eyes from their spot – yeah, she was pretty sure that
was the coffee table. "I look terrible." before she knew it, she'd been joined on the couch. The wolves moved so quick and Jezzie was still getting used to it. The fact that she couldn't see it didn't help. She inhaled sharply and she soon felt two warm hands holding her face like she was made of glass.

"You can't see me, can you?"

Jezzie only shook her head.

"When's the last time you've eaten?" Embry asked.

She shrugged, trying to focus on a spot she thought might've been Embry's face. "I had Rice Crispies for lunch. It's not worth burning the house down when you can't even see the gas stove."

"Can I help at all?"

"Hm..." Jezzie hummed in thought. She rarely refused food, especially her own, and her limited mobility had robbed her of a desire to move with enough dexterity to make a decent meal. And she could definitely use a ride to the hospital to get this whole blindness thing checked out. "If you'd make me a sandwich and drive me to the hospital that'd be cool. It's not an emergency, so just chill out."

Embry was back five minutes later with a sandwich that made Jezzie salivate in a most unattractive manner and a glass of juice. "Oh, bless your heart..." she murmured as she fumbled with the plate and took a grateful bite.

Embry sat on the couch with her, but relaxed back a bit, clearly more calm watching her eat. She leaned against his arm as she chewed, reveling in the warmth. He seemed to enjoy the physical contact as well. "I talked to your Dad," he began apropos of nothing.

Jezzie nodded and swallowed her bite. "Sneaky devil failed to mention that in our last phone call."

"It was only yesterday. I just got back. Sorry if I smell like fish pier."

"You went all the way to a Seattle fish pier to talk to my Dad?" Jezzie asked in wonder.

Embry nodded. "I didn't know what to do. After last night, you scared the crap out of me, Jez... Google and Quil didn't help either," he shook his head. She could only imagine Quil trying to give him sound advice.

"I had to talk to someone and I didn't know if you were ready for that or not. Since you ignored everyone for two weeks, I assumed you weren't. Your Dad was my only other option. He said you do this."

"Do what?" she quirked a testy brow in the direction of her coffee table. She may have been blind, but she still had attitude.

"Keep to yourself, when you have a..."

"Flare," Jezzie supplied for him. "Yeah. I do. I'm sorry, Embry. I really am. It's just... I'd rather people think I'm mad at them or am busy, than know that I'm sick. People change when they know you're sick."

"Jezzie, nothing is going to change how I act around you. But if you're sick, and you need something I can help you with - that doesn't seem like a big deal to me. You called Leah..."
He sounded a little hurt by that. Jezzie nodded. "I was too sick one day my dad was out of town to get down my stairs and somebody needed to feed and let Archie out," she supplied quietly. She didn't mention anything about her desire to talk to someone… anyone. He might've felt bad if she mentioned that. She reached up towards Embry's face and felt around long enough to know that his face was creased in all the wrong places. "See, it hurts you to know I'm sick like this. I didn't want to do this to anyone. I didn't want make people sad. I knew Leah would react better."

"I'm only sad that you felt like you couldn't tell me about it, Jez," he replied. "I was so friggin' worried about you. And you're here alone in your house and totally blind."

"Not totally blind," she sniffed in annoyance. Having it said aloud just made it a lot more real and worried her even more. "I can see blurry shapes in one eye."

Embry's head snapped up and he reached for Jezzie but stopped, unsure. She could detect the motion and realize the hesitancy.

"See?" she gestured. "This is what I mean. You don't even want to touch me. You're so wary of me now because you know I'm sick. It's a natural reaction but I hate it!"

Jezzie closed her eyes and refused to let the frustration overcome her. She hated being trapped in her body, trapped in her house and she hated that people were so affected by it. People other than her. Embry allowed his arm to fulfill the natural path it had set out on and he rested a hand against Jezzie's neck. The side of her face was still scraped from her running accident. He'd cringed watching her – in Quil's head – fall and skid over the ground. One side was littered with little, tiny cuts. He wondered what the rest of her looked like if just her face sustained that much damage.

Her breathing calmed and she opened her eyes but didn't look up. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she said stubbornly.

"You don't have to apologize, Jezzie."

Jezzie shook her head. "No. I should have told you. You're one of my closest friends and you all trust me with stuff like the Pack and the Cullens. I should have trusted you and I didn't."

"Okay..." Embry replied, unsure of how to proceed. "Apology accepted?"

"Thanks," Jezzie whispered. "Can I ask you for one more favor?"

"Duh," Embry supplied intelligently.

"Can I have a hug?" Her voice barely even audible.

That was all the invitation Embry needed. He bent forward with a smile and wrapped both his arms around Jezzie Sullivan's frame, squashing her into the corner of the couch. By most accounts she wasn't small – though she didn't quite match up to Rachel and Leah – but when Embry wrapped his arms around her, she felt so tiny in comparison. Jezzie pulled her arms in close and buried her face in his shirt. He leaned back in an effort not to crush her and pulled her into his lap.

And there she stayed. Curled up in her blanket and warmth and Embry; she stayed peacefully motionless. After a few minutes she spoke. She talked about her diagnosis four whole years ago and how rare it was for people underage to get diagnosed. She'd had three flares since then - not counting the one she was currently living through - and she was lucky enough that her type of MS was livable.

Apparently there were worse cases. Though Embry couldn't imagine a worse case than his normally
enthusiastic and eternally positive friend - his Jez - being reduced to a state of immobile blindness.

She told him about the meds she took and how she was lucky enough that they worked for her and how the side effects had worn off quickly. She tried to describe what happened to her during these episodes but it was tough for Embry understand. Just like that stupid Wikipedia page had told him and Quil, just about anything could go wrong or malfunction in an MS patient's flare because the brain controlled everything. Jezzie told him that she was scared, because even though there was more and more time between her flares each time they were growing in length and intensity. To be expected with her strain of MS, she explained, but scary nonetheless.

She told him about she made it all the way through her time in Detroit - three full years of college - and only managed to tell a handful of administrators and her two best friends. She was very proud of that.

"That's the first time I've heard you talk about yourself in the past tense."

"I miss them," Jezzie smiled quietly, leaning rather contently against Embry's chest and thinking of her friends. His pattern of breathing and the steady beat of his heart struck a soothing rhythm. Jezzie appreciated any kind of additional sensory information she could glean from the outside world. She'd never realized how much more you lost with blindness than just your sight.

"Cool kids? Would I like them?"

Jezzie smiled big and nodded. "You would. They love you all."

"Excuse me?" Embry asked warily.

"I Skype with them every few days or once a week. I've shown them the few photos I have of my new friends here. They are especially fond of the man meat in the town over. You all are so lucky you aren't on Facebook. Trust me."

"Fantastic," Embry smiled through a small laugh. "Don't tell Quil. Or Seth for that matter. In fact... Don't tell any of them."

"Just to be safe," Jezzie supplied.

"Yes."

And for the first time since Embry had wrapped his arms around Jezzie - now close to an hour ago - she moved. She reached up with a single hand to the long table that abutted the back of the couch. Her hand felt around a bit before it stumbled across the proper object. She pulled it forward blindly and offered Embry the picture frame. "Even trade," she said. "It's only fair."

The photo of was of three faces - all dynamically different - but they shared the same genuine full-toothed grin. Heads bunched together sending winter hats slightly askew, Embry could make out small snowflakes as they clung to eyelashes and fabric.

Jezzie carefully wiggled herself around and Embry released her long enough for her to resituate. She leaned back, her back to his chest now, and she reached up, feeling the frame with her fingers and getting her bearings. "On the left," she began and Embry's gaze was drawn to the girl with flawless dark skin, "is Liz. She's six foot three and a perfect size four. She's gorgeous and her pants are almost as tall as me. This one time," she laughed. "I was in a school play and I had to be a grumpy old man and I borrowed a pair of Liz's pants and they came until right under my chest and were still a foot too long."
Jezzie smiled as her fingers moved slowly along the edge of the frame. "She's a sweet girl. She reminds me of you, actually. Quiet but very kind. Loyal to a fault... And on the right," Jezzie's tone ticked up a notch as she indicated the girl on the farther side of the frame, "is Carla Maria Rivera. She is an aggressive individual. Socially, mostly. But she'd cut a bitch. She's got her mother's temper. She'd give Paul a run for his money. Actually," Jezzie cocked her head to one side and thought a moment. "She'd win."

"What makes you say that?" Embry asked.

"Paul fights fair. Carla doesn't."

"Yeah and Paul doesn't really make a thing out of fighting girls."

"This is true," Jezzie nodded. "Now what do you say about that ride? I need to get some steroids if I want to be able see again anytime soon."

"Steroids?" Embry asked skeptically as Jezzie felt her way upright using the coffee table.

"Not the anabolic kind, Embry," Jezzie laughed. "My MS is causing the arteries in my eyes to restrict the blood flow. It usually gives MS patients blurry vision but it's bad enough for me this time that it's totally wiped my sight."

Jezzie made her way – and rather adeptly considering she couldn't see anything, Embry noted – into her kitchen to get her car keys. In the foyer she asked Embry to get her coat after she opened the closet – because the whole expanse looked like one giant brown blob. Embry was a little hesitant once he opened the door. He didn't want Jezzie tripping down the stairs, however he didn't want her to feel like he was being overbearing by offering to carry her the whole way.

Jezzie found an alternative – as Jezzie was wont to do – and reached around for Embry's hand. He gladly gave it to her and lead her to the Jeep. She felt haphazardly around the door before getting it open and buckling herself in. Every now and then Jezzie would grip on to the door or the dashboard, not anticipating a bump in the road or a change in direction. Embry could tell she was completely disoriented and didn't like it all. He drove as smoothly as possible to Forks Community Hospital. Embry had to partially catch Jezzie as she almost fell onto the pavement in her attempt to get out of the car.

"Whoa there, killer," he reached out instinctively.

"Sorry," Jezzie laughed. He was surprised by her level of humor about the situation. But, Embry thought, what else could she do? "I'm gonna knock my teeth out while we're at it."

"Please don't," Embry requested. "You kinda have a nice smile. Appalachian hick wouldn't work on you."

Jezzie laughed and she reached out for Embry's hand again. She wound her arm up into the crook of his elbow so she could follow him at the same pace. "Does the ER look busy?"

Embry glanced inside. "Nope."

"All right, let's go there. I know more people so they'll actually get my doctor to see me in less than two hours. It's worth the extra money."

Jezzie had been right. When she felt her way to the reception desk in the ER she told the woman behind it that she needed to talk to her doctor. The receptionist and the nurse behind her working
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"Jezzie, honey," the nurse asked. "What's wrong? What's going on?" she definitely noticed Jezzie's inability to focus on the objects she should've been looking at.

"Just a flare," Jezzie waved her hand. "I need something for the eyes. And I should probably officially call in sick, huh? Yeah. I won't be here for my shift tonight. Sorry."

The nurse nodded. "I'll go get Dr. Franklin, you just wait here."

"They know you're sick?" Embry asked when they'd sat down in the waiting area.

Jezzie nodded. "It's kinda hard to avoid it. It's a tiny hospital. I work here and my doctor is here."

Jezzie had been correct. Dr. Franklin – upon finishing with his last appointment – was kind enough to squeeze Jezzie into half of his lunch break. Embry sat in the waiting room, but Jezzie emerged not long after with a prescription for the hospital's pharmacy.

Jezzie had him read her the label and dosage – just to double check – before they left and she dry swallowed her first dose.

"Thank you, Embry," she spoke on the ride home. "You're taking all this rather well."

Yeah, that was it…

Monday, December 11, 2006

"Hey, Seth?"

"Yeah?"

"Did you understand the biology homework?"

"Mostly?"

"Would you mind helping me out?"

"Uh… sure. C'mon over."

Anna Ateara never asked anyone for help. Ever. Seth was almost positive that there was a gene in her and her brother's biological makeup that allowed them to convince themselves they were always right. So it naturally followed that Anna Ateara never asked anyone for help, because she always knew the answer.

She had an attitude that Quil did not, and never really struck Seth as the nerdy-type but she did maintain good grades until she phased. Post phase was still up in the air… Seth and Anna were the same age and had been in the same class since the start – just like Quil, Embry and Jake (until this year), then Jared and Paul, then Leah, Sam, Rachel and Becca. Seth knew damn well that you could never escape anyone on this reservation, but he'd never really 'hung out' with Anna. Sure, he saw her often enough – especially after both he and Quil phased – and she was let in on the Pack secret after threatening to call the cops or the FBI on Sam. But he'd never spent any length of time with her.

And he was just now starting to realize that might've been a mistake. Because Anna was fucking awesome. Quil was cool and all – kind of a pain after a while – but a decent guy. And as much as Anna was outgoing like Quil, she was a lot different too. She kicked Seth's ass in Legend of Zelda –
no one could manage that except Leah, and only if she was on her game. Anna still had all her Pokémon cards in a binder in the bottom of her locker. She was the only other person Seth had ever found that enjoyed eating potato chips with ketchup. And she didn't even get grossed out by double dipping! She'd really sealed the deal the time she didn't make fun of him for tripping over his own tail. That was cool.

Seth decided she was pretty good for a friend. Even if she was a girl.

The Ateara's and the Clearwater's were separated only by one street and two back yards and Anna was knocking on the door less than five minutes later. Her nose was already buried in her textbook when Sue opened the door and she offered a pleasant hello. She dropped her book open onto the living room and Seth glanced up from the cloud she'd made of his handouts (never was he stuffing that crap in his backpack and forgetting about it ever again).

"So – let me get this straight – 'mitosis' and 'meiosis' are two different things?"

Seth smiled – partly because of her comment and partly because of her Star Trek shirt. "Yeah. Two different things."

She growled and sat down on the carpet, crossing her legs beneath her. "That would explain the C- I got on that last quiz."

"Probably has something to do with it…” Seth agreed. "Do you have the handout from… last… hold on. Last Wednesday?"

"I think so, yeah…” she looped her backpack off her shoulder and pulled a green binder out, flipping through the pages.

And that afternoon Anna Ateara and Seth Clearwater made the world's best cooperative, group effort sophomore biology binder that they promised to share and guard with their lives. Via spit shake.

Anna learned the difference between biological mechanisms and coincidentally explained to Seth how to use a semicolon. And Seth wondered how Jezzie felt about homework buddy polygamy because he hoped Anna could stay for dinner more often.
"The two most powerful warriors are patience and time." Leo Tolstoy

Chapter Notes

Also, now that Jezzie's cat is out of the bag, I'd like to refer any of you research nerds to this on my Tumblr, wherein I list some of my source information. I did a lot of research on MS, and this is just the barest hint of it. I don't want anyone thinking I slapped a disease on my OC just for grins and giggles and angsty plot factor. The goal is to craft real life issues, without offending anyone in the process.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thursday, December 14, 2006

"Holy shit," Brady breathed as he whipped his head around in his seat. "Dude, they're trying to corral us."

"Brady," Claire squeaked. "You said a bad word!" Nessie was simply sitting with wide eyes and her hands over her ears. For all the good it did her, Embry thought.

"They're not even under cover. They're on the road!"

"My Uncle Emmett says that word sometimes, and Mama gets very mad."

Embry thought quickly. He was in a car that would prove no trouble at all for the werewolves chasing them to dismantle. If they stopped, the werewolves had fast enough reaction times to tear the walls off and be off with Ness or Claire – or both before Brady or Embry could get far enough away from them to phase. And there was no way in hell this beater was going to outrun them.

At least Claire and Nessie were unfazed.

"Brady, listen to me." The rank poured out of Embry's voice. Normally, a passive wolf he left the leading to others more qualified. He was content with his status as Third. However, locked in a car with two imprints and a very young, very low-ranking wolf pulled on Embry's reserves of leadership. The panic and anxiety rolling off Brady that pulsed with a need for direction kicked Embry into overdrive.

"On the count of three," Embry relayed quickly but clearly. "I want you to get Ness and Claire. Full body shield. This isn't going to be pretty. You only phase if absolutely necessary."

"What the hell are you going to do?" Brady asked wide-eyed. Asking. A much more common trait between mid and low ranking wolves.

"One," Embry replied as he shifted into a higher gear and sped up.

"Shit, dude, okay," Brady hopped as lithely as his size would allow over the center console and unbuckled both Nessie and Claire. Claire was trilling something at a high enough pitch that Embry wasn't processing and Ness kept muttering about how that was not allowed.

"Two," Embry shifted into fifth and sped up even further, pushing far beyond the posted speed limit.
"Three," shifting directly from fifth to reverse, the small Escort came to a violent halt. Screeching gears and grinding metal clashed with Nessie and Claire's screaming. The car was an old enough model that it there wasn't a lot to stop a major cataclysm if a driver was stupid enough to shift from the highest gear to reverse. There was a crack and thud as the transmission fell completely out of the car.

The machinery tore at the low riding undercarriage and sent the rear axle careening to keep up with the front. Pushed by the force of its previous speed, the now disemboweled car skidded on its passenger side wheels. Embry and Brady could hear the thud and bang as the sprinting werewolf smashed into the bottom of the car, halting his pursuit immediately. The car teetered before rolling completely over.

Launching himself out of the driver side door as the car took the brunt of the hit on its opposite side, Embry phased once he'd cleared the door frame. The sound of tearing flesh, and metal being ground into the pavement was all that filled his ears as he tried to land close to the car.

Where had the rangy bastard gone? Embry heard him crash into the careening car full force. He'd kinda been hoping the blunt force trauma would've been enough to kill the thing. The first had been quick and sly, but not very hearty. They weren't as resilient as shapeshifters or even vampires.

He landed – nails ticking against the pavement – just in time to feel the impact of a body against his. Being much larger than a werewolf helped infinitely. He snarled once before grabbing the creature's leg between his teeth. They were too lanky, too ill-equipped to fight. Embry flung the werewolf off him and he landed with a thud more than twenty feet off.

The monster was still. Moments passed as he looked around the deserted roadway. The others hadn't disappeared – not that fast – they had to be somewhere close. There had been at least five of them. He sniffed. They were heading east it seemed like? Away from the car at the very least. The sound of small cries began to echo from the car as Nessie and Claire realized what had just happened. Embry could hear Brady trying to console them.

*Heading east*, Embry heard reverb through his head. *Embry? Embry, are you okay? Are the girls okay?*

Jake had yet to phase into the collective consciousness – he was meeting with the elders. And Leah was in Seattle at school with Addie and Rachel. But the rest knew they would be phased in minutes. The impact of an attack on one imprint – let alone two – was not an event that died at the edge of a single consciousness. Some things – like Alpha orders – reverberated through Pack Mind even in human form.

*Fine. Paul, I can't find them. They disappeared – all except one. I got one. It smells like the rest are heading east.*

*Towards the Cullens*, Jared informed them all again.

*They probably caught Nessie's scent and didn't differentiate between her and her family, Paul continued to think. Seth – warn the Cullens. I don't care if you end up in their living room phased or naked – you're only a quarter mile away.*

*Ten-four, dear high beta!* Seth must've been even closer or had anticipated the order because his mind dropped out moments later.

*Embry get rid of that one you've got, and stay by that car - phased. The others are past you now. Stay with the girls, have Brady get the car upright and off the road. Jared – go help them out.*
But what about the Cullens?

They'll be fine. This is their mess, now they can clean it up.

Jared had finally made it to the edge of town where Embry had rolled his car over. He stepped out of the woods to one of the most bizarre sights he'd ever seen. The Escort laid on its side on the shoulder of the road, though it's transmission was still laying pitifully on the double yellow line. Good thing this stretch of road was mostly abandoned. Brady was doing a remarkable job of entertaining both Claire and Nessie and neither was even crying anymore. Embry was on the other side of the road, out of human sight, lying next to the crushed form of a true to life werewolf.

Jared phased human, waved to Brady and crossed the road to where Embry lay with his head on his fore paws, out of sight in the trees. Jared looked down at the werewolf next to him. It was a gruesome sight at best. Werewolves seemed to maintain most of their human physical form. There was a greater hunch to the back; the arms and legs were longer, with higher ankles and distinctly claw-like hands and feet. Heads with muzzles and bodies covered fully in fur. However their phase wasn't drastic enough to completely shred clothing. Jared noticed that the remnants of a shirt and pants still clung to the dead monster's frame.

His head was at an odd angle and Jared knew that Embry – ever the humanitarian – had probably snapped the creature's neck and was done with it.

"The girls didn't see you do that, right?" Jared checked.

Embry chuffed. He was kind of offended that Jared even asked. "Sorry," Jared raised his hands. "Just checking. I know it might've been unavoidable. All right, I don't know how werewolf lore works. But Carlisle and Edward said the old stuff holds true. Silver bullets or tearing the heart out."

Embry whined slightly, the sound echoing in his snout.

"Yeah, I know," Jared nodded looking at the ground. All of them were way too young to be killing, let alone tearing out the hearts of people. Between hunting down Laurent and then Victoria's army – Jared was sure that the entire first generation of phases were going to be permanently scarred. Sometimes he swore he could still taste the once-human vampire flesh in his mouth. It woke him up at night sometimes. He never told anyone that. Only Kim knew. Embry was seventeen, only two years younger than Jared. But it seemed like an awful big age gap.

"Well... it's supposed to be death by brain or heart damage – so I think snapping the neck definitely counts. I say we just burn the bastard. Is your phone in the car?"

Fifteen minutes later, Jared had called Charlie to report his car stolen. He'd sent Brady, Ness and Claire on their way back to La Push on foot before catching up with them after he and Embry had placed the werewolf inside and set the car on fire.

"Why are you naked in my living room, Seth?" Bella shrieked when the young boy barged into the house without knocking or wearing any pants.

"They're back," Seth said out of breath. "Those werewolves. They're back. They're headed here."

Vampiric hearing was normally polite enough to pretend to ignore private conversations even though they could be heard at the far recesses of the house. This was not one of those times.

"Oh my God," Bella gasped, now coming at Seth, gripping his bare shoulders like a vice. If Seth
didn't actually know Bella, he might've been scared. "Renesmee! Where's Renesmee?"

Emmett was past Seth and out the door in a blur, his eyes scorching as far as he could see as he made for the back of the house. Seth heard a thud as Jasper jumped from God knows where and landed in the front yard. The rest soon flooded out in similar fashion, circling the house. Bella and Edward were the only ones left inside.

"Where is she, Seth?" Bella shrieked, looking enraged and terrified as Edward tried to prevent his wife from dismembering the one shapeshifter he didn't necessarily hate.

"Don't kill me," Seth backed away. "Jared and Brady have her and Claire back over the treaty line on the rez. They're gonna stay there with them. They're fine. The issue is here. These werewolves are coming here. They don't care about us for a change. They caught your scent and seem hell-bent on finding you."

"Why?" Edward looked at him confused.

"How the hell am I supposed to know? We were kind of hoping you could tell us. It's obviously you guys they're after."

Seth was interrupted as loud snarling rent the outside quiet. The three were out the door and Seth jumped over the railing and landed, phased, just in front of Esme. The entire coven was lined up across the front yard, watching the shadows and leaves shift with the coming confrontation. Seth could discern the shadows as they approached.

The Pack began materializing out of the woods to the rear of the house and settle in on either side of the porch, crouched – like the Cullens – in a defensive position.

From the woods to the east, four werewolves and a single haggard human emerged from the underbrush. The man was young – maybe mid twenties – and he was filthy and wild. His jet black hair was short but shot in many directions, his pants were shredded at the bottom and his feet were bare. His shirt was torn and unidentifiable in color. His face was long, lean, distinctly canine – like a jackal. When he looked up, he smiled a manic gesture.

"Ah, Edward Cullen. It has been too long."

Friday, December 15, 2006

"What time is it?"

Things had not gone according to plan when five werewolves had materialized in the Cullen front yard. Carlisle – in his never-ending quest for world peace – had actually engaged them in conversation. Well, actually, it had started with Edward, who wanted to know why the heck some feral werewolf knew who he was and how to find him.

Jacob would grant them that. However, it seemed like any time Carlisle got to talking to someone, it turned into one giant peace summit. Which was why five – now fully human – werewolves were sitting at the unused Cullen dining room table.

"Midnight?" Anna shrugged.

"Collin," Jake spun around. "I need you to down the road and get Jezzie. She just got off work so she should still be awake. Try not to scare her but make it quick." Because Jacob needed to convene a delegation of his most diplomatic and dominant Pack with ten minutes warning. Great.
"Once you phase, tell Embry I said to get here, pronto."

"What?" Paul asked as Collin disappeared into the woods.

"Excuse me?" Anna remarked. "What gives?"

Jacob was of the opinion that this Pack asked him too many questions. Though, neither Paul nor Anna were pleased that they were being sidelined for a Third and a Pack Human – as much as they loved them both.

"Because," Jake replied in a long-suffering way. "Paul, I need you to hold the Pack while I'm in there. Embry's too passive to do that and Leah's at school. I need you to be able to run the show out here, just in case. And Anna, I love you dear, but you're way too green. The others will sense that and I don't want them provoking you into a phase. Besides, Leah would kill me."

"But Embry and Jezzie? Isn't that a conflict of interests?" Anna pointed out.

"Not if Jezzie doesn't know," Paul spoke, the Beta in him able to pick up on Jacob's thought process with more ease over the course of time. "And Emb's pretty much proved she doesn't."

"And if I order Embry not to make it one," Jake added. "That's easier than my risking your life and packing our delegation with too much dominance and leaving the Pack vulnerable."

"Beta life sucks," Paul informed Anna plainly as she scoffed and rolled her eyes.

It was only five minutes later that Jezzie's Jeep could be heard rumbling down the driveway and the remnants of the Pack – Jake, Paul, Quil, Seth and Anna – waited for their last required member. Jezzie parked and Collin hopped out as Embry came out of the woods behind them, pulling his shorts up.

"Sir Alpha, this best be a good one," Jezzie yawned. "Because it's midnight."

"All right, Jezzie, Embry over here – the rest of you, I want you on patrol between this house and the line. If you hear from Leah or Rachel, tell them to stay together and I want them back here. But don't call them. Only if Leah phases. We don't call Sam unless this negotiation goes bad. Let him stay human. Paul, anything odd you come get me, clear?"

The last five nodded and ran into the trees.

"Jezzie, I'm going to make this quick for your sake. We had some real, bonafide werewolves break the borders earlier today. They almost attacked Ness and Claire, but they're both fine. Apparently they have some issue with Edward. We're meeting them inside and because neither Leah nor Rachel are here I need you as representation without the whole dynamic being off. Are you game?"

Jezzie just gaped for a moment. "What… what about Anna? I'm not a shapeshifter. I'm not even Quileute."

"Doesn't matter," Jake shook his head. "You're Pack. We're naturally balanced by the female presence and you've worked your way into the hierarchy. Anna's too new, and they'll sense that – she risks a phase if anyone pushes her buttons. I need cool heads."

"Sure," Jezzie shrugged, throwing up her hands at a loss. "Why the heck not." And with that she stepped between Embry and Jake and made her way up the Cullens stairs looking absolutely flabbergasted. She tried not to let the aching pain that radiate from her torso and her back show.
"Embry," Jake said in undertones as they followed her. "I need you for your diplomacy. I need Paul to hold the Pack in case of anything, but I am ordering you not to let your feelings for Jezzie figure into this, okay? I know how you feel about her, but if the others sense it we're done for."

Embry nodded silently, feeling the Alpha demand roll over him. He wasn't a fan of how detached it made him feel from Jezzie. It was the first time an Alpha order had ever messed with his emotions. It was hard describe, but he felt… distant. Like she was a stranger. Like she didn't matter. He felt indifferent. He would kick his best friend's ass for that later.

He tried to shake it off and the two headed inside the house after Jezzie. Jake nodded to the rest - Jasper, Alice, Rosalie, Emmett, Esme and Bella waiting in the living room. He stepped ahead of Jezzie and Embry and opened the dining room door, preceding them inside.

Carlisle and Edward were seated at the long side of the table closest to the door. Jacob admired the good tactical choice to put themselves between the werewolves and the rest of the coven.

Jezzie watched Jacob and Embry sit down in stoic silence. She took a seat between the two, trying to stay calm and poker-faced. The five individuals across the table were a truly terrible sight to behold. They looked homeless, like refugees or victims of some horrible natural disaster. Or zombies. As ridiculous and clichéd and horror-movie-esque as it was, Jezzie thought the group looked exactly like the living dead. And not in the sparkly vampire way.

Two were male and three were female. One woman looked to be about middle-aged, one girl might've been Jezzie's age and the last not more than thirteen. The boy that sat in the middle had black hair, and also appeared to be about Jezzie's age. The last boy might've been the youngest girl's twin. Their clothes were torn and ragged; they were filthy.

But what worried Jezzie the most was the expression. Not zombie-like at all. Most zombies were supposed to be fairly stupid. But the eyes staring her down across the table spoke not only of intelligence but an incredible sense of the tactics of the hunt and pursuit. They all shared equal expressions of bloodlust and a distinctly canine speed and countenance. A face that had been put back on a human body, but only masked a wild mind. They looked ready to lunge across the table and tear a person's heart out at the drop of a hat. Jezzie steeled herself, trying to force herself to stay calm and keep her heart at a natural rate – she knew everyone in the room would be able to hear it.

Carlisle nodded and spoke first. "Let's say we start with a round of introductions for the sake of ease. I see you know of my son, Edward. I'm Carlisle. We'll represent the interests of our entire family."

Carlisle turned to Jacob and for a moment – a brief flash of a second – Jezzie was reminded of just how young Jacob and Embry were. How young the whole Pack was and how it was much too much for the world to ask this much responsibility of them all. She was smart enough to know that the health and safety of many hinged on the outcome of this meeting.

"Jacob," he nodded towards the five ragged humans on the other side. "I'm Alpha of the neighboring Pack. We represent our own interests, as well. But it would be important to note that we maintain a treaty with the Olympic coven. Embry is my Third wolf. Jezzie, my Beta."

"She is human," the young woman noted, cocking her head to the side and leaning a little over the polished mahogany table.

"True," Jacob nodded. "But irrelevant."

"I am Damien," the dark haired leader nodded. "This is Elizabeth," he indicated the older woman. "Lydia," the young woman who had spoke. "Zachary and Abigail," the two youngest.
"All right," Carlisle nodded to them in recognition. "It has become clear to us that your presence on our land over the past few weeks has not been an accident. Is there anything you’d care to share with us?"

"Retribution," Damien grinned.

"Excuse me?" Edward replied.

"Did I stutter?" Damien leered across the table. Edward reached up to briefly rub his forehead. It looked like he had a headache. "Terribly sorry about that. I am afraid our kind tend to interfere with most your abilities."

Jezzie could see Embry quirk a brow and Damien's eyes flicked momentarily to him before addressing their whole half of the table. "You cannot read my mind, can you? Well," he continued not waiting for a response. "Your sister cannot see us and your leaders do not have much affect either."

"Why is that?" Edward asked, looking particularly pained.

"We are not quite human anymore, are we? You read human minds. Your sister sees the future of humans. Your nobility – they track your kind as well as humans. We are not human. I very much suspect you would encounter the same problems with your allies, no?" Damien indicated the wolves on Carlisle's opposite side.

"Excellent observation," Edward replied curtly.

"Do try to keep up."

"It will be a lot easier for all of us to reach some kind of compromise here if you were simply to let us know what – precisely – your desires are." Jezzie swallowed and waited as all eyes in the room turned to her. Maybe they didn’t expect her to speak. "I think it would be poor form to start out talks of cooperation on a bad foot. Don't you?"

Damien only grinned at Jezzie in a manner she found unsettling before he spoke again.

"I believe it is largely by accident that our families have become interconnected," he spoke to Jezzie before turning back towards Edward. "1928," he said his voice slightly elevated. "Minneapolis, Minnesota. I was twenty-five. My father, in an attempt to bring some justice to our family, sought out the werewolf that attacked and changed each of my family members. It took him quite a few years to track the man down. As you have noticed it is very easy for us in the supernatural community to leave no trace upon the earth."

Jezzie watched, and saw no visible change in either Jacob or Embry’s demeanor. Carlisle appeared engaged and she saw Edward’s jaw clench.

Damien only grinned. "Yes, this part of the story should start sounding familiar. My father tracked the man to a more unappealing part of town. He had him cornered in an alleyway – all very cliché and Hollywood, I assure you. However, he was apprehended by a vigilante. A young man, pale and refined beyond compare, swooped down upon him like a wraith, pulled my father from his seemingly helpless victim and snapped his neck, killing him instantly. The would-be victim – a true werewolf – beat a hasty retreat and escaped unscathed."

Edward expelled a breath and leaned back in his chair.

"Yes, your mind reading got you into trouble that day because you were only focusing on that one
mind – were you not? You could not make much of the victim’s, eh?” Damien nodded. "Unfortunately, tracking an anonymous attacker such as yourself is hard in even the best of circumstances. Having limited witnesses was a trouble spot and it was only about ten years into the search did I realize that this man who killed my father – this attacker – must not have been human. Eerie the pattern of life; the way he moved about the country was far beyond the ability of any mortal.

"Of course there was also the small logistical issue of having a small nomadic coven claim the entire Plains region as their own territory. But you seem to have polished those three off and cleared the road for us to find you. You really could not have placed a better sign upon your own home. If your whereabouts were still hazy at best, they were clear after the Newborn War trickled through the ranks of vampire and wolf alike on this continent."

"You heard about our altercation last spring?” Carlisle asked. "Of course," Damien responded blithely, leaning back in his chair. He had a way about himself, he didn’t just sit in a chair, he possessed it. Like it was a prop to further assert the image of his power and dominance despite his homely state. Carlisle thought he could've given Aro intimidation pointers. "We are a largely unorganized and disconnected community, I will grant you. But there are few things that happen to us otherworldly types that are not disseminated quickly. That is, if one is willing to listen. Surely you were not surprised by our seeking you out?"

"I'm afraid the reception up here in Forks has been rather foggy, then,” Edward grumbled. "It was easy enough to find you when the very man you saved has been circling your lands like a vulture."

"He was the one that first came through here?” Embry asked. "No," Damien replied slowly. "We are not entirely sure who that was. No one we were familiar with," he brushed the dead werewolf off. "A new creation – new prospect – I suspect? No, the man that dear Master Cullen spared came through right after that – a few weeks ago now? He skirted the land, before cleverly darting inside. The way I hear it, your Pack almost had him. A real pity your 'allies' don't take an equal share in securing your shared land. You surely would have finished him."

Embry could hear Jacob grinding his teeth and Jezzie sat up a little straighter. Damien had found the sticky spot in the relationship between the Cullens and the Pack: the Cullen's negligence on patrolling.

"Well, now that we are all caught up? Our demands." Damien's sinister smile faded and his face turned one of pure anger. "Retribution," he demanded in a firm voice. "Blood for blood, this one here has released a plague upon the Earth. My father – a single breath from ridding us all of the putrefaction of a rabid werewolf – was killed in a moment of vigilante terrorism." Damien's fist came crashing down on the table as he tried to emphasize his point. "This lycan remains at large and is nigh uncatchable. Over eighty years has taught our family that."

"This… werewolf," Jacob began trying to make the distinction between the shape shifters and those across the table. "He's still out there? The one that came through – how are you sure it's him?"

"He is the same," Damien nodded, significantly more calm than moments ago. "I can be sure, because werewolf populations are cropping up in various parts of continent. Mostly here in the states. Apart from my family he is the only rogue wolf in the Americas. Extensive observation has proven that he is wild and unpredictable. I realize how much you dislike sharing a common name with us," he leaned across the table, "and believe me the feeling is quite mutual, but not all of us are naturally
prone to wanton savagery. However, those possessed entirely by the wolf are uncontrollable."

"Are you trying to say that there are spotty werewolf populations all over the area?" Jacob clarified.

"No," Damien shook his head, examining his ragged nails. "My family and I have largely taken care of those isolated few that do not perish on their own. It is hard to survive the first year a lone wolf. For those that survive the Transformation and the first moon cycle, it is difficult in the extreme to remain present minded enough to control themselves thereafter. Most are killed in human form during acts of violence. An entirely uncivilized lot they turn out to be. The issue at hand is their creator; he is strong, intelligent and completely savage."

Jezzie didn't know if it was more ironic or disturbing that Damien was talking about degrees of civility – and rather adeptly emanating his own – as he sat across the table, filthy and looking beyond the pale of hygiene.

"Civilized?" Edward repeated. "Is that what you call the ravaging of a cemetery? The exhuming of the dead for consumption?"

"I am afraid that is largely your own fault. As I said, he has been seeking you out. For reasons unbeknownst to us. The one the wolfpack decimated was one of his new creations – as I have said."

"So this attack on our local cemetery is not of your doing?" Carlisle confirmed.

"Of course not," Damien assured him. "As I am sure the killing of our ally from Tulsa earlier today was unavoidable," he glanced toward Embry. "The cost of combat."

"So," Jezzie spoke. "Are you proposing a war? Retribution is what you want. Have you come here asking for a slaughter?"

"Well that would be silly now, would it not?" Damien replied.

"We desire a compromise," the woman Elizabeth – who Jezzie could now assume was Damien's mother – spoke for the first time. "We face extinction from all sides. Your nobility does not see fit to allow our populations to live – however meekly – upon the Earth as long as they have the means to find and exterminate us. We are regularly pushed to the edge of existence despite our presenting no threat to the public, let alone your own kind. We rule over our own kind with enough discretion. We cleanse our populations of all rogue elements."

"We rarely make it a habit," Damien explained, "to hunt your kind down. You're quite frankly not worth the effort. Your family has proved the exception in this case. And we do not anticipate your assistance with eliminating those of our own species but we ask you to exercise some degree of persuasion with those of your own."

"You desire an alliance with us against the Volturi," Carlisle said. It wasn't a question.

"Simply put," Damien inclined his head once.

"Uh, we're gonna have to call for a brief recess," Embry interjected. "La Push needs to confer with the rest of the Pack on this matter."

"Sounds fair," Carlisle nodded, before turning to Damien. "Are you amenable?"

"Of course," Damien insisted with a wave of his hand.
"They want what?" Paul shouted. He looked like he was about to have a coronary.

"They want a treaty," Embry sighed.

"Oh well doesn't that sound familiar?" Paul replied. "Like we haven't had to deal with one of those before. What part of living on an Indian reservation or being the leader of this Pack makes any treaty sound like a good idea? We don't have a good track record with those things."

"You can't be seriously considering this, man," Quil replied, looking to Jacob. "Billy and Old Quil and Sue will tear you a new one if you make a new treaty with these guys. It's bad enough we've got the one to hold up."

Paul was pacing a short circuit around the yard, rubbing his jaw and trying really hard to act his rank. "Look, I respect that we've got a duty to not kill the Cullens. And in the broad scheme of things, they're really not worth starting another war over. But that doesn't mean that any good is going to come out of our joining up with someone else against an enemy we don't actually have."

"The Volturi," Anna interrupted. "Aren't going to make a lot of distinction between werewolves and shapeshifters if it ever really came down to it. And I mean, it's not like we couldn't handle it if need be. And, we'd probably sympathize more with the werewolves than the Cullens. I mean, all our lives are royally fucked thanks to them."

"But wouldn't it be best if we just never had a throwdown with these Volturi bats?" Quil pointed out. "We're neither friends nor enemies with the Volturi and it's been kinda nice that way. If we ally with their enemies though, that puts us on target. We're allied with the Cullens, that's enemy territory enough."

"Loyalty complications will arise," Embry added slowly, "if we chose to step back on this treaty but maintain the one we have with the Cullens and the Cullens ally with the werewolves. We'll still be diplomatically tied to the werewolves, even at a distance. We could be morally bound to them in ways we can't anticipate."

"To hell," Paul replied, "with the morals of it. This about self-preservation. It's our job to protect the tribe, to protect La Push and the people in our area. This isn't some kind of whack ass foreign policy battle. What does an alliance with a family of werewolves from fucking Minneapolis have to offer us?"

"Protection?" Anna shrugged. "If anything ever does happen involving the Volturi – to either the Cullens or us – the Minneapolis Pack will be treaty-bound to help us. More numbers never hurt a battle."

"They're another geographical barrier," Embry shrugged. "We have no one except the Cullens between us and Italy. More ears on the ground aren't necessarily a bad thing."

"And what's going to make them uphold their end of the bargain? We have no idea how trustworthy they are."

"Not to mention that one on the road was an easy kill," Collin added. "I mean, they run like crippled ducks and sure, they're poisonous if they bite, but how effective are they in a fight, really?"

Jezzie had mostly just stood in this circle of arguing, half-naked Quileutes in a state of shock. "None of this makes any sense," she finally blurted out. She got a few looks of frustration when she was misunderstood and decided to elaborate. "What I mean is that we don't know these people. That means we can't tell their intentions and we don't know if working with them will be good or bad.
Allying with them formally could bring us some problems, but turning them away could be just as bad. It doesn't have to be a black or white situation."

Paul and Anna actually both nodded in something akin to appreciation before a thoughtful silence permeated the group.

"I say," Jacob interrupted the quite. He'd mostly allowed his Pack to talk this out, while he watched. The beauty of Pack was that they all were highly opinionated and were very good at debate. Watching them hash out the issues was easier than Jake being forced to do it all himself. He didn't want to be a total dictator anyways. "This Pack is open to a non-aggression treaty, but I'm not putting loyalty to strangers down in writing anytime soon."

"Elaborate," Quil requested. "Hey, I'm the one that's gonna have to go and explain all this to the council – humor me."

"I don't mind agreeing to not attack these people if they do the same for us. And if they have some serious issue that we can help with, without endangering ourselves, then sure. I'm cool with that. But I'm not going make a rock solid alliance, only to have them go provoke the Volturi into an all out war."

"I think that sounds pretty good," Paul conceded.

"Jezzie, Emb," Jake nodded his head over his shoulder. "Back to the drawing board."

They never really got done to hammering out definitive agreements that night.

"What do you mean you're not open to any kind of alliance?" Damien asked Carlisle. "Do you mean to make us as your enemies?"

Jacob, Jezzie and Embry only stared in a line down the table towards Edward and Carlisle. All three had expected the Cullens to be far more liberal about the matter than the Pack. "I am afraid it would be most disadvantageous for us to ally with a group that is a decided enemy of the Volturi – a group we maintain a fragile relationship with."

"Decided?" Damien scoffed. "We have decided nothing. We have been hunt to extinction, as your kind are as well, no doubt. We know their opinion of the Western vampire's lifestyle. And yet, you choose to refuse a potentially prosperous alliance as a way to avoid stirring the pot?"

"We don't agree," Jacob interjected plainly. Damien's shocked expression turned to Jacob. "We're not signing our lives away here," Jacob began. Jezzie extended her hand and placed it on Jake's forearm. She could sense the impending arrival of a foot-in-mouth moment and realized now was not the time for it.

"The fact of the matter is," Jezzie began carefully, "that the Pack is not familiar enough with your family to cement real diplomatic ties with you right now. However we don't wish to see you as enemies either."

"The La Push Pack is open to a pact that outlines an agreement for mutual nonaggression," Embry elaborated. "We are willing to treat your family as peacefully and respectfully as you do ours. And we're willing to help your family in any way that doesn't prove a threat to the Pack's safety and security."

"This is not ungenerous," Damien agreed. "And I appreciate your willingness to work with us. However," he turned back to Carlisle and Edward, "I have a very difficult time imaging what you
have to gain by spurning a potentially dangerous neighbor for a distant and apathetic alliance in name alone?"

"We feel it's in the best interest in our family," Carlisle replied.

Lydia scoffed and sunk lower in her chair. Jezzie watched as the young woman stared daggers towards Edward and Carlisle. She was visibly trying to restrain herself.

"The best interest of your family?" Elizabeth seethed. "What a novel concept. It's wonderful that you have such luxuries, to live in a relative peace, to be assured that you will not – at any moment – be attacked and wiped from the face of the Earth! We have been made enemies without our own consent! We were born into a world that gave us enemies! I realize many of you did not have any more choice in your transformation than we did ours, but you continue to hold yourself the higher diplomatic power!"

"That is most certainly not the case," Carlisle insisted. "That is not what we intend."

"It does not matter what you intend," Lydia growled. "The fact is we are mere pawns in this game of ego. We are like colonies to your imperial powers and your choice not to deign to put even an iota of risk upon your shoulders puts the entirety of it on our own! Your frail alliance with the Volturi is more important to you than a strong one with those of like mind!"

"This family," Carlisle reiterated firmly, "desires no such thing. And we will not be made to feel the tyrant, simply for wishing to remain out of the fray of interests that are not our own."

"You robbed us of the possibility of a quiet life," Elizabeth spat in Edward's direction. "These interests are your own by the simple fact that we were so close to ending the creature that brought all this upon us, but you – you! – dashed that hope! And after all that you cannot even bring yourselves to—"

Elizabeth did not have the chance to finish her thought as Lydia, seething in anger, lunged across the table. She jostled the huge piece of furniture and Edward met her halfway before she was able to reach the other side. Jezzie saw Edward pin Lydia to the table by her throat and Damien snarled before jumping up so quickly his chair fell back and crashed through a pane of the glass wall behind him. Jezzie only heard the hard crack of rock solid bodies against the wood before she found herself on the ground with Embry on top of her. Just as Lydia went sailing through the air where Jezzie had just been sitting, she heard screeching from the younger werewolves as an all out fight consumed the room.

She would have been surprised if she had the time.

She heard the door bang open and the sound of the Cullens clashing with Elizabeth, Damien and even little Abigail and Zachary. The roar was deafening as yelling, growling, the crushing and snapping of furniture and the collision of bodies rent the air of the small space. The entire china cabinet fell away from the wall after a particularly harsh bit of reverb from Damien's forcing Jasper against the wall. The armoire wavered before crashing down on Embry's back. He uttered a few choice words and Jezzie shrieked and closed her eyes as grains of shattered crystal and china rained down around them. Jezzie gasped as a heavy someone then landed right on top of the cabinet, pressing the two further to the ground as Embry tried to prevent her from being crushed by the supernatural strength around her. She could see a small bit of light flood back on her left side and she could see Jake force the cabinet off Embry's back.

Embry slid Jezzie and across the dusty bits of finery as he lifted the armoire more fully to block any
more projectile bodies. "Get her out of here," Jacob shouted over the din. Jezzie made a quick scramble on her hands and knees to the door only a few feet away. She made it out in time to see one of the smaller werewolves – she wasn't sure if it was the boy or the girl – come flying out with Alice in full attack mode.

Embry more or less tossed her in the passenger side of her Jeep as Jake jumped off the Cullen porch. Jezzie watched in horror through the front windows as she saw the fight rage. She watched as they screamed and yelled and growled; she could see someone tear another someone's arm off and another person was being held by the hair. Her hand flew up and covered her shocked mouth instinctively. She could've sworn all that debris meant they'd torn down a wall.

Her attention was broken as Embry put her truck into gear and she heard Jacob shout. "Get her back to La Push and I want your ass back on the treaty line with the rest. We will not be party to this BS."

And so they weren't.

If Jezzie were not so shell-shocked by her second ever Pack related adventure she would have protested being kept behind the lines and guarded like a prisoner. But she didn't. The Pack patrolled the treaty line for hours, and it wasn't until Jasper and Rosalie arrived to tell them that the Minneapolis Pack had gone back East that some of the Pack fell off patrol to rest up for their next shift.

There was a letter in Jacob's mailbox from the Minneapolis Pack the next day thanking for him for his openness to cooperation. And the Pack accepted La Push's offer, reciprocating in full. They also promised ample notice of their next arrival in Washington.

And though Jezzie was almost mauled in her attempts to help negotiate some semblance of peace between the four species present, she didn't complain. Leah arrived back in La Push around 2AM and almost took Jacob's head off when she found out he didn't call her. She growled and seethed the entire time she was driving Jezzie home. Jezzie almost fell asleep against the window.

She mumbled her thanks and stumbled painfully into the house. The day of school, combined with work – and recent history – had not been kind to her pain quotient. She collapsed for the remainder of the night, exhausted.

The Pack found that her willingness to help did not end her exile. And no one heard from Jezzie for many days thereafter.

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_Tuesday, December 19, 2006_

Embry only barely stirred when Jared threw his bedroom door open and let it crash against the opposite wall and ricochet back. _Damn_, his mom had been right, _boy was dead to the world._

Tiffany Call had been nice enough when Jared Cameron had showed up on her front porch asking to talk to her half-dead son. Jared had become a regular enough face over the course of a year that she expected him as often as she did Jake or Quil. Or even Seth.

And because of that, Jared was nice enough to drag her emo son's bitch ass out of bed. "Do you plan on getting the fuck up at all in the next few days?" Jared asked loudly.

Embry replied with the display of a select finger and rolled back over. "I don't have patrol until tonight."
"So?" Jared replied coming more fully into the room. "You haven't left this goddamn room in two days – what the fuck is wrong with you? Even your Mom is worried and hell knows raising you makes it hard for that woman to worry."

"I don't have patrol until tonight."

Jared just stared for a moment at the pathetic lump that his charge had turned into. In the broad scheme of things, Jared and Embry had it easy. Dealing with Jake had been a motherfucker for Sam, and Paul had seriously considered investing in some rubber bullets after the first few weeks of trying to wrangle Quil. But Embry had always been lowkey and, sure, phasing had seriously freaked him the fuck out, but he learned to control it quick; he didn't complain about his Mom ragging on him all the time, and if Jared were being honest – he was glad he didn't have some spazzy imprint fascination running through his head all the time.

Jared actually liked the kid; raising him through Packlife made him love him. Kim loved Embry, too. There was a strange and intrinsic sort of soul tie that developed in the mentoring lineages of the Pack. Sam was a fucking mess when Jake left and no one heard from him; Emily cried for days. Jake had almost eaten Tommy Littlesea when he came back into town after Collin first phased; and Paul had been the only one on Quil’s side in the first day after he imprinted. And, now, Jared was worried as fucking hell when Embry had fallen off the radar for two days. Because Jared loved Embry – in his own weird way. He loved him enough to go and drag him out of whatever funk he was in, because if he let Kim do it – like she'd been threatening – she might've traumatized the guy.

But this was not the Embry anyone knew. Embry was quiet, sure. Never talked much, even as a kid. But this was fucking depressing as hell. It wasn't hard to gather just by associating with the Pack like normal that Embry hadn't turned up in days. No, he hadn't had patrol in a few days but to go more than twelve hours without anyone hearing from a Packmate was pretty friggin' odd.

Something was wrong. "Embry what the fuck is going on?" Jared was running over scenarios in his head. Embry was even keel about almost anything that came at him. Not much shook him up; Jared liked to think he got some of that from him. He was right. "Embry? Seriously? If you don't tell me who died, I'm dragging your ass into the yard and locking you out."

Embry's phone lit up and shook against the side table. Jared snatched it up before Embry even had time to rollover. It was Leah.

"Hello?" Jared answered.

"Give me my phone," Embry demanded without moving. At least he'd rolled over so Jared knew he was alive.

"Jared? Where's Embry?" Leah asked.

"He's being a bitch right now, can I take a message?"

"Sure," Leah replied. Jared could practically hear her roll her eyes over the phone. "Tell Embry to stop being insane and to give the damn girl some room to breathe because he's being a pain in the ass. And if he doesn't, well... I hope he's not allergic to nuts because I'm going to kick his up into his throat."

"All righty then," Jared nodded. "Anything else?"

"I think that covers it for now."
Jared hung up the phone. "This is about Jezzie? Are you torturing the poor girl?"

"I'm not torturing her," Embry retorted actually sitting upright. "She won't talk to me!"

"Did it ever occur to you that that's her choice? You can't force yourself on people, Emb."

"She won't even tell me why!"

"All right," Jared shook his head and stepped forward. "Time to take a shower and wash the clingy bastard off you." Jared reached down grabbed Embry's hand and pulled him out of his bed. The kid was damn mess and *hell* he needed a fucking shower.

"I'm not clingy," Embry insisted as Jared steered him out of the room and down the hall.

"Like hell you aren't," Jared scoffed. He didn't think he was doing it on purpose, but Embry was becoming a dick over a girl. Something neither his friends, nor the aforementioned girl would appreciate. Embry liked Jezzie. A lot. Jared thought he probably liked her more than he realized, more than the rest of the Pack realized. Jared was pretty sure only he knew how much Embry liked Jezzie. And he thought that was damn stupid. The boy had never been good with this sort of thing.

"Over my dead body is any pup of mine turning into a whiny-ass bitch and scaring away a good, decent woman." Jared opened the bathroom door and gave Embry a good shove to the back. "Now get in the damn shower before I call Kim and *she'll* help you do it."

Mrs. Call had actually hugged Jared on her way out the door, thanking him profusely before going to open the store across town. Jared just sat on their porch. It was a quiet morning. The Call house was small, but they were on some really nice property. The trees were far back enough that the place made for good open space, and always the brightest mornings on the res. Jared heard Embry in the house less than ten minutes later; he eventually swung the screen door open before sitting down next to larger Embry.

Embry inhaled deep and Jared just continued to pick pine needles of an individual frond. Something was up with Embry and Jared could sense he was about to spill, so he just waited for it.

"I haven't heard from Jezzie in two weeks," Embry said, shaking some of the water out of his hair.

"Wow," Jared offered. "I haven't seen her around, but I didn't know she was gone gone."

Embry nodded. "It didn't really bother me at first," he shrugged. "I mean… we've been busy. It's not like I didn't notice, but I didn't make anything of it. But a few days ago she called Joy and cancelled on her."

Jared nodded.

"I called her to see if everything was okay, but she never picked up. The same thing happened the next day. And the next. And it's kinda taken all I have to try and be normal about this and not go wolf-stalk her house like some creep, but I was worried. She just… disappeared. And then out of the blue, she called Leah. She disappeared to her house for a full day and came back with all this ominous bullshit."

Jared tried not to grin – this was serious – he wondered if it really was ominous or if Leah was just rattling Embry's cage.

"And, yeah, I was worried before. But when Leah came back and pretty much implied that Jezzie's keeping something from me."
"So?" Jared offered.

"So?" Embry replied with a small shake of his head. "Dude… who just does that? Who just bails on all their friends and doesn't say anything. That's not cool."

"We're kind of in some extenuating circumstances, Emb, don't you think?"

"What?" Embry shrugged. "Just because we're shapeshifters means we can't have normal relationships with people?"

"Pretty much," Jared nodded. "Think about it, man. In the course of a week Jezzie watched Anna's first phase, learned about the wolves, vampires and imprinting. I think she might be a bit shell-shocked."

Embry didn't respond. Why hadn't he thought of that? "I'm such a moron," he groaned, leaning back.

"Yes," Jared agreed. "But a well-meaning moron. Look, Emb? Just chill out when it comes to Jezzie. I know you like her a lot man, but don't scare her off. And don't obsess."

"It's hard not to obsess," Embry offered, staring at the sky.

"I'm aware," Jared nodded. "More aware then you'll hopefully ever be. Don't treat her like an imprint, because she's not. Whoa, whoa," Jared supplied when Embry's head snapped up with a glare. "Chill. Okay? I'm not placing a value judgment on imprinting here, so you shouldn't either. It's different Embry."

"It is," he agreed.

"And I think it's a good difference. It gives you both space do things as they come naturally. Jezzie isn't an imprint. So don't treat her like one. None of us should treat our imprints 'like imprints'. It's not fucking healthy. But we have a harder time controlling it than you do. She's first and foremost a human being. And so are you. So even though all this BS is probably Pack-related, you gotta remember that you're still a guy. And hopefully at some point that's all you'll be."

"So," Embry sighed rubbing his hand over his face. When was the last time he could've gone a day without shaving? Those had been good times… "I have to treat her normal. I don't know how to do that Jared. What do normal people do when their friends ignore them?"

Jared shrugged. "Hell if I know. That's a chick thing. Ignoring people. Some people would probably call obsessively but I don't know who would call obsessively and worry themselves to the point where they don't leave their room for two days."

"Point granted," Embry conceded.

"About fucking time," Jared smiled, giving Embry's shoulder a friendly shove. "I can't take this emo bullshit from you, Emb. You were the easy pup. What the hell happened?"

"I don't know man," Embry grinned in return and slung arm around Jared's shoulder, his playful air returning. "This girl's turning me into a total pussy and I can't even help it. Maybe I'll get the retribution when Seth reaches his emo stage?"

"My bets are on Seth stealing your girl if you don't get your ass in gear. And Jez definitely wears the balls in your relationship."
"Hi, Joy? It's Jezzie. I was wondering if I could call in that rain check on dinner?"

"Absolutely!" Joy shouted over the phone. The woman didn't even pause to breathe - let alone consider having another mouth to feed. "How about tonight? I made pot roast – I make a mean pot roast."

Jezzie laughed. "Okay, sounds great. What should I bring?"

"Oh, please," she heard Joy Ateara scoff. "Don't worry about it, hon."

"Please? I had to bail on you guys with no decent excuse, the least I can do is bring dessert."

"Dessert sounds good to me," Joy agreed. "Give me an hour, okay? The house is a mess and if Quil isn't stuck to the floor yet, I'm sure Anna's laundry situation has eaten her alive. Maybe both."

Jezzie agreed and hung up the phone. She was glad she was feeling better. She was glad to be back. And she was glad to be spending the evening with the Ateara kids – who Jezzie had found took right after their Mom. Joy Ateara was where Quil and Anna got all their Quil and Anna-ness. Jezzie wasn't sure how to describe it. Maybe sass? Yeah, she'd go with sass.

Jezzie was also starting to think that Joy Ateara was one of the only things that anchored the tribal council to sanity. Well, that and maybe Paul. Elections were next month and everybody was rather certain on Paul's winning. They didn't even fix the voting (Paul would have killed them if they tried), he was winning hearts and minds all on his own. Those two definitely tag teamed Billy, Old Quil and Sue – who seemed so stuck in an alternate universe some days she wondered how La Push even functioned as a political entity.

Joy loved all her extended and unrelated family greatly. She had to. There was too much acting against them for her to ever consider not taking someone under her wing. So when wan little Jezzie Sullivan showed up on her front porch with an apple pie just below her gaunt, smiling face she got mauled. Joy looked her up and down once before ushering her inside the house. She carefully took the pie and started towards the kitchen before nodding her head towards the table. "Sit that behin' of yours down. You're wastin' away 'fore my eyes. Sit! Sit! Mama feed you. Quil! Anna!"

Jezzie hadn't made it more than a few steps before both she was sandwiched between the two Ateara siblings. "Red on Red sandwich!" they shouted.

"Cheeks in seats, heathens!" Joy yelled from the kitchen and the three laughed like kids before sitting down.

"So you don't think we're total freak shows?" Anna asked as Joy knocked the swinging door open with her hip and placed the pot roast in the center of the table.

"Of course not. I've just been a little sick. It doesn't really have anything to do with you guys being wolves. Oddly enough."

The knowing glance both Anna and Quil gave her from across the table when she used the term 'a little sick' lead her to believe they knew exactly what was wrong with her. She had anticipated that. She hadn't asked Embry to keep it a secret and hadn't expected him to. She knew Leah's mind was a steel trap, but she'd kind of planned on the news getting around once she'd told Embry.

Joy broke their small visual conversation. "Well, Jezzie, I'm really glad we haven't scared you off. Honestly, I've been thinking Anna was gonna phase – not quite so soon – but she certainly had all
the warning signs. You seem to have handled it pretty well."

Jezzie shrugged. "As well as can be expected, right? They still kinda terrify me. I wouldn't even leave Kim's house when I asked for them to prove it."

Joy smiled slightly as she put a ridiculously large portion of sweet potatoes on Jezzie's plate. "Well, good for you for asking for proof when these kids threw down such an outlandish concept. Smart girl. And for staying in the house," she pointed to her sharply with the serving fork. "They're our kids, yes, but they're still wolves. You're well-advised to give them ample room whenever you can, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

And the rest of the evening passed in such a normal manner that Jezzie wondered if maybe she hadn't dreamt recent history and maybe things were normal. That was until Anna snapped the bathroom doorknob off with a muttered curse. Apparently wolf strength was hard to get used to. They ate the apple pie Jezzie had bought, watched Family Guy, Joy tsked a little more about Jezzie's obvious state of unhealth, and didn't let her leave until she accepted a thermos of stew as a good will gesture.

She smiled and took it with grateful thanks. On her way out, Quil snagged her elbow on the porch and turned doleful eyes on her. "Oh God, what?" Jezzie asked warily. "Your wiles don't work on my Quil Ateara. Save it for Veronica. What do you want?"

"Do me a favor and go say hi to Emb before he has a total bitch fit meltdown?"

"It's 8PM," Jezzie checked her watch. "Is that too late to stop in?"

"The Calls love you, so I'd say it's fine."

Jezzie was still nervous knocking on the front door. She hadn't planned on doing this. She didn't know how she was going to tell Embry she was back in the real world. The fact that she had to think about how she was going to tell him something so trivial like that felt incredibly immature. This boy brought out a lot of infantile tendencies in her. And she didn't appreciate the stomach acrobatics either.

"Jezzie?" Tiffany Call's look of surprise was at least welcoming. "Come in, come in." She stepped aside and allowed Jezzie to enter. "Are you feeling better? Embry mentioned you'd been a bit ill. I was wondering why I hadn't seen you around. Anything we can do for you, please don't hesitate."

"Thanks Ms. Call," Jezzie smiled. Tiffany Call really was a nice lady. "I actually was just stopping in to say hi – because I am feeling a lot better."

"Well," Tiffany smiled, placing a gentle hand on Jezzie's shoulder. "It's good to see out and about. Last I checked, Embry was asleep but I don't think he'd mind if you woke him up to say hello. Last door on the right."

The door moved open easily enough and while the light was on, Embry was indeed out cold. Jezzie took a moment to glance around the small room. Embry had somehow managed to wedge a bed, a dresser, a desk and two bookshelves into the small space. The room was neat, if crowded. Everything obviously had a place and the only hint that this wasn't just a staging area for a teenage bedroom was the desk spread with homework. The bookshelves were full with varying shelves of CDs and books. There might have been an organization system – it looked like there was – but there didn't seem to be much rhyme or reason to what Embry might've favored in his music or reading.
There was political philosophy and history, classics and graphic novels, Hawking and… was that a Quran? Jezzie reached up a bit almost automatically, tilting her head to the side to observe the unfamiliar script on the binding. She heard movement from behind her and turned in time to see Embry roll back over to face the wall.

"Whatever the hell you want Jake, the answer is no," he mumbled.

Jezzie smiled. He must've been awful tired if he couldn't tell the difference in sight, sound, or smell between her and Jacob Black. "Well it's a good thing Jake isn't here then, huh?" Jezzie replied quietly as she turned back around to the bookshelf.

"The fuck?" Jezzie couldn't help the ear-to-ear grin as she listened to Embry awake in a confused and shocked haze.

"Jez?" He stood up – maybe a little too quickly given the way he wobbled like a drunk. Jezzie turned again and reached an arm out to steady him and he bent down and scooped her into a hug. A warm, safe, happy, bone-crushing hug. Was this being too obvious? He wasn't really sure. He was acting on impulse which – given the givens – was probably not the best idea in the world. But she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him back, laughing easily.

"Not that I'm complaining but what the hell are you doing here?"

"I just stopped by to say hello," she replied. "I had dinner at the Atearas. Feeling a lot better. Hey, Embry?"

"Yeah?"

"You can put me down now."

Oh. Right. "Sorry," he mumbled putting her on solid ground. Pants. Pants were definitely in order, he decided. "So is your flare passed?" he asked as he opened a dresser drawer.

"Mostly," she nodded happily. "Still a little achy, but nothing I can't handle. I'm a lot better."

Embry – slightly more comfortable now that he wasn't standing in front of Jezzie in only a pair of boxers – sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Jezzie appraisingly.

She didn't miss it. "What?" she asked.

"You don't look good."

"Thanks Embry," Jezzie rolled her eyes. "You sure know the way to a girl's heart."

"I just mean you still look sick," how he managed to stick his foot in his mouth so often with this girl was beyond him.

"Well, I am," she nodded taking a seat in his desk chair and propping her feet up next to Embry. "But I have two things to ask."

"Okay, shoot."

"Number one," she indicated raising an index finger. "Can I borrow The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time," she pointed to the bookshelf. "I've been meaning to read it but the library here is small."

Embry smiled. "Of course," he nodded. He knew Jezzie was a science person. She liked logic and
process. But it was nice to see that Jezzie liked to read. "Under one condition…" when she glanced back at him dubiously, he grinned further. "You have to lend me a book. You can pick it."

Jezzie's grin matched his own and she bit her lip, standing gracefully to appraise his bookshelf. "Hm… I have to see what you've read, first. Wouldn't want a repeat performance. And it should be of comparable length… I guess that rules out Anna Karenina…"

"I have seen that one," Embry interrupted her. "And I'm gonna need a helluva long time to get through that. Help me out, Jez."

"Ever read Conrad's Heart of Darkness?" she asked with a sly grin as she turned about to face him. He shook his head. "Excellent!" She pulled the book carefully from the shelf and ran a hand over the cover. "You read a lot," she noted. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah, when I used to have time. I don't even read the instructions on Easy Mac, anymore. Some days I wonder if I'm still literate."

"It's like riding a bike," she insisted with a smile, sitting lightly on the edge of the bed next to him. "Do you know what you want to do when you grow up, Peter Pan?" She glanced back at him, and Embry could tell that her question wasn't patronizing or prodding, like every other human life form that wanted to know if he was going 'make something of himself' or why he had such a hard time getting to school everyday or why he only did strategic parts of his homework. She was just curious. They'd never really talked much about school, really.

"I don't know," Embry offered a one-shouldered shrug. "I've always been really good with numbers – you saw, I do all the billing and accounting stuff for my Mom's store. I'd like to go to college in the fall. Kinda depends on a lot of things. Pack, money, whether or not I can salvage my GPA from the hit it took this fall. We'll see." Jezzie nodded with a small smile playing on her lips. People always asked him if he was going to do something, very few people ever asked what. Embry liked the change. He liked that Jezzie just knew he was going to do something cool with his life, and she was just curious about the specifics.

"What about you, Tink?" he asked. "What are you gonna do when you grow up?"

"Mm," she hummed. "Med school."

"Really?" he replied. "Tough stuff. Bet you'll love it, though."

"I think I will," she agreed.

"Was that the second thing you wanted to know?" Embry asked, leaning back against the wall his bed was pushed to.

"No, actually. Tell me what's been going on the mythical part of the world since I've been gone?" she insisted. "I feel out of the loop."

"So you mean to tell me that some other non-human biting vampire from Alaska stopped by, saw Nessie, and the shapeshifters on their way out of town and is going to go to some vampire monarchy that can have us all killed and now it's just a matter of when Alice sees them arriving?"

"Pretty much." Embry wasn't sure if she was gonna freak out like she did when Anna phased or if she'd take it way too well like she did with the werewolf thing. He was batting a thousand with this girl's reactions.
Then that wry smile Jezzie gets when she had an idea cropped up on her face. "What?" Embry asked, dreading her response just a bit. The girl had a habit of throwing serious curveballs at him – and aiming for the nuts. She took no prisoners and the fact that she was involved in a mythical world with people that could kill her in a moment, didn't really seem to phase her. She was either crazy or tough as nails. Probably both.

"I'm not telling you," she teased lightly as the cogs in her brain continued to spin.

"What do you mean you're not telling me?"

"I have a question… a musing… about this upcoming battle. But you're way to personally invested. And you're not Alpha. Technically I'm not under your jurisdiction."

Embry rolled his eyes. Great. Whatever she had up her sleeve it was bound to be a whammy – especially if she wasn't telling him. Embry wasn't nearly as overprotective as some of the others, particularly Sam or Jared – but if it was bad enough that she wouldn't tell him, he only assumed it was because she knew he'd put his foot down. Awesome.

"Technically," Embry mocked her tone, "you're from Forks and are under Carlisle's jurisdiction."

Her eyes narrowed and she glared at him for a moment. "Good," she finally said. "I need to talk to him too. Let's go find Jake," she hopped up out of her seat. "I'm calling a meeting."

And for some godforsaken reason, Embry followed her out of his bedroom continuing to buy into her elusiveness. "A meeting? Well aren't we all that and a bag of chips? You're calling a meeting with my Alpha and the head of the neighboring coven. Aren't you precocious?"

Jezzie's relapse hadn't fully died out; or it was gone but left her with lingering symptoms. She had skirted around the issue but he had figured it out. Based on what she'd told him her symptoms tended to be, it wasn't hard to pick out. "Wallet," he said quietly. She nodded and picked it off his counter, along with the phone next to it. "Phone? Good."

Jezzie was strong willed enough that Embry was afraid that she wouldn't be receptive to help. So he'd always been really careful about stepping over boundaries. He didn't want to make the girl feel like an idiot, but whatever method Embry had adopted (because he sure as hell don't know how he stumbled on it; he was running blind) seemed to be working. She responded well to it and didn't yell at him.

"Sanity?"

"Funny," she chided. She took a last look at the countertop, absently rubbing a spot on her lower back as she made for the door. However, Embry being an all encompassing being being blocked her exit. She was forgetting and her back was still bothering her?

Embry held my arm out and grasped her shoulder, causing her to meet his eyes. He couldn't help his glance down to her leg as she tried to shake the feeling back into it again. "You okay?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "Four."
Just to clear up any confusion: the whole shebang with Irina stopping in town and seeing Nessie and the shapeshifters has happened in Jezzie's absence. Just like it does in canon. I'm not rewriting the whole shtick, because, well, I'm kind of assuming you've already read it. So that's what happened there at the end. Sorry for any confusion.

Also, have you guys ever seen someone drop the tranny out of a really old (or conversely, really new and expensive) car? It's horrifying and awesome.
I've Seen Loneliness

Chapter Notes

**Trigger/Warning**: This chapter has allusions to/mentions of child abuse; nothing graphic, no witnessing of the act itself - only discussion. I know some of my readers have sensitivities to certain material, and I plan to add a trigger warning when certain things crop up in my fics. Heed the Archive Warnings, bebes.

Wednesday, December 20, 2006 (cont.)

Embry had imagined Jezzie calling a meeting worthy of a UN summit or at least some kind of grand bonfire and weird ceremonies. Instead, she simply drove to Jake's house – he was actually there, which was surprising – insisting that if Jake thought it was workable, then they could call Carlisle.

"What do you mean you want to help?" Jake looked at her aghast.

"Look," she said rolling her eyes. "Before you get that holier-than-thou face on, Jacob Black, hear me out. I have skills. A lot of skills. I'm an EMT and a first responder. I'm trained to treat a variety of injuries on short notice and I learned in an urban environment. I know all about the Pack, the Cullens, and now the werewolves. The fact is, if meeting these Volty-whatsits is going to result in bloodshed – and you pretty much said it will – I will be a good asset."

Jake had the decency to look taken aback, but didn't shoot her down right away. Unlike Embry. "No way!" Damn, she'd been right about not telling him.

She raised her hand and held it petulantly in his face. "Embry, I'm having a talk with the Alpha. Do you need to wait outside?"

"No!" he shouted, slightly miffed at her brush off. "I don't need to wait outside, because this meeting should be over. What makes you think you can survive in a battle against vampires and werewolves?"

"Don't you dare talk to me like that!" She exhaled an angry breath through her nostrils. "You're upsetting the Alpha," she informed Embry plainly.

Jake uttered a single laugh at the way Jezzie channeled her anger in a way that they all knew was just making Embry angrier. Jake just shrugged noncommittally. Bastard. "He's got a point, Jez. Why do you think this is a good idea? Besides your skill base. This is not basic medical care. This is combat. For shapeshifters."

"Well there are a lot of contingencies. I'm not totally stupid. I don't have a death wish. I figured a chat with the Cullens would be in order. Some of them must have dealt with the Volturi in the past; I can find out if they're diplomatic in their acts of war. People don't kill the lifesavers. From my experience, I have seen that warring factions just don't do it. EMTs, Medics, First Aid and CPR volunteers and the like? They tend to be neutral territory."

"Yeah, because the EMTs will help anyone. I'm assuming you're not offering your services to the Italian bloodsuckers as well? Because that I'm opposed to."
"Minor technicality," she rolled her eyes. "But what would happen if they killed me? If in the midst of the battle they spilled my blood?"

"A serious feeding frenzy for all vamps present."

"Exactly," she pointed at him with a wry smirk. "And why distract your own troops? I say, I talk to Carlisle – the man works at the hospital, he can get supplies – I'll come with you guys and stay on the nearby ATV trails. That way it looks like I may not even be with you."

"Because that sounds like such a good idea!" Embry was going to continue ranting, but Jake raised his hand and his posture was all business Alpha. Embry couldn't help the silence that fell over him.

"And you'll stay behind the tree line and just hope for the best?"

"If they're going to be uncivilized about it, I'll split. Back to the rez, behind the treaty line," there was a pretty obnoxious eye roll with that last part. "If we find they'll mostly leave me be, I'll run med patrol. You guys heal fast, not instantaneously, and if you're getting ripped up by someone of equal strength you're going to need someone to at least staunch the flow of blood or make up a decent tourniquet while you heal."

"No fighting though. Purely support system?" Jake actually looked like he was considering this, but Embry still found he couldn't speak.

"Of course not," she scoffed. "I'm not stupid. But the thing is, if you leave your injured on the field of battle they will kick you when you're down and they will kill you. I've seen it happen. It's worth a shot. Everyone's gonna run some risk that day. I have skills – I know I'll be really out of my element – but I demand that you at least consider using me. We can work on nit picking my security later."

Jake was quiet for a moment and Embry was praying that he would chalk this all up to excessive enthusiasm and say no. "This has potential," he finally acceded with a nod.

Jezzie perked up immediately. "Wonderful! I'll call Carlisle. At the treaty line, shall we? Good? Good." And without waiting for a response she bounced out of the room flipping her phone open.

Embry stood there, unable to move, unable to talk, though he was pretty sure only the talking bit was Jake's fault. Jake sat on the couch and waved his hand, indicating Embry's permission to speak and move freely.

"Are you insane, Jake? She's human! She could get killed! You're actually considering letting her do this? What the hell is wrong with you?" As a way to avoid a spontaneous phase in Jake's living room, Embry took to pacing, which helped marginally. If 'marginally' meant 'not at all'.

"Dude, she volunteered. And while her case has holes in it, it has potential."

"Man..." Embry sighed. "If this was Emily or Kim or a human Bella, you would put the kibosh on this like that."

He shook his head. "Jezzie is her own person, Emb. She volunteered for this. Kim and Emily are roped in by someone else's biology. And Bella's a mess – there's not a lot of contesting that. " He was quiet for a moment, watching Jezzie out the window as she talked on the phone.

"She's not like the other girls, Embry. She's here by choice and she has valid skills to offer. She's right; it'll be dangerous for all of us, but can you fault the girl for having the balls to be willing to walk into battle with us?"
"She. Could. Get. Killed," Embry enunciated like Jake was deaf. He might've been. Embry didn't think he was hearing a word he was saying. Jake gave Embry a look that said he was pushing his luck and Embry immediately lowered my head a bit.

"I'm not saying that I'm just going to let her have at it and let her run interference, dragging bodies off the battlefield and shit. All I'm saying is that we could use her. We'll talk with Carlisle and see what we can come up with. Have some faith in the girl."

"I have plenty of faith in her. It's the rest of the world I'm worried about."

Now it was Jake's turn for an eye roll. "Well, I'm glad she's assertive enough to prevent you from overreacting all the time. I swear, you're worse than Jared or Sam on this. I'm not authorizing your opinion with any kind of sway on this matter. You're way too biased. You can come, because I know you'll probably bust an artery if I make you stay."

"But—" Embry opened his mouth ready for a rebuttal. He didn't even know why he bothered. Embry got a quick look and was silenced again.

"You will stand down on this, Embry," Jake said firmly. "She is her own player in this. You have no charge over her; that's me and Rachel's territory. She brings her own cards to the table."

Embry withered under the Alpha tone, forced to actually sit down as Jacob bound him to his word. Embry could feel the shift in power structure. It reorganized and the hierarchy crowded and complicated. Embry had never felt Pack structure in relation to Jezzie before. That was odd. It was distant, but still there. For this occasion, Jezzie outranked him and he couldn't assert his own opinions over her unless she asked him. Jezzie was Pack now. Human pack.

Embry looked up at Jake, pretty much blown away by what just happened. "Did you just…" Embry began to ask, hoping Jake would catch his drift.

Jake looked at Embry through the corners of his eyes and shook his head. "No," he said slowly and peeked out the window where Jezzie was still talking. "She… did it herself."

"Are you telling me she outranks me?"

Jake was just kind of dazed for a moment and shook his head again. "Just on this issue – that was all me. But…" he shook his head and spoke again. "Are you sure she's not Quileute?"

Embry just stared at Jake, his mouth hanging open. "The redheaded Sullivan from Detroit?" Why was that even relevant? Weren't there bigger issues at hand? Jake just laughed once and went out to the porch as Jezzie finished her international relations circuit and Embry just kept thinking the same thing.

She outranks me. They'll never let me live this down.

The new structure was pretty obvious as they approached the treaty line. Carlisle had shown up with his 'sons' Edward and Jasper. He never showed up alone, Embry'd learned. He guessed it made sense, considering Jake never went to talk to him alone. Even though they were all 'allies', there was still some serious tension.

Embry could've seriously lived a fine and peaceful life without Edward in it. The guy read minds and, honestly, Embry might've well have just stripped naked in front of him and done a little dance. Now that he was used to regulating his own thoughts for his brothers, he'd tried to adopt it around the leeches. But it was hard changing up a brain like that while human – being a wolf was different.
Embry was pretty sure all this exposure to leeches and being forced to remold his thoughts was giving him serious brain damage.

They were creepy enough in the now dark evening - they almost glowed. It was friggin' disturbing, Embry thought.

He also didn't need Edward figuring out that Jezzie outranked him and sharing it with the rest of his family. If they had any other senses on alert, they'd figure it out. It wasn't that Embry had an issue with Jezzie outranking him, like some kind of macho issue, but the guys would never let him live it down. And he was pretty sure the hundred billion year old vampires wouldn't see it the same way.

Anyways, Jake, Paul and Jezzie approached the treaty line side by side and Embry stayed about a half step behind Jezzie. The hierarchy issues didn't slip past Jasper's notice as Embry watched him glance down the line and quirk a brow. Damn army kid.

"Hello again, Jezzie," Carlisle offered his placid smile. "Feeling better?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Better. Thank you."

"Excellent. So you said you had a proposition? Have the others been briefed?"

"No" she shook her head, all business. "Just Jake. It seemed like a reasonable endeavor, so I figured it bring it before you all."

Jezzie then relayed her ideas. Explaining again her skill base. Everyone knew; the girl worked weekends and three weeknights as a medic for the whole county. She told Paul and Carlisle about keeping behind lines, only working as support. Embry was hardly an unbiased party, but she presented her case well.

As much as Embry was willing to shoot her down, he didn't necessarily want to hear it from the leeches. He didn't want her there because he was afraid she'd get hurt. The leeches would turn her down because they didn't think she could do it. They'd make her feel like an insignificant human.

"It all hinges on a few contingencies," Jezzie finished. "I need to know what kind of rules of war the Volturi observe and if they'll kill me if I help."

Edward had been staring at Jezzie way too intently as she relayed her information. Embry didn't like it. The wolf didn't like it. Edward looked a bit confused the few times the wolf actually made its opinions vocal in his head. That's what you get for poking around in a shapeshifter's head. Embry didn't know what he was getting at. Edward was always really hard to read because he always looked miserable or confused. But Embry's attention shifted to the left as Carlisle turned to Jasper. That's right, he remembered, Jasper had experience with this crap.

"I can't really say as to their tactics in regards to enemies. I've only ever known them in a friendly capacity. Jasper, do you have any advice to offer."

Jasper looked at Jezzie inquisitively. It was less creepy and more curious. To be honest, Jasper probably weirded Embry out the least of his whole family. He didn't know why, maybe because Jasper didn't pretend to be a normal human. Jasper took a few steps forward and looked to Jake for permission to come closer. Jake nodded and Paul put a firm hand on Embry's shoulder. He could feel the wolf growl from deep inside but prevented it from being heard.

He is dangerous, this one. We must protect her, she is human.
Jasper circled once around Jezzie and she kept her tall stance. Embry knew the vampires made her a uneasy still, but she kept up her façade. It must've even tricked Jasper because he didn't seem to indicate that she was nervous. Or maybe Embry's emotional chaos was just overshadowing her dulcet anxiety. Who the hell knew?

Then when Jasper was almost in front of her again, he bent forward slightly and sniffed her. He *sniffed* her. *Kill it!* The wolf demanded before its desires were drowned out by incoherent snarling. Embry almost lunged forward but between Paul's physical grip and Jake's mental one, he only issued a slight twitch. Damn the hierarchical system.

Jasper then took a few steps back and conversed at would have been an awkward distance for normal people but just comfortable enough for the rest. "Are you sick, Jezzie?"

"Yes," she nodded. "I'm relapsing."

"And you're on something?"

"Prescription meds," she said slowly, like he might've been asking about something else. "That's it."

He nodded and stepped back across the treaty line. "The only rules of warfare I know the Volturi to adhere to," Jasper said to all gathered. "Is kill only the combatants and do not kill the innocent. Jezzie won't be a combatant, that rules out the first qualifier and her being far back enough in the woods will help. The scent of her blood is masked – at least from our kind – by the scent of her illness flaring and the synthetic nature of the medication she's on."

"So you're saying they won't smell her?" Paul asked.

"Probably not. If they do, they likely won't kill her. It's not appealing at all. It'd be like eating a pet goldfish."

"What's the possibility of her being used as a distraction?" Jake asked. "Or as bait. We don't need her being swiped up as collateral."

Jasper considered for a moment. "From a tactical point of view, it doesn't make sense. Whatever happens, it's going to be quick and straightforward. This'll be a battle – not a war. Spilling her blood would only result in distraction. She's only one person and would prove to be far more tempting to the Volturi – who continue to sustain themselves on human blood. They're conservative in their warfare. It's not a risk I'd believe they'd run."

"All right," Jezzie nodded. "So, nothing in this situation is a guarantee, but I think we can assume that my odds of survival in this are better than others. So, I'll be there to help. Carlisle, if I can work with you to get some materials, that would be helpful. Given your family's… condition… I don't think there's much I can do for them but with the wolves I can help marginally. I'll keep my distance. I can position myself down wind the day of. If anyone gets hurt, I'll be there to help or talk or at least supervise a healing process."

She stopped talking and no one said anything. Embry still couldn't speak. Jake was so getting a best friend beat down, later for that one. Alpha or not.

"You already said they outnumber you. You're gonna need all the help you can get."

"I don't have any problems with it," Carlisle acceded. "Jacob? Her personal ties put her under your jurisdiction; she only lives in Forks. What do you think?"

"I won't have her there unguarded. I won't be letting Collin into live combat, so I'll post him with Jez.
He'll also be good for communication back and forth."

Jezzie put her Jeep in park outside Embry's house and he could hear her sigh. It was dark, but her hair shone bright even with just the one streetlight on Embry's entire road. It was getting late, and they both had classes to go to the next day. Embry had been doing that whole 'education' thing lately. At least for the past couple months. Apparently his GPA was salvageable. It was a good thing he had a photographic memory or he would've been dead in the water...

"All right," Jezzie began. "Let's talk about this, Emb. What's your deal? Why do you take such issue to me being involved in this upcoming hoopla?"

He glanced towards her, not moving from his spot. Once Jake had lifted his Alpha voodoo, and Paul had stopped holding him back from dismembering Jasper, he'd realized having to fight the demands of ranked Pack was fucking exhausting. "Because I'm kind of worried as hell that you'll get killed. Jezzie you'll be the only human there. I don't need a flock of those Italian douche bags capitalizing on that and wringing you dry or snapping your neck."

"What's to stop them from doing that to anybody? They're ridiculously strong, right? What's to stop them from doing the same thing to you, or Anna, or Esme, or Edward or any of them, huh?"

"Nothing. But you're—"

"Don't give the 'you're human' BS, Embry Call. Rachel will probably be back here on the reservation orchestrating things – she's human. You're human too. And death doesn't come in degrees – either you're dead or you're not. Either someone has the ability to kill you or they don't. It doesn't matter if they're ten or a thousand times stronger than me. They could kill any of us."

"Jezzie, you'd be a target – a sitting duck – they'd take you out just for the fun of it."

"I'm not going to be there, Embry," she reiterated, the volume of her voice climbing. She sat up straight in her spot and inched a bit closer to the halfway point of her bench seat. She kind of wanted to issue Embry a firm poke with her index finger to set him straight. "I'm going to be yards and down wind, ready to help anyone that gets hurt. Do you seriously want to sideline me at the expense of possibly having one of your Packmates bleed out or have nowhere to go if they get hurt?"

"No!" he shouted in consternation. He met her posture, sitting up straighter, the two clearly in defensive positions and only about six inches apart. "But there's got to be a better way to do this!"

"Embry," Jezzie interrupted in frustration. "What is going on? There has to be more to it than this. It's not because I'm a girl because you don't have any issue with Leah or Anna being involved and it's not because I'm human because you're not worried about Rachel. What is it, Embry? What is going on? There has to be reason you're overreacting like this."

He was shaking now and Jezzie didn't even care. She probably should have. But she wasn't going to let him do this. She wasn't going to let his worry and his concern hold her back from helping. And she wanted some decent answers. There had to be a reason he only took issue with her. Maybe he doubted her skills?

Maybe he thought she couldn't do it because she was sick. That was a real possibility. She'd hardly been showing her personal and physical strength the past couple weeks, since her MS symptoms had pushed her into a flare. She hoped that wasn't the case. She really didn't. So much of her would hate if that was the case. Because part of her would be inclined to admit it was true; she wasn't as capable as normal humans on a bad day. But part of her would just want to smack him if he said it – for
bringing it up, for doubting her, for thinking that she was weak, or needed protecting. She didn't know what she'd do if that was his primary concern.

Then he finally exploded. "Just because I don't want a girl I'm fucking crazy about in the middle of this stupid-ass war doesn't mean I'm a chauvinist or doubt you! I just want you to be fucking safe! Because I won't be able to fucking deal with it, if you get hurt in this, Jez!"

She just stared at him. Her mouth hung open slightly and her eyes refused to blink. She didn't know what to say. She just stared at him, sat up to his eye level, only a few inches away from him. "I…" she tried working her mouth to little avail. That was not what she'd been expecting at all. "You…"

Embry didn't respond, but he closed the distance between the two of them. Before she could even form a coherent thought, she felt his mouth on hers. She squeaked in surprise as his hand wrapped around her neck and into her hair, and his other found her waist. He pulled her flush to him—closing the few inches worth of personal space they previously had—and she still felt her back meet the Jeep's door behind her.

His skin felt hot. Embry and the other wolves, she knew, were warm but this was insane. Not hot enough to burn, but certainly enough for her to build a sweat if she stayed this close for any length of time. She'd never been this close before and it was… new and fascinating. His mouth was urgent against hers and the sensation surprised her.

Her shock broke long enough for her to respond. She kissed him back, her lips' caress meeting his. When she didn't push him away, his urgency slowed and grew to tenderness. Her hands disentangled from their place trapped between their two bodies. She used one hand to pull him closer by the back of his head, and the other she splayed on the door's window to keep herself from toppling to the floor of the Jeep.

His torso pinned her to the door and she pushed back against him, enjoying the feeling of their bodies pressed together. However, he took her response in the negative assuming she wanted him to stop, and he began to back up. An involuntary noise of displeasure echoed out of her throat. She pulled her hand from the window to tug on his shirt and keep him from moving away.

Embry was surprised—but not displeased—when Jezzie's torso crashed back into his, knocking him back just a bit. The girl had made her feelings clear, so Embry didn't feel bad at all about pulling her close enough that she sat in his lap.

It was all starting to make sense now, she realized through the tidal wave of emergency hormonal response. Embry was freaked because of how much he cared about her. Was that going to stop her? Probably not. But the guy clearly needed some kind of reassurance. Jezzie wondered how long he'd been carrying all this stuff around inside of him.

She tried to channel some level of comfort to the boy—more or less—wrapped around her. It made sense now. She understood. Jezzie felt safe here—if surprised—tucked in Embry's embrace, warm and strong. Maybe this was all just the confluence of their time together. Maybe it was inevitable. She wished Embry wouldn't panic and worry nearly as often as she suspected he did.

Their lips parted, though Embry didn't move otherwise, and they both gasped a breath. Jezzie opened her eyes and could see Embry's were still closed—his forehead resting against her own. She could read him like a book. Always the paranoid wolf, she would've bet the farm he was concerned he'd just overstepped the line and done permanent damage. He was probably now thinking about all the repercussions of doing something on a whim instead of overthinking it to death as he was prone to do.
"Well, now things are starting to make a lot more sense," Jezzie said quietly.

_Friday, December 22, 2006_

"No, you go."

"But you're a girl."

"So? You know her better."

"How long are you guys going to argue on my porch before coming in?" Jezzie spoke aloud. "I may not have shapeshifter hearing, but I'm not deaf."

She wasn't blind anymore, either, thanks to that regular steroid regimen. She'd only missed a few days of classes a while back and even if she didn't see any of her friends outside class – and that meant the Pack – she was a lot better at keeping in touch, now. She'd made the conscious effort – like having dinner with the Atearas and then going to see Embry, which was a visit that had gone in all sorts of unexpected directions...

Walking around was a lot easier too. Leah and Rachel stopped by every now and then, since Jezzie's stamina still wasn't up to snuff, and she hadn't been back to rugby in a few weeks. Seth was around when he couldn't focus on his homework and Anna had patrols.

She heard Anna issue something between a scoff and a sigh and shove Seth bodily through the door. They _tromped_ down the hallway and Jezzie thought something had to be off if they weren't their normal silent selves. She never heard the wolves make any unintentional noise. The two collapsed into stools at the breakfast counter and Jezzie just observed as they stared at the laminate. _Kids_, was Jezzie's first thought. She was reminded once again that both Seth and Anna were only fifteen – despite looking older than Jezzie.

Jezzie didn't say anything. She went to the fridge and pulled out a gallon of milk and two glasses from the cabinet. Moments later both Seth and Anna looked up as Jezzie slid each of them a glass of chocolate milk and placed the plate of snickerdoodles between the three of them. She didn't bake much at all – she wasn't very good at it – but after Emily's coaching this batch had come out pretty good. And chocolate milk fixed almost any problem for someone under the age of twenty-one. Hell, it fixed a lot of problems for those older than twenty-one, too. But she wasn't about to offer either of them – no matter how old they looked – the scotch.

Seth and Anna were kids, and they were clearly having a problem.

"What's going on you guys?" Jezzie asked.

"Can you keep a secret?" Anna asked as she pulled a cookie from the plate. Seth was still staring at the countertop.

And because Jezzie was already feeling older sister – borderline maternal – with these two pups in her kitchen, she was a little wary of Anna's question. Ominous indeed. "That depends," Jezzie replied honestly. Because if they were coming to her with something they couldn't handle, it might be something that Jezzie couldn't handle either. Some secrets were best not kept.

"It's Collin," Seth told the counter.

"Okay," Jezzie nodded. "I haven't seen him around much. Is he okay?"
"He's been at Jake's," Seth replied, not answering her question. Jezzie knew Collin spent a lot of time at the Black's. Jake was Collin's mentor of sorts and Jezzie suspected that food and a couch and Pack family was what Collin needed. Because sneaking out of the house on a regular basis when you were only thirteen – and not being able to explain anything – caused a lot of rifts in a family.

"Actually," Anna amended. "It's his brother."

"Collin has a brother?" Jezzie had seen Collin's mom and dad around, but never a brother.

"Tommy," Anna nodded. "He's twenty five. Mostly lives down in Hoquiam, but…" she paused here biting down on her cookie and chewing.

Jezzie didn't know what the hell was going on, but whatever it was that Seth and Anna were trying to tell Jezzie, she realized it was important. So she didn't push, she let them get it out in their own time.

"He's not a very nice guy," Anna finished.

"He likes to beat the shit out of his little brother," Seth offered abruptly looking towards Anna.

Jezzie's eyes bugged a bit with that revelation, but she still didn't react. They obviously had more to say. "Excuse me?" Jezzie said, indicating she'd like them to elaborate.

"It's kind of well-known on the res, here, that Tommy Littlesea is the bad seed. He lit out La Push when he was seventeen and moved down to Hoquiam. Never finished high school, drinks a lot, does a lot of stupid and illegal things. Mostly he just sells, but the Council has kinda chased him off La Push. But he still comes around every now and then for days at a time and we don't really know why."

"Didn't," Anna interposed. "We didn't know why he came around."

"But now you do?" The two nodded in unison. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"There's a big age difference between Collin and Tommy," Anna said. "And usual sibling beat downs are kind of hard to apply to brothers that are twelve years apart."

"Like, totally not normal," Seth added. "But it's gotten worse. Like a lot worse. I mean, Collin's not going to get seriously hurt by Tommy now that he's phased, but still…"

"He still comes around looking like someone backed over him with a semi," Anna stated bluntly.

"And he's skittish as hell."

Jezzie knew that one. "So not normal sibling rivalry?" Jezzie offered. Already realizing that was the case. Again the two nodded.

"For a long time we kind of assumed that he just was trying to keep Collin scared," Anna said. "Tommy didn't want Collin spilling about what he does for a living. And it's kinda been ramped up since he noticed Collin hanging with the Sam last year."

"What's Sam got to do with it?" Jezzie asked.

"Sam and Tommy used to be good friends in high school," Seth offered. "He used to hang out with him and my sister – and even Rachel too – all the time, but in like their junior year or something Tommy started to go off the tracks and get into the drug thing. Sam, Rach and Leah said no and
bailed. Ever since he's been wicked paranoid that one of them's gonna sell him out.

"And Collin being seen almost constantly with Sam or Leah and practically living in Rachel's house is freakin him out even more," Jezzie concluded.

"Yep," Anna popped the 'p'.

"But then obviously Sam isn't around much anymore now that he's trying to phase out and Leah and Rach goes to school. But Tommy is still on Collin's case – so it's not just that."

Jezzie narrowed her eyes a bit as the plot thickened, but Seth didn't say anything further.

"So why is he still abusing him?" Jezzie intentionally threw that piece of vocabulary into the conversation. Clearly, the pair knew what was happening and that it was wrong, but she was unsure if they'd made the technical and legal connection. Tommy was twenty five, Collin was his thirteen year old brother. It was abuse.

Seth's mouth clamped shut rather resolutely but Anna only fiddled with her fingers. Her mouth moved a few times as she shifted in her seat. Jezzie let Anna take her time. "He thinks Collin's gay."

Jezzie nodded.

"And, like, I realize that whether or not he is is totally irrelevant, but Collin's mind is like a steel trap. No one else besides Jake and Sam have that much control over their heads and what we can and can't hear in Packmind and Collin's only thirteen and he's still just a pup like us. So not knowing his sexual orientation was one thing, but we couldn't even discern that that's why Tommy was beating him up in the first place because he never lets anything slip through."

"How did you two find this out?" Jezzie asked. Did they have evidence or was this all conjecture at this point?

"We were patrolling and Collin's house is right along the old treaty line," Seth offered. "Tommy and Collin were on the back porch and Tommy was yelling and screaming about Sam and Leah and keeping his trap shut and then all the gay slurs and jibes about his sexual activity and Brady. That pretty much gave it away."

Jezzie just blinked in wonder. Oh...

"We didn't hear anything after that," Seth continued. "Because Anna flipped out and ran screaming and naked into the Littlesea's yard ready to take Tommy's head off."

And then Anna's mouth snapped shut, just like Seth had and she leaned back in her chair. "Shit," she muttered. "I mean, he never told any of the Pack this for a reason. And I get that having some privacy is nice but this…"

Seth shook his head. "This wasn't something we couldn't tell anyone. We didn't know what to do Jezzie."

Jezzie offered a sad glance towards Anna and Seth who clearly felt terrible for selling Collin down the river. Jezzie walked around the island counter and hugged them both very tightly to her side. "I'm glad you guys came to talk to me about this. I really am. You can always tell me anything. But, I'm sorry, this is a secret I can't keep."

Anna's head clapped down on the counter and Seth exhaled. "What do you mean?"
"Look, as an adult – and a medical professional – who views not only Collin, but you two, as kids, I can't let abuse slide. Not morally, not legally. As an EMT, I am mandated by law to report suspected child abuse. And what's happening to Collin is beyond sibling issues, is beyond bullying. It's abuse of a child."

"Jez," Seth sighed. "If you call the cops, though, everything's going to get all screwy. We can't have the police and child services and the friggin’ Bureau of Indian Affairs all up on La Push. Jezzie, the Pack… we'll be so screwed. It'll be our fault."

"Seth, any authority coming here is coming to investigate abuse of a child. They're not going to be looking for the local boys and girls to turn into transformers. Yeah, you guys might have to put some shirts on and lay low the few days anyone's here, but isn't that worth the long term health and safety of a Packmate?"

"Mindfuck," Anna muttered.

"You're telling Jake," Seth replied. "Not me."

Jezzie would call the Forks PD this afternoon and then she'd call Jacob Black. And if he had a problem with that, Jezzie had a few choice words for that boy.

Going to see Charlie in Forks PD to anonymously report a case of suspected child abuse at the Littlesea place in La Push was hard. And Jezzie sat in Charlie Swan's office, holding her roiling stomach the whole time. She didn't know how she felt about making the report anonymously. She felt like the less she was involved the less it might endanger the Pack and Washington-state law allowed for anonymous mandatory reporting. Charlie had told her that she didn't need to put her name on the report even if he knew who she was, but tribal policies might require her to at least be named before a judge.

Then she went to the Black's. Because this was something Jake needed to hear in person. After she knocked on the door, she politely declined the offer to come inside and simply took to pacing up and down Jake's porch. She noticed the cars in the driveway and kind of wanted this to be a private conversation. "Are you alone?"

"Rach is inside asleep…" he answered carefully. "Is this the part where you kill me and bury me in the woods?" he asked. She didn't respond, but only continued pacing. On her lap back past him he reached out and carefully snagged her arm. He pulled her close and into a hug. Jacob was highly dependent on physical contact with his Pack and Jezzie noticed that had transferred over to her, too. The entire Pack thrived on closeness. They all sat closer than normal people did, touched each other more often than most friends did. And if any other normal, non-shapeshifting, non-Alpha wolf had randomly pulled her into a hug, she might've been concerned. But she knew Jake was just trying calm the frenzy he could smell coming off her. And it worked.

Jacob was quite glad that his Alpha voodoo had begun working so well on Jezzie. She had only recently popped into his sense of spatial awareness regarding Pack. Even when human, if Jake thought about it, he could tell where almost everyone was – including the imprints. Especially the imprints. But never had a non-Pack human figured into that awareness. He could never sense his Dad or Sue. And before Anna phased he couldn't sense her either. But Jezzie was beginning to bleed into his conscious mind in a way that only Pack did. And more than physical whereabouts – which he was sure would come in time – he had known that she'd felt… torn… all afternoon.

"Jake, I called the police," she mumbled into his shirt.
"Excuse me," he asked, not moving his arms from around her.

"About Collin. About the abuse. I had to. I'm required by law and my own moral compass. But I wanted to let you know. I know it's going to make the Pack uncomfortable for a few days when people come in and out. I know it's going to make the tribe uncomfortable – and some people might just hate me all the more for it – but I had to do it."

She offered no apology.

Jacob's feelings on the situation with Collin were… complicated… to say the least. Unfortunately, as Alpha, he was often required to play the role of Pack douche bag. Jacob was an Alpha wolf, not a superhero. His wolf required that he take care of his Pack and when it came to Collin he defended and protected him to the point that Tommy Littlesea was too terrified to come within a mile radius of the Black home. Jacob's wolf didn't really understand or acknowledge that there were better paths of action, even if human Jacob did. His wolf's primary focus was protecting the Pack and drawing extra attention to the them by way of an investigation was not a good idea in the wolf's mind. Jacob had been almost incapable of dialing the right phone number or even speaking the right words – stringing all the proper actions together to do what was right.

The human remains of Jacob's soul burned in hatred of the wolf that refused to let him do what was right. He hated that the wolf was callous enough to sacrifice the well-being of one wounded animal for the sake of the rest. And Jacob hated himself a little bit for not having the control required to let his human dominate his wolf – because if the Alpha couldn't dominate his own wolf, who could?

He thought it sounded like a cop out most days.

Jacob had watched his young cousin – more often now that he'd phased – and was amazed by how intuitive and intelligent both he and Brady were. Collin spoke far less often and his mind told the Pack even less, but behind Collin's bastion of total stoic silence, there lived an incredibly perceptive, kind – if not terrified – thirteen year old boy. Self-hate aside, Jacob had managed to put together the best wall he could – a wall of his own personal making – far less durable than Collin's but still another layer of protection as a way to keep his pup – his pup – from being touched.

This is why the male wolves required the female counterbalance. Because Jacob's wolf would never acknowledge that there were sometimes more important things than PackPackPackPack. He could feel the pull of Jezzie's own opinion on his mind – which was odd – usually only other Packmates' persuasions pulled on his mind. When it came time to make decisions, Leah counterbalanced him with her thoughts. And then Rachel. It's how their consensus and decision making worked most often. It's the only way the Pack could operate. The male wolves, the shewolves, the Pack Humans. Jake couldn't ignore Leah, Paul, or even Rachel if he wanted to. But that was it. Jacob could feel the weight of Jezzie's disagreement weighing on the wolf's brutal pragmatism. Jezzie was balancing the scales like Leah did to him so often. She was humanizing him.

This meant Forks police and federal attorneys. This meant the BIA. It meant the FBI and a federal felony charge. Jacob wondered if Jezzie knew just how complicated legal action involving a tribe could get.

"Thank you," he offered quietly, whispering to the top of her head.

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**Sunday, December 24, 2006**

The stress of having to visit Forks PD recently had been rough. Then adding the impending showdown between the Pack, the Cullens, and the Volturi had just salted the wound. The tension
had been getting to everyone. Alice's visions hadn't cleared to the point where she could tell when the Volturi were coming. She just knew they were. Emmett and Paul unwound by beating the crap out of each other. Leah and Anna had taken to going on daily runs with Jezzie – except they jogged half way to Seattle and back – and everyone was pretty sure Jacob was going to pace a hole into the floor. All the nervous energy made Jezzie anxious. She wasn't good at handling it on her own. And none of this explained why she ended up on Paul's couch on Christmas Eve stoned out of her mind.

"She's as high as a kite."

"How much did you let her smoke?"

"Just one."

"What a lightweight."

"I think she's just enjoying it. Lasts longer that way."

"Paul, I can't believe you got Jezzie stoned."

"Embry, I can't believe you didn't think of it first."

"I didn't realize that was a major thing missing from her life."

"Girl's wound tighter than an eight day watch and she can't drink because of her meds. She needs something."

"Stop," came the heavy and lazy voice from the couch. "Talking about me."

From the kitchen table Jared, Paul and Embry could see from Jezzie's knees down as her legs flipped about to a rhythm no one else could hear.

"I'm high, not deaf... All this wolfy hearing, and they all think I'm deaf," she muttered the last bit mostly to herself.

Jared choked a laugh. Maybe they should leave Paul and Jezzie alone together more often? Or maybe not, considering how much they learned about Jezzie's inhibitions (or total lack thereof). She'd always seemed straightlaced, but apparently she was willing to try anything once.

"This is kinda nice," Jezzie admitted, stretching her arms above her head. "Too bad I'm a dirt poor college kid with a pristine record to maintain."

"Anytime you want some pot, Jezzie, just let me know. You don't need to buy that shit."

"Don't tell her that," Embry groaned.

"Who the hell are you?" Paul shrugged. "Her father? If the girl wants some damn weed so she can chill the hell out than c'est la fucking vie."

"That's very nice of you, Paul," Jezzie noted absently. "If a little chauvinist."

"What is with the Paul hate? Jezzie, I'm offering you free drugs and you're calling me a woman-hater? Yes, I know what a chauvinist is, thank you very much," he added before she could reply

"Only because I sense you're offering because you don't want some frail human girl going to buy pot from a scary man twice her size. I know your dealer."
"Or," Paul offered leaning over the back of the couch. "It's because I know a med student's career goes down the shitter the second they're brought up on possession charges. Iron workers? Not so much. Plus, you're way more likely to get caught than me."

"Nuh-uh," she shook her head lazily. Paul grinned. Jezzie was funny when she was stoned. "I am discreet. Besides, you forget where I'm from," she poked him in the shoulder as she kneeled on the couch.

She could now see Jared and Embry at the kitchen table. Jared looked amused and Embry just looked bewildered. "I think someone else needs it more than me," Jezzie offered with a little pout.

"No way, Little Red," Paul shook his head. "Embry's the good kid around here. Doesn't drink or smoke anything."

"Really?" Jezzie cocked her head to the side and laid it against the top of couch. She guessed she noticed that. She was sure next to none of the Pack were old enough to drink but some did anyways. Mostly Jared, Paul, and Leah. Only Leah was old enough, she thought. She never saw it from Sam or Embry. "How come?"

Embry shrugged. "Just never something I got into."

"What he means to say," Jared added. "Is that he actually has a desire and a shot in hell at leaving the rez and going to do something with his life. So he's actually doing the responsible thing and staying clean."

"Are you calling me irresponsible?" Jezzie attempted a glare. She stuck out her tongue before flopping down on the couch and out of Jared an Embry's line of sight.

"It's different for us, Little Red." His tone was mean or patronizing, but actually rather calm and steady – a trait that was cropping up with more frequency in Paul's demeanor as his wolf matured.

"Why?" she demanded craning her neck up to see Paul's face again.

"Because a white girl smoking pot is no big thing. It's actually rather socially acceptable. Reservation kids smoke pot and were just a bunch good-for-nothing junkies taking the government dole."

Jezzie spun around, feeling the trickles of seriousness come back into her consciousness. "Why would you say something like that?"

Paul shrugged. "Because that's the way it is. I don't ever want to leave the area. The Olympic Peninsula is my home. And if that's the case then I could start doing meth tomorrow and no one but another Indian is gonna care. But Embry's gonna have a hard enough time getting people in the professional world to take him seriously without being a smoker or drinker. He's doing himself a favor."

"That is terrible," Jezzie's face pouted into one of complete disappointment.

"Dude, do you have to get all Deloria on her?" Jared asked from the table. "You're killing her high."

"I thought you wanted her to enjoy it," Embry asked with a quirked brow.

And Jezzie did enjoy it. Mostly. But after that, she had a strange and heavy feeling in her stomach the rest of the day.
"How the hell do you say good bye to the girl you love, who isn't your girlfriend, before you go into a fatalities-guaranteed battle royale without it all being a fucking melodramatic cliché?"

"Get her laid? Go out on a positive note?" Quil offered as he rummaged through the cabinets. "Is that old mumbly guy going to be on the TV all night again waiting for the ball to drop in New York? I really hope there's some better TV on, because otherwise we got the shit end of the deal for patrols."

"Number one," Embry rolled his eyes from the Ateara's couch. "That isn't really an option for Jez and I," Embry offered. "And number two, you're mocking a stroke victim."

"You two haven't slept together yet?" Jake asked in astonishment from the chair across from Embry's head.

"Uh, no," Embry replied. "I've only just started talking to her again after she bailed on me for weeks. Before that we were just friends. Now, she can barely walk for the pain, I'm not about fuck the poor girl into paralysis."

"You overestimate your abilities," Quil said, as he flopped into the chair at the other end, and propped his feet on the coffee table.

"Shut up," Embry growled. "And – not that I have an issue with it – but how is it that that isn't something you don't know Jake? You know friggin' everything that happens in our heads. Quil spends the majority of the time reliving bad action movies, but isn't knowing shit your job?"

"Yeah, relevant things," Jacob stated obviously. "Your and Jezzie's relationship hasn't been relevant since she found out about the Pack. I really, really don't want to know about any of your sexcapades. It got a lot easier blocking that shit out when I had to hear Jared all the time. I figured that one out quick."

"Gross," Quil offered absently as he flicked through channels that did not feature 'Dick Clark's babblin' ass'.

"Damn right," Jake replied. "Just wait until either you or Anna gets with someone. That'll be special for all of us."

"No," Quil shook his head. "We'll just ship her to the Himalayas."

Jake rolled his eyes but spoke again. "That doesn't answer the question about sleeping with Jezzie, though. Dude, you've been crazy about this girl for a while time now. She's nice and all, but are you really that retarded? You think about nothing but her. She's got you hanging on her every word and touch. You jumped her shit in her car with no warning whatsoever, and she just went with it. Why not just cash the hell in?"

"This isn't more of that self-hate imprint bullshit, is it?" Quil demanded as he ate his cereal. "Because you can't say you're flipping the bird towards imprinting but still take all the precautions. It's all or nothing, man. You gonna live you're fucking life or not?"

"Said the imprinted wolf…" Embry grumbled.

"Exactly," Quil replied. "You can't let it rule everything you do. I love Claire, like her father, like her brother. No more and no less. The imprint didn't send my guy-genes back to the Maker. Girls are still plenty fuck-hot – hello, I do have a girlfriend – and I can still pick up on when someone's making shit harder than it has to be."
"Amen," Jake agreed.

"I don't want to sound like a dick or anything," Quil continued. "But if you don't say something to that girl, someone else is gonna carpe that diem. If you know what I mean."

"My money's on Seth," Jake noted.

Embry rolled his eyes and sighed in exasperation. "Why is everyone betting on Seth?"

**Tuesday, January 2, 2007**

Jezzie was coincidentally around La Push the day Tommy was arrested. She knew it was coming. But it still took her by surprise. She watched as Charlie Swan's deputy cuffed Tommy and put him in the back of the cruiser. He didn't put up a fight. Neither did his parents. Collin wasn't home. Collin didn't find out until a few days later when he was called in for questioning about charges of abuse.

He almost phased in the police department's lobby.

It wasn't that he was mad. He wasn't really. But Collin never liked being blindsided and that's what he felt like. When Charlie had called his house and asked his mom or dad to bring him by the station for a few questions, he had pretty much assumed it was the latest in Charlie's attempts to appear to be cracking down on the La Push gang situation. But Charlie was all business when Collin had arrived with his Dad the next day after school. Collin was a bit wary as he entered Charlie's office. He could smell the nervous tension and… resignation? as he shut the door behind Collin.

The next hour had been long and painful. Collin didn't feel any particular loyalty to his brother. He never had. But something about telling Chief Swan about how Tommy knocked him around like a cat toy just made him feel like a child. Collin hadn't felt insignificant or helpless in a long time and he'd loved the shit out of it. Collin hated feeling helpless, and for all the weird-ass stuff that came with being Pack, it definitely had helped with that whole helpless thing. He wasn't a scrawny, weak, thirteen year old, punk little brother anymore.

But telling Charlie about how Tommy beat the shit out of him on the daily made him feel like he was eight again. Like he was ratting his brother out to his mom. And sure, Collin knew Tommy was fucked in the head – he had to be – but tattling had never been his style.

Some of the questions made Collin uncomfortable and he assured Charlie that the only thing Tommy had ever done was whack him around. He also did not feel like explaining to Charlie that half of Tommy's ass-whooping was because he thought his brother was a "damn flaming faggot." Collin was mostly content to let Charlie run with the drugs and the gang theory. Which was still mostly right.

Collin tried to regulate his breathing – like Jake had taught him how to do when he felt like he was losing his grip – while Charlie went through a series of paper work. He tried to calm his wolf, convince him he wasn't cornered and that they were fine. Just fine. He could feel Jake inside his mind, easing the tension with the presence of the Pack. He must've known Charlie would be calling him in. Collin's Dad had been allowed to join them for the rest of the meeting. Only the majorly uncomfortable crap had to be one-on-one. Collin was trying not to freak out knowing how much stress this was going to cause the Pack. Yeah, Tommy had been abusing his underage brother and it was a felony offense. That was enough red tape in and of itself. But it got more complicated because Collin and Tommy were registered members of the Quileute tribe and it had all taken place on the reservation.
That made Tommy's actions a federal crime, Charlie informed them. That meant FBI, BIA, and all other sorts of acronyms that meant no good for the Pack. The reservation was going to be swarming with government suits over the next two weeks thanks to all this. That meant that Collin and his family and his whole Pack – his whole tribe – would be under scrutiny in the midst of their already giant supernatural clusterfuck.

And Collin was pretty sure he was going to lose his shit over the whole thing before Charlie let him and his Dad go home. Collin was quiet on the drive home. So was his Dad. He wasn't sure what his parents thought about the whole thing with him and his brother. Both his Mom and Dad knew that Tommy was doing the drug thing in Hoquiam, but he wasn't sure if they'd caught on to the fact that he was still using him as a punching bag on a regular basis. When they were younger, they'd chalked it up to sibling rivalry.

But Tommy moved to Hoquiam full time about the same time Collin had phased. So Collin wasn't visibly bruising anymore. And when he was, his parents were more concerned about him sneaking out at night and hanging out with the troublesome older boys. Maybe they'd thought it had all gone away. Must've sucked to have the truth thrown back in your face by the local police – and relative strangers.

His Mom was on the porch when they got home. She'd been crying. He could smell it, even if he couldn't see it anymore. She smelled ashamed and scared. Definitely scared. Had she been afraid of her oldest son as much as Collin had? It seemed strange to Collin that his Mom would be afraid of Tommy…

She sprung up from the seat on the porch and pulled Collin into the most forceful hug she could manage and he let her. His Dad clapped him on the shoulder and ushered them all inside. A dinner that Collin didn't eat and a long family talk about honesty and new leafs and safety and the impending government visits and better futures ensued. Collin was too dazed, too wound up to even eat what his mother put on the plate in front of him and he lost focus of the conversation after about a half hour. His parents had both finally allowed him to go to his room, after the promise that they'd talk more tomorrow. Collin couldn't wait.

He laid in his bed that night – a rare occurrence – wondering how the hell his whole life had spun out of control so quickly. Phasing had really thrown a monkey wrench into his grip on the world but he really thought he was getting the hang of everything. Until today. Now, his brother – if he didn't go to jail for the rest of his life on his combination of drug and abuse charges – was definitely going to be out for Collin's head. His Pack was going to be operating under an even lower than normal wire as La Push was soon to be overrun with feds and he still had no idea who had told the police that Tommy was beating the crap out of him. Who finally noticed? And after all these years?

He didn't know how to respond. He felt very mechanical, like he was waiting for his head to decide if it was nervous or mad or just freaked. The wolf was not normally confused. And it didn't like feeling that way. It was uncomfortable. It made them both antsy.

Collin glanced at his alarm clock and saw that it was only six o'clock. He could hear both his parent's in their room and the low, even breathing of their own dozing. Collin decided now was as good a time as any to make a break for it. He needed to get to Jake and at least warn him that the res was going to be crawling with suits in less than forty-eight hours.

He yanked his window open quietly, knowing his parents were going to be keeping a much closer eye on him in the near future, and hopped out in one quick motion. He hit the ground and opted to take the woodsy route at least until the end of his road when he would be out of sight of his house. It was still early, still a bit light outside.
He tried to think about who could've tipped off Forks PD about Tommy. He knew it must've been the abuse thing, why else would Charlie have gone through all that if they were only arresting Tommy on drug charges? Tommy was arrested on suspicion of child abuse. No one on the reservation had noticed (or cared) until now. Until Collin was in his teens and it appeared to outsiders that it had stopped. Because Collin didn't bruise anymore and Tommy was never around.

Well, that's how it looked to outsiders… Maybe it hadn't been an outsider.

Collin was in front of Jake's house and his only asylum until today – though he still didn't really like his own place much, it still felt suffocating – when he decided he was pissed. Someone he knew had sold him out. No one would report child abuse that hadn't happened in months. The upsurge in Tommy's beating on Collin was only known within the Pack.

"Fuck," Collin swore as he kicked Jacob's mailbox square in its support post. He felt and heard the wood splinter and the action only made his anger grow. He could feel the wolf pacing in his head. Betrayal and hurt and shame pulsed in his system and he could only stand in Jake's yard fuming.

Jacob sensed his pup in his yard – smelled him – before he even heard him. He stepped outside and he could see Jezzie and Seth on the Clearwater's front porch doing their homework. Neither seemed to notice Collin or Jake for that matter. Jake looked down in time to see Collin half demolish his mailbox. Which he didn't really appreciate, given that he'd only just reinstalled the thing after his father literally mowed it down in a wheelchair-fueled high as he raced down the hill on the way back from Council last week.

But Jake could smell – more than anything – the anger and shame coming off Collin like a force field.

"I messed up," Collin ground out, not meeting the Alpha's eyes. Jake approached the submissive wolf carefully, his hands in his pockets. Calm. "Tommy got arrested. Someone called him in on child abuse charges." Collin muttered the last part so quiet, even Jake could barely hear it. "The whole rez is going to be swarming with assholes for like the next two weeks, Jake. The police, the state, the BIA. I think the friggin' FBI has to come, too, because it all happened on the rez and that kinda thing isn't technically Charlie's jurisdiction and fuck—"

"Collin…" Jake began. He'd expected the explanation. But it didn't quite explain the anger. Or the shame.

"What the fuck, Jake?" Collin replied. "Who the hell sold me out? I know it was Pack. Only you guys know about this shit!"

Jacob had never heard Collin yell or shout and least of all to him. Collin all but walked with his nose in the dirt around ranking wolves – a habit Jake was trying to pull him out of, submission was one thing but Collin's wolf seemed to take it to extremes.

The canine growl that emanated from his chest stirred the notice of the Clearwater porch and from his peripheral vision, Jake could see Jezzie perk her head up and indicate Seth to stay where he was. "Who was it, Jake?"

"Collin," Jake said steadily. "I need you to calm down. Remember where you are. Talk it out, man." He placed a firm hand on the boy's shoulder – the contact meant to calm and stabilize.

Collin's chest rose and fell with his attempts to maintain his breathing and his human form. "Everyone thinks Tommy got the hell out of Dodge, someone Pack sold me out to the fucking cops! And now I'm the reason this whole place is about to become ground zero for federal investigation!"
Who the fuck was it, Jake? I know you know!"

"Collin—"

"Was it Sam? He's been giving me shit about that since he was Alpha? Was it Jared? Brady? Tell me!"

"Collin!" Jacob stepped closer to Collin and wrapped his hand around the back of the pup's neck and held on tight, bending him to his will in a way that Jake didn't like to do very often.

Jacob could feel the ties holding Collin to the Pack fraying at their middle as Collin worked himself into hysteria, thinking his Pack had betrayed him. Jake could feel the wolf inside Collin chomping at the bit and railing against the cage of its human body. Collin was mad but his wolf ripshit. But Collin was keeping it at bay, if only just.

Most wolves had the capacity to tear themselves from Pack if they wanted to, but few wolves ever wanted to. Even fewer could survive. A lone wolf was an almost fatality-guaranteed venture. Collin had – with the exception of Brady – always been a solitary individual. Jacob was very much wary of Collin's snapping his ties to the Pack – intentionally or not – and losing his mind. Collin wasn't old or seasoned enough to control the animal inside him and unfortunately for Collin, his wolf was a strong one. Wolves fell naturally into the Pack, Collin was the only one he'd had to pull back in with an order.

"Collin?" there was a feminine alto from behind the two wolves. Collin almost immediately melted into Jake's grip at the sound of Jezzie's voice and he sat on the Black's lawn. Powerful and hard to control his wolf might be, but it loved and respected the Pack human and would never risk a phase around her. She had been at the Clearwater's – right across the street – watching zombie movies with Leah, when the shewolf's ears had picked up the commotion. Once Jezzie saw that it was Collin she had a pretty good idea of what was happening. Leah didn't have much success trying to keep her in the house...

Jake tried not to sigh in relief as he squatted down – still looking down on Collin and still with his scruff in his iron grip. He glanced towards Jezzie who watched him from the edge of the road. He could tell she wasn't coming any closer in case Collin wasn't safe. Jake only nodded to her, indicating he was fine.

Jezzie stepped closer and rested her hand gently on Collin's shoulder. Jezzie held a strange and previously unfilled place in the Pack. Jacob's Pack had seen a recent slew of female presence – first with Leah, then Anna, Rachel and now Jezzie. But Jezzie was different than the rest. Leah was… well, Leah was Leah and she was damn good at it; she was an Alpha female wolf. Rachel had spent too much time growing up with her father and her little brother and though she cared immensely for the Pack she was more likely to crack skulls than to give someone a hug – which is probably why her and Leah always got along so well. And Anna was fifteen and Quil's little sister – enough said.

Jezzie was… maternal. That's the only way Jake could think of putting it to words. Much like Rachel, Leah, and Anna she didn't take any crap from anybody, but she also had a certain comforting and warm element to her that the others didn't use quite so often. Sure, Jake knew that Leah was about as devoted to Seth as she could be to her own children, but she sure as hell wasn't fostering her stupid Pack brothers through all their self-inflicted BS. And Rachel had a quirky and sarcastic way of caring about people. Jezzie soothed people, and the wolves responded to that immensely.

Jacob was glad for it. Because he sure as hell had no idea how to do whatever it was she did. He mostly thought it was just in the way she lived her life. Jezzie was a very nice. She wasn't very
judgmental and that made her easy to talk to. And she always made people feel like they were worth listening to. Jacob was only now realizing what a critical element Jezzie formed in the Pack.

Collin might've been the lowest ranked wolf, but he wasn't stupid. He didn't mind being the Omega wolf – someone had to do it and he didn't care either way – but sometimes ranked Pack was hard to deal with. For a long time, Collin hated being outsourced to Jacob if only because he wanted to be able to walk around and not be staring at the ground all the time. It wasn't really Jake's fault – Collin couldn't help it. But Collin had never reacted to Jezzie the way he had the other wolves or even Rachel. Because Rachel Black scared the shit out of him.

He didn't react to Jezzie the way he would to a normal ranked Pack member. If anyone else were in her spot. If Paul – or even Anna – had approached him he probably would have lost his shit in the middle of Jake's yard, having been overwhelmed by rank. But Jezzie was always different.

Jezzie sank to her knees next to Collin and stayed close, her face not far from his as she kept her eyes down. "Collin, I called it in. It was me. I found out... and I had to. I'm morally and legally bound."

He issued a deep sigh, emptying his chest before inhaling again through his mouth.

She wound her relatively small arm around his shoulders and sat down next to him, leaning her head on his shoulder. "I'm not sorry."

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_sometime between Christmas and New Year's..._

"Embry! We're going on a field trip!"

"Excuse me?" Embry leaned out of his bathroom, the toothbrush dangling from his mouth, as Leah charged into his house.

"Is your Mom home?" she asked in a quiet voice. He shook his head. "A field trip to Neah Bay," she clarified in her normal volume. "Remember Carlisle blathering all about how you're all Makah?"

Embry nodded. "Well, I know some people; I've been looking into it. We're gonna find out who the hell you are."

"Are you serious?" he asked doubtfully.

"Absolutely."

"Ballin'. Give me five minutes."

An hour later had managed to get both Leah and Embry up the coast to Neah Bay, in Makah territory, in the Clearwater's claptrap sedan.

"This is gonna require some groundwork," Leah told him as she unfolded a map of Neah Bay on the dashboard. "So this is the confines of the reservation. We're gonna start in the center where all the administrative stuff is. We'll dig through records, births, deaths and such. We're trying to find anyone connected with your Mom."

"Okay," he nodded.

"Do you know of any names – any people – connected with your Mom?"

"Nope. Nothing," he shook his head, still with a grin of excitement on his face.
"All right," she nodded with a sigh of resignation, knowing this would take some time. Embry nodded and Leah was a little… surprised… maybe by how interested he was. Or at least how interested he was in something she knew. Leah hadn't had a chance to let her interests and hobbies shine through in a while.

A few hours in the dusty archival bowels of Neah Bay's records room had yielded a lot of sneezing and blurred vision. "You do this for fun, Leah?" Embry asked. He she knew the histories of most of the tribes up and down the coast of the state. She wrote and recorded everything. She was a crazy tribal history buff.

"I do," he could hear the smile in her voice, even if he could only see her back from where he was. They'd come across what they'd inferred were Embry's maternal grandparents. Both had been dead for twenty years, and there were no signs of any siblings. Embry corroborated that his Mom was an only child.

"Oh! Oh!" Leah shrieked as she pulled what looked like a yellowing index card from the box in her lap. "I think I found something." Embry tried not to send the box on his lap flying – reorganizing the box of 1982 Tribal Council minutes would've taken the better half of the next year. "Look! Look!" she pointed once he joined her. "It's a form for change of address from 1989. All it says is 'Call', but your Mom seems to be the end of the Call line here in Neah Bay. No other Call's pop up besides her parents. Doesn't give a first name, but she's the only one that would've still been alive – and it lists where she moved from, to where she moved to."

"Awesome. Time to snoop?"

"You bet!"

The original address hadn't given them much to go on. A young family of four had recently moved into the home and they'd bought it from an older gentlemen who moved in with his kids. His name hadn't rung any bells for either Embry or Leah, which given how long they'd spent digging through relevant records probably wasn't a good sign.

The second address, the address that Call aged 18-25 had moved to, was a duplex. No one was home in the first half of the house, and in the second half a small, wrinkled old woman opened the door. She had long white hair, and Embry very much thought she looked like she could be Queen of the Elves from some fantasy novel. Her eyes were large and welcoming she barely reached his ribcage.

"Yes? May I help you?" she asked firmly. He supposed two massive, unfamiliar native children showing up on her front stoop was not necessarily cause for good news. Embry had been under strict instruction from Leah to speak only when spoken to, and to let her lead the conversation.

"Hi, Mrs. Nollman," Leah offered kindly. "I'm Leah. And this is Embry. We're from La Push and we're doing some research about Pacific Northwestern tribal folklore. For school. We were wondering if we could talk to you for a bit?"

She looked over both the youth in an appraising sort of way, and invited them onto her screened in porch. She brought them some iced tea and Leah asked a few questions and took notes about a few of the legends that the woman recalled with clarity – the ones passed through her family.

Embry found it fascinating to listen to Mrs. Nollman. She sort of melted into the rocking chair she sat in, almost like it was a throne. Maybe she was an Elf Queen. She told the Makah legends in a measured air that he'd only ever heard from Old Quil. She talked like she was passing on the ultimate word – the meaning to life, and the reason for the universe – like she had lived the legends. She
might not have lived them, but Embry realized that Makah lore lived and breathed inside of her blood just as Quileute legends wove through the Pack. You were impelled to pay attention.

Leah's questions about legends had been mostly leading. She wanted to see if the woman had anything else relevant to offer them before she got to the real reason for their visit. Embry thought Leah would've been a kick ass poker player.

"One more question, Mrs. Nollman. We were looking for a…" Leah flipped through her small notepad, "Tiffany Call? We had a couple questions for her, too, but we haven't been able to find her. Would you happen to know where we could find her?"

"Oh, little Tiffany," Mrs. Nollman perked up. "Well, I suppose she isn't little anymore – probably into her thirties by now. Anyways… she actually lived here, did you know that?"

"Really?" Leah feigned surprise. "That's a coincidence. You wouldn't happen to know about her? Where we could find her?"

"Oh, it was almost twenty years ago, now that she lived here. I took the poor thing in after her parents passed. She was a nice girl. A little quiet. I let her stay as she finished out high school. Wasn't long after that, though she started seeing this boy."

"A boy?" Leah asked innocently.

"Mhm," Mrs. Nollman nodded. "Stanley, I believe his name was. Stanley something or other. A bit touched in the head. He had gotten lost in the woods when he was a boy, and it never sat well with him. But when he got older and started drinking – he was a few years older than Tiffany – he would tell all these outlandish stories about that night he got lost in the woods."

"What kinda stories?" This time Leah's curiosity was genuine. Embry thought his head was going to explode. He didn't know why, but this woman knew his. She really had lived up here during her childhood. She's known Mrs. Nollman. Maybe she'd sat on this porch in this chair, just like Embry had.

"Well, he was convinced he'd seen something… otherworldly." Mrs. Nollman looked doubtful and explained the story in a tone that suggested she knew it was dubious at best. "He'd thought he'd seen wolves bigger than bears running through the woods with men – as if any such thing could happen!"

"And Tiffany and this guy, Stan, were together?" Leah asked, trying to fit the pieces together. Embry was trying really hard to keep his cool. He felt fidgety all of a sudden. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but he needed to do something.

"Yes," Mrs. Nollman confirmed. "That boy was absolutely smitten with her. But he was causing quite a bit of ruckus with his stories. Some people around town were thinking he was losing his mind. Anyways, one day, Tiffany comes home and tells me that she's moving out. Stanley had been offered a job down in La Push as an accountant or something of the like. The tribe was looking for someone to help keep the books. Lord knows there must've been a decent accountant closer by, but Stanley always was very good with numbers. Had a degree and everything. Smart boy."

"So she and Stanley moved to La Push?" Leah confirmed.

"Indeed," Mrs. Nollman nodded. "I helped Tiffany pack, and I even gave her a set of quilts for her new home. She'd confided in me and told me that her and Stanley were getting married. She was having a baby."
"I think I'm gonna hurl."

"There is no hurling in the Clearwater death trap," Leah insisted as she and Embry sat in the beat up car staring into the unmoving distance.

"So."

"So. That seems to answer a lot of questions. And raise a lot more."

"I think this means Carlisle might be right," Embry suggested.

"How do you figure? If this guy Stan is your father, we know he was on Makah land, not that he was Makah. You don't find it more interesting that he saw the last Pack as a child lost in the woods?"

"I didn't realize that they'd continued phasing that long."

"Neither did I. Maybe it wasn't the originals," Leah suggested. "Maybe it was the kind of down the line. Think about it, if Brady and Collin kept phasing for the next twenty or thirty years? Kinda the same effect."

"So, my Mom lives in Neah Bay, meets this guy who saw the Pack when he was a kid, he talks about it non-stop after one-too-many beers. And then he conveniently gets hired by the Quileute tribe to do their accounting?"

Embry sounded doubtful and Leah glanced over towards him with a quirked brow.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I don't think they hired him just to do their taxes. Not if he'd been talking so much that word had trickled down about his stories to La Push." "You think they hired him and had him and his pregnant girlfriend move down to La Push just to keep an eye on him?"

"It's entirely possible. Besides killing him, there aren't many other ways to keep a tight leash on a guy who's blathering all over the county about the local pack of shapeshifters. And obviously there was enough awareness in the Council between the one present for the last Pack – and the current Council – to know that he wasn't just making shit up. Hell, it was probably Old Quil that figured it out..."

"I wonder what happened to the guy."

"That'll call for another perusal of the birth and death records – both in La Push and Neah Bay," Leah noted as she checked her watch. "Unfortunately, they're both closed for today."

"This explains how I got to La Push," Embry noted. "But it still doesn't explain why I can transform into a giant wolf at will."

"Nope. Not even close."
Wednesday, January 3, 2007

Training for the impending battle had been tiring. It wasn't everyday that one encountered the vampire royalty, though, and the situation definitely called for it. Jasper – again, ever the voice of tactical reason – had insisted that the Volturi fought in a very different style than newborns. And they were far more 'gifted' with people like Jasper, Edward, or Alice.

So once again, that meant night hours spent in open fields learning how to fight a new enemy. Jezzie came along a few times because she would be in battle and because both she and Jake felt like she needed to know what she was up against. Jake wanted her to know all the facts before she decided to help them out. Jezzie might've just been crazy.

She made a valiant effort; she remained awake the whole time and most sessions did not end until the sky began to lighten. She did fall asleep against Embry's shoulder that one time he'd agreed to give her a piggyback back to the main road and her Jeep. For the most part, however, she'd volunteered to babysit Nessie. Bella and Edward had done some parental voodoo and informed Nessie in some G rated way about what was happening. Embry had no idea how you made a Volturi visit fit for the child victim's consumption, but whatever.

Jezzie did a good job playing with and distracting the young girl. However, she slept at a rate that paled to human requirements and therefore Jezzie slept very little even when not in a cold, wet field full of wolves and vampires.

Patrols had been upped since training began and even though Jezzie protested there was a near constant presence at her house, mostly at night. Her complaints were less about privacy and more about her insisting that they needn't bother because no one was coming after her.

Embry didn't even have to say anything when Jacob insisted that the Pack protected their own, including Jezzie. After that, she insisted that they could at least come inside and sit or eat or do whatever instead of sitting in her yard in the dark and cold; besides, she told them, they couldn't be phased on her property because it was on the wrong side of the treaty line. Jacob thought she was too smart for her own good but had given her that. Seth had slept on her couch for a few nights, Brady had spent a few reading through her bookshelves, and Jared had almost gone stir crazy for her lack of cable TV until she showed him where she kept the season DVDs of Seinfeld.

Jezzie had offered her house as a place to crash, but she hadn't been prepared for the constant presence. She didn't mind it so much… it was nice not being alone all the time. Though it was odd not knowing who would be in your kitchen when you woke up in the morning. The only time her home was really empty was when she was in class or at work, and during the training hours. It was just her and Nessie, then.

Wednesday night – after training – Edward had gone to the Sullivan's to pick up Nessie at the tender hour of 4AM. Wednesday night – after training – Embry had gone to the Sullivan's to take his patrol at the tender hour of 4AM.

With Edward.

It was an awkward car ride.

When Edward pulled into Jezzie's driveway he began to laugh quietly. "What?" Embry asked, too
tired to even care that Edward's telepathy made him seem really maladjusted.

"I believe Jezzie is overtired and overcaffeinated. My daughter, however, seems to love her. Who else would agree to a dance party at 4AM?"

Embry only shook his head, pushing the car door open the moment it slowed to a reasonable pace – the smell was unbearable in such close quarters. The two men – opposites in every respect – climbed Jezzie's front steps and could hear Nessie's *High School Musical* soundtrack pulsing through the speakers and the walls and sighed in a mutual acceptance of whatever girl-thing that was about to hit them that they wouldn't understand.

Then Edward knocked.

"Dude," Embry yawned. "Just open the door. It's fine."

The music continued and before Embry could open the screen door himself, Jezzie flung the wood door open, wide eyed (definitely overcaffeinated) with a Nessie still wiggling to the music in her arms. "Papa!" Nessie squealed. Jezzie noted that neither made a move to cross the threshold.

"I thought all that vampire mythology was false?" Jezzie asked. She peered around the doorframe and saw Embry leaning against her siding with his eyes closed. She shook her head.

She swung the door open wide and both Embry and Edward remained where they were. Not because of ancient vampire myths, but because of the music still pumping through her living room. "You can come in, you know. I mean, we're all in this together," Jezzie trilled (definitely overtired).

She relinquished Nessie to the floor and the girl proceeded to scurry towards her father. "Too much?" she replied upon seeing their mutually blank faces. "Okay, okay."

Jezzie rolled her eyes but went back to the CD player. She stopped the music and put Nessie's soundtrack back inside its case. "Here you go, Ness," she offered it to the girl who had now clambered up into her father's arms.

"Thank you, Jezzie," she grinned. "Will I see you soon?"

Jezzie shrugged. "I don't see why not."

Edward thanked Jezzie and made his way back to the car. Jezzie reached down and took Embry's hand, pulling him from his doze against the side of her house and inside. Her energy level had plummeted after Edward and Nessie had left her property and she'd closed the door. She began picking up the few things remaining out of place in her living room. She tried to craft her face into a normal expression.

She hadn't seen or spoken with Embry much since the day he exploded in her Jeep and kissed her. He hadn't said anything after the fact – never mentioned it – so Jezzie wasn't sure if he wanted her to forget it or not. She tried, but the more hours and days that passed, she realized she couldn't forget it. Even if she wanted to forget it (and a part of her didn't) she couldn't stop thinking about it. It was a while before she was able to dig through the layers of surprise that pervaded the memory to realize that she'd liked it. A lot. That was why she couldn't forget about it: not because she was surprised, but because she liked it.

She didn't know what to make of his reaction to the event, even if she'd finally sorted through her own feelings. She'd called Liz a few days after and told her all about it – mostly skimming over the reason why the conversation even happened in the first place. Liz had listened attentively, and only at the end offered a simple, *Jezzie, that means you like him.* Jezzie knew when she would tell
Veronica about it tomorrow during their study date, the girl would shriek for a while before coming to the same conclusion.

Jezzie had decided she wouldn't overanalyze. She would just do what came natural.

When she picked her coffee cup off the table Embry spoke. "How much of that have you had today?"

"Since this morning?" Jezzie glanced to the bottom of the mug and shrugged. "Yesterday morning, now… somewhere between five and seven?"

"Cups? That's insane."

"No, I ran out of sugar and creamer half way through and still kept going: that's insane."

Embry's nose wrinkled. "Gross."

Jezzie returned from the kitchen with a covered yawn and then bent down to take Embry's hand. "C'mon you," she insisted. "You can't sleep on this couch, it'll kill your back."

"Nah," he hummed.

"Why is it that all of you refuse a bed? Seth does the same thing."

"Because a bed means sleep, and I at least need to try and pretend to be awake. This is technically a patrol; it's my job. I just can't phase unless there's trouble."

"Come on. You're upsetting my guestroom," Jezzie insisted. "If there's trouble I'm pretty sure you'd still be able to wake up in plenty of time. There's no use in running yourself into the ground. Then you definitely won't be any good on a patrol. C'mon. I need sleep too."

It didn't take much more persuading – besides a pouty face and an elongated pleease – for Jezzie to pull Embry along to the first floor guestroom. She stumbled and flopped onto the mattress with an oof! when Embry unexpectedly took her down with him. "My nose," she groused with a crinkle.

"Is it better if I stay?" Jezzie asked, reading into the intention Embry had yet to speak while she rolled over in his one-armed embrace so she could see him. His tendency for contact with her had taken on a different flavor in light of their recent time together. Far from minding, Jezzie felt more comfortable now that Embry had inadvertently spilled his guts to her.

He nodded halfway to sleep, not really feeling his mouth or brain make the words anymore. "It's easier for me if you're close by, Jez," he replied while pulling her a little closer by her hips. "I can hear you, see you, smell you. I wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to you on my watch. I care too much about you."

"Embry?" Jezzie hedged. She had hit her third wind from all that coffee a few minutes before he and Edward had arrived and had a slightly greater grip on her bearings than Embry did. She thought he maybe wasn't quite aware of what he was saying. He only hummed in reply. "Could I ask you a question?"

"Jus' did…"

She rolled her eyes. "Can I ask you two questions?"

"Shoot."
"Would it be all right if I wasn't your friend anymore?"

Embry didn't respond at first, he only peered one eye open halfway to see Jezzie's face. "What're you saying, Jez?"

Jezzie expelled a small huff of air. He was going to make her be an adult about this and say things out loud. She sat up, partially disentangling herself from his grip, but ending with a leg stretched over his lap. "I care too much about you too, Embry. I care too much to be just your friend."

Embry's face split with visible relief, before he sat up and began to tickle Jezzie mercilessly. "You just scared the crap out of me, Little Red," he muttered into the pillow by her neck as she collapsed in laughter.

She smiled, "So it's all right, then?"

"It's more than all right," he replied, now fully awake. He kissed her gently right at her pulse point. This is why he loved her, why he loved being so close to her. She was so very much alive.

"Do you still want to spend the night alone on my couch, now?" Jezzie chided, she smiled and relished the feeling of warmth that Embry sent through her when his lips touched her skin. More than just temperature, she felt the rush in her chest.

"Not as long you don't plan on seducing me," he muttered, not moving his face from the bend where her shoulder met her neck.

"You're lucky. I usually sleep in my underwear."

"Don't tell me those kinds of things, Jez," he smiled, pulling her closer.

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**Thursday, January 4, 2007**

Jezzie vaguely discerned the dim Pacific light filtering its way into her room. Wait… the bed was in the wrong spot. This wasn't her room. She felt the brief snap of cold air as her ambient heat source moved so far away from her. She was tired and all she could do was utter a quiet whine and curl into the warm spot left behind.

"Go back to sleep," she heard a quiet voice as warm lips brushed her shoulder. She obeyed without thinking and drifted back into the wonderful abyss of sleep.

When she awoke the second time, Jezzie was none too pleased with the unceremonious sunshine blazing through the open window for all it was worth. This was Forks; it wasn't supposed to be sunny. At least not when she didn't want it to be.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and performed a full body stretch – relishing the crack in her spine and sighing as she felt the muscle strain from last night's exhaustion continue to pulse through her system.

The price of a human fighting in a supernatural war, she assumed. Otherwise she felt good. Today would be a good day, then.

When she rolled over she saw one of her bright green post its – normally reserved for important appointments – stuck to the pillow next to her head. She plucked it up and held it within reading distance.
Jezzie smiled. Normally she'd get all narrow-eyed and stubborn about having someone telling her where to be and when, but there was a question mark and this sounded like a nice surprise so Jezzie didn't mind. She reached for her phone and checked the time. 12:07PM. Definitely time to get up. She sat up, texted Embry a smiley face knowing he wouldn't get it until later and stood, ready to begin the day.

Veronica was due to come by at 1PM so they could both study for an exam, so Jezzie decided to be lazy and only wear sweatpants. She was glad she woke up when she did. She had just enough time to eat breakfast, wash up, and gather up her books to dump on her couch when she heard Veronica knock.

"C'mon in!" Jezzie hollered and the door clicked open immediately.

"Hi, Jezzie," Veronica called as Jezzie made for the kitchen. She could hear the unceremonious thud as Veronica dropped all her notes next to Jezzie's. "I'm so glad we're studying for this together because chapter four is completely lost on me."

"Same," Jezzie replied. "Except I don't get chapter seven, so maybe we're in luck if our knowledge is going to coincide. Do you want something to eat or drink?" Jezzie peaked around the corner. "I just got up and ate breakfast, but would you like something?"

Veronica paused for a moment when Jezzie peered out of the kitchen. She looked momentarily surprised, but spoke. "I could do with something to drink. Lemonade?" When Jezzie brought out two glasses of lemonade and placed them down, she noticed Veronica's watching her.

"What?" Jezzie asked. Why was she staring at her like that?

"I ought to ask you the same thing," Veronica took a sip before placing the glass down on her textbook. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Jezzie replied. She was so confused. "We're studying?"

"No," Veronica shook her head. "It's something else. You're all glowy and happy. And you're smiling a lot."

"What's wrong with smiling?" Jezzie glanced down into her lemonade to hide her further grin.

Veronica quirked a brow. "Dish, woman."

"I think I'm going on a date," Jezzie said slowly as she traced her finger against the rim of her glass.

"Really?" Veronica intoned, her voice dropping down low. "With who?"

Veronica knew exactly who, but she wanted to hear Jezzie say it. Jezzie was aware of that. "With Embry, you goon!"

Veronica's face split into a grin worthy to rival the Cheshire cat. "I knew it. It was only a matter of time. That boy is in love with you. I can't believe Quil didn't tell me, though!"

Jezzie only rolled her eyes. "Because I'm the one that pushed him to it. He moves a little slower than Quil. I told him I wanted more than friends last night. This morning I had a note translated into
"Oh my god," Veronica grinned, shoving her pile of notes aside to get closer. "We're not getting any homework done. I want details."

Jezzie spent the next forty-five minutes relaying to Veronica the evening's events. Or at least those that she could reveal. She glossed over the training and babysitting induced exhaustion and chalked it up to a difficult night at work for both. Veronica had offered her sympathies and agreed that working fulltime was a handful. *You have no idea, Jezzie thought.*

She explained that Embry had come over to see her. She explained his "care too much" comment. She explained how at the end of the night, when she'd invited him to stay, she'd finally asked him to be more than just a friend.

Veronica sustained a full two minutes of girly squealing. "Did anything else happen?" Veronica asked suggestively.

"No," Jezzie shook her head. "Honestly, I was so exhausted and so was he – that's why I invited him to stay – that we both just passed out. You expected us to sleep together twenty minutes after we became an item? Classy…"

"Oh please," Veronica replied with a flick of her wrist. "Labels are so passé, besides it's not like you don't know him. You two have been beating around this bush for as long as you've known each other."

"I always get dinner before I let a guy into my pants," she noted sarcastically. "Plus I'm still worried he's a little young."

Veronica rolled her eyes. "So do you think I'm a total cougar for dating Quil? Age is just a number, baby. Besides, Embry doesn't look like most seventeen year old boys. And he certainly doesn't act it."

"Well, you're younger than me too. So Quil being seventeen and your being twenty still feels different than me being twenty-one and Embry being sixteen. Even though it really means nothing."

"Exactly," Veronica nodded sagely. "Like, if you guys end up together in the long term, what's five years going to be when you're in your thirties of forties? Nada. Besides, the age of consent in Washington is sixteen."

Jezzie glanced at her friend sideways but still grinned. "I'm not bedding him yet, Veronica. But thanks. I'm glad I talked to you about this."

Veronica grinned. "Don't be so sure about that. Him and Quil are best friends, right? Well, if they're anything alike he'll have you convinced soon enough. And he won't even need to say anything."

Veronica and Jezzie did eventually get around to studying for a few hours and managed to hack through a majority of the material. A quick conference call to a fellow student that Veronica knew to confirm information they'd both missed out on concluded the affair. Jezzie was now much more hopeful about her grade for this exam.

At six o'clock though, Jezzie realized she needed to start getting ready for a dinner where she was clueless about the dresscode. Her and Veronica stood before her closet for a few minutes, pondering its contents.

"Did he mention anything at all?" Veronica asked.
"No – you saw the note – just dinner, and at any rate," Jezzie replied, "something 'nice' for Embry entails a pair of shoes and socks."

"Touché," Veronica nodded; she knew, having spent much time with Quil, that the Pack boys were rarely dressed to impress. "Okay," she reached into the closet, pulling out a simple black dress. "How about a basic LBD? Bring a scarf and it'll work either way."

Jezzie pulled a wide off-white linen shawl off a hanger and draped it over the black dress. "Perfect," Veronica nodded.

"But what about shoes?" Jezzie asked.

Veronica pursed her lips in thought. "Wait 'til he gets here," she decided. "She what he's wearing and then gauge from there."

"Good call," Jezzie nodded.

Jezzie was walking barefoot around the house, getting ready when Embry finally arrived.

He was wearing socks and shoes. At the same time. Jezzie was thus far assured she hadn't overdressed. There was a pair of legitimate pants and a button up shirt, too.

The boots it was, then, Jezzie decided. "Be right back," she held up a finger as she padded up the stairs. She opened her closet at pulled out her pair of blue velvet ankle boots. She slipped them on, picked up her wallet and wrapped the scarf around her shoulders before skedaddling back down stairs.

"Is this okay?" Jezzie asked with a small twirl as she rejoined Embry in the foyer.

Embry smiled, he reached down to hold her chin in one hand as he kissed her forehead. She appreciated his not ruining her sparse makeup. The heat from his skin bled over hers like ink dropped into water – she felt it run across her cheeks, down her neck and shoulders. She wondered how she didn't realize sooner how much Embry's temperature soothed her cold-tortured nerves.

"Perfect," he told her. He lingered for a moment and Jezzie grinned, trying to glance upwards. "You smell fantastic," Embry told her before he moved.

"You clean up pretty well yourself," she nodded. "I think this is the third time I've seen you wear shoes, a shirt, and socks at the same time. Did Jared dress you?"

"What makes you ask that?"

"He wears v-neck t-shirts," Jezzie said like that explained it all. "That suggests he – or Kim – actually thinks about what he buys, even though he's probably going to turn it into confetti eventually. An underlying sense of fashion."

"Wow," Embry said without moving. "That is creepy, Jez. But no, I dressed myself. And these are all my own clothes too."

"Wow," she said.

"Don't sound so surprised."

"Are we sure its okay to leave?" Jezzie asked. "I mean what if something happens?"
"Alice says the Volturi haven't left yet," Embry replied. "And she can only see all of us gathered in a clearing in the rain. The forecast is clear for the next two days. Apart from patrol, tonight's our night off." That was good enough for Jezzie.

Embry offered Jezzie his arm. She quirked a brow at the sight. He rolled his eyes. "I was raised by a woman, Jez. I'm not a totally uncultured Neanderthal."

Jezzie sighed and took her turn to roll her eyes. As if she'd suggested that. It just seemed very formal to her. She looped her arm through his and locked the door behind her before leaving.

The ride was about an hour and Jezzie immediately recognized that they were headed towards Port Angeles. The two talked the whole way about everything and nothing, though thankfully nothing battle-related. Jezzie'd had enough of training for a few days. Mostly it was about the books they'd made each other read. They were starting to consider swapping music too.

Embry pulled into a parking garage and took the automatically dispensed ticket. Jezzie undid her belt preemptively. When Embry finally put the vehicle in park Jezzie turned to him and moved closer, twining her fingers into his. "Ready to have some fun?"

Embry leant down and kissed her along the jawline briefly before pulling away. So he was carefully avoiding the makeup. Bless him. Jezzie pulled her clutch out of the console and flipped the visor down to make sure she looked presentable when her own door was opened and Embry extended his hand.

A girl could get used to this.

The walk to the restaurant was brief and it wasn't terribly cold. And not a drop of rain. Jezzie was thankful for the boots' sake. When Embry suddenly stopped and looked up, Jezzie knew they'd arrived. She grinned looking at the small place tucked between two other businesses. It looked eclectic and low key. Jezzie was glad; she'd always appreciated casual dining. When Embry took a step forward she tugged back. "Wait."

When he turned to look at her she freed her arm and skipped forward. She pulled the large wood and glass door open and waved Embry in. "Just to keep us on an even footing," she explained following him inside. "I'm all for masculine chivalry, but I'm no damsel in distress."

"Fine by me," Embry nodded before looking to the maitre'd. "Reservation for Sullivan."

"Right this way."

Jezzie spoke once they were seated. "I didn't realize we were under one name now. Does that mean I have to hypothetically divorce Seth?"

"First off, you should try ordering food or making reservations with the last name 'Call'. It doesn't usually work out. Number two, yes, please hypothetically divorce Seth. I call dibs."

Jezzie was dozed off against Embry's shoulder well before they'd come back within Forks town line. Embry pulled into Jezzie's driveway and killed the engine. The girl merely curled up against the opposite door. Embry opened her door carefully, unbuckled her, and scooped her up. She was starting to rouse when Embry opened her front door. He was actually very surprised that Jezzie let him pick her up in the first place. Embry knew Jezzie cared about him, she made that very obvious but she also didn't like other people doing things for her. She didn't like being made to feel dependent and that was one of the things Embry loved about her – she kept them all from being overbearing cavemen sometimes. But he kind of appreciated her giving him a small freebie and letting him carry
her. It was nice and it let the wolf know that Jezzie trusted them.

She rubbed her eyes when Embry put her down on her couch. He sat next to her and carefully removed a blue suede boot from Jezzie's small foot. He had no idea how she got around in those. They looked like an accident waiting to happen.

"They're not even that high," she remarked, twisting an ankle around. "There's a one inch platform and that makes it deceiving," she told him as she stretched her legs out into his lap and laid her head against the far arm rest.

"Well god bless your little feet for being such contortionists," Embry replied bending down to kiss her ankle. Embry had started kissing Jezzie a lot. She wasn't opposed, but it was such a new dynamic and it took her by surprise every time he did it. She'd always liked good surprises.

His lips moved higher and she could feel his hand warm and steady against her calf muscle. She just enjoyed the moment – the heat dulling some of the remains of the tension her back had yet to shake. It wasn't bad. Today had been a three. When Embry's hand followed his mouth higher and up to her thigh and the hem of her already short dress, her eyes popped open. That was a new sensation.

She wasn't stupid, she knew Embry was turning her on. If she'd been honest with herself she could've admitted that he'd been able to do that for a while. Jezzie had forgotten what it felt like to have a sexual response in such a way to another person, and she never remembered it being so vibrant and strong. Carla had been near painful in her prodding of Jezzie to 'go have some fun' after she ditched her last relationship in sophomore year. It hadn't been serious - mostly fun. But Jezzie had been busy with other things. Until now. She felt the life hum deep in her abdomen and between her legs.

Embry carefully avoided the major zones of no return and moved to Jezzie's lips. He didn't care much for messing up her makeup now. The night was over and she'd be seeing few people now. However, whatever Jezzie had put on she had mostly wiped off in her post dinner trip to the restroom. Embry was glad for that. He thought make up tasted kinda gross. Jezzie was much better all by herself.

"You have the most wonderful set of legs I have ever seen," Embry told her as he worked his way up her neck. He couldn't be bothered to move his hand from her thigh. It was quite at home there.

Jezzie smiled and wiggled further towards Embry. "I'm a runner. It happens." She turned her head and intercepted Embry's mouth with her own. Warm and a little rough, Jezzie adored the contrast. She wound one arm around Embry's neck and the other pressed against his abdomen. She bit lightly at his lip and his mouth acquiesced to her own. Jezzie's tongue escaped her mouth of its own accord and met Embry's in a rather hasty collision. She smiled, letting him take the lead.

And just like that, he stopped. Jezzie blinked in confusion. Where a moment ago Embry had been nearly flush to her, as she enjoyed being pressed between couch and him, he was gone. He was now anchored and hovering a good six inches above from her at all points. His mouth was gone from hers; the absence of his hand against her leg let the cold rush against her skin.

"Embry?" she glanced up. Why were they stopping? It was just getting so good.

"I'm sorry, Jez," he glanced down between them and she couldn't see his face until she reached down to pull his chin up. His face was guarded and wary.

"Are you okay? What just happened?"
She didn't know if she'd pushed him out of his comfort zone or if it was something else.

"I have this problem," Embry began cagily, not meeting her eyes, but went back to staring between them, somewhere in the vicinity of her abdomen. "And it's hard for me to be around you sometimes."

She was actually getting the opposite impression from Embry recently. She thought he quite liked to be around her.

"The thing about being Pack, is that I don't just change into a wolf." Jezzie didn't know how they went from making out to talking about Pack but she just listened and tried to follow. "There's this whole other thing inside of me. Just like when I phase, but Embry's still in my head and I'm still me on the inside. When I'm human, there's still a wolf inside."

Jezzie had never really heard Embry - or any of the Pack for that matter - talk about phasing like that. It was always just a very basic 'we're shapeshifters, we're made to protect' sort of attitude. She now realized they had been glossing over some major intricacies.

"And the wolf likes you, Jezzie. A lot. But wolves don't show affection like people do. And it's trying show that affection the only way it knows how." He mirrored the sentiment physically, lowering himself closer to her once again. His mouth bowing to the skin at her neck as he continued to speak

Jezzie's jaw dropped open at the realization of what Embry was trying to tell her. Embry did like being around her. He liked being around her a lot. His wolf liked her even more. She'd seen enough Discovery Channel and Animal Planet specials to know that animals were not patient in the pursuit of their loved ones... With their mates.

"When I'm around you, Jez," he continued, a hand moving to her hip again as she felt him nibble her ear lobe, "all I want to do is be near you. To hold your hand. Anything. But when I get too close the wolf gets too happy, too excited and it starts to take over. It would never hurt you, Jez. But when it can smell how turned on you are, it takes over and I don't want to be anywhere near you when I'm not the one in control of my brain."

Jezzie's throat constricted as she realized what Embry was telling her. His mouth trailed the line of her tensed muscles, willing them to loosen. Despite what he was telling her, he never wanted her to be nervous around him. Embry had checked and double checked and triple checked with the Pack. This was unprecedented. None of the other women in a wolf's life did this. However – as Leah pointed out – almost all the other women were family, Packmates or imprints. Or various combinations of the above.

Jezzie was not Pack, she was not imprinted or related to anyone. She wasn't even Quileute. Just as Jacob developed a sort of intrinsic soul tie to all the imprints - loved them all as family - so did the rest of the Pack. They loved and protected family and the imprints because that's what they were supposed to do. With Jezzie, they protected her because they liked her. It wasn't a base instinct, it was a conscious human choice.

Wolves, as a rule, were animals without the option of free will. They ran on instinct. So Embry's wolf - introduced to a girl Embry's human felt bent to protect and trust because he liked her - protected her because it assumed it fit one of the categories for instinctual, mandatory protection. Family, Pack or Mate.

The wolf knew she wasn't Imprint and knew she wasn't Family. That left only one option. And if Jezzie was Mate, Embry's wolf didn't know what his human was waiting for. When it realized Embry was not fulfilling the necessary requirements for species propagation it got antsy. To the point
now where Embry didn't want to touch Jezzie, for fear the wolf would like it just a little too much and what if it wanted to go farther than either Embry or Jezzie were comfortable with?

Embry was careful enough around Jezzie just for obvious reasons: she was human. Instead of simply making sure to keep his strength in check, he had a whole other being in his head to keep away from Jezzie. A whole part of him that he wouldn't allow to see her.

"He's grown really attached to you, Jez. And sometimes it's too much. Sometimes I can't keep it in the back of my head." He said it slowly, but quietly, and he didn't meet her eyes. He focused only on working his way to where the fabric of her dress met the skin of her chest, and she felt the flush rush up from deep in her belly.

Jezzie very much suspected that Embry felt embarrassed or ashamed to admit it. Jezzie opened her mouth to speak and had to clear her throat; she was trying to reconcile warring factions of practicality (this was important discussion), and hormones (because she was really turned on). "What does it want?" she had the sneaking suspicion she knew the answer but wanted confirmation.

"You."

"Me," her suspicions were correct.

"All of you."

She didn't know how to respond to that. Embry's wolf wanted to bang Jezzie. Like yesterday. This wasn't exactly how she expected to broach this topic. Now it was her turn to glance downwards, making her feelings obvious.

"Do you want me to move?" Embry asked, picking up on her tension and pausing - though thankfully not pulling away from her this time.

"No," she insisted, reaching up to fist some of the fabric of his shirt in her hand. He grinned at her adamant refusal and moved to prop himself up on his forearms, slightly further down her body – now level with her chest. Jezzie didn't want him to leave; she'd keep him pressed against her - warm and all-encompassing - until she died if she could. She just wanted to know what the heck was going on.

"So, what do we have to do about that?" she continued. "Because I don't know how I feel about you and I sleeping together right now."

"No," Embry stuttered, cutting her off. "No, we don't have to now. I mean we can - if you want - but I don't want my control issues to be the reason for it."

"Would it help, though?" Jezzie asked. She wasn't considering sleeping with Embry just to calm his wolf, but she also needed to know what she was dealing with. He nodded slowly in affirmation. "I'm not saying I don't want to sleep with you, Emb. But this new information changes things a bit… The possessive thing, I won't have any of it."

Now Jezzie didn't know how she'd ever make an unbiased choice about having sex with Embry. She'd always be second-guessing herself, wondering if she was doing it because she wanted it or because she wanted to help him out. And she really didn't want their relationship turning him into a possessive psychopath. Great. But she really needed to stop thinking about sleeping with the guy or she'd wake up in the morning trying to convince herself it had seemed like a good idea at the time. One date? She wasn't a prude, but she'd always been able to get through at least one date before sleeping with a guy. But at the rate Embry's tongue and teeth were doing things - and only against her bared neck and part of her chest – that resonated with the pleasure center of her brain and her
body in a magnificent way.

"I don't think it'd be quite like that, but I agree," Embry nodded. She blinked and mentally shook herself. What were they talking about again? "I like you Jezzie. I like you a lot. But I'm not about do anything stupid with you either. I just wanted you to know that it's not all me, you know? I don't want to you think I'm being a jackass – it's just the animal instinct to… keep going."

"Okay..." Jezzie nodded slowly.

"The wolf likes you Jezzie it's not going to attack you like an enemy," Embry confirmed with a mumble as the hand at her hip found its way back to her thigh again. "It just gets overexcited. Don't be afraid to put me—it… us… in it's place. No hurt feelings or anything. I want to know if somethings freaking you out. It won't be able to disobey you, you outrank me."

"I outrank you?" Jezzie asked skeptically.

"You worked your way into Pack recently," Embry admitted begrudgingly, and Jezzie could feel some of his weight press into her as he sighed, his thumb dancing a pattern at the edge of her extremely hiked up hemline. She only barely registered what he said next. "You're only the second human to do it, after Rach. That makes you Beta Human. I'm a Third. It's complicated, but yes, you outrank me - in terms of you and me. Because we're together. You won't outrank anyone else unless more humans come into the Pack."

Jezzie was quiet for a few moments as Embry's lips traced a path towards the hollow of her throat. He couldn't just dump all this on her and keep going. Now she was all distracted and turned on, and didn't know what to focus on. She had the feeling she could get this from Embry anytime; but that whole having sex with a werewolf thing was hard to forget about, too.

"You said I'd know when it happens – this thing with your wolf – but... How?" her query was cut off with a small breathy gasp as she felt his teeth come out to play against her fair skin. She inhaled quickly and wiggled enough to free her legs to bend at the knees on either side of Embry's waist. She tried to maintain some train of thought. "How am I supposed to separate hormonal teenager from mating wolf? Because you're freezing up like that was weird."

"Is there a difference?" Embry asked, pausing long enough to glance up at Jezzie's face. "I want you to stop me anytime you're uncomfortable, regardless of who you think is running my head."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. Seeing him glance up at her from her cleavage with an arched brow and a smirk was doing nothing for her focus. "I was plenty comfortable, sir. It was you that ran off. How am I supposed to know when it's you," she poked her index finger to his forehead, "in there, or the wolf?"

"Do you want... like... a demonstration?" Embry asked awkwardly.

"If it's not too much trouble," Jezzie replied as her skin flushed. She kinda needed to be able to figure this out.

Embry laughed once moving until his face was level with hers. "Jez, I never mind. As long as you're okay with it?"

She nodded quickly. Embry tipped her face up gently. He smiled. "I love that color on you," he said, brushing his thumb along Jezzie's cheekbones where her blush flooded. He leaned down and kissed along the trail of his thumb until he reached her ear as his body settle comfortably in the space between Jezzie's knees. "Especially when I put it there."
Jezzie sucked in a short breath and her heart tripped over a single beat. Then she could feel a small rumble of laughter in Embry's chest.

He leaned back slightly, so his one free arm no longer supported his weight. Embry's other hand gently grasped around Jezzie's neck. Sliding closer, Jezzie's mouth met Embry's and her hands wound themselves around his neck. He started off slow, moving carefully and methodically over Jezzie's waiting lips. Embry loved Jezzie's mouth. All of her was soft and sweet-smelling, but he was thus far certain her mouth was the sweetest.

She pushed him further, tucking her chin in and pulling at his lips, urging his mouth open. She hummed in happiness and Embry worked his mouth lower. He kissed down her jaw and her ear lobe; he lavished her pulse point. Nothing felt better than her heart beating strong and healthy under her skin. Her small noises were going to undo him before he even started.

He felt her cool hands push his shirt aside and move over his stomach, long and nimble fingers tracing along the contours of his abdomen. She wiggled impossibly closer and Embry could feel her hips pressed against him as her skirt moved dangerously higher.

Jezzie purred in happiness as Embry kissed down her neck. She felt the intermittent presence of his tongue as he worked his way lower. The hand at her thigh held firm and his right hand covered her exposed back, a few fingers glancing beneath the top of the dress.

She wound one hand into his short, thick hair as his mouth began kissing and sucking below her collarbone. It was more rushed than it had been as he spoke. His movement had been slow, lazy, and careful as he'd explained things to her. Now, however, it was clear his mind was back on a single track. Jezzie liked this track. She tried not to shove her chest into his face. But it was so good, and warm, and made her whole body vibrate at a slow hum. Jezzie could feel the tingles in the tips of her fingers, her stomach and between her legs.

There was the barest hint of teeth against her skin and Jezzie uttered a small, uncontrolled and very suggestive mewling noise pulling tightly against Embry's hair in her hands. Her legs instinctively grew tighter in their spot around Embry's torso. She could've sworn the heat ratcheted up ten degrees instantaneously.

Then she felt Embry's grip on her thigh tighten to firmness. The hand on her back curled and she could feel his nails against her skin. He tugged at her leg, pulling her fully underneath him, as he arched over her and Embry was all she could see. Above, below, and on all sides – it felt like a human cage. The hand at her thigh was holding too tight and the hand at her back stung as it curled deeper. Jezzie gasped in surprise and could feel Embry's breathing become quicker and shallower against her skin before he bit down just a little too roughly.

"Ow," she gasped at the spike of pain. She felt a brief note of panic. Was this it? Was this that change that Embry insisted she'd be able to notice? Regardless, his ironclad grip was now painful and she didn't like it.

"Embry?" she said, pulling her hands out of his hair. When his grip on her thigh tightened, she put her hands on his shoulders. "Embry. Stop," she said.

He responded well to her gesture as he snapped back and off her like she'd shoved him. She noticed immediately that he did look different. It was in the eyes. They were darker than usual – black – or maybe just vacant looking. Like an animal. Jezzie sat up from her spot and stared down Embry's wolf, refusing to blink. She said no, and she'd meant it.

"Embry?" she asked without blinking and he only cocked his head to the side – a distinctly canine
"Embry's busy. We don't think he's doing a very good job."

Jezzie swallowed. Holy crap, who the heck was she talking to? "Embry's my friend and he's doing a very good job of that. I would like to talk to him, please." When Jezzie got nothing but a stare back she spoke more firmly. "I want to talk Embry. Now."

"We always give the mate what she wants. She smells very good, but Embry doesn't do a very good job; we are very effective hunters and the mate would never be hungry... But we sense that we're scaring her."

"Just a little bit," she nodded.

"This is not our intent." And Jezzie glanced down as she felt Embry's hand wrap carefully around hers, warm yet yielding.

Jezzie wasn't sure if this felt more bizarre or life threatening, but the wolf didn't do anything that felt threatening – it just wanted to bring her dead animals. That was a good sign from cats and dogs, though, right? It proved they could provide. Or something like that. Before Jezzie could speak again, Embry broke the line of their stare, blinking a few times. It looked a lot like he was waking up from a nap, and she knew he was back.

He didn't say anything, but his eyes immediately darted down to her chest. She followed his gaze and saw that he was staring right where he'd bit her. It was a slightly red spot about the size of a half dollar and she could make out obvious teeth marks. It wasn't bleeding and it didn't hurt particularly much. Jezzie thought it looked a bit worse than it probably was as her fair skin was prone to overreacting.

She looked back up in time to see Embry swallow. "I hurt you."

"Don't start that self-deprecating nonsense," Jezzie insisted firmly. "There's no blood. I wasn't expecting it. That's why I had you stop."

Embry moved closer to Jezzie - very slowly. His thumb glanced over the mark, barely touching her skin. "This is what it wants, Jez. It wants to mark you."

"Embry, I just had a conversation with your other half," she diverted his attention to what she felt was a far more serious matter.

"It actually spoke to you?" Embry's eyes shot up to hers.

Jezzie nodded. "Did you hear that?"

"I hear everything it says. I didn't realize it was out loud this time."

"That was really weird and if you bring me any dead animals, I'm gonna be really upset."

"You're not upset now?" Embry asked tentatively.

Jezzie thought about it and shrugged. "It was really bizarre talking to the wolf that lives inside you, but... I dunno. I guess it kinda makes me feel better now. I mean, I've met it. And pretty much it's just like you said. It doesn't like the way you're going about things, but it doesn't want to scare me. And it thinks I smell good."
"Yes," Embry nodded with a small grin. "It very much enjoys your scent."

"I think it's just confused. Maybe you should explain me to the wolf."

"Yeah," Embry sighed as dragged a hand through his hair. "I've been working on that. Well, you never cease to amaze, Jez. I figured your meeting my wolf like that after I told you it wanted in your pants would freak even the most unshakable."

"It's a part of you, Embry. I never thought you had some evil Jekyll and Hyde thing going on. It doesn't scare me, I just don't understand it."

"You see why I'm wary around you, now?"

"Yes," she nodded. "But I really don't want you treating me like tissue paper. If you live in constant fear of being around me, that's not good either."

"Okay."

Jezzie smiled – crawling carefully into Embry's lap – and pulled him gently into a hug that he fully reciprocated. "I don't want to be completely insensitive to this issue, but can we put the beast in the cage and go back to the fun part, now?"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Friday, January 5, 2007

"Are you effing kidding me?"

Collin's breakfast of Cocoa Puffs was officially ruined.

"Watch your language, mister, and no I'm not kidding you." His mother had been… uneasy… as of late. Learning that her youngest son had been being beaten around by his much older brother – and that her youngest son had been lying about it, insisting that it was from rough housing with friends – had left her confused. She was sad, angry, embarrassed and ashamed. And she didn't know where to direct half of those emotions. And as angry and sad as she wanted to be at Collin for lying to her, she knew it would accomplish nothing – so she withdrew.

Collin noticed. He tried to tread lightly over the past week. He made an especial effort to spend non-school and non-Pack time at home. Jake had offered to give him a reprieve from patrolling for awhile until his family started to settle back down but Collin refused. He was the lowest ranked wolf and that was okay. However, he didn't want to be the weakest link; there was a battle coming anytime in the near future, he wasn't going to let the Pack be down a patrolling wolf. He swapped some of his patrols with the third-shifters and patrolled at night, went to school during the day and hung out at home during the afternoon. He had also tried doing his homework on those afternoons, but not ever sleeping was quickly starting to eat away at his sanity.

Collin was stretched to the limits with what he was already dealing with, and now this? "Mom, I don't need therapy. I'm not crazy."

"Collin," his Mom sat down at the table. She sank heavily into the chair. "No one thinks you're crazy. But it's for your own good. Honey, you've been through a lot – a lot and on your own. I've messed it up until this point obviously, but I want to make sure you're all right."

Her hand reached up and rested against his cheek. Since when did her thirteen-year-old son have
beard stubble? When had this happened? All of it. She assumed his growth spurt last spring had been natural. Extreme and shocking, but he'd been small for his age until then… Then he'd clammed up. He didn't talk like he used to and he began spending more time with friends.

Mary Littlesea had always assumed it was a part of growing up. She knew her first son had not followed the typical path to adulthood and a very large part of her had always regretted not stepping in when she could. Letting Tommy live his own life and experience things for himself had lead him down a brutal and dangerous path. But Collin had always been the careful one. He always said 'please' and 'thank you', he held doors and could never fake a decent lie because the guilt showed on his face. He was a good kid.

So when he started spending more time with his best friend – and some older boys on the reservation – Mary worried. She knew he was lying to her, however she also knew he wasn't drinking or doing drugs. Mary was now a pro at recognizing those signs. There weren't any upswings in reservation crime or vandalism, either. She didn't know what was going on, but she had the sneaking suspicion it wasn't what most people thought. Because Collin was in a strange way, but it certainly wasn't the same way his brother had gone. Mary – of all people – would have known.

However, whenever she pushed the issue, Collin panicked and he receded further back into himself. The more she let it lie, the more comfortable Collin became in his own home again. And the last thing Mary wanted to do was to drive her teenage son off. So, she kept a diligent eye, searched his room when he was out regularly, and kept herself open and always willing to talk. She rarely put her foot down about anything.

But this was one of those things she was sticking too. Help was offered. And as much as she resented watching federal employees from the FBI, the BIA, as well as state and local officials swarm through her small reservation and especially her home – questioning her like she was both blind and stupid – as much as she resented all that, their were resources that she was hard-pressed to refuse. She wasn't about to deny her soon help on principle of pride.

The Indian Child Welfare Act provided counseling through the Division of Human Services. And Mary wasn't stupid. Collin wasn't going to talk to her, but he needed to talk to someone. Because the kind of tectonic shift that had radiated through their family warranted talking. And Mary wondered if this was what had caused Collin to pull back – why he spent more time out of the house and with older boys – boys that Mary knew would intimidate her oldest son.

The idea that her son felt better protected by local reservation boys than in his own home made her both sick and grateful. And in an attempt to simply make anything better, she wanted Collin to try counseling.

"Please?" she asked. Because as much as she was going to make him do this, she knew what kind of reactions pushing generally brought her.

Collin sulked. Collin was a champion sulker; if it was an Olympic sport, he would've won gold. "Fine, Mom. Just one, though. One time."

"Okay," she nodded. For now, she would take what she could get. "Conditions though?"

*Oh god,* Collin thought. He knew his Mom would start digging deeper once the whole kettle with him and Tommy blew, but he didn't know how far she'd go. He knew she thought his behavior was weird. But he hoped she'd chalk it all up to that – because there were only so many half-assed lies he could throw up around phasing and the Pack. He'd actually been lucky so far. His Mom had mostly let him be (because Jared's Mom asked so. Many. Questions.)
"What?" he asked warily.

"Collin, you know I'm going to be keeping a better eye on you, now. But stuff like this... Collin, you can't keep stuff like this from your father and I. You're thirteen and it's not healthy. This is something no one, let alone a thirteen year old boy – yes," she indicated with a rustle of his hair, "as much as you've grown you are still a boy – should have to deal with. I understand that you're getting older, Collin, and you're not going to tell me every detail of your life and day like you did in third grade. That's okay. But, please, promise me you won't close me out anymore. Not about the important things. I let you be – I didn't want to risk losing you – but I'd rather have you unhappy with me and safe, than at risk. Okay?"

"I can do that," Collin nodded.

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**Sunday, January 7, 2007**

Jezzie regretted having to call the Pack and tell them she had to cancel. She was going to La Push to play a reservation-wide game of capture the flag. It had been the first reprieve anyone had had from training in a week and a half. But her back was achy. Certainly not to the point that made her immobile – mostly just uncomfortable. But it was cool outside and she knew the cool, moist atmosphere of the Pacific Northwest wouldn't do her any good. Especially if she was running around in it for several hours.

Embry had sighed into the phone, long and dramatic. "Are you sure, Jez? Seth might cry."

"I wish I could believe you're kidding, but I can't. I'm sure Seth will be okay and you will all be plenty fine playing without me."

"You're just going to sit at home alone?" Embry asked.

"Yeah," she shrugged. "I guess so. Maybe order some Thai. I've been feeling some good Asian food, lately."

She hadn't expected Embry to show up even before the delivery guy did. She swung the door open and couldn't help but smile. "Unless you're hiding any phat thai or drunken noodles, I'm going to be disappointed in you, Embry."

"Nope," he grinned.

He didn't have time to respond further as a small girl pulled up into her driveway. Jezzie gleefully exchanged the twenty-dollar bill for the bag of delicious food.

Jezzie nodded her head, indicating Embry to follow her, as she made for the kitchen. Embry thought it was odd that Jezzie – who reacted adversely to the cold – had answered the door with bare feet and shorts on. But once he closed her front door, he had to rethink that. "Jezzie, it has to be at least 85 degrees in here. Are you insane."

"Better safe than sorry!" she trilled from the kitchen. "Want some? You just can't eat it all."

"Sure," Embry agreed as he joined her. "What'd you call this? Drunken noodles?"

"That's the phat thai. Pad thai? It's pretty must just rice noodles, eggs and fish sauce. Try it before you grimace at it. Sheesh, you're finicky. Those," she pointed to the other Styrofoam container, "are drunken noodles. And the chili and basil will certainly clear your sinuses."
When they had settled into Jezzie's couch and she'd coaxed her laptop back from sleep and turned *Fight Club* on, she spoke. "So," she asked after swallowing a mouthful of noodle. "What makes you give up on a gigantic game of capture the flag to come to a house that's too warm for you and eat half way decent thai food with a girl that won't leave her house?"

Embry was trying not to choke. Shit, she was right. This noodle stuff was incinerating his tastebuds. "And leave you alone here to rot? How lame is that, Jez?"

She picked at her food for a moment and Embry observed the top of her head. "Embry, does your wolf know I'm sick?"

"Like right now?" He asked, wondering where the sudden change in subject and demeanor came from. She'd gone from her normally cheerful self, to rather quiet.

"In general," she picked a bean sprout out from her plate and munched on it.

"Yeah, he does," Embry replied. "It's kind of hard for me to keep things from him. There's just a lot he chooses not to deal with because, well, he doesn't care. Like grades or doing laundry. But you know how he feels about you, Jez. So, yeah, he knows."

She nodded carefully.

"I can smell your meds – it's usually barely discernible under the smell of coffee," he nudged her slightly and could tell even from this angle that her cheek quirked in a grin. "And on the bad days I can smell your pain."

"So, does it realize I'm defective?"

That made Embry pause. They were getting closer to the real issue, he could tell. "It realizes you're sick and wants to protect you a little extra when it can smell your pain spike. You're not defective, Jez."

She leaned forward and put her plate on the coffee table, when she leaned back she turned herself so she was facing Embry. She didn't look up though.

"Jez, do you want to tell me what this is about? For real?" Embry placed his plate beside Jezzie's on the coffee table.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "I like you. You like me. Your wolf likes me. Your wolf knows I'm sick."

"Affirmative," Embry nodded. He leaned back, trying to remain casual. He wanted to know what was on Jezzie's mind. It was obviously bugging the crap out of her and she was starting to worry him.

"Well," she fidgeted with the sleeves of her sweatshirt. Embry was trying really hard not to just tell her to fess up. Jezzie never got nervous like this. She was always straightforward and spoke easily, even about issues that bothered her. Hell, she'd agreed to fight a vampire war without batting an eye, and then had told him that his inner wolf was just misunderstood – what the hell could be making her this nervous.

*Wait...* "It's not getting any worse, is it? Are you getting sicker?"

"Oh god, no!" Jezzie's gaze snapped up to meet Embry's immediately and shook her head vehemently. "No, it's not that. I've been feeling a lot better actually. These new meds I've been on
these past few months have done wonders. Flares move in peaks in valleys, this is just my last flare tapering off. Okay, I just need to spit it out because you're jumping to worst case scenarios…"

"Please," Embry agreed.

"I'm worried that now that we've… moved forward – that we've agreed to be more than friends – that something is going to click and your wolf is going to realize I'm sick that I'm not a good mate and he'll go and…"

Shit… He knew exactly what she was going to say.

"…imprint," she finished. He'd tried to brace himself, but it didn't help. It still hit him in the gut like a suckerpunch. Jezzie was wary of being with him because she feared an imprint. He'd tried so hard to help her understand the way imprinting could potentially work. Hell, she knew Paul and Rachel, Jake and Ness, and Quil and Claire… He didn't want Jezzie corrupted by the tribe's understanding of imprinting as a holy and romantic eternal bond that tore lives apart. It didn't have to be that way. Unfortunately, Jezzie and Embry had found themselves in a situation where an imprint would have been… awkward, at best.

"I know what happened to Leah," she whispered next.

Embry tried to find an emotion to settle on. It was hard. He'd never told Jezzie about Leah. Partly because it was helluva personal story and the only reason he knew was because he shared a head with both Sam and Leah all the friggin' time. It wasn't his story to tell. He also hadn't mentioned it because he really didn't need that fiasco to be Jezzie's mental archetype for imprinting. Then again, having that role relegated to any pair that wasn't Paul and Rachel wasn't much of a better option.

"Sam was the first to phase, Jez. Shit between him and Emily and Leah… it's complicated for more than just imprint reasons. Three more imprints later and we're getting a better handle on how it works. Sam and Jared are the only ones with romantic imprints…"

"Because of biology, right? You said imprinting was a biological thing. To find a mate or like geese… But Embry, don't you see? I'm not a good mate. It would be natural for your wolf to look for a healthy mate if it noticed I was sick. Survival of the fittest and all that. Like all of Darwin's finches? Why mate with the finch who can't fly?"

Oh, holy god, how was he going to deal with this? Jezzie was terrified and not unjustifiably. But an undercurrent of terror ran through Embry's system knowing that if he didn't get this right he could lose her.

"Because we're not finches, Jez. And I'm a guy, too. Not totally wolf. I don't know how a wild wolf would react to a female that was sick. Yeah, he probably wouldn't pick her for a mate. But I didn't decide I liked you for exceptional genetic qualities. That's the thing about being human. I get to decide based on things like what we have in common and how much I like your freckles. Animals don't do that."

"But it's more than just you in there, Embry," she tapped him on the forehead lightly. "There's a wolf too. And he's driven by pure biology and instinct."

"But I'm the one in control here, Jez," Embry shook his head. "And it's not like I'm fighting anything off. The wolf likes you a lot, I think we covered that. So, it's not exactly looking for another mate."

Jezzie's hands balled into fists and he couldn't tell if she was mad, sad, or frustrated. His nose told him it might be a reaction to a small spike of pain. "But if it realizes I'm sick and I'm never getting
any better it could change its mind," she mumbled through clenched teeth. Embry looked up at her face and saw her jaw locked. Her eyes were closed together tightly like she was willing it all away. "I can't take it anymore. Having you around makes it so much better and so much worse because now I'm so worried! And I've taken so many hot showers in the past three days. My skin feels like it's so tight it might rip completely off. I can't take it!"

Embry jumped a bit when she screeched the last bit. Jezzie was always so calm and collected – he'd never seen her snap. And never about her MS. And never about imprinting. But Embry was pretty sure he was being introduced to Jezzie's breaking point. His wolf was not pleased. His normally happy mate was vulnerable and weak. The wolf didn't like to see its mate weak.

"I want out," she yelled. "I don't want this body, I don't want this spine, I don't want this brain!" She reached up and tugged emphatically at the hair near her forehead as she buried her eyes in her palms, leaning over her lap.

"I don't want a brain that is slowly killing itself and growing these goddamn lesions," her breathing was erratic and Embry could hear her heart beat moving in much the same way. "I don't want a brain that's going to poison me and turn you against me." Then he smelled a change in her body chemistry and…

"Jezzie?" He was too afraid to touch her, so he only leaned in closer and under her partial veil of hair. Zhis nose had been right: she was crying. The tears were rolling down her face in earnest. Not like the time she'd seen Anna phase and she panicked. Not like the time she'd heard the rumors at school, was taken by surprise and was just stunned with hurt.

Jezzie was sobbing. Large uncontrolled breaths rocked through her diaphragm and made her back rise and fall at odd intervals. It was the kind of crying that rocked her whole body as the breaths pushed themselves from her lungs. She gasped for air through her mouth and growled out in anger. She was mad and sad and frustrated all at the same time and Embry was so out of his depth…

She released her face and looked Embry in the eye. The wolf was now fully alert. It stood and paced, anxious about its mate's own mental state. Embry forced the wolf back; now was not the time. It could sit and watch, but this was human-only time. She was a sight to behold. Embry had never seen her look so angry. He had never seen her so… enraged. Her eyes were hard and he knew what people meant when they said 'if looks could kill'. He was kinda afraid she'd hit him. "I hate this," she ground out, the tears still pouring down her cheeks as a muscle in her jaw twitched. "I hate it. I don't want this body anymore. I want a do over."

Embry was so fucking lost. He took a deep breath and started with the basics. "Jez, hon? I need to know what not to do. I need to know what's going to upset you?" Could he touch her? Did she even want him to talk? Was she just going to use him as a sounding board? He didn't really mind; he just wanted to make sure he didn't royally screw it up or make her even more upset.

"Unless you feed me some crap line about how God never giving us more than we can handle or how we all have struggles in life to overcome, I'm not going to get more upset," she hiccupped roughly. "Don't placate me. Don't pity me."

A moment's silence passed and then she uttered a much quieter and petulant, "Ow…" she reached down carefully and rubbed her hand over her knee. She didn't know if she preferred the pins and needles or the numbness. They sucked in equal parts.

"I'm gonna pick you up, is that okay?" Embry asked. Jezzie nodded. Not even really caring if he intended to throw her out the window or hang her upside down in her closet. With more grace than she really thought even he possessed he slid his arms around her, picking her up like a small child.
"How about a bed, Jez? At least for the night? That couch is not good for anyone's back."

He nudged the guest room door open and placed Jezzie carefully on the bed – she didn't even feel the landing. She didn't feel much like lying down. That's all she did when she had a flare – to the point where she'd get vertigo just from sitting up. She wanted to keep her horizons where they were supposed to be.

Embry headed back out the door and Jezzie could hear him down the hall in the bathroom. She pushed the few pillows out of the way and leaned her head against the bedpost, looping her arm around it. She didn't want to lie down, but she was so damn tired.

Jezzie let her eyes stay closed and she heard Embry return. She heard the dragging sound of the desk chair come closer to her and it sounded like Embry had dropped it right across from her as he sat down.

She couldn't feel much, but she definitely felt his warm hand wrap around her ankle. She gasped at the contact. It was the first bit of sensory information her lower half had processed all day. Besides the feeling that she was going to shed her skin, it was so dry and tight. Her eyes flew open in time to see her small foot resting in Embry's lap. His eyes were wide and his hands were in the air in a position of surrender.

Jezzie shook her head. "It's fine. It's just… your body temperature is the first thing I've felt in days."

She kept her eyes open but continued to lean against the bedpost. Jezzie watched as Embry dispensed a glob of Aveeno skin moisturizer from the bottle that had previously lived on the vanity in the bathroom into his hand. He leaned back in the chair, propping his feet against the bed's frame and let Jezzie's numb leg lay against on his own. He spread the moisturizer between his two hands briefly before taking Jezzie's ankle in his hand.

Jezzie watched in shock.

He rubbed carefully, starting at her ankle and pushing his thumbs firmly into the flesh on each side. He massaged along her Achilles tendon before palming all the way up her calf. He used the whole width of his hand to knead the muscle under Jezzie's fair skin. He let her heel rest on his thigh as he worked his thumbs into the space on each side of her leg where her muscle met bone.

Jezzie sighed in contentment, letting her body relax more than it had in days. She felt herself slowly melting into the bedpost as the heat from Embry's hands slowly sank into her skin, her muscles, her bones… She could feel the temperature as it traveled but the pressure only barely registered – but she knew it was working because the ministrations to her leg muscles were already relaxing those in her lower back. Whatever it was he was doing, he was doing a damn good job.

He was careful around her knee, and worked the area around the cap, using his fingers to rub out the tension in the back. He pressed his whole hand – fingers and palm – into the flesh of the back of her thigh, feeling the intermittent pressure and tension that seemed to be characteristic of her numb muscles. When he reached the hem of her shorts, he leaned back again and took her tiny foot in his hand. Never in his life did he expect to be holding anyone's foot in his hand. And he'd never imagined a person could have such a small foot. He wanted to ask her what size shoe she wore – that wasn't an inappropriate question like age or weight, right? – but now didn't really seem like the time for talking.

Jezzie's eyes had drifted closed again and her face had relaxed. No longer harsh and jagged, crowded by the cloud of her own anger, the hatred of her own body for turning on her. So hopefully she was enjoying it?
He pressed the pads of his thumbs into the arch of her foot, drawing a long line from heel to the ball of her foot several times. He pulled on each of her toes, stretching them from the point of tension. He smiled slightly, enjoying the bright aquamarine of her toenails. He rubbed his hand – slow and warm over the top of her foot before carefully letting it return to its dangling position.

He moved to the edge of the chair so he was closer to Jezzie and carefully slid his hands under the hem of her sweatshirt. He hoped she didn't misinterpret his action. He wasn't exactly coming on to her. When she made no move to hit him or push back, he let his hands rest on her lower back. He knew that's where it all came from. The sense that made her feel like her legs were numb. The little lesions on her spinal column making her muscles spasm in small intervals, causing pain to radiate down her legs over time. He'd never told her but he could feel them happening – those spikes of pain. It was so minute no human would have been able to tell. But he knew.

He let the warmth from his own skin soak into Jezzie's. She hated the cold. It sunk into her skin and bones with such ease and made it all the worse for her. He hated what the MS did to her. More than usual. He'd always hated that his Jez struggled with it – that she obviously tried to ward it off in her own ways. Going so far as to sustain half body road rash to keep it at bay, he had learned. But now it was affecting her even more. She was mad at it, at her body for making her sick and crippling her. And he was so angry. The fact that anything could convince Jezzie that she might not have been good enough – in one of the most unconventional ways possible – made him want to put a hole in the wall.

Jezzie wrapped her hand around his shoulders. She tugged herself towards him and moved even closer. Their knees met but they were still three feet apart. Jezzie let her small cool hand reach up and around Embry's neck. She pulled him close until their foreheads met.

"Thank you," she said without opening her eyes.

Embry swallowed. He hadn't been expecting that one. "Well," he said quietly with a small smile. "It's the least you can say. No self-respecting man ever looks twice at moisturizer."

A small grin played at the corner of Jezzie's mouth. She opened her eyes and met his gaze. She looked exhausted, but a lot less distraught. "It's a lot more than that."

"We're gonna figure this out, Jezzie. I'm not going anywhere."

"Leah!"

Oh joy.

Leah wasn't surprised that Embry was close to breaking down her front door. But that didn't mean she appreciated it. "What do you want, Embry?" she avoided virginal nicknames this time. If only because she was pretty sure she knew why he was here.

It wasn't her fault he'd never clued Jezzie into why she was a near-constant bitch. She was surprised Jezzie never asked. Actually, no she wasn't. Jezzie never asked those kinds of questions. That girl was the queen of letting it be. Maybe Leah would make her a thematic mix CD for actually being nice enough let Leah be who she was.

Leah was still a little mad at Embry for never giving Jezzie the whole truth about imprinting.

"I need your help."

Leah stopped short. She hadn't been expecting that.
A part of Embry was mad at Leah, too. But that part was slowly logic’d to death on his run over to the Clearwater's house after he left Jezzie in a sleepy haze and promised they would figure shit out. He finally realized he couldn't be mad at Leah for telling Jezzie the truth. And Jezzie and Leah were friends. Something Embry loved to see. Because he liked Leah and he liked Jezzie. And Embry knew Leah – more than anyone – needed a friend who wasn't a shapeshifting wolf.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Call?" Leah smirked as she sat at the kitchen table.

Embry plunked down beside her. "You know the history of every tribe up and down the Washington coast. We need to do some more research."

"I wasn't gifted by the gods with the power to work my way through an entire local archive in less than eight hours. Did you think that was natural talent?" Leah was curious. Both about his request and why he wasn't yelling yet.

"We've already started some – and there's a good chance that I'm not even a Quileute wolf," Embry stated. Leah rolled her eyes. She knew that much. "Which means that a whole different slew of legends apply to me. I need to know if imprinting applies."

Embry didn't mean to be quite so blunt, but considering he could easily read the look on Leah's face – she was expecting him to uncharacteristically flip his shit – he figured this was still toned down compared to her expectations.

"Jezzie told me you and her talked. She's worried we'll be next, even though we haven't even friggin' started anything... But I need to know if this is even an issue in the first place. I need to dig a little further, Leah."

Leah looked at Embry appraisingly. He was a nice guy. And his girlfriend was even nicer. And if she was being honest with herself, Leah would be over the moon to find out that Embry wouldn't imprint. That would be two people spared, at least. But what if research revealed that he was a Makah wolf and legend told that Makah wolves did imprint? Leah knew enough about her foray into local research to say that often times, digging turned up the unexpected. And it was usually worse than you thought. Research and bad news were very good friends.

"Okay," she agreed. "What are you up to this weekend?"

"This is gonna require some groundwork," Leah told him as she unfolded a map of Neah Bay on the dashboard. "So this is the confines of the reservation. We'll start there. We can branch out to the rest of town if need be."

"We'll talk to some of the families I know and hopefully they can point us in the right direction. The thing about Makah's is that stories and dances and songs pass through families. They're not owned by the tribe. Parts of culture belong to certain family units."

"That could be problematic," Embry offered.

Leah nodded. "Given the amount of families that have been wiped out by disease and time? Yep. Culture death is a bitch. There's also the small bit about how wolves are not the dominant symbol of Makah culture. They're not necessarily that way for the Quileutes either," she rolled her eyes, "but given recent history we bring those legends to prominence."

"Makah are fishermen, canoe builders, right?"

Leah smiled a little bit proud. Maybe he had been listening. "The focus is the sea, yes. Not the land."
Two days later, Leah had found Embry to tell him that she’d found a newspaper article about the death of Stanley Kallen – newly married to a ‘Tiffany’ – due to the complications of a rare, previously undiagnosed blood disorder. The article dated two months before Embry was born.

"He's buried in Neah Bay, Emb," she told him.

"Because he's Makah," Embry realized.

She nodded. "Carlisle was right."
Again, I owe a debt of gratitude to Stealth Liberal for her PNW tribal knowledge, without which I would not have been able to craft such a back story for Embry. For the sake of perpetuating knowledge (and not stereotypes or myths), please know that the information in this chapter regarding potlatches and the Makah are historically true, as is the note regarding association of females with bears (though not in the shapeshifter sense). The rest has come from my own head – including the shapeshifter/potlatch stories you're about to read – and I do believe it has been done with taste and respect for a tribe that still exists and thrives to this day. I do not take cultural context lightly.

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

"Okay…” Embry rubbed his head, looking slightly disoriented. "So not a single family turns up vampire legends." He and Leah had spent the entire day combing over Neah Bay under the guise of research for the preservation of Pacific Northwestern tribal folklore. It was only as the sun dipped low in the sky that they had met back up, exhausted, and extremely over-informed in a McDonald's parking lot.

"Neither do the tribal historians or the documented legends," Leah added. They had skipped lunch entirely, which was never a good idea for a pair of wolves and were making their way through $20 worth of food, notes made on napkins, maps, and their own recollections. But Embry was bound and determined to figure out this imprinting crap, but that meant they had to figure out why a full blood Makah kid lived on a Quileute Reservation and phased according to legends that didn't match his DNA.

Leah had tossed aside the idea that Embry had lingering Quileute blood. You need a lot to phase, Emb, she'd told him. And the research says both your parents are full Makah in all ways that count. They also both assumed that after Stanley had died – so shortly after arriving in La Push – they extended the offer to Tiffany Call allowing her to stay. Maybe they thought she was crazy too. Things would look fishy if they sent her back to Neah Bay and she started babbling about wolves. They were probably playing it safe. Not to mention she'd just settled in and finally popped you.

Eventually, they both just decided to go with that theory. Knowing the Council's paranoia, it was probably right – even if Tiffany had never muttered a word of the craziness that the father of her son had. They couldn't get bogged down in the gritty details, Leah insisted – not yet – because they needed to figure out the whole playing field first. Which meant figuring out why the hell a Makah kid was phasing.

"But the Foster family," Embry remembered. "They were the ones that had all the lore about the tribal women phasing. Which is weird…"

"It's not weird," Leah snapped. "It's different. Instead of all the boys running around having macho time, it's a girl's right to phase and protect, too. Now shut up and tell me what she said again."

"How can I tell you what she said if I have to shut up?" Leah glared at him, so he continued. "She
talked about potlatches."

"When all the local families would bring together their surplus food and clothes and such?" Leah asked. Embry nodded. "Potlatches were outlawed in the 1800s. Members of a tribe weren't allowed to trade goods in the potlatch manner because it was a vestige of tribal culture – it's how you gained status. That's why Whites wanted to get rid of it."

"Yeah," Embry nodded in agreement. "But the Makah's held onto the tradition, apparently. It was dangerous. If anyone who wasn't Makah found out, everyone involved was liable to get shot. So they kinda changed up things. Any family that was invited to a potlatch also had to be willing to have a member of the family stand guard. So while the potlatch was going on, there'd be people on the lookout who could sound the alarm if anyone suspicious came wandering through."

"Okay, makes sense. Apparently, Makah's were remarkably good at maintaining potlatches in the twentieth century despite the ban. Good for them. Keep going."

"Those chosen to guard the potlatch would pace the woods – sounds kinda like how we patrol today. And they'd wear animal skins – wolf skins, bear skins – as a way to scare people off, to intimidate them."

Leah nodded scratching around on some paper as she did so. Embry thought she might've been taking notes and just kept going.

"During one potlatch, it happened that everyone chosen to keep a lookout was female. So all these women took bearskins and went to their posts. They were so good at it – at keeping watch and scaring others off – that they became like permanent guards. It was their job to keep watch at each potlatch. After many months, when the women would go to keep watch they found that they had become one with their bear skins, as they protected their families."

"So the women masquerade as bears," Leah clarified. "As a way to protect the rest. Like scarecrows. And they eventually phase into the skins? Like La Push does with the wolves?"

"Sounds like it," Embry agreed. "The lady said that before one potlatch someone in the white part of town had been tipped off. They were told when and where the potlatch was happening, and that the guards were only people in animal skins. The white settlers marched through the woods and into town. They shot at the guards, killing them all. It's said that the spirit of the women moved into the bear – which kinda matches up with Makah lore about the maternal instincts of bears."

"Just like Mama Bears," Leah noted. Embry nodded.

"So there's the shapeshifting connection," Leah mused. "But I'm wondering how this ties in with the wolves. You're definitely not phasing into a bear, that's for sure. And you're definitely not a female." She smirked and glanced down momentarily at his crotch.

"I am not proving my manhood to you in a McDonalds parking lot."

"Embry Call, I have seen enough of your junk between phasing's to last me a lifetime."

"Anyway," Embry sighed. "There's more."

"The families and loved ones of the female lookouts were so upset by the slaughter of their family, they decided to guard their land almost constantly so they could never be snuck up on again. The young men were chosen as guards. Adult men had to work and so did the remaining women, but young guys apparently were free enough to guard the lands until they married. They wore wolfskins and protected the land constantly until one day, they realized that they had become one with their..."
wolfskins, able to choose between the shape of a wolf and the shape of a man. As bears, the women worked to protect the tribe, so the men would do the same in wolfskin."

Leah just stared at him, her mouth slightly open. "No mention of vampires."

"None," Embry shook his head. Leah only leaned back a bit and snagged a French fry while Embry continued to talk. "I think if the guards were being killed by vampires that would be something that would be remembered. That's kind of a big deal part of the story. It definitely sounds like plain ol' white folks."

"Yeah," Leah agreed. "So no vampires. Vampires don't figure into Makah mythology. Gimme that map." Embry slid the map of the peninsula towards her and she leaned forward glancing over it.

"Check this out," she pointed. "Neah Bay is obviously on the edge of the Olympic Peninsula, yes, but look. It's all mountainous to the East. Water to the North and West. The Quileutes to the South. The Makah have been insulated from vampires – they don't have exposure. Any vampire that comes in goes the easiest way possible – over moderate terrain coming in from the South – and they always hit La Push first. La Push wolves historically dominate the vampires. No vampire has made it this far North. Makah and Quileute phasing isn't related."

"So then why did I phase?" Embry asked. "If vampires are irrelevant to Makah history?"

"Makah wolves seem to phase as a protection instinct," Leah stayed on task. "Which – technically – isn't any different than the Quileutes. Their threats have just been different throughout history. Makahs don't seem to phase anymore because potlatches are allowed, and random people aren't wandering into the villages with the intent to kill. My hypothesis is that you, being the most unlucky full blood Makah in the world, are descended from the original Makah guards – maybe either male or female – and got moved to La Push with your Mom – who probably gave you the phasing gene in the first place – and then vampires started drifting through town. Your genes recognized a threat to your friends and family – an instinctual sore spot for Makahs. The source of the threat and your gender seems irrelevant. The threat must've been powerful enough to trigger your phase, even if it's latent. You're improbable, not impossible. Like me and Anna."

"Wow," Embry nodded. "That does suck."

"I bet if you never left Neah Bay, you never would've phased."

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**Thursday, January 11, 2007**

"Jake we need to call them," Leah insisted.

"Dude," Embry insisted, "if they don't hear it from us, the Volturi might snag them on their way here. And if we didn't warn them? We don't need another enemy."

"Well, what if they come from the West and we call them here for nothing. We then risk putting a bullseye on them and I'd doubt they'd be quite so pleased. Paul, you've been awfully damn quiet."

Paul had recently won the January Council elections – by a landslide victory – to the open seat left by Old Man Whitehorse's death. He was actually taking the job quite seriously – which shocked the hell out of the likes of Sam, Leah, and Jacob. All three had more or less anticipated having to make sure that while Paul made sure Old Quil stopped proposing crazy ass ideas in his senility, they would have to make sure Paul didn't propose crazy ass ideas. He was doing a good job thus far.

He'd convinced the Council that the chunk of money missing from the budget that had been going to
the Pack was too big. First off, someone was going to notice soon. Secondly, all the wolves that lived on their own had jobs. Mostly. They didn't need that money; at least not that much. The rest of the community could use it though. Emily had almost cried, and definitely hugged Paul, when she found out. Emily taught traditional weaving and other local handicraft work at the local schools and her programming was one of the many next on the chopping block.

Jacob, Leah, Embry and Rachel glanced towards the Beta wolf as they all sat in the Black's living room. It appeared he was spacing out. Elections and practical tough love for his tribe aside, he hadn't changed much. When Rachel said as much and waved her hand in front of his face, he batted her away. "Thinking," he responded.

"So that's the burning rubber smell," Leah commented.

Paul ignored the jibe and spoke. "I say we call them. We've been looking for a way to tell if this Plains Pack is legit or not – if they're really willing to cooperate – and this is the perfect opportunity."

"How do you figure?" Rachel asked. "If we call them out here, we owe them something. And we don't know if they'll turn on us."

"According to Alice's vision, whatever is coming is something the Pack and the Cullens can handle. We technically don't need them. Bringing the Plains wolves into this gives them the chance to prove that they actually want to be allies. If they do, they'll come and help – especially if they're worried the Volturi will head after them – there's only five of them, they can't take the Volturi on their own."

"And if they don't want to be our friends, they tell us to go screw?" Embry offered.

"Pretty much," Paul nodded. "And no big loss; because we don't technically need their numbers. Though, it'd be nice."

"Jake you still got that phone number?"

An interesting development indeed.

Damian had received a telephone call from the most unlikely of suspects. One Alpha, Jacob Black. His family did not make a habit of keeping with modern developments, but his sensibilities had told him that a telephone number in the twenty first century might not have been a bad idea. It seemed he was proven correct.

La Push was the newest target of an ongoing war. A war that the entire Olympic Peninsula seemed to be – simultaneously – both the center and oblivious of. Damian was largely tempted to allow them to handle their own messy details. After all, the Volturi already knew of his family and while he was assured they had not forgotten them, they had let them be. Appearing as adversaries by choice in this new battle of wolf against vampire would not be advantageous. After all, it would be nice to allow the Volturi to preoccupy themselves with La Push and forget his family. The Volturi was very good at preoccupying themselves.

Damian had rather liked the La Push wolves. They were a bit blunt and not terribly refined, but Damian knew they were capable. And they would prove a far more desirable partner than the Olympic Coven. The Olympic Coven would have been a powerful ally, yes, but not a pleasant one. To see that the genes of La Push had resurfaced after so long was interesting, very interesting.

An interesting development indeed.
Unfortunately, Collin's cover was mostly broken that one fateful Friday when his half brother Tommy had seen him coming out of Jake's house as he headed for school. He was lucky to make it to school unscathed and uncaught – Collin was very fast. During last period he laid out logistics in his head and decided that Kim and Jared were definitely closest to QTS.

Collin had been better, lately. A lot better, actually. He didn't feel so freaked out about lying to his parents about everything in his life. Now he only had to lie about some of it. It didn't really change that much but he just felt so much better. He really wasn't looking forward to the shrink crap his Mom was going to make him do but he'd promised. And promises were promises. Plus, he didn't want her so bent out of shape about him all the time. He wanted her to feel better, too.

The one dark spot in all of this was that Tommy had been bailed out. Who had the kind of money required to set the bail for Tommy, Collin didn't know. He figured it was a whole slew of his cronies from down in Hoquiam. At any rate, they'd let him free until his court date and he wasn't allowed near Collin within a certain amount of yards or feet or whatever. Collin had no idea how that was supposed to help. Was he just supposed to get an invisible forcefield? Maybe walk around with a cattle prod of the proper length attached to his belt – just in case? What was the use in telling Tommy he had stay so many feet, yards, inches, miles from his brother? Collin was pretty sure his awful sense of math had no idea how to gauge any of that.

Collin also didn't know what his brother was after that day he'd spotted him on his way to school. Maybe more cash? Maybe the thrill of the hunt? But when Collin finally made it out to the parking lot that afternoon he saw his brother in that stupid shitbox Trans Am that belonged to one of his stupid shitbox friends. Tommy saw him, and Collin high tailed it off and around the school.

After making it across the playing field he made easy work of the chain link fence and passed through someone's yard. Kim and Jared were two minutes, a street, and two back yards away.

He was hoping he could make it without Tommy seeing where he was headed. In a town this small, everyone knew where everyone lived and Tommy had easily deduced who Collin had taken up new friendships with. If he saw him on Jared's street he was screwed. He peeked around the side of a house, saw no signs of the gold Trans Am, ran across the street, and through two more yards back to back.

He was so pleased to be on Jared and Kim's street he didn't think to check before he jumped onto the pavement. Tommy glanced him as he drove past on an adjacent street. "Shit," Collin cursed and turned the other way. He rounded the corner and made it up Kim's flower-lined walkway and onto the porch in record time.

Jezzie – drinking her iced tea and sitting cross-legged on the swing, and reading Embry's old as hell copy of The Giver – was the complete opposite of Collin's current disposition. She put her glass down hastily and glanced up at Collin – out of breath and panicked looking. "Is Jared or Kim home?" he asked as he caught his breath.

"No," Jezzie stood up and came towards him. "Jared's on patrol for another hour and Kim just ran out for something at the store. Collin, what's wrong?" she approached him and put a hand on his shoulder as he braced his hands on his knees. Running had definitely not helped abate a panic attack. He was trying desperately not to let it happen.

"Collin?" she spoke again and he could hear the concern in her voice. Then her attention was diverted by the rumbling of an engine in serious need of an oil change. He felt her grip on his shoulder tense. "Collin, get in the house," she said lowly.
"But…" he began to retort before Jezzie cut him off. He wasn't about to leave her here with his crazy ass brother. First, because he would never do that to anyone. Second, because Embry would crush his skull like a grape.

"No 'buts', mister." And with that, she put the sole of her foot to the backside of his knee, forcing him forward and through Kim and Jared's open front door. She followed him in and went to the umbrella stand and pulled Kim's shotgun out of the bucket.

Collin just stared in shock as he watched her load Kim Connweller's home defense weaponry like a seasoned pro. She marched through the door, slammed it, and he could hear her marching down the stairs.

"Ah, you must be the white girl from Detroit," Tommy noted blithely as he climbed leisurely out of the car. "Word on the street is, your bedding half this group of degenerates. No one else can figure out how you got in."

Collin watched in horror and wonder as Jezzie Sullivan – the girl who never swore or said a bad word against anyone – cocked the round for discharge and raised it to her shoulder. Tommy had clearly not noticed that accessory when the pasty redhead marched out of the house. How was Collin letting this happen again?

"Tommy Littlesea, you march your behind back up off this lawn and you go home, you hear? This is a violation of your bail."

"Whoa, whoa, there 8 Mile," he raised his hands when Jezzie didn't let the gun down. "No need to do anything crazy."

"I'm perfectly sane, Tommy. I think you need to go."

Tommy nodded and began to back up slowly, never taking his eyes off Jezzie. "All right, all right. I can take a hint. But if you ever get bored with these morons, you come see me. We like our women feisty in Hoquiam."

"Tommy, if I ever hear that you've so much as laid a finger on Collin again I will break your knees and drop you in Puget Sound. Clear?"

"Crystal," he smiled warily. He slipped back inside the car and backed all the way down the street. Jezzie lowered the gun. She came back inside and placed the gun where she'd found it.

Collin simply sat in the armchair staring at her in shock for a while. Kim stepped carefully in the door moments later with a bag in her hands. "What'd I miss?"

Collin wanted to ask the same question. Jezzie had always been so quiet and reserved. Something about the last few weeks, though – since the New Year – had caused her to become a little unhinged. She wasn't as neat, polite, responsible, and reasonable as she used to be. Maybe all the insanity around her was finally starting to crack her reserves.

Jezzie crossed the floor and dropped onto the arm of chair Collin was seated in. "Are you okay?" she asked, gently tugging him towards her – examining him for signs of damage. When he nodded yes, she hugged him toward her abdomen tightly. "Poor baby," she mumbled. Jezzie's demeanor had completely flipped since she'd come back through the door. Now she sounded concerned beyond belief and the worry hung in her eyes.

"Collin Littlesea," Jezzie pronounced as she sat up and braced his shoulders. "If that boy so much as looks at you funny, I want to know about it," she stated firmly. "I am not prepared to let a fully
grown man hurt his younger brother. I don't care if you're a bulletproof shapeshifter. Do you understand me?"

Collin gaped at her for a moment before swallowing and nodding. "Yes ma'am."

"Thank you," she replied before marching back into the kitchen.

Later Jake got a text message – which he thought oddly modern, considering the sender didn't even use contractions or the contemporary vernacular.

_We should be there within the week._

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_Saturday, January 13, 2007_

"Shit, where are we gonna put them? I didn't think about that?"

"Embry," Jake sighed and rubbed his eyes and massaged his forehead. "You're, like, the ambassador of this Pack. My secretary of state. And you didn't even think of _where_ we were going to house the pack of werewolves that was coming into town? I kinda assumed you had that shit handled."

"Excuse me," Jezzie raised her hand from the bowl of cereal she had helped herself to in the Ateara's kitchen, her legs swinging around beneath the stool. "Mr. President Alpha? Mrs. Secretary of State has a suggestion that can save her inept partner's ass."

Embry rolled his eyes, but it felt kinda nice to hear Jezzie package them together like that.

"Shoot," Jake replied.

"We can let them stay at my house," she said, scooping up a spoonful of Cap'n Crunch. "My Dad's gone fishin' – literally – and I've got a big ol' house to myself. There's only five of them, right? I can make that work."

"They're werewolves, Jezzie," Jake offered. He felt like he might've needed to remind her of that before she offered to share living space with them.

"So?" Jezzie shrugged. "Does that make them second-class citizens? There has to have been some case in Supreme Court history about the unconstitutionality of keeping all the werewolves away from everybody else because they have cooties." When both Jacob and Embry stared at her she did nothing. "What? You don't think so? I can install different drinking fountains if makes everyone feel better."

Jacob wished she wouldn't throw those kinds of things back in their face so often.

"They don't have cooties, Jezzie, but they are werewolves. It's like vampires. If they bite you, you will transform."

"Only when they're phased, though, right? I mean, they can gnaw on me all they want while human."

"Yes..." Jacob didn't like the ease with which his Beta Human worked around his logic. "Technically. But I don't want strange people gnawing on you, Jezzie. At least not against your will."

"Well the next full moon isn't for a few weeks. And even if they're here that long - which I doubt
considering Alice says the time for the battle's coming closer - I live in the woods. We'll draw the 
shades and stuff. Or I can move out for a few days. As long as they promise to phase outside and not 

eat Archie. It's easier to relocate just me than a whole family."

"Alice said this will be over within the week." Embry added. "She can't see past the weekend, which 
means that's when all this is going down - because she can't tell who will make it out."

"Do they only phase with the full moon?" Jezzie asked idly, stirring her spoon in her milk.

"No," Jake shook his head. "They can phase whenever. Apparently it takes a lot more effort in lesser 
moon cycles though."

"More effort means more control," Jezzie noted.

Annnnd there's the mindfuck. Jezzie was too good at that shit.

"All right, Little Red," Jacob nodded. "You want to play host to the Plains wolves, have at it."

"Yay! Guests!" Jezzie chirped in victory.

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Monday, January 15, 2007

"Hi guys," Jezzie bounded up the Ateara's stairs where Damian, Elizabeth, Lydia, Zachary and 
Abigail had been in a holding pattern. Rachel had been nice enough to play it off like a nice hostess 
and offer them food and tea - these werewolves really appreciated tea - while Embry figured what 
the fuck he was going to do with them until Jezzie got off her shift at work. She was glad they had 
arrived today – her last day on Winter Break before her last semester of classes started.

Jezzie noticed they all looked much... better. They looked just generally better than last time. 
Granted, now they hadn't been running in wolf skin for days or fighting off shapeshifters or attacking 
the local vampire coven. They actually flew in from Minneapolis. On an airplane. Fancy that?

"You guys are gonna stay with me because my house is nice and empty and I need some darn 
company."

The werewolves all glanced to each other. Despite the cleanliness and the lack of bloodthirsty terror 
that Jezzie remembered from last time, all of the family still had a distinctly sleek, aquiline, predatory 
set to the face.

"Under one condition," Damian replied.

"Do you have a tea pot?" Lydia asked with a smile.

Jezzie didn't know if it was a time period thing, a family thing, a werewolf thing, or just a weird 
thing. But the Plains Pack drank a lot of tea. Jezzie didn't mind. She liked tea, too. And she liked the 
Plains Pack, actually.

They were all scary in their own way, though Jezzie supposed that was the job, but as a family unit 
they were almost… normal. They interacted so seamlessly together, Jezzie almost felt like she was 
the guest.

Damian was the big brother and obvious patriarch. He was often quiet or stoic with a very dry wit, 
but played with his little brother and sister far too often for Jezzie take him seriously after two days. 
They were the only ones he smiled for. Lydia reminded Jezzie a bit of Rosalie. Maybe like Rosalie
and Leah combined. She was attractive and refined, but she didn't take any crap from anyone – including Damian – and it was obvious he respected his sister as his equal.

Elizabeth most often seemed… lost… in her own thoughts and daydreams. She mostly contented herself and didn't talk much, though she was kind when she did – if a little eerie. No one else in the house seemed to notice, no one certainly mentioned it. Jezzie wondered if life too long raising her children alone, life too long without her husband had done her irreparable damage.

Jezzie found it remarkable that the werewolves were completely indistinguishable from mortals when in human form. They weren't unbearably strong. Jezzie probably could've taken Lydia in an arm wrestling match. They weren't unnaturally cold or warm. Their skin was normal skin, they got paper cuts and bruises, they stubbed their toes or sometimes tripped.

Jezzie thought it bizarre that for all the Cullen's and La Push Pack's aversion to the werewolves, they were the most human. The shapeshifters picked up on that more quickly than the Cullens did, at least.

They spent three days at Jezzie's. In the day time, she went to work – and the wolves played and planned with the shapeshifters. They trained in the deep woods – far from humans – with Jasper and the other Cullens; and Jezzie hung out with Nessie.

Friday, January 19, 2007

It was Friday afternoon and Jezzie was driving with Nessie into La Push proper and down the main road when, apparently without cause, five young kids ran out of homes, stores and cars, tearing off their clothes, only to leap into the woods in total synchronization.

They were here.

In less than a half hour, Jezzie had left Nessie safely with Rachel, who was orchestrating battle safety plans for the humans on the reservation. Brady's wolf was pacing anxiously in the woods on the outskirts of town and by the time Jezzie navigated her supply-laden Jeep down the ATV trails, Collin nodded his big furry head to her before taking a few steps into the woods – between her and the battle.

Jezzie got out of the Jeep and picked her way carefully over to Collin's side. She rested a tentative hand on his furry shoulder – about level with hers. The two stared off into the wooded distance, and through the quiet, Jezzie thought she could hear what anyone else would think was the crack of thunder. "So that's where it's all happening?" Jezzie asked quietly. Collin uttered a small whine and shook his head. Jezzie flinched as she heard the distinctive thud and snap of rock and tree, before she returned to her Jeep and readied her supplies for a long night.

Friday night into Saturday morning…

"Seth! Stop it! Get out of here, you're going to tear the door off my Jeep!" Jezzie tried her hardest to force his muzzle out of the truck and back to his post. His belligerent whine echoed through the cab, adding to the grating screaming coming from Leah.

At some point about an hour into the battle, with no indication at such a distance that anything was going wrong or right, Seth had replaced Collin. Collin phased human and Jezzie only knew because he called to her from the woods to tell her it was Seth coming to trade places. Soon after Leah had
come stumbling through the trees with one leg bent at odd angles at the knee. She was too dazed to scream or cry from the pain.

"Seth! I know she's your sister! But I can't help her if you don't move!" With that final shove Seth retreated far enough that Jezzie could get to work. She wasn't even going to begin to force Seth to go back to keeping watch. Jezzie scrambled back and grabbed a long swath of torn bed sheet to use for a tourniquet.

She used her hands and wiped the blood hastily from Leah's leg, trying to find the source so she could place the tourniquet properly.

Leah had ceased screaming and now just seemed to be fuming her pain out of her system. She was also quite possibly going to tear some of the upholstery out of Jezzie's truck.

"Shoot," Jezzie muttered, Leah's blood up to her elbows. "Leah, this is your knee. They took out your whole knee. I can't tell for certain, but this looks pretty bad."

"I'll phase back, it'll heal better," she ground out, staring at the roof of the truck and barely comprehensible through the renewed shouts and growls as Jezzie tied the tourniquet near Leah's hip and applied gentle pressure at the wound; she didn't want to damage Leah's knee any further.

"No way," Jezzie bit out as she tore fabric to tie the rudimentary brace. "This isn't going to heal on the fly and I don't know how to treat animals."

"But—"

"You're out of commission, Leah," Jezzie said firmly. "Otherwise, you risk the others if you get hurt." Jezzie braced Leah's knee from both sides and tried to clean up the area as she went. "Seth, tell the others. She's fine, but she's out."

Seth just whined and padded off a ways to relay the information, and resume his post. Jezzie continued wrapping and bracing Leah's knee and hoped it set well enough and wouldn't heal too quickly. She wanted Carlisle to check it over. "Do you have anything for the pain?" Leah ground out. Whatever had happened, it had massacred Leah's entire knee. That was not an easy injury. They were beyond Tylenol and ibuprofen.

Jezzie riffled through the small pack of prefilled syringes Carlisle had given her. "All I have in here is Lidocaine," she said as she continued looking.

"Will that help?" Leah growled.

"It'll make it numb, but in your case I don't think it's going to numb your whole knee. Your temp and physiology… I don't even know."

"Oh my god," Jezzie muttered as she pulled a small glass vial out from the bottom amongst several others with similar labels.

"Whatever you have there, Dr. Cavorkian, it better be good," Leah was not up to waiting any longer.

Jezzie tore open a sterile syringe and immediately began to fill it. "Oxycodone. I have no idea how Carlisle got opiates out of the hospital, that could get him in some serious trouble. But if this doesn't work, not much else will."

Jezzie checked her measurements against the scale, though she didn't know why. Leah definitely needed more than a typical dose, but how much more was anyone's guess. "I'm assuming you've
never been under, post phase?" Jezzie asked. "Any idea of how sensitive you are to meds?"

"Juice me up, kid. I promise not to sue or die."

Jezzie cleaned an area of Leah's skin – old habits died hard and no matter what the wolves and Carlisle told her, she couldn't completely forsake cleanliness and sterilization – and stuck her with the syringe. "You should feel this real soon. If not, let me know, I'll give you more." Jezzie made to crawl out of the cramped space and cleaned up the trash and ripped fabric and some of the blood, when Seth came barreling back to the trail yelping and hopping, frantically.

"Seth, I don't speak dog," Jezzie said in frustration, only resisting the urge to pull at her own hair when she remembered she was still covered in blood. Seth moved aside quickly as Paul and one of the Cullens came staggering backwards onto her trailhead. Jasper… that was his name, Jezzie now remembered. "Paul? Jasper? What are you doing?" she asked as they backed out of the trees.

Then they turned and the sight before Jezzie almost made her reel. Jasper looked absolutely manic. His face looked anguished enough to split. Jezzie had never seen Jasper anything less than nonplussed. Paul looked on the verge of being ill. He was breathing heavily and his movements were haphazard and unsteady. So out of character for him, it was startling. Between them, Jasper and Paul were pulling the torso of a red-blonde haired stone.

Jasper's brother. Edward.

*They reconstitute themselves, Jezzie* reminded herself automatically as she stared in horror. He's not dead. Not that kind of dead anyways. Jezzie had promised to look out for the Cullens as best she could, too. She swallowed thickly, "Where's… where's the rest of him? We need the rest, right?"

"Yeah," Paul gasped and nodded. "Not far, fifty yards in the trees maybe, one of them got away from the group, smelled blood."

Jezzie nodded. Edward had been torn to pieces to save them, the bystanders. "I'll get the rest of him, Jasper," she said quietly as she noticed he wouldn't remove his eyes from his brother's dismembered form. She rested a hand on his deeply scarred forearm. "He'll be fine; I promise. Your family needs you. If anything comes up I'll have Seth send word." If she was of slightly cooler mind, Jezzie might wonder if Seth didn't appreciate being used as a telepathic homing pigeon.

Paul ducked his head and was the first back into the woods. Jasper moved mechanically backwards as he slowly began to disappear, never looking away from his brother. He disappeared begrudgingly, his face tortured into a frustration and sadness Jezzie felt ashamed to have witnessed.

"What's going on out there?" Leah groggled from Jezzie's truck. "I smell leech."

Jezzie crumpled down to the dirt path next to Edward's frozen torso and just stared open mouthed. Seth joined her on Edward's other side, whining quietly he nudged Edward's still form. He moved like a stone. His eyes were frozen open and her mouth held slightly open in a mask of shock. It reminded Jezzie of a statue.


Jezzie wandered into the trees and was still within sight of her truck when she found Edward's left hand. She stared at it dumbstruck for a few moments and slowly bent to pick it up. It was cold and hard – just like marble… or maybe granite. Jezzie felt her stomach roll inside her and bent over
against a pine tree as she retched. She clung to Edward's severed hand the whole time refusing to drop it.

Jezzie eventually collected Edward's right arm, his right hand and his whole left leg before having to return fully burdened with severed human body parts. She stared right ahead and refused to think of the stone cold, sweet smelling body parts lying lifeless in her arms. A person's body parts – they weren't statues or stone. They were Edward Cullen and she realized with a shiver that she still had a whole other leg and arm to find. She could see the break in the trees when she felt something move behind her. It only manifested like a gust of wind and she felt her hair swish out of the way before a searing pain scorched her back.

Jezzie gasped and cried out as Seth came crashing through the trees. She held onto Edward's limbs as she ducked, glancing back to see Seth crash with the force of a rockslide into a vampire. Jezzie hissed and tried not to shriek as bark from a nearby tree went flying in all directions and pelted her back lightly. She stood and ran, dumping Edward's limbs by his lifeless torso before picking up one of Rachel's self-igniting Molotov cocktails (that had been an interesting lesson in the Black's driveway a day earlier).

"What's going on out there?" Leah screamed.

"Be right back," Jezzie replied. She took a deep breath and ran back into the woods, ducking behind tries to avoid being hit with anything. She arrived back in time to see Seth take a total arm to the side of his skull and Jezzie could hear the crunch of bone. As Seth stood again to lunge, looking slightly wobbly, Jezzie stepped out from behind her tree.

"Seth, move!" she shouted. And he was able to see what she was carrying with enough time to get out of the path of her toss. It hit the vampire square in the chest as it charged towards Jezzie and she ducked back behind her tree with enough time to only feel the heat of the passing inferno. The vampire was fully engulfed in flames and proceeded to collapse on the forest floor as Seth approached it and carefully pulled off the arms and legs.

Jezzie just stared in wide-eyed horror, covering her ears, as the vampire screeched in agony slowly being burnt to death – to a pile of ash. The thick, acrid purple haze of smoke hung in the trees and Jezzie only moved when she felt Seth's muzzle nudge her forward. She started slightly at the contact before heading back to her Jeep.

She shook her head and decided not to think about what she'd just done and witnessed – at least not right now. There were other issues to tend to.


"Probably yours," Jezzie muttered, tearing the carefully tied fabric around Leah's knee.

Leah shook her head. "No, it's... turn around. Holy shit, it's you. Jezzie, you're fucking bleeding what the hell just happened out there?"

"I set a vampire on fire," Jezzie replied finally meeting the she-wolves eyes.

Leah only stared at Jezzie, her eyes saucer wide. "Jezzie turn around." She obeyed the command and felt Leah's hands careful on her back as she assessed Jezzie's lacerations that streaked across her shoulder blade. "One, two, three, four. This is from a hand. Jezzie, did it bite you?" Leah asked seriously.

Jezzie shook her head. "I don't know," she choked quietly. "I didn't see it. I don't think so. It burns a
lot, though."

Jezzie turned around and told her not to worry about it. Leah's painkillers were setting in and the bleeding was manageable. Jezzie advised her to keep moving it. Leah let the subject change happen.

"Won't the knee not heal if I keep moving it?"

"Yeah… Carlisle says you guys heal too quick. If your knee sets wrong he'll have to break it again. You want it to heal and still move like a joint."

"Ew," Leah cringed. "Point made." Jezzie watched her undo the splint and proceeded back into the woods.

Jezzie took a deep breath, mentally prepping herself to go gather Edward's remaining appendages and trying to ignore the painful sting of her back as she felt small trails of blood trickle down her back, when Seth came out of the woods again. He was howling and pacing haphazardly and for a moment Jezzie thought something was wrong with him. It was only a moment later when Emmett came out of the woods with a bloody and beaten wolf hanging off his shoulder.

Jezzie could only tell it was one of the wolves by the sparing glances of unbloodied, dark flesh. Jezzie just stood and stared in shock as Emmett laid the man down on the ground next to her Jeep. He stole a brief glance towards his brother and forced himself back into the tree cover without a word.

Jezzie fell to her knees and scrambled to clear the blood from the face before her. Pragmatically, it wasn't entirely necessary for her to know whom she was treating. The wolves were all the same. But coming out of the battle, buried so deep in new and caked on blood, the sight of muscle matter, tendons and even a few compound fractures – she felt she needed to know. She cleared the face enough to realize it was Sam Uley.

His breathing was rattling and wet. Jezzie could hear the gurgling in his chest that sounded a lot like a collapsed lung.

Jezzie swiped at the tears pooling in her eyes as Sam's brown ones flashed to her own. He wasn't unconscious or even delirious; Jezzie realized Sam was fully present as he suffocated. The old La Push Alpha was dying a slow and gruesome death.

"Don't you dare, Sam," Jezzie growled as she scrambled over his body and leapt into her truck. She rifled around for supplies as Leah tried to more to see the face of the body just out of sight. "And that is..."

"Sam," Jezzie grunted. She threw all her bandages, plastic tubing and a plethora of other supplies through the open door. She hopped out and returned to Sam, who now lay gasping and flinching on the ground.

Jezzie wasn't confident in her ability to treat a shapeshifting wolf as bad off as Sam. She was a medic, not a doctor, not a miracle worker. She plugged her stethoscope into her ears and placed the chest piece against his skin. Jezzie sighed when the tell tale signs of a collapsed lung reached her ears. She dropped the ear tips from her head and she lifted Sam's left arm slightly, giving herself room near his armpit. He flinched at the movement. "I'm sorry," Jezzie hissed. "Sam, your lung's collapsed. I have to get a chest tube in here."

Jezzie's eyes flickered up to Edward's dismembered torso. She did a double take and noticed the edges of his frame blurring. Almost like when the wolves phased, Edward's torso vibrated at its
edges – it was also shimmering ever so slightly in the pale moonlight. Jezzie forced her focus back to Sam. Edward could reconstitute with the parts she'd found, there wasn't much Jezzie could do for him; Sam was not healing his injuries by himself.

She pulled on a set of gloves since this procedure would actually involve breaking into some of Sam's flesh – or at least that which hadn't already been exposed. She bent her head back down and cleaned Sam's skin and injected him with a local anesthetic. She tapped the skin and he made no indication to know she'd touched him. She quickly applied clean drapes to his skin and made a small incision in the side of his chest between his fourth and fifth ribs. She tried to gently make a passage through the muscle to Sam's lungs as she inserted the clamp and widened its mouth. She reached inside, finding his lung – and not the liver or spleen. She could tell he could feel her wriggling around inside him due to the look on his face, but he didn't flinch anymore. He must've known this would have gone better with stillness.

She guided the tube into Sam's chest with the clamp, trying desperately to keep her focus on Sam and not on Edward's still vibrating, still not reconstituted form. Jezzie was able to insert the chest tube and suture the opening with relative quickness. She attached the opposite end of the tube to its suction unit and prayed for the best. She sat in the dirt for a moment and took a deep, relatively easy breath. She gave Sam's hand a firm squeeze and cleared some of the blood and dirt from his face. Jezzie only allowed herself a breath of time before springing back up, forcing herself to remember that simply inserting a chest tube into Sam's collapsed lung was not the end of her duties.

She popped the cap off of the antiseptic and wet a torn sheet. She began carefully cleaning the caked blood from Sam in order to see where his wounds lay. Her gaze was half focused on her task and half focused on Edward. *When was it supposed to start working?* Edward's torso and his limbs next to her were vibrating at a significantly slower pace now, though they still glowed.

Jezzie didn't have time to worry any further as Sam issued a loud gasp. Jezzie glanced down and couldn't immediately discern the source of his pain. As she continued to clean his skin – glancing over slashes, scrapes and bruises of varying severity – at a slower pace, she came across what appeared to be a particularly large, particularly raw and deep scrape along his other side. Jezzie continued to clean, softly apologizing every now and then, and soon realized that what she thought was one large scrape was in fact a very serious case of road rash. Just like hers had been, only much, much worse.

"Jezzie?" Leah asked, sounding significantly doped up now. "What's happening out there?"

"No worries, Leah," Jezzie tried. She knew she couldn't brush Leah off even if she was high on painkillers. But she also didn't need the she-wolf barging in with her broken knee and her buzzed out brain in the middle of some serious injury duty. Jezzie needed to be able to concentrate and she didn't want to call Seth back from watch to distract his sister. "Just a little wound cleaning. Stings a bit."

"Ouch… Gotcha."

Jezzie continued to clean the caked on dirt and blood, but from the area she'd already exposed she estimated that most of Sam's right side was scorched earth. She guessed he must've landed and skidded, because he'd torn off many layers of skin. And as his body began to heal itself, the fluids and skin that began to ooze and regrow and had begun incorporating the dirt and dried blood back into his newly created flesh.

Jezzie tried not to gag at the sight of the new flesh – hidden beneath the crusted blood and dirt – interwoven with earth and slowly crawling its way over the raw and oozing layers exposed beneath. She bit down on her lip. She'd never seen this before because it didn't happen to normal people. But Jezzie couldn't let Sam's skin grow over old blood and dirt – god only knows the infections that
could cause. Ones even his shapeshifter immune system might not be able to fight off.

"Sam I apologize in advance but this is going to hurt like nobody's business. If you promise to hold mostly still, I promise to give you really good drugs for the pain." And with that oath, Jezzie plunged into the task of scrubbing away Sam Uley's newly grown skin. She had the immense task of lifting his torso far up off the ground to lay a sheet under his side so she wasn't cleaning the dirt out of his skin in the dirt. After that, there was poured antiseptic, aggressive yet careful scrubbing, lots of wincing and eventually the grinding of teeth against an adjustable wrench that Jezzie gave Sam to bite on as she scrubbed away the top layers of skin until she got to connective tissue and started exposing nerve endings.

From there, Jezzie was out of her element. She'd never treated any injury like this before and her brain was too frazzled to remember the "by the book" manner of treatment. Having exposed all of Sam's skin from his hip bone to his shoulder and down to his elbow had left her a little on edge. Any normal person would've needed skin grafts but Jezzie could see Sam's skin already puckering at the edges where it tried to reclaim lost territory. She took careful and precise time, leaving antiseptic moistened bandages on the edges of his wound hoping that would help slow his healing. Starting in small increments, Jezzie carefully removed, by tweezers and dint of her own careful breath, the dirt, blood and other particulate matter that had burrowed into Sam's skin.

She didn't even bother to cover the wounds, they healed so quickly. She would later when it was time to move him. She had to deal with what looked like a clean break at Sam's femur. She'd just sat upright and wiped at her face with a small clean part of her forearm. "Jezzie," she heard a warning call from the woods.

"Yes?" she replied back, not liking the way her voice broke with a mild note of hysteria.

There was no response, only the emergence of Quil and Embry through the treeline carrying… someone else. Jared? It was Jared. "Leah move over, you're about to get some company," Jezzie spoke and the she-wolf slid to one side of Jezzie's truck just in time for Quil to lay Jared down next to her with a thunk.

Jezzie stood and looked into the trunk at Jared laying half-conscious next to Leah. She could hear the others muttering behind her. She got the impression that the battle was mostly over. "Oh god…" Jezzie muttered at the sight of Jared before her. She turned around to Quil and Embry. "Carlisle. I need Carlisle."

They both looked at her but before they could respond she had continued. "I cannot handle massive internal bleeding. Get Carlisle or Jared dies."

Jezzie scrambled up into the truck as Quil ran back into the woods. Jared's legs and arms were nowhere near as warm as they should have been. His abdomen was swelling and Jezzie thought she could see discoloration in the terrible lighting. His face was pale and wan and he looked without seeing. Jezzie reached over his and Leah's heads to the cooler in her back seat and pulled a bag of O negative blood.

"What's happening?" Leah asked.

"He's bleeding internally," Jezzie said shortly. "Probably the spleen or liver. Maybe both. Either way you have to cut a normal human open to fix that. Jared might heal it on his own if he's quick enough, but I don't know where all that blood is gonna go."

Jezzie wiped down an area on Jared's arm and prepped it for an IV; she tore the sterile wrapping off another IV line and attached to the small bag of blood. She hung the bag from the coat rack hook in
her truck and tried to stay out of her own way, with the truck's meager light. Jared didn't seem to realize she'd stuck him and Jezzie wasn't sure what to make of it.

"If he's bleeding it all out," Leah replied. "Why are you giving him more?"

"The space between his organs doesn't need the blood, but his organs do. He doesn't have enough blood where it needs to be. Otherwise he risks brain, heart, liver, kidney damage. All sorts... I can't get the other blood out now without killing him... I need Carlisle; he'll know better what to do about the blood in his abdominal cavities."

She caught a glimpse of Embry out of the corner of her eye and realized the battle must have been over if he wasn't leaving. "Jared," she mumbled looking him in the eyes, holding his chin in her small hand. "Jared? C'mon Jared, focus. I need you to focus." She was able to listen to his lungs and while his breathing was labored, it was regular and stable. "Try and breathe regular, please. Just a normal, regular pattern. It's gonna be all right."

His pulse was high and she knew his blood pressure would be low. After that Jezzie was at a loss. There was so much more she knew he needed but she couldn't do. He needed a Full Blood Count – of both red and white cells – a Liver Function Test, and U+E to test for kidney function. He needed an abdominal CT scan and to be prepped for surgery.

She felt her eyes burn at the edges. She knew what he needed. It was routine, if not painful and a little terrifying. But Jared was a shapeshifter. If he went to Forks Community Hospital, there was no way they'd be able to even help really. According to human rates of homeostasis – Jared had a lot more problems. His body temperature was a death sentence in normal humans. No MD was trained to treat him.

It was such a run of the mill procedure for abdominal bleeding and many people would survive. But Jezzie didn't know about Jared. He wasn't going to a hospital. The best he would get would be her and Carlisle. And he deserved so much more.

She hadn't realized she'd gone completely motionless, until she was being dragged out of the Jeep by her waist. She didn't resist. She was frozen. Carlisle moved into the spot she had just vacated and she watched as Quil helped Leah out of the trunk entirely.

Then her Jeep was getting smaller and smaller and she realized she was being carted away. No. She had to help. She had to do something. And suddenly her limbs remembered how to work and she scrambled against the arm around her waist – pushing and clawing she desperately tried to free herself.


She recognized Embry's voice and she swallowed against the sandpaper in her throat. "Embry put me down," she said.


"Embry put me down."

"We need your help with Alice. Jasper says she's in shock."

"Embry put me down. Or I'm going to throw up on you."

"Okay!" Embry replied and immediately relinquished her to her own feet. Jezzie stumbled a few feet and leaned against a downed tree as her stomach purged whatever was left of its contents. She didn't
think it was much at this point.

"Jezzie are you okay?" Embry sounded concerned and grossed out.

"Just shock," she assured him before standing upright and following him to the next clearing. Jezzie was surprised to find out how close to the action her Jeep had been parked. In the midst of the open field, Jezzie saw two figures sat down. The horizons were fogged and blurred and she couldn't tell how big the clearing was.

Alice was in shock, Jasper was right. "Isn't he a doctor?"

"No, that was my brother's enterprise," Jasper replied as they approached. "I never had the stamina for it... Which, I have to ask, Jezzie, are you bleeding?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Is it bothering you?"

He shook his head. "Smells an awful lot like vampire, though. Were you bit?" he asked, his face immobile.

Jezzie shook her head. "I don't think so." She could tell Embry was having a hard time restraining himself at the sight of her bleeding through the untorn portion of her shirt. "Stings like a paper cut in a salt mine, but nothing unbearable."

"I think you'll be just fine, then," Jasper replied to her, but looking at Embry. "If you had been bit, you'd know."

Alice was sitting in the middle of a field of scorched earth. Most of the bodies were being burned in a pyre set by Emmett and Damian. Jezzie was thankful for that, but the acrid smoke that hung low in the air, almost made her sick again. That was what was making everything foggy.

"Who's gone?" Jezzie asked. "What's our tally?"

Jasper was quiet for a moment before he spoke slowly. "We killed two of their leaders – Aro and Caius – the two strongest. I don't know how or even if Marcus will hold the organization together now."

"I got the blonde girl's brother..." Embry added. "That kid who cuts off your senses. And Jared got that girl with the shield – the one who protected that old black-haired guy."

Jasper nodded. "Alec and Renata, yes. And Emmett got Chelsea. She was the lynchpin for the entire Volturi. She manipulates relationships. It'll be interesting to see what happens to them now she's gone."

"And what about us?" Jezzie asked. "The Plains Pack?"

"Well," Jasper glanced around. "We've scattered quite a bit. I've recently seen all of Damian's family - though the two little ones were left in Forks if I'm correct... We can account Emmett, myself, Alice, Embry, and you."

"Bella's gone," Alice whispered. Embry and Jezzie stared at the small girl wide-eyed. Alice didn't look up. "Felix pinned her down and she panicked, dropped her shield and Jane got to her. She couldn't move and Felix finished it."

"Leah and Sam are back at my truck. So is Jared. Jared doesn't look so good. And Edward. He wasn't... he wasn't going back together."
"Emmett," Alice chirped from her dazed spot. "You should go. The others will need you." Jezzie thought of Edward's dismembered body lying beside her Jeep. She felt ashamed to admit that she'd rather forgot about him in the melee that ensued with Jared but she had. Edward hadn't reformed yet.

"Is he…" Jezzie began.

Alice shook her head, understanding the direction of Jezzie's question. It only belatedly occurred to her that Alice might have been able to see Edward's fate since he was injured. The pretty girl's face was impassive and only partially masked the sorrow in her eyes. Her gaze was unfocused; she wasn't looking at anything specific. "Let's help where we can, yes?" Jasper offered in a stilted voice from behind.

Jezzie nodded.

Alice was in shock, but she wasn't going to die. Again, anyways. She'd lost an arm at the shoulder part of the way through the battle and like any normal person was a little overwhelmed by it. Alice didn't need medical treatment, she needed someone to distract her from being psyched out while her arm reattached.

"It's okay, Alice," Jezzie offered. "I know this has to be weird, but it'll all be over soon." She leaned her head against Alice's other immobile shoulder. The contact made Alice relax slightly, and Jezzie felt that was a bit symbiotic because the temperature of Alice's skin helped clear her head.

Alice, Embry and Jezzie were sat in the middle of the former battlefield waiting. Jezzie could hear the bonfire in the back continue to burn. She wasn't sure if Emmett had left or not.

Alice began shaking her head. "I…" she mouthed like a guppy. "I…" If she wasn't a vampire, Jezzie would have thought she was going to be sick.

"Alice," Jasper spoke in his slow dialect. "You're gonna be just fine. I've seen this my fair share of times. Happened to me once or twice."

Jezzie felt an odd sensation come over her. Like she was being covered in some massive blanket or had taken too many allergy meds. She felt… foggy.

"Stop drugging us with your voodoo," Embry insisted blinking a few times.

"It's just for a few moments," Jasper replied. "She'll heal quicker if she's calm."

True to his word, it was only a few moments later the edge of Alice's shoulder began to hum and blur at the end – like Edward had. Jasper picked up Alice's arm from where lay behind her. He placed it in its proper spot and the break between the two was barely discernible as the two ends trembled and pulsated. Then, Alice gasped.

Jasper released her arm and it remained. The two had knit themselves back together. She glanced down and looked – amazed that she was fully whole again. She flexed the fingers and moved at the elbow and shoulder. Alice ran a tentative hand over her slender shoulder and smiled. "That was terrible."

Edward never reformed.

When Jasper, Alice, Jezzie, and Embry made their way back through the woods. They all moved at a slow human pace. Jezzie thought it was less to humor her and more that they weren't quite prepared for what would meet them on the other side. Jezzie agreed.
As she looked up into the night sky she was able to breathe clear air, the trees had dissipated the heavy smoke and all she could smell was rain and pine. Jezzie wouldn't mind staying in these trees forever. She wanted to live forever in a place where time had stopped. Her whole life amongst the moss-covered trunks, the pinecone riddled floor would ebb and flow and she'd never know change. Everything would be stationary until one day, she simply expired. She'd die with nothing in her heart but the unchanging earth.

But they had to go back. Jezzie reached down and took Embry's hand in hers, intertwining their fingers. And all too soon, Jezzie was torn from her musings as the trees thinned and they were back at her Jeep.

Leah was sat on the ground next to an unconscious Sam, her fingers linked with his, his head in her lap, as she watched the activity in the Jeep's trunk. As much as she hated Sam, Leah had always missed him. She missed his memory, knowing that after he phased he wasn't the same man and never would be. Over time, Leah began to accept that as a fact of life – knew she couldn't hold it against him, but for want of a proper victim, she did so anyways. They couldn't escape each other, and a very old part of them didn't want to. And in coming so close to death, Leah was reminded of that simple fact again; and so she held his hand and cried silent tears as she watched on.

No one ever told Emily.

Jezzie followed the line of Leah's tear-streaked face to those gathered around her trunk. All she could see were the backs of Emmett, Esme, Paul and Quil. Seth was still in wolf form; he had lain down by the side of Jezzie's Jeep next to his sister and his old Alpha, and was emitting a high pitched whining noise.

Jezzie broke from the group, relinquishing Embry's hand, stomped toward the gathered backs and she elbowed her way between Paul and Quil only to see Edward's remains and Jared's body lain together and being wrapped in identical white sheets.

Her hand snapped to her mouth and she felt her stomach drop out of her abdomen completely. No. They couldn't… but they were… Jezzie knew that there was a distinct kind of aura about the dead that would never allow anyone to believe they were sleeping – despite what some people might say. Edward's face was frozen into one of shock and awe – stuck in that brief moment he'd been torn limb from limb; and she remembered that he'd died protecting her and Leah from a rogue that broke away from the group. She wondered if you could close a vampires eyes, post mortem. Jared's face was gaunt and paler than usual. He didn't look peaceful, he didn't look distraught like Edward. He just looked dead. Jezzie was reminded – as she had been in the past – that there was no beauty in death. It was not a kind of glory found in movies and books. It just was.

She was so shocked she couldn't even bring tears to her eyes – the information unable to process in her shell-shocked mind. She stepped back a few steps before walking right into someone. A pair of arms wrapped around her, gentle but tense, and she knew it was Embry. She felt his fist tighten in the extra fabric of her sweatshirt. She wasn't quite ready to look up at his face, but she anchored herself to him. Her back to his chest, his arms to her waist. The hand that wasn't clamped over her mouth laced into Embry's fist around her sweatshirt. She needed something to keep her here – to keep her present – and she leaned on Embry the way he leaned on her.

Carlisle and Jacob had been talking several yards away from the rest and they now returned. No one turned to look at them, but they all heard.

"The danger has passed," Carlisle offered quietly.

"For now we'll separate to tend to our dead," Jacob added. "Tomorrow we meet again. We have a
A few nodded silently. None of the wolves moved. Jezzie felt a brief gesture of comfort as Alice squeezed her shoulder. Jasper and Emmett gathered Edward's remains and Alice and Rosalie followed in procession.

"Where are we burying him?" Paul asked, ever the pragmatist, finally breaking the silence that had fallen as the Cullens left.

"Who's gonna tell his parents?" Quil added, thinking of the family Jared had left. "Or Kim."

"We'll let his parents decide where they want him," Jacob replied approaching the trunk.

"Are we gonna finally tell them?" Paul asked. Jared's parents had never known why their son had been continually disappearing over the past year. It had only gotten marginally better when he moved out.

"Yes," Jacob nodded. "I want everyone to meet at my place in six hours; get some rest, but we have a lot to talk about before we see the Cullens again. Embry, go with Seth; and get the pups home please." Embry nodded wordlessly and followed a clearly upset, wolfy Seth into the woods before phasing.

"Jezzie, would you mind if we used your Jeep?"

"Wait," she muttered, not answering the question. She pulled gently from Embry's embrace, and climbed into the trunk into the spot where Edward just was. She leaned over the back seat and pulled one of the gallon jugs of water from the seat. She tore a strip of cloth from a left over pillowcase.

"I'm not bringing him back to his family looking like he's just been dragged through the undergrowth," Jezzie supplied with a sniff when the rest just stared at her. "Especially if you're gonna tell his Mom and Dad he died protecting something or someone."

Quil, Jacob, and Paul helped Jezzie silently scrub the dirt and blood from Jared's body as best they could. She paid careful attention to his face as it rested in her lap, still angular and handsome, and his hands rough from a short life of manual labor.

Still, she couldn't bring the tears to her eyes. It was so easy to cry at someone's death and it made sense. Jezzie suspected she might've still been processing it all. Her logic told her he was dead, but the information was stuck in mental limbo. She moved like a robot, wondering who or what was controlling her limbs.

Quil helped Sam and then Leah into Jezzie's truck as the others finished, and Jezzie climbed into the driver's side. Jacob quirked a brow when Jezzie rolled down all the windows when the Jeep got on the road. It was a pretty chilly night. She could feel him glance towards her. "Irish tradition calls for the opening of a window after a person dies," she told him, feeling the eyes of Leah, Brady, Quil, and Paul on her, "to allow the spirit to escape and find the afterlife. Old habits die hard."

The ride was otherwise completely silent except for Jacob's few one-word instructions as to how to get to the Cameron's home after they made it to La Push.

"Paul, you got Kim?" Jacob asked. "I gotta tell the Camerons."

"Sure," Paul nodded. He had been closest to Jared and as much as Jacob – as Alpha – wanted to be the one to talk to tell Kim, he needed to talk to Jared's family. The two didn't know much of each other for very long, but Paul and Jared were some of the only wolves for a very long time. They had
always been in the same boat. They'd phased together, imprinted together, raised Embry and Quil – tweedle-dumb and tweedle-dumber – together.

Paul turned down the road towards Kim's house and Jacob to the Cameron's front door. He knocked and a few moments later, he was let inside. Quil opened the Jeep's trunk and sat on the edge. Sam appeared to be conscious but asleep or resting.

"He's okay," Leah assured Jezzie as she opened the door to the second row seating to check on him. "Carlisle said you did a good job, but he'll take a while to heal. No internal bleeding."

Jezzie nodded. "How're you?"

Leah extended her leg and flexed it back and forth. "All better, doc."

She shut the door and joined Quil who sat steadfastly next to the body of the man who he had called a brother. Jezzie leaned her head against his shoulder and wrapped her small arms around one of his.

"When I first imprinted on Claire… almost a year ago, actually, I ended up at Paul's place naked after a phase and babbling like an idiot. He'd thought I'd gone totally crazy… until I was finally able to explain what happened. He was probably the only thing that kept both Sam and Emily from killing me and burying my body in the woods."

Jezzie didn't speak, she only listened.

"Everyone thought it was terrible, but only Emily ever said so. After Sam had come to his senses he remembered what it was like imprinting on someone you shouldn't have. The rest were really wary about it. And for a while, I didn't want to phase, because I didn't want them to pick it out of my head and think I was a total creep. And I didn't want it affecting Claire."

Quil shrugged. "It was never like that for me anyways, but Paul actually believed me without an explanation. I stayed at his place for close to a week."

Jezzie only held onto Quil's arm tighter. "Everyone gets it now, but that was always the idea behind the Pack 'families': you always had someone to go to babbling and naked." He looked towards the woods. Jezzie assumed he could hear Seth and Embry. Both had been close to Jared. Both had spent a lot of time at he and Kim's house. Jared guided Embry through the phase – just like Paul did for Quil. And Embry asked Jared for advice about Seth on a near constant basis. Quil couldn't imagine what it would be like not to have Paul to go to.

"And now you've got Brady," Jezzie supplied. "And Embry's got Seth. Jacob and Collin. The chain just keeps going…"

"Yeah," Quil nodded. "And I can't answer for half the problems Brady has. Jared was an idiot, but I don't know how he or Paul did it."

"Experience?" Jezzie shrugged. "I think that's the only thing that could possibly inform you guys about being a shapeshifter. Brady, Collin, and Seth are all good kids. You all will do just fine, Quil."

"Sure, sure."

Embry and Seth emerged from the woods across the street. Embry had his hand on Seth's shoulder; the boy was visibly upset. They came and stood by Jezzie and Quil, silent.

Glancing down the road and through the darkness Jezzie could make out human forms appearing in the dimly growing light. Quil followed her glance and they watched as Kim Conweller marched
down the street, her arms crossed, her face and jaw set. Paul followed a half step behind her.

"C'mon you guys," Quil muttered as he caught sight of Paul and Kim. "I think it's family time. Let's get Sam home." Jacob still had not emerged from the house.

Jezzie hopped off the tailgate and Quil followed. Jezzie gave Seth the strongest hug she could muster and he attempted a laugh – he knew it was her strongest and still it was pitiful. She looped her arm around his waist and watched as Embry, Quil and Leah managed to get Sam out of Jezzie's Jeep without disrupting too much of his new medical paraphernalia. Seth and Jezzie followed the four down the opposite end of the road. Seth hung an arm around her shoulder and kept his eyes to the ground.

It was the first time Jezzie had ever felt the mental and physical weight of a Packmate shift to herself.
All signs indicated that Paul wasn't going to be able to leave Kim alone for a very long time. As a result, Alpha and Third rounded up the Plains Pack. Apparently the kind of energy required to force a phase into werewolf skin outside the proper moon cycle was complicated and difficult. Phasing back human was no easier.

Damian, Lydia, and Elizabeth sat on the forest floor panting and sweating as if they'd just run the four minute mile. The two wolf packs recapped and tallied their losses.

"I think your neighbors are far more amenable to an alliance with us now that they have met our creator, though I am afraid we rather have an even greater distaste for such treaties."

"So I'm assuming that spare wolf that showed up and tore Alice's arm off was your 'Creator'," Jacob asked through the fog of exhaustion.

"Azrael," Damian nodded. "Yes. That was the same man. I am curious to find out whether he allied with the vampire royalty out of convenience or whether a larger scheme was afoot."

"Did anyone get this guy?" Embry asked. "Azrael, or whatever? I didn't see him towards the end."

"No," Lydia shook her head. "Unfortunately, he has a knack for escape. He has never considered cowardice to be a fault. I saw him run into the woods heading east. When we leave we will be sure to follow his trail and see that he has properly left your land. Do not let your guard down, though. He has been skirting your land since before we arrived. He knows you are here. He is up to something."

"We'd really appreciate that. Let us know if you have any trouble, or need help getting back."

Damian inclined his head with a small grin. "Most appreciated, Alpha Black. However, I do expect we shall be fine. I appreciate your calling us in a time of trouble. I am not unaware that are services rendered were not necessary, but I sense that you are testing our loyalties – to which I cannot fault you. Any good leader must practice such discretion."

"Yeah," Jacob admitted. "You guys seem all right though. I know it takes a lot to fight a battle that isn't yours. La Push truly appreciates your willingness to help us. And – really – you guys have any problems, let us know. We've got the advantage of numbers. We wouldn't want Abigail and Zachary to have to fight."

"Much obliged, I assure you," Damian replied. "Pardon me if this is imprudent, but would either of you happen to be heading to the Coven's cremation? While we are not personally fond of the family, diplomatic manners would dictate that we pay our respects. Unless of course you think the gesture would be ill-received?"

"Sure," Jacob nodded. "We can go visit the Cullens and then we'll go pick up Zach and Abi? You're free to stay a few days to get everything in order. No rush."

"Most excellent."

The funeral of one Edward Cullen was not something that Jacob Black's wolf brain and Jacob
Black's human brain were fully prepared to cooperate on. As such, he mostly stood – still and quiet – and tried not to allow the warring tides of instinctual and emotional disturbance read on his face.

The wolf was determined not to show weakness. He was here with allies, yes, but a Coven and a werewolf Pack was not the most ideal place for one to show an emotion so weak as sorrow. It simply was not a posture an Alpha could take so publicly in front of other wolves that were not his own. Could the Alpha mourn his allies, feel sorrow, grief, pain, guilt, and all myriad of emotions that came with death? Of course.

But Jacob's human head was seven-fucking-teen and running on overdrive to the point where he was quite sure the gears would be ground to discs by dawn and people would see the smoke pouring out his ears. If he let himself feel just a little bit sad, who the hell knows what would happen. He couldn't exactly risk a mental breakdown at a funeral which was – for all intents and purposes – a political event.

However, even Jacob's wolf brain could not suppress the tugging feeling of sorrow and the desire to comfort when fretful little Renesmee – who had screamed and cried herself to the point of physical exhaustion – would rustle occasionally in her Aunt Rosalie's arms to reach out and cry and wail for her Mommy and her Papa. Much to his surprise, Rosalie humored Jacob and stood beside him for the duration of the short ceremony, passing the small slumbering child to him when she helped Carlisle tend the funeral pyre.

Jacob's human mind also knew that this funeral for Edward was just as much a funeral for Bella. Her body had been lost in fires set by the Volturi to scare and distract the wolves and the Cullens. The girl had screamed as she was dismembered and Jacob – in the midst of crushing a stray guardsmen, had only raised his muzzle in time to watch a bloodsucker the size of Emmett toss her torso – gripped by the shirt and her hair – into a smoldering bonfire. Jacob had looked away too long and sustained a crushing blow to the flank as a result.

From their his wolf had realize the trauma that Jacob's human had sustained and took over. As an act of self-preservation – as a way to keep itself and the Pack alive – Jacob's wolf took over. It was only later that Jacob witnessed through Quil's mind that Edward had gone after the goliath that had killed Bella. The giant had run off in the woods and was only yards from Jezzie's Jeep before he tackled him. Edward was not unskilled, but he was too distracted and Paul had been too late when he pulled the large leech off Edward.

Yes, the fire before the Cullens, Jacob, Embry, Damian, Lydia, and Elizabeth was consuming Edward's lifeless remains. However, it also burnt in effigy of Bella Swan. Not Cullen. She would always be Bella Swan to Jake. He could never imagine her different. Petite with big brown eyes that always made her look terrified. Long hair that brushed her waist and a passion for cooking that might've rivaled a few Food Network stars. A quiet girl who had carefully stabbed him in the back several times over the past couple years.

He'd always come back to her though. Jake loved Bella Swan and he couldn't explain why. Not in a way that didn't stupid, anyways. He'd have given a limb to not love Bella Swan. Many times over, too. After every time she tried to carefully let him down but had somehow managed to throw the bulldozer into high gear and level an entire zipcode. So much of him didn't want to be burdened with loving a girl that didn't love him back, a girl that wasn't in love with him, a girl that didn't marry his enemy, a girl that wasn't slowly killed by her fetus, a girl that wasn't transformed in a desperate attempt to 'save her life, a girl that was now dead a second time – with no chance of coming back. He kind of hoped that in death maybe she found some peace.

She was free. She finally didn't have to choose anymore. The better part of the last year Bella had
been miserable and seemed like no choice made her happy. He had willingly not ripped Edward's throat out, because Bella had all but said she would be happier with him. He was like a drug to her, and she needed him. So he let her go. But she was never happy. So why the hell did he let her do in the first place? He didn't want to love Bella Swan anymore. So much of him wanted to be able to view her death with a sigh of relief. It was over. He wouldn't have the specter of her haunting him anymore - forever frozen as the girl he'd always loved, but so physically repulsive it was hard not to gag. It had been a pretty sick form of torture. He didn't want to love Bella Swan, because it would have made her death a lot easier. But since life was never easy for Jacob, he did - in fact - still love Bella.

Or maybe, he thought, he loved her memory. He'd never been comfortable around her after her Transformation. He'd always felt a kind of nostalgia for the girl that used to sit in his garage and drink warm soda; the girl that would chew her lip incessantly when she was nervous; the girl who blushed ten shades of red whenever he so much as reached for her hand. He missed her a little bit like Leah missed Sam. Jake knew that a part of Leah hated Sam. A part of Jake hated Bella. But it was always hard for both wolves to put away the past and accept the present circumstances; for both Jacob and Leah, the deck had been so stacked against them, it was hard to believe it was actually real. It wasn't until Bella's death that Jake realized how much he empathized with Leah; it wasn't just a polite nodding anymore - letting her vent and being the sounding board. He got it now. He understood.

He was torn from his thoughts long enough to realize that the tension from Nessie's sleeping form had melted out of her system. She was now slack, relaxed, and peaceful against his shoulder. After the fire had burnt to coal Jacob took a deep breath and relinquished the small girl to her Aunt. He, Embry, and the Plains wolves didn't make more than ten yards into the trees outside the Cullen house before Nessie could be heard wailing. It took all of Embry's physical and emotional reserves to force his best friend to keep going forward. Back to the reservation.

4AM, Saturday, January 20, 2007

Jezzie killed the engine and glanced over to the man sleeping in the seat next to her. She was pretty sure that Embry hadn't slept in three solid days. She couldn't help a small peaceful smile that graced her lips as she watched Embry sleep just as peacefully. Peace wasn't something the wolves had much recently; Jezzie liked to see them enjoy some. Taking Sam home had been rough. Emily was naturally upset, even though the rest of them knew that he'd probably be fine, now. Jacob had come for Embry from the Cameron's after they'd arrived at Sam's. The two were gone – to the Cullens, Jezzie overheard – for a while.

Quil had set off for home with Anna, and Leah with Seth as the sky began to threaten them all with light. It had brought a smile to her lips, watching the two older siblings walk down the street with their arms over the shoulders of the younger siblings on their way home.

Jezzie had made the potentially awkward decision to bring Embry back to her house after he marched out of the woods guiding Jacob by the shoulder. He lazily shook Embry's grip and joined the Plains wolves as they proceeded down the street to the Black house to retrieve their youngest members.

There was no way Embry could offer his mother an explanation, and for want of making sure he didn't end up sleeping outside somewhere because he didn't want to impose – Jezzie just brought him to her house without saying a word.

She hopped out of her truck and took a deep breath, relishing the cool night air and the peace of her
own yard. She stretched her arms up to the star-speckled sky and yawned once. Her skin itched with the dried sweat, blood, and mud. The slashes across her back from the vampire attack had gone from painful to mindbendingly itchy. She couldn't wait to take a shower. She went to Embry's side of the truck and opened the door. He was conscious enough to support his own weight, but Jezzie wrapped an arm around his waist and steered him along. She murmured a quiet "step, step," at appropriate intervals and he somehow made it to her second floor bedroom without waking up the Plains Pack - all of whom had already returned to Jezzie's and were fast asleep.

She felt bad and didn't want him to be forced to sleep cramped on her couch. And that guestroom bed was too small - even if it wasn't being occupied by part of a werewolf family. Jezzie tried not to feel awkward about the boy collapsed on her bed, but then realized he was probably too exhausted to realize where he was anyways.

Jezzie hung her coat and Embry's light snore soon filled the quiet space. She left the basketball shorts where they were. He'd only been human for a few hours and Jezzie could safely assume that was his last layer of clothing. But she refused to allow those shoes in her bed.

"I know you're not trying to molest me in my sleep. That's pretty low, Jez."

"Of course not," she replied quietly. "But I prefer to ogle my man meat, not just imagine. Actually... I don't want your shoes in my bed."

She slipped off her own shoes and peeled away the jeans and t-shirt that had seen and absorbed too much gore for one day. In the mirror above her dresser she observed the five slash marks cutting across her left shoulder. Taking off the shirt had stung as she peeled the cotton away from the healing lacerations. They were jagged and rough, not neat like knife slices or paper cuts. She felt the skin pulse as the opened cuts began a slow bleed.

"I'll be back," she muttered to her reflection. "I've got to get these cleaned out. They feel really funny."

"Tingly?" Embry asked.

"Yeah," she nodded. "It's weird and uncomfortable."

"Vampires'll do that to you."

Jezzie kicked her clothes into a pile. She pulled some much more clean and acceptable clothing out of the dresser and made for the bathroom. She didn't even bother turning the light on and once under the heat of the showerhead, she felt the burn and sting against her torn skin. She clenched her teeth, not wanting the pain to be made audible. She spent just enough time under the water to rinse clean from the days events, lest she fall asleep under the showerhead. She'd be the one to survive a vampire war and then drown in her own shower after dozing. She pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a simple bandeau bra so her clothing wouldn't interfere with her wounds. After tying her hair on top of her head and spinning in three consecutive circles, she realized there was no way she was going to be able to reach those slashes.

She took her fistful of supplies back to her room and climbed on top of the bed next to Embry who was half-asleep against her headboard. "Emb will you do me a favor?"

"Mhm," he mumbled opening one eye.

She proffered the gauze. "I can't reach," she offered apologetically. "Can you just tape the gauze down? Like a tattoo. So long as it's all covered at least for the night while it closes up."
Embry sat up and took the supplies soundlessly and Jezzie turned around. She felt warm hands begin to work slowly, but steadily, and very meticulously. Again she found herself melting into the warmth and trying not to fall asleep. The sound of the tape being pulled from the roll and torn was the only sound to interrupt the quiet. Moments later she felt Embry’s warm grip wrap around her shoulders, move down her arms and one arm went around her waist as he leaned forward depositing her extra supplies on her bedside table.

"All set," he mumbled against the skin of her shoulder.

"Thanks," she sighed, leaning back into him. Things were markedly more comfortable with those scratches covered up, and leaning against the warmth that emanated from Embry's skin was wonderful on the cold night. "I was spinning in circles in the bathroom trying to do it myself." She could feel his lips smile against her skin, probably imagining her.

"Do they hurt?" he asked.

"They sting. Not as bad as when I first got them. I think, though, the adrenaline kept me from really feeling it. They feel like they did hurt a lot, you know what I mean?" She felt him nod.

She looked down, watching his hand on her stomach as her fingers moved idly around her lap. "Jasper said that I might get sick if the cuts have gone too deep, but nothing worse. Because I didn't get bit. So if I go rabid in the middle of the night the shotgun's in my Dad's room across the hall in the corner by the door."

"That is not even remotely funny," Embry said, pulling her closer. "Too soon for vampire jokes?" she asked. He nodded soundlessly. "Well, at least I'll have a cool story to go with the scars. Even if I can't tell anyone. Glad it's on my other shoulder. I don't know what a vampire clawing woulda done to the tattoo."

She took a moment to relax, allowing her mind and muscles to release some of their tension. She felt... Good. Not great, though great hadn't happened in a while. She could safely say, however, that her relapse was over. That was a nice perk. She let out a sigh.

"You all right, Jez?" Embry asked through a fog of sleep. "I can crash on the couch."

She turned towards where his chin rested on her shoulder with a small smile. "Two," she said simply. "The warmth makes the stinging feel better." Embry proceeded to stretch and lay down.

"Best get some sleep. I'm gonna be up early tomorrow," Jezzie said as she stretched her spine, noticing a very different kind of muscle pain – that from exertion.

"There was a vampire war this weekend and you're still going to be up at the ass crack of dawn tomorrow?"

"Of course," she smiled. "I live in the house of the rising sun."

"Good song... Pretty sure it was about a whorehouse, though. Just sayin."

Embry was right. If not a whorehouse, a saloon. The Animals remake of a folk classic was an allusion to some house of ill repute. Those women and men would be up with the rising sun. A wonderful sight to see over the bayous but Jezzie felt the cost was a bit high. But she guessed cost and worth was something that was really personal. Some things were worth more to others. Jezzie placed a high value on sunrises.
Jezzie didn't think she'd mind New Orleans.

For a moment she sat on the edge of her bed, wondering if she could do this. She had felt so sick the week leading up to the battle. She tried not to let on, but she knew the wolves - particularly Embry and Seth - could smell her drugs and her pain. But since the battle started? Jezzie hadn't remembered her pain. It became such a relatively insignificant thing. It had withered but was no replaced with the exhaustion of wrought by recent history. Cost and worth. Her scales were slightly skewed that weekend.

She turned and laid down, burrowing mercilessly toward Embry's side – half on top of him and one leg over his. He let one hand wrap around her to rest on her bandaged shoulder and she smiled at the way the heat calmed the shooting tingles. Home at last.

"You did a good job today, Embry," she said quietly. Jezzie opened her eyes a few silent moments later, feeling like she was being watched.

She was. Embry was glancing at her sleepily. "You too, warrior woman."

"Hm..." she hummed quietly. "Do I get the ceremonial garb and war paint next time? I might as well channel the land's ancestral warriors."

Embry reached up and ruffled Jezzie's already messy hair. "Jez, I'm not letting you run through the woods half clothed with war paint."

"You are no fun, Embry Call," Jezzie yawned. They were quiet for a while before Jezzie spoke again. "Embry?" he hummed in response. "What happens now... you know..."

"You of all people should know that you have no choice but to keep going after someone dies. I like to think Jared's finally made some peace with this world."

"And what about..."

Embry knew who Jezzie was talking about without the names. "Edward lived a long life, Jezzie," he said evenly. "And Bella got what she always wanted in the end – to be changed. They died defending Nessie. That was something they really believed in. Edward and Bella loved Ness."

"How do you know all this?" Jezzie muttered into the pillowcase as her knees tangled with his.

"The joy of Pack Mind," Embry replied. "Edward's mind reading was shoddy with Pack and occasionally worked two ways with us. We don't know why. And Bella had told Jake a lot and he's never been good at keeping it from us when he's upset."

"And Nessie?" Jezzie's voice was barely above a whisper and a normal human might not have heard her.

Embry released a small breath, anticipating Jezzie's train of thought. "She's upset. I've never seen anyone so sad and scared. But... she'll be okay. She has a big support system. Both the Pack and the Cullens. She's not a typical orphan."

Jezzie whispered, "I've never had anyone die on me. Not like that. Like any of them."

"Jezzie," Embry said her name purposefully and intentionally. For the first time, he made deliberate and prolonged eye contact with her. Previously, Embry had just been talking with his eyes closed, on the cusp of sleep. Now, he moved back a bit and propped himself up on an elbow, taking one of Jezzie's hands.
"There wasn't anything you could do. You of all people should know you can't save everyone. There was no helping Edward or Bella. Jared was doomed because we could never take him to a hospital; Carlisle said he wouldn't have made it in time anyways. Helping Sam didn't kill Edward or Bella or Jared. You save who you can." Jezzie simply squeezed her fist inside Embry's hand. "You made the right choice."

"How can you say that?" Jezzie intoned sharply.

"Because whether any of us like it or not, Edward has been dead for a really long time. He's lived life over and over. Bella knew the risks going into all of this. All of it. And I pulled you off Jared less than two minutes after he got there – that's not on your head. And Sam is in his mid twenties. The only mid twenties he'll ever get. He has his whole life ahead of him and is excited to live it. Between saving someone who you can't help and someone who can be saved, I say you made the right choice. Given the situation."

And - in a most unexpected turn of events - Jezzie crawled forward, curled into Embry's lap and buried her face in his shoulder and cried. It felt powerful and intensely personal; naked. It was the first time he'd seen her cry since the battle happened. He was wondering when it would show up. The past several days had wreaked havoc on all of them.

Jacob hadn't been sleeping, Sam had almost ground his molars into dust and Leah was definitely going to need a new punching bag (maybe they should buy her a really nice piece of granite…). Embry had been stressed six ways to Sunday knowing that his mortal, human girlfriend was going to be party to all this. More than once he'd told the other imprinted wolves just where they could shove their incessant worry. At least the rest of the humans were miles away behind the Treaty Line. Embry was proud as hell of Jezzie. He knew it took guts to do what she did. She never had to be a part of any of it. She could've stayed home and done her homework. She could've told them all they were crazy and gone back to Detroit. But she didn't. She offered what skills she had and for anyone that wasn't Embry (…and sometimes Jake…) it didn't matter that she was human.

But he knew she was stressed. Between school, work, babysitting Ness, and still trying to pretend to be normal, the poor girl hadn't had much in the way of peaceful sleep. She was downing enough coffee to give even a shapeshifting metabolism a grand mal seizure. Just less than a week ago, her symptoms had begun nagging her – not even enough to count as a flare, she'd told him – just a spare few hours of inconvenience and she'd gone to pieces. She'd flipped out in a way that Embry'd never seen before. Embry knew part of it was exhaustion. But part of her was very serious about that imprinting business.

Given all that, plus the afternoon, evening, and night they'd just had, Embry didn't begrudge the girl of her breaking point. Even if he was totally fucking clueless when it came to crying girls. He wrapped an arm around her waist and the other moved to her hair. He leaned against her headboard, his eyes heavy, hoping she'd be able to get some rest tonight. "Oh, Jez… it's been a helluva day."

Embry wasn't quite sure how long it was before she squirmed slightly and planted herself steadfastly in his lap, determined to stay there for the night. It wasn't Jezzie's fault that Embry's warmth was comforting, but he also made an exceptionally good teddy bear. Jezzie was extorting the benefits of their relationship and she knew it.

Embry was not opposed. He liked her here – warm and soft against him – breathing steady and content, if not entirely happy in this moment. Embry liked it a lot. But even through his exhaustion, he remembered himself. He wouldn't hold Jezzie here. He'd never ask for her gone or prevent her from leaving. It was all on him that it was all on her terms. Sure, Embry liked her a lot and would die a happy man if she stayed in his life forever. But he wasn't going to be the one to ask her to stay. The
others told him he was stupid on a daily basis.

Everything was on Jezzie's terms because Embry came with way too much baggage. It had to be on Jezzie's terms. Accepting life without an imprint was one thing, but he couldn't accept life with a non-imprint unless it was completely her choice. She knew the risks, she knew the possibilities; the what-ifs and worst case scenarios. Embry might've been a masochist but he sure as hell wasn't channeling any of his male precedents. The other guys in Embry's life hadn't had such good luck in pursuing women - imprinted or not. Embry and Jezzie were going this alone. And Embry would never drop Jezzie for an imprint. It would just have to be different…

Maybe he was pathetic. Okay, he definitely was. But he would take whatever Jezzie was willing to give him. When did he turn into such a miserable, sad, lump of a man?

"No funny business, Mr. Call," Jezzie said through a teary yawn. "Or I'll sic my jealous ex-husband on you."

"Girlfriend, please, Seth isn't even coordinated enough to scratch his own ears," Embry slumped carefully down the headboard until he was mostly lying down and Jezzie stayed tucked into his side. "No worries. I'll be dead to the world in less than ninety seconds. I'm thinking it's me that has to worry. What with your penchant for taking my clothes off while I sleep."

Jezzie blew a half-hearted raspberry against his skin. Embry snorted, "I can get used to two."

Jezzie curled up beside him. She was surprised that Embry slept like the absolute dead. He'd slept at her house before, but never very often and she always fell asleep before him. Not this time. He was totally still — not prone to rolling or thrashing as Jezzie was — and he didn't snore at all. That was a serious change of pace; Jezzie was used to her father sounding like a winded rhinoceros. Jezzie wondered, as she began to drift off, if it was the result of the Pack. Maybe he was so exhausted he couldn't even bring himself to breathe loudly or move around in his sleep.

However, Embry was easily twice her size and his general stillness had spoiled her. Hours later she felt the shifting then sudden lightness of the bed behind her. She rolled over groggily, stretched her toes and let her arm fall down on the warm vacant spot Embry had left. Before she was able to fall back asleep she heard the flush of the toilet and moments later Embry dragged his feet back into her room.

She could tell by the look on his face, illuminated only by the hazy moonlight, that he hadn't woken up from a full bladder. His face was drawn and wan, he looked worn out, and a light layer of sweat clung to his skin. He didn't notice Jezzie's wakefulness as he sat on the edge of the bed, his head in his hands.

The sight of him and his posture rang like a distress call and Jezzie woke up more fully. She sat up, rubbed her eyes to consciousness and scooted across the bed to him.

"Sorry," he spoke quietly and shortly. "I tried not to wake you." He didn't move an inch as he spoke.

Jezzie sat behind his broad back and moved close, leaning her face and her front against the strength there. He was actually almost clammy. "It's all right; I'm a light sleeper," she murmured against his skin. "Are you okay?" she traced an idle pattern on his skin.

"M'fine," he muttered half audibly.

Jezzie sat up on her knees and laid her chin on his shoulder to better see his face. "You're a terrible liar, Emb."
"Just sick," he confessed, dropping his hands from his face and continuing to stare ahead.

"I gathered," Jezzie replied as she laced her arms over his shoulders and into some semblance of an embrace. Embry didn't get sick. None of them did. Not like that anyways. "Want to talk about it?"

He shook his head but spoke anyways. "Having nightmares makes me feel like a damn child." Jezzie didn't speak; she just waited. "Dealing with what happened is harder as a human. The wolf is cool with it, because that's the job: kill vampires, sometimes your friends die. But I'm still a guy and I still know that on some level killing people – even if they're blood sucking, soulless, psychopaths – is wrong. Because they were human once too. It really fucks with the head. I killed people today, Jez."

Jezzie was shocked at Embry's level of emotion. He didn't swear often.

"And I can ward it off well enough while I'm awake, but not while I sleep. I can kill just as easily as those bastards. There isn't much that separates us."

Jezzie slid from his shoulder and ducked under his arm. She wound her arms around his still frame and kissed his shoulder. "There's a lot of difference between you and them, Embry. We've all been killing each other for thousands of years. Unfortunately, war is not a modern invention. You and your brothers don't kill indiscriminately like the Volturi did. You did it to protect the people and the land here. That's a natural reaction – shapeshifter or not."

"Even though they were terrible, you still feel a sort of remorse for having to kill in the first place. I think that's a good telling to your humanity. Monsters don't feel bad about killing. Just look at those vampires. Not a trace of emotional upheaval."

"So because I can be guilt-ridden after the fact, I'm still human? Awesome."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. Embry tended to get sarcastic when he was upset. She reached a hand up to touch where his heart beat, so strong and distinct beneath his chest even her human senses could feel it. "You have a beating heart and metaphorical one. You love me, right?" Jezzie asked with a small smile.

"You know I love you, Jez," Embry replied tiredly.

"Exactly, and how many villains and monsters have ever been capable of that kind of emotion? It just doesn't work that way. You were human before this, you'll be human after this. Right now is just a messy interlude. Plus, I've never been the monster-type."

For the first time since he sat down, he turned to look at Jezzie. A small smile that didn't reach his eyes, inched up one side of his face. "Have I ever mentioned that you're too good for me?"

"Once or twice," Jezzie smiled. "You seem to forget I like you just the way you are. None of us are perfect, Emb. I burnt my toast this morning and willfully killed a spider in the bathroom. It's all an unfortunate business sometimes; as long as your means and your ends all match up. We can't always sit idly by; some of us are vested with too much responsibility. Have I ever mentioned that I used to be normal before I met you?"

"I don't believe that for a minute. But you definitely keep me human, Jez."

"I'm good at humanity," she smiled against his side. "You are too when you want to be; are you gonna be a vampire next?" she jibed. "Because at this rate of sleep, you're on the way."

"I am way too much of a man to ever sparkle," Embry grumbled. He finally silently agreed to move and climbed back into Jezzie's bed entirely. This time, Embry fell asleep in Jezzie's side. With his
head on her chest as she hummed quietly and allowed her fingers to wind gently through his hair, waiting for him to get some rest. He dozed again quickly, silent and still in his slumber.

Jezzie waited a whole half hour after the fact, keeping a careful eye on him. She tried to convince herself she wasn't being creepy, she was just worried. She wanted him to be able to sleep peacefully. At 6AM her eyes finally gave out on her and she drifted into unconsciousness, firmly entwined in Embry's arms and scent.

Jezzie was sitting on her kitchen counter the next morning eating a toaster-heated waffle slathered in peanut butter. She'd woken at about ten o'clock. She'd checked the alarm clock on the other side of Embry's behemoth form and decided that four hours of sleep – given the givens – was quite respectable. It didn't take her long to realize that Damian, Lydia, Elizabeth, Zachary, and Abigail were not in the house. She'd taken the pile of her clothes and tossed it in the wash, scrounging up a spare toothbrush for the wolfboy in the meantime and leaving it sealed on the bathroom counter. She'd settled into her waffle after the clothes had made it to the dryer and she heard Embry shuffle into the kitchen in a sleepy haze.

She smiled at the sight. His hair was askew and it was plainly obvious he'd slept the remainder of the night on one side as the pattern from her quilt was still embedded on the side of his face. She was also mildly horrified, because the light of day revealed that Embry was absolutely filthy and she could not believe that she just let him go to sleep like that…

"Morning, sleepyhead," Jezzie greeted him quietly, taking a bite from her waffle.

He shuffled over to her and stood just in front of her spot on the counter. "Morning. Thanks for the toothbrush."

"You're welcome," she offered him a small sad smile. Her next attempt at a bite of her breakfast was interrupted. She was expecting peanut butter, but she got Embry. He had leaned in close and kissed her. She squeaked once in surprise – not expecting his advance, but not really upset about it all. "Good morning," she mumbled against his mouth as his lips caught hers.

She put her breakfast down and her arms found their way around Embry's shoulders – happy to be the same height as him at current – and his hands held her hips, pulling her close. She tried to prevent herself from falling completely off the counter. "Peanut butter," he mumbled back to her as his mouth migrated and she felt his teeth against her ear.

"Peppermint," she laughed, licking her lips and remembering the odd combination. He seemed to get distracted from there as his mouth moved lower, down the column of her neck. She could feel the alternating sensations of teeth, lips, and tongue. For a boy who hadn't had many girlfriends, he was pretty good with his mouth, Jezzie thought. The contact warmed her, bleeding through her skin where they connected and also growing from within. Embry was very good at warming her up inside and out. Body and soul.

However, he'd been on a bit of an emotional rollercoaster over the past twenty-four hours and this moment really came out of nowhere, so she had to wonder…

"Embry?" He only hummed in response against her skin, but she felt his shoulder muscles tense under her grip. "Embry… what's going on? Not that I'm opposed to any of this, really, but…" she trailed off, leaving her question open and ambiguous, hoping he would pick it up and just be able to say something. Anything.

He stilled against her, but didn't move. "Talk to me, please?" she tried to keep the note of mild
begging and hysteria out of her voice, but she felt so out of her depth. How was she supposed to help with any of this? She didn't know, but she was far more terrified of being shut out than being overwhelmed. She also desperately didn't want to be the nagging girlfriend.

Embry held on to her hips, preventing her from falling off the counter but moved back far enough to see her face. Her eyes were wide and he could tell she was slightly terrified by the can of worms she just opened.

"My brother's dead."

Jezzie bit down on her lip. What was she supposed to say to that? It was true. Jezzie's grief last night had been immediate and obvious, because someone had died. Someone she had known had died. But Embry had been reserved, quiet. Embry had known Jared a lot longer than she'd known him, and he'd never get the chance to know him any better. He'd been Embry's big brother, his – as Seth would call it – Daddy Wolf. It was true; there wasn't any getting around it. Embry's brother was dead. "Yeah," she replied with a soft nod. "Yeah, he is."

Embry didn't respond for a moment, then he only pulled her close again – closer than they'd been before – and she felt him bury his face in the crook of her neck. She felt his arms around her tighter than usual, and all she could do in response was hold on, a steady hand against his back and wound through his hair.

She felt so helpless. Jared's death had made her sad – she was still sad – but Embry… Embry had known him in a much different way and therefore his grief was much different. Bigger and deeper. No matter how close he pulled her, Embry was in a place much darker and scarier than Jezzie was, and she had no idea how to go to him, to help him.

She felt tears in her eyes, largely suspecting she could not help the boy who pulled her so close.

Jezzie made the trip into La Push that morning to check on the battered wolves, before the rest of the Pack convened their meeting. She assumed Leah was probably mostly fine at this point. It was Sam she was worried about. When she arrived at Emily Young’s house she knocked quietly. Emily arrived at the door, looking distinctly creased with worry. Her eyes were red with crying. She didn't say anything, but she did lunge at Jezzie, wrapping her up an embrace to rival the wolves.

Jezzie was shocked for a moment before she realized Emily hadn't been there last night when Jezzie was patching up Sam for the night. He was merely dragged home by his ex girlfriend clinging to life, but alive. That must've been quite a shock.

"Thank you," Emily said quietly and Jezzie could hear the tears in her voice. She wrapped her arms around Emily too, in a true embrace, trying to offer some level of comfort. "Thank you."

"Of course, Emily," Jezzie replied. "Can I see him? I wanted check up on him."

"Sure," Emily released Jezzie and wiped hastily at her eyes. Jezzie hitched her med bag over her shoulder. "Carlisle was by earlier but he seemed a bit distracted. He said Sam was healing properly, though."

Jezzie nodded, unsure if certain details of the battle had been revealed to Emily. "I heard about the others," Emily added. She said nothing else.

Jezzie only nodded as they reached the closed bedroom door. Jezzie offered a sad smile before turning the knob and entering quietly. She grinned a little when she saw Sam. He was healing on his own quite well it seemed.
She pulled up a chair and sat down beside him as Emily leaned against the doorframe. "He's been asleep almost non-stop."

"That's good," Jezzie nodded. "The body heals better in sleep, plus it means the pain's not too bad."

"Not… sleeping…" Sam offered through oxygen tubing. He reached up and tugged the setup off his face. "That shit is so obnoxious."

"Better than a breathing tube," Jezzie offered as she unzipped her bag.

"I was high as a kite for that part, I don't think I cared very much." Jezzie looked at Sam with wide eyes, wondering why in the hell he was high. "The drugs," Sam offered. "Carlisle was running a bit blind on dosages."

"Oh," Jezzie nodded in humorous recognition. "What else did he do? Just try out a breathing tube and juice you up?"

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "Pretty much. He was still a bit upset. We told him he didn't have to come by, but he did anyways."

"He's a good man like that," Jezzie offered. Sam only grunted. It was easier for someone like Jezzie or even Emily to appreciate the humanity left in Carlisle or his family. Sam couldn't by default. Jezzie didn't blame him for that.

"They're the ones that got us into this goddamn mess." Jezzie moved closer to the bed and moved Sam's arm so she could access his bandages. "They did. They're the whole reason all this happens in the first place. Did you know that Jezzie? Wolves only phase when there are vampires near by."

"I didn't know that," Jezzie asked.

"Not that we've seen," Sam shook his head. "Anyone that phases ages rapidly to their mid twenties and stops. I look pretty much the same as before I phased. Just bulkier. And angrier if you ask the guys."

"So mid twenties is prime age for the strength of phased wolves?" she concluded. He nodded. "Has this felt any more painful than it did yesterday? Has it burned or heated up – more than usual – at all?" she asked as she peered closely at the still ghastly wound on Sam's entire side.

"No," Sam replied. "It's actually probably the most comfortable injury I've got."

"Good," Jezzie nodded. "Probably means it's healing well." Jezzie checked and there were no signs of redness or swelling and no pus. "I'm really surprised you didn't sustain an infection actually. When I was cleaning this out I kind of figured I missed something but your system was healing so fast you were incorporating dirt and pine needles back into your skin."

"Yeah, I remember," Sam noted bitterly. "Then you scrubbed off all the skin on that side of my body."

"Better than dirt and pine needles, Jezzie," Sam offered with a smile. "I appreciate it, Little Red. I really do."

Jezzie smiled. That was the first time Sam had ever called her anything but 'Jezzie' and she wondered if maybe she had finally broken the most stoic of the wolves.

"Of course," she nodded. "Now… you're healing pretty well, so I'm just going to cover this loosely with a dry dressing. Emily, you can check on it every few hours, once it's a closed wound you can take it off entirely. If anything looks red or you start seeing pus, let me know."

Emily nodded from the doorway.

"Now this leg," Jezzie sighed looking at where Sam's leg had been strapped and later casted by Carlisle. "I won't lie, compound fractures are about as bad as it can get. Most humans take more than a year to heal that. I don't think anyone has any idea how long it's going to take before it's solid again. If we take the cast off too soon, you run the risk of fracturing again at the break."

"Well, I can tell you that most normal bone breakages take about a week to heal in a wolf. I don't know if that helps."

"Well," Jezzie said, leaning back in her chair. "Anyone ever busted a femur before?"

Sam thought for a moment. "Yes, actually," he replied after a pause. He laughed at the memory. "Jared had made some asinine sexual comment about Leah, and Seth tackled him. He had just phased for the first time recently and had some pent up aggression. He fractured his thighbone at the midpoint. Poor kid was upset about it; Leah thought it was hilarious. That healed in a week."

Jezzie was quiet for a moment. The casual mention of Jared surprised her. She wasn't sure why. It wasn't as if all memory had died along with him. She supposed it just felt a little jarring. But Sam had been one of the wolves to know Jared the longest. Jezzie wondered if Sam was taking it all as well as he appeared.

"All right, well, a femur fracture takes about twelve weeks to heal naturally. Jared did it in one so that's about a twelfth the time. A compound fracture of the same place takes eighteen months which is seventy two weeks. A twelfth of that six weeks."

Sam just looked at her point blank. "Are you telling me that I'm gonna be laid up here for six weeks?"

"At least before the cast can come off," Jezzie nodded. "I say we give it a week before you put any weight on it. So a few more days. After that, we'll get you some crutches or a chair if you want."

"Great," Sam seemed less than pleased.

"Well, look on the bright side," Emily offered from the doorway. "You've been looking for a way to step out of Pack life, maybe this is your opportunity. I take it he can't phase for those six weeks?"

Jezzie shook her head. "I wouldn't risk it. Heaven only knows what a phasing does to broken bones. Can you go six weeks without phasing?"

"Probably," Sam nodded. "Wow, that's it, huh? I guess I'm out." He looked a little shocked. Jezzie knew he and Emily had been working themselves out of the Pack since she arrived in Washington, but now that the final opportunity was here, it seemed bittersweet and unreal. Pack had been family –
a staple – for so long now, it was strange to consider life without it. Without Pack. It was all the more real with having lost a member so recently. Sam's wolf turned in his head with anxious energy; it didn't like this idea, not one little bit.

"Sam, you're only ever out if you want to be. You'll always be Pack. You raised these mongrels, trust me when I say you'll never really get rid of them."

"The intuitive grasp you have on Pack is kind of bizarre, Jezzie."

She only smiled.

"How's Kim?" Jezzie asked quietly, staring down into her coffee.

When Paul didn't respond, Jezzie glanced up. He only shook his head. She'd brought him two coffees. "I don't know. She hasn't said a word. Been crying nonstop, but hasn't said a word. It's all I can do to keep her hydrated. I brought her home and she's been sitting in the same place – hasn't moved."

Wow.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Jezzie offered. She didn't know Kim very well. She'd gotten on better with Leah. But she liked Kim.

"Would you?" Paul replied. "I don't know what to do. She's never been close with either Rach or Emily. And I'm afraid if she doesn't eat or talk soon, I'm gonna have to take her to the hospital. I don't want to have to sit outside her room all night again."

Jezzie nodded, reaching across the table and squeezing Paul's hand once. "How about some reinforcements," she said as she stood and moved to the fridge. She took the quart of OJ – with any luck maybe the girl would open up and at least drink something with sugar in it. Paul passed her a box of saltines from the top shelf of the cabinet and Jezzie took the box of tissues from the countertop.

"Wish me luck," Jezzie nodded as she turned down the hall. Paul saluted her and Jezzie shifted the box of saltines so she could knock.

"Kim?" Jezzie spoke to the door. "Kim, it's Jezzie do you mind if I come in?" Silence. "I'm gonna come in unless you say otherwise, all right?" More silence. Jezzie edged the door open with her hip and placed the supplies on the floor next to Kim's bed. The room was big enough for the Queen sized bed, a dresser and two side tables.

On the bed sat a woman so small and inconsequential, Jezzie almost missed her. This was a testament to Kim's state – because she was normally impossible to ignore. She talked all the time.

Kim had curled herself into such a compact shape she almost blended with the furniture. She sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed, staring into the hands in her lap. Jezzie took a few hesitant steps before perching herself on the edge of Kim's bed.

She was quiet for a moment, letting her legs swing and her feet graze the smooth wooden floors before she decided to be the one to break the ice. "I hate that feeling, when so much happens at once that you just kind of… check out. You can't feel yourself talk, you can't feel yourself move. It's like autopilot. I hate that. I hate that feeling of not being in control."

Jezzie heard the bed creak – even though she hadn't moved – and she turned to see Kim nodding.
"That's why I haven't moved in twelve hours."

"You don't like that feeling either?"

Kim shook her head. "If I don't move, nothing changes. Stupid, I know. But," she shrugged, "it could be any old day. It could be last Sunday or two Tuesdays ago. Everything in this room is exactly same. And maybe I just need something to be the same for a little bit. I can't let all the things in my head reshuffle and watch everything around me change too. It's like overload, you know?"

Jezzie nodded. She did know.

"And I know it sounds really clichéd and melodramatic, but it's like there's this hole in my chest now." Kim gave a snort of derision. "Before you moved here, Bella walked around like her chest was a black hole for months because Edward left her. I always thought she was crazy."

Kim shook her head and licked her lips before continuing. "I don't think my opinion has changed much," she rolled her eyes. "But I know the feeling, now. I feel like if I sit up straight, my whole chest is going to cave in. Like some critical support beam is gone."

"Do you think it's the imprint?" Jezzie asked.

Kim nodded, chewing on her lip. "Yeah," she whispered. "I do. And it's weird because I felt something snap inside me, that cave like feeling began last night. I tried staying awake until someone came home, but I fell asleep on the couch. That woke me up from a dead sleep. That something snapping."

Jezzie took a deep breath as she realized what Kim was telling her. Kim knew exactly when Jared had died. She didn't know it at the time, but now she knew what that feeling meant.

"We've always been really… symbiotic," Kim offered. "When he was mad, I could feel it – and it took me a while to be able realize when my random mood swings were mine or his. But when he was happy or excited, I felt that too. He was the same way. We reflected each others feelings. We couldn't help it."

Kim wiped at her eyes and Jezzie reached down and brought the tissue box up to the bed. She snagged one after Kim did.

"If the empty spot is where the imprint used to be, would that mean it's broken or gone? Maybe that spot is just being filled with your own feelings now?" Jezzie offered.

Kim reached up and covered her face with her hand. She began sobbing in earnest. Jezzie moved herself awkwardly across the bed and wrapped her arms around Kim's slumped shoulders. She actually accepted the embrace and cried into Jezzie's shoulder.

"I don't want it to be gone," she wailed. "I've been so close to him – even when I didn't want to be – for so long, and all I ask now is a grain of hope; all I want to know is if he's okay, if he's happy. And the stupid imprint can't give me that. I don't even have that one small, emotional tie anymore. Nothing."

Jezzie failed miserably at keeping her own tears at bay. "I know, hon," she told Kim – holding her tight and rubbing her back. "I know."
Kim remained like that for a few minutes before she sat up, pulling herself away from Jezzie momentarily. She wiped her eyes on her forearm. "I'm really thirsty," she offered. Jezzie reached over the edge of the bed and picked up the OJ and the saltine crackers. Kim uncapped the OJ and took a sip straight from the jug. She stared down into the vibrant contents and breathed deep. Her heavy sobs and mostly subsided, now.

"I'm pregnant, Jezzie."

Jezzie had helped Kim uncurl herself from her bed and into the bathroom. She said she wanted to pee, take a shower and then just go to sleep for a while. Jezzie didn't blame her for that. She sat in the living room – in case Kim needed anything – and stared into space until the girl retreated wet and clean into her room.

It was less than ten minutes later that Paul peeked into the room, saw her asleep, and closed her bedroom door. "What the hell happened in there?"

"You didn't hear?"

Paul shook his head. "Seth came by. I was talking with him."

Jezzie huffed out a breath and leaned back. "I just… it's… I don't even… yeah."

Paul nodded sitting on the couch across from Jezzie. "I understand entirely."

Jezzie glared at him without conviction. Was it her place to tell him? She really didn't think Kim cared at this point. And she made no indication that she was going to keep talking. Apparently Jared had known, and Jezzie wasn't sure how the others didn't – given the Pack hivemind.

"She's pregnant, Paul." Jezzie had never seen Paul Lahote at a loss for words. It was odd. "She's six weeks on. She said she's surprised none of you actually noticed it before her. With the smell and all."

Paul stood up walked through the kitchen and Jezzie watched him quietly open Kim's door. He didn't leave the doorway, but Jezzie definitely saw him sniff. He pulled the door closed and leaned his head against it. "Shit."

"I have to go talk to Jake. You got this for now?"

He nodded, dazed.

The rest of the Pack proved fully healthy. Leah's knee had healed overnight – though Seth was still following her around like a mother hen. She'd gone to the Black's home after doing her rounds to check in with the Rachel and the dear Alpha to update him on the medical health of the Pack. And Kim… Jezzie needed to tell someone about Kim.

"Jake?" she knocked on the door. When it swung open, she was greeted by Billy Black. A nice man, but one of the ones that didn't trust her. At least he hadn't insulted her, like Old Quil, and called her a drunk 'Catholic Mick.' Jezzie had tried not to blame anyone for that, because the feeling of distrust did make sense. She tried to be understanding. But she still felt a little resentful and bitter when she saw that face when the people of La Push looked at her. And she still refused to share presence with Old Quil – especially after he'd given her the third degree while she was babysitting his grandson's imprint.

"Jake's out back talking with Collin," Billy offered. "Why don't you come in?"
"Thank you, sir," Jezzie offered quietly. She stepped inside and closed the door softly, keeping her head down. It was almost an unconscious act. Billy was the Alpha's father, even if he himself was not Alpha, and the lack of acceptance weighed down on Jezzie's Pack bond.

"Take a seat, dear. Let's have a chat," Billy offered as he wheeled into the living room. Jezzie sat and Billy took a space where it appeared his wheels had worn into the rug, marking the spot as his own. "I heard what you did for the Pack during yesterday's battle, Miss Sullivan."

Jezzie nodded. "It was the least I could do. I wanted to help somehow. Turns out I was a bit useful," she shrugged.

"A bit?" Billy questioned. "The way I hear it, you saved Sam Uley's life." Jezzie only nodded discreetly; she didn't feel the need to mention that she'd also failed to save another wolf. "Jezzie, I wanted to offer my apologies," Billy said apropos of nothing. Jezzie's head snapped up immediately, wondering if she heard correctly.

When she glanced up, _that_ face was gone. The one of guarded questioning. The face of doubt and distrust; of outright dislike. Now, Billy simply looked tired and aging. "I know we have not been entirely receptive of you here in La Push. And we worry for good reason, not just because we're an Indian tribe on a reservation, but because of the Pack. They're still our children. But I think you've more than proved your intentions."

Jezzie just kind of stared with her mouth open like a guppy. She couldn't believe what was happening. A movement behind Billy caught her attention and her eyes quickly shifted to see Jake in the hallway behind him. He hadn't made a sound coming back into the house. Jake looked about as surprised as Jezzie had, but he held up a finger to his mouth, signaling her to keep quiet about his presence.

"You're a good person Jezzie," Billy nodded. "And I happen to be quite fond of your father; I know you come from good people. I wanted to apologize for the way we've received you. And for Quil's – Quil Senior's – behavior. I hope you can find it in you to forgive us someday."

Jezzie didn't know what kind of inner fortitude it took for a man of Billy's place to apologize to someone like her. Jezzie was never very good at apologizing herself. She could very well appreciate the gravity of the moment.

"Thank you, sir," she nodded. "I... I really appreciate that. And I accept. I understand your doubts, but I'm glad you changed your mind."

She didn't know what else to say. Maybe fewer words were better in this circumstance?

"All right, Jake," Billy offered in a slightly louder voice. "You can stop hiding and eavesdropping."

Jake only swung his arms out as if to say 'what gives?' Jezzie only shrugged. She hadn't heard him make a noise. "I'm a Dad," Billy offered as he turned his chair partly to face his son. "I got eyes and ears everywhere."

Jake stepped into the living room and smiled. "Thanks dad. It's a lot nicer when you guys accept my Beta Human."

Jezzie nodded as she stood and Jake ruffled her hair. She glanced down at Billy, "Sir, may I embrace you?" she asked in a bit of a happiness-fueled chirp. She felt light now; Billy's accepting her into the Pack had taken a knot of tension out her Pack bond – a knot that Jake had been desperately trying to keep from weighing on her for weeks now. She felt her connection springboard like an elastic as she
was pulled tighter into the fold. She tried not lose her balance.

Billy looked up at her appraisingly. "Well, I don't see why not."

"Sam's off his feet for the next six weeks," Jezzie said as Jake handed her a cup of coffee.

"Six weeks?" Jake asked in astonishment. "Even with phase-strength healing?"

Jezzie nodded. "If he was human it would have been months and months. You don't spring back from a compound fracture to the femur. Leah's fine, Seth is hovering. She puts on a good show of annoyance but I secretly think she loves it."

"Probably," Jake agreed.

"Also..." Jezzie trailed off and stared at the floor. Jake noticed immediately.

"Jezzie, what's going on?" he tried to coax it out of her. "I'm a big boy, let me have it."

She opened her mouth to speak when Jake got a peculiar expression on his face. He cocked his head to the side and it looked as if he was just noticing something for the first time. Jake glanced up momentarily and looked at Jezzie appraisingly. "What?" she asked.

"Why is Kim in my head?" he asked.

Jezzie thought about it – getting used to Pack hierarchy was hard as a human. Her awareness was limited. She felt around in her subconscious and her awareness of Kim was hyped up. She mostly thought that was due to the fact that she was a now widowed imprint with a baby on the way and was mourning in the house they'd shared.

"That's what that is? I felt it... it happened in the room. When she let me hug her," Jezzie replayed recent history. It was a lot easier to pick out when she looked back on it.

"Kim?" he replied. "You felt Kim? She's not normally Pack, Jezzie – not like that anyways. What happened?"

"She's pregnant, Jake. I went to go see how she was. We talked and then she just... told me. It felt a little different. I thought it just felt weird because she was upset and I don't really know her that well, so it felt really personal. It's not because she's pregnant, right?"

"I don't know," Jake shook his head. "Kids are a sign of strength in the Pack, and she only comes in and out of the ranks occasionally. Maybe with the baby coming and with Jared being gone... she's probably holding onto what she knows. That's what Pack is for. We hold each other up in bad times. That's easier for us to do if she's fully Pack and not just an imprint. Hell, you probably pulled her in."

"Me?" Jezzie replied. "Why?"

"According to what you told me, you just Mama Bear'd the shit out of her. Being protective has a whole lot of other repercussions when you're in a wolfpack. Because Pack is protection."

"How the heck did I go from random new girl from Michigan to pulling renegade imprints into a wolfpack?"

"Hell if I know," Jake offered. "But you're stuck with us now."

"Well, from a completely present-minded point of view," Jezzie offered, with a shake of her head
trying to bring her mind back to more pragmatic issues. "We're gonna have to make sure she starts consuming more than OJ really soon. Not eating is not good for the baby. She needs nutrition. Later on..." Jezzie added, glossing over a direct mention of Jared's funeral, "she's gonna need to go to the doctor."

Jake returned to the couch and collapsed down, his head in his hands. "An imprint is having my dead wolf's baby and I have no idea what to do." Jezzie stood up and walked around the coffee table, sitting down next to her overexhausted Alpha.

Jezzie looped an arm around his slumped shoulders and leaned her head against his arm. "It's okay, Jake. I'm not sure there's a precedent for this." Seventeen was just a little too young for all of this, Jezzie thought.

Wednesday, January 24, 2007

"All right, Black. If we're fetching an imprint then I'm driving. No way I'm letting your mangy ass drive us off the road in some fit of pique."

"Wait... what?" Jacob looked back at Leah as she dug through the basket by the table for the keys to the Honda outside.

Jacob had been back and forth almost constantly between La Push and the Cullen house. The Alpha was extremely distracted by the state of his imprint. Nessie had been in tears since Carlisle and Esme had told her that her parents had died. Leah had no idea how much of Nessie knew what was really happening. She also didn't know how the two of them explained to Ness that her parents were torn to shreds. Bella's remain's were never found and they assumed she'd been incinerated with the rest. Jacob didn't notice but Leah pointed that he'd come home with Nessie claw marks all over him and smelling like bleach, ass, and burning plastic. Leah didn't have the heart to give him any shit about it.

It had been a few days since the battle and Nessie had been in hysterics the whole time. Jake tore himself away for twelve hour blocks to tend to his own Pack. But his attention was split and everyone knew it. This is why Alpha's shouldn't imprint. Everyone was thinking it. No one said it. Leah had been shouldering the majority of the Alpha business, as a result.

Paul was mostly busy trying to keep a violently severed imprint bond from tearing Kim apart at the seams. He was starting to think it wasn't even her reaction to Jared's death but mostly the imprint being cut off so quick and gruesome.

Leah actually agreed to go over to Sam and Emily's place and help out. No one was more surprised than Emily. Leah didn't like Emily. Leah hated Emily, but she wasn't about to watch her Packmate and the shadow of a man she once loved develop blood clots and bed sores because his fiancée wasn't strong enough to lift him. She wasn't that much of a vindictive bitch. Though she made it quite clear she was doing it for Sam's benefit – not Emily's.

Embry had been working with the Plains Pack and making sure that they were thanked good and proper and seen off home as safely as possible. Jezzie helped them pack their spare few belongings. They'd proved themselves to be true allies and he worked as best he could to really cement that bond between the Packs. He knew La Push might need the werewolves in the future and he didn't want the million other distractions to make them think otherwise. They accepted his thanks on behalf of the Pack with grace and agreed to help when they could. Maybe this allies thing would work out?

Jezzie spent most of her time between Kim's, Sam and Emily's, and making sure the younger wolves weren't too traumatized. She thought it might be best not to think too long on that last. At least Collin
was already in therapy and Seth's family would understand why he was a little left of center for a while. Brady, though, she worried about.

Quil spent most of his time keeping time for Jacob and reminding him when it might've been a good idea to go visit his Pack or Nessie. With so much going on at once, Jacob's focus had gone single-minded and he tunnel-visioned his way through tasks, ending up spending too much time with either Pack or Ness. Quil broke him down to even twelve-hour shifts with each. It worked out pretty well given that Jake didn't seem compelled to sleep.

But it soon became obvious that while Kim was now eating and Leah was around often enough to help Sam at least bathe, Nessie was not getting any better. She seemed to be getting worse, actually. As the hours trickled by and her father's service had passed, the impact of her loneliness threatened to crush her. Both her parents were torn from her before she even got to know them. She was an orphan in the world and the only remaining thing left she had any blood ties to was Charlie Swan. She liked her Grandpa, but it wasn't the same. The only thing that calmed her long enough to stop wailing was Jacob's presence. Her imprinted wolf was supposed to be there for her. Sure, they didn't share blood, but they were bonded in a special way just like families.

Nessie never brought it up though. She knew it would hurt her aunts and uncles, her grandpa Carlisle and grandma Esme. Jacob, however, was a (mostly) full-grown man. And hell if he didn't notice that the only time Nessie got any relief for her lungs or her mind was when he sat down with her. Neither of them could continue to live like this. Nessie needed him around a lot more frequently than six hour intervals, and so did his Pack. The only thing that made sense was bringing them together. Because Jacob was never good at multi-tasking.

"I'm coming with," Leah insisted. "And assuming you're going for the dramatics and refusing to leave without Ness – a car would be good. I think one of the cardinal rules of parenting is that you transport your children in vehicles and not on wolfback."

"That's a good idea," Jacob agreed like a car only belatedly occurred to him. Maybe he should take Leah along. Jacob was currently being driven purely by his emotions and his imprint. Leah was always logical.

"It's what I'm here for," Leah shrugged.

Jacob held the door as she followed him out onto the porch. "I didn't think you liked Nessie."

"I never said any such thing. I think her parentage is unfortunate, but no one gets to choose that. And in the broad scheme of things I think a seventeen-year-old boy has a better shot at raising a child than those emo sparkle pussies. Of course, my never letting either of you out of my sight will help."

Jacob gave her a sideways glance and Leah rolled her eyes as she hopped off the porch and stretched with a smirk.

"Seriously, Jake? I mean, just because you're better for her than the leeches doesn't mean I think you can raise a child. You're cool and all, but it would be nice if Ness grew up to be normal. Relatively speaking."

"Leah…" Jacob knew there had to be more to this than Leah was letting on. She was volunteering to fight a coven for their youngest member? "You hate the Cullens."

"Partially true. I don't hate Rosalie and Emmett, necessarily – though don't tell them that – and Jasper's okay. But Nessie isn't a Cullen, Jake," she shook her head. "She's young. And she's a nice girl. And she just lost both her parents. You know what it's like to lose a Mom. I know what it's like
to lose a Dad. I'm not about to let you bring up a kid on your own. I think this is something we can adequately tag team."

Jake just smiled. Leah was having a maternal moment. She was letting an emotion that wasn't covered in acid shine through – something very few people ever saw and Jake loved seeing it from his Alpha female. She could be softer than she would ever lead most people to believe.

"I knew you loved us," Jacob insisted as he crossed her yard to catch up.

"It's no reflection on you, you dork," she replied as she slung her arm over Jake's shoulder. "But who else is going to explain boobs and menstruation to the girl? Because at her rate of growth that's gonna be real, real soon."

"Point taken," Jacob nodded. "I really would appreciate your help Leah. I've got sisters but I know it's not the same. Especially since I'm younger. But raising Ness isn't going to be a picnic. Don't you think you've given up enough already?"

"Do not deign to lecture me about what I've given up, Grand Poobah." Her words were serious, but her tone was flippant as she chided Jacob briefly. She turned the engine over and pulled immediately out of the driveway, not pausing long enough to let Jacob lecture her about the benefits of actually letting the car's engine warm up. "My scales got smashed a few years back, but I've figured out how I want to rebalance them."

"Whatever you want, Leah." She smiled with that one. Jacob maybe indulged her a little too much. This Alpha was inclined to do so for his she-wolves. Leah didn't mind one bit.

"We'll be one big, multi and interspecies family. Now if we can just get Jezzie to agree to be the crazy Irish aunt, we'll be complete. Maybe Damian can be godfather. That'd be five different species."

To say that Jake and Leah were not well received was the understatement of – quite possibly – the decade. Esme would have cried, if she could have, and Rosalie threw a chair across the house.

"No," Alice protested steadfastly. "She's all we have left of either Bella or Edward. We can't. She's our family. She comes with us."

"Like hell she does!" Jacob replied. "She's my imprint and you guys aren't the only ones that lost someone. Bella meant a hell of a lot to me, too – in case you forgot. Don't you guys get it? This is why I'm tied to Ness the way I am; this is why I imprinted. To take care of her and to help her. Being raised with vampires is not normal for her. She's more human than she is vampire."

"You're not all human either, Jacob Black," Jasper offered quietly.

"No," Jake shook his head. "You're right. But I'm a lot closer to human than you all. I still eat and sleep and someday I'm gonna age like a human too. I've been around long enough to know that you guys have to put a lot of effort into appearing normal. Nessie needs to grow up as happy and natural as possible. And you guys can't give that to her. You can't even go outside when you want to."

"You said it yourself, Jacob," Carlisle shrugged. "When you stop phasing, you will begin to age as a human. What then?"

"What do you mean, 'what then'? Then I'll get older. I'm not going to instantly turn into some wrinkled old man. I'll still be plenty young enough to raise Ness. I'm only seventeen."
"And what about when Nessie comes of age?" Carlisle queried. "Won't people wonder?"

"Wonder about what?" Jake looked confused. "Yeah, I get that she's going to grow up quick, but we can keep her underwraps and only around the reservation until she's fully grown – even that's better than being locked in a house. And when she's older, she'll be older. I'm not going to lock her in the basement or some shit. She can go to high school and college if she wants to – she can do whatever she wants. She'll be an adult and can make her own decisions."

"Without you?"

"Sure," Jake responded flabbergasted. "If she's eighteen or twenty-one or when-the-hell-ever and wants to make her own life choices, who the hell am I to stop her? What are you getting at Carlisle?"

"I worry about the changing dynamics of your relationship and the kind of effect that could have on Renesmee's psyche in the short and long term."

Jacob had the decency to look deadpan floored for about a half a second. "Oh for fuck's sake!" he growled. "What the hell is with all you people and this sick ass thought that the wolves are picking up child brides? Carlisle, I hate to disappoint, but I have no romantic interest in your granddaughter. And I never will. I'd sooner through myself off a cliff. It's sick that you'd even think that. You have no basis for thinking whatsoever. And if that's anyone's primary concern, well you can all go to hell."

"You have to consider," Leah offered in an uncharacteristically calm voice, "that we might be a better option for Nessie. We don't want to take her and run for the hills, but we want her around humans, where she'll play and interact with others who know about her and one day she'll go to school and she'll make friends and she'll live a life she can choose. You have so few options, she would have no choice but to live like you. None of you chose this life, don't force it on a young girl."

Leah came along because – as much as she hated the Cullens – she really wanted Jacob to win this one. And she knew he wasn't going to be able to go into it with a level head. She didn't really expect him to. But she was also very well assured that negotiations would break down quick if Jake phased in the living room and ate someone.

Who would've thought Leah came to play 'voice of reason'?

There was no response as suddenly their argument was interrupted by the heartrending cries of someone very small and very scared from two floors up. Everyone's eyes darted to the ceiling immediately and Rosalie was gone in a flash. They could hear her up on the third floor, trying to calm a frantic Nessie.

"Honey, it's okay. I'm here."

"I… want… my… Mommy!" Nessie's voiced splintered between a scream and a sob. "Where's Papa!" The sounds of Rosalie attempting to comfort the girl drifted down to sensitive ears and Leah had to hold Jacob in his spot. His face looked anguished enough to split.

Nessie's nightmares had not abated, despite her comfort in her father's old room during her waking hours. She had sustained next to no sleep since the battle and while Jacob had assumed this – feeling her through the imprint bond – having it confirmed only made it worse.

Nessie had woken up confused, not understanding right away where Bella or Edward were, why she was in the main house and why she was so scared, angry, and sad. As the fearfulness of her sleep slipped away it was replaced by the colder, darker reality. At least her Mom and Dad had been in her
dreams. In her waking world, they were nowhere to be found. And the small girl, screamed and cried all the louder.

It was becoming clear that Nessie could not be comforted. Leah cleared her throat subtly. "Rosalie, if you don't bring the girl down stairs... well, I can't be responsible for what Jacob does to your stairwell."

The blonde issued a long-suffering sigh but was down the stairs moments later, the fretful child in her arms. She hadn't even made it off the last step when Nessie wrested herself from her Aunt's grip. Rosalie could not hide the mask of hurt that washed over her face as the distraught child stumbled blindly to Jacob.

She was wailing and sobbing uncontrollably. Tears streamed down her red flushed cheeks from her bright brown eyes – Bella's eyes – and Jacob squatted down wordlessly to take the child into his arms. He scooped her up, held her close and took a step back from the group – his focus entirely redirected.

"They'll be back," Leah muttered quietly when Alice and Esme looked tempted to follow the pair's retreat. "They won't go far."

"Her nightmares never stop." Leah glanced away from the retreating Alpha and the small imprint to see that it was Emmett that had spoken.

"That's understandable, Emmett," Rosalie replied, irate. "Her parents are gone. I think it's going to be awhile before she makes it through the night."

"She's fine when Jake's here. She's fine when any of the wolves are here. I love the shit out of that little girl out there, but I don't wanna sit here and guess how long it's gonna be before she stops crying her heart out, just so we can keep her away from the Pack."

"It hasn't stopped once," Alice admitted as she approached the window, watching the pair on their front porch. Nessie had at least stopped screaming. Alice turned back towards the rest and glanced sadly at both Rosalie and Esme.

"The Pack does have a point, peach," Jasper glanced down at his wife. "We aren't good humans. For the public, sure. But here... we're a house full of vampires. What's that gonna do to a small chil' like Ness, huh?"

Alice glanced towards Rosalie, who was tall and fearsome in her sadness. Her face was flat and she pursed her lips as Emmett wrapped his arm around her. "Rosie, I know that Nessie feels like your own, but we have to seriously consider what might be best for her. We at least have to give her the option."

Rosalie was quiet and still for a moment before stepping out of Emmett's embrace. She approached the window Alice was at and looked outside briefly, to Jacob and Nessie on the steps, before marching resolutely back towards the porch. The screen door whirled open and Rosalie sat down on the steps beside the pair.

"I have conditions," she said shortly.

"Understandable," Jacob nodded, as the small girl in his arms quieted to whimpers. "So dish."

"I want to be able to talk to her whenever. If your phone number changes, I want to know. I want to be able to see her. I'll let you know whenever I'm coming – I'll give you good warning – but I don't want any excuses."
"That goes for the rest of us, too," Emmett insisted as he leaned in the doorway.

"Of course," Jake nodded. "I'm not trying to steal her from you guys. I'm trying to make her happy. And, if Carlisle's right, she's going to look like a twenty-something for the rest of her life, right? Which is forever. I'm not going to phase forever. I'm going to grow old and die as soon as I can - like a normal person. So... I've got another forty, fifty years with her. But after that? You guys have her forever. She's going to be just like you for all eternity."

Rosalie offered a weary smile but continued. Her face was sad now, no longer flat, and she looked at Jacob in a way that she hadn't before. She was being honest and not a bit sarcastic. "Please don't let her forget. Anything. Us. Bella or Edward. I know... I know they did some damage. But they were her mother and father. Don't ever let her forget that."

Jacob nodded. Her request wasn't at all unreasonable. "Of course, Rosalie."

"Thank you, Jacob."

And without much further fanfare, the Cullens and Jake and Leah and Nessie sat down and talked. The Cullens explained that they had to leave for a while and that Nessie was going to stay with Jacob and Leah, if she'd like to. Of course there would be visits, and of course no one would ever leave her. She was intelligent enough to understand that her family's presence caused a lot of stress for her Pack. Somehow, they'd all migrated to the porch and Nessie stood up, walked carefully down the steps and paced a little – back and forth – across the lawn.

"If you leave, where will you go?" she asked.

"I'm thinking it will be nice to visit our friends in Alaska for a little while," Carlisle supplied. "From there, we'll decide as a family."

"And if I stay in La Push? Will you still come visit me? What if I want to go with you?"

"Nessie, dear, come here for a moment," Esme crouched on the steps next to Rosalie and beckoned the child to her lap. "Either of us will come to get you at a moment's notice. You won't be giving anyone up. If you stay here with Jacob and Leah and the rest of the Pack, we will all still be able to see you. We'll talk all the time. But if you'd really like to stay with us, of course Jacob will come and visit. Nothing is set in stone, dear."

The small girl observed her own lap with big eyes for a few moments. "Okay," she agreed quietly.

And for the first time, the Cullens and the La Push Pack were party to a treaty that they never questioned breaking.
Friends I will remember you, think of you, pray for you

Chapter Notes

Also, the bit of narration during Jared's funeral regarding the history of trespassers from a major media network on an LP cemetery is entirely true. (Though, I don't know if there's a fence.) If any of you lovelies ever have the chance to visit a rez: be polite, respect reservation rules and policies.

This is what Jezzie's new tattoo looks like.

A warrior
I have been.
Now
it is all over.
A hard time
I have.

Tuesday, January 23, 2007

They buried Jared on a Tuesday.

The funeral was the hardest thing Jezzie had to watch in a long time. It was harder than being knee deep in mud and feeling like she was going to throw up everywhere in the middle of the woods again. Because when Jared died, there were no expectations. It was ugly and that was okay. But now, she stood in a scratchy, black, wool dress that hit just below her knees and a pair of heels that were not meant for the soft earth she gracefully trod upon. There was a very prim and proper kind of grief to be expected at funerals. But all Jezzie felt was an ugly kind of grief. Having to keep it tucked inside a woolen dress and half-size too small pumps was suffocating.

Everyone was there. She was pretty sure that ‘everyone’ entailed the entire reservation. Even Sam, who was technically not supposed to be upright yet but like hell was he going to miss his friend and brother’s funeral just put me in the goddamn wheelchair, already, Leah.

Kim's catatonia was still going strong. She didn't cry. Paul said she hadn't cried in days. Mostly she just stared, blank and wide-eyed, in front of her. She did, however, refuse to release Paul from her hand's death grip for the duration of the service. Rachel had swooped into active duty the moment she could free herself from Seattle. Jezzie thought it was partly about sympathizing with her fellow imprint, and partly because Paul just had to have called her in a panic because he had no idea what to do. Addie was also down for at least the week. If Jezzie had pulled Kim close to Pack that day in her bedroom, then Rachel drew on all her blood and status and swallowed Kim whole into Pack. And, man, did Jacob have the mother of all headaches as a result.

The cemetery had been fenced off recently, in light of a major media network trespassing on the land and filming graves of the dead, especially those of past elders. The ground was soft and Jezzie could see the remnants of lots and lots of dandelions. The Pacific Northwest didn't seem to favor much of a snow cover. The headstones were simple. Some wooden and metal crosses, a few lichen-covered
granite pieces sticking up from the earth. Mostly flat stone, laying flush to the earth, some grown over with dying weeds and others obviously maintained more regularly. It was small but open and surrounded by trees – like everything else on the Olympic Peninsula – and had a single empty flagpole in the middle.

The cold wind against her cheeks and the bare legs exposed by her dress kept her alert. She’d spent so much of the day drifting in and out of awareness that she didn’t remember a lot of what was happening, as she had so much trouble processing what came.

She distinctly remembered – and would for the rest of her life – the few moments when all the gathered passed the young man’s coffin one last time. Some were quiet, others spoke or murmured to themselves or others. Lots of people cried. Funerals for older people made Jezzie sad. Funeral for young people made her long, she never liked ‘what ifs’. She always would remember passing by Jared’s coffin – Embry behind her and Kim and Paul in front – as Kim’s fingers traced delicately up the wood and her other hand threatened to force all the blood out of Paul’s.

The cedar was cold but smooth. Brady’s father and uncle were local craftsmen and had hewn the casket in record time. The smell reminded her of the woods.

Friday, January 26, 2007

“I heard Billy apologized to you,” Embry mentioned as the car came within the Port Angeles border. It’d had been more than a week since the battle. Embry had thankfully stopped throwing up at night from nightmares and Jezzie had stopped worrying so much. He was gone during the day for class and patrol while Jezzie went to classes and work, but he snuck out of his house every night and spent it curled up around her. And she spent every night pretending to sleep waiting for his breathing to even out and then a full half hour the fact – just to be sure.

“He did,” she smiled.

“Jake said you seemed really excited. You hugged the guy?” Jezzie nodded. “Wow… you’re really that accepting of the BS they’ve given you?”

“There wasn’t really anything I could do about it, Embry.”

“But they gave you such a hard time of it. And I know it affected you, Jez.”

“It did,” she nodded. “It was no picnic having Old Quil call me a drunk Mick.”

Embry shook his head. Jezzie knew her reception in La Push from the adult population bothered him more than her.

“Jez, hon,” Embry sighed. “I’m the local bastard child, so I know thing or two about people being less than fond of you. But you can’t just give them a pass like that because they’re old and Indian. I mean… does your Dad hate every British person he comes across?”

Jezzie glanced over at Embry while he tried to convince her to give his neighbors hell. “It’s different, Embry.”

“It’s not different, Jez. People have been giving each other crap about religions and skin color and land since forever, but that doesn’t give anyone an excuse to develop a hate of a whole part of humanity they’ve never met. It doesn’t justify them treating you the way they did when they didn’t even know you. The same way it wouldn’t justify you’re being biased against us if it was the other way around.”
“I know that, Embry,” Jezzie nodded and she reached across the console to cover his hand with her own. “But what do you want me to do? Flip them the bird and raise hell? They’d have hated me even more. I can’t change the world Embry. I can’t convince whole populations to give every individual their due before judging them. And I’m not going to change who I am just to prove a point. If they don’t like me then, tough shit. I know I’m a good person.”

He shook his head rather vigorously and Jezzie admired the level of commitment he held for her honor as a person. “You can’t force people to be tolerant, Embry.”

“But you don’t have to be so forgiving,” Embry grumbled.

“Are you telling me that I should’ve told Billy Black to shove his apology where the sun don’t shine and stormed off? What does that accomplish?”

“I can’t believe you hugged a guy that has all but scorned you from day one.”

Jezzie smiled slightly. “I don’t know Billy, Embry. So, I can’t say that I’ll ever be overjoyed to know him as a person, but his apologizing was a really big step. I’m far more thankful for his personal growth; I don’t know him well enough to say whether or not I truly value his opinion of me. I rather think I don’t.”

“That was quite a backhanded compliment. And you are way too humanitarian for your own good,” Embry told her in a low voice.

“It’s easy when you have some friends on your side,” Jezzie squeezed Embry’s hand.

“Are you gonna hug Old Quil too?”

“Absolutely not,” she denied. “What he said about me made me feel terrible and it’s a lot different than passively doubting someone. Billy never actively expressed his dislike for me. Old Quil did and that’s not right. No one should be made to feel less than human like that.”

"C'mon, Embry! Please?" Jezzie stood next to the car tugging at Embry's hand futilely. He simply groaned and shook his head. "Embry! You have to be big and brave and manly and hold my hand when it gets scary. Plus, I want you to see how it's done. It's important."

"Aw, Jez. Do I have to?"

Jezzie stood up straight placing her hands on her hips and shaking her head. "I knew I should've brought Seth," she sighed. "Embry Call, come out here right now before I break out my lethal pout. You are upsetting the tattoo parlor," she stated flatly and waved her arm to indicate the facade of the building behind her.

"You know I'm squeamish," Embry whined. "You brought me to a tattoo parlor?"

"I'm getting the ink, not you!" she shouted. "Embry, I go through a dozen titanium needles just to set one line of stitches on you... people," she ground out the last word, glancing around remembering she was in the real world. "You can watch for a while."

Embry had not moved from his spot - sitting sideways with his legs hanging out of the passenger seat of Jezzie's Jeep - since they'd arrived ten minutes ago. Her last plea hadn't even made him so much as flinch.

Fine, she decided. Time for the big guns. She climbed up into the open doorway and placed herself
right in Embry's lap. She held her hands in her lap and after a few moments glanced up through her lashes. "Please Embry?" she asked sweetly.

"Ugh," Embry's head lolled back and he groaned in both acknowledgment and defeat. He knew Jezzie was about to issue a full whammy on him.

Her nimble fingers walked up and down his forearm. "Pretty please?" she asked softly, ever so much closer to his face. "With sugar on top?" she breathed, placing a soft, teasing kiss on his lips as her fingers continued to tickle along his forearm.

"Fine!" he finally caved.

"Yay!" Jezzie shrieked. And with that, she launched herself off of Embry's lap, onto the black top and tugged him bodily into the tattoo parlor with a strength Embry didn't know she had.

Once inside, Jezzie confirmed her appointment and made Embry sit all the way across the waiting room as she discussed the tattoo's subject with Tina - the artist.

"I thought the whole idea was that you wanted me to see this and how it was done?" Embry asked her, confused.

"It is! But not yet," she shooed him towards the far wall.

Embry could very easily hear them talking, but couldn't make heads or tails of what they were talking about. Tina left for a few minutes to do the final touches on the sketch and Jezzie joined Embry.

Embry was slumped in his chair, enjoying that this place was kept at a nice 64° when he noticed that Jezzie was sitting next to him bolt upright with one leg bouncing up and down incessantly. Embry sat up a bit and his hand found the small of her back. "Jez?"

She glanced back at him, but a genuine smile played on her lips. "Just nervous excitement," she assured him.

"Jezzie?" Tina called from around the front desk. Jezzie hopped up and grasped Embry's hand.

He followed after her. "An audience today?" Tina asked as she held what looked like a piece of parchment paper in her gloved hands.

"I dragged Embry along," Jezzie admitted, as she sat down and extended her left forearm.

"Right on," Tina smiled as she laid the paper on the inside of Jezzie's forearm. She offered Embry a rolling stool similar to her own as the print set on Jezzie's arm.

"Sit down and learn another transferable skill, Emb," Jezzie laughed.

Tina peeled the paper back and revealed the bluish outline of a wolf coming out of a torn elliptical shape. Embry glanced up at Jezzie; he'd previously been totally in the dark about what Jezzie was having permanently embedded on her body.

Her grin was big enough Embry thought her face might split. And he couldn't help the smirk that slid over his mouth. Embry felt like this was a pretty big deal. He'd ranted enough about the permanence of tattooing, and he knew Jezzie knew how he felt about it. Make it something good, because it was forever.
Tina fired up her instrument of permanence and pain. She spoke over the low buzzing. "So what made you choose a wolf?" she asked as she bent over Jezzie's forearm.

"We come from a slightly more woodsy area," Jezzie explained. "I just moved here not too long ago and I've had more than a few brushes with the lupine population," she grinned.

"For real?" Tina asked in surprise. "That's scary, huh?"

Jezzie couldn't help the knowing smile that crept over her face. "At first. Definitely," she nodded. "But our wolf population is mostly benign. They do their own thing. Bunch of overgrown puppies most days."

Embry narrowed his eyes in Jezzie's direction, from behind Tina's back. Jezzie responded in turn by sticking her tongue out at Embry.

Jezzie’s forearm was neatly wrapped in gauze and plastic wrap just a few hours later. Tina had given her the option of taking a break and coming back another day to have the majority of the coloring filled in. Jezzie wanted all done in one sitting. She hadn’t even really bled much at all. But she did make Embry drive home. Her arm was sore.

Embry had stared at the wolf on Jezzie’s arm for a while. It was good. Really good. Which was saying a lot considering how many terrible wolf portrait tattoos both Embry and Jezzie had seen in their lives. Embry knew Jezzie got it for lots of reasons – the Pack and her recent foray into shapeshifter life and death probably being foremost. But it still felt like a really quantum shift kinda moment as he sat in the Jeep’s driver’s seat and carefully held Jezzie’s bandaged forearm in his hands. His girlfriend had something permanent emblazoned on her skin. Something that was more or less related to him and his brothers and sisters.

She was normally pale. A creamy kind of pale – not unhealthy – just a product of her northern European ancestry. The part of her skin that wasn’t stained dark with bluish-greens and red-oranges was pink and irritated. “Does it hurt?” he asked, running his thumbs along the edge of the flushed skin.

She shook her head. “Not really, anymore. Just kind of sore. Like someone’s been scratching at it incessantly. Did it hurt when you got yours?” she nodded towards the circular abstraction that covered Embry’s – and all packmates’ – deltoid.

“I don’t remember,” Embry shook his head. When Jezzie looked surprised, he explained. “There’s a really short window of time after the first phase – when you’re human – when the skin is still soft enough to not need Carlisle’s titanium needles. We think it’s like twenty-four hours tops. I’d phased – I was the fourth wolf – and I had thought I’d lost my mind. I really did. Paul, Sam and Jared were trying to corral me and keep me in the treaty line without cornering me. After two days I hadn’t calmed down but I was too exhausted to move anymore. I hadn’t gained the control, but I didn’t have the energy to maintain the wolf anymore.”

“So you just… snapped back to human form?” Jezzie asked.

Embry nodded. “Yeah. Pretty much. Then I got literally jumped,” Embry grinned in a way that suggested it wasn’t necessarily a pleasant memory. “Jared held me down while Sam shaved my head.” Jezzie looked at him horrified. He’d never told her any of this. She’d never heard anything about his first phase. “That’s when I got this,” he smiled more genuinely as he patted the shoulder of his arm where his Pack tattoo lay beneath his shirt. “As you can guess, I was a little distracted.”
“Hair’s kind of a big deal with Indians. Some tribes’ tradition says you only cut your hair when someone dies. I guess that’s kind of ironic in the La Push case. But a lot of people do it just to stick it to society – white people and the government had a big issue with Indian hair for a long time. It’s really political now. But anyways, having been in an animal’s head for two days and having the local ‘gang’ try to calm me down and then cut all my hair off really kinda sucked.”

“So what’s the tattoo for?” Jezzie replied quietly.

“Kind of a unity thing. It’s a symbol that ties the whole Pack together as a family. And more tradition. Historically, boys and girls in tribes around here would get tattoos when they become teens – after puberty – and the tattoo is a way to show that you’ve moved into adulthood. It’s an honor. The Pack tattoo is a lot different than the old school ones, but for the Pack getting the tattoo is kind of just a way to reclaim a bit of yourself that you lose when the hair goes – to prove that you’re not just caving to some social expectation – and to show that we’re not kids anymore. We’re still part of this tribe.”

Jezzie offered Embry a tentative smile. He was a quiet person, but she’d never known him to be much less than happy and content. But this was a whole new set of information. She knew it must not have been a lot of fun to share. The guys obviously never talked about it – maybe it was just one of those unspoken things. But Jezzie could tell it was a big deal.

With her free hand she reached for Embry’s and twisted her fingers into his, matching their palms.

“Thanks,” she smiled.

“What for?” he laughed a little glancing up at her.

“For coming with me, even though you hate needles. And for telling me that.” She sat up on her knees and gently pressed her lips to Embry’s. Only intending it to be brief – they were in a public parking lot, after all – she was taken by surprise when Embry held on to her. The hand cradling her forearm had slipped around her waist and the one locked in her own pulled her forward tentatively. He wasn’t going to embarrass her in wide-open space if she didn’t want him to. He was pleased when she didn’t pull back.

She hooked her bandaged arm around his neck and wiggled closer. Jezzie hummed happily as Embry took the lead. She got this so rarely. So, so rarely. Her and Embry had been ‘not friends’ since the beginning of the month and the moments alone she got with him when they were both awake were few and far between. Then there was that whole issue of his wolf’s overexcitement.

He was hesitant around her in physically close situations and Jezzie almost always encouraged him. It was something they were going to need to get over if they were going to have a healthy relationship. Because having Embry back out of a ten minute make out session having already got his hands up Jezzie’s shirt and turned her brain to oatmeal was not acceptable. They were some of the biggest let downs Jezzie had dealt with. She never told him that – that would’ve been mean – she just always insisted they keep going. How the hell else where they gonna fix it? Getting acclimated to each other sounded like the best plan of attack to her.

She could always tell when it was coming. His grip on her would firm up and his breathing would stop for a minute as he forced himself away from her – like it was hard to do. It bothered her, mostly because she was sure Embry didn’t have enough faith in himself; that he was actually enjoying it but still making himself back away. So when Embry’s mouth paused against hers and she felt his torso pull back, she held on.

“No,” she told him. “Embry, please don’t do this.”
“Jez, I’m going to hurt you,” he grumbled.

“You’re not going to hurt me. Your wolf’s not going to hurt me. You’re psyching yourself out, you know that? I’m not totally stupid.”

He only growled into the skin of her neck. She smiled. “Have a little faith in me,” she kissed his shoulder. “I’m gonna feel dirty if I have to con you into all the fun stuff,” she chided when she nipped at the muscled skin on his neck. She let her tongue peek out when she reached the hinge of his jaw – a soft spot she’d discovered recently. He groaned a little in response and Jezzie only felt a little bit guilty. She wasn’t teasing him too much.

She paused, not wanting to push him, but pulled herself closer as she hugged him, resting her chin on his shoulder. He needed to get used to this. “I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to do, Embry, but I also really don’t want you thinking through all these terrible contingencies every time I kiss you.”

“Okay,” she felt him nod. “But I’m not making out with you in this parking lot for the world to see.”

Apparently, making out with her in her driveway was a much more suitable option. The steering wheel was admittedly uncomfortable against her back, but Embry responded better to Jezzie in the position of dominance. He never liked being on top of her. She leaned back against the steering wheel as Embry’s mouth moved down the trail of her unbuttoned shirt. She could feel his erection growing and pushing right at her center. She made the conscious effort not to push back against it, knowing that would be just a bit too much today.

Instead she concentrated on his fixation on her chest and his hands wrapped around the small of her back. “Jez, I don’t want this to sound weird,” Embry mumbled from his spot in her cleavage. “But you taste really good.”

She smiled. Maybe she should’ve thought that was weird. She didn’t. She pushed a little on his shoulders and propelled him back into the seat. “Not weird. But it’s my turn to play.” She hadn’t gotten very far, though she was sure Embry’s pants had to be getting uncomfortable, when she felt him sigh in annoyance. “We’re about to get a visitor,” he informed her.

“Nope,” she asked idly, not really caring to stop her path down his pecs. They were quite lovely.

“Don’t know. I think it’s Jake. Judging by size. Sounds like one of the bigger guys, and since Sam can’t walk…”

“Meh,” she grumbled petulantly. She quickly weighed the costs of having Jacob enter her yard with her top unbuttoned as the temperature in the Jeep slowly rose and decided she might as well just not go there today. She sat back against the wheel and sighed, beginning to snap the shirt closed. “You know, at the rate you boys walk around half-naked I feel like I should be allowed to enjoy it every now and then.”

“What? The liberty to walk around half naked or the liberty to enjoy us walking around half naked?”

“Both,” she decided.

“I’m not even going to touch that,” Embry replied as Jacob emerged from the trees near Jezzie’s porch.

“Do you people ever use phones?” Jezzie asked and she knew Jacob could hear. She watched him shake his head and she popped the door open, remaining in Embry’s lap. She could afford to give him a few more moments to will his hard on away.
“Definitely not, Little Red,” Jacob smiled. “Because that would ruin the fun of getting to bust up the party. It’s way more fun with Quil and Veronica, though. I admit I kinda feel bad about doing it to you two.”

Jezzie rolled her eyes. “Don’t need your pity, Jacob Black.”

“Hey,” he raised his hands in surrender. “I pity no one. But you two are awfully fucking cute together.”

“So what brings you to break up the fun, Jake?” Embry asked finally.

“Emily is calling a last minute meeting for everyone in the wedding party.” Embry’s head lolled back against the chair’s headrest. Sure, he didn’t mind being a groomsmen in Sam’s wedding – even though Emily had been the totalitarian orchestrator of the whole thing – but the two were already good as married, he wasn’t sure what the big deal was about making everyone dress up. Dressing up sucked. Though Sam assured them all that it sucked more when you couldn’t even stand up.

“She wants to make sure no one looks like an idiot in their suit. Because apparently Brady was still growing and had some serious Steve Urkel pants going on.”

And there was also the added issue of this digging up a whole shitload of bad juju for Leah. She was not a fun person to share a head with. Again. No one held it against her this time. She’d been getting a lot better. But when Emily insisted on going full steam ahead with the ceremony, it just opened old scars. Emily thought doing it quick would make it like a band-aid. Leah thought Emily was Queen of the Damned.

Leah refused to step down as maid of honor. She insisted that she was no quitter, and that refusing to be maid of honor would just make her look weak – like she couldn’t handle it. She did it less for Emily, and more as a way to prove to everyone else she knew that she wasn’t broken. She was Leah fucking Clearwater and she would do whatever she goddamn well pleased – including, but not limited to acting as the maid of honor to a woman she loathed. Because she was Leah fucking Clearwater. They’d all been subject to that mental tirade more than once whenever someone was crazy enough to be surprised about hearing that Leah had accepted the position.

Jezzie did not envy them. She actually planned on buying Leah some good liquor for the wedding. It seemed like the thing for a friend to do. Which reminded her… “What does Leah drink?” she asked both boys, apropos of nothing. They both just looked at her. “She strikes me as a scotch or a Tennessee whiskey kinda girl. And I probably won’t be able to get a hold of any moonshine. Thoughts?”

“Why do you ask?” Embry inquired.

“Because come this wedding, you all have to play nice and grin and bear it. I get that you’re stuck between Sam and Leah – your loyalty’s to both as Packmates. But Leah and I are girlfriends, and Sam’s pretty cool, but it’s my girlfriend obligation to buy her the good alcohol and get drunk while we talk shit about everyone present. It’s like therapy. Except cheaper. And you all can just… do what you do.”

“I think the only man Leah has never said no to is Johnnie.”

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**Thursday, February 1, 2007**

“Happy birthday!” Jezzie announced cheerily once Embry opened the door. Her little golden yellow
dress mirrored her attitude to perfection. She hopped once inside the door and jumped up to give him a hug.

“I think that’s the fourth time you’ve told me that, today, Jez,” Embry laughed.

“But this is the first time I get to tell you to your face! The first time was a text – so impersonal, then through Seth – again, not me. And I’m glad I got to call you during my break but it’s just not the same! So, happy birthday – that makes number five.”

She smiled and gave him a peck on the lips before sliding back to the floor. “Buuut,” she continued with a small smile. “If you don’t have that Jay-Z CD like you said you would, I might not be such a happy camper.”

“C’mon thug life,” Embry nodded over his shoulder. Jezzie dropped her bag on the counter and followed after Embry towards his room. He pulled the CD off his bedside table and extended it towards her and snatched it back before she could take it. “Where’s the Steinbeck?” he countered. “Even trade.”

Jezzie pouted but went back to the kitchen and returned moments later with *East of Eden*. She grinned when he handed her *The Black Album*. She stepped up close to him and pushed herself up on her toes. Jezzie’s unspoken request for a kiss. Embry thought Jezzie was pretty friggin cute when she wanted to be, even if she hated that word. Embry obliged, ducking down and meeting her lips with his own. She smelled like soap and coffee. Jezzie always smelled like coffee. Reaching up, she wrapped a hand around his neck and the one holding the CD pressed against his abdomen.

He felt her lips part slightly and her small tongue flicked out, teasing his own mouth open. He tried to suppress the moan; he was sure Jezzie knew she had too much power over him, already. But for once, when Embry pushed a little further, it was Jezzie reacting to him. Which just made him want her more. If they didn’t stop, Embry wasn’t going to be able to leave the house – he could already feel his pants tightening around his groin. He’d had much better stamina before Jezzie started teasing him three months ago.

She made a high-pitched little whining sound and took a step forward, trying to get closer. Embry’s legs hit the bed and knocked him off balance as his ass crashed rather ungracefully into the mattress. Jezzie only persisted and he largely suspected it was because she had the upper hand in physical stature for once.

He felt her lips part slightly and her small tongue flicked out, teasing his own mouth open. He tried to suppress the moan; he was sure Jezzie knew she had too much power over him, already. But for once, when Embry pushed a little further, it was Jezzie reacting to him. Which just made him want her more. If they didn’t stop, Embry wasn’t going to be able to leave the house – he could already feel his pants tightening around his groin. He’d had much better stamina before Jezzie started teasing him three months ago.

She pushed and pulled, trying get closer to just get… more. Embry had grown used to her pattern. Jezzie was very easy to rile up, and she tended to get aggressive. He wasn’t complaining. He could feel her nails digging into the skin at the back of his neck as her other hand fisted the fabric of his shirt. However, she did let Embry take over and calm her mouth to a less frantic pace.

“Jez,” he muttered between breaths. “We’re gonna… be late… the others… are waiting.”

All Jezzie did was grunt petulantly and push Embry further onto the bed so she could crawl up onto his lap. One hand drifted lower and tugged on the waistband of his jeans. *Hell*, Embry thought. The others could wait. He gave Jezzie a chance to breathe and pulled away from her swollen lips. He was pretty sure he was on the verge of busting a seam in his jeans because they were officially uncomfortable beyond belief. His hard on was pushing against the fabric and it made him want to grimace. He trailed his mouth down her neck, below her ear until he found her pulse point. He always paid careful attention to this spot. He loved feeling her blood pump strong and healthy under her skin. It meant she was safe.

Embry was almost entirely focused on not completely hickeying the hell out of Jezzie’s neck when
she rolled her hips into his. Hard. He bit down on her collarbone not expecting her to thrust on him at all. Jezzie gasped when she felt Embry’s teeth rough against her skin and she only pulled him in closer, grinding on him again. “Oh, that was good…”

“You lied,” Embry said under his breath, airing his suspicions. “Didn’t you? We don’t have anywhere to be?”

“Are you mad?” Jezzie smirked.

“I think I’ll get over it,” Embry admitted.

“Good,” Jezzie nodded as she reached down to snap Embry’s jeans open and unzip the fly. She pushed her hips towards him again and Embry hissed. Jezzie glanced up and read his expression. “Too much?” she guessed.

He nodded. “Don’t make this too embarrassing for me, Jez.” Because at the rate the girl was moving, he was going to end up coming in his pants.

She smiled a sweet smile and wiggled her hips a little further back and away from his groin for the time being. She leaned forward and kissed him slow and deep, trying not to get herself too worked up and trying not to push Embry over the edge too soon. He tugged against her lower lip with his teeth and she pulled her hands away towards the buttons on the front of her dress.

Embry’s mouth followed the trail of her hands as the fabric pulled away from her skin. Down her collarbone, her breastplate, between her breasts to the point where her bra connected. He opened his eyes long enough to notice the blue fabric of her bra. He lifted one edge of her dress to expose the full cup beneath. Blue. His favorite color. “You planned the hell out of this, didn’t you?” he said against her skin.

“Just in case you needed extra convincing,” Jezzie shrugged.

“Unlikely,” Embry laughed. Embry had woken from enough Jezzie-induced wet dreams with a cock stiff enough to chop logs. Had she seriously expected him to turn her away? The thought made him a little angry and he placed a kiss at the swell of her breast. There wasn’t a lot of ‘no’ he’d ever throw at this girl.

“That’s nice,” Jezzie nodded. “Because I’m kind of fed up with waiting.”

Embry didn’t know how many times he’d told her that the age of consent in Washington was sixteen. And that between birth control and condoms, those were some good odds. After they’d gotten over Embry’s worry about his wolf and his control, Jezzie had become worried to the point of paranoia about something – she told Leah – called ‘supernatural wolfy sperm’. He laughed a little to himself as he slid the shoulders of her dress off. The prospect of moving beyond second base made Embry almost die of relief. Almost. Jezzie moved closer when the cold hit her back. He watched the goosebumps radiate up her arms and tickle over her tattoo as the flushed skin of her chest paled. Embry knew that beneath that fantastic blue bra, her nipples would be fully erect. And he’d much rather see that than the bra at this point. He wondered briefly if a bra got as uncomfortable as his pants.

Embry’s hand was around the clasp in the back when his phone rang. “Shit,” Embry swore.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jezzie sighed as she deflated against his shoulder. She wouldn’t tell him not to answer it, as much as she wanted to. It could have been important... It better have been important. “This better be good.”
Embry leaned forward and fished around the side table drawer for his phone, holding Jezzie’s lower back so she didn’t slip. “It’s Quil.” If he was calling for anything less than a vampire apocalypse, Embry was going to rip his balls off.

Jezzie took the phone from him, flicked it open and put the receiver to her ear.

“Embry,” Quil began without even waiting for the receiver to speak.

“Quil,” Jezzie countered.

“Jezzie?”

“Is the reason your calling any kind of emergency?”

“No. Why?”

She snapped the phone closed and dropped it on the rug before turning back to Embry and pulling down on the waist of his jeans.

“I should have told you we were going swimming or something,” Jezzie mumbled. “The pants would have been so much easier to get off…” she smirked as his jeans made it past his knees and he kicked them off.

She could see his erection pushing steadfastly against his boxers and she grinned like a Cheshire cat and crawled closer. She hovered right over his lap and kissed him as he groaned, feeling her brush against him. His hands slid down her waist and into the sides of her little blue shorts. He could feel her smile against his lips as he squeezed her ass.

“Jez, if you don’t take these off I’m going to tear them off,” he warned her, mumbling into her mouth.

She sat back a little and wiggled them off her hips. “That sounds like fun but let’s save it for a cheaper pair.” She tugged them off her ankle and put them in the pocket of his shirt with a sly grin before proceeding to unbutton it. He was far too clothed and she was far too naked. It was time to balance the scales.

When Embry’s boxers finally made it off his body, and he groaned thankful not have the restrictive fabric anymore. Jezzie kissed the tip of his member and he grunted. She moved north quickly, remembering she didn’t want to make this too embarrassing for him. Up his hips, his abs and his chest she went, dragging herself across him the entire time.

“Are you okay with me on top?” she asked, nudging him so his back leaned against the headboard. “I know you don’t ever really like to be on top of me.”

“Whatever you want, Little Red,” he stared at the ceiling. She could tell he was concentrating, even as she tried to make this as unembarrassing for him as possible.

She reached past him and opened up the drawer on the bedside table. Just as she suspected. She pulled a condom out of the box and tore it open quickly. "How’d you know those were there?" Embry asked in amazement.

"Boys are predictable like that," she replied tossing the wrapper to the floor. "I'm on the Pill, but better safe than sorry. Plus, it dulls the sensation just a bit; helps things last longer."
She kept her eyes averted from Embry’s as she rolled the condom on; she'd tried to be subtle about her reasoning. It really was more for his sake than hers. Repairing bruised man ego was never fun...

All right, she decided, enough with the preshow tension. She braced one hand against his shoulder and used the other to guide Embry’s cock into her opening. Embry tried to rein in the moan as he held onto her hips. Jezzie let out a little squeak of pleasure and pain feeling him move inside her. Wow, she guessed it had been a while...

“Good?” she asked through heavy breaths, her forehead leaning against his. He nodded after a moment. Embry’s issue was two-fold. The normal guy in him was really hoping this all didn’t finish inside of thirty seconds, no matter how much he knew that was highly probable. No amount of jacking off in the shower was going to help when the real thing came. Maybe with any other girl, but sure as hell not with Jezzie. And the realistically more pressing issue was the canine subconscious telling him to roll her over and just push and drive into her until she saw stars. But he didn’t need his superhuman strength crushing her pelvis and running over her like a reciprocating saw.

“Tell me if I’m hurting you?” he asked her, his hands running light circuits down her sides to her bare hips. He needed her to be honest with him.

“Of course,” she nodded with a quiet response. She kissed him, distracting him momentarily with her mouth as she raised her hips tentatively and lowered them. Again she repeated the pattern. She continued to tug at his mouth as she moved her hips. She steadily quickened the pace, and deepened the push inside her. Embry found her rhythm after a few moments and adjusted the angle. She gasped when he felt himself rub against one of those sacred girl spots that he couldn’t remember the name of. He just knew there were at least two.

“That was fucking perfect,” she muttered against the skin of his neck. He tried to find the same place again and he must’ve done all right because Jezzie’s nails dug into the skin on his shoulders as she swiveled her hips. He gasped a little bit, not prepared for the small spike of pain to actually feel so good. He reached down, his hands wrapping around her upper thighs as she rolled her hips into his. Jezzie’s little moans, breaths, and bad language were going to put him over the edge more than being inside her was. Okay, maybe not.

Jezzie felt his grip on her thighs tighten as she continued to move herself over him. She looked down where their two bodies met and felt the pleasure in her core build even higher, as her breathing turned to a full pant. She dragged one hand down from his shoulders to rest against his abdomen, while the other fisted in his hair. She felt the tension as his muscles clenched, his grip on her went rigid, and he released inside of her.

She slowed as he worked down from his orgasm and felt the tension leave his body. She leaned her head against her shoulder, and her body – still tense – laid against his. She could feel his breathing, heavy and deep, as his chest rose and fell – still strong enough to lift her up as it did so. She giggled a little at the thought.

“What are you laughing at?” Embry asked warily.

“Your breathing patterns,” Jezzie smiled looking up at him, “are enough to lift all my body weight. That’s insane, Emb.”

“I’m a little stronger than you, Jez,” he said like it was obvious.
“I take offense to that,” Jezzie pouted. “I could take you.”

“Think so?”

“Mhm,” she nodded decidedly.

“You ready to prove that?”

“Bring it on.” She then squealed in surprise when he sat up and half tackled her, as she wound up on the other end of the bed on her back. Her head readjusted to her horizons and Embry had his arms braced on the bed at her shoulder level as he looked down at her with a mix of amusement and challenge.

She issued a well-placed, pointy elbow to his forearm and when his weight collapsed on that side he fell entirely off the bed. Jezzie smiled and rolled off the bed, landing lightly on his lap. As she reached out, his hands met hers and their fingers locked together.

“When locked in hand-to-hand combat always keep your pinkies on the outside,” Jezzie indicated, showing him how their hands had aligned. “That’s where all the leverage is.”

“Ow!” Embry complained as Jezzie demonstrated, lightly twisting his wrists.

She released her fingers and slumped down, lying on her stomach on top of Embry. His newly freed hands found a home on her butt. “And never let your emotions blind you,” she smiled as she leaned down for a kiss. “Ready for round two?”

In order to give him time to regroup – though it quickly became obvious he didn’t need much time, damn boys… – she guided his infinitely curious hand between her legs.

“So, that’s where that is,” he muttered in realization.

Jezzie released a strangled little laugh as Embry got acquainted with her g-spot, and her hips twitched of their own free will. “Yeah,” she replied. “Oh, goodness… I cannot be on top for this.” She used her grip on Embry’s neck to tug him forward as she leaned back and he positioned himself above her.

“Don’t laugh at me,” he chastised as he nibbled at the skin on her throat. “Those health class charts make no sense, and how good of a match do you think porn and a dial up internet connection are?”

Jezzie was finding it really hard to laugh while Embry was two fingers deep in her. It came out like a strangled, guttural, choking noise. Very attractive. “Stop making me laugh and just—oh, oh good. Right there, that’s perfect, just… don’t… stop…”

Like hell was he going to stop, while Jezzie made all those noises and ground on his fingers. Embry watched in amazement as Jezzie’s eyes drifted closed and she continued to roll her hips into his hand. He had no idea what the fuck he was doing, but apparently whatever it was, it was right.

He’d gone completely hard again about seventeen seconds after finishing the first time. She didn’t seem to mind having him pressed against her thigh – the pressure helped take some of the edge off – while he focused on whatever it was his hand was doing. Embry was quickly learning that he didn’t have enough blood for both his dick and his brain to operate properly at the same time, so it was hard to try and remember not to hump her leg like some overexcited dog.
Embry felt Jezzie’s nails dig into the skin at his shoulders and he looked up to her face. “Don’t—stop—,” she managed to get out before Embry felt her walls contract around his hand, her hips giving a few jerky movements. “Embry…” and then she just… melted. That was the only way Embry could describe it. One moment her face was tight and her whole body tense as he felt her juices run over his fingers, and the next she was laying on his bedroom floor like she didn’t have a bone left in her body.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled. A light sweat had broken out over her skin, giving her a subtle shine and her pale skin was flushed. He had done that. Embry Call had just given Jezzie Sullivan an orgasm. Only the sheer potential for humiliation was able to keep Embry from doing something that would only embarrass himself. No one would ever let him live it down. Jezzie included. This shit was kind of amazing and a helluva lot more interesting then hearing others talk about it.

Her chest rose and fell with the force of her breathing. Embry smiled a bit; in their haste, they hadn’t even managed to get Jezzie’s bra off – it still covered her chest and now seemed to be restricting her. Embry leaned down kissing Jezzie on her forehead and reaching between her and the floor. He found the clasp of her bra, pinched the fabric and slid the two halves apart.

Thank you, Jared, he thought. How many times had Jared given Embry bizarre sex talks – man to man – about not getting a girl pregnant, or contracting crabs, and additional peripheral information? Like how to get a bra off without looking like an idiot. Embry had tried to ‘be a man’ about the regular conversations they seemed to stumble into, but mostly it made him want to crawl under the couch until it was over. Jared was totally unfazed. Regardless, he’d given Embry a lot of valuable information and free access to the box of condoms under he and Kim’s bathroom sink. It was an odd sort of gesture of brotherly love, and Embry was only now really understanding what that kind of stuff meant coming from someone like Jared.

“Thanks,” Jezzie smiled, running her hands through her hair to get it away from her face and neck.

Embry only grinned in response, thinking that Jezzie was probably the coolest girl he’d ever known.

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**Friday, February 2, 2007**

Embry was a virgin. And Jezzie probably could have deduced that without Leah telling her on an almost daily basis. But there was always the chance that Embry was one of those modest quiet types who just surprised the hell out of a person some days. Jezzie didn’t mind. It didn’t really make much difference to her. He was younger and had been pretty damn busy since he was sixteen. So, it made sense to her.

She was glad – for both their sakes – that she was not a virgin. She was pretty sure that Embry would have terrified the day lights out of any girl who hadn’t had the experience. It was clumsy and very messy and even a little comical at points. Their endurance had lasted for three rounds before Jezzie collapsed on the bed after the fourth mostly incapable of independent movement. Embry’s damn wolfy endurance probably could’ve kept going, but Jezzie pretty much just passed out asleep a few minutes later.

At any rate, it had ended on a happy note with only a small undercurrent of dysfunction that they both found humorous. Jezzie agreed to change his sheets in the morning. However, when she slowly began to wake up that next morning, she felt like her pelvis had been cracked in half.
She groaned quietly in discomfort and pushed the layers of covers off herself. Sleeping in the same bed as a shapeshifter was like spooning with a bag of lit charcoal and Jezzie was overheating. From his spot, face down next to her, Embry opened a single sleepy eye, one arm still hooked around Jezzie’s waist.

“You smell like pain,” he mumbled as his nose crinkled. His head turned and Jezzie could hear him rooting around. He offered her a bottle of Motrin moments later.

“It’s been kind of a while,” she noted as she popped the cap. “No big deal.”

Embry lifted the t-shirt he’d leant her above her waist to expose her bare hips. The faintest of outlines in the size and shape of his hands still could be seen. “Is that what’s causing the pain?”

Jezzie perched up on her elbows and glanced down. “No, actually, it’s more inside than outside. I can’t really feel that,” she brushed her fingers over the spots and didn’t even flinch. When she realized Embry was staring and not in a normal man-is-fixated-on-girlfriend’s-hips kind of way, she took his chin in her hand and redirected his gaze towards her face.

“Stop it,” she said, sensing where his train of thought was going.

“Jezzie,” Embry shook his head. “I don’t know how I feel about leaving bruises on you.”

Jezzie collapsed back on the bed and sighed. “Embry they’re not bruises. They’re just marks on my skin. Haven’t you noticed that I can’t even scratch an itch without my skin swelling and turning beet red?” He didn't respond after a few moments so Jezzie spoke again. "If it upsets you that much, we just won’t have sex ever again.”

His eyes shot up to her face again and narrowed. “Well played.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ll give you a real good hickey.”

Only a few more minutes had passed (wherein Jezzie crawled on top of Embry and tried to give him a killer hickey and he told her it wasn’t going to happen with his skin, which only made her try harder) before they heard rustling in the house.

“Oh my God,” Jezzie gasped and froze. “Is that your mom?”

“Yes,” Embry nodded. “She lives here too, you know.”

“When did she get back?” Jezzie squirmed self-consciously back under the covers and Embry thought her embarrassment was adorable.

“About three?” he shrugged. “You were asleep.”

“Does she know I’m still here?”

“She’s my mom, so probably, yes. Isn’t your bag out on the counter?”

Jezzie groaned and rolled over, burying her head under a pillow. “I don’t want to be that girl,” she whined petulantly. “Your mom’s going to think I’m some kind of whore.”

Embry tugged her gently by the waist and pulled until her back met his chest. “I think she’d only
think that if you were that kind of girl. Which you aren’t. Besides, unless you plan on sneaking out, I don’t think you’re going to give her that impression. My mom likes you, anyways.”

“But that means I have to face her,” Jezzie groused.

“Jezzie, you’re twenty one. I’m eighteen. It’s not like she was in the house when it happened. We’re adults. We’ve known each other six months. I think you’re blowing this out of proportion.”

“Fine,” she caved. “But I need my underwear back. I don’t care how much you like blue, I’m not going commando while I eat breakfast with your mom.”

Embry obliged unwillingly and Jezzie left his room the same way.

Oddly enough, Tiffany Call didn’t seem to have much compunction about Jezzie emerging from her son’s bedroom, in her son’s clothes at nine in the morning. She just kind of smiled at them. She even made breakfast, which they ate in relative silence until Embry’s mom spoke causing Embry to choke on his OJ.

“You two are being safe, right?”

As Jezzie thumped Embry on the back she looked wide eyed at the totally calm woman across the counter. “Yes!” she assured her. "Embry, breathe for the love of God.”

“Well, you seem like a smart girl, Jezzie,” Tiffany grinned slightly. “And I know Embry and I have had our share of uncomfortable talks. But I’m a mom – I need to check on these things. Even if I know that at eighteen and twenty-one you’re both old enough to make those choices. I’m not totally naïve. Nothing stupid under my roof.”

“Okay,” Embry interrupted. “So, I gotta go see Jake for a bit. But, uh, you guys have fun with this,” he indicated as he stood from the table. Jezzie might’ve been mad that he was bailing on her with his mom for Jacob the morning after, if she didn’t like Tiffany Call so much.

It was less than three minutes later that Embry had put shoes on, kissed his mom and Jezzie, and was out the door.

“That boy…” Tiffany shook her head. “I know this sounds strange, but for the longest time I assumed he was gay.” It was Jezzie’s turn to choke on her OJ. “Just… when he turned sixteen, he started disappearing and hanging out with the same group of boys – doing heaven knows what. Refused to tell me anything. It was that Sam Uley boy for a while – he’s about your age. And now it’s Jacob.”

“Haven’t Embry and Jake been friends for a while?” Jezzie clarified.

Tiffany nodded. “Yes. Him and Jake and Quil have been close since grade school. But only lately has he really been bending to his every whim.

“And that made you think he was gay?”

“It made me think my son had a crush on his boyhood friend, yes.”

“Well,” Jezzie said looking into her lap. “I think I can safely say that Embry is not gay.”
“Yes, I guess so,” Tiffany eyed Jezzie. Part of her just enjoyed watching the girl squirm a little bit. She remembered being in Jezzie’s position on at least two occasions. She did like Jezzie. “You’re very good for my son,” Tiffany smiled in earnest.

“He’s good man,” Jezzie nodded.

“I’ve always thought so,” she took a sip of her coffee. “But it’s nice to hear that from others. It’s how I tried to raise him. I feel like I’m losing him, but I’m glad his grades have at least picked back up. And he’s still got his manners. Maybe something sank in.”

“You did a good job,” Jezzie agreed. Her heart went out to Tiffany Call. She had no idea what it must have been like to watch the happy boy you raised grow to an angry man over night and slowly but surely begin to disappear from your life all the while knowing he was lying. Tiffany Call was a saint. “And I think… I think Embry’s just afraid of disappointing you.”

Tiffany cocked her head to the side in a way Jezzie had seen Embry do at least million times. “Really?”

Jezzie nodded. “He hasn’t said so, just… female intuition, I guess? He loves you. He cares a lot. But I think he just wants to make sure that he never lets you down.”

Embry wasn’t two steps in the Black’s house before Seth looked up. “You smell funny.”

Jacob turned from the fridge. “You look funny.”

Paul spared a glance around his shoulder, knowing he couldn’t look from his plate for too long lest his imprint steal the other half of his sandwich. She was worse than her brother some days. He looked Embry up and down, though he supposed it wasn’t really necessary. His nose told him all he needed to know.

“Kid got laid.” He figured he might as well not sugarcoat it for the two obvious virgins in the room.

“No way,” Seth muttered.

“Well, I lost that bet,” Jacob shook his head and ducked back in the fridge.

“Its your own fault for betting against Leah about what’s going on in Jezzie’s head,” Rachel insisted.

“Bad call,” Paul agreed. “So, how was it, kid? You didn’t’ traumatize her, did you?”

Paul glanced to Embry as he sat on the Black’s couch, perpendicular to the breakfast counter. Embry just shook his head.

“It was Jezzie, right?” he checked.

“Yes!” Embry replied, his gaze snapping to Paul’s.

“Just checkin’,” he muttered around a mouth full of turkey, his hands in the air. “Now, you can either tell us about it, get it out of your system, and let us form our own visuals. Or you can keep it to yourself and slowly but surely share it with the entire Pack due to your assumed inability to stop thinking about it the next time you phase.”
“The wolf’s quiet now,” Embry said.

“Whaddy mean?” Paul asked in reply.

Jake turned from the kitchen and interrupted. “It’s not bothering you anymore? Not about her?” Embry shook his head.

“Wait,” Paul interceded. “What are we talking about here? Embry’s ongoing hormonal issues about Jezzie?”

“It wasn’t him, though, remember?” Jake paused and rolled his eyes. “Okay, it was him – but it was also the wolf – which was why he way giving everyone a headache.”

“Oh,” Paul glanced back to a still slightly dumbfounded Embry. “Well, you mated with her,” he said simply. “The wolf’s happy now… You know it was never going to hurt her, Emb. Your wolf fucking loves Jezzie. Can’t you feel that? Because that’s all that your wolf ever thinks about while phased, at least.”

“I could have hurt her without meaning to,” Embry finally spoke.

Paul only rolled his eyes. “You’re a wolf and a guy – not a moron. You really shouldn’t be giving yourself less credit than I do.”

“Hell, if it makes you feel better, than freaking mazel tov,” Jake raised his glass of water in Embry’s direction. Embry only flipped him off and continued staring.

Paul stood and crossed towards Jake’s couch – waving a hand in front of Embry’s face. He didn’t seem fazed.

“What’s wrong with him?” Seth asked.

Paul smirked but reached down and propelled Embry up by the shoulder and towards the breakfast counter. “You haven’t eaten anything since, have you man? Shit, you are new to this stuff. Sex burns a lot of calories, Seth. Jake, you got any eggs in that fridge. We got to get some protein in him.”

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_Sunday, February 28, 2007_

“Quil! Get up! Oh my god, your mother was right… If you don’t get out of that bed, I’m getting the hose! It’s one in the afternoon!”

“Hrmph,” Quil batted rather uselessly against Veronica’s equally useless attempts to wrest him from his bed. He wondered who would win the battle. “So tired… Worked all night.”

He heard Veronica issue a long suffering huff and eventually she just plopped down on the edge of the bed. His arm reached out from sheet and wrapped around her waist.

“Oh no you don’t,” she retorted and Quil felt her bat at him with her small fancy handbag. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep linen from wrinkling? This is why people just need to get married in overalls. But seriously, Quil, if you don’t get up, we’re gonna be late.”
Veronica smiled slightly as she watched Quil burrow further into his bed. She was beginning to see where Claire got her antics from. It was cute. But he wasn’t snoring, so she knew he hadn’t gone back to sleep.

“Tell you what,” she offered leaning over so her chin could rest on his shoulder. “You get up, get dressed, and drag a comb through this,” she ruffled his hair, “and I’ll make you one kick ass cup of coffee.”

“A pot.”

“A pot, then,” she acquiesced. “We can even bring it in the car if you want.”

Then, his face moved from its spot squashed into his pillow. “I like the way you think,” he mumbled.

“Well, I am an evil genius,” she smirked, pushing herself off his back. “All right. Dressed and presentable Quil in exchange for a pot of bitchin’ coffee. Le’s go.” And with that she issued a well-placed smack to his ass to assure that he wouldn’t go back to sleep, and headed for the kitchen and the coffee pot.

Embry let himself in since the door was unlocked. He couldn’t hear Al in the house and it sounded like Jezzie was upstairs. “Jezzie?” he called. “Al?”

“Dad’s outside. I’ll be down in one sec,” Jezzie called from upstairs. Embry took a seat on the bench in her entryway. He checked his watch and noted that they were cutting it close. Jezzie had never been the type to take very long getting ready, and he hoped she didn’t start now.

“Coming, coming, coming,” she called as he heard her begin to tromp down the stairs. He glanced up and watched her come down the last steps. Her sandals were threaded through her wrist and she was putting her last earring in. However, Embry just watched her – his mouth slightly agape – as she paused in her golden yellow sundress, the one with the big buttons down the front with a belt at her waist on the last step. The Dress.

She noticed him staring and glanced down at herself. “What?” she asked dubiously. “What’s wrong?”

Embry stood carefully and took the few steps to meet Jezzie. Still standing on the last step, they were matched for height. “Jezzie,” he began slowly as a hand reached out to hold her waist. “Do you remember the last time you wore this dress?”

“Oh I don’t know, Embry,” she replied offhand. “I didn’t really think about it.”

“Think about it,” he insisted.

She looked down at the dress hanging loosely off her frame, and after a moment she glanced back up at him with a smirk. His own half grin confirmed her suspicions and she rolled her eyes. “Embry, we’re going to have a serious problem if I can’t wear an outfit just because you got to take it off me.”

“This one’s kind of a big exception,” he mumbled, giving her a chaste peck. He didn’t have any qualms about any of the other clothes she wore when they’d slept together. But that golden dress was kind of burned into his mind. And for all its demure qualities, it didn’t help Embry think polite thoughts.
“So, I’m never gonna be able to wear this dress again?” she sighed.

“In polite company?” Embry grinned, his kisses trailing down her neck to her collarbone. “At least not for a few more weeks. Have some mercy on me?”

Jezzie scoffed, but Embry could tell she was also partially amused. He felt her hands move between them and he opened his eyes to see she had made fast work of the buttons. She slid the dress off her shoulders and Embry was only able to glance up in time to see her stick out her tongue before she dropped the piece of fabric over his head. He did catch a glimpse of a purple underwear set as she tromped back up the stairs, though.

“Isn’t your Dad home?” he shouted.

“He’s outside,” he heard her shout as she began rifling through her closet again. “Try not to look too guilty.”

Embry draped the tempting dress over the banister and resumed his seat on the bench. A whole outfit change was bound to take some time, but given that he caused it he figured he had no right to complain. He was surprised when Jezzie was downstairs not even five minutes later. This time in a form-hugging blue satin number.

Embry’s head lolled back. God. Maybe he shouldn’t have put up such a stink about the yellow one. Or maybe now she was just trying to torture him as payback.

“I am not!” she insisted. “This is the only other dress I have that fits the occasion, Embry! So it’s either this, the golden dress, or the drapes,” she pointed fiercely to the curtains. “And since my instincts say you don’t know how to rig a toga, it looks like this is your only other option.”

Embry grinned. It was a nice option. Jezzie was a curvy girl, not overly so, but most of the clothes she wore hid it well. The yellow dress had been loose – Jezzie called it a sundress – and it had been ‘pretty’. But now Jezzie had come back downstairs in a blue shiny dress that hugged every curve of her body. It pulled in at her waist, wrapped around her hips and her butt and formed perfectly to her chest. It was the definition of ‘fits like a glove’ and Embry was so totally screwed.

“Oh, he conceded, his hands wrapping comfortably around her waist. This fabric did feel really awesome and the color made her fair skin look better than the yellow. “I guess it’s just me then. You could probably wear an industrial trashbag and I’d think it’s hot.”

“Embry, I have the distinct feeling that you’re going to have a hard time behaving yourself today.” Embry could hear the smile in her voice as he let his mouth towards her ear, the smell of her hair even stronger with the proximity.

“Mm,” he hummed in response. “Especially with those shoes…”

“The dress hits below the knee. I’m too short to not wear heels. That’s your fault again you—” she was cut short with a breathy little gasp as Embry’s hands wandered down over that smooth fabric – almost like glass – to her ass. He’d surprised her. He’d found it was hard to surprise Jezzie and relished the rare moments it happened.

“We’re gonna be late,” she whispered, even as he felt her move closer, every curve of her body was easy to see and even easier to feel beneath the fabric as she pressed closer to him.
“How many weddings have you been to that have actually started on time?” he asked curiously as his tongue glanced out to meet the skin of her chest. This dress had a very different neckline than the previous.

“True,” she acceded, and he felt her fingers against his scalp. “But I really don’t want to go to a shapeshifter wedding and have them all smell how horny you made me a half hour before the ceremony. Not cool, Embry Call.”

“All’s fair in love and war,” he replied with a last squeeze to her rear. “Or something like that.”

She growled a little in her chest at his egging her on. She narrowed her eyes at him, stepped off the last step extremely close, and brushed her butt against his lap as she steeped by to the coat closet. Embry noticed that she kept her placid mask. Innocent my ass, he thought.

Jezzie slipped out onto the side dock of the small reception area. Everybody was mostly gathered on the main dock that overlooked the water for Sam and Emily’s reception – it was a very pretty view. Jezzie had seen Leah disappear rather quickly, but was more or less obligated to make some rounds as she continued to get intercepted on her way across the dance floor. Seth was by far the best dancer – which certainly shocked Jezzie – but Jake let her stand on his feet like she used to with her father when she was a little girl.

Embry was hesitant to let her go – he got very little time with her and he liked looking at her with a dress on. Jezzie looked fan-fucking-tastic in dresses. It was easier now that he was over the shock value. Every now and then she’d get dressed for something – sometimes it wasn’t even a special occasion – and he’d just be amazed. Embry had never really got a grasp on teenage girls, which is why he was always thankful he landed a twenty-something.

“I’ve danced with you and Quil through enough Earth, Wind and Fire to last me a while,” Jezzie whispered. “You can watch my butt as I walk away – let me tell you it looks fabulous in this dress with these shoes – but I really need to go do some girl time with Leah. I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

She’d finally escaped and slipped out to her Jeep to get Leah’s present. Jezzie even wrapped it. She felt it was only appropriate. She held onto the bag that contained the bottle as she quietly pushed the sliding glass door open. Leah glanced quickly to see who was joining her but made no other indication to move or talk. Her bare feet were propped on the deck’s railing and her shoes lay beside her rattan chair.

“I brought you a present,” Jezzie spoke as she sat on the only other chair only a few feet from Leah.

“You know it’s not my wedding,” Leah quirked a brow. “I think you might be confused.”

“No, I’m not confused,” Jezzie shook her head. “I bought them a blender, this gift is way better.”

She plunked the conspicuously shaped bottle on the small end table between them and watched as a sly grin moved up Leah’s face. Leah reached over and snatched it up, tearing the paper off in one quick motion before her face broke into a full toothy grin. “Ah, Johnnie Walker – the only man in my life. Black label? Damn, girl. You got the good shit.”

“Thanks,” Jezzie laughed, she bent down and pulled a glass from her bag as well.
“I’m feelin’ fancy,” Leah insisted as she twisted the cap off to take a quick sip.

“I figured you might,” Jezzie nodded as she reached into the bag and pulled out a can of Coke.


“To hell with men,” Jezzie rolled her eyes. Leah proffered her the bottle after pouring her glass. Jezzie shook her head. “My meds.”

“To hell with men, indeed,” Leah reached down and pulled a small box off the ground and tossed the pack of cigarettes into Jezzie's lap. Jezzie didn't smoke or drink much, but indulged Leah knowing that doing either alone was miserable. “We should just date each other, how do you think Embry would feel about letting me in your little kink fest?”

“I like you Leah,” Jezzie said as she clicked the lighter. “But I just don’t swing that way.”

“We can definitely pretend though,” she smirked evilly. “Wanna be in a semi-fake relationship with me?”

“Semi-fake?” Jezzie asked.

“Well, yeah, the only thing you’re missing is a penis. It’s not like I find you a completely appalling relationship prospect. Plus, it’ll drive all the guys totally fucking nuts.” Jezzie grinned. “All right then,” she nodded. “How about you just not date inside a pack of wolves?”

“Agreed,” Leah nodded, leaning back into her chair while nursing her glass of scotch. “Not such a good life choice.” She glanced to the small redhead leaning over her own lap, the smoke beginning to swirl in ribbons around her head. Jezzie only nodded her head in a measured sort of way. “So who told you I like scotch?”

“Well, I figured it was either that or moonshine,” Jezzie glanced back to Leah with a grin. “But I double checked and Jake confirmed.”

“Bless that boy,” Leah insisted. “You know I bought him his weight in Stoli when Bella got married.”

“You bought a seventeen year old boy vodka?” Jezzie laughed. She tried to imagine Jacob on a break up binge.

Leah nodded in a self-satisfied way. “100 proof. It’s as close to drunk as I’ve ever seen a wolf get. He brought me some tequila this morning – that’s my morning drink – I think we’re falling into an unhealthy pattern,” Leah informed her.

Jezzie laughed.

Leah emptied her glass and refilled it. “He’s a good kid, he didn’t deserve what happened to him.”

“Neither did you, Leah,” Jezzie said after an inhale from her cancer stick. “No one deserves to have their heart played around with or get dropped like a hot potato.”

Leah shrugged. “I was too aggressive for Sam anyways. Emily’s way more toned down. If our relationship survived through my phase, we probably would’ve ended up killing each other.”
“You sure about that?” Jezzie glanced back. “Don’t sell yourself short, Leah. Sometimes life just takes a shit on you.”

Leah smirked a little. “You sound like me.

“It’s true,” Jezzie offered a one-shouldered shrug as she flicked the tip of her cigarette. “People change.”

“I hate when they do that,” Leah growled polishing off her second glass in a single gulp. “Sam did that. He wouldn’t talk to me for fucking weeks. Like if he just broke up with me and made a clean deal about it? Yeah, I would have been pissed but I think it would’ve been better. I felt like he was leading me on – and just to have him dump me in the end anyways? What the hell was that worth?”

Jezzie could only shrug.

“I knew he was stringing me along. I just cut to the chase, I told him to do it,” Leah nodded. "He wasn’t my Sam anymore. Not after Emily. I didn’t know about how he was going after her until a while after the imprint. I will give Emily a sand’s grain worth of credit in the whole Sahara by saying that she did try to ward him off at first, but you can see how solid she was on that stance.” Leah waved her hand towards the sounds of celebration happening behind them. “Fuckin’ bitch.”

“After the imprint,” Leah continued looking down in her glass. “He changed. The wolf changed him and I could sense that, but he was still my Sam at first. But once Emily came,” she shook her head. “He’s a different man now. I love Sam – I love my Sam. And he is still in there somewhere. I don’t know if I’ll ever get to see him again – maybe after he stops phasing, maybe if he outlives Emily – I don’t know. But the Sam out there isn’t my Sam. My Sam was smart, he was going to college, he was funny, he spent time with my little brother, he loved blonde jokes, and the Batman movies. Only the ones directed by Burton, though. He smiled and laughed all the time. He was a good man.”

Mostly, Leah missed having someone to talk to, someone to tell her ideas to or to bounce questions off. It was strange when, for so many years she had always had her friend to talk to about anything, he suddenly disappeared. That would’ve been a nice thing to have that day she exploded into a giant wolf and gave her Dad a heart attack. No one had known what to do with her. The whole Pack had been floored. Sam most of all. Sam especially.

“Smiling and laughing? Not the Sam I know,” Jezzie commented quietly.

Leah nodded without looking up. “Sad, huh?” Jezzie nodded. “The Sam in there is a total stranger to me,” Leah continued harshly. “So much so that sometimes it scares me because I feel like a stranger knows all about me and I don’t know anything about that stranger. I don’t like the Sam in there. I don’t like him one fucking bit.”

“That’s a very particular and very critical difference,” Jezzie noted as her cigarette burnt almost to its finish.

“Yes it is,” Leah agreed. “And because next to no one knows that two different Sam Uleys have lived and walked this earth in the same body, everyone thinks I’m the crazy one.”

“Bitches…” Jezzie muttered.

“Fuckin’ right.”
“Are you drunk?”

“I wish.”
Late winter, early spring 2007…

The ghostly woman padded down the stone corridor silently. She relished the freedom to move about. For so long her and her sister had been trapped in that godforsaken tower. For so long her mate in lived in terror of her own demise. As if she couldn't protect herself. But now he was gone… So was her sister's mate. Her sister contented herself with quiet freedom. Enjoying the gardens within the castle walls, occasionally stepping outside in the night to see how the world around them had changed.

That sort of freedom did not appeal to Sulpicia. Sulpicia was bound and determined to make sure that no one ever held her prisoner again. Regardless of their professed love for her and concern for her safety. She was an old vampire, one of the most dangerous. When her husband perished at the hands of a filthy mutt in that cesspool of a peninsula she swore she would make their world anew for herself.

She wouldn't avenge her husband's death. No. He was foolish for allowing his fondness for the head of the Olympic Coven blind him to their growing power. Aro had been foolish. How many times had she instructed him – the people must love and fear you. They must love you enough to never desire to waver in their loyalty, and also to fear your wrath should they ever become too presumptuous. For all Aro's ability to see, he was quite hard of hearing.

Her small size belied her strength as she pushed the heavy wooden door open. "Marcus!" she shouted to the figure seated in the room. He had been in the same place since she last time she came to speak with him. Sulpicia had no idea what Aro saw in him. Maybe it would have been best if her husband hadn't killed his brother's mate all those centuries ago. Hard of hearing and not necessarily good with foresight. It amazed Sulpicia that her husband maintained power as long as he did.

Marcus didn't flinch, however his eyes directed towards her indicating he was listening and attentive. "Have you word from the others?"

The aged man moved slightly, adjusting himself like it took much effort and moving like he was made of block-stone. "Maria is agreeable – though admittedly hard to keep track of."

"Well, given that we've lost Chelsea we will actually have to go through pains to assure her loyalty. We cannot bind her to us. I am sending Corin to work with her. Alistair has agreed to join us, smart man. He'll track Maria down and Corin's gift will allow Maria to feel content with us. As such, I am charging you with keeping track of both of them. Now that Demetri has defected back to his home with the Egyptians we must keep careful track of our reserves. Are you listening to me!"

With unbridled fury, Sulpicia reached out and allowed her hand to smack across Marcus' face. "I can hear you quite clearly, Sulpicia," Marcus confirmed, still unfazed.

She put one hand on each of the arms of his chair and leaned in close, speaking quietly. "Marcus, this moment in time is of critical importance. The Volturi is fraying at the seams while the alliance between all the known wolves, shapeshifters, and American Covens of the world is growing every day. Unsettling, to say the least. We need to network."

"Sulpicia," Marcus sighed in a knowing sort of way. "Do you really expect Carlisle to mount a full scale assault upon Volterra? He's never expressed any interest in politics."
"No," she barked. "However, I do expect them to either extricate themselves from discourse or join the alliance forming under the Romanians, you ignorant fool! If you don't think they haven't been waiting for the Volturi to make one false step all these past centuries then you are deluded. Allies in the west are the least we can aim for."

"You expect a Romanian attack then?" Marcus asked drolly.

"Absolutely," Sulpicia pushed her self from Marcus' heavy chair, trying to control her anger. She paced about the room slowly. "They've already accrued loyalty in the western nomads and you're deluded if you believe the Egyptians will side with us over them. That – dear friend – is why we must subdue the unaligned powers. Decimate these 'vegetarian' covens and the wolves after we solidify our stance in the Americas with Maria and that is one less ally for the Romanians. This must be a guerilla effort before we attempt to storm the stronghold. The American Covens are only the first step."

"Alistair has joined us because he fears you so. Both Makenna and Charles have expressed their allegiance in light of Renata's death – to lose as family member is a great tragedy."

Sulpicia clenched her hands behind her back and observed the scene outside overlooking the gardens. "What about the rogue wolf? He attacked the Pack and the Coven in the Peninsula? Even when the other werewolves sided with them. Do we know where his loyalties lie?"

"I would imagine with himself. Given the reports from others, Azrael seems quite unhinged."

Sulpicia grinned in a satisfied way. "Excellent," she nodded before turning towards the open door. "Alistair! Come here! I have a different mission for you, my pet."

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**Friday, February 16, 2007**

"Play fair, Little Red," Paul glanced down to Jezzie with a smirk.

Jezzie extended her hand for a shake and replied. "Against a pack of wolves? You don't know me very well, do you? Bring it."

Jezzie had missed the last pack and reservation-wide game of capture the flag. This time, though, they planned it on a day when she was guaranteed to be able to join in. Pain free.

"Keep an eye on your girl, Emb, she's a sneaky little shit," Jezzie heard Paul say as she released his hand and retreated back from the dividing line and returned to her team. It was just her luck that she drew the short straw and got to captain a team – not the easiest duty in the world – comprised of Jake, Anna, Quil, Collin, and Addie. Paul was her immediate adversary, captaining Leah, Embry, Rachel, Seth, and Brady.

"Damn right she is," Embry grinned, glancing across the grass towards his redheaded girlfriend. He sounded more proud of Jezzie, than he did agreeing with Paul. The odd warm streak had granted them a week of 50F days in mid February. The ground was softening, and the wolves were slightly less peculiar in their various degrees of shirtlessness. All still wore shorts. Jezzie even donned a tank top when she'd realized how mild it was outside. Her half sleeve tattoo was easily visible and added maybe just a little bit of credibility to her tough girl act.

"One," Jezzie called out, starting the count off.

"Two," Paul replied.
"Three!" they shouted together. The wolves, Jezzie learned, played dirty. That left her and Addie – the two humans on her team – almost no incentive to play fair. As soon as the two shouted three, Jezzie turned and made a beeline for the trees. The wolves were remarkably good in the woods in wolfskin. However, this was a bipedal hominid-only game (regardless of the fact that Brady had figured out how to get around on two hind legs as a canine), and the wolves were remarkably loud in the woods as humans when they were in a rush.

Addie was right behind her, the two having discussed their tactics with the rest of the team beforehand. They kept out of the open land, knowing any of the wolves – and even Rachel – could easily catch them at a flat run. Jezzie did distance, not speed. She and Addie kept far enough into the trees that the wolves wouldn't be able to readily see them and took the long, roundabout way into the opposing team's half of the reservation. Jake, Anna, Quil, and Collin would go for the full-frontal attack and begin rounding up trespassers, while Jezzie and Addie snuck around on flag detail.

"Where do you think they stashed it?" Jezzie asked Addie as they made their way to the heart of enemy territory, soundlessly through the trees. "By Sam's you think? He lives at the far end of the reservation."

"Hm," Addie hummed. "I don't think so. Too predictable. How about we try closer to the line. The Clearwaters and the Blacks live really close to each other – and the Atearas are only just a few houses down. Three birds, one stone?"

"I like the way you think."

The two made it to the woods bordering on Jake and Rachel's house. And could spot no sign of the bright red bandana that had been christened a flag. The two girls were forced, then, to extricate themselves from the woods as both the Clearwater and Ateara houses were across the street and without the benefit of treecover.

"You take the Clearwater place, I'll get the Atearas," Addie murmured. Jezzie nodded and the two peered carefully around the garage in the Black's yard before making a dash across the street. Jezzie carefully turned over every rock and boot and rusted car part in the entire yard. She eventually came to the conclusion that it wasn't there. More evidence was given to her conclusion when Joy Ateara glanced out the window to seeing the girl poking carefully around her yard. The small smile and shake of a head was all Jezzie needed.

She cut through the one back yard that separated the Clearwaters and the Atearas and checked her surroundings before stepping out of the small patch of trees that separated the Atearas from their neighbors. Jezzie immediately saw Addie approaching the side of an old rusted car, slowly being consumed by the earth, on the other side of the Ateara's lawn. She immediately saw the red bandana on the opposite side of the car. Jezzie had the advantage of seeing the car head on and noting that it was tied to the driver's side mirror, while Addie had yet to make it to that side of the car yet.

Without thinking, Jezzie stepped out into the yard and before she could open her mouth and even point – she felt arms close around her middle. She shrieked and felt herself pulled against a warm, hard chest. "Come out, come out wherever you are," she heard Paul's self-satisfied baritone behind her.

"Paul, you butthead!" she cried out. Addie turned, her eyes wide. Jezzie kicked and flailed like a fish out of water. Technically, if she'd been tagged that meant she was a jailbird, now. But if she could escape and make a break for it? Well, all's well that ends well. None of them were fond of the rules. Jezzie took the moment and lunged, pointing. "The driver's side, Addie! Run!" Addie bolted to the other side of the car, tore the bandana from its spot and was gone from the yard in a flash.
"Godammit, Little Red," Paul growled, tossing her unceremoniously over his shoulder. There quickly followed the sound of an airhorn. The match was over. They kept an airhorn at the line that separated the two teams' territory, and when one person made it across the line with the proper flag, they sounded the horn to recall everyone back from all over the reservation. There were never any false alarms. That – for some reason – was one rule they never really considered breaking. That, and don't hurt the humans – though Rachel was known to play wounded just to trick people.

"Yay!" Jezzie squealed releasing a breath of excitement. "We win!"

"You don't know that," Paul replied setting off at a walk for the dividing line.

"Paul, after Addie got out of the Ateara's backyard it's maybe a hundred yards to the line."

"And anyone could've nabbed her by then," Paul supplied. "You don't know if it was one of the others coming across after finding your flag, now do you?"

"You're a bit too optimistic for my liking, Paul."

"You're a bit too sneaky for my liking, Jezzie."

She grinned and continued to look around. Being slung over a shoulder meant she could only see behind Paul. She thought they must look awful funny. Jezzie wasn't quite a pixie of a girl at five and a half feet. Though in comparison to any of the wolves, maybe she was a shrimp.

"You know you can put me down, the match is over," she added as they hit the street.

"Yeah, but you might've cost my team this match. I'm taking this small consolation and checking out your ass and legs until we get back to the line."

"That's not fair!" Jezzie whined in reply. She pouted a bit as he continued to walk, she could tell they were getting close. Then, she had an idea and raised her arms to about Paul's waist level. She paused for a moment before sending in tickling fingers.

Paul's steady gait derailed as he jolted at the sensation of being tickled. "What the--" he swung around, responding automatically to Jezzie's finger torture, but he turned too fast and Jezzie went sliding off his shoulder with a shriek. Paul managed to keep ahold of her legs just above her knees where he'd been balancing her previously. But Jezzie's head crashed unceremoniously into another overheated wolf before she felt a pair of arms scramble to keep her head from making contact with the pavement. Her arms flailed helplessly for anything to latch onto, before her world finally stopped spinning and she hung suspended between the two boys at the knees and shoulders.

"I don't even want to know," Embry offered looking down at Jezzie and then across to Paul.

Jezzie extricated herself from Embry and Paul's. "Who won? Who won?" she demanded through a fit of giggles, realizing it was the first time she'd genuinely laughed in weeks. Her question was answered when she saw Addie doing the mother of all touch down dances in the middle of the street, while Rachel and Seth just shook their heads while watching on.

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Monday, February 19, 2007

"Okay, Paul? Part of the imprinting contract was that you are my valentine forever. And I'm the girl and the imprint. I get to decide what kind of debaucherous fun we're going to have!"

Paul just sighed and rolled back over. Rachel had come marching – no blazing – into his room at the
godawful hour of 9AM after he'd just get off patrol at seven, and plopped herself down on the edge of his bed. It hadn't taken very long after imprinting for Paul to realize that Rachel had zero qualms about personal space. He really needed to start locking the doors when his Dad went to work. Then again, Rachel would probably just climb through his window, down his chimney, or blow off a side of his house.

"Rachel…" he mumbled into his pillow. "You're gay and engaged. Isn't my being your valentine a conflict of interests? Number two: I just got off patrol two hours ago, please have mercy. We'll go eat all the prime rib you want in the PM hours. Please? I'm begging you."

"Fiiiine," she sighed in a way that suggested she was severely put out. She only stretched to crack her back, and laid down next to Paul. She bunched up and burrowed against his shoulder.

"Where's Addie?" he asked without opening his eyes. "I don't need to be stealing you from legitimate valentines."

"Paul," Rachel mumbled into the fabric of his t-shirt, "We're five days late; Addie and I did valentines on Valentines Day. But I hadn't had imprint time in, like, weeks because you work and patrol. So I decided to be needy today."

Paul grinned at Rachel's comment. She was a pretty low-maintenance individual. He imagined she did probably wake up and decide to be needy. It's the only way it would've happened. "After a nap, we'll go get some steak?"

"After a nap," Rachel decided. Paul rolled over slightly, wrapped an arm around Rachel's waist, and decided he had the best imprint ever.

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**Wednesday, February 28, 2007**

Jezzie pulled up to the edge of the pier, parked her Jeep, and fed the parking meter. She then proceeded down the pier, taking in the familiar smell of salt water and fish, and continued looking for the *Eliza Finch* – the boat her Dad was on. He'd been back in Seattle for about a month, and had spent a few spare hours at home but could never stay. He needed to finish all the repairs to all the damage a few months at sea were prone to wreak upon a boat. But today, he was finally coming home for the season, and Jezzie agreed to come and get him.

It was hard to spot the boat, since the Dungeness crab season was finishing and some other season that Jezzie didn't know was starting up, the pier was full and every available pit of dock was mooring a vessel. She finally spotted the boat – white and red – at the edge of the dock. She could see a few members of the crew putting the deck back together. They must've just offloaded.

"Jezzie Sullivan? That you?" She glanced up towards the front of the boat – the bow – and spotted who she thought she remembered was the crew's greenhorn with a coil of rope over his shoulder.

"Ethan?" she asked stepping closer to the edge of the dock. He was a few years older than her, but still quite young. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," he extended a hand, and Jezzie bridged the gap between dock and boat with relative ease. "I survived."

"I see that," she nodded. "No one threw you overboard or turned you into crab bait?"

"Nah, not yet. Though I think I've cut enough crab bait to last me a lifetime."
Jezzie leaned forward and gave his orange rain suit a careful sniff, before crinkling her nose. He had her a friendly shove, telling her not to smell him because he hadn't had a proper shower in weeks. She was about to ask where her Dad was when loud metallic bangs preceded his exit from the ship's engine room.

Ethan just waved one arm in the man's direction as if to say, **well, there you go.** Jezzie gave the boy a smile and hopped lower onto the deck.

"Gosh darn it… everywhere a wire, a rope or a cable, whippersnappers can't keep anything in order no more. Get a man killed…" he fumbled out of the porthole with his toolbelt in hand.

"That's why we keep you old farts below deck," Ethan called out, sitting on the deck of the wheelhouse. "Don't need you falling overboard."

"Boy, you made it this far on your first trip, don't make me toss you into the sound so close to home." Al was the picture of sternness for all of ten seconds before his bearded face split into a grin. "You done good, kid. 'spect to see you next season?" He extended his hand towards the boy seated above him.

"If no crazy old men throw me into the sound between now and then," Ethan replied, reaching down to shake Al's hand.

Al smiled, as he turned to his daughter. "Ah, Miss Jezebel! Right on time! How are you my girl?" she stepped forward and hugged her Dad – fish and salt and grease and all – with a smile bigger than she'd had in weeks.

"Oh, Dad. I'm just so glad you're home…"

Jezzie and Al had lots of catching up to do on their four hour ride home. Jezzie knew her father could sense almost immediately that she was a little… off. She knew she wouldn't be able to hide her head from him forever.

They'd run the gamut of how she was and all her friends. Veronica – and by extension Quil – Kyle and all her other Peninsula friends. She felt horrible about not having much to report on Kyle, Ricky, Kayla, and even Veronica. She'd been so distracted since school started… she hadn't been paying attention too much. Her Dad noticed, but she chalked it up to last semester stress. She didn't like lying to her Dad, even if she could do it well – like she'd told Jared all those months ago the day Anna phased. She was going to have to fix that. The lying and the not knowing anything about her friends.

"Jared died," she finally blurted out.

Al was quiet for a moment. She wasn't sure if he was mulling over what she'd just said, or trying to place the name of a boy he'd probably only heard a dozen times. "The young chap seeing that girl, Kim?" he asked. So he had remembered.

"Yeah," Jezzie nodded. "It was a wild animal attack," she added, using the excuse decided on by all those that didn't really know what happened to Jared Cameron.

"That's awful," Al replied. "That truly is. Boy was too young for that. Were you the one to get that call, Miss Jezebel?" He inquired calmly.

She nodded jerkily. "Yeah, well… I was close by. When he was found. Carlisle… Dr. Cullen, he was there too. He helped but, it was no use."
"That's too bad," Al said in a measured tone. "His family must be beside themselves."

Jezzie nodded. "Kim's pregnant too." There was so much she couldn't tell her Dad, but she was so compelled to word vomit out all she was allowed to say. She was so tired of having to deal in carefully measured half-truths with so many people. Just because she was good at lying didn't mean she liked doing it.

Al let out a small huff of indignation. "She's awfully young for that, now isn't she?"

"Eighteen," Jezzie nodded.

"Kids these days," Al mumbled. "Y'all are too young for such things. Should be having some fun and enjoying your youth while it chooses to stick with you." He was quiet for a moment. "She going to be all right? Healthy? Has family around?"

Jezzie couldn't help the small, sad smile. Only her dad would berate the carelessness of her generation and then dig deeper into personal well-beings inside the same breath.

"Yeah, Dad," Jezzie replied. "She'll be okay."

She didn't mention anything about Nessie. Or Bella and Edward who – Jezzie had learned – hadn't even been seen in Forks since Bella gave birth to Renesmee. She had no idea what they possibly could have told Charlie. Maybe he finally knew the truth? Maybe that was part of the reason the Cullens agree to leave Nessie in La Push… Jezzie didn't know, so she didn't bring it up. She had no way to explain all that.

"She'll be fine."

Saturday, March 3, 2007

Jezzie spent the rest of the weekend at home with her Dad, catching up and doing fun and silly things for old times' sake. Eventually, she'd had to tell Embry that he couldn't have carte blanche of her bed anymore.

"Aw, Jez… really?"

"Really," she replied. He was on his way out, having just had dinner with Al and Jezzie – and since Al had fallen asleep in his recliner Jezzie thought it was as good a time as any to deliver the bad news. It was quiet on the front steps, but the air was beginning to turn mild as the season's changed.

She stood on the last step, and it put her on the same height as Embry – maybe a little taller – when he stood on the ground. "That is soooo lame," he grumbled as she pulled her into a hug.

"Yeah, yeah, wolfboy. You'll survive," she grinned as he pouted.

"You don't know that," Embry replied glancing up at her. "Blue balls is a totally legitimate medical condition."

Jezzie stifled a laugh against his shoulder. "Stop it, my Dad is right inside."

"And completely dead to the world," Embry snickered in reply.

She leaned in and gave him a small, yet lingering, kiss. "Sorry," she told him, as she anchored her arms around his waist. "I guess I'll have to make it up to you."
"No complaints here," Embry agreed.

She pulled back and ran her teeth over her bottom lip. "I'll think of something good. But in the meantime, it'll do wonders for your mother to see you in your own bed."

"Ever the responsible one," Embry sighed.

"I know," Jezzie wrinkled her nose. "It's a sickness. I'll see you sometime next week. I've got midterms and then I'm spending the weekend with Veronica."

"Great," Embry rolled his eyes. "That leaves me with Quil."

"Some best friend you are. I'm sure you two can find a way to entertain yourselves. Blow something up, wreak some havoc. Finally see if you can out-eat Brady and Collin. Try to be a human teenager for a few hours."

"Man time, it is," Embry nodded. He gave Jezzie one last kiss, enjoying the warmth and softness of her lips, before disappearing into the woods.

Thursday, March 8, 2007

"I got it," Leah mumbled sitting bolt upright from her state of sleep only moments ago. She moved reflexively off the couch and proceeded to step square in the middle of Jacob's stomach. He made a noise like she'd just sucker punched him. "Oh! Sorry… what the hell are you doing there, you idiot? Are you okay? Oh, for the love of all things holy…"

She stepped over Jacob's half asleep form – they'd both fallen asleep in his living room – and proceeded towards the bedroom where Nessie could be heard starting to fuss. The two wolves had supersonic hearing and had become very well attuned to Nessie's distress calls recently. She was good – if occasionally pensive – during the day. However, her nights were still very, very rough. Both Jake and Leah had taken to sitting up and waiting in the living room until the small girl fell asleep peacefully. It was a difficult task, given that Nessie – as half vampire – required about half as much sleep as the normal person.

Jacob sat up, rubbing his bruised abdomen, and leaned against the couch. Through the fog of sleep he could hear Leah carefully budge the door to his sister's old room – now Nessie's room – open.

"Leeee-ah," the small girl cried. Jacob had been working on splitting Nessie duty with Leah. It was hard, but Leah had agreed to it the day they went to go get the small girl. And when Leah committed to something, she put her all into it. Jake wasn't entirely sure what made Leah so adamant about Nessie. He was realizing though, that Leah's maternal instincts couldn't sit idly by while someone as helpless as Nessie was completely screwed over by life. Jake was also sure that Leah had phrased it far more eloquently than he could've.

At any rate, he'd been splitting duty with Leah now. And it was hard. Because the imprinted instinct was to mow down any and all obstacles in his path to help his imprint when she cried like that. However, as days passed Jacob realized that Leah soothed Nessie just as efficiently as he did. And the wolf could hardly be upset by any presence that had such a calming effect on such a sorrowful little girl. The incessant need to spring up, to jump into action, that uncontrollable urge, had ebbed as he split the responsibility of ushering Nessie through her parent's death with Leah Clearwater. She wasn't a threat to his imprint, Leah helped calm his wolf's frenzied attention to the small girl.

"I'm here, sweetheart," Leah murmured. From the living room Jake could hear the creak of
bedsprings as Leah sat down with Nessie. He couldn't quite make out what the girl was saying. It was mostly incoherent tears. "It's okay, Ness. It's all right. I'm right here."

And then she started to sing.

_I have a little present here for you_
_Inside this tiny bottle so very small and blue_
_Please do not uncork it, simply put it on away_
_For inside, there lies a summer's day_
_Put it on away_

As long as he would live, Jacob would never tell anyone what he heard. But hear it he did. The only one that Leah would ever sing for, Jacob learned, was Renesmee. Jacob wondered if Leah knew he was awake, knew he could hear her. It would be a long time before he'd ever mention it. Jake did coincidentally learn that Leah used to sing for a very young little brother of hers, but Seth only barely remembered.

_Now I'd be pleased if you didn't ask_
_Why I gave this gift to you_
_I don't know myself; did it on a whim_
_As the thought came running through_

And it sounded just like Leah, like singing was just such a natural extension of her voice, as easy as talking, or yelling. He would've been able to pick it out anywhere, even having never heard it before. Nessie began to calm quicker tonight, as she had begun to do. Slowly, the girl had started waking from night terrors instead of nightmares. It turned out her eidetic memory was very short term. She was intelligent, but her memory didn't stretch back to her birth. She was starting to forget the particular events surrounding her parents' death, and now only the emotion clung to her consciousness. Both Jake and Leah were hoping that would fade in coming weeks as well.

_I just wanna make you happy_
_In a summertime sort of way_
_And I thought you might like your own summer's day_
_Put it on away_

And just like that, the fussing stopped. Nessie was quiet and Leah was still as both she and Jake – from two separate parts of the house – listened to her breathing and her heart rate slow and even. She was asleep. Jacob could hear Leah lay the small girl back into the bed, the door clicked closed, and she padded across the kitchen and back to the living room. She plopped down on the ground next to Jake and she leaned and exhausted head against his shoulder.

"I think we caught it before she woke your Dad this time," she mumbled around a yawn.

"Mm," Jake mumbled in confirmation. "Here's to small victories."

_Sunday, March 11, 2007_

Because Jezzie hadn't spent any proper time with Veronica since before the battle, the two resolved to have a girls' weekend after midterms and depleted parts of their souls. Embry and Quil cringed in mutual expressions of horror and told them to go, just go.

The two ventured to Port Angeles, where Jezzie decided that her hair was nine different kinds of crazy since she hadn't had it cut since she'd moved to Washington, and Veronica had her roots
tended to. The two enjoyed an immense amount of window shopping, some legitimate shopping, and a matinee viewing of the latest zombie movie, before buying the greasiest pizza they could find in the whole city.

"So have things been with you and Quil – or just you in general? I feel awful. Ever since New Year's I've been so…"

"Distracted?" Veronica offered with a smile. "Last semester insanity, right? Don't you have to finish your senior project, too?"

"Ugh," Jezzie sighed. "The role of anti-myelin oligodendrocyte glycoprotein antibodies in demyelination as biological marker for Multiple Sclerosis' is eroding the foundation of my soul." Never again would Jezzie choose to research her own disease.

"Okay, we won't talk about school, then."

"You've been pretty busy lately, too," Jezzie noted.

"Yeah," Veronica smiled. "I don't know… just the past couple of months, I guess."

"Uh huh," Jezzie smiled with a leading nod. "Pretty busy with a certain La Push boy. Oh my goodness, you're blushing like a preteen! Dish!"

"I really like him," Veronica said, dropping her slice of pizza on her plate and leaning back in the booth.

"Really?" Jezzie hissed in excitement.

"Really, really," Veronica nodded. "I'm such a commitment-phobe, but being with him is so easy. It doesn't give me anxiety like any other relationship has. It just feels so normal and natural. Plus, he doesn't take issue with my being into sports."

"Guys have given you crap about that before?" Jezzie asked as Veronica picked up her pizza again. She nodded. "Like, I don't know… I play a few sports, so I have muscle strength and know my way around a few courts, and like all of a sudden all their masculinity is eliminated."

"Oh, god," Jezzie recoiled.

"Yep. I take it you've known the type?" Jezzie nodded. "Quil's a blast, though. I have a lot of fun with him. And his sister's great. I think she's got me convinced to join your rec rugby league for this spring's season."

"Do it!" Jezzie cheered. "She conned me into it before I even knew her. Anna Ateara is very persuasive."

And that was how half the local rugby team ended up with half a bench full of women that – Rachel, Addie, Leah, Jezzie, Anna, and now Veronica – that looked like a twisted game of six degrees of separation.

Friday, March 16, 2007

"So," Jezzie began, "before we're amongst all the ignorant humans, would someone please explain to me how two shapeshifters are able to play this game with humans and not kill anyone."
"With the control of a god!" Leah shouted from the driver seat. She was driving the La Push contingent plus Jezzie to their first practice of the new spring season.

Anna only laughed. "It takes a lot of practice, and it definitely knocks your game because you're more worried about hurting people and focus less on the game. But it's a nice challenge. Leah's been showing me how to not maim people."

"Well, just let us peons live another day, wouldja?" Addie requested.

"So we get Quil's girl, now too? I've watched those two play basketball together and she owns his ass. I'm pretty sure he's not even giving it to her; she's legitimately winning."

"Oh, Veronica definitely is," Anna confirmed.

"Isn't your brother pretty good?" Rachel asked. Anna nodded. "I think I like this girl already."

"It's so good to be back!" Anna announced as she kicked the locker room door open. Leah, Rachel, Jezzie, Veronica, and Addie followed with strange looks. They were all excited to get on the pitch, so no one spent very long getting ready. Though, Anna did have enough time to bop around to a Shakira song like some kind of deranged Amazon.

Jezzie stayed in her usual spot, as a scrum-half. Leah was clear behind across the field, playing full-back for the other side; Anna across from her back in her traditional post as winger. Addie and Rachel were the teams newest prop forwards, since Anna and Leah had mysteriously 'injured' themselves and couldn't take the brunt of bashing their way through tackles. Without killing anyone. Though they kept mum on that last part. Veronica – as a far faster runner than the rest – was given the position of center.

It was just a practice, so their team was facing off against itself – which was always an interesting psychological endeavor, when some teammate told you your patterns or your weaknesses and all you could do was say Really? I do that?

Leah bent down to peel Jezzie and Addie out of the mud after a particularly fun tackle pile, when Addie propped herself up and looked upwards towards the stands. "What the heck are they doing here?"

Jezzie and Leah followed her gaze. Jezzie's mouth dropped, and Leah cackled in amusement. "Oh, that's fucking hilarious."

Jezzie did a quick count. Six heads. "They're all here," she hissed. "Except for whoever's on patrol."

"Well," Anna joined and stuck her head between Leah and Jezzie's, "they have been talking about wanting to know what kind of shit we've been up to for the past several months. Maybe curiosity got the best of them."

"Should we give them a good show?" Rachel asked leaning on Leah's shoulder and offering a fingered wave to the bleachers. "Lord knows they think we just get together every weekend for a sewing circle and some gossip or some shit."

"I've seen their heads," Leah added. "They have no idea what rugby is."

"No, idea, huh?" Jezzie replied.

"Jacob, Ness, Quil, Paul, Brady, and Seth," Anna noted. "That's all of them. Embry and Collin are
"Well, let's give them something to watch," Addie insisted before issuing a round of muddy ass slapping. "Quit ogling and get playing, ladies!"

They largely forgot about their audience soon thereafter, and were absorbed in the feeling of being on the pitch after a long winter break. Until other members of the team started to notice.

"Who the hell are those chumps?" Mary asked.

"Some punks we roll with," Leah offered a one-shoulder shrug.

"No lie?" Amy asked. "What are they doing here?"

"They probably didn't believe us when we told them we played football without pads or helmets every weekend," Veronica noted.

"Chumps."

Leah and Anna cackled like banshees, knowing damn well that they could all hear what was being said on the pitch even at this distance.

The practice ended forty-five minutes later with a particularly successful new play that earned them an easy try. Veronica and a Mary congratulated each other with a mutual hip check as part of their victory dance and their coach blew the whistle.

The six women marched out of the locker room a half hour later to find a few miscreant Quileutes hanging around the parking lot. The spectating boys just looked at the six girls, covered in bruises and mud and some dried blood. A few of them looked horrified, and the still a few others looked in awe. Brady and Seth had gone missing and Collin and Embry jogged around a bank of cars.

"What'd we miss?" Collin asked.

"All the good stuff," Jake assured him.

"Damn…"

"So are y'all convinced we're doing more than jazzercise every weekend, now?" Anna asked.

"Maybe more dried blood will convince them," Addie teased.

"I think we're convinced," Paul disagreed. "No crossing you chicks."

"That's right!" Rachel reaffirmed with a punch to Paul's bicep, before leading the way back to the car.

"Ow," Paul rolled his shoulder. "That kinda hurt."

"Dude," Quil whispered. "Don't let on, geez…"

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**Monday, March 26, 2007**

"This dress thing is too long for me. What do I do?"

"Sew it?"
"I don't know how to sew!" Jezzie shouted. "I can barely work a zipper. Don't you dare make some asinine sexual comment, Embry," she warned in the receiver. "Because if I trip walking to get my diploma I'm probably going to cry."

"Please don't."

"What am I gonna do?" she wailed. "I feel ridiculous in this thing!"

"Hold on a sec…" there was a pause wherein Jezzie pouted and tried to yank up her gown in a classy way and totally failed. "Jez? My mom says bring it on down. She'll hem it for you."

Jezzie grinned wide and hung up the phone.

"So you know how to cook but you don't know how to sew?" Embry asked as they sat at the kitchen counter and waited for Tiffany Call to bring Jezzie's graduation gown back out of her room from its latest trip to the sewing machine.

Jezzie nodded in confirmation. "There's lots of silly gaps in my female knowledge. My mom taught me how to cook – but we never got around to baking. I learned how to sort laundry – but not to sew. Lots of stuff like that."

"So you don't have a mom?" Embry didn't know quite how to phrase it. He thought that was the least offensive way to do so. He'd never seen or heard of Jezzie's mom and she never brought it up. He didn't want to push it in case it was a touchy topic. But that didn't mean he wasn't curious.

She shook her head. "Nope," she offered quietly. "She died when I was a freshman in high school. I kinda got cut down in my prime for the transfer of mostly girl-based knowledge. It's been just me and my Dad for a long time."

And it started to make sense to Embry why Jezzie liked his Mom and Joy Ateara so much…

Tiffany came bustling out a moment later. "All right, dear. Try this now. We don't want to make it too short or it'll cut you at an unattractive place – but of course we don't want you to trip either."

Jezzie slipped the gown over her head and stood on the kitchen chair Tiffany had set in the middle of the room. She walked a quick circuit around Jezzie and tugged and folded in a few places.

"You kids just grow up like weeds, huh? Graduating high school and college. I can't even stand it. I could have sworn that Embry and Jacob were throwing dirt clods at his poor sisters just yesterday."

"We were," Embry answered. "'Cept Rachel hits back now."

"I think that looks good. What do you think?" she glanced to the girl two feet above her.

"Looks good from up here," she smiled.

"Wonderful! Slip it off and I'll give it a quick iron for you, dear."

April 1, 2007

"Are you ready for this?"

"Definitely not."
"Don't be a wimp! It's April Fools – we gotta go out on top. You know someone's going to get us anyways."

"If he finds out that it's us that did this – we're dead. Self-preservation. Not wimp. You ruled out your brother."

"Do you really want to prank my brother while him and Veronica hump like rabbits while my Mom's gone?"

"Good point."

"Yeah, I thought so. Now go!"

Seth pelted out of the woods and across the street, hoping the cover of darkness would give him and Anna some cover. That and the fact that Paul's car was parked behind an embankment of trees, and he was probably dead asleep after spending the day with Kim. Seth and Anna made it to the far side of Paul's car and found the door thankfully unlocked. Not many people around here locked anything. Least of all the wolves.

"Score!" Seth whispered. He used the crank to lower the window a few inches before closing the door again. Anna did the same to the rear window. They each took their back packs off and unzipped them. They glanced together inside – full of ping pong balls. They dumped their back packs into the small crack in the window. It took an hour and about two thousand ping pongs balls – which surprisingly cost them less than ten dollars – and Paul's car was filled.

The two stopped for a moment to appreciate their handiwork. They'd had to shake the car a few times to even out the distribution, but they'd filled it. Paul was gonna be pissed. They took their backpacks and the abundance of trashbags they'd needed to transport the ping pong balls, and ran through the dark, back to the woods.

"That was awesome," Seth noted as they made their way back to their own neighborhood. Little did they know the havoc had only just begun. Seth would wake up to find that his and Leah's doorknobs had been tied together. Leah ended up tearing Seth's door off the hinges. Someone greased Jacob's front porch and he insisted that was sadistic with a handicapped man in the house. Billy only laughed. And some genius had rigged Quil's bed with an undetonated airbag…

But for now, Seth and Anna were feeling pretty smug.

"Thanks for coming along," Anna said, casually looping her arm through his. For a moment Seth didn't know what to do. He was entering serious red zone territory. Mostly because he was about as romantically retarded as it was possible for a fifteen year old to be. This would probably be the part where he said or did something so absolutely friggin' embarrassing, that Anna would either run home screaming or just slowly back away. Maybe while laughing. And he liked Anna. She was really cool. She was fun to hang out with, she was about as much of a nerd as Seth, she was Pack so he didn't have to worry about spilling the beans, and he didn't get all weird and nervous word vomity around her. Until now. He could feel the word vomit – or maybe real vomit? – threatening to make an appearance. And he could also hear something in the back of his head that sounded distinctly like Leah yelling at him.

He thought this was something he should just suck up and get over. So she touched him? Was still touching him? What was the big deal? Pack did that all the time. They were wolves and thrived on contact…

"Even if you are a wimp," Anna added with a smile, and all the word vomity feelings just kinda
"Okay, I think they're gone. I can't hear them anymore."

"Those were the most awful fake sex noises. Please, don't ever make sounds like that ever again. Least of all during a sex act. With me."

"Well, we had to traumatize them properly."

"Sitting here making howler monkey noises is one thing, but if you ever do that for real... I swear I'm getting up and walking out." Veronica bent double in laughter on Quil's bed. "They probably think we're swinging from the rafters or something."

"Hm, really?" Quil asked leaning in close and stealing a kiss. "I think we should consider at least trying animal noises before you shoot them down completely."

"No howler monkeys," Veronica insisted through laughter as Quil's mouth worked down the column of her neck, and she leaned back into the mattress, as his hands found her waist.

"How about... cats?" Quil asked lazily before meowing in the most ridiculous fashion against the skin of her chest. They were dangerously close to derailing the mission.

"Oh, fuck no," Veronica denied adamantly. "I hate cats."

"Really?" Quil asked sounding surprised. "I didn't know that."

"Now you do. Write it down."

"I just might. How about wild boar?" Quil tried, before looking up for a moment. "I don't even know what kind of noise that would be, but it must be gnarly."

Veronica looked down, trying to reign in her laughter. "Probably. Why are we talking about animalistic sex noises, again?"

"I forget," Quil replied immediately, but continued on his train of thought. "What about howling?"

"Okay, okay," Veronica finally conceded. "I think I can tolerate howling..."

"Score!"

"I'm pretty sure the animal sex noises probably scarred Anna and Seth for life."

"Good. Maybe that little shit will think twice about going after my sister. Pubescent horn dog." Veronica only arched a brow and waved her hands between the two of them, seeming to think that was quite an ironic statement coming from the man on top of her, about the boy who was playing pranks with his little sister. "I was a fifteen year old boy once," Quil insisted. "I know things. But at any rate, they won't be back for while," Quil said.

He leaned in for a kiss and the two banged noses as Veronica continued to laugh. "Word on the street is they're going to try and prank Paul for some street cred. Let them live their last hours in peace."

"We best get started then," Veronica insisted, giving him a gentle shove and sliding off his bed. "Don't want to be found out, do we?" She reached under the bed and grabbed a handful of rope. "We've got a very small window of time while Sue is at work, Seth is off signing his death
"You're pretty hot when you're evil," Quil nodded.

"I even threatened to booby trap his front and back door earlier today, so I know for a fact the worrywart will probably climb through his bedroom window tonight. So, we'll be in the clear."

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**Thursday, April 12, 2007**

Brady and Collin rarely got time to themselves. As pups, there was always someone around, even though they'd been phasing since before the great big newborn brawl. They weren't exactly at risk for an uncontrolled phase anymore. Mostly, the others just seemed to like having younger siblings to rag on. Both Brady and Collin were fourteen now and they were going to high school in the fall. Brady was pumped. Collin didn't care either way.

"It's gonna be great," Brady assured Collin.

"I dunno," Collin shrugged, letting the basketball bounce between the ground and his hands as the two walked to the beat up old court in La Push.

"We get new teachers, whole new block of students," Brady continued. "They'll finally stop treating us like kids. And maybe we can actually take an interesting class."

"Yeah, but it's all the same kids," Collin added. "Giving us the same crap for being mutant freaks."

It was Brady's turn to shrug. "We'll see. We've got Quil, Jacob, Anna, and Seth to scare the crap out of everyone."

"If Seth isn't busy sucking Anna's face off."

"Gross!" Brady replied in horror as he swung open the gate to the basketball court - complete with missing chain and split blacktop.

"It's true," Collin nodded. "Have you seen him? Have you heard him? He likes her."

"Whatever. I don't need to have the image of him kissing Anna in my head. Seth, Anna, Leah, and Quil will skin me alive."

"Fine," Collin smiled at the small victory of having grossed his best friend out. "Did anyone ever figure out that it was us that greased Jake's porch?"

"Doubt it," Brady laughed. "Who would suspect the pups of pranking the Alpha? We totally won this April Fool's Day."

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**Saturday, May 5, 2007**

Embry's graduation was something else. Jezzie's was easy enough even if she couldn't figure out how to work the hood contraption. But Jezzie could tell that it just made Embry want to crawl under the house and wait for it all to pass when it was his turn. He had the joy of being the only member of Pack to graduate in the class of '07 – given that both Jake and Quil were forced to repeat their junior year. So the focus was all on Embry. And boy, did he hate it. Actually, he probably mostly just hated them threatening to make posters. Would it be rude to tell them all to stay home?
"Probably," Jezzie insisted, when he voiced that last query aloud. She sat on his couch, her feet on his abdomen, while he lay on the floor. She flipped steadily through The Young Man's Handbook. Embry had leant it to her. He insisted after she handed him Full Frontal Feminism. A book he refused to take out of the house – even though he told her it wasn't the subject, growing up with his Mom made damn sure he was pro-girl – but because it had a naked torso on the cover. Jezzie just told him he was lucky she didn't have him read Cunt – because that had a big flower and nasty word on the cover.

Clearly, they had moved out of their political philosophy phase for the time being (wherein Jezzie grew extra paranoid reading 1984 and Embry didn't know how there were so many words in Atlas Shrugged) and into iconic books for their respective gender.

When Embry didn't elaborate after her response, she flipped half of the book over and glanced down at the boy on the floor.

"I know what you need," she insisted. She reached to her bag on the couch next to her and fished out her iPod. When she turned it on, the music coming from the small speaker just made Embry quirk a brow. She plopped the device on the side table and stood up next to Embry. She reached upwards – towards the ceiling.

"Monks?"

"It's Gregorian Chant. And, no, I just think plainchant is mellow." She reached down to touch her toes and glanced at him as her chin brushed her knees. "I'm sensing a disturbance in your navel chakra."

Jezzie hummed and continued to stretch. Embry just continued to watch her, wondering where she came up with this stuff.

"To meditate is to lose the Self. To become one with Atman – the true self – and realize it is one with the transcendent self – Brahman."

"Besides the irony of the Catholic girl teaching the Indian boy about the heathen pagan beliefs of the Far East," Embry began as he watched Jezzie breathe deep and stand up as straight as she could. "Why would you ever want to lose yourself at the expense of knowing someone else?"

"Well, with meditation, it always ends," Jezzie replied sagely as she extended her arms out perpendicular to her sides. "You can go to the ends of the Earth to lose yourself, but you'll always come back to yourself in the end. You can't escape it. And that's frustrating to many people who want to meet the higher power."

"I spend a lot of time out of myself, and I have to say that I'd like to live a good human life for as long as I can and enjoy it. Not that I don't want to meet the maker, but I think there's a time and place for that. And it ain't for the living."

"How very western of you," Jezzie noted. She heard him move on the floor, but he didn't speak any further.

"Embry stop looking up my skirt and cleanse your chi," she said measuredly knowing – without even looking – what he was doing.

"The things up your skirt do wonders for my chi," he replied with a laugh. "Which coincidentally – as the Chinese word for the life force – comes from a different faith than Hindu transcendentalism."

"Hinduism and transcendentalism are two completely different schools of thought. Though I think
Brahman and Thoreau would have gotten along pretty well," Jezzie opened one eye and stared down at him. "And I'll start wearing burlap. Just to spite you."

"Emerson read Hindu scripture – almost no philosophical movement is independent of another. And no you won't," he insisted as he wrapped a hand around one of her ankles. "You'll get a rash. And my chi is fine, thanks. It's my back and Pack that is bothering me."

Jezzie nudged Embry's side with her toes and he obeyed her silent command to roll over. She gently stood on top of his back and he groaned in satisfaction.

"Well, I think I can fix the back thing," she replied, taking light steps and using the balls of her feet where she knew Embry carried his stress. She smiled, already feeling him melt into the carpet. "And how about I just bring my pepper spray to your graduation and I'll threaten to mace anyone who tries to embarrass you?"

"Sounds good," he grinned, enjoying Jezzie's weight crunching his spine back into working condition.

Twenty minutes and a melty boyfriend later, Jezzie sat cross-legged on his back. "Thanks, Jez."

"Of course," she nodded. She leaned forward and curled up on his back, snuggling her head at his shoulder. "I'm proud of you Embry."

"Hm?" he grunted. "What for?"

"For everything. I know the whole Pack has a lot on their plate. The fact that each of you maintain lives while doing so is kind of amazing. And graduating with a 3.5 when you started the year at an even two is nothing to turn a nose up at."

"Love birds!" a shout cut off Embry's chance to reply. "Impressionable youth, incoming!" And then Seth proceeded to barge through the front door. "Hi Mrs. Call! I am pretty good, I guess. Leah used all the toothpaste this morning, so I guess things could be better… Oh, really, you don't have to. Trust me, I need caffeine like La Push needs trees… Kool-Aid! Boss!"

When Seth arrived on the Calls' couch with a leap and a bound and glass of cherry Kool-Aid later, he just stared at the pair on the floor. "Whatever it is you two are doing, please stop. You're traumatizing me."

"Seth," Embry glanced at the younger boy. "My Mom is in the other room… what the hell do you think we're doing."

"Not a clue, Papa Wolf," Seth shrugged. "But it'd be cool if you and Ma could keep me in the dark for a few more years."

"Innocent little Sethy," Jezzie crooned as she sat up and moved to the couch pinching Seth's cheeks.

"Fuckin' right," Seth nodded. "That and these killer dimples are what bring all the ladies to my yard."

"So you're horrifying Leah to the point where she sleeps in the backyard now?"

"Funny," Seth replied snidely. "Don't you have a high school to graduate from?"

And to Embry's amazement, nobody embarrassed him. They mostly were amused just watching him wait in potential terror the whole time.
Leah snickered a lot. His mom cried.

Monday, May 21, 2007

"Hiiiii – yah!" Jezzie vaulted off her front porch and Embry was concerned for only a moment that she might not actually land on her feet. However, upon landing he realized Jezzie had totally lost her mind. She was wearing glasses – she didn't wear glasses. And she had this big smudge on her forehead.

"Jez?" Embry spoke quietly. "Sweetheart? Are you okay?"

"I am awesome!" she trilled, hopping up and down.

"Are you sure?" Embry checked. "Because I think you've lost your mind. And what's with the yellow and black scarf? It's July and you look like a bumble bee."

"I'm a Hufflepuff, Embry!" Jezzie insisted like it was obvious.

"What the heck is a Hufflepuff?"

"You might belong in Hufflepuff / Where they are just and loyal / Those patient Hufflepuffs are true, and unafraid of toil!"

Embry nodded slowly. Was any of this supposed to be making sense? He reached down and took both her hands in his. "Jezzie, I'm really going to need you to explain what is going on. Because I'm thinking that you might need some psych meds."

"Embry," Jezzie whined petulantly. "The two month countdown has begun!" When Embry showed no signs of knowing what she was talking about, she took him by the hand and dragged him inside her house. She pulled him into her living room and pointed enthusiastically to a spot on the bookshelf. Embry bent down and looked at the books she pointed to. All lined up, they were different but Embry could tell they all belonged together.

"Oh," he nodded in vague recognition as he pulled a book of the shelf. "I've seen these before. This is that book series about wizards and stuff. Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets? What happened to this book?" The pages were puffed and crinkled. The book was almost twice as thick as the binding and the soft cover was taped together.

"I accidentally sent it through the wash," Jezzie supplied. Embry just shook his head. He didn't want to know how Jezzie sent a whole damn book through the wash. "The last book comes out at the end of July and the fifth movie comes out right before that. Seth and I are preparing – since I won't be here for either. We're having a movie marathon."

Embry grinned down at her. Jez was a nerd and he loved it. "How many are there?"

And that was all it took for Jezzie to launch into a long and energetic talk about Harry Potter. An apparently scrawny, orphaned, British kid who was lucky enough to find out he could do magic, but unlucky enough to find out that the world was pretty much out to get him. Jezzie explained the whole backstory to Embry – about how Harry's parents were killed by Lord Voldemort and how Harry got his scar. Embry thought Voldemort was a weird name, but better than calling the guy 'You-Know-Who'. She told him about Harry's mean aunt and uncle and his two best friends and Hogwarts – which was also about the weirdest name for a school ever – and how it was Harry's job to defeat Voldemort so the wizarding world could live in peace.
"That sounds intense," Embry replied.

Jezzie nodded enthusiastically. "It is! It's really good. But there's so much more to it than that. But I won't spoil the story. You should read the books or see the movies. I favor the books, but I understand you're crunched for time."

"To say the least," Embry nodded towards the later half of the series. "We've been swapping tiny ass books, mostly."

"You can have the first if you want. It's pretty short," Jezzie pulled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* off the shelf and traded it with Embry for *The Chamber of Secrets*.

"So that's Harry?" Embry pointed to the boy on the cover. Jezzie nodded. The boy really was scrawny. "Is that supposed to be the 'sorcerer's stone'?" he asked.

Jezzie glanced at the cover. "Nope," she shook her head. "That's a snitch."

"What's a snitch?"

"Read the book," she grinned in that impish little way she had. "Everything on the cover, actually, has a tie-in to the book. They're kinda cool like that."

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**Wednesday, May 22, 2007**

"Voldemort was living on the other side of Quirrell's head the whole time?"

"Hmpf?" Jezzie felt around hazily and glanced at her alarm clock. "Embry," she mumbled sleepily into the phone's receiver. "It's one o'clock in the morning."

"I know! But I just finished. Jez, this guy had a supervillain living inside him for the whole school year? How does no one notice that? I mean, I'm all for cultural sensitivity with the whole turban-thing, but no one got suspicious at all?"

Jezzie grinned and collapsed back on her pillows, listening to Embry go off about Harry Potter. She never thought she'd see the day. "I gave that book a day ago. You really tore through it."

"Just because I almost flunked high school, doesn't mean I'm an idiot," Embry offered quietly.

"You didn't almost flunk high school – you graduated with a 3.6 – and I have never called you an idiot," Jezzie assured him. "We've been swapping books for long enough for me to know how smart you are."

There was silence on the line for a few moments before Embry cleared his throat and spoke again. "So what's the deal with this Snape guy?"

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**Saturday, June 2, 2007**

"So, so, so!" Jezzie skipped down the packed gravel path between the beach and the road. "I'm really excited. I've wanted to talk to you and tell you all about this for so long." Jezzie and Embry had agreed a few months back not to discuss their post-graduation plans until after they had both decided and all the loose ends were tied up. Mutually, they didn't want to influence the other's plans. So they talked plenty about regular school – grades, exams, weird professors, assignments – but never anything about med school (which Embry had already known about), and whatever it was the
Embry was going to decide to do after graduation.

Embry laughed at Jezzie's obviously pent up excitement. "All right then, you go first, Jez."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm afraid if you don't, you might explode, so yes. Go."

"BU Med."

"BU?"

"Boston University. Yeah," she nodded. "They offered me a serious financial aid package if I promise to keep with my summer internship throughout the school year. So, yeah. BU. You?"


"You got in?" Jezzie trilled in excitement. "That's amazing! I'm so proud of you!"

"Geez, Jez," Embry replied glancing towards the ground. "Don't sound so surprised."

"I'm sorry…" she replied. "It's just that… I know your GPA took a serious hit these past two years. I know it hasn't been easy on any of you."

"Yeah, well I graduated with a 3.6," he nodded, still glancing sheepishly at the ground. He seemed almost embarrassed to tell her about his success.

"I know that," she smiled big. "You told me. I remember. And that's pretty much amazing, Embry. It's fantastic. But that's all I knew; I had no idea…"

"No idea?" he glanced up at her. "Really?"

"Embry," she slowed her frantic talking down a bit. "We agreed not to discuss our mutual post graduation options with each other until they were both finalized, so we didn't influence each other, remember? I really liked that idea. But… you knew I was going to med school. I haven't heard anything about school from you in a few weeks. And I kind of figured that—"

"That I'd stopped going again?" he offered. "Jez, just because I never complained didn't mean I'd dropped the heck out."

"I didn't say that," Jezzie replied slowly, trying not to lose her patience. Wasn't this supposed to be happy news? "I figured, you were busy – for one."

Embry stopped walking at this point and he looked up and met Jezzie's eyes finally. "Jez, I'm not stupid."

Her mouth went slack and she turned and stared at him. Did he just? Yes. Yes, he did. "Embry Call," she spoke quietly and slowly. "When have I ever suggested that you lacked any kind of intellectual faculties?"

"Well, you sound so damn surprised that I've been accepted."

"That's because I didn't know you'd applied," she groaned, reiterating her earlier point. "You knew I was going to med school. I was clueless about you. You could have gone to law school or become a professional ballet dancer or joined Greenpeace for all I knew. I'm surprised because I didn't know, not because I think you're an idiot. I'm excited."
He didn't respond to her immediately. "Honestly," she continued trying to search for a way to vocalize what was going on inside her head. "I'm kind of insulted you would even think that of me. I really am. Have you been, like, laboring under this delusion that I think you're stupid?"

She hated saying it. She hated even thinking it. But she was pretty sure that's what he was getting at. And she didn't want to be beating around that bush anymore. It hurt her feelings that he felt that way, that he thought she had felt that way. Even worse was that he never said anything. Had he told anyone? Well, he'd been thinking it—Oh, no.

"Embry," she wheeled around, torn from her thoughts by a revelation. "How long have you felt like this?"

"I don't have a specific date in mind," he offered blithely.

She scoffed an unpleasant little noise and flopped down onto a bench. "If you've been thinking in this in Packmind everyone else is gonna hate me!"

"Jezzie whatever opinions my friends have you, they make them on their own."

"Your friends?" Jezzie stared up at him. "Embry? I've lived here for eight months, do they not count as our friends yet? What the hell is going on? Would you please talk to me? You're clamming up."

"I don't know if I want to talk about it," he grumbled staring at some point over her shoulder. "Your digging into something where there's nothing."

"There is something, though, Emb. I want to know. I want you to tell me the truth: do you really believe that I think I'm smarter than you? Embry you're your own brain and your own mind there's so much you know that I can't even fathom. I'm reminded of that every time I see the bookshelf in your room. If it's such a non-issue then why can't we just talk about it?"

"Jezzie!" Embry shouted and Jezzie jumped a little, startled. "I don't want to talk about it! Why can't you just accept that? Why can't you just deal and move on?"

"Because," Jezzie said aghast. "Because I don't want there to be this, this, this thing between us. It's clearly bothering you and now you won't even look me in the eye? Embry, you're freaking me out, right now. Why is this something you don't want to talk about?"

"It just is," he shouted. And with absolutely no further fanfare he walked away.

He walked away.
Saturday, June 2, 2007

Jezzie didn't really remember stumbling back up the narrow beaten path; she didn't remember driving home; she didn't remember when she started crying; she didn't remember when she sat in the corner of her living room because corners had always made her feel secure; she didn't remember when Archie curled up beside her; and she definitely didn't remember when she'd dialed Seth Clearwater, of all people, sobbing hysterically.

"He thinks I'm a bitch," she wailed.

"Wait, what?" Seth sounded slightly disoriented and if Jezzie was of a calmer frame of mind she might've noticed. Seth had been trying to catch an hour of sleep before he had to go on patrol when Jezzie had called him screaming. Once he'd ascertained that she wasn't physically hurt – he knew she'd spent the day with Embry, so that was unlikely – he was just confused.

"Jezzie my brain is on, like, inbred retarded cousin mode right now. Could you please explain to me why you are flipping the hell out in the middle of naptime?"

"Everyone must hate me!" she wailed. "Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you tell me that he had been thinking that I was acting like some kind of intellectual superior?"

"Who?" Seth was totally lost and talking was only making Jezzie's voice climb higher and higher.

"Embry!" she screeched. Seth jumped a little and wrenched the phone from his ear. That octave had definitely hurt.

"Jezzie," Seth replied calmly, leaning his head against the bedpost. He really needed to go back to sleep. "I'm never phased with Embry – he patrols with Paul – so I can't really say what he's been thinking lately – but I doubt it's anything bad, especially about you – and I'm pretty sure no one hates you."

She didn't reply but Seth heard the distinctive sound of her crying. "Jezzie what the heck happened? What is going on? I'm so fucking confused."

"He—he," she tried to control her breathing in order to speak clearly. "He told me about how he got into school and about graduation and all that stuff. I was so happy and excited for him. But he took it as surprise. I think he's been thinking that I think he's stupid or something."

Seth took a moment to process the amount of 'thinks' in that statement. "And… where does the Pack supposedly hating you come into play?"

"If he's been thinking about that – then everyone can see it and they must think I'm such a terrible person. But I'm not! I swear! I haven't heard anything about his academic life since freakin' January! I had no idea what was going on; I had no preconceived judgments or anything like that."

"Wow…” Seth was wholly unprepared to deal with the social drama of the world.

"I know!" she cried.

"Okay," Seth continued. "Well, I'm gonna need you to calm down, Jezzie. You're kinda freaking me out. Where are you? Everything sounds all echo-y?"
"I'm sitting in the corner of my living room," she pouted quietly.

*Great.*

"Jezzie, it sounds like this is all a misunderstanding. And Embry doesn't have a big ego, but it sounds like his pride was a little hurt – even if it really wasn't intentionally. That's kinda important to us menfolk. So… just chillax and I'm sure you two will regroup and sort all this out. And no one in the Pack hates you. Not even Paul. And Paul hates on an equal opportunity basis."

When had Dr. Seth come on duty? He was too delirious with exhaustion to even tell Jezzie that he needed to sleep before he died.

"Seth," Jezzie replied evenly. She had at least stopped sobbing. "I leave for my internship in less than a week. And then school starts. I'm not going to be back in Washington until Thanksgiving! Or, rather, Rachel's wedding."

"Well, then best sort this shiz out quick, huh?"

Jezzie spent the rest of the afternoon in a miserable heap, laying on the living room floor with Archie, before getting up the motivation to dial Leah's number. Might as well run the Clearwater gamut.

"Hello?" she picked up.

"Do you hate me?"

"Jezzie? You sound like shit," Leah noted. "I know. Do you hate me?"

"I know. Do you hate me?"

"No, not particularly. I kind of actually thought we had this whole 'friends' thing going on, but maybe I got confused? Do Michiganers express their hate by spending lots of time with those that they dislike?"

"No," Jezzie noted petulantly.

"Okay," Leah replied, not quite giving into her obvious bad mood. "Then I definitely don't hate you."

"Does Paul hate me?"

"Not that I'm aware of…” she said slowly. "Are you getting at something here, Little Red?"

Jezzie then explained her predicament to an older and slightly more coherent Clearwater sibling. When she finished, Leah was quiet for a bit. "Huh," she said. "Well that's interesting… Embry has been feeling a little weird lately, in Packmind. But it mostly seemed like he was distracted. I never got the vibe that he thought you were better than him. Maybe he's finally gotten better at hiding his head."

"So…"

"No, Jezzie," Leah replied anticipating her question. "I'm pretty sure Paul *doesn't* hate you. I'm pretty sure no one hates you. I actually think they all kinda love you. I think Paul's distracted by the fact that his best friend is dead. And he and his imprint are clueless about what to do with said dead best friend's pregnant girlfriend. It's finally hitting home."
"Really?" Jezzie asked, partially torn from her inner spiraling sadness. Jared had died a while ago. It still bothered Jezzie. She woke up with nightmares about it sometimes. She knew it still bothered the Pack, but she had thought they were… healing. They appeared to be – at least more so than Kim – who seemed to lack any kind of happiness in life. She just seemed so dazed all the time.

"Yeah," Leah responded. "I mean… I know it's been a while, but it's hard to really believe one of your good friends – one of your brothers – can just disappear like that. Even when you see it. Even when you feel it. Because believe me, you can feel Jared's absence in the Pack. It's so weird. I thought that would go away after a while, but it hasn't yet. Anyways… yeah. I think that has been distracting – especially Sam and Paul. And Jake is running his head in circles trying to figure out how to make Seth his fourth. Like for real."

"'For real'?' Jezzie asked. "What do you mean?"

"Seth's not a submissive wolf, but he's very subdued. He kind of fits naturally into the role of Fourth – Jared's old spot. Seth and everyone else should naturally shift in light of the absence and rearrange. The hierarchy has to make up for his death. But it hasn't. Seth is technically Fourth, but… only because there's no one else in the chain of command between him and Embry on the guy's side. But it's like he hasn't changed roles. He's still the same goofball. Quil's been doing this weird thing lately – I don't even know if he's realized it… he seems to be the one with a pulse on the Pack now. He can just kind of sense when things are going on with who."

"Wow," Jezzie murmured. "You think he'll bump Seth?"

"And Brady?" Leah asked. "I don't know. Brady and Seth are not very active in the hierarchy but both are still more dominant that Quil is. Quil is too laid back. Always has been. So, I think the roles are just being redefined. And it's kinda weird. Mostly it gives me a headache… Anyways, so the reason you called? Yeah. Um… I don't know what the hell is up with Emb, but I can say that no one hates you. Does that help?"

"Yes, actually it does. A lot. Thanks Leah."

"No, problem, lady. And if you need someone to beat reason into Embry, you just let me know. Lord knows I hardly need a good reason to kick some ass."

"I'll keep that in mind," Jezzie noted. She might end up taking Leah up on that offer.

She was unable to do much more than feel like a pathetic useless lump.

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Thursday, June 7, 2007

Going to bed angry was one thing. Leaving the time zone was another. Jezzie's flight left at 4PM, which meant she was up at 6AM making sure she had everything and still fit in the required weight and dimension limits. Her bathroom scale had never gotten so much use.

She had gone over to La Push to say her goodbyes until the fall. Seth picked her up in a giant hug and spun her around, refusing to let her go because how would he do his homework without her? Jezzie assured him that Anna was fully capable of keeping him in line. Seth was well aware. He was pretty sure Anna would be a bigger distraction than Jezzie had ever been. "Imma miss you, Mama," he grinned.

"You're gonna make sure my Dad takes care of Archie, right?" Jezzie asked. "And in December when my Dad leaves for the season?"
"Duh!" Seth rolled his eyes. "Me and Archimedes are tight, now. No prob, Little Red."

She was only on the ground long enough to regain her balance before Quil subjected her to the same treatment. "Go learn something all right? Don't need you bailing on us unless it's for something good. No more of that slacking off."

She'd said her goodbyes to Claire, too, as well as Paul and Kim. She promised Rachel she had the week of her wedding already scheduled off and she would be back in August, just before school started. Collin and Brady made her a Red 'n Red sandwich - two Reds, one redhead. Anna and Veronica threatened her with pain of death if they didn't get all the details of East Coast life via email. Sam had actually given her a hug and smiled, and the rest of the Pack confirmed that this was the greatest display of affection they'd seen him give anybody that wasn't Emily.

She couldn't find Embry. His Mom said he wasn't home. Jezzie didn't ask where he was because she knew the woman didn't know. No need for her to rub it in. Tiffany squeezed Jezzie with a hug fit to rival one of the wolves and told her to stay safe and call if she needed anything.

Jake, Leah, and Nessie were last. She knocked on the faded door and waited, bracing herself to say goodbye to her Alpha and one cute imprint.

Nessie looked a little older today. She'd been the one open the door and she scampered off only to drag Jacob bodily from the kitchen. "We have to say goodbye to Jezzie! She's going to be gone until she comes back for Thanksgiving. That's five whole months, you know."

"I do," he replied as he scooped her up, helping her attempts to scramble to higher ground. "That's a long time, huh?"

He was speaking more to Jezzie than to Nessie and Jezzie realized this. She smiled sadly. "Yes it is," Nessie replied. "But she's going to go to school to be a doctor. Like Grandpa. That's very important."

"It is," Jake agreed again. "You know your Dad was a doctor too."

"Really?" Nessie asked. Her voice quieted with the small wonder of information about her parents.

Just like any young child the only reason she knew she'd lost her parents was the reinforcing of the memory. When Jacob realized that her memories of Edward and Bella were fading, he felt bad bringing it back up. Jacob still missed Bella, in a way that he was sure wouldn't go away, but he was able to look back with nostalgia instead of total mental and emotional trauma. Nessie helped. She looked so much like her mother but radiated an unbridled curiosity Jake had never seen Bella exhibit. He loved Nessie, but there had been a lot of times in the past he wished he could've done so on his own terms -- without the imprint. But now, he wouldn't change it for anything. He was pretty sure that if he hadn't imprinted, he wouldn't have adopted her. What seventeen year old would?

Nessie's enthusiasm for everything in life, and her growing confidence made Jacob feel every part the proud parent, watching her figure things out. Sure, Bella had left a serious hole in his heart. But a half Bella never would've filled that void. Because she would either been human and broken without Edward or immortal and tainted by the same. But Nessie was a part of Bella and she made life better in her own unique way. Jacob was her Dad now -- different than Edward's role -- but still very important. He could love her without shame and that was the best feeling in the world.

And she may have looked a bit like Bella, but everyday she grew more into her own self, her own mind and her own personality. Though he'd learn the hard way that she'd never shed her father's stubbornness. Leah didn't help with that either; she encouraged Nessie to stand by her convictions on an almost daily basis.
Jezzie watched as Jake nodded. "Yep. Your Dad helped you when you were born."

"Wow..." Nessie nodded, mulling that one over and then was lost to her own daydreams. Jake set her down and she wandered into the living room. "Why don't you go get Lees, Nessie? She'll want to say good bye too."

"She doesn't remember?" Jezzie asked when the small girl was out of sight.

Jacob shook his head. "No, thank god." She was highly intelligent from birth, but her memory was not on par. She didn't remember much from her first few months and mostly only the last few had begun to stick in her head. Her eidetic memory was very short-term – both a gift and a curse. However, she was distancing herself enough from the memory of her parents' passing that it simply made her sad and not completely distraught as the news had originally affected her. And it was a hard decision to make, but as much as Jacob didn't want Nessie hurt, and didn't want to think about his dead best friend, he didn't want her forgetting her birth parents. Plus, Rosalie would shank him. Nowadays, he didn't mind so much telling her about them when the opportunity arose.

Dealing with a hybrid baby must've been awfully difficult, Jezzie imagined. Having to raise a kid solo at seventeen was daunting. Having to raise a kid that wasn't yours and wasn't totally human at seventeen might've been asking too much.

"So you're leaving me with the crazies, huh, Little Red?"

"I'll be back."

"For a weekend in November," he rolled his eyes. "For Western European Awareness Day." Jezzie quirked a brow. "Mandatory Indian cynicism. We celebrate Thanksgiving on the rez by marching into another person's home and telling them we own the place."

"My Dad's really touchy about Northern Irish Protestants," Jezzie shrugged, trying to find some common ground. "I don't know if I'll have the cash to get back home for Thanksgiving. But I'll definitely be back in August for Rachel and Addie's wedding."

"I haven't been able to find Embry," she noted.

"He's been on patrol," Jake nodded.

"For the past five days?"

"Don't be like that, Jezzie."

"I'm not being like anything. But given the fact that I kinda really care about him - and I assumed he reciprocated - it would seem odd that I haven't seen him in the week leading up to my leaving this seaboard for an extended period of time."

"Jezzie, I'm not saying I agree, but I'm not about to drag him out of the woods. He's a full-grown man and my best friend. He needs to grow his own balls."

Jezzie smiled a bit. "Well, tell him I said bye and that I wish him luck this semester and to go to hell."

"I will," he agreed with a grin. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. You're going to school, not the gallows. You two have plenty of time to sort your crap out."

"Embry always was the moody one," she grumbled.
Just then Leah came around the corner and flopped into the door frame, leaning against Jacob like he was furniture. It made Jezzie smile realizing how comfortable the two had become around each other.

"You should've never divorced Seth," Leah noted. "I raised that kid right."

"Ha!" Jake barked a single laugh. "Don't tell Anna that."

"I'm not taking any child grooms any time soon," Jezzie replied. "Sorry, Leah."

"That's all right," Leah nodded crossing her arms. "Anna's capable of keeping the kid alive while they're around each other. Besides, I've got plans for you."

"Plans?" Jacob looked at her sidelong, and Leah just grinned malevolently.

"Oh, heaven help me…" Jezzie reached up to drag her hand down her face. "Well… I guess this is goodbye, Jacob Black. Leah Clearwater. I'll see you kids the last week in August. If you need anything until then, let me know."

Jezzie gave Nessie, Leah, and Jake big hugs for her farewell. She promised to bring Nessie back a good textbook for her to read. As Jezzie closed the door she wondered if it was too much to expect Jacob - a seventeen year old boy - to be left to raise Nessie, watch out for his Dad's health, and lead the local Pack of shapeshifters. But she remembered he had Leah… who seemed thoroughly devoted to Nessie's care, who had grown so comfortable around the small girl and her imprinted wolf. And as her worry threatened to reach a boiling point, she felt Pack wrap around her. The warm and all-encompassing contentment that came from knowing no matter how much stuff you had to juggle and now matter how far away you went, you were never alone.

There was always Pack.

The ride to SeaTac was a quiet one. Jezzie alternated between not crying buckets and enjoying her Dad's presence for the last few hours she had with him.

When she boarded her flight and buckled her belt the sight of the pavement moving away form her made her choke a little. She took a gratuitous Tylenol PM to help with the headache and slept until the plane glided low over Boston Harbor.

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**Monday, June 11, 2007**

Med school was officially the first time that Jezzie had moved somewhere without knowing anyone. When she moved to Detroit as a kid, she had family there – plus she went with her Dad. And when they picked up for Washington? She went with her Dad again, even if they didn't know anyone. But this time – moving to Boston – Jezzie was on her own. And it was terrifying. Her aunt was sort of local; she had a house in Maine but spent a lot of her time in Detroit. Most of Jezzie's other relatives had moved, and her cousins had gone off to various colleges around the country.

She had spoken with some old classmates – from school back in Detroit, both college and even back to high school – that had been Boston bound. Most of her friends from Peninsula that had graduated with her had stayed on the West coast.

Her landlady was nice – she ran the old brownstone – and so was her neighbor. Apparently Monique was a transgender and while that didn't bother Jezzie, Monique was very, very talkative and slipped that in on their introductory conversation.
"Oh, honey," she smiled. "I know I don't look all that girly. I just didn't want you thinking you were living next to some kind of crazed psychopath! I know I make a very broad-shouldered lady. I'll stop, you look plenty overwhelmed without talking to me all day and night. Feel free to knock if you need anything!"

Monique was nice. She just surprised Jezzie that first day.

Jezzie was mostly busy during the day. She was up at 6AM to make the subway across town for her internship and she stayed through the evening because she hated leaving lab work unfinished. But when she inevitably made it back to her new – empty – apartment at 8PM? She'd sit in the window and watch the traffic. She could see the Charles River peek out at small intervals as it split Cambridge and Boston. She'd watch as the late summer light would fade and the city would start to flick on its lovely golden lights.

The scenery was admittedly beautiful. She'd never felt so lonely.

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**Sunday, June 17, 2007**

"AhhhHHH!" Seth had come tear assing into Jacob's house one lovely afternoon only to find his Alpha passed out asleep on the floor, with little Nessie curled up asleep on his abdomen.

Watching Jacob become a father had been really fucking weird, but also kinda nice. It became obvious over the days and weeks that it wasn't necessarily an imprint that could break an Alpha, but that being a father strengthened him immensely. Jake had always been a nice guy, though he admittedly had zero idea of what to do with a bunch of teenagers that could transform into wolves and didn't know how to be shapeshifters and teenagers at the same time. The early handling was haphazard at best.

Sam had mostly gotten by on a detached kind of mysticism, alone. Having Sam actually be a normal guy now was admittedly a helluva lot better than ever having him run the show. It just wasn't his element.

But having Nessie around, well… that girl needed a parent. A normal one. And Jake snapped into Daddy-mode like a slingshot. It was obvious that he was still feeling his way through it – apparently kids really didn't come with manuals – but he was what Joy Ateara called 'a natural'. They did family meals. So everyday, Jacob was out of commission from five in the evening until six. He also went hunting with Nessie once a week to make sure she didn't become too thirsty. The poor girl, however, was having a hard time living with the guilt of killing small woodland creatures for sustenance. And when cold turkey proved to be an impractical option, the quest for a less soul-eroding form of nutrition began.

Excepting her supernatural diet, Nessie had actually decided to become a vegetarian. Jacob was beside himself for all of a half hour while Nessie explained that she didn't want to take any more life than she had to. But given Jacob and Billy Black's total dependency on everything redmeat, the new family diet required a call to Addie who – as a born and raised Hindu – was about as vegetarian as it was possible to be. Hearing Jacob mentally tally through nutritional supplementation and how make sure his growing hybrid daughter actually got all the sustenance she needed was odd at best.


*How the hell am I supposed to know? Fish.*

*That's meat.*
And of course, Leah was always around too. She patently refused to allow Nessie to be raised by – literally – a pack of wolves. Boy wolves, no less. Granted, they almost never did anything typically 'girly', but they spent quite a bit of time together. Leah had a weird kind of maternal light about her. She didn't run around the house in an apron and cook food and do laundry, but she was the epitome of a Mama Bear. She'd been the same way to Seth their whole lives. She was sarcastic with a sense of humor drier than the Sahara, but you knew she loved you and would kill anyone who looked at you the wrong way. Leah helped Nessie learn to tie her shoes, explained why the moon was out in the daytime every now and then, put her hair in pigtails before she did anything messy. Leah had even shown Nessie how to make a kick ass tree fort last week. She showed Seth the same thing when they were kids. Those were the days…

And if Seth was not in the midst of a full-blown personal meltdown, he might've appreciated the general adorable factor of seeing the Alpha in a position of submission to his tiny, curly-haired imprint as she dozed against his chest on the living room floor.

Leah was on his couch with her feet propped up reading some academic journal that would've made anyone else's eyes bleed.

"'Sup little brother," Leah replied not looking up from her reading.

"I need to talk to Jake," Seth said.

"If you wake that grizzly bear of an Alpha I swear to god I'll have Mom put you up for adoption."

"I'm having a crisis! A girl crisis!" Seth clarified like it was the end of the world. "I need to talk to him."

"Last I checked," Leah noted flipping a page, "Jake had a pup. Where's Embry?"

"Embry's a fucking mess, you think I'm going to him for girl problems? I'll call him if I want my taxes done."

Leah glared up at him. That was a pretty low blow. Everyone knew Embry wasn't dealing well with what had been coined "The Jezzie Situation". Leah thought Embry was a good enough guy, maybe just confused as hell. She kind of figured he'd end up crawling back to Jezzie after he matured up. Regardless, she knew it would hurt when he inevitably found out that Seth was running blind because he didn't know who to go to with his guy issues anymore. The entire Pack family system was crumbling from the top down since Jared had died.

"Well, considering the only girl in your life that isn't me, Mom, or Jezzie tells me everything, why don't you talk to moi?" Leah offered placing the opened journal on her abdomen.

Seth lacked the appropriate amount of tact to be unable to control his disgusted face. "Because you're my sister. That's gross!"

"It is not gross, Seth," Leah replied rolling her eyes. "We run around in the woods naked and I am occasionally privy to your disturbed thought patterns. That's gross. My trying to help you not shoot your chances with Anna to hell is an act of kindness. Take it or leave it."

Seth just stared at her like she'd grown an extra tail.

"Do you do this to Anna, too? That would explain so much…" she mumbled.
Seth blanched. "What did she tell you!"

"Sit down, little brother," Leah swung her legs to the floor and indicated the now vacant spot on the couch. "Let's have a chat."

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**Early Summer 2007**

Corin instructed the cab driver to keep to the side streets and off the beaten path as she followed her instructions and her nose to the den of the southern vampire coven. "Aquí," she said once the scent had grown strong. "You can let me off here. Gracias." She handed over her fare and waited until the cab had meandered off.

She followed the distinctive scent of vampire down a side street and away from the evening life. Not more than a stone's throw from the main thoroughfare through this portion of Monterrey, Corin came upon an empty block of houses that abutted the sprawling Parque Nacional Cumbres de Monterrey and one particularly abandoned looking – though reeking of vampire.

Corin was told that Maria's coven was chaotic at best and she maintained a nomadic lifestyle within the confines northeastern Mexico. She seemed to favor Monterrey. Corin knocked softly on the door and waited. Without any indication of movement from within – even to her own senses – the door swung open. Maria was small, with full thick brown hair, and vampirism had not robbed her fully of her coffee complexion.

"Volterra," Maria smiled, not recognizing Corin, but presumably the smell. "Bienvenidas. Walk with me?" She waved her arm toward the road and took a quick glance before lighting off at an unnatural speed. Corin followed and the two did not slow until they were within the confines and beautiful surroundings of the national park.

"I come with a request," Corin began without hesitating. "From the Volturi."

"Sí," Maria nodded. "Well, if you will tell me what this request is, I will consider it."

For a moment Corin just looked on at the small dark-haired woman standing a few feet from her. Maria smiled in a way that may have been intended to calm, but had been used for sinister purposes for too long. "No, no," Maria shook her head. "I know your kind. I have heard about you from the others. You are like my Jasper. Tenéis duende… you both have that special sort of gift. None of that, Volterra, or I will be of no help to you."

Corin smiled a close-lipped grin. Maria had picked up on more than she'd anticipated. No wonder the Volturi had let her live so long on the fringes of their rules. Maybe Corin's gift for forcing feelings of contentment wouldn't work on this vampire. "The Volturi has some plans… but first we need help with the American Covens."

"¿Los Americanos?" Maria quirked a brow "¿Pero pensé que eran sus aliados? I thought they were your friends, no? Tell me more."

"First, tell me what you know of this werewolf… Azrael?"

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**Thursday, June 21, 2007**

"All I want from life, is a taco and to take regular shits again."

Annnd Paul's dinner was officially ruined.
"Okay… Kim? Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not," her head thunked against the counter top. "When I go grocery shopping again this weekend, I'm buying my body weight in bran and kale. Prepare yourself."

"As long as you buy more pop tarts, that's fine with me. What the hell is kale, anyways?" Paul looked at her overturned head in horror.

"I don't know but we're gonna find out." She huffed a breath and sat up again. "Why the heck did you agree to let me move in again?"

"Because I need someone to split the rent with and sharing a place with a guy sucks." Paul answered easily and picked up his cereal bowl as he turned towards the sink. "Guys are slobs."

Kim rolled her eyes. He was such a bad liar. It was almost July and Kim was now – almost officially – in her last trimester. She was due the first week of September and feeling about as big as a rhinoceros. She continued to refuse help with just about everything insisting that she was 'goddamn pregnant, not fucking handicapped' which only caused the likes of Paul, Embry, and Seth to retreat with hands raised in surrender. Rachel was probably the only one she willing accepted help from.

With Rachel it was far more natural. There were no other circumstances in the world, really, that would've aligned the cosmos in such a way that Paul – of all people – agreed to cohabitate with her while pregnant and mourning. And she appreciated his kindness, but also knew he was pretty far out of his depth with most things that pertained to her personal chaos. Through no fault of his own really. It wasn't his fault he couldn't conceive, carry, and bear children.

Kim appreciated Paul letting her move in, even though her and Jared's place was perfectly fine. Technically. It wasn't so good for the psyche for her to walk the same floors day after day following his death. But it had been kinda nice… Kim was either sad, mad, irritable, or a flat out bitch about 97% of the time, and she never felt like she had to hold that back at home because Paul was a bitch all the time too. She didn't have to worry about upsetting him with her vitriol or her attitude.

Rachel was like a softer version of Paul, and Kim never wondered why he imprinted on her. The two were yin and yang. Both abrasive, talkative, occasionally combative, and always competitive. But just like Paul knew where to pull verbal punches – he always knew what would hurt the most, so you knew he thought about what he said before he said it – Rachel had an atypical nurturing sentiment. Kim figured it came from having to help raise a little brother when she was only twelve. She was still sarcastic, and blunt, and swore a lot but she asked questions. She was always checking, and helping, and inquiring in this really innocuous way. She'd talk the whole time too. Telling stories about something funny she'd seen on TV, or something stupid Jacob had done, or this space-saving idea Addie had for their apartment would inevitably distract Kim with conversation long enough for Rachel to do an entire load of laundry, or cook a whole meal, or pick up all the shoes that Kim just couldn't reach off the floor. So it never felt like an obligation, and Kim never felt particularly bad about Rachel helping, because she felt like a friend.

It was the first time Kim considered herself to have a friend among the imprints. She got lumped in with Emily for so long, because they were both imprints. Like that was enough they needed to have in common in order to become BFFs. Kim thought that maybe the others put the two together so Kim and Emily could swamp tips on being imprinted to teenage wolfboys. Kim really didn't want any advice from Emily. Emily was a few years older than her, and she was so boring.

Kim always thought Emily cooked and cleaned a lot because it was necessary. And she guessed it was, considering the frequency with which the Pack tramped through her house in the early years. But even when it was just the two of them spending an afternoon together… all Emily would do was
cook or clean. After making a whole meal for the two of them – when sandwiches would've sufficed – Kim would watch as Emily sat on the couch and started nervous fidgeting until she got up to clean some already sterile surface. After that, Kim had told Jared that she wasn't going to start another Emily war, but the girl just creeped her out and if she wanted to spend time together she could come to their house where there was dust, some expired dip in the back of the fridge, muddy shoes at the door, and a week's worth of laundry on top of the dryer.

Kim was also not blind to the fact that Emily wouldn't come near her with a thirty nine and a half foot pole. She didn't really blame anyone for giving her a wide berth, since she'd turned into a mourning, constipated, pregnant psychopath - but Kim thought it was novel that the first imprint and cardinal provider had no idea what to do with her.

But Rachel was totally different. While Emily was so contained inside her house, her home, and her role, Rachel was so… normal. Kim had known of Rachel and Becca before they graduated, however Kim was very shy and the twins were very not-shy, and so they never really befriended each other. But the day of Jared's funeral had seen Kim incapable of moving from the bathroom floor, lest she vomit up her internal organs – because there definitely wasn't any food left to come up – and Paul beating his head against a wall because he just didn't know what to do. Then Rachel showed up with a black dress, some kava tea for anxiety and panic, and she held Kim's hand through the entire process of even simply dressing. One step, one zipper, at a time and they were out the door.

Rachel's calm and peaceful energy swallowed Kim entirely, engulfing her in the Pack that day. It was probably the only thing that kept her from throwing up on someone's shoes. That and the kava. God bless the kava.

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**Friday, June 29, 2007**

Jezzie was homesick. Viciously so. She never said so, but Seth could tell. Mostly because he was guaranteed a call from her once everyday. He didn't mind, actually he thought that it was kinda nice that Jezzie didn't just light out of Forks for med school and never talk to any of them again – especially given that her and Emb were through. Well… good luck telling Embry that. Seth was pretty certain that Jezzie – who he was ninety percent sure could barely keep herself from crying during most phone calls – was taking the whole thing better than Embry was. Embry was the epitome of a depressed lump. Seth almost couldn't wait until he moved on campus.

There was a distinct difference between the two. Seth was pretty sure that Jezzie missed home: everybody. She talked to Leah about once per week and emailed Anna constantly. So, he knew she wasn't just being some psycho girl with her guy problems – because Seth had seen a lot of that since he started high school – she was just homesick. Whether or not Embry was part of it was actually kinda hard to decide.

Embry, however, missed the damn shit out of Jezzie Sullivan. And he beat himself up about it constantly. Paul was going stircrazy having to patrol with him. Seth got a spare few moments of it whenever he came to take over evening patrol. That guy was fucking pathetic.

"Why don't you just call her, say you're sorry and be done with it?" Jake insisted. Jake didn't know what to make of it most days. Embry'd gone through hell and back dealing with his own head, imprinting, and how Jezzie fit in there – he and Leah still hadn't figured it all out, yet. And now he was just going to throw it all away? Clearly he wasn't over it.

"Veronica and I have been dating for, like, six months," Quil intoned. "Do you have any idea how often I put my foot in my mouth? Shit happens man. But I cannot deal with you mentally harping about this."
"Dude, it's... it's more than that."

And what affected Papa Wolf affected Seth. Because Embry had been a near constant presence in Seth's head for close to a year, Seth's wolf was really highly attuned to Embry's, but not nearly as much as Embry was to Seth. Which is why Embry knew that Seth liked Anna a lot more than he was really capable of currently understanding. He thought it was like déjà vu watching those two. It was interesting to watch a non-imprinted relationship develop from the outside. However, there was no way in hell Embry was ever taking relationship advice from his pup.

Regardless, Embry's mental warfare was starting to affect Seth. Just like any intense emotion bled through the entire Pack. But Embry's was intense and sustained. So Seth woke up many mornings just wanting to stay in his bed and refusing to move before he realized he had no reason to be a lump. He was generally morose, and he didn't even have his own teenage attitude to blame. It was Embry's. Who was a full-fledged adult, regardless of his age ending in the word 'teen'.

But Seth wasn't just feeling sadness from his Papa Wolf... For many days he was definitely feeling something else, but he couldn't quite place it. Then one Sunday Seth was patrolling with Collin – he had taken Jared's place on the Saturday morning line after he had died – when Jake and Embry arrived early. After checking to see if hell had frozen over while he and Collin paced an invisible property line in the woods, Collin phased out and went home, but Seth went to go meet Jake and Embry. Because Embry had that weird unidentifiable feeling again. And Seth could tell he and Jake had just been arguing. The residual mental grumbling kinda gave it away.

When Seth finally caught up to them, he froze. Jake was normal. Big wolf, lots of red fur, sniffing a day's old raccoon trail but Embry looked ready to drop. His tail was down – almost between his legs – and his head hung below his shoulder line. Way too submissive a stance for a Third. Hell, even Collin didn't get that bad around Jake. And half of Embry and Quil putting up with Jake was appearances – apparently after being friends with the Alpha through your entire human childhood, it makes it hard for even their wolves to take him so seriously. So what gives?

Seth cracked back into human form and neither Jacob nor Embry seemed to pay much attention. He wondered if they'd gone back to arguing now that he wasn't in their heads anymore.

And then it hit Seth... "Embry? Are you... embarrassed?" Seth knew that emotion. When you grew a clear twelve inches inside six weeks and still had thecripplingly inability to coordinate your limbs at the age of fourteen, you got very well-acquainted with 'embarrassment.' Fifteen had been marginally better. The gray wolf glared up and snapped its jaws at the young boy. "That's it!" Seth said, latching on to his epiphany. "I haven't been able to figure it out – two whole weeks I've been dealing with leftover emotions that aren't mine and I can't evenfigure them out. What the hell are you ashamed of? What did you do? You're supposed to help me with this shit! Not the other way around. I'm so confused!"

Seth was losing his goddamn mind. And if Embry didn't figure his shit out soon, Seth was going to drag him by his tail across the country to Jezzie's apartment.

Jacob looked at Embry appraisingly, his large head cocked to one side. Then he sat back on his haunches. Embry just laid down on his belly and Jake rested his snout on the smaller wolf's shoulder. Seth was about to ask someone to explain what was going on, when Jake phased back human in the pine needles.

Seth just looked at Jacob. Did he really even need to ask at this point? The Embry wolf stayed in its spot – looking the picture of pathetic, Seth insisted – and Jacob crossed over to Seth's side, pulling his shorts on.
"He shamed her," Jacob said. "He shamed his mate, his wolf is eating him alive for it."

"What did you do?" Seth wailed. They were guys. Shit was not supposed to be this complicated.

"He made her feel bad. You know Jezzie has a guilt complex – so admittedly, it's not really that hard – but... he made his mate feel ashamed and his wolf knows that's a cardinal wrong. He broke a core rule of Pack respect."

Seth quirked his brow. "Well, that's retarded," he insisted. "So there's no way you can ever make someone feel bad? That's stupid – what if they do something they should feel bad about? Huh? What then? If that was true, Paul would've gone insane for making people feel bad months ago."

Jacob shook his head. "That's exactly it. Embry and his wolf feel guilty because they know she didn't deserve it. Embry's taking it bad enough, but his wolf is downright stewing. Why didn't you say anything?" Jacob directed his last statement to the gray wolf on the ground. It only snuffed a breath into the dry pine needles.

"So he made Jezzie feel bad for something either she didn't do or something she didn't need to feel bad about?"

"I don't know. I think so. His head's kind of a mess."

"She calls me everyday just to hear a voice from this time zone. Her and Leah talk all day on Saturdays. And the length of her emails to Anna could rival a Russian novel! And you think she's mad enough to not even talk to you? You can't pull this bullshit if you're not even willing to say anything to her."

Jacob just watched, slightly amazed and slightly amused, as Seth ranted. He largely suspected he was just letting off steam. He knew Embry's issues had been affecting Seth, and he knew Seth wasn't handling them well. But given that they weren't his issues, he didn't blame Seth.

"I can't handle this! I'm going home to make a sandwich and watch Star Trek until my eyes melt out of my face or someone figures out how to make this all better. Whichever comes first. Call me if you need anything!"

And with that Seth stormed out of the woods, towards town. Jacob hoped he had the clarity of mind to remember to put on some pants before he got to the road.

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Monday, July 2, 2007

It was one of the first days of summer and Collin had to go to the doctor's. He thought this was eight different kinds of retarded. He'd taken to calling the shrink 'the doctor' because it made him feel less crazy then having to admit to going to a psychiatrist, even if it was only ever an internal admission.

Everyone that counted – his family, the Pack – knew where he was going. None of them ever mentioned it or brought it up. But whenever patrols accidentally overlapped with his appointments, Jake let him off without a single complaint. It was all too easy. Part of him was glad to be able to make it quick conversation, and part of him was pissed about feeling like people were giving him the special treatment because he had these friggin' family issues.

It was mostly the idea that bothered him. He'd done the whole "sit in the office for an hour and not say anything" the first two times. Then after that he spent two more times talking in circles with the guy. But Lee was a nice enough guy. Collin had honestly expected some wrinkled-ass old Einstein type and some ugly tweed pants. But the Port Angeles office and the doctor that ran the place was
nothing like he expected. The secretary had been an older woman, nice, if spacey. And Lee's office was generally plastered with sports memorabilia. Rachel and Paul probably would have had an aneurysm if they saw the signed Ray Bourque poster on the opposite side of the door.

Lee was, Collin guessed, in his thirties. Old enough to be a doctor, not old enough to look old. And he looked like he might've been Native. Collin learned he was half Umatilla, half Korean and raised in Long Beach. Collin thought Lee might've been even more confused than he was.

And when Collin asked about all the "totally not-shrink stuff" on the third appointment when he'd talked about nothing important, Lee had told him that joys of having your own office meant you could put whatever the hell you wanted on the walls.

Lee wasn't so bad.

And he didn't make Collin feel crazy. It was hard most days, trying to talk without spilling the beans about Pack – which would not have been good – but Lee mostly let Collin lead the conversation and would occasionally ask some questions.

"So your brother's been aggressive for a long time, then?" Lee asked after Collin finished a story about Tommy pushing him off a jetty when they were kids.

"Pretty much. I mean… he's always been a jerk. At least to me."

"So that's why it doesn't feel like things change – even though you got older."

"Yeah, I guess so," Collin shrugged, putting his feet up on the coffee table mimicking Lee's gesture. He never sat behind the desk during their appointments. "I mean, I guess most brothers grow out of the 'sibling rivalry' thing eventually. We never did."

"And that's where it becomes different, you think? Just because you're older?"

"Well, I mean I guess in theory you shouldn't ever be hurting your brother or sister. But when you're little it's not a big deal. When you get older it is."

"Sibling rivalry is normal, Collin," Lee agreed. "But kids are prone to thinking before they act. Which is why even though we still disagree with people as we get older there's less of a tendency to act on our feelings. Mostly we talk it out. Or yell it out."

"Things were okay for a while when he went to high school," Collin offered.

"Really?" Lee asked. "How so?"

"Well, he was busy with friends and school and girls," Collin replied. "He hung out a lot with some people that I know now."

"Are these people still friends with Tommy?"

"Nope," Collin shook his head. "By the time he got to his senior year, he really went off the deep end. Drugs and shit. And they dropped him. They didn't do stuff like that. Still don't."

"And is that when your sibling rivalry picked back up again?"

"Yeah," Collin nodded. "I knew his old friends. The rez is small, so we all end up in the same kinda circle of friends. I think he was paranoid. Like that he was gonna get thrown under the bus or something."
"So, not sibling rivalry then?"

"I guess not," Collin agreed. "I think he was just trying to scare me into not ratting him out or anything."

"So there's a difference there, huh?"

"Yeah…" Collin trailed off. "I don't know what his deal was though. I mean, he'd moved down to Hoquiam and I had no idea what he was up to. I couldn't have sold him out even if I wanted to."

"Sometimes when we're scared, we do things we wouldn't normally. And drugs alter the way we think and deal with situations. Just like alcohol. Used over a prolonged period of time, damage can be just as acute."

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**Wednesday, July 11, 2007**

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Nessie," Jacob replied as he picked up the spare few articles of clothing strewn about the room and dumped them in the hamper while she climbed under the covers.

"Why are Auntie Rachel and Addie getting married?"

"Because they love each other," Jacob replied simply as he sat on the edge of her bed.

"But you and Leah love each other and you're not married," Nessie replied. Jacob wondered how children could be so innocently blunt.

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Because Leah and I are different."

"Why?"

"Auntie Rachel and Addie love each other, and Leah and I love each other but it's different kinds of love," Jacob elaborated, hoping that calmed her questioning. There was no way in hell he was prepared to explain sexuality – if her brain was going to down the 'why are two girls getting married?' path – or 'you should marry Leah because anyone with an IQ greater than a cabbage can tell she's taken to the role of mom like a fish to water' path. Jacob was not prepared for either explanation. It was bedtime. He was tired.

"Like an extra special kind of love?"

"Yeah," Jake nodded, decidedly that logic worked. "You like ice cream, right?"

"Of course!" she chirped.

"But you're not going to marry ice cream. See, love comes in lots of different packages Ness, it doesn't always mean you're gonna marry a person you love."

"I'd have to marry a lot of ice cream…"

"Yes, you would," Jake laughed. "All right, Renesmee, teeth brushed, story read, time for bed!"
"You rhymed!" she smiled rolling over into her covers as Jake pulled the quilt over the side exposed by her turn.

"Just call me Bill Shakespeare," he grinned, and leaned down giving her a kiss on the forehead. "Goodnight, Nessie. I love you."

"I lub you too," she yawned. He stood and made a quiet retreat, as her eyes drifted closed.

Jacob stretched his back as he made towards the empty living room. "Leah?" he asked through a yawn, wondering if she'd finally gone home.

She sat bolt upright from the sofa – with its back to the kitchen it was no wonder Jake couldn't see her. "The spoon's in the fridge!" she rasped out, with eyes half open.

"Thanks," Jake laughed. "I'll remember that for next time."

"Ugh," Leah grimaced and rubbed her face, realizing she fell asleep. Jacob went to the sink for a drink. "Christ… what time is it?"

"Midnight."

"That's awful," Leah stood and stretched and Jacob tried not appear like he was totally staring while, in fact, he was totally staring. "I used to be able to make it until two before I started dozing."

She dragged her feet towards the kitchen, looking like the walking dead.

"Leah, you are here – before I'm even up – at six in the morning. Which means you're waking up earlier than that to get here. And you stay here until well past Nessie is asleep, even though her night terrors have almost disappeared and she sleeps about half as much as normal people."

"What're you saying?" Leah mumbled as she fished around the cabinet for a glass.

"I'm saying, don't you think it's kinda pointless for you to go home to crash in your bed for four hours a day and spend two or three more trying not to pass out on my couch. You can just… you can stay here Leah. It's fine. You pretty much live here already."

"Jacob," Leah sighed, resting her forehead on his shoulder. "You have the most uncomfortable sofa, ever. And that includes Paul's – before and after it got broke in half. If I spend a night on that thing I'll be crippled."

Jacob rolled his eyes as one hand reached for her waist to keep her balanced, while the other took her empty glass and turned on the faucet. "Okay, Leah you don't have to sleep on my couch."

"You have no other beds," she stated point blank. Then she paused for a moment and lifted her head up. "Wait… Jacob Black, are you coming onto me?"

"Only if you want me to," Jake admitted. "Otherwise, I'm offering you a bed so you don't drive yourself into the ground."

She smiled. "Okay."

Jacob wasn't ignorant to the fact that she hadn't answered the question.

Thursday, July 12, 2007
"Dude, what is this shit?"

"I don't know. I found them that way."

"What do you mean you found them that way?"

"I mean I came over to ask Jake if he still had the spare shift knob from that old Toyota, and this is what I found."

"Are they like…"

"Dude, two Alphas? Don't you think you'd smell that like a mile away? They've just been sleeping."

"Guys? Where are you? Why did you call me over here for some kind of twisted ass emergency I—Oh god, my eyes!"

After Seth screamed, Leah sprung out of the bed like a coiled spring and Jacob fumbled to the floor on the other side. "What the fuck is going on!" she screeched.

"What are you doing?" Seth screamed at Leah.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Leah screamed at Quil and Embry and this time they actually jumped, as a vein visibly pulsed in Leah's neck and forehead.

"I don't even want to know!" Seth yelled in reply to his sister.

"Get the fuck out!" she screamed at the three of them, as they shrank back but appeared too horrified to move.

Leah was preparing to remove them bodily when Jake finally stood up. "Everyone shut the hell up and get the fuck out of my room!" And with that, Jacob steered his two best friends and Leah's little brother out of the room and slammed the door.

He could hear some muffled chatter, a few punches and then Nessie. "Why is everyone yelling? I heard a lot of bad words. Quil can you reach the Fruity Pebbles?"

Jacob let out a breath as the volume levels in his house returned to normal. He could hear the others regaining normalcy and talking with Nessie. He turned around to see Leah sitting on the edge his bed, tense and fuming.

He sat carefully beside her, not knowing if she might lash out at him too. "Thank you," she mumbled with her face in her hands, beginning to relax and lean into his shoulder. "Ugh," she sighed. "Everyone's going to be talking about us now."

"Leah they've been talking about us for months," Jake offered simply.

"But now they have visuals. Because you have the biggest fucking spoon complex I have ever borne witness to. We're gonna get you a goddamn body pillow or something."

"Nah," Jake grinned. "It's just you. Normally I sleep flat on my back."

"Shut up."

_Friday, July 20, 2007_
Jezzie stumbled across a closet full of old household and decorating supplies after looking for a bucket in the supply closet at the end of the hallway after work one day. She'd been eating dinner while sitting on the floor and noticed that the hardwood floors in her apartment were actually quite lovely, if absolutely filthy and scuffed to high heavens. She wanted to clean her floors but discovered a treasure trove of supplies. Old Mrs. Nelson the landlady had given her carte blanche of whatever she could find and Monique – at an even six feet - had pulled a few cans of half used paint of the top shelf for her.

"Oo," Jezzie's nose crinkled as she carefully attempted to chisel off the lid. "I think this is lead paint. It's older than me."

"You gonna start chewin' on the windowsills?" Monique asked as she sifted through some rolled up wallpaper in the corner by the door.

"Hm," Jezzie thought. "Probably not."

"Then live on the edge, honey," Monique replied. "Oh Lord, isn't this the most appalling thing you've ever seen?" She unfurled a length of gaudy 70s wallpaper. "I think I'm going to be ill."

Jezzie grimaced but joined Monique as she picked through the pile of dated paper. "I think this is the wallpaper in my bathroom," Jezzie noted with some squinted eyes.

"Are those... cats?" Monique asked. Jezzie nodded. "Oh Lord have mercy."

**Late Summer 2007**

He could smell her. Her scent hit him in the face like a crowbar the moment he entered the street and he knew this must've been where she lived. The trees that sprouted from between the cement slab sidewalk trapped odor in the street like a cave. He could smell many other things, too, however he'd been following only a trace of her since he'd recognized it passing through the city.

He really only had been passing through, on his way further north. He hadn't expected to stop. Then again, he hadn't expected to find one of La Push's ranking female humans quite so far from home. Had she been exiled? He didn't think so…

He'd stopped in that busy downtown street when he'd caught the scent – just to confirm. He hadn't even been looking for her, however it was a nice surprise. He followed the scent, and it brought him to a local college's library. He was quite certain it was her. He became slightly distracted, but decided to follow the trail to its end. Was she still around? Was she visiting?

He thought it most, most unwise for the young La Push Alpha to let his ranked Pack wander so far from home alone. It was a temptation he could not resist. He grinned wickedly, took a deep breath of the crisp night air, followed the strength of the girl's scent, and walked silently down the empty road.

**Monday, August 13, 2007**

Jezzie had been in a bit of a rush on Monday. By some stroke of cosmic alignment her alarm had not gone off. By the time she woke up, she had seven minutes to get ready before she missed the last subway circuit that would let her get to campus on time.

She made her way home that night – having indulged herself and gone out to dinner with a few friends – and trudged up the stairs. She paused momentarily as she unlocked the door to her apartment. The stark, bright light of the old hallway fixture made the pure white door shine in an
obnoxious way. However, it also illuminated the new scuff marks on the door. Jezzie reached out to the dirty smudges at the level of her chest and touched. When she pulled her hands away, her finger tips were covered. Dirt.

Ew, she thought. She had no idea what the crazy ass neighbors were up to, but hopefully it kept off her door and out of her apartment. She'd have to ask Monique. She munched on a bowl of grapes that night and sat in the doorway, scrubbing the grime from her door.

On Tuesday morning, Jezzie ran into her landlady in the entryway.

"Oh, dear? Someone was by to see you. You weren't home."

"Really?" Jezzie asked and turned around, releasing the building's door handle. "Who?" Jezzie found that odd. A handful of her classmates had her phone number, her email, but no one knew where she lived. It hadn't come up. The only people that knew where she lived were back in Washington. And her aunt in Maine. Any of them would have called her first. Probably.

"Young man," Old Mrs. Nelson clarified. Jezzie waited for further descriptors, seeing as Mrs. Nelson's definition of 'young man' seemed to be anyone younger than herself. "Tall. A little older than you, maybe. Dark hair, fair skin. Very strong jawline." Mrs. Nelson then proceeded nudge Jezzie in the ribs a bit with her pointy elbow in a suggestive way. "Attractive boy, but appeared very haggard. Could've used a shave. I don't fancy me all these scruffy chaps, nowadays."

"Mrs. Nelson," Jezzie replied hoisting her backpack back onto her shoulder. "I don't know who the man was. If he comes by again, have him wait outside okay? Don't let him in the building. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Nelson fussed. "He was harmless. Nice young man. Besides, what have I got to steal, huh?"

"When was this, Mrs. Nelson?"

"Was yesterday," Old Mrs. Nelson replied. "About noontime. Said he'd stopped by to say hello and you weren't home. He said he'd try again another day."

"Oh good…"

Jezzie spent the entirety of her commute wracking her brain for any memory of a man under the age of seventy-five that fit Mrs. Nelson's description. She had initially assumed it was someone from Forks or La Push. But the tall, dark haired, fair skinned, haggard man's qualities didn't fit anyone from the rez or Peninsula.

It wasn't until she was three stops shy of her destination that she felt someone take the seat beside her. "Got the time?" asked the gravelly baritone.

Jezzie glanced down at her wrist. "Half past seven," she replied shortly. When she felt his arm fall down against the seat behind her she made to stand. Crowded subway car or not, she was not in the mood to be harassed for the next few minutes before she got to her stop. She felt a fist in the back of her jacket holding her in place. "Let me go, or I'll scream," she muttered around clenched teeth.

"Oh, feisty, aren't you. I thought so…" Jezzie's stomach rolled but she tried to keep her face even. She finally turned to the man next to her – finally got a look at him – what she saw almost made her swallow her tongue.

The man was tall and slender with black hair to the shoulders and sallow skin. He was young – yes –
not out of his thirties but his cheeks were covered with uneven and gristly stubble. His face was harsh and creased deeply like worn leather.

"You're awful far from home, aren't you?" Jezzie continued to gape, realizing this was the man that Old Mrs. Nelson had let into the building, and wondering how he'd found her. Had he followed her? Who was he? What did he want from her? Could she reach her pepper spray in time and still not spray herself?

But much to her relief, he released her jacket. "Tell the puppy pack 'hello' for me," he muttered quietly. And with that, many of her questions were answered, and still more arose. She stood electing to get off the subway two stops early and use the walk to clear her head. She stumbled towards class in a moderate daze, wondering who she'd just encountered. Whoever it was might not have been human. Puppy pack. He'd known about the Pack. Maybe he knew about her. Maybe that's why he commented about her being far from home. She was suddenly incredibly nauseous… Only one more week until her summer internship was over and she got to spend a week back home… Not a moment too soon.
Monday, August 20, 2007

"Daddy!" Jezzie yipped in happiness as she skipped down the tarmac of the Port Angeles Municipal Airport. "I'm so glad to be home!"

"Ah, good to have you back, my girl. Even if it's just a week. You think I'd be used to livin' without you – seein' as your gone all summer and me all winter, but it never does get any easier."

"Oh, Dad," Jezzie sighed, pulling her duffel bag up off the ground and wrapping her free arm around her father's waist. "Stop being such a drama queen."

Jezzie and Al talked animatedly the entire ride home and it was only when they came within a few minutes of home, Jezzie turned a quirked brow to her father as he drove them towards the coast, instead of inland towards Forks. "Dad?" she asked.

"I'm quite certain that boy, Jacob, has been wanting to know whenabouts you'd be home for near ten days now. I know you and Embry didn't part company on such pleasant terms, but I suspect Jacob might be trying to seize an opportunity."

"So you're just offering me up for sacrifice?" Jezzie laughed. She knew Jake wasn't after her like that. He was probably just getting a little fruity having member of the Pack so far away for so long. He probably would just want her to sit on his couch for a few hours so he could get his head back normal.

"Absolutely not," Al replied gruffly. "After that boy beat me out of a good game of poker, I'm inclined to do nothing for him, the smug little shit."

"You played poker with Jacob?" Jezzie asked in confusion.

"Mhm," Al nodded. "He's not too bad – his father's damn terrible – and the Chief of Police is awfully sly, too."

"Oh god, Dad…"

"But I must confess a soft spot for Leah Clearwater. She asked about you a day or two ago and I agreed to let you by once you got in. I do like Leah. Good girl. Doesn't take crap from anyone."

"No she most certainly does not."

Jezzie suspected that Leah came as close as she ever would to a girly scream when Al pulled up in front of the Clearwater place and Jezzie hopped out. The two girls collided in the middle of the yard and Jezzie did enough squealing for the two of them, while Leah just laughed and smiled.

"Have her back home in a few hours," Al nodded towards Leah as he leaned out the pick up's window.

"Sure thing, Al," Leah saluted Al Sullivan and gave Jezzie a noogie at the same time.

"Welcome back, whore queen!"
"It's good to be back."

"Ready for the world tour? I got some people you gotta see."

Jezzie made the rounds of La Push. Quil and Veronica were actually on their way down the street to see Leah, when Jezzie and Leah set out. If Jezzie's squealing didn't compensate for Leah's lack, Veronica's certainly did.

Quil spun her in circles for old times sake before they set off in the direction of Jake's house. Apparently he was going stir crazy.

Jezzie lead the way up the stairs and knocked politely before edging the door open slightly. Billy rolled up to the spot and opened it the rest of the way. "Hi there, Jezzie," he offered with a knowing grin. "Get on in here before my boy chews an arm off the sofa."

Jezzie smiled and Leah followed her inside. "Jacob Black, what did that sofa ever do to you?" She looked around but couldn't see him.

They both turned towards Billy. "Wait for it," he assured them.

Then there was the sound of a slamming aluminum door, pounding footsteps over a yard, up the stairs and the wing of the back porch door. "I can feel it this time for real! I'm not making it up!" Jacob rounded the corner of the hallway covered in car grease before finally spotting Jezzie.

He grinned wide before reaching down and scooping her up in a full body hug. "I am not putting you down for at least an hour, Little Red. Do you have any idea what it does to the Alpha brain to have the you on the other side of the country? It sucks. Wait! You smell funny…"

"Jake… can't… breathe… oxygen…" Jezzie squeaked and Jake replaced her on the floor.

"Sorry!" he apologized, still keeping a hand on her shoulder. He looked her over once more. "But seriously," he ducked down and Jezzie pushed him away.

"Jacob Black don't you dare sniff me!"

"You smell… weird. It's vaguely familiar. But I don't like it. It's not a good familiar."

" Maybe it's just the new city. Boston's a lot different than Washington. I have also just spent an ungodly amount of time in various airports and planes."

Jake nodded, agreeing not to sniff Jezzie. Her point did have merit. "It's good to have you back, Jezzie."

"It's good to be back, my paranoid Alpha. I have an idea. Turn around," she spun her index finger to indicate that he should turn and when he acquiesced she hopped on his back. "All right, let's go visit me a wolfpack. Where in tarnation is your imprint?"

Rachel had big sighs of relief at having another normal female around. Because apparently everyone excepting her and Leah was going absolutely nuts over the wedding for the end of the week.

"Get married in jeans, I said," Rachel wailed. "It'll be so much easier, I said. But did anyone listen to me? No. Because no one ever listens to me! Ever! Paul ran away hours ago and no one else will come near me because I'm too close to all the crazy!"

"Rachel, breathe," Jezzie laughed, bracing the girl's face on each side.
"You know you love it," Addie crooned and her slender arms worked around Rachel's waist from behind. Jezzie let go of Rachel's face and she spun in Addie's embrace.

"I don't," she pouted. "There's way too many flowers in my life right now."

"Oh, poor baby," Addie leaned for a slow kiss. "It'll all be over in less than a week. So please try act like you're looking forward to marrying me?"

"I am looking forward to it, except for the part where I'm not. It has nothing to do with you – obviously!"

It was then that Paul flung the front door to the Black's house open. (All wedding planning for the week had moved into the Black's living room and kitchen. The house was near unrecognizable and rumor had it that Jacob – who had conspicuously gone missing – was sleeping on the Ateara's couch, and Billy was on a three day fishing trip with Charlie). "I came to retrieve my imprint before she pulls a Carrie and douses us all with pig blood!"

"Mm…" Addie hummed, ignoring Paul and kissing her fiancée again. "That would be effective if not for the lovely convenience of Hindu weddings being primarily red."

"Pig blood all around!" Paul shouted.

"I'd settle for a Bloody Mary," Rachel supplied.

"You kids have fun, I've got to get back to my place," Jezzie added. "Addie, you look like you have enough help; Rachel, if Leah is busy and you need some sanity just give me a call."

Rachel smiled and offered some glad thanks as she took Paul's hand and Addie picked up an armful of fabric scraps from the couch.

Under the guise of walking back down the street towards the Clearwater's to have Leah bring her home, she skedaddled across the street to the Ateara's and knocked on the door. Everything was dark inside, and she wondered if anyone was home. Then she heard some distinctive rustling and knocked again.

"Jacob, it's me," she spoke knowing he would be able to hear her. "I come with nothing wedding-related, I promise." The door opened a crack and Jacob peered out. When he confirmed that Jezzie did not present a threat he allowed her inside. "Where's Nessie?"

"Her and Leah are scouting out falafel joints or something. I was actually going to sleep, but the never ceasing paranoia that someone is going to pop out of nowhere with flowers, tulle, or guest lists is kind of overwhelming. What can I do for you?"

"Falafel?"

"Yeah. I think it's like grass. Like legit grass, not the smoking kind."

"One can only hope," Jezzie rolled her eyes. "So…" she said trying to find some kind of segue, while plopping onto the Ateara's couch.

"Jezzie," Jacob interrupted her silence, sprawling on the couch next to her. "Just lay it on me. Like a band-aid, make it quick – it'll be less painful that way."

Jezzie pulled her legs up towards her chest and rested her chin on her knees.
"Oh-kay," Jacob announced; Jezzie was giving him vivid Bella flashbacks – to the days where she felt compelled to ball up because she thought all her guts would just spill over the floor around her. It wasn't a pleasant parallel. "Little Red, you've never gone fetal ball on me, so now I'm worried. Either you tell me or I just start having people killed indiscriminately until we figure out who's making you do that."

"Remember that smell you mentioned earlier when I first showed up at your place?" Jacob nodded and so Jezzie kept going. She took a deep breath and attempted to relax, letting her knees fall until she sat cross-legged. "Well, last week I was on the subway and some guy sat next to me--"

"Oh Jesus, I am going to have to kill someone, aren't I?"

"Let me finish," Jezzie offered a small grin at Jacob's remark. "He asked for the time, and then told me that he thought I was awfully far from home. That creeped me out, and I thought I had a cross-country stalker, until he told me to say 'hello to the puppy pack'."

Jacob's face was blank, his eyes wide, and his mouth slightly agape. "Fuck," he offered after a moment of silence. He leaned over and grasped a bunch of Jezzie's hair and inhaled. Jezzie was going to remark on how awkward that was – wolf or not – when he stood up and started pacing and cursing.

"Fuck… shit. Goddammit. Son of a bitch… So stupid!"

"Jacob," Jezzie interrupted his ramblings. Her voice was a little shaky as she tried to repress the sudden nausea. The whole ordeal had made her nervous – really nervous – but the fact that Jacob was nervous didn't help. Since when had Jezzie relied on a seventeen year old as a mental lifeboat?

"Please stop that," she implored. "You're not making it any better."

"Oh god. Okay. Sorry," he sat purposefully back down on the couch and took a calming breath. There was a slight pause and when he spoke again he was a lot more calm. "You think it was Azrael?"

"Who else could it have been? It wasn't anyone I knew – including the Plains wolves and the Cullens. Do I know everyone that knows about the Pack?"

Jacob thought for a moment. "Yeah, you do… I think. Minus some vampires."

"He wasn't cold like the vampires," Jezzie noted. "I could feel it when he grabbed my jacket. He was tall and really wan – not really pale, per se, just unhealthy looking – scraggly black hair to the shoulders. Sound familiar?"

"Not really, but the Pack only saw Azrael when he was wolf. He bolted at the end, but he showed up and left in werewolf form. Smells like him though, however old. You said this was last week?"

Jezzie nodded. "Last Monday."

"Wow," Jacob remarked. "It's strange that the one scent would last so long after only one encounter."

"Oh no," Jezzie moaned as her epiphany hit her, and she leaned downward against her knees again. "He was in my building! He knows where I live!" Somehow she'd forgotten that minor detail. Jacob looked like he'd about swallowed his tongue so Jezzie kept explaining and tried not to babble. "Someone came looking for me – said they knew me and wanted to say hi – and my landlady let them in the building, but I wasn't home. He fit the description, I realized when I saw him on the
subway, but I didn’t… I forgot until just now. Oh god, what if he's been back to my place!

"Okay," Jacob nodded in a dazed and measured way. "We're gonna need some antacids, the scotch, and I think I'm going to call Damian."

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**Wednesday, August 22, 2007**

What kind of professor wanted to meet every single one of their students? Like on a one-to-one basis. Weren't professors supposed to just dole out dry and boring lectures about God knows what to a hall of a hundred kids and just be done with it? Wasn't it bad enough that lectures started in the heat of friggin' August?

Embry's finance professor wasn't quite like that. He wanted to know all his students personally. It kinda helped that class was more around the fifty person range and not one hundred, he guessed.

Embry knocked on the heavy wood door and opened it after he heard an affirmative from inside. He stepped inside the small office, closed the door and made the half step to the chair on the other side of Dr. Murtagh's desk. The room was small and bordered on one side by a wall of shelves that were threatening to pour forth their contents onto the unsuspecting.

"Take a seat Mr. Call," Murtagh indicated as he finished typing something on his computer.

Embry sat and observed the room for a few moments before the man finished and wheeled his chair around. "What do you think?" he asked. "Lovely little cave I have here, huh?"

"Yeah," Embry nodded absently as he glanced around. "I think a room says a lot about a person."

"What is my office telling you?"

Embry shrugged. "I don't think I need your office to tell me. I can make my own judgments."

"You know Mr. Call, you strike quite an intimidating presence given your size and yet, you seem an incredibly placid individual."

"I'd say that's a pretty accurate assumption," Embry nodded noting the amount of political philosophy books in his finance professor's shelves.

"And what do you make of me?"

Embry met Dr. Murtagh's gaze and replied after a short delay. "You seem like the talk softly and carry a big stick type. Like you know what you want to hear, you're just waiting for someone to say it."

"Mr. Call," Murtagh leaned back in his chair and chuckled a bit to himself. "I do believe you just called me an manipulative ass."

"Of course not, sir," Embry shook his head. He didn't try to act fearful at having potentially offended a member of faculty during his first week of class. Murtagh didn't seem the type to be offended.

"Why are manhole covers round, Mr. Call?"

Was he serious? Apparently so. "I don't know, sir. And I know what they say about assuming, but I would hazard a guess that it's so the covers don't fall into the manholes." Being a sewer worker had to suck enough on it's own. Imagine having an inept coworker drop a manhole cover on you while
you were knee deep in yesterday's lunch?

"Do you know why I have these meetings with each my students, Mr. Call?" he asked. "Run through more less the same kinds of questions?"

"No, sir, I don't. But if I did, I probably wouldn't be sitting on this side of the desk."

"Good observation, Mr. Call," Murtagh nodded. "Character study. It's hard to get a grasp of personal character just by watching a person take notes or listen to a lecture about interest rates. Talking to a person reveals a lot. And I quite think I like you, Mr. Call."

"You're not too bad yourself Dr. Murtagh."

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**Friday, August 24, 2007**

"Why are you here?" Paul asked when Jezzie Sullivan of all people waltzed into his kitchen the day of Rachel's wedding. He'd been out in the garage generally swearing and kicking things as his car's engine refused to turn over.

"I've been given the lovely duty of Pack Wrangler, according to Rachel. I have to make sure you all get their on time and properly clothed. Though, I'm learning it's a lot like herding cats."

"Glad everyone has so much faith in me. I promise to be there on time. But right now I have to go find out how to get my engine to turn over."

"Play to your strengths, Paul. And if you want I'll take a look at your car," Jezzie chirped energetically as she hopped off his counter.

"In that?" he quirked a brow. She was in heels. And a dress. And not a long one.

"Sure," she shrugged as she made towards the living room and Paul could here the click of the door as she entered the garage. "As long as your undercarriage isn't oozing green slime, then I don't think it will be an issue. Got a creeper?"

"Excuse me?" Paul enunciated as he leaned in the doorway.

Jezzie turned her head and quirked a grin. "One of those boards with the wheels on it?" she explained.

"Oh," Paul nodded. "There against the wall. So how do you know so much about cars? I thought you were from a family of sailors?"

"I've been around La Push long enough," she grinned dropping the board on the ground and taking a seat, "for both Embry and Jacob to build on the basic mechanical knowledge my father taught me. Surprisingly, there's not a lot of fundamental differences between a ship and Chevy."

She rolled her small body underneath and Paul thought that the sight of just her legs and a set of heels sticking out from the underside of his car was really fucking hot. If Embry wasn't still pining after her like some kind of Shakespearean dipshit, Paul might've been a little less well-behaved.

"Where the heck have you been driving?" she interrupted his thoughts. "The salt flats? The corrosion under here is ridiculous."

"Great," Paul replied sarcastically. "I know the things a piece of shit, I just want it to run."
"Hand me an adjustable wrench and the WD-40?" her small hand reached out from near the driver side door. He obliged and took a seat on the steps and listened to her work and hum cheerfully to herself. He also watched her legs. He'd always wondered why that's all Embry fantasized about. There had to be more interesting parts of her, right? But as Paul listened to her hum and watched her click a stiletto'd heel to the beat of what he was pretty sure was a Wu-Tang song, he realized fantasizing about Jezzie's legs was a very good way to pass the time.

Was that inappropriate? Well, she was Emb's girl. Was. Past tense. They haven't even seen each other in months. Jezzie seemed mostly over it. Embry would probably never be over it. Paul wondered if Embry'd beat the shit out of him for catching these thoughts about his ex. Embry wasn't the only one with a tie to her. She was her own person. It wasn't his fault the girl worked out.

Paul stood and walked to the front end of the car. So Jezzie couldn't see him checking her out. A few moments later, he heard the board roll and felt a yank. He looked down as Jezzie hooked a toe of her shoe around his ankle to pull herself out from underneath the car.

She sat up and sprung lithely onto the hood. She was smiling slightly and had a knowing look in her eyes. Maybe she had seen him. She crossed her legs and started wiping the small bit of residue from her hands onto a rag.

"So Paul, are you a good news or bad news first kinda guy?"

"Bad."

Jezzie offered her half degreased fingers an appreciative nod. "Speaks of a balls to the wall attitude. Interesting."

She was teasing him.

Paul leaned forward placing a hand on each side of her and encroaching on her personal space. "I like saving the best for last. Dish, Little Red."

Jezzie grinned wickedly. And Paul realized she knew exactly what she was doing.

She opened her mouth and paused carefully. "You're gonna need a new muffler. This one's got a hole in it. The straps on your gas tank are about to drop the sucker and start a fiery conflagration the next time you hit a decent pothole. And I'm pretty sure your oil pan is rusted onto the car. Good look changing that."

"Anything else?" he leaned in closer, now only inches separating his face from Jezzie's. She made no move to back away and her body language was completely sure.

"I think you need a new catalytic converter," she whispered with an expression that looked as if she had just said something dirty.

"And the good news?"

"Your battery's dead."

"That's the good news?"

"It's the easiest to fix, so yes. What kind of good news were you expecting?"

Paul offered her a wolfish grin and Jezzie's smirk broke into a smile full of bright teeth. She uncrossed her legs, placing her heels on the bumper and used the leverage to lift herself up. She
collided with Paul forcefully - hips, chests, and lips thrown together in a complete disregard for neatness. He felt small quick hands against the skin beneath his shirt.

He felt a flick of her tongue, and opened his mouth to hers. One of her feet slipped momentarily before Paul caught her at the thigh; she didn't even skip a beat. She pulled herself closer, clenched her core muscles and used the strength to wind her legs around him, her hands against his shoulders, as the skirt of her dress moved up past her thighs.

She climbed higher and his hands found purchase on the back of her thighs, coming to the edge of her underwear. Her tongue teased his for a moment more before he leaned back. Not that this wasn't shaping up to be a hell of a lot of fun, but maybe he shouldn't be going tongue deep in his friend's ex-girlfriend? Were there consequences to that?

"Jezzie—"

"Sh," she interrupted. "No talking."

"Yes, ma'am," he mumbled into the skin at her collarbone. Okay, consequences be damned. Paul was just gonna enjoy the shit out of this. There weren't many other options, as Jezzie succeeded in putting his mind on a very single track.

"I like the sound of that," Jezzie decided.

Paul wasn't quite sure what she was going for here, but he decided it was worth having some fun until she wanted to stop. And she smelled fucking awesome. His nose followed the strength of her scent from her neck down to the deep cut in her dress, then his tongue retraced the route. Jezzie released a low satisfied noise and Paul felt a few of her muscle groups twitch in response.

She fisted the fabric of his collar in her small hands. "I've gotta go," she said quietly.

Paul sighed and his head collapsed into the crook of her neck. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Wish I was Paul," she said. "But I have my first ever gay wedding to go to and you really seem like the type to do hell to a girl's hair. Can't show up looking tragic chic. Weddings just aren't the place for that. It's your own fault really. If you didn't look like you banged like crazy then maybe I could've stayed longer."

"You are such a tease, Jezzie Sullivan." Paul didn't know if he found it hot or irritating as hell. Maybe the two weren't mutually exclusive.

"We'll talk in a few hours and you can decide if I'm still a good idea."

Then there was the humming again. But it wasn't Jezzie this time. Paul looked around and couldn't see where it was coming from. Then his perspective began to change and he couldn't see anything. Then there was the distinct feeling of not being able to breathe so well and…

"Rachel?"

"Rise and shine, sleepy head," his imprint chirped. "I would've sworn you would've woken up when I decided to sit on you. I'm no peanut, Paul."

Paul blinked and yawned as the girl sitting on top of his stomach pulled two small bottles of her pocket. What the hell had just happened to him?

"Blue or green?"
"What?"

Rachel proffered the nail polish bottles. "Blue or green? You're way more girly than me. I can't choose these kinds of things."

"I'm not that girly, Rach," Paul insisted.

"Which speaks more about me than it does you, I assure you," she patted his chest. "Blue it is."

"How long have you been here?" he asked as she leaned back against his upturned knees and proceeded to paint her nails on top of him.

"Long enough," he saw her smirk without looking up. "Helluva a dream, huh?"

He only grabbed a throw pillow from the floor to cover his face with. Why the hell was he embarrassed? Okay, so a hot-as-hell wet dream involving Jezzie – a Packmate's ex-girlfriend was a little awkward for someone else to witness, but if Paul had to pick someone to witness it, it would have to be Rach. Everything rolled off that girl. She was like Teflon. Only his imprint would march in here on her wedding day, demand he pick her nail polish color and then proceed to sit on him and his not-so-morning wood while she smirked knowingly at him. Did this count as exploitation?

"I'm not making you uncomfortable, am I?" she asked. "We'd do the same people, but I don't have your parts. I don't know how it works. I can move if you want."

"Nah," Paul sighed. "It's fine. Just don't move back."

"Okay," she agreed, finishing off her left hand. "So who was it? You gotta tell me."

"No. Way."

"Paul," Rachel crooned peeling a corner of the throw pillow away from his face. "You're my man of honor and it's my wedding day. Every decent twenty first century film says we have to swap raunchy wet dream stories!"

"I don't know what kind of TV you're watching…"

"I'm a science geek. We don't watch a lot of TV. I guess I'm behind the times. Will you do my right hand? I can't paint with my left hand; it'll look like an epileptic did it."

"You play hockey lefty," Paul insisted finally removing the pillow from his face and deciding the light of day wouldn't melt his skin off. "What's the difference?"

"A hockey net is six feet wide, my nail is one inch long. And I don't know why you won't tell me. We have the same taste in women. You're just mad I got Adrienne first, aren't you?" She held the rejected bottle of green nail polish up close to his face and scrutinized. "Definitely not a good color on you."

There was a bang of the screen door and the distinct click of heels on linoleum. And it smelled like coffee. Oh shit.

"Rachel," came the gravelly alto from the kitchen. "Have you seen Jacob? I wanted to know if he ended up getting those name cards or if you and Addie were just gonna have the guests pick their own seats and— Oh, hi Paul."

Rachel had watched with a shit-eating grin. The moment Jezzie had come in the house, the second
her heels clicked the floor and her voice resonated through the room – Rachel knew. Rachel knew because Paul's whole body tensed, his eyes grew wide and she could feel his erection grow further as it pressed into her back.

"No way!" she screamed and proceeded to punch Paul in the shoulder, while Jezzie watched over the back of the couch.

"What?" Jezzie looked confused. She wasn't sure whom Rachel was addressing.

"Did you know," she turned to Jezzie, "that Jackie Chan's action scenes have to be shot at half speed because he moves so fast? Paul just told me."

Jezzie glanced down, "You're a wealth of information, huh?" He nodded before she announced that she was going to make sure that Quil hadn't sawed halfway through reception chairlegs as a prank and that Seth didn't wear white socks and hopefully Addie could show her how to wrap her sari just one last time.

Rachel bit down on her grin as Jezzie made her way back outside and down the steps. She leaned in close to her wolf – who apparently refused show his face. "Was she any good?" she whispered excitedly.

"You have no idea..." he groaned and Rachel laughed like a fiend.

"Embry's gonna kill you!"

Paul leveled her a good glare and proceeded to sit up slightly before snatching the bottle of nail polish from Rachel's grip.

"Ow," she grimaced as she resettled. "Your icky boy parts are poking me."

Paul only offered her a close-lipped grin and nodded for her to give him her hand. Even while giving her a hard time it was difficult not let Rachel get her way. She didn't have many demands at all. He supposed he could paint her right hand for her. After all, he was the man of honor.

Sam leaned towards his brother seated next to him and whispered. "You know, if you keep staring at her, she's probably going to call the cops."

"Shut up," Embry snapped back. They were at a half subcontinental Indian-half American Indian wedding and joyful chaos reigned. Addie had been screaming a few days prior about finding a green sari that looked 'fabulous' on Jezzie's skin tone. Sam had watched through the entire ceremony and now the better part of the reception, as Embry stared blatantly at his ex-girlfriend – or more specifically, her half-exposed midriff. Embry'd been getting a bit snippy lately. Probably because Jezzie was in town and this was the first time he'd seen her and he hadn't gotten any closer to her than twenty feet. That was entirely his own fault. Sam pointed this out. Often.

As much as his demeanor warded off Brady and Collin, and made the Clearwaters roll their eyes, and even Quil and Jacob had mostly taken to ignoring him – well – Sam had been Alpha to a bunch of unruly wolves for a while, and he'd seen Embry through his first phase. Post-break up drama was child's play compared to having to heal an ear back to full attachment on his head after that kid phased.

"Why don't you go talk to her?"

"Why don't you shut the hell up?" Sam and Embry were the only ones left at the table and Leah and
Anna and Jezzie were the only ones at theirs across the room. They were talking and appeared a helluva lot less miserable than Embry – who might face plant in the half eaten tandoori chicken.

"No offense Sam, I respect you, but are you seriously trying to offer me relationship advice?"

"Don't you think I know the tell tale signs of someone royally fucking themselves over? I'm really good at spotting something like that at this point in my life."

"I don't know who that insults more. Me, you, or Emily." Embry loosened his tie and slumped in his chair, continuing to stare. "Point made. But I'm still not going to talk to her."

"So you're electing to fuck this up? Because there is no way in hell she'll ever say anything to you ever again if you don't."

"Yeah," Embry sighed. "I know she won't come crawling back to me. I don't expect her to. I don't want her to. I probably wouldn't even love her the way I do if she was that kind of person."

"Okay, good," Sam nodded leaning back in his own chair. "This all makes so much more sense now." Embry didn't respond and Sam was quiet for a moment. "What is it, man? You just admitted you love her. You never stop thinking about her. What gives? Are you confused? Embarrassed? Don't think she'll take you back? Why – after months – won't you even speak to her? She doesn't deserve that."

"Exactly."

"She's not like other girls, man. She's going to very easily move on with her life and let all this be in the past. She's not an Emily, she's not a Bella, she's not even a Leah."

"Wow," Embry glanced back towards Sam for the first time. "You just insulted your ex-fiancée, your imprint and wife, and a dead woman – all in one sentence."

"Like I've got a helluva lot to lose? Trust me, I've done worse. But a big part of me didn't have a choice. I imprinted – and hell if I wouldn't have eaten glass shards for Seth to have had his imprinting epiphany about two years earlier. I couldn't help that Embry, and I'm sure as hell not making any excuses, but when half your brain is in a spiraling panic and the other half is listening constantly to people telling you they know how to fix it – to people you've trusted your whole life – there's not a lot of clear, independent thought happening."

"Are you saying you regret what you have with Emily?" Embry nodded towards the girl laughing with Rachel and Addie on the dance floor.

"It's kinda hard to judge. I don't remember anything before Emily. Not like that anyways. I did for a while, but not anymore."

"So you don't love Leah anymore?"

"No, I do. I'll always love Leah, but the kind of feeling you're supposed to have for someone you're sexually attracted to isn't there. The moment Emily and I's relationship went romantic that disappeared entirely. I know when girls are good-looking, but no one looks hot anymore. It's all the imprint."

"That's fucking sick," Embry noted in an offhand way. "So you think if you knew about filial imprinting, things woulda gone different?"

"Maybe," Sam shrugged. "It's hard to tell. All I know now is the imprint. Emily's the only woman
I've found sexually attractive in close to two years. So it's hard to judge when every time I look at another woman I'm not fazed at all – which isn't a natural human reaction. But it would have been nice to have options. It would've been nice to have a choice. It would've been nice to have an imprint without a three-way body count."

"And you think I'm giving up the choice?" Embry hedged. "You know I'm choosing not to talk to her."

"No you're not," Sam offered with a snort of derision. "You're choosing not to talk to Jezzie the same why I chose to relentlessly follow Emily. You're operating on pure instinct. Instinct is not a choice. I don't know what has you overthinking this, man, but that's what you do. You are the fucking king of overthinking shit. You've been doing it as long as I've been in your head. First about Jake and Quil phasing, then wondering about who the hell your dad was, and if you should tell your mom. Now it's about Jezzie. Pack isn't going anywhere. Neither is your Mom, but Jezzie's not going to hang around your life unless you ask her to. If Jared ever saw this shit from you—"

"Don't," Embry interrupted him. "Go there."

"I'm fucking going there," Sam denied. "You may have been under Jared's wing for a while, but don't forget who raised your mangy ass – brought you through the first phase. I know you, and I sure as hell knew Jare. I know that he kicked your ass into gear about so much shit, Emb, but are you going to let all that fall to nothing because he died? He's gone, Emb, he's not coming back. The least you can do is pretend he taught you something. Paul's too busy dealing with a girl carrying his dead best friend's child to do this, so Gramps is here to put your ass back in gear. You're eighteen Embry; you're a full grown man. If you want the girl, then start fucking acting like it."

Jezzie glanced at the bag Leah dropped on the table next to her. "Is this…" she peered at it. It was. "Thanks," she grinned, swiping it in her fist and standing to make for the back of the venue and exit near the kitchen.

"Can't take all the credit," Leah admitted, hiking the length of her own sari up far enough to walk without damaging anything. Still light years better than a dress, she admitted. "I just rolled them because I know you suck at rolling. Paul bought it. He feels for you."

"Paul? Is sympathizing with me?" Jezzie glanced at Leah speculatively. "What alternate dimension have I fallen into?"

"Yeah, he does. Has a hard time expressing it though. And I think his quota for dealing with emotional women is entirely filled by Kim, right now."

"I would say so," Jezzie nodded, opening the bag and pulling out a joint. She offered one to Leah. "How are those two? Still roommates?"

"Mhm," Leah nodded, accepting Jezzie's offer. "They're doing good. Paul does a better job than he gives himself credit for. He thinks it's his responsibility – but he likes Kim, so…"

"What do you mean 'his responsibility'?" Jezzie asked, flicking the lighter on.

"Well," Leah began trying to piece out her explanation in a way that made sense. "Jared and Paul were good friends. The way Jake, Emb, and Quil are – just without the advantage of time. They phased together, imprinted together, started to raise their own pups together. The two bonded like superglue. And now that Jare's gone… Well, it kinda falls to Embry. And for a long time he did more than even Paul did. But when the fall rolled around and he offered to push off school to stay
around, Kim flipped the fuck out. Threw a cast iron skillet across the apartment. She just barely missed Embry, but took out a helluva lotta dry wall."

"Why him?" Jezzie asked.

"He was Jared's pup," Leah said simply. "They're family. Jared loved Embry. And Embry loves Jared and Kim. So, it's his place. But Paul's kinda taken over because no one wants to see Emb give up on school. Sam's phasing out of the Pack and has enough of his own BS to deal with and Jacob is busy as hell anyways – he can't help Kim without letting the rest of the Pack stutter to a halt. That's why we have the Pack families."

"And so now Paul takes over?"

"Yeah."

"And gives me pot?"

"Yep," Leah nodded. "Like I said, he feels for you. He kinda thinks that your and Emb's whole cluster could've been prevented."

"How does he figure that one?" Jezzie asked with doubt.

"Jared very much kicked Embry's butt into gear about a lot of things. He was always the quiet kid. Quil has been womanizing since at least eight when he kissed me in the Black's backyard – he's got a thing for older women. And Jacob has always been so ridiculously happy, that he makes friends easy. But Embry was shy and then phased just after he turned sixteen."

"So he had no social skills?" Jezzie guessed.

"With girls. You're catching on," Leah smirked. "Yes. He never learned the girl thing and has always naturally second-guessed himself. He used to do it with Pack stuff all the time. He doesn't anymore. He's a good Third. But all that human crap? Jared was his big brother – teaching him how to be a teenager."

Leah paused for a moment and observed the lovely surroundings. They were in a back alley and this was a distinctively less attractive place to meet for some self-pity time than the last time the two had moped together at a wedding. They seemed to be developing a pattern.

"With Jared gone, Embry didn't have the natural go-to he was used to. Sure, Pack is all family and we all help each other no matter what, but you get used to the certain people you go to with your problems. And Jared's death really hit Embry, if more latently than Kim. And because Paul's been so busy helping with Kim he feels guilty for not smacking Embry back into shape."

"Embry's eighteen," Jezzie offered. "He has to figure some of this out eventually."

"Oh, absolutely," Leah nodded in agreement. "He can't be coached through relationships. Believe me, I'm not giving him an ounce of an excuse because hell knows I've yelled and smacked him from here to kingdom come about whatever it was he did to you – all I'm saying is the man's a creature of habit. And when Jared died, he kinda flipped out a little bit."

"Wow," Jezzie nodded. "A big part of me misses being around to learn about this on my own. It feels weird having everyone tell me stuff secondhand. But it has also been really nice to get away and have some new scenery."

"No one begrudges you that, Jezzie," Leah smiled with a nod. "Hell knows this Pack has a long ass
history of all of us running from shit. Sometimes you need new surroundings. I would have killed a litter of kittens to be able to leave after my romantic debacle."

"It's nice to get away when life takes a dump on you."

"And that's what happened with you and Emb? Life took a shit in your general direction?" Leah asked carefully.

"You really don't know?" Jezzie asked. "Isn't that kind of hard to keep out of the communal mind?"

When Leah shook her head, Jezzie only sighed. "I have no idea what happened with me and Emb. I got dropped like a hot potato, just like you did – totally clueless."

"Well, he didn't imprint. I can tell you that much. I spend enough time in his head to know that would bleed through."

"No, I figured as much," Jezzie agreed.

"Other than that though, no one knows what's going on," Leah offered. "Which is a new thing for us. Emb's not good at lying, but he's really good at not thinking about stuff. After phasing and having all those issues with who the hell his dad might've been? He got really good at redirecting his own thoughts. Jake might know – I actually think he does – but no one else does."

"I don't even know what happened," Jezzie whispered at a loss flicking some ash off the tip of her joint. "We were talking about school after graduation, he told me about where he was going. I was so excited… and then he just, changed. He got really defensive and left. He hasn't spoken to me since."

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**Saturday, August 25, 2007**

Seth, Jacob, Leah, Anna, and Collin were all lying around the day after Rachel and Addie's wedding – coming off a serious post-wedding high – and recovering from the whirlwind. Leah had consumed a full pot of coffee, Jacob had slept twelve full hours, Seth dozed on the porch and Anna was using sunglasses to hide the dark circles under her eyes.

"I can hear someone coming," Seth mumbled into the crook of his arm as he laid on his stomach.

"Seth your back moves far too much when you speak," Anna complained from her spot where her head rested on his back.

"Sounds like Quil," Collin added.

"Makes sense," Jacob muttered from the other side of the porch. "It is his house."

"That doesn't explain the rest of you people," Anna yawned.

Then Quil entered the Ateara's back porch, muttering furiously to himself. "I was going to Sam and Emily's to see Claire – was being nice and picking up a gallon a milk like Emily asked along the way – and you know what happens? Some old lady spit on me!"

"Ew…"

"Gross…"

"That sucks…"
"Thanks for sharin'."

"Why?"

"Go clean that shit off."

Quil only chose to answer Collin. "I don't know why! She also called me a 'no good hoodlum'."

"Ah," Leah nodded, propping her feet up on the banister. "She thinks you're a no good La Push hood, Quil. This isn't news. People have been giving all of us shit for a while. Where have you been?"

"Well, yeah," he offered. "But it's been almost two years since Sam, Jared, and Paul started phasing. And I've never had anyone spit on me. I thought it was getting better, not worse!"

"Nope," Jake leaned back on two legs of his chair. "Paul says Council's been getting a lot of complaints about us."

"But we're not even doing anything. There isn't even any, like, vandalism or petty theft to blame on us. The rez has been spotless since the Pack started phasing and Tommy got sentenced."

"They still think we're suspicious and the Council is having a hard time ignoring it."

"Why don't we do something," Anna offered, "to convince them that we're not all a bunch of good for nothing punks. We've got to be able to craft a decent cover story. We're just a bunch of kids."

"Except for the part where one of us died last winter," Collin reminded Anna. "Jared's death probably did nothing for our cause."

"Oo!" Leah perked up for a moment. "I think I have an idea. However, it's seriously going to issue a deathblow to some sleep schedules."

"Share with us, oh enlightened one," Seth muttered to the floorboards.

Leah scoffed and issued him a shove with her foot, which reverberated back through Anna. "We look like a bunch of gang-banging kids, right? Well, let's make it look like the opposite. Like we're a bunch of godsend angels."

"We kind of already are, Lees," Jake replied. "We just can't tell anyone."

"Exactly. We can't tell them we're a pack of wolves, but we can do something to prove that we're not bad seeds. We'd have to give back to the rez in a way that they can see with their own eyes."

"What are you proposing," Anna glanced up to Leah. She was starting to think Leah was getting some awful ideas.

"I propose we exploit Jacob, Quil, Embry, and Sam's mechanical prowess – and possibly Paul's welding skills – as a way to craft a charitable front for the Pack. Except we'll actually be helping people."

"Oh god," Jacob and Quil groaned in tandem.

Leah's legs dropped from the banister and she leaned forward in her chair. "Seriously, though. Have you guys noticed how many INDN cars are on this reservation? Hell, Quil there's three right here in your yard. If we can drag as many unused clunkers out of the bowels of the forest, we can actually maybe sling a few decent cars together. Which would be great for some of the families that still don't
"Y'all are never sleeping again," Anna nodded decidedly.

"You have to be the PR person, Leah," Jacob said. "And you have to get the cars to my place."

"The state of some of these hunks-a-junk means we're only going to get about one functional car for every three," Quil added. "It helps that they're mostly German – under the hood. What with the way Opel has relabeled pretty much all of its line under Buick and Saturn in the past twenty years."

"You think we can swing it between the four of us?" Jacob asked. "Paul's useless for anything that isn't metal fabrication – which we'll actually probably need – but still."

"Sure," Quil shrugged. "Why not? It might take us a while, but as soon as we actually produce a real car and if Leah keeps the PR going, then it keeps people from spitting on me and off our case for that much longer, right?"

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**Sunday, August 26, 2007**

"Jake?" she nudged his side with her comparably bony elbow. "What gives?"

Jezzie had been by to return a pair of shoes to Leah – who, Jezzie had learned, had more or less moved into the Black house – when she'd been greeted by Jacob. Her and Nessie were apparently giving each other pedicures. Paul was working in the city in dry dock after a ship came in for an emergency repair that would take the better part of a week. Kim was in the vicinity of a place called better. Sam was in the middle of acting as Paul's proxy on council and knee deep in committee debates about reallocating funds from school programming to develop the local tourist industry. He had been looking like he might start foaming at the mouth, so everyone just backed slowly away and let Emily have fun with that. Seth, Brady, and Collin were goofing off somewhere.

So that left Jezzie on Jake's porch for a chat.

"It's stupid," Jake groused, his foot scuffling in the dirt walkway. His legs were so darn long they reached all they way off the porch to the ground. Jezzie didn't know how he slept on a bed without having to curl up into pretzel shapes.

"Jacob?"

"Yeah," he replied distracted.

"I'm four years older than you?"

"Uh huh," he nodded.

"Okay, then why don't you do yourself a favor and lean a little on me and let me help you out if I can."

He nodded but didn't speak and when the silence dragged, Jezzie reached out. Jacob was always more of a physical being anyways. She looped her arms around one of his own in an embrace and tugged him towards her. Jake sensed the meaning in the gesture and smiled, his hand on Jezzie's knee.

"This summer's been a lot harder than I thought it would be. And not just because you're gone. It's everything."
"Being pulled in thirteen different directions?"

"Yes," Jake nodded. "Exactly. And I feel like I'm failing horribly at this, and who the heck am I supposed to vent to? I can't vent to Pack about the Pack. It's just that... Rach is either busy or gone. And Ness is too young and not exactly the person I need to be venting to, and my Dad... is my Dad. He either doesn't get it, is the subject of my need to rant, or just doesn't need to hear it. And then there's Collin. That poor damn kid – he crashes here so he can be safe; and he is, but I find myself just babbling to him at 3AM sometimes and he's friggin' fourteen. And I'm his damn Alpha. I can't be talking to him about that crap."

And once again, it was confirmed for Jezzie that Jacob was far too young for all this.

"It's been kinda hard with you and Emb gone, and Leah with classes. Rachel too. That wipes out my ranking Pack. Just me and Paul. And Paul's got work and Kim. And in a Pack this size? I don't want you guys stuck here and the Pack is pretty much fine, but adding on my Dad, Kim and the baby, Collin's asshole of a brother and – holy fuck – I'm a father?"

He seemed to amaze himself with that revelation.

"You are," Jezzie nodded. "And you're doing a fine job, by all indicators. Nessie absolutely loves you. And she's happy, Jacob. Do you know what that must mean to a girl who lost both her parents and is going to deal with some of the worst identity crises ever seen? It's a big deal."

"I know," Jake agreed. "But with only my Beta here? When he's not in dry dock or making sure Kim is stable. I have my Alpha Female and Human across in Seattle, my Third only here on weekends and my Beta Female across the country – I just feel..."

"Overwhelmed? Lonely?"

"Both," Jake admitted with a sigh.

"Tell you what, Jacob. I'll make you an offer?"

"Oh, god..."

"I don't know what you're thinking, but I'm sure it's incorrect or dirty – so stop it. No, I have a way for me to help out even from Boston. I want Collin."

"I think Embry and the state of Washington might be opposed to that," Jake replied. He pretended to be injured by her elbow's jab to his side.

She rolled her eyes and ignored the comment about her ex-boyfriend. "No, I mean let him come back to Boston with me. I know Tommy's friends have been frequenting the area a lot more lately since they've cleaned out Hoquiam. I know Collin tries to be as unobtrusive as possible at your place because he knows you have your hands full. So, let him come to the East Coast with me. If his parents are cool with it. If you're willing to pull him off patrols."

"Huh," Jacob considered the offer. Collin was a good kid, and deserved more attention from his Pack than just his Alpha's couch. Unfortunately, Jake was spread too thin and would probably not register much about the poor kid until his brother was tailing him on the way to or from school again.

"Have him talk to his parents. I'll talk to them if they'd feel better. He doesn't need to pay any rent or utilities because his being in my apartment doesn't affect any of that. We'll get him enrolled in school and he's a good kid – I'm sure he'll go; if not, I'll make him. It's only his first year of high school. Now would actually be a good transition time – before the year starts."
"That boy eats a lot of food, Jezzie," Jake said. "And I know for a fact your budget is stretching you to a thousand calories a day."

"Does Collin work at all?"

"Yeah, part time evening shifts at the Thriftway in Forks, why?"

"Well there are plenty of supermarkets in Boston. If he's willing to work part-time to help with the food, I wouldn't hate it. That way, he's away from his brother's crap, you don't have to worry about him and he's still getting an education. Plus, I can actually pull some weight being so far away."

"I'm not totally opposed to this idea," Jacob replied after thinking it over. "But I don't know what we'd tell his 'rents. They don't know he's Pack."

"Well, you can be honest and he can tell them he knows someone on the East Coast and it's a way to get away from his brother and still have someone watch out for him. They can meet me if they want."

"Not half bad."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. Because she was such a frequent purveyor of bad ideas? "Well, Boston schools start back up the beginning of September. That means I'll have to head back with him early. Let me know ASAP so we can find him a high school he wants to go to."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, trust me when I say that there are a lot of legal intricacies involved in allowing a minor to move across the country with someone that isn't their family/next of kin. It's actually quite a difficult thing to accomplish. There's legal guardianship paperwork up the wazoo. Plus, regulations involved in specific tribes further complicate things.

I'm going to be ignoring almost all of that because you'd all die of boredom and it interferes with the flow of this fic unless I wanted to write several chapters of technicalities. I take small consolation in the fact that almost every other facet of this fic is researched and explained to the nines.
Deep roots are not reached by the frost

Chapter Notes

Kim's comment about babies only having two settings is totally not mine, but the original (I assume) and truthful (this I can confirm) words of John Green of the Vlogbrothers.

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Tuesday, August 28, 2007

"What's happening in there?"

"What do you think is happening in there?" Leah said, resisting the urge to smack Seth in the back of the head in front of Nessie. She was plenty intuitive to pick up on the older girl's bad behavior. "A child is passing through her birth canal."

"Leah, is Kim having her baby?" Leah nodded. The answer seemed to content the girl and she soon returned to her crayons and her seat.

"How long has she been in there?" Seth asked.

Leah sighed in a tired way and sat down in the uncomfortable hospital chair. "Long enough," she replied.

A loud and choked, guttural scream came from the room Seth was trying to peer into – but even his vision wasn't going to penetrate frosted glass – and he immediately turned around and sat down next to Leah, staring steadfastly forward. "Oh God."

"Yep."

"Is it always this bad?" Seth asked. Seth was still very much the blissfully unaware kid sometimes – even though Brady and Collin were three full years younger. Some things never change.

"It's different for everybody," Leah shrugged.

"I don't know how Paul's dealing with that," he shook his head.

"He doesn't have much of a choice," Leah laughed as Nessie laid her head against Leah's side. It was getting late and Leah didn't want to leave until Kim had given birth, but Nessie was going to need some sleep soon. "You think your strength is tough. Paul's gonna be lucky if he doesn't come out of there with the bones in his hand turned to dust. Trust me, though, I don't think he's watching."

Jezzie rounded the corner moments later, passing around coffee and passable hospital food. "How's she doing?" Jezzie asked.

Leah shrugged. "No news. About as well as can be expected, I guess." She took the proffered caffeine gratefully and sipped. "Where the heck are the others? Wasn't someone trying to beat their way in here earlier?"

"I convinced them to take shifts," Jezzie replied. "Instead of having a dozen overgrown Quileutes in
the maternity ward. Anna's running interference."

"Speak of the devil," Seth nodded and Jezzie turned in time to see Anna coming up the hallway.

"They're chomping at the bit down there," Anna said lightly as she joined the group. "Jacob called and says he's coming in when he gets here because like hell is he going to miss the birth of an imprint's child. And Embry might be foaming at the mouth."

"Well, then he definitely can't come," Leah laughed.

"It's 4AM on the Forks maternity ward," Seth said looking around the abandoned hallway. "Why don't we just stop the charade already?"

Both Anna and Seth glanced to Leah, the ranking wolf until Jake arrived. "Sure," she shrugged.

"Yes, my Queen," Anna said holding up her hands and offering a small bow. "But I take no responsibility for their actions."

It was less than five minutes later before Quil, Collin, Embry, Claire, Sam, and Brady were seated with Leah, Seth, Jezzie, Nessie, and Anna in the maternity ward's waiting area and Jake was pacing like a man on a mission between the gathered wolves and Kim's door.

"Jake," Quil offered quirking a brow in the Alpha's direction. "Chillax, you're gonna confuse people. You're not the Dad, remember?"

"I can't help it," Jake told him. The poor Alpha was a little frazzled whenever any of his Pack was in a compromised state. Childbirth definitely counted, his wolf insisted. "She's an imprint," he reminded Quil. "I can't help it."

And Paul and Kim were hardly going to die in there, but childbirth put Kim in a naturally vulnerable position. The fact that Kim didn't rank and her mate wasn't around to protect her was giving Jake a serious migraine.

There was another scream and all the wolves jumped at the noise. Seth, Embry, and Jacob then began a really mature attempt to see what was going on by jostling each other out of the way of the small and entirely opaque frosted glass window.

The childlike shoving was interrupted by a half-crazed Rachel running around the corner. Rachel looked a mess. Her hair was all piled up on top of her head and she was in sweats. Apparently 4AM phone calls were not her forte. Kim had said she'd wanted Rachel there. One, for Paul's sanity, and also because Rachel been the one to first to pull her fully into the Pack and help her realize how much she cared about the child inside of her. She was the only female member of Pack that Kim was really that close to.

"I'm here! I threw the e-brake and left a valet to park the beast, so help me, but I'm here. Oh, for the love of God, you three, get out of my way," Rachel dropped her elbows and made her way between Jacob and Seth and Embry and was allowed permission to the delivery room rather quickly.

Jacob's headache eased considerably once his sister was inside. He realized a large part of his pain was probably residual from Paul – since he was probably having an embolism being in there alone. He slumped into a chair and dragged Seth down to the one next to him. "Take a seat, kid. It might be a while."

There was a lot of pacing, sighing, fidgeting, whispered talk, yawning, and some dozing in the interim. The sun started peaking through the trees and the windows along the hall, letting golden
yellow light diffuse the harsh fluorescent bulbs before Quil and Collin went to get more coffee and food. Embry and Seth were sat next to each other – to the left of Jake – and all three shared equal postures of distress: hunched backs, elbows to knees and incessant hair tugging.

It was a few moments later that Paul emerged with a three-mile stare of wonder. "It's a boy," he said in amazement.

There was an equally mature battle of wills that happened in the attempts to actually go see Kim and meet little Noah. Because even fewer overgrown Quileutes could fit in one hospital room than the maternity ward. Something about fire codes.

"I outrank you," and with that, Leah slapped Quil in the back of the head and snuck in the room ahead of him with Nessie on her hip.

"Dammit," he groused rubbing the back of his head.

Leah slipped inside with the biggest grin on her face she'd had in a very long time. She sat down next to Embry and Seth, and transferred Nessie to her lap. She couldn't believe how small Kim looked in that big hospital bed. She looked exhausted but absolutely thrilled. She held the small boy close to her chest. His fingers peaked out every now and then but Leah couldn't hear him make any noises except to breathe.

Leah didn't particularly like Kim, but she never had a lot of reason to hate her either. She never did much, didn't interfere in Pack – though Leah supposed she was grateful for that – and mostly kept to herself. But something inside her frayed a little bit the day Jared died. Because Leah remembered how bad Sam had been hurt and how much it felt like a pile driver to the gut to know that he might die. Just the thought made her sick. But Kim had actually lost Jared. It was hard to hate her on principle after that day. And though their situation might've been very different, Leah would've hated to see another girl fall victim to a damaged imprinting situation.

Plus, it was really hard to for Leah to resist babies. Leah loved babies.

"Do you wanna hold him?" Kim offered to the three wolves.

"Hell yes!" Seth agreed. He stood up and went to Kim, bending over to take the small boy from her arms. He was warm and soft and smelled really, really good. The way only newborn babies smell. Leah thought it was actually quite nice to see the remainder of Jared's Pack family – Kim, Embry, Seth – all piled in the room together.

Noah made his rounds to Leah and Embry, as well, before Quil opened the door and said if someone didn't come outside and let him meet his nephew he was going to drag them out bodily. He didn't care if that charge nurse at the desk was watching.

It took a while, but everyone got to meet Noah – who was dubbed Popeye – because somehow Quil went from 'Noah' to 'ship' to 'sailor man' to 'Popeye'.

"What is with you and Jake and the weird ass names?" Embry asked.

Nessie only giggled at that.

"Search me," Quil shrugged. "But Ness seems to have survived the ordeal." She offered a thumbs up from her spot talking to Noah.

"We haven't even gotten to know him yet, Quil," Nessie offered. "How do we know he's a
"Popeye?"

"Because he's Jare and Kim's kid? Duh?"

Nessie rolled her eyes but laughed good-naturedly.

"Did you pick the name out on purpose?" Jezzie asked quietly from the windowsill. She'd contented herself with watching the others get to know Noah. She could understand the lupine need to sniff out the newcomer. It was a very early morning and she was exhausted and now leaning against Paul who was sat down next to her. Paul was exhausted and leaning against the spare few inches of wall next to him.

The woman smiled in a quiet sort of way. "I did. But because it's a family name, actually. Noah's from my Dad's side, and he'll have Jared's last name."

Jezzie only smiled as Kim went back to talking to the Clearwater siblings. Then she felt Paul nudge her. "What gives, Little Red? That's an odd question. What do you know that we don't."


"Really?" Paul looked down at Jezzie kind of amazed.

"It's nice how that all sort of ties together like that."

Wednesday, August 29, 2007

"Holy crap," Collin muttered as Jezzie scrolled the listing of Boston public schools. "Those are all in one city?"

"Mhm," she nodded. "It's easier to narrow down if you have a certain interest area. Do you know if you want to go to college? Learn a trade? More artsy? More technical?"

"I'm not artsy, and I don't know if I can go to college."

"But would you want to?" Jezzie emphasized. "I asked if you wanted to, not if you could. Because even if you don't do it right out of high school – going to a college prep high school might be more to your benefit than a technical high school. Like I said, it depends."

Collin had never seen a list of high schools so long before. Public high schools no less. The page was bursting with education options. And it kinda amazed him. It was overwhelming and pretty cool, but he also felt a bit guilty. The only public education offered to any of the kids around here was Forks High. Res kids were at least lucky enough to get to choose between the tribal school and Forks. If you considered that 'lucky'. Everybody else was pretty much screwed.

Jezzie watched him with a small smile. "Education is what you make it," Jezzie offered, picking up his line of thought. Collin was always prone to guilt tripping himself. "I went to school in one of the worst cities and one of the poorest, underperforming, underfunded, and understaffed high schools. And somehow I swung a now four-year internship at a leading university. Name is not everything, but you should take as many chances as are given to you."

"None of the other guys or girls got to choose where they go to school."

"Nope," Jezzie shook her head. "But Sam had a full scholarship until he gave it up for Pack, and
Embry's in one of the area's leading business programs. Leah regularly wipes the floor with her classmates, and Rachel is kind of a technological genius. The system isn't fair, but sometimes life gives us these kinds of gifts. You wouldn't turn down a gift, would you?"

"Probably not," he shook his head. "Math and science," he answered her original question. "I can't even snap my fingers to a rhythm."

She smiled and sat next to him for the next three hours as he scrolled through all of Boston's thirty-six high schools and their various websites. Collin didn't know about the whole college thing... but he knew anything with the words 'arts' or 'music' in the name probably wasn't his best choice. When he'd narrowed it down to three, he hit a wall.

"Do you have a computer at home?"

"My dad has a work laptop?"

"Okay," Jezzie copied down the three school's websites on to a post it. "Go home, talk to your parents, sleep on it." He looked absolutely amazed that she'd suggested he talk to his parents. "Your parents seem like good people," Jezzie offered as Collin nodded. "And I understand you can't tell them about Pack, but that doesn't mean you need to close them out of every facet of your life. They've got more real world knowledge than you and I combined and they know you pretty darn well – even without that whole wolfy thing. You're a kid, Collin. Go ask your parents for help."

"Cool," he smiled. "Thanks, Jezzie. I'll get back to you." And with that he bounded out her front door down her porch and thankfully waited until he hit the tree-line to phase. Her Dad was going to start getting suspicious about why her friends walked from La Push all the time. But it was only a few miles and her Dad had grown up walking from county to county, so maybe she could play it off.

She sighed and swiveled in her chair, turning to look at the overgrown teenager on her bed. "By the way I should probably tell you," Jake said, flipping to the next page of one of Jezzie's textbooks. He tilted it at an angle, probably looking at some strange anatomy chart.

"Oh, good Lord..." she muttered.

"Well, I feel like it's important for you to know," he offered. When she was quiet, he continued. "Okay, so even though we orchestrated this, Collin's parents think it was Council. They think it's a scholarship opportunity – we just won't tell them it's public school – and the Council has 'conveniently' told them that another local girl, living in Boston with her mother, happens to be going to school and has offered room and board."

"I can't believe we're lying to these people," Jezzie breathed.

"Collin's been lying to them for a while now, why not throw one in that's to his personal gain. By the way, we had to tell them you're twenty five."

"What?" she replied immediately. "But I'm not."

"Yeah. I know that, thanks," Jacob mocked her. "Because the Littlesea's aren't about to hand their troubled fourteen year old over to a twenty-two year old med student."

"Ugh," Jezzie sighed and slumped in her seat. "I've got a fake Mom to go with it. Anything else I should know?"

"I think that's everything."
"And when do I meet these people?"

"Tomorrow."

"Oh good."

Embry blinked, wondering where he was. He definitely went to sleep in his own bed last night for once. This was not his bed. It was friggin freezing. This - he realized - was peculiar given that he hadn't felt cold since he phased. He probably could've stood stark naked in a blizzard.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness. The light was almost non-existent and he realized the small bits he saw were all reflections. There were mirrors everywhere. Full length, frameless and from floor to wherever the ceiling was. He couldn't see that. As his eyes adjusted he noticed he wasn't alone. Sitting about ten feet from him was a small hunched form. With the legs pulled to the chest and the face bent over the knees the face was impossible to see but Embry would recognize that flaming hair anywhere.

Jezzie.

As soon as he thought it, her neck snapped up and he could see her face. The darkness seemed to accentuate her fair skin making her look almost vampire pale. The spare shots of light put her eyes in shadow and made her cheekbones stand out in a skeletal way. When he made to move, she opened her mouth wide and her face contorted. She was screaming, but he couldn't hear a word. It looked like she was steaming fit to stop her own heart. And then through the silence the dark mirrors began to shatter into crystalline pieces and rain down around his head like sand as Jezzie's hunched form screamed in silence.

He snapped up and lay awake until the morning waiting for his mother to leave. He suspected something might have been up, since she usually left so quick and quiet in the morning. She was definitely dragging her feet. And then he heard her gentle knock against his door.

Oh goody. He really didn't need this right now. He'd lain awake all damn night trying to think his way out of the box of shit he'd clearly constructed for himself. He needed to talk to Jezzie. He needed to talk to her bad. But he kinda knew that unless he explained himself, she was pretty much going to tell him to go fuck himself. Though Jezzie would find a different way to phrase it, he was sure. He was also sure that she was going to think his explanation was absolutely ridiculous and she'd just end up being even more angry…

Every now and then, he'd also get a little mad at her – which was not a normal thing, he didn't really get mad at her very often – even though he was pretty sure she thought he was mad at her. He was mad because he laid awake night after night, knowing he should call her. That he should say something. Why should the relationship get shot completely to hell? Clearly Jezzie and Embry were not good at argument and disagreement if this is what happened… But he was sorely reminded of the fact that – yes, he hadn't spoken to Jezzie since the late spring – but she hadn't spoken to him either. Not once.

But then there was this nagging in the back of his head. It sounded distinctly like Jared and looked just like Sam. And this nagging insisted that Jezzie had no reason to talk to him, given the terms his bitch fit had left the two on.

His train of thought had been proceeding in this circuit for way too long. He thought it might've been the bedroom. Or maybe the bed. Every time he tried to sleep, the psycho mental train would get back on its tracks. It didn't help that even after weeks Jezzie's scent still permeated the fabric of his sheets.
and his pillows. It got to the point where he thought that it wasn't really there, but that he was just imagining it. He washed that shit every week hoping it would just stop. His mom thought he was crazy.

She looked at him with worry – like she used to do when he had first phased – more often. They'd fallen into a sick kind of symbiosis, wherein she ignored the fact that Embry disappeared at random intervals, and Embry continued to play the role of good son while he was around. Embry felt bad having to shrug off her resurfacing concerns. It was like déjà fucking vu.

Embry heard his mom knock again before opening the door a crack. She peeked inside before stepping in completely. "Up early," she noted.

"Still awake, more like," he yawned.

"You haven't slept yet?" she asked in shock, taking a seat at the edge of the bed near his knees. She reached up and brushed the fringe of his hair away from his face. The dark circles under his eyes were more pronounced than usual. "Sweetheart, you need to get some sleep. Do you feel all right?"

"Oh, just super, Ma."

Tiffany grinned in a sad way. "Are you not sleeping because you're just sitting in here thinking to death?"

"I don't think that's possible."

"Neither did I, but I'm afraid you're going to prove us all wrong. Having you considered talking, Emb?"

"Mom, I don't want to talk about it," he grumbled.

"I know you don't want to talk about it with me," she emphasized. "That much is obvious. But I don't think it's me you have the issue with."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"She leaves this weekend, right?"

"Right."

"I know you miss her," Tiffany ventured. "I know your friends miss her too. It's okay to miss people, Emb. It's a natural part of life. Sometimes we stray far from home in our pursuits, but that doesn't mean we leave our friends and families behind. It doesn't mean we stop caring. Life just moves in stages like that."

"I know that Mom," Embry rolled his eyes. "But that doesn't fix anything."

"No, it doesn't. You know what does fix things? Talking. Talking, Embry. Talking to people does wonders. You really ought to try it sometime. You keep enough bottled up. Let someone in every now and then. And if you're not going to sleep, then get up and fold that load of towels in the dryer."

Thursday, August 30, 2007

Jezzie had the lovely task of meeting the Littleseas – who both seemed like wonderful people – wearing the most uncomfortable shoes in the world. And she hated wool. Especially wool pants.
You are so lucky I like Collin so much, she had muttered murderously to Paul as the two followed Billy and Sue – who were the ones orchestrating the introduction given that they were actually "adults" on Council. Apparently Paul didn't quite count yet.

Someone who wasn't her or Collin had managed the technical paper work. Apparently there were a lot of intricacies involved in bringing an underage teen across the country to live with a non-family member for alternate schooling. It helped that Collin was enthusiastic about going, goading his parents into it.

The Littlesea's opted to skip most of the optional technicalities after they met Jezzie. They'd seen her around; for some reason the scourge of the Pack hadn't touched her in their minds. Both of them had run across her Dad a few times. They trusted her – and by extension, her nonexistent mother.

Jezzie had already called Boston Latin School to register Collin and swore on her apartment lease that she'd be in first thing Monday to fill out the proper paper work. They didn't need to know that Collin still wasn't in the proper timezone, but thus far it seemed they'd only be getting back into Boston the day before classes started.

"All right," Jezzie smiled as they finished up. "Well, my Dad's going to drive me up to SeaTac at the end of the week. I'm leaving my car here for a friend. We can fly out together if you like?"

And the deal was sealed. Jezzie gave Collin a polite wave and told him she'd see him, before leaving with Paul. "That was too easy," she remarked to Paul as they made their way down the street and Jezzie pulled the uncomfortable shoes off, opting to walk barefoot.

"Because they're desperate for anything that'll mean their son will be safe, happy, and educated. Plus, you get along well with people."

"How'd it go?" Jake materialized from a neighbor's yard, two doors down.

"Jezzie and Collin are set, but Council's got a whole slew of shit to deal with. At least these two can leave before school starts. I got go get started with some this paperwork bullshit. I'll see you kids."

And with that Paul gave a salute and fell back, towards the center of the rez.

"So," Jacob continued slinging and arm over Jezzie's shoulder. "They like you?"

"They do," she nodded. "I didn't even need any fake Mom pictures."

"Fake Mom pictures?" Jacob questioned.

"Yeah. I had to dig around the internet for some candid redheads that look like they could be my Mom. I shoulda just scrounged for one of my aunt."

"Why not just a picture of your own Mom?"

She smiled up at him in a sad way. "My Mom died about eight or nine years ago. All the pictures I have of her are sorely and obviously outdated."

"I'm sorry, Jez," Jake offered. "I never really thought about it, I guess. I always just thought of you and your Dad. Jez and Al. That seems like enough crazy to go around."

"It was an accident. It was a long time ago."

"My Mom died in an accident, too. Car accident. It was icy. I was ten. They had to nail the coffin shut."
Jezzie reached up with the hand that wasn't busy holding her shoes and took hold of the hand that Jake had slung over her shoulder. "My Mom got hit by a car when she was crossing the street. I was thirteen."

There was a brief pause in the conversation, but Jezzie felt Jacob's arm pull her just a little bit closer to his side.

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**Sunday, September 2, 2007**

There was no car in the driveway and Jezzie assumed that Tiffany was at the store receiving her monthly shipment, which frequently came at all hours.

Jezzie was standing in the street, the edge of the yard under her toes. She was leaving for Boston with Collin tomorrow morning. Well, later this morning she realized with a glance to her watch. 12:17AM.

She'd been in La Push for more than a week. She'd been to Rachel and Addie's wedding. She'd even been lucky enough to be around when Kim delivered. Embry hadn't even made eye contact with her. It's not like she'd expected to come back and find that everything had changed. But she did expect an explanation. She wanted to know why she'd been dropped on her ass for no good reason. Embry had quite literally walked away. No matter how hard she'd tried before she left in the spring, he wouldn't talk to her. He conveniently was almost impossible to find.

But she knew he was home tonight. She'd been on her way back from the Clearwater's as Seth left for patrol when she'd passed the Call house. She noticed the single light on in Embry's room. And like the obsessive creeper she was, she pulled over on the other side of the road. She wasn't quite sure when she'd vacated the car and crossed the road.

She must've done it while her subconscious was seething.

She was so pissed. She was past self-destructive doubting. She'd had enough pixie sticks and Red Bull - she'd never hated her alcohol-prohibitive medication routine so much as the two weeks immediately preceding Embry's flake out - and listened to more Kelly Clarkson, Alanis Morrisette, Amy Winehouse, and P!nk than any normal girl should in the course of a few months.

She was past doubting. Because she knew she didn't do anything wrong. Maybe Embry had misunderstood something, but it was his fault for never bringing it up. For just walking away. She couldn't do anything if he wouldn't talk to her. And now she was mad. Because if he wanted out, well, she sure as hell deserved an explanation.

She reached down to the ground and picked up a small rock that fit easily in her hand. Without pausing to think about the consequences of her actions - so characteristic of Jezzie Sullivan to think about the consequences of everything she did, she was the responsible one, the careful one, and her time in Washington had slowly eroded her pathological responsibility. She'd lived a little and what did she have to show for it? A broken heart and unsound frame of mind.

Without pausing to think about the consequences of her actions… she threw the rock at Embry's house. She heard it clatter against the wood shingle siding before thumping back to the ground. She didn't care if she hit a window or a flower pot or a gutter. Her aim was probably awful enough in her compromised emotional state to miss anything that small, anyways. She bent down and picked up another rock and threw again, this time it hit something metal and landed on the porch. Again, a third stone went zinging through the air and was followed by the sound of shattering glass.
The last extinguished light in Embry's room flickered back on and moments later the front door was open.

"Whatever the fuck you punks are doing—Ow!" Embry was stopped short by the rock that caught him the solar plexus. Jezzie had been aiming that time. He stopped and stared at the crazed redhead on his lawn at half past midnight that had just launched a projectile through his bedroom window, but he didn't say a word. Jezzie would settle for eye contact for now. It was the first time in months.

"You," she seethed. Embry made no attempt to move. He just stared at the girl in his yard, looking slightly horrified. "You asshole. That's right. Fucking look at me. You haven't looked at me in months. Like I just fell off the side of the planet! Like I never existed. Who does that? I want an explanation. I deserve an explanation. If you don't love me any more, I want to hear you say it!"

Jezzie was cut short by the arms that suddenly wrapped around her middle. "All right, methinks that's enough for tonight."

"Seth, dammit," Jezzie replied. She forgot it was him and Paul on patrol. Duh, Seth had left with her. Then he lifted her off the ground. "Seth, put me down."

"I don't think so," he denied, while turning around towards Jezzie's Jeep. "Let Seth save you from a whole heapin' pile of embarrassment. Because when you and Emb finally do get your shit in order... Well, let's just say he's currently not worth your ragey efforts." Seth pulled open the passenger door and dropped her inside as he finished. He buckled her in and shoved the lock down too.

"Seth, I am going to throw rocks until his house falls down." She couldn't work the safety belt off with her fumbling fingers. She couldn't see either and when she reached up to clear her vision she realized she was crying.

It was here that she gave up fighting. She heard the driver's door slam as Seth climbed inside and she stared at the moisture on her fingers like her hands had suddenly grown scales. Suddenly, she didn't want to be here anymore. She didn't want to be in front of Embry's house throwing rocks. She just wanted to leave. She wanted to put as much distance between her and him. She wanted to sleep. For days. In her Boston bed. She wanted to not care about the stupid boy a town over who confused her eight different ways to Sunday and broke her heart in as many ways.

She slumped in the seat, bringing her knees to rest against the dashboard. She could feel Seth pulling away from the side of the road and she just closed her eyes.

She was home before she knew it. She could tell by the scent of brine and pine that seemed a constant in her yard. "Thanks Seth," she said without moving.

She heard him hop out of the car and she undid her belt. Her door was pulled open for her. "No problem, Mama."

Jezzie offered a sad grin. "I don't think that counts for me anymore, Seth."

"Jezzie, I don't care how much of an idiot my brother is, you'll always be my Mama Wolf."

Jezzie slid out of the Jeep and wrapped her arms around Seth, who fully reciprocated. There was always something different - something extra - about Seth's hugs. Kind of like Jacob. But Jake was all Alpha voodoo. Seth just felt comfortable. Kid could've been a professional little brother.

"We're like the mob, Jezzie. Or federal prison. Or Congress. Once you're in, you're in for life."
It was by dint of much effort, all Jezzie's reserves of compassion, and an entire box of Benadryl that Collin got across the country via airplane. He seemed to be coming out of his drug-induced coma as they landed on the Boston Logan tarmac, and Jezzie looked a little frazzled. Her hair needed a brush, and her eyes were wide and slightly manic.

"We're taking a bus home," Collin shook his head. "I don't care if I have to pay for it. I don't care if we take a barge through the Panama frickin' canal and are forced to live in steerage. Wolves. Don't. Fly."

"Lesson. Learned," Jezzie muttered through clenched teeth. If they made it out of the airport without getting arrested for looking suspicious, then she'd be thankful. The two made their way through security, to the baggage claim and Jezzie hailed a cab – willing to fork over the extra cash for the convenience of not dealing with the subway – and the two finally collapsed in a pile of relief and suitcases when Jezzie let them into the foyer of her building.

They paused momentarily, then Collin began sniffing. "What's that smell?"

"What's what smell? This building is older than our grandparents. Lead paint. Asbestos. Horsehair insulation. I'm not surprised things smell funny. We're in a different kind of city than Seattle."

"No," Collin shook his head looking around. "It's a someone smell, not a something smell.

Jezzie just glanced at Collin. She could assume whom he was smelling, but she was surprised that Jacob hadn't said anything to him before they left. Had Jake kept it from Collin intentionally? Jezzie wanted to wait and confirm before she spilled the beans. "Well, there's something like a dozen tenants in this one row house. Plus, you've got enough allergy drugs in your system to sedate a Clydesdale, I think your senses might be a little skewed."


"I'll tell you about it later. In the meantime, we're on the third floor, unit C."

"What do you want me to do, Emb?" Jacob sighed in frustration. Embry was his best friend. Had been so since the third grade. But he was really, really starting to grate on Jacob's last nerve. "Tell her she can't go back to school? I'm not her father, I'm her friend."

"But she's at risk from a psychopathic werewolf!" Embry wailed. "You can't tell me you're just going to let her go."

"Yes she is. And yes I am." Jacob slammed the fridge door shut and pulled the bread off the counter. Leah and Nessie were out doing 'girl things' according to Leah, and Billy was at Sue's. Full meal prep was totally out the window; sandwiches it was. "She's human, Embry. She's not a wolf, she's not even Quileute. She's pack by choice and could tear herself out a lot easier than any of us could. I don't doubt she would if I tried to keep her from school. I'm not that much of a dick, man."

"So we're just going to let some creepy ass killer follow her and Collin around the city? That's good."

"I called the Plains wolves," Jacob reminded Embry for the umpteenth time. Jacob had called Damian right after Jezzie had left. Damian had confirmed that Azrael was no longer on the West Coast but had alluded their tracking in a dust storm just north of Texas as he made for the East. He had promised to keep both Jezzie and Collin safe. "They've been looking for Azrael for a while now. They'll keep an eye on them. Plus, she lives in a crowded city, in a crowded apartment. How could he get to her without someone hearing or noticing?"
"I'd like to no have to imagine the ways for you!"

"Dude, she was here for over a week. You didn't say a word to her. The only reason you picked up on this, is from the hive mind. Let me make this really clear: if you have an issue with what Jezzie is doing," Jacob enunciated, "then talk to Jezzie!"

"I FIGURED IT OUT!" Collin's shouting from halfway across the tiny and not necessarily legal third floor studio apartment scared the daylights out of Jezzie. "Shit-shit-shit-shit – don't tell my Mom I swear – shit-shit-shit-shit!" He was babbling as he ran across the apartment and Jezzie just watched him, her hands part way to her opened suitcase. She hadn't even had a chance to give a phone call, send a text message, or an email. They'd been inside for all of a half hour.

Collin ripped the door open and stuck his head outside. "Goddammit," he muttered, before slamming and locking the door. He glanced up to her confused expression from across the apartment. "How long have you lived here?"

"Since I first came to Boston last spring, why?"

"That smell I was smelling? It's werewolf, Jezzie. It's all mixed up with vampire."

"What!"

"Yeah," Collin nodded. "Brady and I never got to meet the werewolves. We were always the ones guarding the Treaty Line because we're just pups, but I recognize the scent. From what the others remember, from smelling it on them after the fact. But it's not the same. It's different… But it's definitely werewolf. And it's definitely mixed with vampire."

Jezzie just stared at him wide eyed, and then at the same time they proceeded to scramble around the apartment locking all the windows and drawing all the shades. Five minutes later and the two were sat together smack middle in the apartment's floor.

"Now what do we do?"

"I dunno! I didn't realize I had werewolf and vampire scent all over my apartment. This doesn't happen to me very often!"

"You say and like you might've been known a werewolf was pissing on your doorstep," Collin noted.

"He did not pee on my door, did he?"

"I meant, like, metaphorically. But… the scent's kind of old…"

That made the situation marginally less terrifying.

"It's old. It doesn't smell in here at all. Just in the entryway downstairs. But vampire and werewolf mixed is kind of weird. The second one that showed up would've definitely whiffed the first."

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**Tuesday, September 4, 2007**

"Bag?"

"Check."
"Key?"

"Check…"

"Lunch money?"

"Jezzie?"

"Bus fare?"

"Jezzie."

"What?"

"Would you please chill out," Collin requested. "You're worse than my Mom."

Jezzie grinned as she pulled her own backpack onto her shoulders. "I appreciate the compliment, but no one can be worse than your Mom. That's a Mom's job."

"Jezzie. I'm fourteen. I'm going to a new high school three blocks away. I'm gonna be fine."

"I know that, Collin," Jezzie insisted as she buzzed around him making sure his shirt wasn't bunched or his pants weren't creased anywhere they weren't supposed to be.

"So help me, if you lick your finger to fix my hair I'm putting you in the trash compacter."

Jezzie only grinned up at him. "Have a good day and if anyone gives you any crap, I wanna hear about it."

"Jezzie," Collin insisted as he opened his arms. "Look at me. No one is going to give me any crap."

"You remember how when I first came to La Push," Jezzie segued, "and everyone kept looking at me funny but the Pack always had my back?"

"Distinctly," Collin nodded.

"Well, you are now living on the fringe of one of the greatest and last Irish ghettos in this nation. And sometimes, it shows. So if anyone gives you any crap today, you will let me know."

Collin offered Jezzie a sad smile. She was right. He hadn't seen a single non-white person in this neighborhood in days. The mailboxes mounted to the doors were covered with names he had no familiarity with. Flaherty's, O'Malley's, Flynn's, Callahan's, and at least three Sullivan's. None of which Jezzie was apparently related to. He'd asked.

Collin was pretty sure he was the only not-white kid that lived within four blocks. No one had said anything, but they definitely looked at him a lot. Collin was kinda used to that… but maybe now it wasn't just because he was over six feet.

_Friday, September 7, 2007_

"What is it doing?"

"It's crying, Paul," Kim sighed. "And it has a name."

"It's making devil faces while it screams, it definitely doesn't look like your kid."
"Well, it is my kid so if you could pick it up that would be great."

"But…"

"Paul!" Kim shouted. "I am naked in the shower. I need to bathe every couple days! Would you please go pick Noah out of his bassinet? I promise he won't be judging you for your inability to decipher what his screaming means."

"Fine!"

Kim sighed and pulled the shower curtain closed. It had been two days since she had a shower. Paul was actually the one to suggest she go take five because she was looking a little manic about the eyes. However, Kim knew that Paul was touch-and-go with baby Noah. And taking a shower meant leaving the two to face down each other.

Paul treated Noah like a rabid kitten. He wanted to like him, and he did; but Noah also scared the crap out of him. It seemed cute and harmless, but it could just as soon eat you alive. And he was convinced Noah could smell weakness, and thereby screamed whenever Paul was alone with him and didn't know what to do.

A few days after the two had come home, he'd asked Kim why Noah was crying. Kim had to explain to Paul that babies only had two settings: I am ecstatically happy, or things could be better. And the only way to make things better when you were a week old required you to scream. A lot.

Screaming unnerved Paul. But he was trying to get better at handling it. He went into the living room, and the little swingy, rocky contraption that Noah had been laid in. Paul was relieved that Noah was asleep when Kim went in the shower. It hadn't lasted… He bent down, and carefully pulled the small, tufty-haired baby boy out of the swingy, rocky contraption. "Dude, what is wrong?" Paul asked the fitful screamer in his arms. Noah was really small. He looked really small when Kim held him, but he was absolutely dwarfed by the shapeshifter. He probably could've held him in one hand, but knew that wasn't a good idea.

"You're your father's son, all right," Paul grinned sadly. "He never quit bitching either."

Noah just continued to scream and yell, and his face was all twisted and red, and Paul wondered if this kid was going to pop some capillaries from screaming so hard. Then his yelling and thrashing stopped for a moment, his eyes widened, and he issued a small burp.

"Oh, I know this part!" Paul announced victoriously. He propped small Noah up and leaned him over his shoulder. "Let it out, little man. Better the attic than the basement. At least until you start shitting solid."

Noah continued to fuss, but the screaming subsided, and was replaced by small periodic baby belching – some starting to sound wetter than others. "Ew. Wait– don't puke on me yet, kid." How did he forget that babies had this weird tendency to puke when they burped? He was glad that was something that a person outgrew over time.

"All right, puke away, kid," Paul announced when he'd found one of the rags Kim used after Noah ate.

He turned around and saw Kim in the hallway. Her arms were crossed as she sat in her hip with a knowing smirk on her face. Her hair was wrapped up in a towel. "Well, look at you. I don't speak baby," she mimicked Paul's bass tones. "What if it pukes on me? I'm an only child. You're so full of shit, Paul."
"He screams every time he sees me," Paul insisted.

"Probably because you won't stop pulling faces. He seems quite content now."

Paul spun in a circle, trying to get a glimpse of Noah's face on his shoulder. Kim only laughed as he spun around on the living room floor. He couldn't see little Noah. But he didn't miss the sound of his low even breathing as the baby slept against his shoulder.
The Old That is Strong Does Not Wither

Sunday, September 16, 2007

Jake had called a Pack meeting. He knew he should've done it in human skin. But half the Pack was already out in the woods. He should've just told them all to meet at his house. Or even Quil's for that matter. But no, he thought he'd try and make it easier for people. But it had all backfired. Because he and the rest of the Pack were sitting in the middle of the woods in wolf skin, waiting patiently for the Beta and the Third to stop tearing each other apart.

What the fuck was that Paul? Huh? Tell me! I want to fucking know! Paul's back hit the forest floor with an echoing thud as pine needles puffed away from the scuffle. Paul bit down on Embry's ear, and as he flinched back Paul kicked him off.

My money's on Paul, Brady offered.

I don't know, Leah offered. Embry's got a lot of pent up aggression.

Don't egg them on, Jacob sighed.

What's it to you, you pussy? Paul taunted. She's been single for three months, she can do what – and who – she wants.

Embry snarled at Paul's remark, his lips curled back over dagger-like canines. He lunged once and his jaws snapped at Paul's shoulder, barely missing. Did. It. Happen?

Wouldn't you like to know? Paul danced out of Embry's reach. You would if you ever fucking talked to her about anything. Or maybe even if you weren't such a fucking drama queen. It's about time you did something. Even if it is just wailing on me for a fucking dream.

A dream? Embry paused.

Yes, you douche canoe. A dream. Which is kind of unavoidable given how often I'd seen the girl naked secondhand in the course of the five months you were together.

A dream…

Yes! Do you really think I'm going to bed your ex-girlfriend? Thanks for the vote of confidence. Now back off – your breath is melting my retinas!

Are we done, manchildren? Leah inquired. I think it would be in all our best interests to take five and reconvene this in human form.

I second that motion, Anna offered.

A half hour later, Embry and Paul were apparently over their spat—though Paul had told Embry just man the fuck up already, for about the four hundred and seventy third time, and Embry told Paul he didn't want to know about any more of his twisted-ass dreams—and the rest of the Pack had piled into the Ateara's living room.

"All right," Jacob began. "I got a call from Damian. His family's been attacked."

"What!"
"By who?"

"Are they okay?"

"They're all fine. It was Elizabeth and Abigail and Zachary. Damian and his sister Lydia are the ones patrolling the East Coast. The other three were at home – minding their own business apparently. Zach and Abi are kids, they only phase in the moon cycles. They don't patrol or fight or anything."

"So who was after them?" Quil asked. "Was it Azrael again? I thought he was tailing Jezzie?"

"No," Jake shook his head. "They didn't recognize the scent. Elizabeth said it was vampire, though. And not someone she knew. So that rules out the Volturi."

"Well, that's just more concerning now, isn't it?" Leah offered. "Is it someone we know?"

"That's what we're gonna find out."

"Roadtrip!" Seth crooned.

"Not for you, you dork." Jacob rolled his eyes. "Paul, I'm sending you."

"You're sending me what?"

"To Minneapolis."

"Where the fuck is that?"

"Minnesota."

"Where the fuck is that?"

Jacob leaned back against the sofa, and Leah just reached up to drag her hand down her face.

"We'll get you a goddamn map," Jacob sighed. "But you're one of the most seasoned wolves and I can't send Sam because he's still half crippled and can't be phased for very long. I want you to go out there, poke around and see if you pick anything up."

"You want me to poke around the entire Midwest alone for a vampire?"

"No, I want you to poke around Minneapolis with Jasper Hale for the scent of a vampire."

"WHAT? That creepy-ass army kid with the mind voodoo?"

"Yes."

"What did I do to deserve this? Is this punishment for dreaming about having sex with Jezzie?"

"WHAT?" Embry yelled beginning to move off the couch, before Quil caught his shoulder and yanked him back down. What he'd initially seen in Paul's head was disturbing, but he didn't realize his subconscious had taken him to a full sex act. "Stop dreaming about my ex-girlfriend!"

"You're oldest," Jake interrupted as Anna took the liberty of slapping a hand over Embry's mouth.

"Fuck that shit."

And so the unlikely duo of Paul Lahote and Jasper Hale – newly returned from the Alaskan Yukon – set up to venture to Minneapolis, Minnesota. A city and state which were apparently somewhere east
of La Push and West of New York City. Paul was perfectly fine making Jasper play navigator.

"He's from the 1800s, right?" Paul asked. "They used compasses and shit all the time. He can handle it. That's better than following the scent of werewolf across half the country."

"All right, Quil, this is serious shit – I mean it," Paul informed the younger wolf as he stuffed a bag with a few days worth of civilization-worthy clothing a few hours before he was due to leave. He was meeting Jasper at the Treaty Line, and they would take almost a full day to reach Minneapolis.

"Uh-huh," Quil nodded.

"I mean it!" Paul turned around and pointed to his pup. "SportsCenter whenever possible. The Red Sox are going all the way this year, okay? As my pup you are morally obligated to make sure that Noah witnesses all the history leading up to such an event, because hell knows Kim doesn't give two shits about baseball. We have to think of the kids, Quil. Because otherwise no one will care about relaying all this stuff to us when we're old and deaf and blind and senile."

"Paul, I swear on my Mom's secret lasagna recipe," Quil raised his hands as he swore his oath. "That I will make sure that Noah misses no historic athletic moments while you are gone."


"Just go to Minneapolis," Quil shook his head. "And try not to kill Jasper Hale while you're gone. He's the only Cullen that makes any sense anymore."

Friday, September 21, 2007

"Okay, I think I'm finally going to do something about this," Embry announced as the credits for the episode of CSI ran

"Congratulations," Quil said without enthusiasm as he began flicking through the channel.

"What praytell are you doing?" Jacob asked from the kitchen as he fastened on of Nessie's shoes on her feet.

"I gotta go to Boston next week with Dr. Murtagh and some other students for school. I figured I might as well finally talk to Jezzie."

"Lordamercy," Quil wailed. "It's about fucking time."

"Language," Jacob intoned from the kitchen as Nessie gasped and pointed at the offender.

"It's come to the point where I don't even know why I've gone this long without talking to her… it feels really stupid."

"It's because it is really stupid."

"I bet Leah bakes you a cake," Jacob replied.

"And then pushes you in it," Quil added.

"You have been driving her up the wall during patrol. I have to hear it from you, and then I get it secondhand from her too."
"And that's why you should never share a bed with anyone," Quil replied. "Ten bucks says you don't even make it inside her building."

"Thanks Quil."

**Thursday, October 11, 2007**

*So you don't recognize the scent at all?* Jacob asked. He was pleased to learn that distance didn't seem to interrupt the Packmind. He could hear Paul all the way in Minneapolis as if he was sitting next to him.

*Nope, Paul insisted. Although… Jasper does. He's being pretty quiet on who he thinks it is. Apparently we're going to Mexico tomorrow for a few days? Fine by me. I think it's an ex-girlfriend.*

*How do you figure?*

*Well, I just assumed. And when I made a joke about it he got all tense – which I've learned is not really a Jasper-y thing. Anyways, so apparently we're going to go see about his Mexican ex-girlfriend tomorrow. I bet she's a total battle-ax. Should be a good time. Don't tell Alice.*

*I'm sure Alice knows. And if she doesn't, I don't think she cares.*

*Whatever, man. Bro code, and all that.*

*I sent you out there less than a month ago, and you hated me and threatened to rip Jasper's head off. And now you two have a bro code?*

*Who else have I got? This guy isn't so bad. He's just got like no social skills.*

**Sunday, October 14, 2007**

Embry didn't know what to expect when Jezzie came back home. He knew she wouldn't exactly be thrilled to see him sitting in her hallway outside her apartment door. When she came off the elevator Embry could smell and hear her heightened heart rate before she even saw him. She'd been on a run.

When she finally glanced up as she stepped off the elevator, her face was blank. Like she was trying to decide how to react. Then her jaw set and her eyes hardened. Bitterness smelled exactly how felt and it was coming down the hall at Embry in tsunami-like waves. She kinda scared the hell out of him because – for a minute – the expression looked oddly familiar. But not on Jez. Then he realized she looked like Leah. Like Leah used to look. Jezzie wasn't mad, she wasn't sad. She was absolutely resentful.

Jezzie paused for a moment. Why the heck Embry Call was in her hallway was beyond her. She was half tempted to step back into the closing elevator, wait until it was between floors and press the emergency stop. But that would be an awkward explanation for Boston FD. Instead, she clenched her teeth, trying not to let her emotion show – though she knew Embry would pick up on it anyways – picked her key out of her pocket and marched down the hall, like everything was normal.

*She shoved the key into the lock rather forcefully and thrust the door open. She took a step inside and spoke without moving. "Are you coming in?" Did she want to kick Embry in the shins? Yeah. But he did just come across the country somehow and heaven knows how long he'd been in her hallway.*
She heard Embry follow her and he closed the door after himself. Jezzie kicked off her sneakers with more energy than was really necessary and went to the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. Embry sat at the counter stool while she drank the whole thing down. Then, wordlessly, she set about picking up the apartment's living room. Seven o'clock. Collin would be home at nine. She cleared yesterday's newspaper off the table and piled up the worksheets for Collin's geometry homework before setting them on the desk on the other side of their studio apartment.

"Is there something I can do for you Embry?" Jezzie asked as she wrenched the refrigerator door open. Her and Collin had a half hour discussion about dinner this morning and now she couldn't remember a word of it. Her brain was too fried by the man at her breakfast counter. She pulled open the bottom drawer before she saw the chicken. That's right. Collin was making buffalo chicken tomorrow, so that meant she was making the shepherd's pie tonight. As she pulled the hamburger out of the fridge and spun around, she found herself cornered in her spot.

"I haven't heard from you in a while," Embry told her matter-of-factly, standing no more than three inches away from her. "I wanted to see if you were okay."

"You don't say?" she replied sardonically. "And I haven't heard from you. Which is odd considering the frequency with which I call home. Or maybe you missed the whole week I spent in La Push in August? I don't know if you noticed but I brought someone back with me. You did notice that Collin's been missing for a month and a half, right?"

"Yeah," Embry nodded crouching down slightly so he was eye level with the angry redhead. "I did pick up on that. Thanks." He paused for a moment and looked her up and down appraisingly.

Jezzie did not appreciate that. She only glared. He had no right. He had no right to flip his shit, ignore her for months, and then just show up on her doorstep like he owned the place. She did not appreciate his arms on either side of her – braced against the fridge – and trapping her. As a wolf, he knew exactly what he was doing and what kind of position that put her in, and she did not like it.

"You're still stubborn as hell, huh?"

"Embry Call," Jezzie glared at him through her lashes, resisting the urge to growl. She seethed, though. Man, did she seethe. "If you dent my fridge, I'm killing you and mixing you into my shepherd's pie. And, I'm a little spiteful, yes. Excellent observation. I'm also perfectly fine, thanks to the werewolves that run circuits through my neighborhood a few times a week."

She issued a sharp elbow to the inside of his own – having learned that weak spot early on – and took the moment to step away. She slammed the hamburger down on the counter and bent down to retrieve the pan from below the oven.

"So, is there a reason you're here," she reiterated as she pulled a few potatoes from the sack on the floor. "Because honestly, Embry, I don't need you here in my kitchen making me relive four months ago when you up dropped my ass out of nowhere, okay?"

She didn't wait for a response as she ripped the cutlery drawer open with a clatter and fished around for a vegetable peeler. It would take longer but using a paring knife might tempt her to stab the wolf standing across from her.

She braced her arms against the counter and locked her elbows, taking a deep breath trying to center herself. Keep it together, Jezzie.

She felt Embry before she heard him. She could feel the heat pulsing off him as it soaked into her skin and so much of her wanted to admit that she missed that…
"Jez…"

"Don't," she interrupted him, trying to keep her voice from cracking. "Don't call me that." Deep breaths, deep cleansing breaths… That was her nickname from the Embry of four months ago. The Embry that had been funny and light hearted and kind. The Embry she had wanted to spend all her time with. But not this Embry. This Embry was a stranger and so much of her wanted to smack him with the frying pan. She didn't want this stranger here in her kitchen pulling cheap shots in all the right places.

Jezzie's body chemistry totally changed the second his nickname for her slipped out. Embry wasn't sure what new emotion overshadowed the earlier acid… it was softer and more raw. Not the bitterness from before. It was different.

He watched the girl's back, her shoulders high and her muscles tense. She hadn't liked it very much when he cornered her either, but he couldn't really help it. He hadn't seen her in months and she was fresh from a run. And he was also worried as hell about her. He didn't care if Damian and Lydia passed through a few times a week. It wasn't enough. Knowing she was out here with Azrael sniffing around her put him over the edge.

Embry's wolf was also quite insistent that he merely do something. Wasn't Embry the human? The wolf was very good with smells and sounds and instinctual things and it had always counted on its human to do the emotional and mental thing. Embry's wolf was getting quite tired of its human failing on its end of the bargain. Their mate was upset, they hadn't seen her in months and the wolf knew whatever Embry was doing, it was wrong. The wolf wasn't about to risk an excellent mate because its human did not know how to keep her.

Jezzie felt his overheated hand wrap around her forearm and she was about to pull away when she was spun around. She gasped at the quickness of the movement and just as quickly she felt the warmth permeate her abdomen. She glanced down and watched as Embry dragged his tongue from the top of her running shorts to her belly button.

Holy…

"Embry!" she gasped, gripping the countertop at her back firmly and trying desperately to ignore that long hibernated feeling that suddenly burst back to life between her legs. Not what she needed right now. "What the hell are—"

But the eyes that met hers when his face glanced up did not belong to Embry Call. She recognized those black eyes and she hadn't seen them in many months.

"Or… not Embry," she whispered, shocked. *Holy crap… this was new.* What was she supposed to do? She didn't remember the last time very clearly. The irony of the wolfish grin that slipped up his face was not lost on Jezzie. He only shook his head. "Okay, Not-Embry. Could I have Embry back?"

Because as uncomfortable as Embry made her feel, his wolf didn't do much better. He shook his head again. "We are not going to lose our mate."

"All right, well if it's you and me – could I ask you not to lick me? Please?"

"But it pleases the mate," he insisted before burrowing his nose into her abdomen, one arm lowered from her waist to wrap around her thigh and his hand rested between her legs. "We can smell it."

Jezzie's eyes widened. "That's from a while ago. Embry has made me kinda sad lately."
He nodded. "Yes. He is losing the mate for us. Your smell is good. We missed it." He tightened his arms around her hips and her thigh and let his cheek rest against her abdomen, but she was glad that he observed her request not to lick her.

"Well, Embry hasn't done such a good job of holding onto me, but... you seem to have that covered," she glanced down at his hands around her midsection.

"We are here because we want to keep the mate. He wants to keep the mate too. He does not know how. He has lots of human problems. But he does not fix them. We do not know how to fix them though. That is not the wolf's job. But we like the mate very much."

"He wants to keep me?" she asked. "Is that why he's here?"

The wolf nodded. "She used to be very happy. She used to like to play games. She is very sad now."

"Okay," Jezzie nodded. "But... I can't fix anything if I don't get to talk to Embry."

The wolf nodded again and after blinking a few times, Jezzie could see Embry come back to the forefront. She sank carefully – still encircled by his arms – to a squat, now level with him. Embry looked a little disoriented and she tried to move slowly.

"Embry, it's me. It's Jezzie. Did you... Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Guess not... Your wolf and I. We had a chat." His face showed nothing but pure astonishment. "Embry, talk to me. What's going on? I want to talk to you, not your inner wolf. You should be better at it anyways. He's a canine of few words."

Embry just watched Jezzie's reaction, his eyes still wide with shock. Jezzie was patient, she waited. She knew from experience that Embry's wolf wasn't really dangerous, but it only came out when Embry couldn't handle things. That led her to believe there was more going on than she thought, so she waited.

"Jezzie, I'm sorry."

Her mouth grew slack and she had to blink a couple of times. "Excuse me?"

Embry pulled her into a hug, hoping against all odds she didn't push him away. He wrapped his arms in their familiar spot around her waist and leaned into her neck. Jezzie was too shocked to do much of anything, as her arms stuck out at odd angles. "I'm sorry," he repeated. "For all the bullshit I pulled. I really am. I fucked it up – it wasn't your fault. Hell, I'm lucky Leah didn't come by and slash my tires or set my bed on fire or some shit. But I'm sorry. I'm sorry I upset you. I'm sorry I haven't talked to you in months. I'm sorry you were out here alone being followed. I'm sorry it hurts for me to even call you 'Jez'. I'm sorry."

Jezzie was still slack-jawed and still dazed and now a little bit confused. "What... what pray tell brought all this on? I mean, Embry, four months ago we were talking about school plans, you accused me of thinking I was better than you, and you walked out on me. I could use some explanation."

Embry exhaled and Jezzie could feel the warm course down her neck and her chest. She shook the confusion from her head long enough to move her arms, to wrap them around Embry's shoulders. Clearly this explanation was going to require some encouragement and Jezzie wasn't a completely cold-hearted bitch.
"I've always been touchy about school, Jezzie. I don't think you ever realized that because we never talked about it – we decided we wouldn't. But ever since I was a kid… I'm the local bastard child and most people like my mom, but for the most part the rez has been waiting for either her or me to face-plant these past eighteen years. I never sucked at school, but I was no Sam and I was no Leah."

He paused. She waited.

"I was nervous as hell about college. Because I thought I'd make it, but I didn't know if I would because I tanked the last half of my junior year. And I didn't want places accepting me just because I'd be the token reservation kid. And I let that bullshit out on you and I'm sorry."

This time Jezzie exhaled. Wow. "Why wouldn't you just say something, you lunatic!" Jezzie was floored. She had no idea what had precipitated their relationship meltdown. He hadn't said anything that would've given his thoughts away. It didn't help that he hadn't seen or uttered a word to her in months.

"I know. It was stupid."

"Do you have any idea how nerve-wracking it was for me to apply to medical school across the country with a serious medical condition? Trying to think how I'd deal with relapses? What I'd do – how I'd explain – if I couldn't leave the apartment for a week? How I'd prove that I'm not too undereducated or am not up to the challenge?"

She swallowed and shook her head vehemently. "I have problems too. They're not the same as yours, but they stress me out, too. I wish you'd said something. Anything."

"It was stupid."

"Yeah," she insisted. "Good clarification. You are not stupid, Embry. But that was a really stupid move."

"Not saying anything was. Not talking to you for four months was."

Jezzie loosened her grip and leaned back slightly, her head bumping into the cabinet door behind her. She moved so she could see Embry's face and he still looked pretty miserable – if relieved. Then he leaned in carefully, taking a careful hold of her face and kissed her forehead.

It'd been too long. Too long since she'd been this close to him – close enough to feel the heat and smell the woods of the Pacific Northwest. Too long since she'd kissed him.

He hadn't touched her like this in months. And then he felt… wait, what the hell was that?

"Jezzie," he pulled far enough to see her face. She was crying. "What's wrong?"

He watched as a knot in her throat bobbed and then she pulled herself close, burying her face into his shoulder. What the heck was going on? He was confused, but tried to squelch the fear that being this close would make her want to hit him.

"I'm scared," she rasped against his skin.

*Oh shiiii!* "Of…" he hedged.

"Of… of this," she began, and he felt her fingers try to gain some kind of purchase against his shirt. She was grasping like she might've drowned if she let go. "I'm scared of whatever is following me. I'm scared that Collin just isn't going to come home from school one day. I'm scared that what
happened last winter isn't over. And I'm so sick and tired of living in a constant state of terror! And it's just all been building and one of my best friends hasn't even been talking to me, except now he is but it's making me rethink everything and I'm just so confused and terrified now!"

Embry could feel her heartbeat unusually strong, and her breathing was uneven. "Jez, sweetheart? Breathe, please? Breathe. Your gonna make yourself sick."

His hands found a natural pattern, rubbing a smooth circuit into the skin of her back and willing her to breathe normally. He took a minute to take a deep breath, too. He was in that uncharted no-man's land again. The place where he was totally fucking clueless. He was really stupid when it came to crying girls. Maybe he could convince Anna or Leah to start sporadically bawling more often so he could get used to it. Unlikely...

"Okay, Jezzie? Number one: I love you." He could hear her sharp intake of breath as he said it, but he kept going. "Clearly, it took months of my finding out that I'm also relationship retarded to realize that, but I do pretty much love the shit out of you. I think only time is probably going to fix what I fucked up, but I don't want you to be scared of whatever the hell happens between us."

"Number two: Azrael hasn't been around in weeks, especially since Collin started stinking up the block – he probably scared him off. I've smelled nothing weird since I got off that plane. And Damian and Lydia don't let him out of their scent range."

"Number three: Collin is sturdier than your average fourteen year old, and if anything was going wrong, I'm pretty sure he'd tell you. He likes you a lot, Jez… And I'm scared that what happened last winter isn't over yet, either."

"Emb?" she offered a teary reply, as his hands continued their circuit over her back, hoping to keep her calm.

"Yeah, Jez?"

"I love you too."

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" Embry hedged.

She shrugged noncommittally. "I don't want to hold it against you Embry, but I also don't want you think I can just fold like a napkin. Give me a few minutes to let it sink in. We have a lot more to talk about. And if you ever do that to me again, you're getting worse than put into my shepherd's pie."

And things were better. Not quite entirely right, but they got better.

They both climbed off the floor and Embry leaned against the counter in the narrow galley kitchen while Jezzie wiped her tears and cooked the hamburger and peeled through a few potatoes. She asked lots of questions, and he told her about school – about how he liked the department and the material came very naturally; about how his faculty advisor, and the man who held Embry's career in his hands, had taken a liking to him and he was in Boston with a handful of other students to shadow that professor at a board of directors meeting. Tomorrow he would sit in on a gathering of officers from a Fortune 500 company and listen as his professor prognosticated about economic and financial futures.

Jezzie was excited and asked even more questions and Embry couldn't help but smile at her back as she cooked and twittered at the same time. When he asked about her, though, she seemed both tired and happy. Her first semester was running her into the ground, but she loved it. The high brow kids that infused the upper echelons of academia were getting to her. Classes were getting to her, but most
of the professors and a good chunk of her classmates were great.

Collin was doing well – if totally terrified – at Boston Latin School. "I think," Jezzie remarked with a small smirk as she dumped the beef and the corn into the casserole dish. "That he's enjoyed not being the only not-white kid. He's probably the only Indian, but this is a very colorful city, even if this is a white neighborhood." Jezzie and Collin lived in the South End, and Jezzie knew that there were more predominantly Irish neighborhoods, but the fact that she got a studio for under a thousand a month was apparently unheard of.

Now her and Collin lived on the third floor on a street packed with row after row of old brick apartments. Embry had only been to Seattle a few times in his life and it was nothing like Boston. He guessed he liked Boston, but he sure as heck wasn't ready for it. Getting from the airport to the hotel had been fine – he'd been with a man familiar with the area and five other students. Getting from downtown Boston to the South End where Jezzie lived had been a special half hour of public transportation.

Jezizzie laughed when he told her how he almost got cut in half walking through the automated turnstile doors on the subway.

Embry agreed to make sure the apartment didn't burn down while Jezzie took a shower and her pie was still in the oven when Collin got home from work. For a minute, he just stopped in the door and looked. And then he stared. Collin knew Jezzie was mad, knew she was spiteful as hell about Embry – it was her normal residual scent. The whole apartment had a tinge of bitterness to it because Jezzie carried it with her everywhere she went. And Collin wasn't stupid. He knew Embry was the reason why. He was pretty sure that every single Packmate had been verbally (if not physically) beating him into talking to her already. The physical beatings mostly came from Anna or Leah.

So to come home after school and then hours bagging groceries – he'd chosen to walk home. (The city had grown on Collin, but his wolf wasn't always a fan. Jezzie was nice enough to let him phase in the living room a couple times a week in order to talk to everyone back home and to just let it out of his system. Collin was young and his wolf got claustrophobic in the city.) So after spending the ten minute walk home trying to decompress, his stress levels went back through the roof when the whole hallway smelled like bile, anger, and Embry.

Collin didn't want to have to kick Embry's ass – because it was a brawl he'd only win on principle – Embry would surely beat the crap out of him. But when he opened the door, everything changed. He could see Jezzie smiling from the kitchen, for one. Secondly, it smelled like… happiness. And shepherd's pie. What the fuck had he missed?

Embry agreed to stay for dinner and Jezizzie heated up their ziti leftovers. Collin hadn't phased much as he used to, but he still ate plenty. They talked mostly, which would have been the case even if Jezzie and Collin weren't poor or cheap enough to pay for cable. They spent most of the night on the living room floor while Embry updated them on the goings-on of Washington.

Embry explained in more detail the attack on the Plain's Pack and how Jake had sent Paul out to talk with them and see if they recognized the scent. They were pretty well assured that the attacker was Volturi – though the scent was not theirs, the attack pattern was reminiscent of their style.

Collin and Jezzie talked about the strange scent of vampire mixed with werewolf around Jezzie's apartment when Collin had first arrived. Jezizzie didn't know how long it had been there but Collin confirmed that it hadn't cropped up again since. Embry gave Collin a hard stare and the younger wolf stubbornly insisted he was keeping a nose out for it.
They talked about school – each of them – and Embry explained to Collin why he was even in Boston. It was midnight when a yawn echoed out of Jezzie's chest and she checked the clock. "It's officially tomorrow," she nuded Collin's side. "You have school."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Collin groused. "Growing kids and sleep. I'm going – you adults have fun."

"We'll try to keep it quiet," Jezzie rolled her eyes.

Collin scoffed. "No need. You know I could sleep through the second coming."

"Night, Collin," she ruffled his hair. It wasn't a half hour later that both Embry and Jezzie could hear Collin's light snore on the other side of the studio apartment.

"You're doing good with him," Embry noted.

Jezzie smiled a little as she looked down at her cup of tea. "I'm trying," she amended. "It's so easy for me to forget that he's only fourteen. With Pack and the fact that he's built like a college football player… It's hard to expect me to be just his roommate given our age difference. But I don't want to mother him too bad – he's got a Mom. And he's a responsible kid."

"You seem to have a good symbiosis," Embry replied. "Give yourselves some credit."

"Yeah, he's a good kid."

"So, Leah and I have started some research," Embry began. He'd started the whole process because of Jezzie. Mostly. He definitely wanted to know, but before he blew his entire relationship with Jezzie to hell it became a major lynchpin. Imprinting. She was afraid of his wolf imprinting on someone else because she was sick. He felt she deserved to know about it.

"What kind of research?" Jezzie asked with a quirked brow.

"We've been poking around Neah Bay."

"Oh?" Jezzie replied, a look of recognition passing over her face. "And what have you scrounged up?"

"Not a lick of lore about vampires," Embry nodded decidedly.

"That's odd. Isn't that why you all phase in the first place?"

"It seems like the way geography works, the Makahs have been luckily isolated from most vampire activity. Makah women started phasing to protect family – during local potlatches."

"But you're a boy."

"Yeah, thanks. I'm glad we've cleared that up," Embry rolled his eyes. "History seems to show that male Makah wolves are rare the way female Quileute wolves are. Chromosomes and shit. Carlisle said something about Xs and Ys. I'm sure you'd understand if he told you, but he just confused the hell out of me."

"Wow…" Jezzie nodded. "So you get it from your Mom, then. But… why did your gene respond to vampires if that's a trigger for Quileute wolves?"

"It seems that the Makah gene responds to any extra special threat to the tribe or the family. It just so happened it was vampires. If I went long enough without phasing, the Plains Pack coming through could've done it."
"Whoa…"

"Yeah, that's all we got for now. Leah's kind of a genius about this stuff." Jezzie smiled at Embry's comment – knowing that Leah must've been in nerdy heaven getting to pick through tribal history for a mystery. "We're going back up in the next couple weeks – we don't want to attract too much attention. Hopefully then we'll get some more answers…"

"Well, keep me updated," Jezzie nodded, noting that he never used the dreaded 'i' word, but knowing exactly what he intended. It meant a lot to her that even though they'd gone months without being together he was still looking into all this. Then again, she thought, maybe he was just curious. That'd be natural. It was silly to think he'd be on a mission when they weren't even together for that time.

"Duh," Embry rolled his eyes. "You're the reason I'm on this quest, Jez."

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**Monday, October 12, 2007**

Embry was slowly regaining consciousness and something smelled like coffee… and flowers. Well, not really totally like flowers, but that really nice smell that one could only describe as flowers. Then he made to stretch his shoulders and—

Oh.

Jezzie was still on top of him. Twin beds were not ideal for six and a half foot tall shapeshifters. Let alone additional bodies. Okay, so this wasn't the worst thing in the world. It was her hair – more or less all over the place – that smelled of coffee and flowers. Or just girl. She smelled like girl. And it was really, really nice. He knew if he moved closer to her skin he'd be able to smell the trace antiseptic from the lab she worked in and the synthetic weirdness of the drugs she took everyday.

He moved slightly, content to let Jezzie wake up on her own until at least the top of the hour rolled around and he had to get ready to leave. Then, oh shit.

He couldn't move even if he wanted to. Otherwise Jezzie was going to be greeted by a very awake and alert part of him. He was also pretty sure that being stabbed in the stomach with his morning wood as a 'how do you do' would freak her the hell out. *Goddammit*. Embry figured there was no way out of this and he laid his head back, thinking through his limited options.

He'd gotten nowhere fast when Jezzie started to rouse. She shifted uncomfortably against his groin and he tried not to groan but she stopped moving immediately. She lifted herself off him carefully and glanced down between their hips. Embry fully expected her launch herself off him and head straight for the bathroom or the kitchen. Instead, she just collapsed in a tired heap back on top of him.

"Good morning, Embry," she mumbled into his shirt. "Good morning, little Embry." He could definitely feel her grinning against his shoulder. "Is that my fault?"

"Yes," he admitted. He hadn't seen her in months. Though that was definitely his fault. Her sleeping half naked on top of him sure as hell didn't make it any better. "I'm not thirteen. I don't sport wood like this for no reason."

"I just thought it was a general morning thing. Sorry," she glanced up with a small pout. "I should've slept on the couch."

"Yeah," Embry barked a laugh. "Because that would've been so much better. That's like setting the house on fire so you don't have to clean it anymore, Jez. Not nearly as effective as it would seem."
"I think my sleeping on top of you probably only made it worse, though," she said.

"In all the best ways," he admitted as his lips found the crook of her neck. He held on to her hips, his hands large enough to wrap halfway around her ass and all she did was scramble closer. "Real remorseful, aren't you?"

"Definitely," she snickered as she kissed and sucked against Embry's skin. He had the luxury of hiding any bruise with his skin tone – even if he was capable sustaining bruising from her, which he largely suspected he was not.

But when Embry's fingers dipped below the side band of her underwear, she gasped and launched herself off him – making it almost off the bed, limbs flailing, catching herself before she fell. "No, Embry," she said steadying herself.

Embry just laid back with a groan. "Are you serious, Jez? Because this is a hell of a lot better when you take care of it. I'm seeing way too much of my own hand lately."

Jezzie perched herself on the edge of the bed, her back to Embry but she grinned slightly. "Sorry. I just… I can't," her statement finished in a small growl as she rubbed her hands over her face. She dropped her hands from her face and continued stare out the window. "I can't sleep with you now, because Collin lives in this studio apartment too and would hear everything – for one. He's only fourteen."

"Collin's dead to the world – trust me his heartbeat is at an all time low," Embry insisted.

Jezzie perked her head up and glanced around. "Really? Wait… what time is it?" she glanced at the clock beside her bed. "Holy crap! Six thirty! Collin!"

And with that she launched herself off the bed, pausing only long enough to pull a long t-shirt on. She ran and Embry could hear her skid to a halt and attempt to roust Collin. "Collin, wake up! It's six thirty!"

"Hmph… But the… what?"

"It's six thirty! You're going to miss the six forty-seven train and you know the six fifty-two is bedlam – you'll be late! Wake up!"

"Fuck," then the distinctive sound of a shapeshifter falling out of bed.


Embry mostly just sat and watched as Jezzie and Collin ran around like headless chickens. He couldn't help, so he figured he'd stay out of the way. Ten minutes later – at six forty – Collin was slinging his backpack on, had his homework between his teeth and Jezzie tossed him something wrapped in foil. "Breakfast sandwich," she told him breathlessly. She turned around as he caught it and finished filling the brown bag on the counter and tossed that to him too. "Lunch. Have a good day."

"You rock, Little Red," Collin smiled, pausing long enough to take his homework out of his mouth and give Jezzie a hug, before disappearing out the door. Embry watched as Jezzie slumped down the closed door with a tired puff. She paused there for only a moment before standing back up and dragging her feet back to her bed and a very amused-looking Embry. She crawled back into bed and collapsed on Embry's chest.

"Don't you have something for school this ungodly early?"
"I have until ten-ish. My histology professor has the flu."

"So, was there a number two?" Embry asked her after a moment.

"Hm?" Jezzie hummed in question.

"You said no sex because of Collin's young and impressionable state. Unless you have a second reason, your first doesn't apply anymore," he joked.

Jezzie issued a petulant raspberry to the skin at his shoulder. "He'll smell it. You know he will. Unless… wait—" and with that Jezzie popped upright. She gasped with a sort of recognition, and slid off the bed. She clasped Embry's hand in hers and tugged him after her.

"Where are we–" Embry asked before Jezzie forcefully shoved him into her bathroom. "Oh," he realized. There were about nine hundred other chemical, soap, and cleaner smells in the bathroom that things all blended together indiscriminately. "We're gonna fuck in your bathroom?" he asked her. "Okay."

As soon as the door clicked closed Jezzie was pressed up against him, standing on her toes, and her lips pressed against him. He pressed back against her mouth, and his hands went to her hips. She released a small breath when he picked her up and sat her on the sink's counter, toppling a few bottles and containers of something.

She reached back over her shoulder and tugged her t-shirt off, pulling her legs up until she was on her knees. Embry met her in small crash as their bodies collided. A few more bottles scattered to the floor. Whatever the hell they were about to do would certainly be drowned out by the smell of what Embry was pretty sure was the Axe and nail polish remover they’d knocked over. They could’ve left a pile of burning leech carcasses in here and Collin wouldn’t have smelled it over that.

Embry moved – rather haphazardly – down the column of her neck to her shoulder, where he kissed a few of the petals tattooed on her skin. He glanced down to her breasts but was immediately distracted by where her hand had gone and escaped between her legs under the fabric of her underwear. “Jezzie, are you—”

“Sorry,” she muttered sounding anything but, “would you be mad if we skipped the foreplay?”

Oh, yeah, definitely, Embry though sarcastically. “Not as long as I can watch.”

“No!” she rasped, trying to sound exasperated but Embry only watched her fingers move faster as he reached to tug her underwear down and off. “You can watch some other time, I want you to do it – I’ve seen enough of my own hand lately, too.”

“I dunno, Jez,” Embry just stared in wonder as she leaned back on against heels as she fingered herself. “This is really fucking hot…” It was totally transfixing. He really couldn’t look away, and even the boxers around his waist were growing extremely uncomfortable.

“Did you come all this way to watch me give myself a hand job?”

“I don’t remember,” he mumbled unintelligently.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Jezzie muttered. She slid her hand free carefully, and moved to the counter’s edge.

“Don’t stop!” Embry insisted horrified.
Jezzie only grumbled as she pushed Embry’s boxers off. “You haven’t been with anybody else since, have you?” she asked.

“No!” he sounded aghast.

“Just checking. Health reasons.” She reached up and tugged him closer, not bothered with being too aggressive. The fingers from one hand wound into the hair at the back of his head. “Now, I want to have sex with you, not myself. Could you bring the wolf back, he wants to have sex with me.”

“No, I think I got it covered.” Embry pushed inside her and she gasped. She spread her legs a little further to accommodate his hips and leaned back. “It feels so good to be back inside you…”

“Just keep going,” Jezzie replied, leaning back on her elbows. She closed her eyes as Embry pushed inside her. In and out. In and out. No amount of her own fingers or any other stimulation would be quite the same as this. She rolled her hips into his and she could practically hear him grit his teeth. Like she was just going to lie here like dead weight?

She propped herself up on her hands and wrapped her legs around his waist trying to pull him closer. Embry reached down slid the clasp of her bra open, running his fingers along her skin and around to her front. Her skin was soft. Her hands wrapped his wrists as his thumbs dragged across her peaks. “I missed this. A lot. You’re way better in real life than in my imagination.”

“Well thank goodness for that,” Jezzie said softly as her fingers danced up towards his shoulders and dragged downwards. She could feel her climax building as Embry’s pace remained steady and quick. She kissed where her fingers trailed and issued a small sharp bite, causing Embry to jolt a bit and grunt. His rhythm faltered momentarily She pulled herself closer, angling her hips so he hit just the right spot and… “Oh, don’t stop-don’t stop…” Her breath came out in bursts, their hips slapped together messily, and Jezzie began to feel her thigh muscles shake. Her brain disengaged for a bit when she felt the orgasm roll through her – her walls tightening around Embry still inside her. The heat and pleasure shot out from her core and through her limbs before she felt her bones turn to jello.

Embry paused over her as she slumped against the wall abutting the counter top. His smirk was what finally prompted her to speak. “What?”

“I usually finish before you, so I don’t think I noticed but… do you always say my name as you finish?”

“Did I?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Embry replied like it was earth-shattering news.

“I don’t see why it would be a one-time deal. And you’re right, I did finish first. I guess that means it’s time to return some favors.”

“What?” it was Embry’s turn to look confused as Jezzie issued a gentle push against his shoulder, forcing him to back up.

“Don’t want any unfinished business,” she smiled sweetly and glanced down at his erect member. “And I mean it’s only fair. How often have you been the one to get me off, because my climax hides better than Carmen Sandiego?”

Embry just stared at her with mouth slightly agape. She propped his chin so his mouth was closed and dropped down to her knees. She licked her lips once before placing a kiss to the tip of his
erection. He shuddered and stumbled back a step until he made contact with the wall.

“Everything all right?” she looked up.


Jezzie smiled and continued. She’d had occasion to give Embry quite a few handjobs. But her personally irritating tendency to take excessive amounts of time and effort to orgasm generally meant that when all was said and done Embry was more than spent, and Jezzie was exhausted. This time offered a nice role reversal, and Embry’s stuttering lead Jezzie to believe this was new territory for him. Her limited experience shouldn’t faze him then, she thought.

She listened as he groaned – using his vocal cues to learn what was good and what was better. She offered a smooth, slow lick from tip to base. She blew a gentle stream of air against the trail. He gasped and his neck snapped in her direction. “You are pure evil, aren’t you?”

“Of course not,” she played innocent. “Only partly evil.” She took him into her mouth. Pulling her lips around her teeth, she moved as far as she was comfortable and wrapped her thumb and index finger around the base of his member and moved it over the length of what didn’t fit in her mouth.

“Oh, this going to be embarrassing…” groaned Embry.

Jezzie rolled her eyes as Embry tilted his head back. He slouched slightly down the wall, and Jezzie could feel his thigh and abdominal muscles twitching. She felt him wind a hand into her hair as she swirled her tongue around him. She gave his tip a firm but gentle tap with her tongue, and she felt his tell-tale jerking.

He released inside her before she had decided if she actually wanted that series of events to transpire. She was starkly reminded of her first time giving a blow job and she learned the truth behind the adage ‘you are what you eat’. Succeeding experiences and boys were far less… gross. This time had not been bad at all, and she believed it was surely better than ending up covered in ejaculate. That stuff itched.

“Whoa…” Embry offered after a silent moment as Jezzie got to her feet. His eyes were closed and he looked a little dazed. “So that’s what that feels like.”

Jezzie sat back up on the counter – her knees a little sore. “Enjoyable?”

"I think in my top ten list of awesome experiences, that's probably in the top three." He thought about it a moment, staggered awkwardly a few steps towards the counter and Jezzie. "Yep. Definitely."

"You're keeping a running list?"

"Of favorite experiences? Hell yes. What's on yours?"

"I don't know; I never thought about it. Tell me yours – I need a chance to think."

"I think having a tail is probably still my number one."

"Having a tail beats out a blow job?"

"I think so, yeah," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe a couple more and I'll have to change my mind. Right now that's in a solid number two position. Number three has to be either cliff diving or being
able to pee after a six hour weekend patrol."

"Wait… you're a wolf. Why don't you just… pee like normal wolves?"

"Because Anna and Leah get their rocks off by kicking the guys over if they're ever on less than four paws. They think it's funny that we refuse to squat to pee because it's a chick thing, and therefore expose a serious weakness by doing something that is typically masculine. So they knock us over into a puddle of piss. I think they're conducting some kind of twisted sociological gender experiment."

"I think that's more than I ever wanted know."

"You're the one that asked," Embry grinned reminding her. "Come up with your list yet?"

"Hm…" she hummed thoughtfully. "Number one is definitely waking up in the morning, stretching my legs, realizing that one of my MS relapses is gone, and I'm free to walk again."

"That sounds like a good one."

"Number two… that might be a hard one. You have a very talented tongue," she smiled wickedly. "But I also quite enjoy your space heater capabilities."

"If you ever want a tie-breaker, just let me know," Embry laughed, his nose nudging under her chin and down the column of her neck. "And number three? You gotta have at least three, Jez. Ties don't count."

"Speed."

"The drug, the movie, the channel, or the magnitude of an object's velocity?"

"Never had the drug, don't remember the movie, and I don't have cable – so that last one. I like going fast."

"So that's why you were totally chill about cliff diving a week after you got here?"

"Yes," she nodded. "My reservations were about the cold affecting my MS."

Embry leaned against Jezzie, spent, with his face pressed into her shoulder. "It's weird how a lot of that stuff makes more sense now that I know."

He was enjoying the post-coital Jezzie smell, which he thought was one of the best smells in the world (it was right up there with prime rib – but that was another list entirely), when he realized she smelled… different.

"What's that smell?" he blurted out before thinking.

Jezzie only laughed. "We just had sex in a bathroom. I think the possibilities list is too long to go through one at a time. Wanna narrow it down?"

"It's you, you smell a little different. It's on your skin. You smell," he paused for an inhale, "different."

"Maybe it's the tattoo," she replied with closed eyes as she slumped back against the mirror. "If it's a synthetic smell that isn't the lab or my meds. Lord knows you could probably smell my interferons from a mile a way by now."
"The tattoo's months old," he shook his head glancing at the wolf on her forearm. "That's worn off."

"How about the one I got last week?" Jezzie grinned.

"Where is it!" Embry demanded in excitement suddenly glancing all around. Wouldn't he have noticed that?

"Guess," Jezzie teased. "You haven't seen it already?"

"Definitely not," he replied. "Tell me where!"

Jezzie smiled as Embry looked like a kid on Christmas. His eyes ran over the both her half sleeve, and the newer wolf on her forearm. It definitely wasn't either of those. "Follow your nose, wolf boy. I'm sure you can figure it out."

Embry braced her hips to keep her from moving and decided if she was going to make him play this ridiculous hide and seek game, he might as well win. So he started at a central location and dragged the tip of his nose down her abdomen.

"Cold," she laughed.

"You're lying."

"Am not; you're tickling me!" He moved further down her body, towards her waist – where he smelled a whole helluva lot of things, but not a tattoo – down her thigh and to her knee. "Colder…" She only laughed more when he growled. "Warmer…" she trilled when he started at her abdomen again. "Warmer…" she encouraged when he passed her breasts. He was nose to nose with her when she said, "hot."

He could tell he was close. He could smell it. But he couldn't see it. She didn't have a tattoo on her face (that he would've noticed, thank you very much). He picked up her hair and leaned around to look at her neck. Nothing. "Close," she shook her head. "But no cigar."

"Close only counts in horse shoes and hand grenades… Aha!" he cried in victory as he glanced around the other side of Jezzie's head and caught the spare bit of bright color poking out from behind her ear. "Is that a lion?"

She nodded. "County Carlow where my Dad is from is one of the few counties where the prominent family was able to hold their land from the English. This is represented by the English lion on the county's coat of arms. That's an English lion back there."

"Seriously?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

"That's fucking awesome," Embry replied. "I'm not Irish but I can appreciate the hell out of that. You got this last week?"

"Tuesday," she clarified.

"I think someone," Embry muttered pressing a kiss to the spot. "Has a tattoo fetish."

"Stop it, that tickles!" she howled as the breath from his laughter only served to make her squirm further.
Thursday, October 18, 2007

So let me clear this up, Paul said as he spoke with Embry and Quil while they were on patrol – on the other side of the country. The two would make a quick round up and along the border soon, but it was daylight and the weekend had been quiet. They weren't very worried. Jezzie didn't want to sleep with you at first because she didn't want to traumatize Collin? Does she know what he's seen in our heads? Does she know that he probably knows what she looks like naked?

That was her first objection, yeah. And I'm not about to tell anyone what goes on this group brain... She demanded we leave the bathroom after the one round because I had to leave in a few hours and... I don't know. Something about not having enough time and epic let downs. I wasn't really absorbing a lot information after that point."

Once wouldn't have been enough, so she just pulled the whole train over after she got you off?

Well that sucks for both of you, I guess, Quil offered without any of his characteristic snark.

Wasn't all bad... Embry insisted.

Damn... Paul shook his big wolfy muzzle. A strange human motion on a canine body. I don't know if that's more awesome or frustrating. You two are weird.

Tell me about it.

So does this mean that you're not going to be getting any ass unless you have, like, at least a full day to commit to fucking each other? Quil reached up to scratch his floppy ear. Because you realize that's like Christmas and if she ever comes home for spring break. And she's gone all summer, usually.

Embry only whined, the small noise echoing through his nose as he laid down on the pine needle debris and laid a paw over his snout. Oh god...

Hey, man – if she needs to keep you in bed six hours before or after you two sleep just to get the fucking out of her system, I don't know if consider that a bad thing.

Embry thought Paul was highly optimistic for a guy who slept with people on the same seaboard. I consider only an annual fucking to be a bad thing.

You're just going to die of blue balls, Quil offered with a total lack of sympathy. How does she feel about hookers?

The only sound that could be heard over the cracking of Quil's jaw, was Paul's howling with laughter as he rolled on the forest floor, a thousand miles away.
Paul and Jasper’s trip to Mexico had been diverted, as they began to cross the Rio Grande they’d run across Jasper’s old friends – Peter and Charlotte.

Maria had gone absolutely berserk, they’d insisted. Peter and Charlotte had come across her only days prior. She had tried to conscript them back into her tactics. However, both had adamantly refused when they realized that her motivations for conquering the entire Western hemisphere could hardly be of her own making. Maria had confessed to attacks on shifters in the US, and to having cells all over the US, Mexico, and Canada. Who else could have been responsible for the string of attacks and suspicious behavior they’d all dealt with recently?

Jasper was surprised. Maria was bloodthirsty, but exceptionally calculating and rarely did anything without due cause. The Volturi were involved, Peter insisted. There was no other way. The pair were headed to Romania, where one of the oldest covens in the vampire world lived.

"The Romanians?" Jasper balked. He’d actually looked surprised, Paul noted, refusing to phase human. "You know what that means, right? That's war."

"Jasper," Charlotte shook her head. "If Maria is allied with the Volturi, what makes you think war is not already unavoidable?"

"The path to war can always be diverted," Jasper intoned emphatically.

"Will you join us?" Peter asked hopefully. Paul only chuffed in response. He didn't care what Jasper did, but like hell was he going to fucking Romania to hide behind a pair of arcane Draculas.

Jasper shook his head. "I'm afraid I can't. I... I don't see what you hope to gain from this though. Vladimir and Stefan... they've been running from the Volturi for centuries – ever since Italy became the nexus of power."

"Don't you believe after the costly mistake that lost them their power – their showiness – that the Romanians have learned?" Peter insisted. "They would not have survived this millennium without great skill. The Volturi are highly gifted in their ranks."

"We think their alliance with the Egyptians has played to their benefit – especially after the way they lost such critical members in the fight with your coven."

"But we did not attack them," Jasper insisted. "They came after us. They came after Renesmee. And the neighboring Pack had their own investment in the fight. It was a defensive act. But going to the Romanians – and the Egyptians? – that is asking for trouble."

"So you are content to allow Maria's mania for power to grow unchecked, then?" Charlotte's tone grew cold. "Because she is a Volterra proxy now. And she is making her way across the entire continent – your family will be on her list eventually."

"Better to face her wrath alone, then be forced to deal with her and the Volturi after needlessly throwing ourselves before their enemies!"

"Jasper Whitlock," Peter stepped forward innocently. "I have always considered you a great friend. And I do not wish that our ties be twisted by politics. I do believe it best that we simply part ways for
the time being. Should we hear anything regarding the wellbeing of your coven, we will be sure to inform you."

"We will return the same courtesy," Jasper conceded. Paul felt the unchecked defeat radiating out of Jasper. He knew he was disappointed at not being able to convince Peter and Charlotte to exercise more caution in their tactics against an unstable ruling power.

"This is splintering into a three-way conflict," Paul noted when he phased back human after the two vampires left.

Jasper only nodded vaguely. "The more ways we split, the more bodies we mourn."

Wednesday, October 31, 2007

Jezzie found it hard to believe that only a year ago she'd gone to her second La Push gathering—a Halloween party—where Leah had sprinkled glitter on everyone dressed as a vampire, Old Quil had made her want to cry, she'd taken Nessie and Claire trick-or-treating and everyone was human. Well, at least to her knowledge. Sometimes, she felt like ten years had gone by, not one.

She was reminded of how little time had passed as her and Collin attempted to form a kind of living pattern. The two fell awkwardly into their own form of symbiosis. Trying to define themselves in terms of each other—friends, guardians, responsible adults, kids—was difficult. After a while, Jezzie gave up trying to find proper mental labels and just decided that they were roommates and she felt a particular responsibility for the well-being of her roommate. She still made him call his Mom a few times a week.

Long stretches of time without phasing was starting to make Collin uncomfortable, and Jezzie permitted him to phase in their studio so long as he promised not to scratch the floors. He'd been worried about phasing in a confined space—even if it was a whole apartment. He was especially concerned about doing it with Jezzie—a human—around. She'd agreed to go downstairs to get the mail, and give him a few minutes to phase. When she returned she promised to open the door carefully and make sure all was safe before entering.

Collin didn't get much in the way of movement, but allowing the wolf to breathe in its proper skin for even an hour was a relief. Collin's phasing as such a few times a week quickly turned into a bizarre communication relay. Jacob insisted that Collin phase to check in. He didn't really care where or when or how he did it. And neither Jezzie nor Collin thought it made much sense to let him phase anywhere else. A wolf the size of a bison running around the streets of Boston would've attracted attention.

So periodically, Jezzie would go get the mail two floors down, and Collin would strip and phase, and Jezzie would go about her business as he talked to the Pack until he'd make some kind of noise or movement designed to get her attention. Jezzie considered learning morse code and making Collin tap out a signal on the floor boards, since she always felt ridiculous standing before him asking, "Okay, who am I talking to? Jacob? Leah? Seth?"

Sometimes it would take a while for her to figure out who was seeing her through Collin's eyes, and even longer to figure out what they were trying to convey. Jezzie felt all kinds of strange standing before Collin, waving, saying hello, and telling him—and by extension the people in his head—that she was fine and well.

Wellness checks tended to be brief and standard issue. Mostly Jacob wanted to know if Collin had whiffed anything new in the building or area. Damian and Lydia were stretched thin running back
and forth between Boston and Minneapolis. Paul and Jasper realized Maria had lost her mind, and so had elected to help the werewolves. The three – the Pack, the Plains wolves, and the Cullens – were all so intertwined now, it was difficult to extricate loyalties. Jasper insisted that there was power in numbers. However Paul insisted that the more time passed, the more it looked like their strange alliance was about to play host to a global power struggle, and continental turf war.

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**Wednesday, November 7, 2007**

"So are you going home for Thanksgiving?" Liz asked.

"No," Jezzie shook her head as she watched her friend – through her Skype session – yawn for the umpteenth time. "I mean, it's not really worth the cost of airfare to fly home for two days when we'll just be doing it again in a month. Plus, it would be pointless for Collin. He doesn't exactly celebrate the day…"

"Point made," Liz smiled. "I guess I probably shouldn't either. I'm a little more out of touch with my Kenyan roots, though."

"Liz, your family's been in this country longer than mine has," Jezzie noted.

"All the more reason for me to say to hell with this holiday. But I won't get to see the parentals for Christmas this year – so I guess I'll keep tradition one more November. They've got a series of conferences to go to through December, so I'm going to maybe see if the school will let me stay for the holidays. It would be cheaper than driving or flying home. Even getting from Detroit to Chicago is multi-hundred dollar venture."

"Come home with us," Jezzie replied without even thinking.

"To Washington?" Liz questioned dubiously.

"Yeah," Jezzie nodded. "I mean either way you're going to be paying U Chicago to live there for an extra month between semesters, or you're going to have to drive or fly home. Both result in your being alone for Christmas. And New Years. Why not spend the cash and come hang with me and my Dad - and some crazy locals. You know you miss him."

"This is true," Liz considered. "But for Christmas? I'd feel like a squatter. And isn't your Dad gone before Christmas?"

"Really Liz, it's fine," Jezzie insisted. "My Dad doesn't leave until the twenty-eighth this year and he will love having some people in the house again. And Collin and I are inevitably going to have a layover in Midway anyways considering it seems to be the center of the domestic air passenger world. Might as well pick you up on the way."

"All right," Liz finally agreed. "Sounds like a plan."

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**Monday, November 12, 2007**

"Hello, is Jezzie at home?"

"Damian?" Jezzie questioned. "Is that you? No one else I know talks or sounds like that."

"Hello. Yes, it is me."
"What can I do for you?" Jezzie propped the phone on one shoulder as she continued sorting out a load of laundry to take downstairs.

"Jezzie, I am afraid I have some unfortunate news."

"Well, given the crowd I run with this is not surprising," Jezzie noted. "We're really familiar with unfortunate news in the supernatural part of the Pacific Northwest."

"I am afraid that I cannot identify the additional individual following you and your ward. Your initial encounters were with Azrael, that I can confirm. He appears to have left you alone for the time being; I warn you to stay on your guard. Azrael's attention is… scattered… and he has a tendency to leave points of interest for stretches of time, only to reappear with no notice. But the new scent your charge had picked up is the reason for my call… it is unfamiliar to us. It is not of our kind."

"Is it a vampire?" Jezzie asked.

"We are assuming so, yes," Damian confirmed. "Jasper Hale believes that your follower is an underling of someone he once consorted with. And if this is true, there is reason for concern. We do not wish to make a shut-in of you, however we would request you exercise extreme caution when outside of your house. Particularly when you are alone. Particularly in the evenings."

"Anything else?" Jezzie sighed.

"That is all we have to report right now. If either you or Collin need anything, do not hesitate to call."

"Bye." Jezzie hung up before waiting for Damian's closing. It was a bit rude, especially considering politeness seemed to ooze out of Damian's creepy, diplomatic pores. Jezzie leaned forward and pressed her forehead to her knees - to hell with the laundry. She felt kind of nauseous now. Collin slumped into the couch beside her. He'd been there the whole time, he'd hardly needed the speaker to his ear to hear the entire conversation.

"That guy never calls with any good news. Can we set his ringtone to the death march, please?"

"Have at it," Jezzie replied but Collin only watched her hunched form.

"We'll be fine, Jezzie. Clearly I am repulsive enough to scare werewolves away, and you're pretty much a modern Van Helsing. Between the two of us, we have this covered."

"Excuse me?" she glanced up at him slightly.

"That vamp you torched last spring, the one that took a bite out of Seth?" Collin reminded her. "You blew the thing up with one of Rachel's homemade self-igniting Molotov cocktails, remember? We all saw it in Seth's head. It was pretty cool. We could call you Blade if you don't like Van Helsing."

"I doubt I'm lucky enough to be immune to vampirism like Blade." Jezzie reached back tentatively to feel the scarring across her back where she'd been slashed last winter. Her skin had cut open and healed very quickly, but it had hurt and it had scarred. She had four thin, raised, even lines across one of her shoulders - like she'd been sliced with a razor. They were paler than the rest of her skin, and slightly cool to the touch. Jasper had showed her some of his scarring afterwards, and she learned that vampire venom scarred even the supernatural.

"Still, I think we'll be fine," Collin replied. "It's not going to jump out at us in the middle of a crowded street, and I can meet you at school when it starts getting dark after your afternoon classes."
Jezzie was mostly a nervous wreck after that point. Having Azrael find her had been one thing, but something about Damian's call had just snapped her reserve. She stopped going for runs. Partly because she was terrified to be out of the house when she didn't need to be. However, it soon became near impossible for her to run given how few calories she could keep in her system. The anxiety was doing a number on her digestive system.

She tried not to let it show, and Collin didn't have the heart to tell her that emotions had their own distinct smell and he could smell her a mile off. She got really jumpy. She wouldn't fess up to anyone. Not Leah, not Anna, not Seth, not even Embry. Embry had called her one night after Leah had talked to her the day before and knew something was off. The Pack had seen through Collin's phased mind and sight that Jezzie was on edge, but she refused to admit it.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Jezzie replied petulantly.

"You're a champion liar, Jez, but I know something's up."

"I'm fine," she snapped.

"You know it's okay to be nervous or worried. It's okay to talk about it."

"Look, Embry, I gotta go. I have an exam tomorrow and two weeks worth of material I need to review. But I'll call you later."

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**Tuesday, November 20, 2007**

Jacob, Embry, Quil, and Sam were all busy either bent under the hood or laid out on their backs beneath the chassis of a '92 Jetta. Embry – with the help of a hoist older than himself – was attempting to lower the Jetta's engine block back into place without crushing Sam who was beneath the car. Sam would've probably been just fine given such an accident, but it would've required lifting a car and unattached engine back off him, reconstructing whatever broke off the engine and the inside of the car. Plus, the old Alpha was just starting to enjoy life without being reminded of that time he sustained a compound fracture to the femur.

"Embry, so help me god, you drop that on me and I'll sell you to a circus."

"Shut up," Embry muttered through his concentration.

"So, how not okay do you think rust is?" Quil asked. "Because my perspective is a little warped given how rusted my tank is, but I'm pretty sure it's not legal anymore anyways."

"Visible rust won't pass state inspection," Sam replied in a muffled grunt from beneath the car as the engine lowered into place. "We should at least be try to construct a vehicle that'll pass inspection."

"What the hell," Quil muttered glancing at the offending piece of car in front of him. "How are we supposed to deal with a rusted-through fender when the metalworker is halfway across the country? And do have any idea how few cars on this rez would pass a state inspection? Maybe four."

"Clearly we did not see this one coming," Jacob added. "We went through hell and back make sure the thing had an exhaust system that didn't pump out sludge, and now this."

"Someone just show Paul the next time he's phased," Embry suggested. "I'm sure we can figure it out if he just tells us what to do."
"Pack of wolves wielding a blow torch sounds like a good idea," Leah interrupted as she rounded the corner.

"Food!" Quil wailed when he saw the fast food bag in her hand.

"Eat up, mongrels," she grinned tossing him the bag. "I promised the Stewart's they'd get this thing by the weekend. So hurry your tight asses up."

"Goody," Jake mumbled as he fished a burger out the bag. "You're more than welcome to help, Leah. You know your way around a car just fine."

"Oh hell no," she raised her hands. "You told me all I had to do was PR. Besides, this was my genius idea. I am spending all my valuable spare time trying to get people to stop hating you people. Y'all can have the dirty work. Besides, it looks mostly done."

"Except for the rust hole the size of my head in the front fender."

Leah stepped around the parts scattered in organizational piles on the garage floor to get a glimpse at the fender at Jake and Quil's feet.

"You're going to need to cut it out," she told him. "Cut out a rectangular shape right there from the wheel well and around all the rust. Then you'll have to cut a new piece of sheet metal the same size and weld it on. Use some brute strength and bend the edge to match, and pound the lower portion so it fits the rise before the well."

"How do you know these things?" Quil asked in mild wonder.

"Logic, dear," she ruffled Jake's hair absently on her way by. "I'll see you idiots later. Ness has got her playdate with Rosalie and Emmett this afternoon."

"You are not allowed back on property before a shower," Quil intoned. "Rule number of seventeen of consorting with the undead."

Leah flipped Quil off.

"Rosalie and Emmett are all right," Sam ventured. "They don't take any shit from anybody and I respect that."

"Wise words from a man lying beneath imminent death, controlled by another man who's girlfriend is being stalked by a vampire."

Rosalie and Leah watched as Emmett and Nessie chased each other around the Cullen's old back yard.

"I figure now is good a time as any to tell you, but Alice has been seeing a lot more of the Volturi in her visions."

"The Italian egomaniacs from last winter?" Leah asked.

Rosalie nodded. "Yes. The same."

"I thought we wiped out their leadership? They can't be starting a ruckus already."

"Time moves in interesting ways when you're immortal," Rosalie noted. "A year can seem like a day, but when you're busy or determined the opposite is quite true."
"What does she see them doing?" Leah asked.

"We think they are the ones responsible for the trouble we've been having. The attack on the Plains wolves… Jasper believes it was at Maria's command. But she may only be the middle man considering she hasn't been active in any kind of territory acquisition – due to Volturi injunction – in almost a century. Plus, whoever is stalking your Pack out East. There have also been troubles across the Atlantic, too. The Volturi made it a habit to issue small, yet non-fatal attacks on the Romanians to remind them who was in charge. However, some of their scare tactics have moved to the Egyptian coven. It all seems just a little too coincidental."

"There's a coven in Egypt?" Leah's jaw dropped.

"Yes," Rosalie nodded. "They're large and possess substantial power. They have gifted members. Demetri – the tracker for the Volturi is originally of the Egyptians. He returned to them after last winter's battle and the Italian hierarchy began to disintegrate."

"Flaky much," Leah muttered.

"The Volturi have a member with a gift for manipulating emotional ties. Similar to Jasper's talent, she would break and form emotional bonds. She could make a person want to join the Volturi."

"So they abducted the tracker?"

"Along with some others… but she's gone now. Which probably contributes more to the dissolution of their ranks than the loss of leadership. But at any rate, we have seen Volturi activity against the Egyptian coven – who number only one less than our own coven. That, in conjunction with what has been happening here, starts to look very suspicious."

"Looks like a desperate power grab," Leah noted. "They're gathering allies and taking out weak links. But… to what end?"

Rosalie shrugged. "I certainly don't know. They've always feared us – Carlisle's coven, anyways. We are large, gifted, and have a lifestyle very incompatible with their own. I believe they always felt threatened, even though Carlisle never entertained any delusions of grandeur. Our entire continent has been a bother to them. Filled with rogue gold-eyed vampires and all kinds of werewolves and shapeshifters." Rosalie smiled. "They perceive as an uncivilized bunch."

"Don't tell me we're lumped into this, again?" Leah sighed in disgust.

"Given your ties to our family, the Plains wolves? I'd say so. And I hardly imagine Azrael's activity on the East Coast is an isolated incident - separate from the problems being had by the Egyptians. Like your Pack, Alice loses sight of Azrael and his kind. She can only tell where he is by the blank spots in her vision where she should be able to see. She lost sight of the Volturi for quite a few days this summer, and I think we can assume no one from La Push or Minneapolis visited Italy - who else is left but Azrael? There have also been a few unidentified nomads crossing the spare bit of sea between Chukotskiy Peninsula in Russia and Seward Peninsula in Alaska. The Denali coven has had to run off a few intruders already."

"They're scouting us out," Leah realized.

"Jaaake," Leah whined from the living room.

"Leah," Jake entered the living room, an expression of mock disapproval on his face. "Use your words." That was what both he and Leah had taken to telling Nessie - both when she insisted on
fussing when she wanted something, as well as when she began to rely on showing them things with her gift instead of talking. Use your words. It was a phrase on constant replay in the house.

"I am using my words, you jerk," she moaned as she covered her face and curled up at the end of the couch.

It was then that Jacob realized that Leah was not whining for the sake of whining. Even if he missed the small scent of pain that she let slip through, he couldn't miss the small bit of her expression visible through her hands or her body language. "Lees, what's wrong?"

He sat down on the couch, while Nessie finished brushing her teeth for the night, and gently tried to pry Leah's hands from her face. "Don't," she wailed.

"Leah... hon... what is wrong?" he insisted. "You are wailing in pain on the couch. You never wail in pain. I have to know whether or not I need to panic or make fun of you."

"My head is killing me," she groaned, pitching her body forward so her forehead rested against her knees.

"Like a headache?" Jake asked, moving closer and placing a protective hand on the she-wolf's back with another at her shoulder. It was then that Nessie came out of the bathroom with her toothbrush still in her mouth.

"Auntie Rosie gets headaches," she spoke matter of factly. "She says the wolves smell yucky."

Then it dawned on Jacob. "Oh! Lees, do you have vamp headache? You just spent the whole afternoon with a pair. Do you not remember the horrible headaches we all used to get around them? I guess it's been a while with zero exposure."

"Dammit," she muttered, finally beginning to sit up but not opening her eyes. Jacob encouraged her to sit up fully and she slumped into his side, trying to hide her face from the light.

Nessie crawled up and sat in Jacob's lap, her feet extending to Leah's causing the older woman to grin slightly and blindly tickle at Nessie's toes. "Auntie Rosie says that she only feels better when she's around Uncle Emmett, Auntie Alice, Uncle Jasper, and Grandma and Grandpa. Because they smells nice. She says it's because they all smell the same - like vampires. Do other wolves smell nice, Leah?"

"Yeah," she confessed, eyes still sealed. "You two smell all right." She buried her face near Jake's shoulder, as she left a warm hand on Nessie's shins on her lap. Jacob noted that Leah did reek of leech, but the tension he could feel in her back ebbed as the minutes passed, Nessie hummed absently to herself, and Jake raked careful fingers up and down her spine.

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**Saturday, November 24, 2007**

"All set?" Kim crooned and glanced over at the bassinet where Noah lay, happy and babbling. He'd recently learned his gift for noise that wasn't crying and was a constant stream of baby babble. She glanced around the room, as she zipped her last bag and tossed it onto a sealed box.

Kim felt strange leaving Paul's – even if he wasn't there and hadn't been there for weeks. She'd moved in months ago, mostly because she'd sat on his couch and cried and never left. He was really very good about it. This should could appreciate more fully now, in retrospect. But the tiny cabin had become something akin to a security blanket.
During her months of pregnancy she’d spent a lot of time with the likes of Joy Ateara and Tiffany Call. Both of them knew what it was like to raise a baby on their own. Both women were fully aware of what it was like to lose a partner just as the family was beginning to expand. It didn't quite click in Kim's head until the two women invited her out to lunch, but she realized that their mutual troubles all sort of tumbled over each other in the same five year span. Marriage, moving to a new town, a death, a baby, another baby, and then another death knitted the two women together.

The two had helped her go job scouting, since working in a grocery store on her feet all day was not only the most unfulfilling career prospect in the world, it quickly became painful and not lucrative enough. Kim had a gift for piano, and Tiffany recalled the music shop in town gave lessons, but had discontinued their piano lessons after their last instructor had moved away. And that was how Kim wound up with a job she enjoyed, and could work until almost delivery.

She'd given up the lease on the place she and Jared had lived in and really had no regrets. Not that she wanted to forget, but she simply wasn't in a good enough place to be wandering around their house after he died. She needed to be able to move on. She saved all their stuff – much of which was in storage – and had just existed in limbo here until she realized she had started mentally referencing it as home.

That's when she knew she needed to leave. She didn't have that desperate feeling of needing to get out like she had with her and Jared's place, but she felt if she was comfortable enough to no longer think of Paul's house as her panic room, that meant she was ready to stop extorting his small reserves of kindness.

She'd found a place on the edge of the reservation. The owner had a dear attachment to the house even though she no longer lived on the reservation. She wanted to keep it in the family, and Kim agreed to maintain it if she let her live there. Regular maintenance in exchange for exponentially lower rent was fine by Kim.

Paul had been gone for two months now. She'd called him to mention that she was leaving but she'd still take his mail in and whatnot and he'd actually sounded… confused. Like having her and Noah move out was something he couldn't comprehend. She told him that she'd still be extorting him as a babysitter. When he'd tried and failed to sound massively put out, Kim realized he might actually miss her and her son.

She had no idea why.

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**Monday, December 3, 2007**

Jezzie had the suspicious feeling she was being watched. Granted, that feeling had become an almost permanent state of being as of late, but now she thought it felt more evident than ever. Maybe she wasn't just paranoid this time. Maybe she *was* being watched.

The windows of her classroom looked out on the busy Boston street. Her eyes flicked casually out, trying not to appear distracted. The passage of people, cars, buses, cabs, bicycles, and catered dinner carts moved with so much haste it was hard to make out anything unusual.

When the lecture ended, Jezzie took her time packing up. She was the last one out of the room before the professor. It was her last class of the day and she'd planned on spending some day light hours in the library. Spending time in the library often put her on edge. It was so quiet, but there was also so much she couldn't see. She couldn't hear others and therefore always got the sense that she was alone and easy to sneak up on. She didn't get much done in the library, but today she needed some reference material.
She padded down the empty hallway – full classrooms on either side of her – taking a deep breath and trying to reason with herself. She was fine. As she rounded the corner she noticed two people – out the corner of her eye – walking silently behind her, maybe twenty feet back. Her heart hitched in what had to be an unhealthy way and she picked up her pace. She kept her ears peeled and noticed the pair matched her pace.

They didn't look like college kids – even if they might've been her age. They were pale and very blonde, a boy and a girl. They looked like they'd tried to blend in and failed. Jezzie – like most of her peers – came to classes in jeans, sneakers and a sweatshirt. However this pair looked like they'd taken dressing pointers from unrealistic teen TV dramas. They had tight jeans, black leather jackets, and the girl's eyes were rimmed in black makeup. They looked pretty and handsome, but they did not blend in. Jezzie began at a run once she came in sight of the building's door, which would thankfully spill her onto a crowded street. She heard their pace quicken as well, and as she bolted towards the door she yanked down on the fire alarm, instantly heard the creak of hundreds – maybe thousands – of chairs against linoleum as students made for the hallway.

Jezzie caught a last glimpse of the pair before she stumbled out the door. The woman was snarling at her while the boy just grinned wickedly. She turned and made for the nearest subway stop at a jog. She managed to get down the stairs, through the station, and onto an outgoing train just before the automated doors cut her in half. She slumped into a chair and glanced around quickly. No blond boy or girl in sight. She sighed and closed her eyes.

She didn't know who they were. But they clearly knew who she was. They were unhealthy pale, strangely beautiful, and fast. Jezzie had no idea how they managed to find her in the daylight without being found out.

She drove her mind in circles until she heard the subway doors open on the noisy platform for that connected passengers to the local professional basketball and hockey arena, as well as the train station that branched out of the city.

She clambered out of the subway car and to the surface road, making for the train station and series of food outlets under the arena. She paused long enough to buy herself a Sprite, feeling ridiculously thirsty and nauseous. She sat in the train station's busy waiting area beneath the large schedule of incoming and outgoing trains.

She took a moment to regain a normal breathing pattern and glanced at her watch. Four thirty. She wracked her brain and remembered it was a Monday. Collin didn't have work. She flipped her phone open and dialed their apartment.

"Hello," Collin answered lazily.

"Collin, it's me."

"Jezzie, are you all right? You sound out of breath."

"Do me a favor and meet me at North Station. Bring one of your sweatshirts."

Collin came jogging into the train station about ten minutes after Jezzie had hung up her phone. He must've run the whole way there.

"Are you all right?" She could tell he wanted to shout, but was trying to act natural surrounded by throngs of people.

"Fine," she muttered pulling the sweatshirt from his hands and pulling it over her head. It didn't
swamp her quite the way clothing from some of the other boys might've but it was still huge on her. "Can you smell me?"

"Not over the smell of me, no."

"Good, let's walk and talk."

Jezzie explained what had happened on their way home. She explained the feeling of being watched, how she was tagged in the hall after class, how she'd run to the subway – assuming the scent and the chaos would throw off the vampires.

"How the hell were they out in the daylight? And Jake is gonna be ripshit," Collin nodded as they finally reached their block. "We gotta tell him. He's gonna be pissed."

Jacob was indeed angry as hell. He didn't like having his Pack spread where he couldn't defend them at the drop of a hat. That included the likes of Embry, Leah, Rachel, and Addie in Seattle; Paul in god-knows-where Midwestern USA; and especially the pup and the human clear across the country. He wouldn't be a dick and demand they come home. It'd be all but useless on Jezzie anyways. And Jake wasn't nearly enough of a jerk; he'd done Collin enough damage by not reporting his brother. But could he continue to let them live at risk in an attempt to play nice? Embry was the one to remind Jake that if he did order them home, Jezzie would probably tell him to go to hell, and Collin would probably finally tear himself from the Pack and lose his mind like his wolf appeared to be doing every time the boy had been threatened or cornered.

He'd just have to sit back and wait until the danger passed or he finally had a chance to tear that danger in half.

Jezzie spent the rest of the semester alternately wearing Collin's clothes and dumping hers in his bed to disguise her smell. She also started using his soap and decided that Old Spice really wasn't that bad for your hair.

"You know this is really weird," Collin told her one day as she threw her next day's pair of jeans at his bed.

"I realized that," Jezzie replied. "I don't think having your roommate sleep on your clothes before you wear them is a normal thing. But 'weird' is a fat lot of crap coming from the boy who spends his evenings as a wolf in the living room. Shouldn't you be studying for your algebra midterm?"

"Shouldn't you be studying for your pharmacology exam?"

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**Saturday, December 22, 2007**

"Your friend is really hot," Collin muttered as he stepped into Chicago Midway with Jezzie. Collin was a lot taller than Jezzie, and given the madness that was Chicago Midway, Jezzie had shown Collin a picture of Liz and charged him with finding her. Because, you know, he could see over everyone. And besides, the girl was over six feet and her hair gave her at least another three inches. She shouldn't be too hard to miss.

Collin got a pretty good impression from Jezzie's phone photo that Liz was a looker, but all put together – not just a pixilated shot from the waist up – she was damn hot. She was about six-foot-three, which put her on par with Collin's height. Something he sure as hell was not used to. She was tall and wiry and all limbs. Her smile broke wide when she saw Collin. She raised her hand and waved tentatively. Jezzie had made sure to tell her to look for the six and half foot tall Indian kid
before they took off from Logan. Liz had assumed a six and a half foot Indian kid would be just as small a probability as a six-foot-three black woman. Apparently she'd been right – Collin waved back.

"Found her?" Jezzie grinned. Collin nodded, grabbed her hand and lead the way through the crowd with all his imposing glory. Jezzie loved the perks of Pack sometimes. Even if Collin was only fourteen, it worked. Jezzie used her size to squirm ahead and she broke through the crowd first, jumping on Liz for all she was worth. The two girls hopped around the middle of the terminal screaming in a high pitched way that made Collin and his wolf twitch a little bit, but both he and the wolf were glad to see Jezzie happy.

After releasing each other, Jezzie turned. "Liz, this is Collin. He's a friend of mine from Washington. He's been going to school out in Boston. We're roomies. Collin, Liz. Liz, Collin."

"Hi," Liz extended her hand and shook Collin's with a sincere smile. "Good to meet you. Where are you at school? I have family at BC."

"Uh… Boston Latin School?" Collin offered, feeling a little awkward. Sure, he had to explain his real age to people all the time. It took a month before the staff at BLS had stopped pulling him aside thinking he was some kind of child predator or intruder – even though he wore his ID like everybody else. But it was worse when he had to knock himself down a few pegs in front of a hot chick – even if he didn't have a shot in hell with her.

"No way," she replied in astonishment. "You do not look like a high school boy."

"Down, killer," Jezzie smirked. "Save that for Carla."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. He's lucky Carla isn't here. Poor kid would've already been thoroughly molested."

Collin swallowed. What kind of people had Jezzie been befriending before he met her and why didn't he know more of them? Jezzie only laughed but proceeded to pick up her backpack from where she dropped it on the ground. "Let's say we get some food and a bathroom break? We should have time before our flight leaves if we're quick about it."

The three made their way towards the sights and smells of airport food and Liz spoke again. "Are you sure you don't mind having me, Jezzie? I mean I love and miss your Dad and all, but for a whole holiday? I don't want to impose."

"Liz," Jezzie sighed. "We're not leaving you alone in Detroit at home – or Chicago at school for that matter – for Christmas. It's absolutely fine. We have more than enough room. Besides, I think my friends are going to get a kick out of you."

"Why's that?" Liz quirked a hesitant brow.

"We rarely meet anyone as tall as us," Collin offered, leaning in between the two girls.

"Are you serious?" she replied turning to the ridiculously overgrown boy standing between her and Jezzie.

Collin nodded. "I only seem like a freak of nature. Put me back in my element and I'm the pipsqueak."

Jezzie corroborated this with a nod. "I had neck spasms from looking up so much."
"Good Lord…" Liz offered with a sigh.

The three barely made it to their flight – because Jezzie was going to die if she didn't get a pretzel – and both girls got a kick out of Collin's reaction to flying. Jezzie thought it would be mean to point out that at least on this leg of the journey he wasn't holding her hand for dear life. He was just praying in two languages.

Jezzie took the Jake calling duties when they landed as Collin just reveled in laying on a solid surface – or the airport's nicely landscaped grassy entrance area. Liz sat down next to the boy and smiled. "You don't fly much, huh?"

Jezzie watched the luggage carousel for their bags and then Jake finally picked up the phone. "Jezzie!"

"Hello dear high Alpha!" Jezzie chirped as she recognized Liz's red canvas suitcase and pulled it off the belt. "I have arrived safe and sound with your son and the ignorant human."

"And how did it all go?"

"Good," Jezzie nodded snagging Collin's duffel bag. "Collin didn't freak out and tear a hole into the plane's structure and get us all torn out by the suction of it. But I'm pretty sure he's on a suspicious person's list given the amount of strange languages he was praying in. He's outside laying on the grass with Liz. You still coming to get us?"

"I'm sending Paul; Council's having a Pack-related conniption fit and he's talked enough sense into them over the course of the year. They can't afford any more broken furniture. He and Ness should be there in about ten minutes. You guys out front?"


"Yes, ma'am. I'll give them a call to let them know where you are."

Jezzie grinned as she hung up her phone and only barely snagged her suitcase before it rounded the bend and she was forced to wait another cycle for it. Jezzie dragged the luggage outside and Liz was watching a closed eyed, sprawled out Collin with an amused expression. "Boy's a goner."

"Collin, snap out of it," Jezzie traipsed across the grass to sit right next to him. "We still have a four hour ride back to La Push and if you puke in the car I'll never forgive you."

"Just leave me here to die," he moaned dramatically. But it was hard to take him even slightly seriously when he grinned so much.

"Collin," Jezzie replied petulantly. "You're upsetting my luggage!"

He quirked an eye open and observed the small, hard-cased, lime green suitcase. "It is some pretty cute luggage. I wouldn't want to hurt anyone's feelings."

"Paul will be here in a few minutes," Jezzie told him. "I just got off the phone with Jake."

"The Jake?" Liz asked. "I mean, if I didn't know you and Embry were a thing and that Seth was sixteen, I'd have my suspicions about Jacob Black. You talk about him an awful lot. Don't think I've heard much about a Paul, though."

Collin snorted, mostly from the prospect of Jake and Jezzie ever being involved. He thought that
might have some latent, yet lethal, outcomes. "Jake's a good friend," Jezzie nodded. "You'll like him. Paul is an acquired taste."

"Yeah, like haggis. Or battery acid. Is he bringin' Ness?" Collin asked excitedly. Jezzie nodded. "Yes! I love that kid!"

No one had time to respond because it was then that Paul pulled up. Nessie hopped out of the car almost instantly and Jezzie was amazed that she already looked like a grade schooler. Collin finally stood up and he greeted Paul as Nessie launched herself at Jezzie. "Jezzie! You're back!"

She scooped the young girl up and smiled. "Of course!"

"And this is your friend, right? Jacob said you were bringing a friend for Christmas?"

"Yep. Nessie, this is Liz – she's one of my good friends from back in Michigan. Liz – this is Nessie, Jake's daughter."

"It's very nice to meet you," Nessie leaned forward in Jezzie's arms and extended her hand to Liz.

"You too," Liz took the small girl's hand. "You're very polite. Daddy raises you well."

"Yes, he does," Nessie nodded decidedly. "Leah says I should remember my manners as long as everyone else does." Jezzie let the introductions flow as she watched Paul give Collin a hug and then proceed to look him over. He nodded in approval and patted the kid on the back. Jezzie suspected he liked having the Pack fully assembled just as much as Jake did.

Collin then busied himself with putting baggage into the car (thankfully, Paul had borrowed the Ateara's old crossover; Jezzie didn't want to imagine two wolves, Liz, Ness, and herself jammed inside anything smaller) when Jezzie approached Paul. He smiled down at her in that way that always indicated he was up to something.

"'Sup Little Red?" he asked. "It's a helluva lot better for my brain having you two dorks on this seaboard, I will have you know."

"Find any permanent damage?" she nodded towards Collin.

"Naw," Paul shook his head. "He seems to be in good hands."

Jezzie nodded firmly and introduced Paul to Liz as she deposited Ness on the ground so she could thoroughly attack Collin. Paul reacted to Liz much the same way Collin had. He was kind of amazed. Jezzie went to go put her backpack in the trunk and watched as Paul and Liz continued talking. It was interesting considering Paul was about as shameless a flirt as Quil.

"Did you bring Liz here for the sole purpose of dangling her in front of the single Beta?" Collin asked in a whisper as Ness clambered back into the car. Paul could probably still hear him from this distance if he wasn't beyond distracted. "You know how he feels about tall chicks."

"No," Jezzie rolled her eyes. "Liz is my friend and needed a place for the holidays."

"Clean up, in Terminal A."

"Is that my Jeep?" Jezzie asked curiously as they finally made their way into town after a three and a half hour trek. It hadn't been bad. They'd talked the whole time. It was remarkable how much non-Pack stuff they could talk about for three hours without even trying. Liz fell into the dynamic
naturally. Normally reserved but not unfriendly, she seemed to take to both Paul and Collin. She handled Paul's moderately abrasive and occasionally off-color personality with aplomb. She even laughed a few times when Jezzie just sat in horror in the back seat, thinking that he'd finally managed to offend her. Liz sat up front – Jezzie insisted knowing she got motion sick – and Jezzie and Collin sat in the back with Nessie.

"Yeah," Paul confirmed. "The thing gets shuffled between Embry and Kim. On the weekends, Embry works for that insurance agency in there. Crunching numbers, data entry. All that soul-crushing kinda shit." Paul glanced up in the rear-view mirror to watch Jezzie. "Should I pull over?"

"And leave Liz to fend for herself with you heathens? I think not!"

Jezzie saw Liz roll her eyes through the same mirror. "Hon, I think I got these two handled. Ness and I can tag team. I'll have them drop me off at your place, okay? Go see your damn boyfriend."

"Are you sure?"

"If you don't get out of the car, I'mma push you out."

"Point taken," Jezzie acceded. Paul pulled onto the side of the road and Jezzie pulled her backpack out of the trunk. "When's he get off work?" she asked.

"Fifteen minutes," Paul smirked looking towards her across the passenger seat. "I promise not to eat your friend."

Jezzie leveled him a glare but didn't have time to respond as he pulled away. She dragged her bag into the parking lot and dug out her long unused key to open the trunk and slide it inside. Now what to do with the remaining fifteen minutes?

It had been a long-ass day. Embry had come into this job at the start of the semester. The guy that ran the insurance agency was nice enough, but he had no idea how to run a business. So Embry spent the better part of a month's worth of weekend time sorting through boxes and boxes of receipts. Had this man never heard of the spreadsheet? How the hell did he get his taxes done each year?

After patching up the carnage, things had gotten easier. But since Embry was only around on weekends, that left a whole week's worth of receipts to get piled up, lost, or simply never even being put into existence. God forbid a person print the confirmation page of an online order.

This weekend had been particularly stressful. Mostly because the office was being renovated and all the boxes that Embry had finally filed neatly had been moved and no one had seen fit to tell him. It didn't help that they stacked them up willy nilly in the storage closet and he hadn't even labeled them all properly yet. Part of him just wanted to close the door and let the cleaning fumes asphyxiate him. But it had only been 9AM.

The afternoon had then included Embry having to explain that even if the owner wanted to use illegal labor to put up new paint and moldings, paying in cash still meant receipts. The year was coming to an end and for the love of God, he was going to have to make sure all the loose ends were tied off during his Christmas break otherwise this strip mall insurance agency was definitely going to get an IRS audit visit in the spring. No pressure.

But the day was over and since he was around all week during break, he didn't need to come in on Sundays. He took a deep breath relishing the evening air as he stepped outside letting the glass door swing closed behind him. He fished around for his keys as he walked and looked up in time to notice that the car was gone.
He blinked a couple of times. He had definitely parked a '93 Wagoneer three spots from the edge of the lot this morning. This whole half of the lot was empty. Who the hell would steal Jezzie's Jeep? It was a solid vehicle, but not worth the price in parts to jack it. Embry swore under his breath and turned back around. Apparently he was going to have to call for a ride and a police report. He didn't even make it a step towards the door when he froze.

The Jeep was on the other side of the small lot. What the… And on the hood, smiling like a Cheshire cat, was a very, very tricky redhead. Embry felt his shoulders slump in relief knowing Jezzie's Jeep wasn't stolen and he crossed the lot quickly. Relief being replaced by happiness and excitement seeing Jezzie in Washington state. It had been two long months.

Jezzie slid off the hood of the beast as Embry came close and she opened her mouth to say something but Embry dipped down and kissed her, preempting her mouth's action with plans of his own. She squeaked in surprise but Embry could tell she was pleased nonetheless. He tossed his jacket onto the hood of the Jeep and continued to kiss Jezzie as she backed up until the heels of her shoes hit the tires. He held her carefully by the waist and lifted her back up so she could sit at a more reasonable height. Their tongues met as Jezzie parted her lips.

His hands ran over her shoulders, her back and through her hair. She was here. She was actually here. He hadn't fallen into a psychotic, delusional, day dream. This was actually happening. He could feel her – soft and warm and safe – against him and it was fan-freaking-tastic.

Sunday, December 23, 2007

Jacob heard the man before he saw him. He plopped down on the stony beach next to him. He noticed that Sam joined him on the ground with a bit of a grimace. Not an old age grimace – not quite yet – but a grimace that suggested getting all the way down to the ground, and then all the way back up was going to be mildly inconvenient.

They were all too young, how were they getting so old?

"So, you and Leah, huh?" he asked pulling a pebble up from beneath him.

"Yeah, I guess so," Jacob confirmed, still gazing out at the ebbing tide.

"I have absolutely no ground to stand on when I tell you this," Sam replied. "But I'm going to tell you anyways: if you hurt her – I swear to all that is good and holy in this world – I will come after you, and I will kill you. Slowly."

Jacob smiled. He knew Sam meant it too. Sam had so clearly fucked up his own personal life years ago, that he had never thought there was any way to take it back or make it better – so for pure desire to see things just not get any worse, he never did anything. Maybe not the best course of action, but given the givens Jacob was not going to hold it against him anymore.

Jacob had spent enough time in his head to know how Sam felt about Leah. Still felt. The way it flowed in his consciousness like water around the small gaps the imprint left, let Jacob know that Leah was still something very all-encompassing in Sam's life. Anyone else might've gotten mad at Sam for what he'd said. Jacob just felt a little depressed.

Because as much hurt as Leah dealt with, she was doing good at the moving on thing. But a glimpse into Sam's mind and seeing that Leah still peeked around any empty corner the imprint left, forced
Jacob to realize that Sam would never get over Leah. It was something his Pack brother would have to carry with him the rest of his life, and Jacob didn't envy him.

"Understood," Jacob smirked knowingly. "I have to say though Sam, if you'd never given her up – I never would have had a shot in hell with her. I'm kinda amazed that I actually have one even now. But I don't plan on messing it up anytime soon."

"For some reason, kid, you make her happy," Sam observed. "Leah deserves to be fucking happy. And don't tell her I talked to you, or she'll come after me."

"I actually think Seth would beat her to the punch."

This time Sam smiled. "That actually wouldn't be so bad. Seth was too young to beat the shit out of me like a normal brother for what I did to his sister. Don't think I don't know I've got that coming to me someday. I kinda look forward to it."

"You're looking forward to Seth beating you to a pulp?" Jacob asked dubiously. "Are you a masochist, or are you just excited to kick his butt?"

"No," Sam shook his head. "I'll let him have that one. He deserves it. I miss the shit out of that kid…"

Jacob didn't comment on how Seth was around – pretty much – all the damn time. Jacob was convinced he knew how to teleport given that Seth was everywhere all the time. Jacob largely suspected that Sam missed Seth in a way he'd never see him again – in a way he'd never get back.

"You know Sam, maybe I'm just being a selfish bastard here, but don't you think that after all this BS you deserve an iota of happiness?"

A part of Sam – and pretty decently sized part – was a bit masochistic, and was fairly convinced that he didn't have the right to be happy. But it was hard to suppress the natural human instinct to do so.

"Don't get me wrong, man," Jacob continued, "You done fucked up good and proper with the women in your life, but… how far does a person have to go before they don't ever deserve to be happy? People screw each other over every day and keep on livin', keep on… doing whatever it is they do."

"It's easier when you're screwing over people you don't actually like," Sam pointed out. "Chalk it up to business. This was not business. Though, I think it'll be easier now. I don't have to feel guilty about giving into Emily's imprint, if I know Leah's happy with someone else that she won't give a flying fuck whether I join the circus."

"How very selfish of you," Jacob chided. Sam looked a bit guilty as he glanced down to the pebbly beach. "Dude, I'm just messing with you, okay? You're right – hopefully Leah is happy enough and doesn't give two shits what you do with your personal life. I would think it'd happen eventually. It's kinda normal. So you're free. Go and live your life in a way that gives you some friggin' peace of mind, man."

All Sam wanted was a quiet life and a quiet mind.
Sunday, December 23, 2007

"Salvation!" Jezzie sighed as she collapsed on her bed. Liz was currently downstairs unpacking her stuff for her stay. Jezzie could hear her laughing at something Al had said. "Did I miss something?" Jezzie asked before curling comfortably on her side against her quilt. "I kind of expected my Dad to be up here threatening you with bodily harm. Given how things were when I left."

"Oh, we covered that," Embry noted blithely, spinning her desk chair. "He found out I'd gone to see you… somehow. I blame Leah. And we had this really twisted conversation wherein he congratulated me on manning up and also threatened to blast me so full of rock salt I'd shit margaritas."

"Oh my god!" Jezzie wailed, curling tighter in herself for a moment before springing off her bed. She stepped out the door and bent over the banister looking to the foyer. "Dad! You can't just say that kind of stuff to people!"

"Well it certainly worked, don't you think?" Al cackled. "I have a happy daughter, plenty of rock salt, and no margaritas!"

"Heaven help me," Jezzie dragged her hand down her face as she slumped against the banister until her butt hit the floor.

"Welcome back to Forks, Jez!" Embry grinned.

Thursday, December 27, 2007

The day before her father was scheduled to head out to leave for Seattle for the start of the fishing season, Jezzie went with him to stock up on food supplies.

"I'm glad you could join me, Miss Jezebel," he grinned as he pulled a lot of coffee from the grocery store shelf. She stepped over to the other side to take some coffee filters.

"Of course, Dad," she smiled. "I haven't seen you nearly enough, with Boston so far off. Plus you know I won't be back until June with Collin."

Al smiled in a knowing way. He had not quite been expecting it when Jezzie came home to tell him that they'd be bringing a young Quileute boy to the airport, too, last August. Al was not against his daughter having a roommate. In fact, he was glad it was someone she already knew. However, he was wary of the boy's young age. They were both quite young, and Al knew from experience that fourteen-year-old boys were special breed of humanity. Collin appeared to be a placid and soft-spoken, if normal, boy. Jezzie had some explanation about scholarships and educational opportunities. Al had asked if his parents knew. He had called and stopped by the Littlesea's a few days before they had left, just to touch base.

"The boy is doing well? It's difficult being so young and so far from home, sometimes."

"He is," Jezzie nodded. "He's a good kid. He's really pretty shy, but he's funny."
"And how about your schooling, my dear?" Al quirked a brow as they walked along with the cart. "It seems all I hear about is the boy's well-being, your neighbors, the newest leak in the apartment, and your classmates. All of which, I must say I care about and do enjoy hearing, but I'd like to know how my daughter is doing. First year of medical school is now gravy train."

Jezzie sighed. "School is wicked hard, Dad." Al smiled noting how her Boston vernacular slipped through. "I'm keeping up okay, I guess. But everyday I just feel like I'm never going to be able to learn everything I need to know is so few years. But the prospect of even just those few years make me wanna hurl sometimes."

"If it's so difficult now, why are you making yourself worry about the next year and the year after? Why not focus on the here and now?"

"It's really hard not to think about it all…" Jezzie paused as she pulled a few boxes of individually packaged sweetener from shelf at the end of the aisle. "And all those books weigh a ton. I think they might actually push into the triple digits on the scale."

"In my day, we were lucky to have schoolbooks," Al smiled, trying to lighten her mood with some lighthearted teasing. "And you walked uphill to school both ways in the snow," Jezzie smiled, knowing what her father was doing.

"Jezebel, far inferior beings have made it through medical schooling. You have had the almighty privilege to meet a few in your time. I'm sure I don't have to remind you about the string of idiots you met in Michigan before we found out that it was really the MS bothering you. If those individuals can hack their way to a medical degree, than I have no doubt that you will be a brilliant physician."

"I think you might have too much faith in me, Dad," Jezzie noted dubiously as they moved to the canned goods aisle.

"I have just the right amount of faith," Al retorted quickly, bending down to reach the peas. "Don't you think after twenty-two years I've got a decent perspective on some of your abilities? It's in our nature to doubt ourselves, but I would never lie to you, Jezebel."

"Thanks, Dad," Jezzie replied. "Promise you'll visit when I end up in a loony bin?"

"You've got too many friends to keep you sane to end up going crazy, my dear."

"That reminds me!" Jezzie's voice rose a bit. She spun around and pointed an accusing finger at him with her hands full of canned goods. "Please do not be threatening bodily harm to my friends."

"Friends?" Al looked at her innocently. "I have only threatened one of your acquaintances, and it was merely in jest – and entirely after he got his head out of his ass."

"Dad…" Jezzie whined as her head collapsed onto her forearms resting on the grocery cart. "This is what I'm talking about!"

"Miss Jezebel," Al said firmly. "I am your father. And as your father, I reserve the right to speak my mind when I think the people around you are acting like absolute fools. Embry strikes me as a good boy, and I think someday soon he'll be a good man. But sometimes, even the best of people need a little prodding to figure themselves out. If someone is not living up to their potential, never give them a moment's peace."
"You said this was non-alcoholic!" Jezzie wailed at the top of her voice from her spot on the Ateara's living room floor. "Seth Clearwater. I'm going to kill you. And then I'm going to eat your first-born. Except I won't kill you until you have a first-born. So you'll have all the suspense until then. But then I'll kill you. Definitely."

Leah and Embry came through the Ateara's front door, shaking snow from their hair after coming off patrol. Both just glanced around. The annual Ateara New Years Eve celebration seemed to be going well enough. Jake and Brady had taken their turn to patrol, and the rest were packed into Quil and Anna's.

Kim and Noah were in the armchair, while Rachel and Addie were enjoying some coffee leaning against the breakfast counter. Paul was half-splayed on the couch with his feet on the coffee table and an arm around Liz, while Anna sat cross-legged in the remaining space, with Collin at her feet. Quil sat on the floor on the other side of the couch with Veronica in his lap. Sam was making no attempt to hide his laughter and Emily was hitting him. They all watched Seth, standing across the living room, argue with an obviously intoxicated Jezzie like some kind of tennis match.

"I told you the booze was in the bowl on the left. Left for liquor! That's how it's been since I was thirteen."

"But you didn't specify who's left!" she pointed an accusing finger, while another hand went to cover her face.

"Well sorrrrry," he replied in mock-apology. "How was I supposed to know you couldn't taste that the eggnog is two thirds grain alcohol? You only had one and a half glasses."

"Have you met me?" she sat bolt upright. "Clearly I am a lightweight! Don't you remember the time I had Benadryl and kept telling everyone I could see into an alternate dimension?"

Jezzie's hands clapped over her mouth as she released a very unladylike hiccup.

Leah stepped across the room to the table that housed the two offending punch bowls before taking a sip of the one she could clearly smell was spiked. "Whew!" she crinkled her nose. "What is in here? This isn't the usual brew."

"Rez'shine," Paul grinned. "That shit's gotta be at least 175 proof."

Jezzie just looked up at Paul from the floor with a blank face. "That is a lot of alcohol," she informed him like he might not have known.

"I'm pretty sure the next part is where all my inhibitions disappear. You're all responsible for making sure my clothes stay on. It's really cold outside," she stated casually as she half-rolled under the coffee table."

"Jezzie, what are you doing?" Embry asked through a partial laugh.

"I'm hiding," she whispered loudly. "Sh!"

"From what?" Collin asked.

"The liquor," she reached out to poke his ankle with a pointy index finger.

"Ow!"
"Embry," Quil began politely, "please remove your adorable, yet drunk girlfriend from underneath my coffee table before she hurts herself and sues me. Or threatens to eat my firstborn, too." Veronica cackled with laughter.

"I object!"

"To what?" Anna inquired. "Being removed from beneath the coffee table?"

"The liquor!"

"Oh-kay!" Embry interrupted a scenario he was sure was about to dissolve into madness and carefully extracted Jezzie from underneath the Ateara's table. She was rather complacent as he dragged her out and pulled her into his lap. Her spurt of drunken energy seemed incredibly short-lived. Embry wondered if it was because she was too drunk to maintain the energy level, or not drunk enough to completely lose her marbles.

A glass of water appeared in front of Jezzie's face, and she went momentarily cross-eyed before looking up. "Thanks Leah!" she grinned.

"You're going to need all the fluids you can get, kid," she insisted. "Rez'shine ain't no joke."

"Am I gonna have a hangover?" Jezzie whined, staring into her glass. "I've never had a hangover."

She didn't wait for a response, but only issued a raspberry in the direction of her water glass, and slumped into Embry's chest and focused on the TV.

Embry was pleased that Jezzie was mostly still after she yelled at Seth and crawled under the coffee table. She enjoyed a congratulatory glass of water when the clock struck midnight, and a kiss to the tip of her nose. But Embry decided it might be a good time to leave when Jezzie started catcalling at Liz for getting a midnight kiss on the cheek from Paul – of all people. Yes, all present were floored by the gesture – even Veronica who'd only very recently got to know Paul. But no one had actually said anything. Jezzie ran frantically onto the porch when Paul chased after her, threatening to kiss her too. He did manage to catch her before she fell down the stairs.

"You know," Jezzie enunciated as Embry made for the car with her over his shoulder. "I am aware that the falling over part means it's time to go home but I can walk to the Jeep! Wait, what about Liz! We can't leave her here!"

"She told me to bring you home, Jez," Embry insisted as he put her in the passenger seat and buckled her in. "She'll be fine. I told her to call me if she wanted a ride. It's not like there aren't five other people with cars in the house right now. I suspect they're not all quite partyed out yet. Not all of us check out at quarter past midnight."

"Seth's fault," she muttered as she watched Embry hop in the driver's seat before leaning against his arm. Embry thought she was dozing until they arrived home and she got out of the Jeep and hopped on bare feet through the dusting of snow across her yard to the door.

He stepped inside the door and she was scribbling something on one of the post-its she kept near her door for when she was getting forgetful.

"Embry," she spun around purposefully and almost smacked her head into Embry's in her pivot. He urged her far enough forward so he could close the front door, but she just continued to examine him.

"Yes?" he prodded.
"I really like you a lot," she said apropos of nothing.

"Thanks, Jez," he smiled. "I like you too."

"I mean it," she insisted. "Like a real lot. I feel like I don't tell you that enough. But I don't want to tell you I love you while I'm drunk, because that seems tacky. So I wrote it down," she showed him the post-it. "I'm going to tell you in the morning when I'm hungover. It's way classier." And with that she affixed the post it not to her chest.

"Okay," Embry nodded. "How about some sleep?"

Jezzie shook her head. "I'm hungry," she patted her stomach and it echoed like a drum.

"Sandwich?"

"Sandwich!" Jezzie cheered with a small hop before setting off for the kitchen. She only stumbled once.

"Sit down, crazy lady," Embry prodded her towards the counter. "You'd probably end up poking an eye out with the bread tie."

Jezzie issued a petulant raspberry, and leaned against the counter to flick the radio on. The jazz station was staticky at best, but Jezzie's feet swung from the barstool and her head bopped happily to the music as she ate the turkey sandwich Embry had made for her. "This is a really good sandwich," she told him decidedly.

"Teenage boys are gifted in the sandwich-making arts."

"I love this song!" she shouted suddenly as the song changed over and the opening notes from Van Morrison's *Moondance* crackled out of the radio. She hopped out of her chair and her slid around the kitchen's linoleum barefoot. "Wanna dance, Embry?" she asked cheerfully.

"You're a really dopey drunk, Jez," Embry noted.

"Don't be mean to me. I'm the best girlfriend ever. And I asked if you wanted to dance, silly." She didn't seem bothered about him joining her, as she moved to the beat all alone. Embry was surprised how well she'd retained her rhythm even though she managed to stumble while walking.

"At 1AM in your kitchen?"

"Yeah," she replied easily. "It's not like anyone besides Archie can see. And I think he's asleep."

"I dunno," Embry shook his head tentatively as he leaned back against the counter.

"C'mon, Embry," Jezzie whined. "Please? See, I asked real nice." She came close and took his hand in her own. He submitted rather easily to her tugging and joined her in the middle of her kitchen floor – though he put on a good show of being forced against his will.

"I'm not a very good dancer," he told her, taking a careful hold of her waist and holding on to her hand with his.

"Haven't we danced before?" Jezzie asked looking upward to him, her forehead and nose crinkling in the process. "I feel like we have to have danced before."

"One wedding," he reminded her.
"Oh, yeah," she recalled. "Sam and Emily's. I promise I'm not judging you." She let out a small sigh and let her head rest against his shoulder as their feet sidestepped in time to the music. The last stanzas of music petered out into the kitchen and Jezzie was wracked by a yawn. "See, you're pretty good."

"Ready for some shuteye, now, Jez?" She only nodded into the fabric of his shirt, her eyes closed as she made no motion to move or let go of him. "Hold on," he told her half-sleeping form. He released her hand to reach down and lift her up below her knees.

As he carted his drunk and dozing girlfriend upstairs he was struck by the fact that he'd never actually carried her before. He hadn't much cause, but she'd always been very independent minded and wasn't very fond of advertising her affections. Embry would have gladly had her sit in his lap all day. But Jezzie was a bit more subtle. She seemed to enjoy handholding – a lot. But her physical affection was usually something she saved for private spaces. And Embry had no occasion to carry her ever before. He knew she never would have allowed it in most circumstances. However, this time she seemed quite content to let him bring her upstairs. It was likely an entirely selfish act, as he sensed that Jezzie had burned through her reserves of energy and probably didn't want to walk up all those stairs with her own legs. He'd take it.

He slid off her jeans covered her with her quilt, but she rolled over and reached out when he made to leave. "Stay," she muttered to her pillow.

"Jez, Liz is gonna be home in a while. I don't want to make anyone feel weird. Wasn't it you that's been telling me to spend more nights at home to make my Mom feel better?"

"If Liz does come back to this house tonight, I think we can both guess that a certain brother of yours will be joining her. Might as well even the playing field."

Embry was surprised by her level of observation. "You caught on to that?" he smiled as he sat on the side of her bed.

"I'm drunk, not stupid," Jezzie informed him. "Liz likes him. I can tell."

"Really?" Embry asked in surprise as he stretched out. "How can you tell?"

"Liz likes boys that are larger than life," she explained while she rolled over into Embry's side. "That kind of sarcastic attitude is endearing to her."

"Paul's a sucker for any woman over six feet."

"Liz is six-three."

"Guy's a goner."

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**Tuesday, January 1, 2008**

Alice Cullen was not exactly the wake up call Jezzie had been expecting. She was up early, with an awful hangover. She made sure to call and leave belligerent voicemails on Seth's phone at the crack of dawn, too. She took some coffee with her morning aspirin and was quietly willing the light to just, please, stop being so bright.

Liz's bag was on the table in the foyer – so Jezzie knew she was home. But the door was closed and she had no idea if she was in there alone or not. She didn't care much. She put some extra coffee in the pot and moved as quick as she was willing to when the doorbell rang. If she moved just quick
enough, hopefully, that the awful noise would not return.

Jezzie opened the door, and the small, thin girl turned around to face her. Jezzie's draw dropped to the floor – along with her cup of coffee – and not even a second had passed before she heard a loud thud from upstairs in the vicinity of her room and a low, startled "What the fuck is that?!" from her guest room. Jezzie gathered herself quickly enough to step outside and close the door before two (apparently) wolves ran a hole through the front of her house. She thought they just might do that anyways.

"Alice?"

"Hi Jezzie," Alice chirped. "I hope you don't mind my stopping in so early. It's really important."

"No," Jezzie shook her head. "I guess it's fine. Um… we should probably wait until Embry – and apparently Paul – reel the panic levels back in, though. I've got an ignorant human in the house."

"Oh, all right," Alice nodded. No sooner had she got the words out than Jezzie's front door was thrown open and ricocheted off the wall inside and two overgrown boys in varying states of undress had leapt on to her porch ready to tear something to shreds.

"Morning," Alice trilled, offering a finger-dancing wave. She seemed to get a kick out of the reaction she caused.

"What… the hell… is going on?" Liz inquired as she dragged her feet onto the porch in the cold morning air to stand between two enraged and shaking boys. "That was certainly a wake up call."

"Sorry, Liz," Jezzie offered, bending down to pick up the few pieces of her broken mug. "Alice stopped by, and these two are very light sleepers."

"Apparently," she looked between the two, unconvinced. "All right," she sighed. "Let's give the woman her privacy, boys. C'mon, how does everyone feel about seafood omelets? Fish is the only thing they keep in this house, I swear."

And with that, both Paul and Embry followed Liz back inside the house after a final glance at Alice. Alone on the porch, Jezzie wrapped her arms around her middle; it was colder than she remembered last night.

"I'll make this quick, Jezzie. There isn't really any easy way to say it. I assume you know at this point – or at the very least you'll know now that I tell you – that I've been having gaps in my visions. I can't see the wolves – were or shifter – and I had some blank spots around Boston when Azrael was following you, then later I couldn't see Volterra after he left you be. We can only assume he's been in contact with the Volturi. But just these past few day I've had visions of Boston cloud up again, only for glimpses of a vampire I don't recognize to appear. And you."

"Me?"

She nodded. "But I can only assume that this vampire and Azrael eventually get to you… because you disappear from my sight almost as quickly as you appear."

"Because… because I'm dead?"

Alice nodded with a grimace. "Or you're taken," she offered. "The only reason I wouldn't be able to see you is if you're killed or you're taken by Azrael – who naturally blocks my visions."

"It couldn't be any of the other wolves. The Plains wolves? The La Push Pack?"
Alice shook her head ruefully. "I don't think so, Jezzie. I checked, and it seems like it comes as a surprise to them because I don't see any of my blank spots shifting in a way to suggest they come after you."

"What about Collin?"

"I can't be sure," she shrugged. "But I think that's why my visions of you and this vampire I don't recognize are so clouded. It's trying to see around two different kinds of mental blocks. Either that or – hopefully – it means that portion of your future is very much in flux. It's giving me a migraine."

"Okay," Jezzie nodded in a daze. "I… um… thanks, Alice. I, uh… I'm glad I know, I guess. I mean, I am. It's obviously unnerving, but the future's never set, right?"

"Right," Alice nodded, offering Jezzie a light shoulder squeeze before turning and descending down the stairs and climbing back into the black Mercedes parked in her driveway.

Jezzie leaned against the cold wood siding and slid down until her butt hit the porch floor. Liz cracked the door open a few minutes later and peered outside. When she noticed that Alice was gone, she stepped fully onto the porch with two new cups of coffee in her hands. She offered Jezzie one. "You okay, Jezzie?" she asked carefully, slumping down to sit next to Jezzie – their shoulders touching. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Thanks," Jezzie said looking down into her coffee. "And Alice… just had some not so good news. Just processing, I guess."

"You gonna be all right?" Liz asked tentatively.

"Yeah," Jezzie nodded determinedly. "I definitely will be."

"Okay," Liz acquiesced. "Let me know if we gotta call Carla to cut a bitch."

Jezzie smiled and leaned against her friend's shoulder for a moment. "Thanks, Liz."

Liz stood and went inside. Jezzie leaned against the siding and closed her eyes, willing the cold to bring her back to her senses. She heard the door open and close again, followed by a silent gait that still felt much heavier on the old porch. He sat with far less grace than his wolfy abilities allowed, and Jezzie felt a warm heavy arm wrap around her.

"What's up, Jez? Liz said you weren't so hot out here."

"Well, it is about 45F," she noted.

"Not what I was referring to," Embry noted.

"I love you, Emb," she said quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"I told you last night that I wanted to remind you that I love you, but I didn't want to do it drunk. I think I'm a little more believable when I'm sober."

"I love you, too, Jez," he replied.

"Alice came by," she began, preventing Embry from having to prompt her again, "because she saw me dead."
"What?"

"After I go back to Boston, I disappear from her visions – but not as a result of the Pack or the Plains wolves. She sees Boston getting foggy again like the last time Azrael found me, she gets glimpses of a unknown vampire and then I just disappear entirely."

Embry didn't say anything. Jezzie opened her eyes, and she felt a tremor radiate up the arm Embry had around her. She turned out of his embrace to see his face. "Embry?" she questioned. She fumbled slightly when he all but disappeared. She looked around quickly, and spotted him bolting into the trees on the near side of her yard – a pair of shorts and t-shirt dropped at the edge of the trees.

"Embry!" she hissed, not wanting to give herself away to Paul and Liz inside. She stood and padded barefoot down the stairs and towards the spot where Embry had disappeared. Somewhere in the back of her logical mind she realized this wasn't a good idea. The tremor she'd felt was one of slipping control. The wolves were dangerous when they weren't in control, and she shouldn't have been chasing one. However, ever since the summer – when she'd started throwing rocks at Embry's house – she had occasionally lost her grip on her logical side. Every now and then it seemed things would derail. She didn't know what it was about her life that made her borderline compulsive responsibility complex slowly erode like rust-worn steel.

She was cold, she was worried, somewhere along the line tears started tracking down her face, and she was hungover as hell. She really didn't need this right now, and so all her logic was tossed to the wind.

She wasn't more than ten yards into the woods when she felt the cold chill her to the bone, and she realized that stumbling into the woods with no shoes on in January was ill-advised. "Please?" her voice cracked slightly on the long vowel as she spoke to the seemingly empty woods. "Embry, please… just… I get that you're scared," she reached up to try to flick the tears from her cheeks. "I'm scared too. But please don't go. You told me it was okay to be afraid, Embry. But I can't be afraid of… *this*… if I have to be afraid of you running off, too. I know it's stupid, and it's selfish to want you to stick around when all you want to do is run, but I can't run. And if I can't run away than would you please… I… I need you. I need you to stay."

The low lying shrubbery around her shifted and a wolf the size of a horse emerged from the trees. It was gray and its back was bled through with black patches. She recognized Embry from that day more than a year ago when he and Jared had proved the Pack secret to her when she thought she was crazy.

She opened her mouth to speak and nothing came out. She swallowed and tried again. "Should I do the running and screaming now, or are you safe to approach?" The wolf emitted a whining noise and crouched low. It batted at its own nose as it burrowed into the pine needle ground layer. Jezzie squatted down and moved a bit closer. She reached a tentative hand out. She'd rarely seen the wolves phased. She was only just getting used to Collin in her living room. This marked the second time she'd ever seen Embry's wolf in its natural form.

She offered the wolf's snout a careful pet before it picked its head up and snuffed along the length of her arm. Startled, Jezzie fell from her squat on to her but in the cold needles. She froze, her arms bunched up close to her side as the wolf stood and paced around her. She felt the hot, wet breath course over her hair, her arms, her legs, her back before the wolf – satisfied with its inspection – curled around her and laid back down.

She sniffed once and wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks. "Embry, I'm not gonna die," she told him determinedly. "I won't. Her futures aren't set in stone." She reached forward carefully and ran her hands through the fur at his shoulders. As her fingers dug deeper, she realized how thick his coat
was. The fur – at a certain point – seemed to start running in the opposite direction, as if the layers were woven. No wonder they stayed so warm. The fur was thick and soft and warm.

The wolf's head rested on its front paws near her feet, but she watched the glassy black eye flicker around to watch her. She leaned into the soft warmth behind her. "I'm too stubborn to die."

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**Wednesday, January 2, 2008**

"Dude, we need to do something about this," Paul insisted. "I mean, I'm hardly the first one to stir up a good panic, but shit's getting real. There aren't enough of us. If Alice is seeing Jezzie get knocked off by a vampire than that means they're planning something. That shit ain't random."

"Yeah, probably not," Jacob agreed. "There aren't enough of us. I can't have you helping the Plains wolves, Collin in Boston and then the rest of the Pack god knows where. And the Cullens are down two bodies from last time which puts them at a serious disadvantage. We can't defend a whole continent with only eighteen people."

"Okay," Paul dragged the word out. "Well, what are you thinking, because I'm pretty sure unless we start a werewolf cloning center or we give the Cullens carte blanche to start sucking vein that we're shit out of luck for this impending supernatural apocalypse."

"You ever hear of Skinwalkers?"

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**Winter 2008**

"That's the one I want dead. No arguments!" Sulpicia screamed as her fist collided with the table. The gathered shuddered slightly with the shaking of the massive oak table.

"Why, though, Sulpicia?" Marcus replied in a bored tone. He appeared to be the only one at the table not oozing nervous tension out of every pore.

"Because," Sulpicia enunciated, "killing her off would cause a panic! We need some chaos!"

"We cannot be sure of her loyalties. Your plan is risky at best. We could simply be killing a strange human, plucked from random."

"Oh, of course we know her loyalties," Sulpicia replied in irritation. "Do not play stupid, Marcus. It is not becoming on you."

From the other end of the table, a pale, wan, greasy looking man sat up a little straighter. He wreaked of wet dog to the gathered vampires, and proved a tenuous ally. "I am well-assured to believe her loyalties remain the same. There is no indication that anything has changed."

"It seems like an awful lot to risk for one casualty."

"It will be worth it," the small woman seethed.

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**Thursday, January 3, 2008**

"You have got to be shitting me?" Leah stared blankly at him from across the table. "You mean to tell me you rang the Navajo rez's president, told them you were a magical shapeshifting werewolf from up north and you really needed to speak to the local deviants?"
"Deviants?"

"Yes, Jake," Leah nodded. "In Navajo lore, you only become a skinwalker after breaking some kind of social taboo, by doing something wrong, or by screwing around with magic. People are scared of the skinwalkers. They harass homes at night. I mean... hell knows if any of it is true. We're purely on legend, here. But... _I can't believe you contacted another supernatural species and didn't tell me about it!_"

"Well, given that VP down in Arizona knew _exactly_ what I was getting at in my not-so-suave attempt to beat around the bush, I'd say they know exactly what the skinwalkers are up to. Maybe they just have a bad wrap. At any rate, their rez is way bigger than ours. That means there could be more of them, and they could know about more shapeshifters."

_Saturday, January 5, 2008_

"Explain to me again why we're going to a beach party in January?" Liz asked from the passenger seat.

"Because there won't be occasion for another beach party when we're all here for a while. We leave tomorrow, Liz. It's the last hurrah for a while."

"As long as I can continue to wear my seventeen layers," Liz smiled.

Jezzie grinned, rather well-assured that today would be the day Liz would get her inaugural shove off a La Push cliff. Cliff diving really did seem to be a bit of a tradition. Veronica had done the deed at some point over the summer. Jezzie had been gone to school but Leah reported that the girl swan dived off the cliff precipice like a fucking champ.

Embry had been correct in his assertion about Paul's inability to resist tall girls, because he was – to put it politely – all over Liz. Kim and Rachel found this hilarious. As the two women in the Pack who probably knew him best, they both knew he wasn't exactly a heart-on-the-sleeve typer. He wasn't very subtle about his growing fondness for Liz Jones.

And given the givens, Jezzie thought it a very real possibility that Liz ended up in the Pacific Ocean tonight.

She parked on the edge of the road in the unpaved shoulder that ran parallel to the rocky beach and hopped out. She opened the back door and pulled out her trusty leather jacket. It was the same one that she'd worn when she came to her first beach party. She smiled a little at the thought. She remembered feeling nervous and excited, being in a new town with new people to meet. That was back before she'd known about the Pack, before her and Embry were a thing. Before she knew Veronica, before Noah, before Jared… So much had changed in a little over a year.

Liz zipped her sweatshirt all the way up as Seth came bounding down the path. "Hi guys! We were wondering when you'd show up."

"Oh, you know us womenfolk take forever getting ready," Jezzie rolled her eyes.

"It's a trick," Liz nodded. "We actually just go out for a few drinks and have you all believe girls take forever getting ready."

"I would believe that if Jezzie were not drunk on my living room floor last week."

"You do owe me for making you a sandwich the other day, though," she countered.
"Your wish is my command," he bowed slightly.

"I want a piggyback ride," Jezzie exclaimed like a small child. She waved her hand about in a motion indicating that he should turn around. She hopped easily on to his back and the three made for the beach. Liz got roped into something courtesy of Leah when they arrived and Seth deposited Jezzie unceremoniously in Embry's lap just nearly missing the food that was also there.

"Thank you," she grimaced looking at the plate he held in one hand as she moved to sit next to him. "Sitting in nachos would've been unfortunate."

"Quil sat in pudding in sixth grade. That shit was gross."

"Ew…"

"If you do not stop telling people embarrassing stories about our childhood, prepare to feel my totally reciprocal wrath," Quil noted plainly as he plopped down on the other side of Jezzie.

"Where's…" Jezzie glanced around noticing that Veronica was nowhere to be seen.

"Roni?" Quil interrupted. "She went to go get ice. Apparently shit still melts in January. Did not know that."

"You two have nicknames?" Embry asked. "That's fucking priceless."

"I'll spare you the embarrassment of telling Jezzie the weird ass shit that comes out of your mouth and mind sometimes."

"Oo!" Jezzie crooned, her eyes lighting up. "Do tell! Do tell!"

"Say anything, Ateara," Embry warned, "and I'll rip your wolfy balls off."

Quil raised his hands in surrender. "I am bound by my brotherly code, Little Red. No dice."

"Darn," she snapped her fingers in mock disappointment. "So anyways, when do we get to throw Liz in the ocean?"

Quil thought she seemed quite giddy about the whole idea. "Who says we're throwing Liz in the ocean?"

"I know that look on your face, Quil. You're up to something. You did it to me, to Veronica, I can only imagine Liz is next."

"The inaugural ceremony is a very sacred moment that dates back a whole year and a half," Quil informed her seriously. "We don't just throw anyone into the ocean."

"You're just scared because she's taller than you. She wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Yeah, but she could definitely put one of them pointy knees or elbows in an uncomfortable place…"

"So you're admitting it!"

"I confess to nothing!"

Jezzie was proven entirely in the right when – a few hours later – Embry willfully joined Quil in carting Liz out into the tide until they were knee deep in it.
"You both need to put me down right now!" Liz demanded.

"You sure about that?" Quil taunted, letting her slip ever so slightly.

"I meant on dry land!" She wailed.

"Should we intervene?" Veronica asked Jezzie.

She shook her head. "Liz is a very nice person, but she doesn't take shit. She'll kill you with kindness. I say we observe for now. We both survived."

"True story."

"Only the coolest kids get dropped in the ocean," Seth shouted out to her. "You should have seen the way Jezzie wrapped herself around Quil's head like a sea urchin."

Jezzie threw the leftover half of someone's hot dog at him. "I wasn't done with that," Collin sighed.

"Sorry," Jezzie smiled and ruffled his hair. "I'll roast you a new one later."

"The only way out is to jump, Liz," Paul informed her from the shoreline with a grin.

"I am not jumping off these overgrown goof balls."

"No… from a slightly higher vantage point."

"Oh. Whatever."

And that was how Liz Jones submitted to jumping off a fifty-foot cliff in January. Leah, Paul, Quil, Seth, and her drove to the top of the thirty-foot jump, wherein she looked over the edge and said "That's it?" like she was unimpressed. If they didn't know she had a latent adrenaline junkie tendency, they found out when she got a running start to her cannon ball off the fifty-foot jump.

"I think she's a keeper," Embry laughed as Jezzie cheered Liz on with Veronica. "You sure do know how to pick 'em, Jez."

"I run with tough bitches."

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**Sunday, January 6, 2008**

"So you won't be home for spring break?" Embry confirmed.

Jezzie shook her head. "Nope. Collin's spring break doesn't coincide with mine and I've got work anyways."

"So I'm not going to see you until May?"

"June," she corrected. She bent down to pick her back pack up off the terminal floor and pulled her ticket out. The plane would be boarding in the next few minutes. "Collin isn't done school until June."

"Why do I feel like I'm being cockblocked by a fourteen year old's education?" Embry asked tugging her closer by the waist.

"Because you are," Jezzie smiled. "Education is important. Yours included. Go focus on school
instead of having to deal with your high maintenance girlfriend, okay?"

"Hate to break it to you, babe, but the sex is kind of a stress reliever."

"Embry Call, we are in an airport."

"Who the hell do you think is listening?"

Jezzie paused and looked around. She saw Paul and Liz sitting together and talking animatedly. But she couldn't see... "Where is Collin?"

"He went to pee a few minutes ago. Something about getting stuck inside airplane bathrooms."

"Really? He's refused to leave the seat the two time I've flown with him."

Embry laughed. "I think it's just his paranoia. Just make sure he doesn't get dehydrated. Ah, here he comes." The pair spotted Collin a ways off and waved to remind him where they were. "Stay safe this spring, Jez," Embry muttered quietly. She indulged him and did not pull away when he leaned in for a short kiss.

"I will be. Collin and I are on the buddy system. I won't tell you not to worry, because you'll just be insulted. But trust me when I say that you'll know if anything happens. I'll call you, okay?"

"Thank you," he replied, issuing a brief kiss to her forehead before finally releasing her.

"My bladder is empty!" Collin announced as he reached the group.

"I'd say the bladder is the least of your problems," Liz laughed.

"What's the worst?" Paul asked warily with a quirked eyebrow.


Their flight was called to board and the group stood together to say their final goodbyes.

"Stay safe, Little Red," Paul said quietly as he gave her a hug. "Because there's no way in hell I'm sheltering Embry's psyche through that shit storm if you bite the bullet. So don't die."

"I'll do my best, Paul," Jezzie rolled her eyes, knowing that this was a form of fondness and expression for Paul.

Jezzie, Liz, and Collin made for the gate. Collin preceded them done the walk to the plane itself when Jezzie spotted something peeking out from the sleeve of Liz's sweatshirt. "Elizabeth Jones," Jezzie hissed. "So help me – what is that on your arm? I know I saw something!" Jezzie reached up and snatched Liz's arm in a vice-like grip. She slid the sleeve up and her mouth dropped open.

"Oh my goodness," Jezzie muttered, staring wide-eyed at the scrawl over her wrist. "That's Paul's number."

Liz just grinned in a goofy way. "Mind if I come visit over the summer?"

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**Friday, January 11, 2008**

*So it turns out these skinwalkers aren't so bad,* Quil informed the phased wolves back in La Push.
He paced around in the Arizona heat and couldn't wait to phase back human. If he spent too long phased he'd start to shed for a spring coat he didn't need at home.

*How do you figure?* Leah asked.

*They've had a lot of trouble during the Southern Vampire Wars in the past because they were so close to the BS. So, in the past, when someone broke the rules or ran afoul of tribal customs in a really big way – they'd be cursed. The cursed would be driven mad and the psychosis would take over their bodies, driving them into the desert until they killed and skinned enough creatures to make a pelt to cover a human body. They'd finally transform after that, losing the bloodlust, and were forced to protect their people as repayment for their crimes.*

*So how'd they get skinwalkers now?* Jacob wanted to know.

*Well, they're the same ones...* Quil replied slowly.

*What do you mean they're the same ones?*

*Some of them are really, really old. They don't die. They have to be killed, which apparently isn't very hard if you can catch one. But the longer they live, the more skilled they've become as fighters having to deal with the Southern Vampires over the decades. You can imagine they're slightly bitter about being cursed, plus the obvious resentment about having a bunch of pale demons try and take over their land so they can suck the blood out of every living thing on it.*

*Heavy on the real life metaphor, there,* Anna noted.

*Definitely. They're fucking bitter as hell. And they're really friggin' creepy. But they're all old enough now that they're more of a placid kind of evil. They're like hundred year old ex-cons. They could kill you seventeen ways with a paperclip, but they're not bothered enough to summon the energy to actually do it. They're not stupid, so they won't take their resentment out on their own people. They let it out on the vampires.*

*So... they're not evil, then?* Embry queried.

*Not entirely. There are also some that willfully changed to skinwalkers. It's associated with a really advanced kind of dark magic. They don't just – poof – turn into coyotes one day like we phase. It's something they have to work really hard at. So all these guys – and it does seem to be mostly guys – are evil magic possessors, or cursed.*

*Oh good...* was all Seth had to offer.

* Anything else?* Jacob asked.

*They've been having issues lately with that chick Jasper knows – Maria? – apparently she's been expanding her ranks again, and they're just waiting for an excuse to decimate her.*

*So do we count them in?* Paul asked.

*They want to talk to someone ranked higher than me, and I told them that shouldn't be a problem. Someone should get their ass down here. There are a lot of them. I've already seen maybe three dozen, and this is a vocation for them. They got mad skills. They seem willing to help us out if we help them out.*

*Anyone ever been to Mexico?*
"Is it really smart for us to be leaving?" Embry asked as he walked with Leah to the car. She had since scrounged a new model. She left the Clearwater deathtrap to her brother and her mother at their place. Her and Jacob had scraped change and funds from every corner of their life to find a used car that would meet safety inspections. Seth had wanted to know why given that either would probably survive a head-on crash in a go cart. Jacob shook just shook his head. Leah actually explained. She felt that as a responsible adult with a child – even one more resilient than most human children – it made sense to buy a car that was safe. Not only was it practical, she insisted, but it set a good example.

"Embry," Leah glanced over the roof of the car to her doubtful brother. "Would you chill the fuck out for, like, seventeen seconds. Goddamn."

She unlocked the doors and they both slid inside. "We're bound to end up getting commissioned out of go find a horde of mythical creatures at some point. But that's not today. And we're bound to end up entangled in some turf war for ultimate supernatural supremacy. But that's not today. Today, we're going to Neah Bay to keep digging into this mystery about Makah shapeshifters."

She drove them out of La Push and once on the open road they recapped what they had managed to gather over the summer. They had established that Embry's dad was, indeed, a man buried in Neah Bay. His mother had ended up in La Push when her fiancé wouldn't stop running his mouth about his sighting the vestiges of the last Pack as a child. He hadn't ever mentioned it until he got older. The Council in La Push invited him and his fiancée to La Push in time for him to die. Tiffany Call just never left.

"We heard the old stories from that lady about how the phasings first started."

"Yeah," Leah nodded remembering. "The women were guarding the potlatch in bear skin eventually were able to choose between bear and human skin. Then they were all killed after being tipped off."

"A younger set of Makahs took their place, determined to protect the land constantly – not just during potlatches."

"And that's where it moves from the female bear stories to the tales of wolves?" Leah confirmed.

"Seems like it," Embry agreed. "We found the Foster family with all the stories about the potlatches and the women and the bears, but that lady we talked to didn't seem to know much about wolves."

"Pull my backpack out," Leah indicated the backseat. Embry turned and brought her bag into his lap. "Root around in there for the roll of papers I have and find the crest with the wolves and bears on it."

"This one?" Embry questioned. He glanced at the paper in his hands. Common in the tribes of the Pacific Northwest were pieces of familiar artwork that were most akin to family crests. Different families had different paintings that spoke a language all their own. Each of these paintings were displayed on a family's house, often right above the front door. Most of the ones in La Push were old and fading even though most attempted to preserve them. To have someone come in a help the preservation process was difficult – for finding someone trustworthy was hard – and expensive. If a person was skilled enough, they could tell from looking at this artwork emblazoned above a home's entryway just exactly who lived there.

When families moved, or people were married they would bring different elements together from their family crests to make a new on. Embry didn't know much about reading the art, but he figured that bear and that wolf were not there by accident.
"That one," Leah nodded. "It belongs to the Parker family. They're related to the Fosters with the bear stories. I figured it'd be a good place to start."

Leah ran back down the steps of the old beat up house and grabbed Embry's hand as he leaned non-threateningly against the car door. "Old Mr. Parker said he'd talk to us! He's got all the wolf stories from their first generation – right after all those women were killed. C'mon!"

"Wow, you are excited," Embry muttered as she tugged him along.

"Embry," Leah sighed petulantly. "We figured out you're full Makah – not Quileute. We figured out why Makahs phase, and therefore why you phase. Now maybe we can finally wrap up the mystery. Aren't you the least bit excited to find out if you may or may not be bound by the imprinting mandate?"

"I'm actually kind of horrified," Embry admitted as they finally reached the porch. "Not knowing sucks, but has been kinda nice in its ambiguity."

Leah stopped and turned around. "Embry, even if we go in there and this old guy tells us that every single Makah wolf that ever phased imprinted on someone unexpected… that doesn't make your life any different than before you knew. Now you'll just know. And don't you think you've witnessed enough imprint pairs at this point to know that you can make it into something mutually beneficical?"

"But what if it's worse?" he pointed out.

"I've thought about this kinda stuff more than once," she noted without malice. "And nothing can take your free will away, Embry. Not unless you let it. The things that move us to act without a choice are things we bring on ourselves – even when we don't know it. For humans, it's like alcohol and drugs. They make decisions without really thinking about it. If you imprint, it'll only control you if you let it. Sam and Emily and me… it was such a clusterfuck. I would never want that for anyone. And I wouldn't be dragging you up these steps if I thought that was your fate."

She offered a rare encouraging smile and Embry followed the girl inside the house. It was small, but clean and well kept. Embry didn't have much time to look around before Leah guided him to the kitchen. A tall well-built old man in a flannel shirt stood prepping coffee at the counter. He reminded Embry a lot of Leah's dad, Harry. He offered each of the two a ceramic mug of hot coffee and gestured to the fifties era kitchen table.

"This is the classmate you mentioned, Miss Clearwater?" he nodded weathered brow towards Embry.

Leah nodded. "I'm Embry, sir. Good to meet you. Thanks for agreeing to talk to us."

"Don't mind a bit," he replied. "It's always nice to see kids take up an interest in our history. Leah here tells me you've taken up an interest in local artwork."

"We kinda covered most of La Push," Leah admitted. "And yours stuck our interest. We talked to the Fosters. We heard some really interesting stories about the protection of the potlatches. I suppose that's where the bears on their crest come from. We were interested in the additional wolves on yours. There don't seem to be many wolves featured in Makah art."

"No, the wolves are not a common animal," Old Mr. Parker confirmed. "See a lot of fish and a lot of birds around here. Salmon, whales, eagles, hawks, and such. The wolves are very closely related – the extension, I suppose – of the stories that recall the brutal massacre of the women who guarded our land."
For all Old Mr. Parker reminded him of Harry Clearwater, he spoke just like Billy. Billy was a great storyteller, in a way that couldn't be taught. He had the right tenor of voice, the proper delivery, and the entire attitude that made you think every story he conveyed to you was a true gift direct from the heavens.

"In the days after that gruesome event, many wept for the loss of their loved ones. Mothers, sisters, wives, daughters were taken from them in a very inhumane way. The tribe from then on vowed to protect its people, its land, at all times – not just during potlatches and ceremonies of great importance. As the women took the form of the bear, it was not long before our young men and women began to take the shape of the wolf. After childhood and before the age of marriage, our young people were charged with these guard duties. It was a task that only lasted those few years, when one is mature beyond childhood, but does not bear the responsibility of supporting one's family yet."

"As our first women began to choose the bear form over time, so our young people could choose the form of the wolf after much patience and time. They developed a resiliency, and could not be harmed by human weapons. This protected them in a way that did not protect their mothers, sisters, lovers."

"Many of those old enough to remember the massacre, were very close to these women. Each woman had close family members take their turn at guarding the tribe. Some of them were husbands, some brothers, the legend says even a father took the place of his daughter. And as these men transformed their hearts and minds changed with their physical form. They vowed to never love another woman as they had loved the ones they lost."

"None would replace their wives, their sisters, their daughters. Even though a man may have had other daughters, other sisters, or even other wives – he would not love them in the same way that he chose to love that one woman. It is said that with this promise, that inside every wolf from our tribe there is a kind of power that exists, an emotional power. Often, we humans cannot choose who we love or how we love them. We seem to develop a fondness for the most unlikely of characters. However those that took the transformation. Those wolves that chose to guard our lands, gained a will and power and a control over their emotions that no human has ever yet possessed."

"Okay, Embry? Breathe!" Leah's alpha command sifted through Embry's foggy consciousness and he took a deep breath.

"Wow…” he whispered.

" Fucking wow, indeed."

"That was insane," Embry noted. He glanced around and noticed that Leah was driving. He vaguely remembered shaking Old Mr. Parker's hand and giving a polite thanks before ending up in the car. "So… wolves phase in Makah land to protect after all those women are killed. And they…"

"They choose whom to love and how. They are the anti-imprint."

Chapter End Notes

Once again, I owe StealthLiberal a debt of gratitude for her knowledge base in re the use of crest-like artwork among Pacific NW tribes. That part is true. However, the specifics of any art I describe, as well as the stories, are not true. To my knowledge, I
made that part up.
From the Ashes a Fire Shall Be Woken

Chapter Notes

This mess is even more unedited than its usual degree of unedited. Make of this what you will.

Saturday, January 19, 2008

They're what? Anna exclaimed.

They're cats… Quil explained. Well, okay, not exactly cats. They're jaguars.

And what's their excuse?

I dunno… something about Olmecs and calendars and birthdays. There's like four different languages going on when we try and talk. We meet halfway with the Spanish and the English. The Nahual and Quileute are clearly not mutually intelligible. I'm pretty sure we're each only understanding about half of what the other is saying. I think the whiz kid needs to come down. He can get some real world experience with the linguistic savantism he's got going on.

Roadtrip! Brady wailed. I finally get to do something!

They seem like cool people. The jaguar thing kinda weirds me out. I think it's the eyes. Or maybe just because they're cats. I dunno. At any rate, they're not warriors like the skinwalkers. They live far enough south, the populations and geography are not appealing to Maria. They've never dealt with vampires.

Why do they phase?

They believe every human has an animal counterpart to which their life-force is linked. It seems like they're mostly outsourced for curse removal.

Tuesday, January 22, 2008

"Lees, I need you and Paul to head East together," Jacob told the Alpha female as they ate quietly. Nessie was spending her dinner this evening with Grandpa Charlie. Billy and Old Quil were gossiping like old ladies at the Ateara's – which left Leah and Jacob to their own devices for dinner. They both resolved that it would be best to eat the leftovers that were slowly piling up in the fridge.

So they sat on the kitchen floor, Leah with leftover spaghetti and Jacob with leftover pot pie, discussing the recent revelations from both Mexico and the Navajo rez.

"Are you sure you want to dig deeper into this, Jake?" Leah asked. "The skinwalkers creep me out, yes, but I don't know if we can trust them. You really want to go dragging more into this."

"We can't afford not to, Lees," Jacob admitted. "Alice's visions are getting weirder and weirder. Plus, finding out that Maria's coven is getting closer to the skinwalkers than she's been in decades? Azrael and that strange vampire on the East Coast? And her vision of Jezzie getting kidnapped or
slaughtered? You said it yourself, Leah: they're cornering us. The Volturi have been picking stupid fights with the Egyptians and the Romanians since the last time they were here and now it looks like they're going to pay us a second visit."

Leah grimaced while stabbing a little too energetically at her pasta. "It's true," she admitted. "Can you imagine what we're not seeing? We've only heard from the Cullens and those other vamps in Alaska. God knows what the Volturi has done to any of the other smaller covens. I'd rather them decimated than recruited."

"Wouldn't we all," Jacob rolled his eyes. He stood up and dumped the empty plastic container into the sink and flicked the faucet on. Leah cleaned off her fork and joined him. "This is why I need both of you to go. You both are high ranked and I really have no idea what you're going to run into between here and the Atlantic. I can't risk sending unexperienced and unranked wolves into the abyss."

"That leaves you here alone," Leah reminded him, though she was sure he didn't need it. "If Paul and I both leave your next ranked wolves are Seth, who is clinging to fourth, and Anna. God bless them both, but you know Seth is allergic to responsibility and they are both very young to hold down the fort here with no experience."

"I don't have a choice. They are the only ones I've got left. And they're both sixteen now. That's when Quil, Embry, Jared, Paul, and I all phased and we figured our shit out. I'd rather have them get a crash course here, than send them out where they could get killed. They're not going to get killed here. They're just going drive me up a wall."

"Baptism by fire," Leah nodded as she turned to lean her back against the counter. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"To put their asses in gear?" Jake glanced towards Leah.

"Yes," Leah confirmed. "Don't get me wrong, I don't want either of them in open combat, but they've been pups for a really long time. They can't keep it up because – as we're seeing now – there's no one to pass the buck to. Collin and Brady are fourteen. That's too young for most things. Anna and Seth need to step up."

"I know, I know," Jake responded immediately. "I've been slacking. No need to rub it in."

Leah smiled and turned around, looping and long arm around Jake's far shoulder and resting her chin on the near one. "I wouldn't call it slacking," she said slowly. "Just a little… oblivious." She laughed a little in her throat, indicating that she was joking.

Jacob turned around, his arms crossed. He was trying to feign serious, but Leah knew he was full of shit. Jake's poker face may have worked on most of the Pack, but Leah knew when he was just putting up the front. "Me? Oblivious?"

"Shocker, right?" Leah noted sarcastically. "So… can't send any of the babies to their death on the East Coast, but Paul and I are good for sacrifice?"

Jacob's head ducked as he looked towards the ground, guiltily. Again, Leah knew that her remark didn't get at the heart of his intention in sending her and Paul off, but she also realized he knew others may see it that way.

"It's not like that, Lees, and you know it's not," he said quietly, still staring at the floor. As an alpha at six and a half feet tall, Leah (who clocked in at an even six feet) was pretty sure that she was the only
to have seen the top of Jacob's head in quite a few years. He never would've taken such a submissive posture in front of any of the other wolves. But she could feel it... she knew he felt bad, guilty. He was worried, even though he was going to try to convince her that he wasn't.

"You and Paul can handle yourselves, and you work well together. I know there won't be any stupid bitchfits while you're together, and you won't do anything stupid. Plus, if we need a quick handshake to agree to be friends with some random crowd of shapeshifters, then I can't pass that any lower than you guys or it won't be legit."

"Jake?" Leah looked at him in an exasperated way.

"What?" he sighed in frustration.

"Chill the fuck out?" she asked. She leaned in a little bit closer, and Jacob's eyes got visibly wider. The two alphas had grown quite accustomed to each other in the almost year they'd spent living together. They'd been sharing Jacob's bed for almost as long and even though their perceptions of personal space were all but nonexistent, nothing more interesting had happened between them than Leah realizing she had no idea how she shared a mattress with a man with the most passive-aggressive spooning and sprawling tendencies known to mankind. Wolves were naturally disposed to touching. The whole Pack did it in a mostly subconscious way. They sat closer together; there was more hugging and almost no qualms about shared seats, beds, space, or living and breathing room. The two alphas were hardly an exception to the rule. And Jacob didn't seem to mind being close to Leah when he initiated it. However, any time she did something to surprise him – it was obvious. He was surprised.

Leah liked surprising Jacob. It was a momentary dash to his Alpha bravado that would let the eighteen-year-old guy show through. She closed the space, never thinking that she'd have to reach to kiss a guy when she was an easy six feet tall.

Jacob might've been a six and half foot tall Alpha, but he was still eighteen and hadn't gotten very far in the girl department. Leah had seen enough of all their heads to know that phasing had put a bullet through Paul's sex life, and that Quil thought girls were a magical other species until he phased, and Jacob and Embry could count on a few fingers the amount of times they'd gotten a handful of push up at a school dance. They'd been a little young to go snaggin'.

Time inside their heads these past few years proved only that Embry would spend the majority of his time having sex with Jezzie if given the opportunity, Paul was extremely jealous and expressed it via annoyance, Quil had lightened up slightly and did spend the majority of his time with Veronica in a sex act, and Jacob was still as pure as the driven snow. Except for those times he kissed Bella...

Jacob was frozen still for all of five seconds before he realized Leah was kissing him. He tiptoed around her, but when she gave him an inch, he'd take a foot. She felt comfortable and easy and safe against him. Their torsos flush, Leah felt Jacob respond. His hands – comfortable with the contours of her body at this point – found an easy home with one at her waist and the other around her neck. His mouth against hers moved and she smiled when she felt teeth. She'd always imagined that Jake might be a bit adventurous. She rested her arms over his shoulders, her wrists dangling limp as she opened her mouth ever so slightly, teasing him further.

He nipped lightly at her bottom lip and she couldn't help the smile. He won that small victory as her mouth acquiesced to his. He was slow but persistent in his exploration. She hummed in happiness, and he pulled away momentarily for air. "Lees?"

"Unless you are uncomfortable, or want to stop, I suggest you shut up," Leah advised.
Jacob smiled his full-toothed grin and kissed Leah right below the ear before working his way downward and toward her shoulder. His hands also slid downwards, past her back and over her ass to rest on the backs of her thighs. She let her own hands wander towards Jacob's waist and then under his shirt. She'd dealt quite politely with him warm and strong and all-encompassing in a bed next to her for months, she was now more than happy to have the chance to explore. Her fingers danced their way up his abdomen and she could feel the muscles twitch ever-so-slightly under her ministrations.

She felt him issue a wet kiss just below her collarbone where her old button up shirt sat in all its unevenly fastened glory. She reached to undo the buttons slowly and hands much bigger than her own followed. Over her shoulders, down her back, her sides, under her breasts, down her belly, to her hips. She wasn't sure if Jacob had a destination in mind; he mostly seemed set on running his hands over every inch of her skin that he could reach.

"You're pretty damn gorgeous," Jacob mumbled into a spot near her shoulder. He caught her off guard for a moment and glanced up to her face.

She hadn't exactly been keeping track of the three or four years in which she had not had any sexual contact. Nothing even approaching a kiss. Those were dark, barren years. Something so fundamentally simple as being intimately close to another person seemed like a cosmic leap to her now. It had been so out of the realm of realistic possibilities in recent history, she might as well have wanted to go to the moon. It was so strange to find a once familiar thing to be so hard to reach. And if Leah was being completely honest with herself, she hadn't really wanted to have sex for quite a while. It didn't matter that she was surrounded by half (and occasionally fully) naked boys all the time. It didn't matter that she was privy to all of their recollections, daydreams, and deranged fantasies.

She smiled and offered a one-shouldered shrug. "I haven't heard that one in a while," she offered by way of explanation.

She spent her days in ratty t-shirts and cut off jeans. There always seemed to be a filmy layer of dirt or sweat on her skin. She'd shrugged off the seething bitch act when it became too exhausting, but having to share a consciousness with so many people she'd known for so long did not do much for her coping mechanisms. Jared and Paul and occasionally Quil had given her a lot of shit for which they apologized for in their own way in time. She'd also made her amends with Embry after all the mouthing off she did about his father. For so long she had not felt attractive at all – physically or mentally.

Jacob stood at his full height and paused to give the girl a kiss directly in the middle of her forehead. "'S totally true. Anyone says otherwise, kick 'em in the shins."

She didn't give the others shit anymore, and they did the same for her. She didn't care much about her traitor-bitch cousin anymore. She didn't give Sam more thought than nostalgia. She didn't blame herself for her father's death or Seth's phasing anymore. But hell if it was hard to move out of the traction of bitter sarcasm when she was stuck in the same surroundings with the same mental echoes for years on end.

"I always knew I liked you," Leah smiled and Jacob reciprocated. She had grown to realize that he intentionally provoked her to smile, and his reaction was vivid. He got so much enjoyment out of simply getting her to grin.

"You seem to be operating under the delusion that I actually know what I'm doing," Jacob replied quickly.
Her desire for any kind of intimate contact had sustained a serious deathblow with small chance of recovery until very recently. Until shared couches, and beds, and plates of food, and hours with a growing Nessie went from new to comforting to natural. When the casual touching that neither of them ever paused to think about started feeling… different. It was rather obvious what the universe had been trying to tell them, however Jacob was terrified that Leah would castrate him and Leah was… well, maybe Jacob wasn't the only oblivious one.

Leah closed her eyes and let Jacob's wandering fingers venture over her skin. Her hands remained still and happy against his torso. She didn't respond; she only concentrated on that feeling and how it made her muscles tense and happy all at the same time. So much of her just wanted to feel like that all the time, instead of filthy or exhausted.

"I hear your Dad coming," she mentioned when the sound of Billy's wheels could be heard progressing closer to the house and down the road. Jacob perked his head up and listened before scowling.

"I've got at least another minute and a half before he truly cockblocks me and makes it up the ramp and into the house."

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**Thursday, January 24, 2008**

Leah didn't give a flying hoot for sitting around in wolf form waiting for the other wolves to phase and took to texting Jacob the details of the cross country scouting mission. Paul insisted this was mundane.

*Someone who is not me can go visit the harbingers of death in Greenland.*

*Leah, you guys have to go talk to them.*

*Fiiiiine.*

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**Saturday, January 26, 2008**

*Will be late to Greenland.* Read the last text from Paul and Leah a day ago. Jacob had told them they had to go check out Greenland. But now he was getting concerned.

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**Monday, January 28, 2008**

"We met some Appalachian waldgeists as we tried to cross the mountain range and make north."

"What the hell is a waldgeist?" Jake asked flabbergasted. When he'd made one phone call all those weeks and months ago to the Navajo rez, he had not expected it to open such a can of worms. He fully anticipated the possibility of the skinwalkers telling him to go to hell, or even maybe joining the enemy side. He did not expect for shapeshifters to start – literally – coming out of the woodwork. Waldgeists, Leah explained, were woodland creatures and keepers of the forests. With twigs and leaves strewn through their hair, they appear as wizened old men.

"They don't harm the pure of spirit," Leah added. "But when two shapeshifting wolves started gallivanting across the mountain range they got concerned. Apparently they're the source of all the bigfoot and chupacabra sightings in this part of the country. They play tricks on people they think will harm the woodlands."
"Oh, for fucks sake..." Jake sighed. "Are you guys all right?"

"Oh, we're fine. They agreed to guard the coast, since the mountain range runs from the Carolinas to Maine. They said they'd let us or the Plains wolves know if anything came off the Atlantic."

"I can't believe you made an alliance with woodland creatures."

"Said the wolfman. Would you like me to go back and tell them to screw? I'd really rather not. I mean we're already across the Canadian border and should be in Greenland tomorrow."

"No, it's cool. I just can't keep track of this shit anymore. Leah's having aneurysms over spreadsheets. Just... see if you can find the valkyries and get your asses home!"

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**Sunday, February 3, 2008**

"All right, all right! Everyone shut the fuck up!" Some variation of this phrase was how Jacob started more pack meetings than not. They were all gathered in he and Leah's (because apparently she was now helping with mortgage payments and the water bill) living room. Everyone except Collin – who was back in Boston and would get all the details secondhand in a much more calm manner at some point tomorrow.

"Leah, can we have some numbers?"

Leah cleared her throat and pulled out a three-page spreadsheet. "Starting from the West Coast and working our way East. The Denali coven, four able-bodied fighters, guarding the passage from Russia to North America. The Cullen coven, six able-bodied fighters, currently roaming Canada to confirm it is empty of anything we haven't already discovered."

"Damian said werewolves used to run in packs numbering in the dozens," Paul contributed, "but most have imploded or killed each other off. We don't think they'll find much."

"La Push pack," Leah continued, "Ten able-bodied fighters—"

"Ten," Quil interrupted. "Why ten? Collin counts as an eastern wolf at this point, right?"

"I'm including Rachel. She said she wanted to be counted," Leah clarified. "Navajo pack, thirty-five able-bodied fighters, actively working on Maria containment, between Baja California and the Rio Grande in Texas. Nagual..." Leah glanced up and looked around. "They're cats... cats aren't a pack. A herd?"

"A pride?" Seth offered.

"The Nagual pride," Leah deemed that good enough, "sixteen able-bodied guardsmen roaming the isthmus between Mexico and South America."

"They are not, by their nature, fighters and they want to start sending up a few of their shifters at a time to learn some basics from us." Brady offered his two-cents, having been the only one able to bridge the moderate language barrier that existed between La Push and Southern Mexico. "It seems mostly like self-preservation now that they know shit might hit the fan, but we can definitely try to barter fighting skills for loyalty. I think they'd go with it."

"Plains pack, three able-bodied fighters guarding everything between the Rockies and the Mississippi, the Dakotas and Texas, plus Boston. We really should send them a fruit basket or something."
"I'll get right on it," Jacob noted humorlessly.

"The Appalachian waldgeists," Leah glanced dubiously at Anna and Paul. "Unclear on numbers, but at least a dozen able-bodied guardsmen. The flock of Valkyrie ravens in Greenland have at least a flock of thirty females."

"No dudes?" Brady noted.

"No dudes," Leah shook her head. "However there also does not appear to be any female waldgeists. Norse mythology says that valkyries are a host of female spirits charged with choosing who will die in battle. They are associated with horses, swans, and ravens."

"I'm assuming there are some folk of Norwegian descent in Greenland."

"Just a few."

"So what's the total, Lees?"

One hundred fifteen able-bodied guardsmen – shifters, werewolves, and a human. Oh, plus Jezzie and Collin. One hundred seventeen. That doesn't count any of the werewolves the Plains Pack might've found."

For once, no one said anything. Eight wolves sat around in a small living room in silence for several seconds.

"We have the possibility of an alliance numbering over a hundred supernatural creatures." Sam was the one to break the silence. Leah nodded in confirmation, setting down her spreadsheets and her pencil.

"They all know about the Volturi?" Quil asked.

"They know something is going on in their formerly peaceful territories," Paul specified.

"According to both the Denali and Cullen coven," Jacob added, "the Volturi don't exactly have regular patrols in the Western hemisphere. They consider the whole of North America to be on the fringe of civilization. The South might as well be a whole other planet. So almost everyone we've encountered has no experience with them."

"And would take some righteous offense to having a bunch of crotchety old vampires claim their land?" Embry quirked an eyebrow. "The foreign relations arm of this Pack has some questions."

"Go ahead, Mr. Ambassador," Jacob waved a hand.

"This is dragging two vampire covens, one werewolf pack, four sets of shapeshifters – including cats, dogs, and birds – and one clan of woodsmen that have never met each other from over thousands of miles of territory. There's at least four-ish languages between all of us. We are united by the fact that we are perfectly happy alone. How the hell are we supposed to work this without it dissolving into a shitstorm of infighting?"

"Good point," Jacob replied, while offering nothing helpful.

"I say we call a meet and greet," Leah suggested.

"You wanna pile all these guys together to have coffee?" Paul asked dubiously.

"Not all of them. The leaders. If we're gonna go political with this, might as well keep at it. Each of
these groups has to have a leader. Someone who speaks for them or calls the shots. We get together, no beating around the bush. Everyone gets to have their say about what they are and are not willing to do in any given scenario.

Sunday, February 17, 2008

Collin would remember – for his entire life – the one and only time that Jezzie Sullivan truly scared the shit out of him. He woke up on time (for fucking once) the day of a major exam. He’d been up late that night studying. Jezzie had actually finished her work before him and she helped him study at the kitchen table.

She had looked visibly worn. Collin felt that if he – of all people – was aware enough to notice then it must’ve been pretty bad. She blamed it on tiredness. When he suggested she just go to sleep and he could really study for his European history exam by himself, she just laughed. She insisted that there was no time in the near future that she would be getting decent amounts of sleep, so why should she start now. It was about 2AM when they called it quits. Collin went to bed, and Jezzie agreed to follow after she emptied the dishwasher.

But Collin woke up at 6AM to find Jezzie sitting in the same clothes, in the same spot, in the same position holding onto what was now an empty cup of tea.

"Jezzie?" he received no response. "Jezzie have you gone to bed at all?" She still hadn't moved and he stepped in front of her and waved a hand in front of her immobile face. Was this a medical issue? Jezzie had told Collin before they moved out to Boston that she was sick – which he kind of already knew from what floated around the Pack mind – but that it wasn't anything he should worry about, just something she felt he should know before agreeing to move in with her. Maybe it was mental. She hadn't really reacted at all to the news that Azrael was following her, followed by a nameless vampire, and then he'd heard from Anna, who heard from Leah, who heard from Paul about the news Alice delivered the poor girl during Christmas break.

"Jezzie?"

Collin reached out carefully to Jezzie's shoulders and shook her lightly. Her eyes snapped to life and tears came pouring down immediately. Collin pulled his hands back like he'd been burnt. She had previously been totally still, and now it was like her whole body had been overtaken. Her breathing wasn't normal – that much Collin could've figured out from a mile away. It was erratic and she was breathing too quickly with breaths that were either too deep or too shallow. Her eyes were wide and her hands were clenched around something Collin couldn't see. When Collin reached up to her hands, he found she had the mother of all death grips – like rigor mortis – her joints were frozen and he couldn't move them without fear of breaking them.

He was fucking terrified.

"Holy shit," he gasped. "What do I do? What do I do?" he spoke mostly to himself. "I'm fourteen; I should know how to handle emergencies, what the fuck do I do?" But he was clueless. He had no idea what was happening to her. If she was bleeding from the head, he'd know to call 911. If she was puking, he knew where the Pepto Bismol was, but he had no idea what the hell she was doing and had no idea how to handle it.

From his spot kneeling in front Jezzie he lunged across the table and snatched her phone up. He pressed her #1 speed dial, not really having any idea as to who it would be but figured it was someone that could help him out.
The voice that interrupted the infinite ringing was familiar but unexpected. "Jezzie?" He sounded surprised and tired. "It's 3AM on this coast. What's going on?"

"Jake!" Collin shouted. "Oh, thank god. Jake, she's freaking out and I don't know what to do!"

"Collin, what is going on? Are you two all right?"

"I don't know what to do!"

"Collin," the alpha voice ricocheted through the phone line and across the country. Far less potent than being heard in person or at a close range, it still reverberated down Collin's spine, calming his frayed nerves and stilling his anxiety. "I need you to explain what is going on and if it is an emergency."

"Jezzie is freaking out," Collin said in slightly calmer tone. "I woke up this morning and she was in the same spot as she was last night. She wouldn't move, wouldn't say anything. She was like a friggin' statue. And then she just started crying. Like all over the place. And she's not breathing right and her grip could probably punch through a steel wall."

"Okay…" Jake sighed, clearly relieved that neither of them was in the process of being killed. "One sec," he spoke before hearing a rustling and background talking. "Leah… Leah! Wake up. Has Embry gone back to Seattle yet? I know it's three in the morning – is Emb still in La Push? Go get him, Jezzie's freaking the fuck out."

Embry might've been in the next room for all Collin knew because it wasn't thirty seconds after that when more rustling was followed by a voice in the receiver.

"Where is she?" Embry was clearly out of breath.

"She is in Boston, Massachusetts. Sitting directly across from me. Where the fuck do you think she is?"

"Cut the shit, kid," Embry told him quickly. "Is she saying or listening to anything."

Collin replied in the negative, which ruled out Embry being able to talk to Jezzie. Collin recounted her symptoms again, and Embry seemed to have a revelation. "Oh… Okay. Collin, it sounds like she's having a panic attack. It's probably not an emergency. What the heck have you guys been doing?"

Collin glanced back up at Jezzie, who had now worked herself into a ball. Her knees were pulled up on the chair and all he could see was the top of her head. Her hands were still claw-like and he could still here her abnormal breathing, but it sounded like she was trying regulate it.

"Nothing! Nothing weird or freakish has happened to us since we got back. It's actually been kinda normal and quiet."

"She's probably finally reached her breaking point," Embry sighed. "Is there anyone else around, Collin? Where's that neighbor of yours? She promised to keep an eye on you guys."

"Monique?" Collin replied. "Uh… She might've gone to work? Lemme check." Collin half tripped out the door, just in time to see Monique locking her apartment door.

She paused, glanced over the tops of her sunglasses and clucked her tongue. "Sugar pie, you look 'bout ready to drop. What's wrong?"
"Um…" Collin replied intelligently before pointing behind him into the apartment. Monique took a few steps (in shoes that Collin was quite sure were defying some kind of law of physics) and looked inside to get a perfect view of a balled up Jezzie in the throes of a breakdown.

"Mhm," Monique nodded like the scene didn't surprise her. "May I?" she gestured inside and Collin only nodded. Monique set her bag on the table and crouched in front of Jezzie.

It was then that Collin realized the phone in his hand was still yelling at him. "Collin? Collin?"

"Oh!" he realized before putting it back to his ear. "Sorry, Emb. I, uh, I think Monique has this handled."

"Okay," Embry sighed. "Are you all right."

"Midly terrified."

"I can live with that. I want a call from you two later on to make sure everything's all right. Deal?"

"Deal."

Collin hung up and found that Monique had – in about a minute – had at least got Jezzie to uncurl from fetal ball position. She looked up at him in an understanding way. "Why don't you go get ready for school, sugar pie, while I handle this."

He just nodded and went with it.

"I'm having some trouble with my eyes, Ashley… Mhm… Yes, I just can't see coming to work today."

Jezzie was on the couch and had ceased her hysterics, while Monique called in sick at work and put on a pot of coffee. Both insisted Collin go to class as he stood ready to leave at the door, but felt like betrayer for even thinking of leaving. When Jezzie mentioned his test Monique spun on her dagger heel.

"What?" she replied with wide eyes. "An exam? Uh-uh, ain't no way you missing out on your education for nothing. Jezzie and I are gonna have ourselves a girls day. Unless you want to join in?"

"Nope! Consider me gone!" Collin ran down the stairs, hoping he would only end up missing first period, and that he could keep his Plantagenet Kings in order.

"So… any particular reason you picked this lovely late winter day to terrify your roommate, honey bee?"

Jezzie smiled at Monique's lingering question and how she had carefully avoided alluding to the cause of Collin's terror – Jezzie's breakdown. The two were sat in a nail salon in raised leather chairs with their feet in warm, jet pulsed water. Jezzie had never had a proper pedicure before and she thought it was probably one of the best things ever.

"Anything in particular, or just the load wearing you down?"

Jezzie sighed and relaxed back into the chair. "Admittedly, I'm not really good at dealing with lots of stress. Steady and normal streams, okay. Stress overload? Not so much. And I have this really nasty habit of never talking about it."
"Would you like to talk about it?" Monique asked without pushing.

Jezzie considered. She would love to talk about it. She wanted to talk about it to anyone that wasn't already dealing with it. She wanted to talk to a normal human would listen, and tell her she was crazy and wouldn't panic with her. But she couldn't. She couldn't tell anyone that didn't already know that she was being stalked by at least two bloodthirsty supernatural's. She couldn't tell anyone about how her friends were crawling all over the continent in search for more supernatural creatures. She couldn't tell anyone that she was terrified of being so far from home with someone else that she needed to protect with no idea how to do that, exactly. She couldn't tell anyone any of this. She didn't want to tell anyone else that she was stricken – at least once a week – with the fear that she'd be rendered completely immobile by an MS flare causing all her other worries to shoot even further through the roof. She had to chalk it all up to school. School was admittedly stressful, but it certainly was not the cause of her morning anxiety overload.

"There's some stuff I can't talk about," Jezzie admitted.

"That's all right," Monique nodded. "Something we don't want to talk about, and somethings we really can't talk about. I understand that. Believe me, I understand. But just know this, honey bee: if you keep it all inside, and you don't talk to anyone about anything it's going to eat you alive. Maybe you can't talk about everything with one person. But you can probably find one person that you can talk to about some things."

"Have you ever just had those days where you've spent so much time thinking about everything that could possibly go wrong and it just paralyzes you in fear and you can't even fathom leaving the apartment?"

"About once a month," Monique replied. Jezzie looked up surprised. Monique had struck her as such a take-the-bull-by-the-horns person. "Honey bee, I'm a man living as a woman. In my heart and in my mind I've always been a girl. Somewhere along the line the order just got mixed up before I got this planet. But I'm certainly not the norm. Don't you think maybe there are some days when I've heard too much, or thought too much about what I've heard and I sit in my bed with the tequila or the pint of rocky road – or both – and just pray for it all to go away?"

"Good point," Jezzie nodded.

"Some days it all seems like too much, because some days it is too much. And it's okay to accept that. It's okay to be overwhelmed. But you've got to tell someone about it. Inevitably, before I'm too far through the tequila or the ice cream, I call my sister in Austin. And she just has this way about her. I don't always tell her exactly what's wrong, because I know sometimes she just won't understand, But she has this way of listening to whatever hysterics I'm going through and reminding me to breathe. On breath at a time, one step, one minute, one day at a time is all it takes. You don't have to take on the world in one day. Just be smart, talk to someone, and take life in small bites so it doesn't choke you."

"My first question is pure curiosity," she heard Embry ask as she sat on the couch and stared down at her perfectly shiny purple toes. "But why is Jake your first speed dial program. Not that I'm offended or anything, I just kinda figured it mighta been your dad."

It was an innocent enough question, with a rather macabre answer. "I figured, if I were to get killed and someone found my phone on me and went through the speed dial, I'd want them to call Jake and Leah first. They're in charge. They'd be able to break it to you, spin a good lie for my father, and get to Collin. I'd hate for the call to end up going to my Dad or you or Collin or even Liz or somebody."
"Super," Embry replied without enthusiasm. "I guess it's pointless to insist that you not think too far into that possibility then. So… are okay?"

"I'm better," she nodded. "Still a little shaky, but Monique says that's to be expected. I scared Collin half to death and he's hovering like a news chopper. I don't blame him. It's kind of cute, actually."

"What's he doing?"

"Right now? He's making dinner. I will admit the boy makes a mean pot of chili."

"Glad to hear he's recovered. He says he thinks he did well on his test. Which is also nice. I told you that rhyme I remembered work. I remembered after three years, right? So, are you going to be all right, Jez? You really worried me this morning. I hate having you so far away, and I can't be there to help you."

"I'm sorry about worrying you," she said. "It won't happen again. I promise I'm going to start trying work out my stress. You might be getting more phone calls, though, because you're one of the few I can talk it out with."

"Call me whenever the hell you want, Jez."

"I think it all just exploded today, because I was worrying but I didn't want to worry anyone else by telling them about it. That clearly backfired because it all just built up to the boiling point. I don't even know how it happened. I stayed up all night… I didn't even realize it. I just kept thinking about it all and how so many things could go wrong. The odds… I was surprised nothing bad had already happened. At some point I resolved not to leave the apartment – Monique had to talk me into it – and then before I knew it, Collin was standing in front of me…"

Embry sat and listened for a long time. He had to plug his phone into the wall and sit on the ground at the end of the second hour as Jezzie's thought, mind, and heart just poured through the receiver. He could tell Jezzie was exhausted because her sentences would start to peter out and some of her words would slur, but he could also tell that she was beginning to relax the more she spoke because the pitch of her voice lowered.

He sat and, for the first time in months, she really talked to him.

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**Tuesday, February 26, 2008**

"Jake…" Leah called as she glanced out the window. Jake was immediately concerned because Leah's voice only went that high when she was worried or scared. Leah was not worried or scared very often.

"What is it?" he called walking from the other side of the house. "There's a flock of death buzzards in yard."

Jacob joined her at the window. Slowly and purposefully each of the dozen or so birds began to grow and morph. Their shape began to alter and soon they returned to their natural state.

"Jake," Leah spoke again, "there's flock of naked women in the yard."

"We are not death buzzards!" an irate blond insisted as she stood – now fully clothed – at the bottom of the steps. Her pitch accent was crisp and staccato compared to what Jacob was used to hearing. "Are you Jacob Black?"
"I am. And are you Kari?"

"I am," she nodded. "It is good to finally meet you."

"Same. You'll have to forgive Leah. Birds kinda freak her out."

Over the course of the rest of the day, more of the shapeshifters began to arrive on the Black's property. The two jaguars that arrived from Mexico nearly scared Seth to death when they cut through his backyard. And the skinwalkers refused to come inside the reservation lines until they were met by someone. Someone without a 'shifty air' as they had called Quil. Leah was far more in her element escorting the cynical and untrusting Navajo skinwalkers across the rez than she was in keeping up with the chatter of the three Scandinavian blondes that were currently in occupying the living room.

Jacob, Paul, Embry and Sam were all piled in the kitchen when Leah arrived. Nine of the Greenland valkyries were happily sitting outside talking with one of the Mexican jaguars. Three of the skinwalkers went inside and the rest chose to stay phased and Leah insisted they wait in the backyard because the people of La Push weren't quite used to the sight of shapeshifters yet. Elizabeth from the Plains Pack was the only other familiar face.

The leader of the skinwalkers found a place in the mobbed living room and Leah made for the kitchen. Jacob looked towards her and Embry. "All right. Leah, this was your idea. Embry, you're the mediator. You two run this show."

Neither Leah or Embry had expected a 'meet and greet' to take more than ten hours. But it did. Settling on names and languages took long enough. They had to settle on English, given that it was the only language that was mostly mutually intelligible among all the gathered. From Greenland, Kari was the head of her flock and had brought both Liv and Danica inside with her. Art and Wyatt were the only skinwalkers to come inside, and apparently shared the leadership in the Southwest. Anselm was a very slow moving old man and the only waldgeist to arrive. Andres was the only jaguar inside, leaving his partner in the yard. Elizabeth offered a casual hello and told everyone that she represented all the North American werewolves. Apparently there were at least a dozen of them including her own family.

All the gathered were wary of each other, but once each party had finished relaying their story of recent territory breaches, the pattern began to emerge and they became more preoccupied with what appeared to be happening all across the Americas than with not trusting each other.

"We have not heard from anyone," Andres spoke after Wyatt and Art and recounted their latest efforts to repel Maria away from their territory. "And we have heard stories of the few vampires south of us. I suppose that would mean that this Maria is moving intentionally northward. Distrito Federal – ah, what do you call it… Mexico City, yes. It is alive with people. If she were simply looking for more victims, she would be better off moving south, no?"

"Well, then it would certainly seem that Maria's movements are tactical, and not related to territory," Art concluded. "If all she wanted was blood she could have the better part of Mexico and none of us would fight her for it."

"We have not had anyone trying to take our territory," Kari piped up from her spot on the couch. "But we have had others crossing through our territory. We spy them from the air, but they are so fast. They never do any harm, it seems they are passing through. They are human in shape and form, but they are too quick to be mortal."

"That matches up with what Rosalie mentioned about spies coming in through across from Canada,"
Leah noted morosely. "Okay, so here's the deal. I'm not going to sugar coat any of this shit for you. We, here in La Push, have good reason to believe that these territories breaches are almost all vampires. Anselm can attest to having actually confirmed at least one vampire on the east coast along with a rogue werewolf. We also believe they're all related. These are not coincidences. About this time last year, we had an encounter with a powerful coven of vampires. We decimated most of their leadership and thought that was the last of them. They're from Europe and we figured the power structure would realign on its own."

"It would seem," Embry continued, "that they have found a way to hold part of their ranks together. Together enough, anyways, to terrorize in small bouts. If they can have this kind of affect on us when we're separated, it would stand to reason that we would benefit from at least keeping in contact. We all would be on the losing end of a sneak attack. But if we agree to stay in touch, and stand by each other – swap skills and information – we can polish off these psychos."

"Currently, we see our only threat is from the Mexican coven," Wyatt replied. "We have enough on our plate dealing with her. What is it us – besides another enemy – if we join you? This will only create more problems for us."

"Not if the Volturi are the ones controlling Maria. In that case you already have more enemies than you think you do. The Volturi has had a tight leash on Maria since the late 1800's; only they could let her loose again."

"Maybe she is capitalizing on this power vacuum you claim has befallen this Volturi," Andres noted. "If that's a risk you're willing to take," Embry shrugged. "But you could dig a little deeper and find you have way more on your hands than you bargained for – which would royally suck. If you're right, than no harm no foul. Either way, if you agree to work with, we agree to work with you. It's a two way street. If Maria is related to Volterra problem, she'll be wiped out in the process. In the unlikely case that she isn't, we'll help you push in her back into her original territory."

"Truly?" Art glanced dubiously at Embry and Leah and then to Jacob behind them.

"It's only fair," Jacob insisted like it was obvious. None of the La Push wolves were particularly well-versed in negotiation or international relations – especially give that they continued to resolve most of their infighting through yelling or physical fights – but fairness, that old childhood standby, still held fast in the young group of shapeshifters. It was a novel concept in groups as old as the skinwalkers who were too accustomed to double dealing from outsiders.

"We will agree to watch over the Northern borders of the Eastern Coast," Kari decided. "We will help as we can, in exchange for your doing the same for us."

"That's not ungenerous of you," Leah nodded with a small smile of appreciation. "Thank you."

"We are wary," Andres confessed. "We are not born for fighting. It is not something we are skilled at. It is not something we have needed to practice."

"We're willing to help and train you," Embry replied. "You're always welcome up here in Washington. We can train you in all the skill ranges we have. I think given that we are not much larger, and we all run on four paws many of our skills will be easily transferable to your pride. We know this enemy well, at this point. We can tell you much about them."

"If you'd like, you can withhold your decision until after some training," Leah added. "You guys don't seem like the type to turn our skills against us. I think we can trust you with that much."
"We are willing to help you, if you are willing to show us how," Andres offered.

"The waldgeist will continue to watch over the Eastern woodlands," Anselm broke the silence with a gravelly tone. "But we are not fighters. I came to convey our wishes for peace. We do not wish to make any enemies today, but we simply do not exist to fight. We are guardians, and beacons of peace. Peace we wish to preserve."

"We really want peace too. That's what we're striving for. Would you be willing to keep us informed about any strange happenings that you come across along the coast. Anything that you think would be relevant to our troubles?"

"I believe we could accommodate this."

"We're in," Elizabeth said. "I think you knew that much though. The werewolves have everything to lose from the Volturi discovering those of us that remain. It's nice to have allies again."

After that, Jacob and Sam scrounged through the house for a map. They found one ancient map of the world – which still had a big 'Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' written across the northern portion of Europe and Asia. They laid it on the coffee table and Leah and Embry pointed out all known vampire covens, and their degree of power. They briefly went over the feud that existed between the Volturi and the Romanians and how it appeared from stories that the Egyptian coven was now involved. They labeled all known points of entry in North America – all the places from where they knew there had been a stranger coming through. Leah used Nessie's pack of colored pencils and they sketched out territory divisions. Lands claimed, lands patrolled, and so on. They hashed out a plan to keep lands, borders, and points of entry secure. They agreed that all were in a defensive holding pattern.

The skinwalkers agreed to nothing, but stayed and listened. At the least they didn't seem to end up as belligerents.

Later that night Leah, Embry, Jacob, and Sam watched the last of the shapeshifters trickle out of the house and into the backyard – where they could phase without being seen. In groups humans faded into jaguars, birds, coyotes, and wolves, and disappeared like ghosts into the dark trees.

"Defensive holding pattern," Sam recounted as they watched the last of the skinwalkers and a transformed Elizabeth, stalk like wraiths into the night as a steady drizzle picked up. It wouldn't take any of them long to pass out of La Push's territory, past the treaty line, past the patrol of Quil, Seth, and Anna. "Know what the sounds like?"

"Sounds like war," Leah answered.
Collin got the mother of all surprises the morning of his first day of April Vacation.

He had woken up at the ass crack of dawn because his body was so used to early wake up times. He knew he'd need until at least Monday to be able to sleep in and it was only Saturday. Jezzie was in the shower getting ready for one of her last weeks of class. She had something to do at the school, and then she had study group until lunch. At least that's what her schedule taped to the fridge said. Collin was glad she had the idea for both of them to put their weekly schedules out in the open, so one would always know where the other was. He was sifting angrily through the cereal, wishing his internal clock wasn't quite so regimented when there was a knock at the door.

He took the box of Chex Mix to the door and swung it open. In retrospect, he knew he had his guard down. It was early and he'd just woken up. Apart from Jezzie's minor breakdown nothing eventful had happened in their neck of the woods since they'd come back from Winter Break. School was going well for both of them, and they got regular updates via Collin's occasional phasing about the slowly forming shape-shifter alliance.

But Collin's ears weren't on high alert. Neither was his nose. Or apparently his brain, because when he opened the door to find Jasper Hale on the other side, his dormant ears and eyes and nose got sensory overload. And he phased. In the middle of the kitchen.

Jasper responded with a curse, but was at least present-minded enough not to tear apart the surprised pup. Jezzie heard the racket of all several hundred pounds of a phased wolf hitting the floor and came running out of the bathroom in a towel.

"What the hell is…" she froze and stared. She had gone into the bathroom and Collin had been grumbling about internal clocks and rummaging through the cabinets. She came out of the bathroom and there was a wolf and vampire in her apartment. "Jasper? Collin? What the hell is going on?! Jasper why are you here? Collin why are phased? Ahhhhh!" She yelled in frustration. She took a deep breath but continued. "I don't care if the world is ending, it can wait until I put some damn clothes on. When I come back, I want to see two civilized humans!"

They were moderately civilized when Jezzie came back. Collin was lying on the floor like he'd just come off some hallucinogenic drug. And Jasper was seated at the table. Renesmee was sat in his lap, and Zachary and Abigail of the Plains Pack were sharing a seat next to him. "Jezzie!" Nessie squealed in delight. She made a running jump into the older girl's arms. Jezzie hadn't seen Nessie when she first came out of the bathroom, but later learned that Jasper had the kids in the car anticipating a less than positive reaction to his arrival. Boy's foresight was spot on. She waved in a friendly way to Zach and Abi, and their shy hands replied.

"Collin, are you all right?" Jezzie asked as she shifted the young girl's weight to a hip and glanced down at the boy lying on the floor.

"I haven't phased uncontrollably like that in almost two years. I forgot what a trip it was. My head is killing me."

Jezzie glanced over to Jasper who looked gravely serious – moreso than his usual souciance – and not about Collin's headache. Jezzie placed Nessie on her feet. "Nessie, I'll let you look through my Neuroscience textbook if you go get the aspirin from the medicine cabinet."
"Yay!" the small girl hopped and then sped off towards the bathroom, while Jezzie went to get a glass of water for her wilting pup.

Nessie returned just as Jezzie sat down next to Collin. "Thanks, dear. The book should be on the windowsill by my bed. Why don't you take Zach and Abi and go get comfy and read up, huh? If they're not interested in neural circuits you can pop a movie into the computer."

"Okay!" And with that the normally intuitive Nessie ran off dragging Zach and Abi with her, too excited about a new book to read to realize she'd gotten the brush off.

"How many of these things do you usually take?" Jezzie asked as she popped the top off the aspirin.

"Seven."

"Seven?" she squeaked. "Collin, your liver won't last you until your twenties at that rate. And believe me your twenties are going to be in need of a liver."

"Trust me, I've tried smaller doses. My metabolism burns off smaller concentrations too quickly."

She gave him the pills with a shake of her head and turned to the vampire at her kitchen table. "Well, Jasper, seeing as it looks like you've come halfway across the continent, and pit-stopped in La Push and Minneapolis," she nodded her head back in the direction the three little ones had run, "I'd say this is important?"

"A bit," he replied with a sarcastic half-smirk. "We're currently in the process of being invaded."

"Say what?" Collin replied from the floor.

"We're not sure how," Jasper began, "but it appears a contingent of the nomadic European vampires, headed by some of the Volturi Guard, and accompanied by Azrael, have managed to penetrate the American heartland. We think they may have come in through the Hudson Bay area. According to the Plains wolves, there's about a half dozen other werewolves in Canada. However, it's difficult for them to adequately protect a landmass so large. We think the invasion force took advantage of that. At any rate, they surprised us. There's enough of them and they split in half - half moving towards Minneapolis where they know the Plains wolves reside and half towards the Northwest. We suspect they plan to take on La Push before moving to Alaska."

Jezzie just stared and Jasper took her silence as a cue to continue. "We haven't heard anything from the Amazonian vampires and our hopes are that they remain uninvolved. However, Maria has stopped pestering the Navajo Reservation and has begun a widespread movement directly northward of Monterrey and back into the old Texas territories. So we've got that to contend with."

"We're… this… but…" Jezzie gaped and tried to speak while she gesticulated wildly. She eventually stopped herself, took a deep breath and continued. "This is it? They're here."

Jasper nodded. "I'm the fastest in the family, and we all agreed it'd be best to get the young 'uns out of direct line of attack. For some reason, Azrael's focus on you has completely dropped. He's with the group heading for the Plains Pack back in Minneapolis."

"But… Jasper, I can't keep them safe. Not against a war party of vampires!"

"They have forgotten all about you, Jezzie. We think their plan was to eliminate you quickly to cause panic but gave up when it became too difficult – you're clearly not as unskilled as you claim. If they're so hyper-focused on their targets: Minneapolis, La Push, and Denali – they won't notice you running off with three little ones."
"What about Claire – I don't see her around. And 'running'?” Jezzie repeated. "Pardon me?"

"Claire is safe in Neah Bay because no one knows of her tie to La Push. Nessie, Abigail, and Zachary are of a whole other species. They are hard to miss. And we can't reasonably expect either you or Collin to stay here,” Jasper insisted. "Jacob wants Collin out of Boston and to head towards Minneapolis with myself. Your beta is already out there. The old Alpha and another have headed north towards Denali – we're unsure of where the west-marching force is headed first and the defensive numbers needed evening out."

"What about all the shape-shifters we've been hearing about?” Jezzie asked warily. From the information she got from Collin after phasings it seemed the alliance between any of them was tentative. In all honesty, most of shape-shifters could've closed their eyes and waited for the onslaught to pass. They were not affected greatly by the Volturi. They risked much by getting involved. La Push, the American Covens, and the werewolves would have to rely on the shape-shifters willfully joining in the fray.

"The call has been put out. We shall see who heeds it. In the meantime, we can't expect you to stay here with the three of them. Sitting targets are worse than moving targets."

"Moving targets?” Jezzie looked at him. "Jasper, how do you expect us to get anywhere? Hitchhike? My Jeep's back in Washington.” Jasper nodded out the window that looked over the street and Jezzie stood and glanced outside. "What is that?"

"Mercedes S-Guard. Mostly produced for world leaders. Can withstand military grade small arms fire, hand grenade shrapnel, and some explosives. Self-sealing gas tank and highly sophisticated alarm system. Compressed air tanks prevent any gases from getting inside. It'll even run on four flat tires. My brother bought it for Bella before their wedding."

Jezzie gaped at him. "There's an armored tank in the street," she muttered. "You want me to go on the run with three children, in a diplomatic level Mercedes from your dead brother and sister-in-law, that probably weighs more than the box truck parked in front of it, and costs more than my entire medical degree?"

"Yes," Jasper nodded with a solemn grin.

"I suppose the Pathology review I have for my upcoming final doesn't mean much in light of supernatural war?"

"Not really, no. Sorry about that. We can definitely assist you with anything school related. At least as far as encouraging administration to pardon your upcoming absences."

"We can get to forging my excuses later," Jezzie agreed.

"I know it's a bit short notice, but I'd hopefully like to see you all out of the apartment within the hour."

"Where do you want us to go?” Jezzie asked as she shut the trunk. She had packed a few days worth of supplies, clothes, meds, food, and anything with an entertainment value into the trunk of the Batmobile, as Collin coined it. Abi, Zachary, and Nessie were still upstairs fully absorbed in watching Finding Nemo on her laptop.

"Anywhere that's not here," Jasper replied.

"What about that Aunt of yours in Maine, Jezzie," Collin spoke from the front steps. She had told
him when they moved that she hadn't totally lied to his parents, that she did – in fact – have one Aunt that maintained a pretty regular habitation in the New England area. "Didn't you say she had a house up on the coast or something?"

"That sounds reasonable," Jasper agreed. "This shouldn't take long. Supernatural warfare is remarkably quick. But it would be better to be safe and out of sight than to risk any of your lives."

"All right," Jezzie nodded. "To Maine then. There won't be anybody at the house. But I should still have the spare key."

"Excellent," Jasper nodded. "Also, would you take a look under the passenger side seat, please."

Warily, Jezzie opened the passenger side door and reached under the seat. She grabbed a hold of something cold and metallic and as it emerged from under the seat she realized what it was. She yelped and dropped it. "What is that doing in this car!? Is that really necessary!?"

"Absolutely," Jasper insisted. "The car is defensive. It is unrealistic to expect you to leave without anything offensive. It's an automatic, and the silencer is in the case. I, myself, don't much care for them given the tendency to jam, however, you'll need the speed. Do you know how–"

"I know how to use a gun, Jasper," Jezzie replied in exasperation sliding the thing back under the seat after making sure it at least had a trigger lock in place. She was going to drive to Maine, in one of the most expensive cars she'd ever seen, with three children, and an automatic weapon. Somehow it seemed like some part of this plan had to go wrong.

"Are you sure?" Jasper checked, noting Jezzie's shaken demeanor.

"Jasper, I spent my formative teenage years in Detroit. I've seen many a stolen rendition of the same gun. I know how to work it. I can fix it if it jams. I promise. I've packed enough for three days, does that sound reasonable?"

"Yes," Jasper nodded. "Keep your phone on and charged. With any luck, you will not be seeing any of us until this is all over."

"You're taking Collin with you?"

"I am."

"You take care of him, Jasper Hale. Or so help me, I'll come after you."

"Yes, ma'am."

The ride to Maine was mostly uneventful, thank god. Jezzie found the car to be a bit unwieldy in the city, but it was a rather beautiful highway cruise. In the back Zach, Abi, and Nessie entertained themselves with crayons, movies, and snacks before falling asleep. Jezzie glanced at them in the rearview mirror and thought they were the cutest sight ever. Zachary sat in the middle, his sister and Nessie were on either side all piled together. The two werewolf pups looked to be about twelve, and they seemed to enjoy playing with Nessie - almost like a younger sister. Jezzie thought the interaction was probably good for all three of them.

About an hour from the town where Jezzie knew her Aunt had a house, she desperately needed to pee. However, her instincts told her that leaving the car as few times as possible was probably for the best. In the meantime, she tried to acclimate herself to all the car's buttons, knobs, and technological cues. She felt like she was driving the space shuttle.
Sunday, April 20, 2008

"Jake we can't just leave Paul out there alone," Sam insisted.

"He's not alone," Jacob replied in consternation. "He's going to help out the Plains wolves. He's got Damian, Lydia, and Elizabeth. Collin and Jasper are on their way. Plus half the valkyries are flying in. Kari ripshit that anyone made it past their watch."

"And what about those six other werewolves?" Sam insisted. "We haven't met or heard from any of them. How do we know we can trust them?"

"We don't have another option," Embry replied. "The Volturi have made it one of their historical goals to slaughter all werewolves. They might not side with us, but I think we can at least count on them not acting against us. Damian assures us they are keeping the Northern borders."

"We can't just leave you guys here," Quil insisted. "La Push is way closer to the advancing line than Alaska is. If Sam and I go, that's not enough to protect the entire reservation. Those aren't good numbers."

"No they aren't," Leah agreed; she'd run with Paul to Minneapolis, and then headed back home across the newly traced territory soon after. The Plains wolves were skilled fighters; she wasn't worried about her Packmate. She was more concerned about the yelling match erupting in the living room. "But we can't leave the Cullens alone to watch everything between here and Alaska. There's only five of them with Jasper in the Midwest."

"Why do we have to pick up their slack!?" Sam yelled.

"Because we're their allies!" Jacob yelled back. "If it wasn't for them we would've lost more than Jared last winter. We may not like to, but we help each other out. And they're a hell of a lot better as neighbors than the Volturi will ever be!"

Leah stepped in between to the two men with a hand on each of their shoulders, trying to calm what she knew would inevitably spiral into a fight. There was too much dominance – old and new – buzzing around the room. "If we insulate ourselves and refuse to help anyone else, we lose our purpose. We phase to protect. Not just the reservation. Not just the Quileute. Anyone we can. Why do you think the mandate against the Cullens biting humans extends past Forks and the Treaty Line? If we refuse to unite a common evil, then we risk becoming like the skin-walkers. Dangerous, unreliable. And if we don't help others, no one else will help us. We need to band together. We need to set the example."

"We don't know if the skin-walkers are going to show up," Jacob spoke, clearly trying to contain his anger. "It'd be great if they did, but hell knows I'm not counting on it. We've got at least another twenty-four hours before the Nagual pride can get here, but it'll only take twelve for the Volturi to be here or in Alaska. All we can do until we get reinforcements is form a defensive line."

"We need to protect the land we have," Leah iterated calmly. "The least we can do is make sure they come no closer."

"I won't order either of you to go, because your heart and your head won't be in it and you're more liable to get killed," Jacob admitted. "I won't have that. But I also really don't want to have to send Anna and Seth in your stead."

"Fine," Sam acceded, with a lessened air of bitterness. "But if it looks for even a second like they're
headed for La Push, we're dragging the line south to compensate."

"And we'll do the exact same if it looks like they're headed for Alaska," Jacob agreed. "We only have to get through one more day. Then we'll have ten more bodies on the ground. Those jaguars are gonna help a lot."

Jezzie had never been more psychotically thorough in her entire life. And that was saying a lot. When she (finally) found her Aunt's house on the outskirts of town – she hadn't been there since she was a kid, and was operating on memory of the town alone – she opened the garage door, pulled in, closed the door, ran for the alarm before it timed out and called the local police station, and then immediately rearmed it. She opened the door into the kitchen and carefully carried Nessie, Zach, and Abi into the living room where she let each of them finish up their nap on the couch.

She ran around the house in the meantime making sure all the windows were locked and all the shades drawn. Truthfully, she knew this would do little good if they were found, but it made her feel better. Once her survey of the house was done, she went downstairs and was relieved to find that the pantry was still well-stocked with dry goods. She dumped some into the trunk just in case they had to leave in a hurry. She hoped they didn't. She hoped they could last the few days here in their shelter.

She took a moment to look at the handgun that Jasper had left under the seat. It was heavy in her hands. She knew she could handle it. Her father taught her to shoot skeet when she was younger. She'd been to the firing range with him more than once. And they'd gone over handgun safety when she'd started college. She'd been telling the truth when she'd told Jasper she'd seen them in her high school years. They were almost all stolen at some point, even if the teens she'd seen handling them had paid money for them.

She weighed the device in her hand and rolled it over. It was in much better condition than any she'd seen her peers toting. She made sure she could work the trigger lock and secured it back in place afterwards. She ejected the magazine and peeked. Silver bullets. Jasper had planned for the worst. Jezzie felt her stomach lurch around uncomfortably at the thought of actually having to use it against someone and not just a paper cut-out or sporting clays. She fished around under the seat and thankfully found a lockbox with a few more magazine cartridges that she could stash the firearm in.

She pushed it under the seat, praying that this would all be over soon.

Monday, April 21, 2008

No one had heard from Sam or Quil since they'd left. No one had heard from Paul or Collin either. Jacob was assuming that Jasper and Collin made it across the Mississippi and to Minneapolis safely. The mental chaos with the Pack spread so far and wide and for such a high-intensity situation was something that all the wolves were slow to adapt to. Jacob got only fleeting glimpses of their minds while phased, though clarity was coming along.

Jacob didn't like it. Not one little bit. He didn't like not knowing what was going on with his wolves when they were so far from home. However, he knew from experience that emergencies tended to ripple through the Pack bond like a tsunami and seeing as he'd felt nothing, he assumed everyone was still safe and whole.

The Nagual pride had gotten lost for a few hours in El Paso, before getting back on track and actually arrived in a record twenty hours. Freshly trained, and newly skilled, the ten jaguars spread through the line that stretched from La Push to Alaska. With the boosted numbers, they slowly pushed south and east. The plan was to crush the invasion force by requiring them to fight in both the
west and the east.

It was a whole day later – the second day of the attack – when the line spread out further to cover more ground across the Rockies, when the wolves and jaguars alike caught the sound of hundreds of thundering footsteps far into the distance. In the mountains, things sounded strange. The Naguals came from an area high in the Sierra Madre del Sur near Oaxaca. They were used to marauding and prowling over the mountainous regions; they were used to the way sound, sight, and smell moved in rocky terrain. Jacob, Andres, and Ricardo - the pride's best set of ears - sat perched on the edge of precipice trying to follow the sound.

"It definitely sounds like human feet," Jacob noted. "Vampires, though. Humans don't carry their weight that way. That's a vampire thing."

"Thirty-five? No... Forty. At least forty," Ricardo nodded. "They're... uncoordinated. It's not an attack. The sound would be more organized. It is as if they're running away. They came from the South - far South - the air they bring smells more of our home than yours. But they retreat North..."

The three glanced down the mountainside, trying to find a glimpse of the path of the vampires retreating north, and into the heart of the impending hellfire and brimstone. They continued cautiously but encountered no one.

That night, the lowest curve of the east-advancing line caught the smell of vampire. Hours old and heading north. The portion of the line that was moving through Nevada began to move north and east, to follow the scent of what looked like a retreat into the heart of the planned enclosure.

To Jasper's mind, it looked too much like Maria's coven to be anyone else. The numbers, the tactics, the location from where they'd come from was all too much of a coincidence. However, he wasn't sure if Collin and Paul were able to convey the message through the continental chaos that frayed the Pack bond. The two had only just managed to decipher what was going on in Jacob and Leah's heads. Jasper was hopeful though. If it was Maria's coven, and all signs indicated that it was, that meant someone had her on the retreat.

On the third day, Emmett Cullen got the surprise of his life when, as the man on the end of the line, he encountered not vampire smell, but shape-shifter smell. Hunchbacked, muscled, vicious-looking coyotes.

"Skin-walkers!" Andres phased human several yards away to prevent the large vampire from attacking one of the admittedly spooky creatures. None of the Cullens had met the other shape-shifters. And the skin-walkers were eery looking creatures under the best of circumstances. The coven didn't recognize them and had been relying on the wolves from La Push on how to know who was friendly. Not the most comforting of positions to be in, but Jacob reminded them that they were the ones that were 'too preoccupied' to come to the big shape-shifter meeting.

"It's good to see you have joined us," Andres grinned stepping out from the tree cover.

"These are the guys from down South?" Emmett asked signaling the three skin-walkers he could see stretched a mile into the woods.

"The very same," Andres nodded. "Welcome."

A rippling took over the closest skin-walker, and the fur receded back inside the skin as its form went from canine to human. Wyatt stood from his previously bent posture. "Thought it might be best not let you have all the fun. We got from here to the Texas border covered."
"And I'm assuming it's you all that the Mexican vamps are running from?" Emmett asked. Wyatt nodded. "Righteous. Well, let's polish these mofo's off in time to catch the last half of the Eastern Conference semi-finals, shall we? I got a lot of money riding on Red Wings this year."

**Tuesday, April 22, 2008**

It was the third day of their hibernation inside the Maine house. Jezzie had run through the absolute gamut of her imagination when it came to games and ideas. TV only entertained for so long. She eventually caved to playing in the yard, even though her paranoia – which had resurfaced with a vengeance – would've preferred they never go outside. She knew she couldn't keep three kids cooped up in the house for so long.

She was starting to get achy in her back again. She wondered if karma was catching up with her. She had emailed administration, along with all her professors and instructors, to tell them that she was dealing with a flare in her MS that left her mostly unable to walk. That was her excuse for not having been around class in the past two days. Most of her instructors were stern if sympathetic, and agreed to discuss how to move forward when she was well again.

She had brought a week's worth of her meds with her in a lunch box – the pre-filled syringes had to be kept refrigerated – and now kept them stashed in her Aunt's empty fridge. Even though her medication regimen had not been interrupted she was starting to feel the creeping signs of a flare. She tried not to think about it. She knew the issues she was having – sore back, increased forgetfulness, shaky hands – were still vague and could easily be chalked up to stress. Which she was experiencing in mass quantities. Instead she concentrated on the two young girls, and one boy in her Aunt's backyard.

Admittedly, they were rather adorable to watch. They ran around in the backyard playing chasing and tag games. Nessie squealed with delight as Zach and Abi chased her around the yard and Jezzie sat on the steps with her tea. She had promised to join in the game as soon as she was done. It was a crisp April day and the sea breeze was wonderful. Jezzie stood to join the three, placing her cup down when she caught the sight of something from her peripheral vision.

She turned to look and from her angle she could see a single human form standing in front of a house across the street and a few doors down. It was still and clearly watching them. Jezzie froze. The street was mostly abandoned when they'd arrived. While all of the houses were fortified for all-season living, they were mostly used as vacation homes. As far as she could see, they had been the only ones on the street. The rest were uninhabited, which made this stranger even more peculiar a presence.

"Nessie, Abi, Zach," Jezzie said shortly. "In the house." While none of the children knew the full scope of what exactly was happening in their world (though Jezzie found it hard to believe that three intelligent children couldn't connect some of the dots), Jezzie had explained earlier that it was very important that they listen to her, because all four of them could very easily get into trouble if they didn't. The three children trotted up towards the house, pausing momentarily to look up at Jezzie. Nessie placed a hand Jezzie's arm and for the first time she experienced Nessie's 'gift'. Almost like a second consciousness, her vision of the yard became a background to what Nessie showed her: the three of them piling into the car, and Nessie locking the doors. Smart kid. Jezzie nodded.

Zach took Nessie's hand and proceeded to tug her along, following his sister into the house. Jezzie turned and mustered up all her courage. She stared down the stranger. She would've bet money they knew exactly who she was. He was average height, average build. Average all the way around. A regular good ol' American John Doe type. But the way he stared – and smiled – she knew that he...
wasn't just a people watcher, or taking in the scenery. That and the unearthly pale skin. The day was overcast, so it prevented her from telling if he really was a vampire, but all her other instincts told her she was correct.

She suddenly wondered if this was the vampire that had been following her, if this was the vampire Alice had seen coming to kill her. Maybe she'd altered enough of her future not be killed in her apartment, but maybe she wasn't out of the clear yet. The idea of being killed here, of leaving Zach, Abi, and Ness open as targets or just alone made her heart jump into her throat.

The knowing smile that spread over the stranger's face confirmed her suspicions. He could hear her heart rate from across and down the street. Without a moment's hesitation, she ran for the house, not bothering to close any doors. She skinned the side of her knee on the coffee table rounding through the living room, and jumped down the set of stairs leading to the garage. She watched Zachary unlock her door as Abi pressed the button on the visor to open the garage door.

"Buckle up," she told the three as she slammed the door and threw the idling engine into reverse.

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**Thursday, April 24, 2008**

The first attack from the retreating invasion forces happened on the fifth day. Esme was the target in the east-moving line's middle section. If they had gotten through her, a mile-wide gap would've opened in the middle allowing the slowly circled retreating forces to pour out and into the west.

However, they underestimated Esme Cullen. As a mother, she had eyes and ears like a hawk – even better than the rest of her family. She’d caught the vampire who attempted to leap on her by the throat before he reached the ground and had him torn to pieces by the time Leah – the next closest in the line – showed up. The women managed to fend off the meager attack by a dozen vampires with relative ease. Part of the force constituted the European nomads: Makenna, Charles, and Alistair.

However, it launched a frenzy and pent up anxiety at being slowly encircled caused more unexpected, unplanned, and sloppy attacks.

Jasper reasoned that the Volturi's plan had been to cut North America in half. If they invaded at the mid point and then split to conquer each coast it divided the workload and made the massive invasion do-able. However, he pointed out that by dividing the workload, they also divided their forces. This was difficult in the best of scenarios and only worked with a large and highly skilled contingent of fighters when dealing with so much land. Their plan had chipped away, and they clearly had no back up: an elementary mistake indicating that their numbers far outstripped their communication and tactical leadership.

While Esme and Leah flicked attackers off like flies, and the line continued a steady pace east, Jasper joined the line of skin-walkers and the west-moving werewolves to form a corral that extended from Utah, through Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. He kept the valkyries in the air to watch the movements of the almost frantic enemy. Their northern border was admittedly sparsely guarded as the Canadian werewolves spread down through Minnesota to strengthen up the line, and the east-moving line was still only in Montana and Idaho. Jasper hoped that they'd be too panicked to notice the obvious way out.

Jezzie lit out of Maine faster than was legally allowed and by some grace of god was not pulled over. She took a few minutes into the New Hampshire state line to regulate her breathing. Abi, Zach, and Nessie were staring at her. Clearly they knew something was up. Of course they were smart enough to know that the grown ups weren't telling them everything, but now they were scared.
Jezzie explained to them, in vague and broad strokes, that some bad people were trying to make all the shape-shifters leave – she didn't have the heart to tell them they were attempting to exterminate them, so 'leave' was better than 'kill' – and that they had to try their best not to get hurt.

Even Jezzie knew her explanation was half-assed. But she was at a loss. How was she supposed to explain the significance of what was happening without horrifying the poor kids? She didn't know how parents explained war to their kids. And they weren't her kids to explain things too.

She didn't stop the car until she was on the highway in Connecticut. She only stopped because the Batmobile needed gas and Abi was having a dire bladder emergency. She supposed these stops would become more necessary, given that they really had nowhere to stay and that did not preclude their need for bathroom facilities.

Jezzie could think of no more suitable reaction than to pout in defeat, when – upon returning to the car – she could spy the pale stranger at the rest stop immediately across the two-lane highway. He wasn't giving up. This time he had the gall to wave.

When the three in the back seat fell asleep – somewhere on the New Jersey Turnpike – Jezzie called Jacob. She didn't think he'd pick up, but she needed to tell someone that they weren't in Maine any more and weren't dead.

"Jake, it's Jezzie," she told his voicemail. "We had to leave Maine. Someone found us. I don't know who. It's definitely a vampire though. Everyone's fine. It seems like this guy is tailing us though. I saw him when we stopped for fuel outside of Hartford. I'm just going to keep heading south. Call me if you need anything."

She clicked the phone shut and cozied up to her extra large coffee that would hopefully keep her awake through the night. As the turnpike spilled her into the 'garden state' portion of New Jersey, she began to logically think through things in a calm way. There were a couple of immediate issues that needed tackling.

Primarily, there was the issue that as one adult, she was in charge of three vulnerable children while they were being tailed by at least one vampire. When would she sleep – because she needed to sleep if she wanted to keep the three young ones safe? She figured daylight would be best, but was it even worth it to get a motel room when this car was built for open combat? And while sleeping during the night scared her, because any vampire would be in his or her element, how would she keep three kids entertained in such confined space while she slept during the day? Maybe she'd stop at a local store and buy lots of cheap DVDs. She only needed about four hours – two feature films' worth – of sleep.

She resolved that sleep would be best in broad and bright daylight within the confines of the car and very close to large populations. She didn't mind too much if the kids reversed their sleep schedules with her, though she enjoyed the peace of the car when they slept.

Her second issue was the creeping pain she was dealing with. She knew now that this was not stress-induced. Her back pain and her fine motor movements were only getting worse. It wouldn't be long before she started getting leg numbness – which would be an issue when operating a motor vehicle. She had left her meds back in Maine. Stored in the fridge, she'd hardly paused a moment to pick them up as she made a frantic dash through the house and to the car hoping not to get killed on the way. This was her first day without her meds. And she hadn't brought any of the steroids that she'd normally take to lessen the severity of her symptoms during a flare. This, she had to admit, had the potential to get ugly. Jasper had said that a few days would see the end of the open fighting, but this was the end of the fourth day and she'd heard from no one so far.
And her last issue was broad: what the hell was she doing? Where was she going? And how was she supposed to fight off a vampire?

\textit{Friday, April 25, 2008}

"Jezzie, are you guys all right?"

"We're fine. Are you guys all right?"

"Yeah, mostly. I think so. Nothing we can't handle yet. Where the hell are you?"

"Uh… I dunno," Jezzie replied intelligently. "Hey guys, what'd that highway sign just say?"

"Shenadoah Valley," the three sight-seers in the back sight piped up at the same time as they peered out the windows at the now changing landscape. The Mid-Atlantic was a lot different than the Pacific Northwest or the Plains.


"And where the hell are you going?" Jake asked.

"Not a clue. But there aren't any supernaturals in the Southeastern US, right? So it can't be all bad."

"Except for the guy chasing you."

"Yeah, there's that."

"And Azrael broke through the Eastern defenses sometime yesterday. No one's seen him since. We had some nomads break off and head West, but you shouldn't worry about those ones."

"Oh, good… So, I'm just going to keep driving and hope the psychotic werewolf doesn't show up, even though that's highly likely?"

"For now, yeah."

"What happens when I reach the Atlantic? Or the Gulf?"

"We'll cross the bridge when we come to it."

"Swim to Cuba, it is. Though I doubt this car floats."

\textit{Saturday, April 26, 2008}

On the seventh day the werewolves, shape-shifters, and the Cullen and Denali coven had closed in enough on the Volturi. The valkyries confirmed Jasper's suspicions: they were spreading out their ranks to accommodate the disproportionate number of shape-shifters. They were making themselves easy targets.

And unlike the previous days that mostly involved chasing scents and trails, the two belligerents were now coming within sight of each other. The invading Volturi and the remnants of Maria's army looked absolutely floored to see the likes of so many shape-shifters stalking in closer. More werewolves than the Volturi ever thought they'd left to exist, coyotes with a disease much like that of those in La Push, scavenging ravens circling in the skies above their ranks, and large, black jungle cats.
They had not prepared for this confrontation at all.

It was a miserable day out, by most accounts. It was rainy, and the local weather stations had been telling the Olympic Peninsula to prepare for a doozy.

Seth, Anna, and Brady were wired with enough caffeine to induce a grand mal seizure in anyone with a normal metabolic rate and had been pacing the Forks town line since they'd gotten word from Leah that a pair of rogue nomads had broken free of the group with Azrael. They periodically insisted the most exhausted person go home for a few hours to sleep off an impending coma, but otherwise things had been quiet if grossly wet.

Seth was on naptime, and Anna and Brady were mostly quiet in the local collective consciousness. They'd honestly stopped trying to decipher what all the flared emotions, abstract thought reactions, and foggy responses from the Midwest meant. Partly because it distracted them, and partly because it just made them feel awful. They were getting very good at controlling their presence in the Packmind.

Anna felt a yawn echo through her chest and it tumbled out of her canine jaw. She gave herself a good all-over shake. She still had three more hours until she got to sleep. Suddenly the sound of falling rain and the occasional clap of thunder was interrupted by the sound of something that sounded distinctly like an explosion.

The patrolling pair uttered a collective …f*ck… before Anna took off in the direction of the noise.

Watch the line! I'm going to wake up Seth!

What if you need help!?

Then I'll let you know, but we can't leave the line unguarded!

Anna bolted far enough into town to kick the Clearwater's back door in and issue a single bark. Seth was half-conscious and tripped down the stairs in time to phase and follow Anna. He asked nothing, but simply peeled through her consciousness as she replayed recent history. They both skidded to a halt where the reservation met Forks proper. A wall of black smoke had formed and was slowly consuming all that was left of the clean air, even as the rain poured down in sheets and thunder snapped overhead.

Anna ducked low, and kicked Seth's knees from under him when she heard him choke on the smoke. Stay down; the air is clearer.

They crawled their way further in the mud, the heat building with each step, when a female vampire dropped from the trees and landed right in front of them. She smiled before making a quick lunge for Anna. Seth caught her easily around the middle, and Anna bit her lower half. The two wolves snapped the vampire in half as it flailed.

Why won't it stop moving!? Seth demanded. It's inside my mouth and snapped in half and the arms just... won't... stop!

I don't know, but this tastes so gross. I think I'm going to hurl. Let's find wherever the hell this fire is coming from and make some use of it.

The pair skirted through the trees as Brady continued to worry and pace the Forks town line. There is no one out here. Just the scent of two vamps. Can I please come help out?
No! The two shouted in unison. It concerned Anna that they hadn’t yet found the source of the second scent trail. The intense amount of rain along with the fire was messing with her sense of smell.

We don't all need to die in the fiery conflagration. Brady would’ve been surprised that Seth knew the word 'conflagration' if he wasn’t quite so worried.

Seth and Anna came to an immediate halt when a flaming tree limb came crashing to the forest floor. Both wolves looked up to see the tops of the trees directly above them alight.

What do we do? Seth asked through a building panic, as half a vampire carcass hung from his teeth. What do we do? What do we do?

Dump and run, Anna decided. She set off at a rapid pace into the woods where the flames had engulfed more of the trees. It was obvious that the fire had been set at the ground level, but had somehow run up the course of a relatively dry, dead tree and begun to spread through some of the tree tips. It was strange the way the fire canopied above them, when normally flames started low and moved upwards. Anna wondered if emergency services would think this fire was from the storm or arson.

She spat out the lower thrashing legs into the red-orange mess that was quickly consuming everything around her and only threw up once on the sprint back. The missing vampire then came skirting around the growing inferno. Anna backed up and issued it a swift kick to the midsection, launching it directly into the wall of fire before it could attack Seth – who was taking his turn to puke on the muddy forest floor.

What do we do now? Brady wanted to know. What about the fire?

We’re wolves... we can't fight fires, Anna insisted. As much as the three wolves didn't want their local emergency services having to fend off the growing inferno, they had to acknowledge that they were not built for this.

Let's get back to the rez and make sure everyone's safe, Seth insisted. I know we're pretty far into Forks, but the closest La Push houses are only a few miles away, and we have no idea how big this thing is.

It was nighttime, and the highway was dark and mostly empty. There was no light except for glare of the headlights from the car as they came to the Virginia stateline. In the distance the light grabbed onto a human form in a long overcoat on the side of the road. Jezzie slowed from 75MPH to the speed limit so she had a better chance of not hitting this individual. However, he stepped directly into the roadway and made a brisk path across to the grassy median. When he glanced up the light caught his face and Jezzie tried to keep from dissolving into tears.

Azrael had found them.

He and the vampire had worked together and he found her. They must've. Jezzie didn't know the vampire that had followed them from Maine. It might've been the male that had found her at school but she never got close enough to tell. There was a vague and irrational kind of comfort in that – not knowing who had followed her. The fear she had of Azrael went straight to her core, because she knew him. She remembered that day he had sat next to her on the subway, the feel of him sitting right next to her, of his grip on her jacket, and his flesh against hers. It made her skin ripple with goosebumps.
On the positive side: she was now dealing with a creature she knew how to kill, as Jasper had conveniently supplied her with nothing but silver ammunition. She could kill a werewolf if need be. She really had no idea how to kill a vampire without a supply of Rachel's explosives like she'd had at last winter's battle. And she didn't have the wherewithal to try and figure it out, because god her back and her legs were absolutely killing her with vice-like pain.

On the downside: she was not going to be getting any sleep anytime soon.

She called Jake to tell her she'd found Azrael. She didn't much care for the hour, knowing she'd wind up with voicemail again. She called to check in everyday and she never spoke to a live person. She expected this, but it worried her. She didn't know the fate of any of her friends. Whether they were okay, whether they needed help, whether they had the upper hand. She knew nothing. And she was pretty sure that acid inside her was eating away at all her vital organs.

"Jake, it's Jezzie. Found Azrael in Virginia."

A wet and sloshy crack interrupted the sounds of snarls and tears, as a vampire's fist went directly through a werewolf's chest. Esme had no idea which werewolf it was. In the fray they all looked the same. Though, she thought it was one of the females. The werewolf's body fell to the ground and as the vampire reoriented itself, Esme jumped. She could tell from the clothing it was one of the Volturi guardsmen. She snapped its head off its neck before it had time to get a hold of her. The frantic grasping of hands wouldn't be able to feasibly fight her off now.

One of the jaguars, almost indistinguishable from the black night surroundings except for the eyes, twisted the lower torso from the upper. All three parts made it to a nearby conflagration. Esme waited long enough to confirm that the remnants had caught fire. From her position, she could vaguely make out the tenor of Jasper's voice on the opposite side of the fray. He was doling out orders and was making headway through the high-pitched screaming and clawing of hand-to-hand combat. The two lines had closed in enough to be within hearing range.

War among vampires was always messy. Not many human inventions effectively destroyed vampires. And those that could, would cause too much destruction to bystanders – something neither party wanted. As a result, vampiric warfare had always been of a hand-to-hand variety. Jasper had received his own tactical training in the American Civil War, a conflict noted for it's brutality and bareknuckle clashes. His skills in close-range warfare had only refined in his immortality. He was skilled, technical, and precise. Often it worried Esme to see Jasper in such a state. A whole other self within him possessed such a perfected and brutal skill set that rarely saw the light of day. However, Jasper was also a natural born leader. She had not seen her family and the La Push shape-shifters interact so seamlessly on tactical matters as when Jacob and Leah, and Jasper and Paul worked over plans from opposite sides of the battlefield.

The earth beneath her feet was wet with blood and venom, and the air was hot and thick with the acrid smell of burning flesh and bodies. It was hard to see, even with exceptional sight. All around her, there was running, shrieking, yelling, screaming. High screeches, and low bellows. The sound of cracking bone and stone, and the occasional wet snap of pierced mortal flesh. Chaos.

She heard quick footsteps behind her and turned quickly enough to see a tall male vampire coming after her, she stepped out of the way quickly and used the kinetic energy from his running pace to force him into the fire burning only ten yards away. He tried to avoid the blaze, but toppled inside and his flesh was consumed off the bone quickly as he screamed.

Esme's head snapped up when she heard her name in a voice of desperation from her other son, Emmett. She glanced across through the trees and crashing bodies. She ran towards the sound,
jumping lithely over a few frays. When she found Emmett he was fine, but both he, Rosalie, Alice, and one of the skin-walkers were closing in on a vicious duel. One of the youngest members of the Volturi – at least as far as age of transformation – the young female, was slowly clawing another person to death as she sat upon their chest. Rosalie glanced up to Esme on the far side of the circle. "On three, Rose," Esme said.

"One… two… three…" the two females rushed into the middle of the skirmish. Rosalie used her height to engulf the small female, who was more like a rabid dog than a human, while Esme used the open chance to pull the victim away from the young blonde female. Rosalie heaved the struggling female away and the skin-walker lined up at the right point and tore the girl in half. Rosalie grimaced hearing the ear-piercing screaming that emanated from the girl.

Esme glanced down to the immobile victim in her lap. Whatever young Jane had been doing, she had wanted the death to be long and drawn out. Instead of simple dismemberment, she had slowly and meticulous raked her nails and teeth along every portion of skin she could reach. The skin over the entire body was shredded, and oozing a combination of venom and blood from a last feed. It looked as if Jane had fed this person through a food processor just for fun. The skin hung off in places like ribbons. Esme cleared the face to discover who it was and what she saw could've shocked her back to life.

If she had a heart to stop, she would've.

If she had a stomach to turn, she would've.

If she had breath to lose, she would've.

The lifeless eyes staring back at her, from a still lifeless body, belonged to the man she loved. Carlisle.

She was torn from her shock by the sound of maniacal cackling. A lot of noises could be heard on the battlefield, most of them shrieks and cries of pain and terror. There was no laughter, save for this one wicked woman – small and beautiful – just behind the ring that Rosalie, Emmett, Alice, and the skin-walker formed. She was gorgeous, but something in her eyes and the way she laughed in the field of carnage gave away the insanity underneath.

"Carlisle Cullen – the great humanitarian of the vampire world – meets his end at the hands of a child!" she cackled wildly, her hair flying about. She seemingly did not care for the loss of Jane, but only for the death of the Olympic Coven's leader. "Oh, my husband would've have loved to have seen this!"

Emmett and the skin-walker who had aided Rosalie crouched, ready to pounce. However, Esme stood – her eyes never leaving the deranged woman's face – her hands and clothes coated in the blood and venom of her husband and countless others. She shook her head. "No," Emmett and his partner glanced back in shock at her word. "Boys, she's mine."

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**Sunday, April 27, 2008**

They were done.

Jezzie was never so elated to be able to just stop. Jezzie had been passing through Charleston, South Carolina, on the eighth day, when she'd gotten a call from Jasper – the war was over. She didn't believe him.
The invasion force had been decimated and all the survivors had escaped the continent. Jezzie thought that explained why she hadn't seen Azrael since those few times in Virginia and once in North Carolina. All had been quite for a few days. The wars in the west had finished when the vampires, the werewolves, and the shape-shifters had slowly squeezed the remaining Volturi army together on the eastern side of the Rockies. They hadn't been surprised when the Denali coven swarmed from the north, but they'd all but collapsed in defeat for the sheer surprise factor of having Mexican Nagual, Navajo Skin-walkers, Nordic Valkyries, and half dozen extra werewolves block their only escape on all other sides. The fray had been bloody, was all Jasper would say.

Jaguars, coyotes, ravens. Jezzie was surprised the Pack hadn't managed to find a bigfoot.

"Jake said we had to stay out of that part of the country. Too much creepy banjo music," Collin insisted over the phone call.

Jezzie told Jasper and Collin that she would stop in Savannah, just over the state line. Jasper was heading back West, and Collin would start South – with Paul close behind – to meet them.

Admittedly, Jezzie was more excited than the others, who were happily sleeping in the back seat. She tried not to bounce enough to shake the car. She was nervous as anything. The only people she'd heard from were Collin and Jasper and Jacob. The only person she'd heard about was Paul. She tried to focus her happiness on seeing Paul and knowing Jasper, Jake, and Collin were alive and not worry about the lives the continental war had cost them. Or so she assumed. Jezzie had been so out of touch. She literally knew nothing. She hadn't even heard from Jacob since that day when she lit out of Maine with Nessie, Abi, and Zach strapped in the back seat. She took a small, sick bit of consolation in knowing that if Jacob had died, Nessie probably would have felt it through the imprint bond – as Kim did – and would've known already.

So, sitting in the heavily armored Mercedes – which after driving into the ground for a week solid, Jezzie was assured cost more money than she'd ever seen in her life and could probably also survive a nuclear holocaust – in a rundown motel parking lot, Jezzie focused on the excitement. Not the trepidation. Or the pain. Because she found a prearranged place to meet Paul and Collin right off the freeway in Savannah when she'd talked to Jasper yesterday, she assumed they'd be able to find her and the conspicuous car without issue.

She jittered through nerves, though she had that tell-tale pain that would soon turn to crushing through her waist and lower back. And the fidgeting was mostly also a way to unsuccessfully convince herself she was fine. It had been almost a year since her last relapse and she bitterly noted that this was right on schedule given that her brain decided annual relapses were a thing. She didn't know how long she'd be gone when Jasper showed up at her door. She'd packed all the prefilled syringes of her daily Copaxone left. But then they were surprised in Maine and she'd left it all behind. She should've just left them in the lunchbox in the car. It was stupid and she mentally beat herself up over it. She was in the fourth day without her daily meds, and no sign of anything for her creeping relapse.

She didn't have time to dwell on dealing with her oncoming pain and where the hell she was going to get more MS drugs and soon because from around the corner of the motel's office Jezzie saw a face that almost made her cry. Collin. He smiled and she grinned, hopping out of the car and leaving the door open as he moved to pick her up in a bone-crushing hug. He spun her around and ducked enough to see Nessie, Zachary, and Abigail safe and asleep inside the car.

"How you doin', Blade?" he asked as he sat her back down on the pavement.

"Blade?" she asked.
"Yeah," he nodded. "Like the comic book character? He kills vampires. How about Van Helsing?"

Jezzie smiled and shook her head; she missed her roommate's silliness. "That was kind of a while ago, you goof."

"Yeah, but I bet he'd drive a cool car like this."

"Where's Paul?" she rolled her eyes.

"He was about a mile behind me. He should be here any minute. He—"

Collin didn't get to finish his comment. At that exact moment he disappeared with a theatrical kind of 'whoosh!' and Jezzie felt a burning pain across her abdomen. She gasped as her knees hit the pavement and she instinctively clutched her stomach. She glanced up and saw a blur of fur and claws and teeth as it disappeared behind the back of the motel between the dumpsters and the sparse trees. Brown fur mixed with coarse, black, mangy fur. Oh no.

She glanced down and watched the sticky red bleed through her fingers. _Shit_.

"Jezzie?" she heard Zachary's sleepy voice in the car.

"Stay there," he recognized Jezzie's all-business voice – they'd all gotten quite used to it this past week. Jezzie swallowed quick and lifted her hand gently, praying to god her intestines stayed where they were supposed to. Nothing. She carefully peeled away where her shirt was sticking to her flesh. Surface wound. _Fantastic_.

She stood quickly, ignoring the way her seared flesh stung, and leaned inside the car. She pulled the gun from the glove compartment and pulled the silencer from underneath the passenger seat. "Zachary, Abigail, and Renesmee you stay in the car, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Jezzie," they all nodded, looking scared. "What's that smell?" Abi asked.

"It's fine, honey," Jezzie shook her head as she screwed on the silencer and Nessie glanced at Jezzie's abdomen from around the seat. "Stay in the car." She locked the doors of the car with the remote in her hand before tossing it on the driver's seat and shutting the door – locking the kids inside and leaving a bloody hand print on the door.

She slipped the conspicuous weapon into her waistband before taking off at a difficult run behind the motel. Between her burning stomach, the constricting way her back twitched, and the size of the weapon and silencer it made for slower going that she would've liked. She skidded over the gravelly pavement in time to see a highly mobile, vicious, rangy monster drag a phased Collin by the shoulder into the barely helpful cover of trees.

Azrael.

He'd disappeared, but he wasn't gone. He was never gone. He'd just been faking her out, waiting until she let her guard down. He hadn't escaped with the rest. She'd fallen hook, line, and sinker. She heard someone shout her name in the distance behind her, but she ignored it. She charged into the woods after Azrael and Collin. Making sure not to slip on the leaves she pulled the gun from her waistband. She never liked the feeling of the weapon in her hand. Mostly because it made her feel inept – she wasn't very skilled – but like hell was she going let Azrael eat her fourteen year old charge alive. Like. Hell.

She wasn't even ten feet into the scraggy patch of urban forestry when she came upon Collin being whipped around like a rag doll. She grimaced as Azrael snapped his neck back and forth, the force
causing Collin's body to crunch in horrible ways. And Collin was now—fully human?

"Jezzie!" She heard that yelling of her name again and continued to ignore it. Though, it sounded familiar.

"Phase!" she shouted. "Collin! Phase!" Why the heck wasn't he still phased? He didn't stand a chance against werewolf teeth or poison in human form. Azrael's crazed yellow eyes glanced up to her as he dropped Collin's body on the forest floor. He hit the ground with a sickening thud and Jezzie's breath caught.

She prayed he wasn't dead, just unconscious. Hopefully. Azrael glanced up at her with a twisted snarl over his lupine snout. She ignored the red coating his muzzle – the red that matched what covered Collin's shoulders and head. Azrael crouched and sprung – not an instant later – towards Jezzie, teeth bared in a murderous way.

Jezzie raised her hand and shot – aiming as best as she could – before Azrael crumpled to the ground, mid-leap, halfway between her and Collin. He flinched ever so slightly before growling and clawing at the earth, trying to close the distance between himself and her, while one lame leg dragged behind him. Jezzie took aim, closed her eyes – which she knew was not a good idea – and issued a last shot.

When she opened her eyes the werewolf lay motionless at her feet. She ignored the blood splatter on her torso and the hole in Azrael's chest. She dropped the gun, not sparing the slain monster another glance, jumped over his body and ran towards the boy laying bloodied in the dead leaves twenty feet away.

"Jezzie!" she heard again, though this time it was closer.

She crouched down quickly and swiped at her eyes to clear the tears. Collin's consciousness was vaguely returning and he was groaning for the pain. One arm reached up towards his head, before Jezzie interfered. His hand tried to deflect her and his grip was too strong around her wrist.

"Collin," she choked. "It's me. It's Jezzie. You're okay, hon. It's gonna be all right." She cleared the piled up leaves from where Collin's body had skidded and grimaced seeing Collin's head close to split in two. She steeled herself and forced her stomach into resilient doctor mode. She reached upwards and clapped her hands over Collin's head. Not medically the best idea, but there wasn't much else she could do for a shape-shifter in the middle of the woods besides hold his head together.

The tears came in earnest as she realized she was his only shot at survival. If she screwed this up, he would die. And all she could think of was to just keep his head in one piece long enough for it heal itself. Without removing her red stained hands, she scrambled around from his side to get closer to his head. The movement made the slash across her stomach burn.

Collin was starting to cry out in pain and part of Jezzie thought he might've been better unconscious. She used one hand and her abdomen to hold onto Collin's head, while she reached out and took one of his hands in hers. It was then that Paul came tearing into the clearing. He'd been the one shouting her name. He must've been closer behind than Collin had thought.

He didn't make it more than a step before halting. He looked around at the fresh scene before him. He looked down and saw the body of the werewolf as it slowly bled out from its chest cavity, laying beside an abandoned handgun. Paul picked up the gun and ejected the ammunition. He looked at the silver bullets inside and visibly sighed in relief. He looked up and saw the blood covered girl crying as she held Collin's head in her lap. He ran over to them. "Jezzie… what… what happened? Whose blood is that? The scents are too intermixed."
"I thought it was over. I thought Jasper said it was over!" she wailed. She took a breath, trying to regulate her breathing and rein in the hysterics. "Mine, Azrael's, Collin's… a little of everyone's…" she answered. "Can you go check on the kids?"

"They're in the car. They're fine. Jezzie, where are you bleeding?"

"Well, Collin's bleeding from the head – which I'm currently holding together – in case you were wondering."

"But you're the human," Paul replied slowly. "Where are you bleeding?"

"My abdomen," she hiccupped. "Just a surface wound.

"Who was it? Who got you? Was it Azrael or Collin?" She only shrugged. She really didn't know. She assumed it was Azrael that snagged her skin as he swiped Collin away from her in the parking lot not even five minutes ago. However, Collin had phased almost instantaneously. Maybe the trauma made him phase back? She didn't know. She was so, so, so confused and felt like an idiot because she couldn't answer the simple questions about something she'd just watch happen.

"Jezzie, if it was Azrael and he cut too deep, it's gonna get you."

"Which means there's nothing we can do about it, right?" she snapped. "I'm not going to let go of Collin's head so his brain matter can fall out and he can die just because I might wake up a werewolf tomorrow morning, or dead. I might, I might not. I can't change that now. The least I can do is keep Collin alive. Please just let me live in my denial and channel my anxiety into other arenas for a bit? And can you please check on the kids? I got rooms 107 and 108."

Paul just watched Jezzie. She was so far gone it scared him. Her eyes were big and glazed and he knew she was holding on to her coherence by threads. But hell if she wasn't right; she was holding Collin's head in one piece and for now that was good. "I'm going to go check the area and make sure it's safe. Then I'll get Nessie, Abi, and Zach. When I come back we have to get rid of Azrael's body – hopefully Collin will be healed enough to move."

Jezzie nodded mechanically and Paul knew leaving her wasn't a good idea, but he didn't have a choice.

Collin appeared about halfway coherent. Conscious enough to know he was in a lot of pain, but not enough to be able to do anything about it. Jezzie held tight onto Collin's head with one hand and gripped his own hand with the other as he grimaced and cried in pain. Somewhere along the line, her mind decided that the tighter she held on the quicker he'd heal, the better chance he'd have at surviving, the better chance she'd have at simply keeping her own mind together long enough to get through this.

Was this what it was like for the other wolves? Did such compounded acts of killing and saving – all at once like this – did it tear at edges of your mind and make things go blurry? Was it supposed to make your head go into power-save mode and operate purely on mechanical instinct? Was this what the wolves had to deal with these past weeks and the battle of last winter? And this was just once. She'd killed one werewolf and was trying to keep one shape-shifter alive. What was it like to have killed two? Or three? Or so many you lost count? What about when they couldn't help a downed ally? Like Bella? Or Jared? No… Collin would not be another Jared.

She held a little tighter and Collin winced.

"Sorry," she swallowed thickly. She released Collin's hand momentarily, though he didn't seem too
thrilled with the prospect. She used the one spare hand and reached down carefully tugging her t-shirt off her frame. Only a small bottom portion had been tainted by her own blood – and the front just a bit by the effects of shooting Azrael at close range. For some reason, that had been a remarkably clean shot… maybe it was the werewolf flesh. She used the clean portion wipe Collin's face off so she could actually see Collin.

She smiled at him in a sad way. "You look terrible, dear." She bent down and kissed his forehead. "Just try and hold still, okay? So your head can heal? We're fine. Nothing bad's gonna happen. We're gonna get you some serious painkillers, I promise."

Paul was back a few minutes later after clearing the area, and getting Nessie, Abi, and Zach out of the car and into the motel. Jezzie only stared straight ahead without blinking as he lifted Azrael's body over his shoulder. He would take him to the next street over, where it was more industrial and they could risk lighting up an abandoned building without hurting anyone or evacuating the motel. When he came back, he wordlessly lifted Collin while Jezzie supported his head and neck and they tried to act natural as they made their way to the proper motel room, and the sound of sirens and a gathering crowd began on the next street. Every step made the laceration across Jezzie's belly burn, as the clotting blood was torn open by her movement. And as her stomach muscles clenched around the pain, it emphasized the ache and crushing feeling in her back. Stress and tension was not good during a relapse…

"Where are the little ones?" she insisted when the door was shut.

"The other room watching cartoons. I can hear from here, they're fine."

"Go hang out with them. We can't just leave them alone in there. They definitely saw that, Paul."

"You were fully out of sight when they heard that gunshot. They didn't see you, only heard you."

"That makes it so much better," Jezzie growled. "Please? Bring me a trash bag and washcloth and I'll clean Collin up and you guys can come in here in five minutes or so, okay?"

When he just glared at her, Jezzie put Paul to work tearing bed sheets into strips so she would actually have the chance to let go of Collin's skull for a moment. She used a single long swath to wrap his head snugly and as his eyes drifted open and closed – as they had been since she found him – she told him to stay as still as possible. When she'd cleared up most of the blood and Paul had tossed the trash in the dumpster, they let younger ones join. The whole scene looked far more serene and antiseptic than it was.

"Oh, Collin," Nessie chirped as she climbed up on the bed near the wolf. "Your poor head."

"Does it hurt?" Abi asked.

"Was it gross?" Zachary asked Jezzie. She nodded.

Nessie kneeled next to him and placed her small hand against his cheek, showing him what was in her mind. It must've been a nice scene or story because she was smiling. Jezzie stood from the desk chair and walked to the bathroom, she picked her med bag up from the desk along the way. It was her 'supernatural' bag, and she'd been lucky to scrounge some narcotic painkillers for Collin that Carlisle had supplied her with for the last battle. Paul prevented her from closing the door and she spun around. He nodded his head, indicating her to keep moving. She stepped aside and let him in.

She flicked the sink on – both handles full force. Holding Collin together had been a lot like an out of body experience. She watched her hands – stained reddish orange – as they operated robotically.
But now, her brain had fully reattached to those hands and they were shaking like crazy. She could see where the blood and seeped into the small cracks and pores of her skin, staining the tissue. It itched like nobody's business. She unwrapped the gratuitous bar of hotel soap and ignored the red smear she left on the counter.

Paul sat on the closed toilet seat and watched Jezzie clean the blood that had made its way all the way up to her elbows. She looked very skinny in that moment – even though Paul knew she was far from a waif. Maybe it was the way her breathing, shallow and quick, rattled her entire body as she worked. He also noticed the way her back muscles began twitching at intervals.

She turned the faucet off and found the silence deafening. Paul watched her lean against the counter, her forearms dripping all over the laminate. "C'mon, Little Red. Let's see it."

She turned towards him, gingerly lifting the hem of her tank top, pulling the fabric from the wound opening it up all over again. She winced a bit and stepped closer to Paul. He was admittedly much more able to see the three slash lines that stretched from her hip and across, under her belly button. He reached for another stacked washcloth on the counter and cleaned her skin off as best she could. It stung something fierce.

"This does not look pleasant, Jezzie."

"That's because it's been clotting into my tank top. It looks superficial, but it's hard to tell from this angle. What do you think? You can't see any major tissue or muscle, right? Not too deep."

"It's hard to tell," he admitted, holding her by the hips and trying to decide.

"Does it look like it's forming a scab at the edges yet?" she asked.

"No," he shook his head. "Definitely not. It looks fresh."

"Great…" Jezzie sighed. "Paul, how are you with a sewing needle?"

"Excuse me," Paul looked up at her like she was crazy.

"It's not deep, but it's wide. It's not clotting on its own and it's on a part of the body that often requires stitches because who the hell can hold their abdomen still for hours and days on end to let something heal?"

Paul continued to stare at her like she'd grown an extra head. "Stop looking at me like that, before I lose my mind and claw your eyes out. If it doesn't get stitched up it could get infected."

Paul visibly swallowed but agreed. Jezzie pulled out a pre-packed surgical suture and the needle holder. When she discovered a mess more in the bottom of her bag she tore the one open and showed Paul the proper stitch on her jeans.

"Okay," he nodded. "I think I got it," he spoke as he watched her shaky hands. He'd never seen stitches done before. The needle was tiny and curved. Probably as long as the nail on his smallest finger. The needle was so small it had its own set of needle holders – like tweezers, almost.

"I don't know how many you're going to need," Jezzie said. "But here's plenty." She dumped out all the packages she had on the counter, and sat up on the laminate near the sink. She pulled out the bottle of rubbing alcohol and stared sadly at the label. "This is gonna hurt like a bitch."

She did the disinfecting herself, grimacing, wincing, and inhaling sharply the entire time. When she was done, she leaned back for a moment before sitting up straight. Paul kneeled on the ground in
front of her, so his face was level with her abdomen. He had three lacerations across her front and fifteen packages of sutures. He was sure as hell hoping that was enough. He strengthened his resolve, reminding himself that it might've been gross but he wasn't going to be the one to feel it, and started.

Paul had stitched up her first gash, slow and careful his stitches had evened and neatened with practice. He didn't know how long it had taken, but it felt like at least six or seven hours. On the plus side, they had more than enough sutures to get through this job, he estimated. He could tell as he started in on the second laceration that Jezzie was in a lot of pain and trying desperately not to move and mess him up.

"Hey, Jezzie," he looked up at her, "why don't you get a grip?"

"So help me god, Paul," she muttered through ground teeth. "I'll kick your nuts so far up your throat you'll need an epi-pen."

Paul suppressed the laugh. She had spent too much time with Leah and his imprint. Okay, so that had come out wrong. "Not that kinda grip, Jezzie. I'm not that heartless. Why don't you use the human stressball over here? No amount of your effort is going to hurt me and I can tell you feel the need to squirm."

"Oh," she replied tonelessly. "Okay."

Paul maybe underestimated her ability to hurt him, because the iron grip she had on his shoulders was pretty decent. He was definitely going to have some claw marks from her nails, too. Those were going to be interesting to explain. But at least she was releasing the muscle tension somewhere else and he could actually get a hold of the skin on her abdomen, now.

Forty or fifty years later, Paul tied off the last stitch on the last laceration and both he and Jezzie exhaled with relief.

"That was awful," Paul said plainly. "I don't know how you do that for a living. How do you feel?" he asked after a pause. "The Plains wolves said that once the poison's in your system you feel it almost immediately."

"I think I feel fine. It's kind of hard to tell through the blinding pain."

"Well, given the fact that I'm pretty sure you're in shock, I hope you won't be insulted that I don't trust your word." With one hand he checked her pulse at her wrist and the other hand moved to feel her forehead.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Fever and increased pulse," he replied. "The big tells on a transformation. I think you mighta cut this one too close, Little Red."

Even though they technically had two rooms, all six of them stayed in the one for quite a while. Jezzie refused to leave and she wasn't about to exile the three youngest to the lonely room. Nessie spent a lot of time sitting with Collin with her hand pressed to his cheek. Jezzie suspected that she spent at least an hour simply relaying the primetime sitcoms they were watching to him. Zachary lay down at the end of the bed watching TV, and Abi enjoyed playing the role of hyper-vigilant caretaker. Making sure there was ice and fresh bed sheet bandages on hand at all times.

At eleven that night, Jezzie started feeling it. She sat outside because the room felt stifling inside – even though it was quite a cool night. Then, at midnight she started getting sick. Paul had carted her
to the room next door – insisting that whatever the hell was happening to Jezzie he wasn't about to let Zach, Abi, Nessie, and Collin watch a possible werewolf transformation. Jezzie happened to agree. She was just too panicked to verbalize. Or move.

After throwing up for the better part of the one o'clock hour, Paul put her in a cold shower to stop her pouring sweat. She slumped in the corner of the fiberglass bathtub and the anxiety overtook her. The cuts across her abdomen burned and she could feel that it was the source of the heat – the source of her hot flashes. It started inside her – in her core – and she could feel it slowly making its way outward to her extremities, that were still cold and chilled with the natural evening temperature.

She didn't want to transform. She didn't want to be a werewolf. It made her skin burn and her stomach contract in on itself. She wasn't sure what symptoms were indicative of her panic and what were symptoms of something else. None of it was doing any good for her relapse. She'd never had one come on so quickly. It must've been the insane stress combined with her not having had her meds in a few days, because she felt like she'd had a week's progression of symptoms crammed into twelve hours. Shock, MS, werewolf venom. Too many things were happening at once and she couldn't properly categorize her symptoms.

"Jezzie," Paul said firmly. She felt his hands wrap around her face and with it the force of Pack. Paul pulled on his reserves as Beta wolf and brought the spiraling human closer into the fold, where the simple presence of Pack naturally calmed mental disarray. Like a big heavy blanket wrapping around her, Jezzie felt the anxiety ebb slightly – though it would do nothing for the poison or the relapse.

"You're going to be fine, Jezzie," Paul insisted. Though it occurred to her he didn't look entirely confident in that assessment.

Jezzie just stared back with big blank eyes and Paul was pretty sure that she was working her way through shock and a panic attack. It was hard to tell if werewolf things were happening too. Now her teeth were chattering. Hot flashes and cold spells. He backed away for a moment, grabbing the biggest towel he could find and he carefully hauled Jezzie out of the tub. He wrapped her up and carted her to the hotel bed where he plopped her down and proceeded to wrap her up in the quilt like a big meatball.

He sat down behind her and pulled her close, using his own ambient body heat and his rank to bring Jezzie back off her ledge. It took until 3AM, but Jezzie stopped teeth chattering, her breathing evened out, and Paul's warmth bled through the quilt and into Jezzie's skin and mediated the warring tides of hot and cold.

She was tired, she looked like shit, and she said she felt like she had the flu. She couldn't feel her MS symptoms anymore. All she could feel was the burning heat that emanated from the cuts across her abdomen. Eventually she just curled up in a ball on the bed and stopped moving. Her eyes were open, and her face was drawn. Whatever was happening to her, it wasn't shock and Paul needed to call somebody.
A Light From the Shadows Shall Spring

And the heart is hard to translate
it has a language of its own
it talks in tongues and quiet sighs
and prayers and proclamations
in the grandest of great men
in the smallest of gestures
in short shallow gasps

Florence + the Machine's "All This and Heaven Too"

Sunday, April 27, 2008 cont.

Paul had no idea how the hell to say what he needed to say. And as a result, he'd already called Jake's phone, listened to the voicemail beep and hung up. Twice. He felt like a damn chick, which was actually a pretty twisted irony considering he was standing outside having a conniption fit over a phone call while Jezzie laid inside and was slowly poisoned.

Beep!

"Jake, it's Paul. You need to call me back as soon as you get this. This shit's important... It's Jezzie."

"She's what?!" Jacob yelled into the phone. He actually yelled. Paul wasn't scared, but he was startled. Jacob was not the yelling type. And he never yelled within the confines of Pack-related business.

"I don't know what's happening to her," Paul replied as he stepped outside the motel room. Jezzie wasn't exactly sleeping peacefully. She had actually crawled to the closet and closed the door. She took the blanket with her, and Paul could see that she was – once again – sweating to death. He stepped outside mostly because he didn't want her to hear him talking about her. Didn't need to freak her out any more than necessary.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"No, I'm not," Paul replied in a lowered tone. "And if you could stop screaming into the receiver, that'd be great... Look, she seems to be surviving it. She's still coherent, she's just a little... well, loopy."

"Loopy?"

"Yeah, Jake. She might be turning into a werewolf, so as you can imagine she's a little irritable. But I need to talk to one of the werewolves. I don't know if that's what's actually happening or if she's just flipping the fuck out about everything. There's a lot of shit involved in this and she crawled into the closet an hour ago growling, and it's starting to freak me the fuck out."

"Okay, okay," Jacob interrupted. "I'll have Damian give you a call. In the meantime, don't tell anyone else."

"Because I have so much time to gossip."
"Hang up the goddamn phone."

"Jezzie?" Paul asked tentatively as he slid the closet door open. There was a growl, followed by a sharp pain in his hand. He let go of the door and shook his hand automatically. "Fuck… that hurt. Jezzie, don't do that. We got enough problems without you clawing my skin off."

He slid the door open the rest of the way and since Jezzie made no move to leave the closet, he sat inside with her. Her forehead was pressed to her knees, and her hands were wound into her unruly red hair. Her toes were curled into the carpet, and there were scratches on the closet's sliding door. She appeared to be rocking. "I just talked with Damian. Do you want to know what he told me, or do you want me to leave you alone?"

"Tell me," she croaked quietly.

"Given your symptoms, he says you're probably not transforming."

"So what's wrong with me?" she asked shortly.

"Not a damn clue," Paul replied. "What does it feel like?"

"Everything's just kind of burning… but it's going away. The burning. But it still hurts." Jezzie explained slowly.

"Damian said the burning would ratchet up if you were transforming," Paul supplied. "Maybe you're body's fighting it off."

"Fucking wonderful," she growled. Jezzie had become exponentially more irate and abrasive in the past few hours. Paul thought part of it was the sheer amount of pain she was in. She growled in pain, and her head slammed back and into the wall. "Do we know anything else? Did he say how long it takes to fight off the contagion?"

Paul just watched with wide eyes, as Jezzie tried not to writhe too much. "No," Paul continued. "Apparently, it doesn't happen very often. Usually you have to be bit to transform. He said a deep cut will do the trick, but yours isn't deep. The thing is… there aren't a lot of occasions for werewolves to issue a minor surface wound. The victim usually is picked to be killed or changed, there's not a lot of reason or precedent for this."

"Goody," Jezzie replied. "How far are we into this?"

"Well, Azrael got you about ten hours ago," Paul leaned outside the closet to check the time.

"The body filters all the blood in your body about once every hour… So whatever is left in my system is in other places. My organs, my tissue, wherever. The burning is passing, but hell is it being replaced by pain."

"Huh?"

"My whole entire body is radiating with an excruciating, vice-like pain," Jezzie explained, as she curled into the corner of the closet. "Ow…"

She winced and Paul couldn't help but mirror the action. It was hard to watch the girl who was normally so full of life roll into a defensive ball of pain. "Can I do anything? Or get anything?"

"Do we know anything about the others, yet?" Jezzie asked.
Paul shook his head. He'd heard from no one except Jake. "Why? What do you need?"

Jezzie began thunking her forehead into the wall in rhythmic pattern that Paul would have assumed was vaguely painful. "I just want my boyfriend."

Paul paced outside for a little while, wondering what the fuck he was gonna do in the middle of Georgia while Jezzie's body did whatever the hell it was doing when there was a shape-shifter pup, a vampire hybrid child, and two werewolf children in the room next door.

Jezzie was probably not going to be a werewolf, but she was in a lot of pain and Paul didn't blame her for a second for being worried as shit about Embry even being alive. Paul figured that Jezzie – much like him and some of the others – had been forced into such long-term emergency mode, that they only now began to realize how much all-consuming panic they were holding onto about the people they loved.

Unfortunately, there was not really anything Paul could do for the girl. He'd stopped trying to connect into the Pack's hivemind days ago. Normally, the La Push wolves fought together and very close to home. That was what their wolves were made for. The collective consciousness was not built to deal with dozens of outside actors spread across so much land. With each wolf seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, feeling so many different things at once it became chaos. Because they were so spread out, no one was seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, or feeling any of the same things and to have all that information coming from a dozen different people at once caused the mind to grind to a halt.

All the wolves had opted out of the telepathic communication, for the most part. At least to the extent that they could. They could avoid pouring gas on the fire, but there was little in the way of other damage control. They couldn't avoid bleeding raw emotion through the Pack bond. As a result all the wolves could feel the panic from La Push when the woods began to go up in flames. The only reason they knew the panic was coming from La Push was because it emanated in equal parts from three conscious minds. No one could differentiate the spare and fleeting moments of individual anxiety or the spikes of pain that bounced around the Pack mind like an echo chamber.

Something had been slightly off kilter since earlier that day. It had felt like something had been knocked off an internal shelf and shattered into a million pieces all over the floor. Something valuable, that couldn't be replaced. Paul had assumed that it was Collin and Jezzie. He assumed that even the light tug the human held on his consciousness was responding to her attack in conjunction with a pup being almost killed. But Collin was probably going to be fine. And Jezzie was losing her marbles, but she also was probably not dying. And that left Paul wondering why he felt off-balance. Almost literally off-balance, as if he had to compensate with every other step…

He couldn't explain it, and he figured he wasn't going to get any answers any time soon. So he decided he would deal with it later, and check on the children in the room next door.

He tried to draw on his reserves of calm energy as he stepped inside. Collin was sitting up and talking, even with his massively bandaged head. Abi and Nessie were playing checkers with crackers on the floor. And Zachary was flipping through TV channels. All four looked at Paul immediately.

"What?" he asked, at a loss.

"You reek, dude," Collin informed him plainly.

Zachary just looked him up and down, told everyone he had to pee, and closed the bathroom door.
Abi sat next to Paul on the bed and looked at him quizzically. "You smell like werewolves," she said sadly.

"Is Jezzie gonna be a werewolf?" Nessie asked pulling her knees up to her chest.

"Nah, kiddo, I don't think so." Paul felt relieved being able to say it out loud.

"Well, that's not so bad," Abi decided.

"I'd say so," Paul replied. There might've been worse things than being a werewolf, but he was pretty sure being a werewolf just generally sucked all around.

"When Zachary and I were turned to werewolves, lots of people were still scared of werewolves."

"I think people are still scared," Paul replied.

"Yes, they are," Abi nodded in agreement. "But they think werewolves are just stories now. So they don't try to pester us. And we don't have to live forever anymore."

"You're not immortal?" Paul asked in surprise. "But you guys got bit, like, a century ago."

Abi nodded. "A long time ago. But my mother… she always liked to work with plants. She found this flower that makes you normal. It's a special kind of one flower and you have to prepare it a certain way. She found out this winter."

"It cures you?" Paul asked dubiously.

Abi shook her head. "No, it makes you get old like regular people. So me and Zachary use it now… and we'll start to get big like everybody else."

"And you'll mature, and grow old, and die someday?"

Abi nodded. "Isn't that wonderful?"

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**Monday, April 28, 2008**

Jezzie had been out in the motel parking lot with Nessie, Zach, and Abi. She'd found cheap sidewalk chalk when she went to the 7-11 for coffee for her and Paul (because if she had a coffee problem before, it was even worse now; especially given that her body recouped it's losses at night simply by making her stay human – true rest hadn't happened). She'd asked the motel owner if the kids could draw and he agreed so long as they didn't draw or write anything obscene. None of them had talked much since the war had ended in their neck of the woods. Jezzie dearly hoped that they were just pensive. She hadn't wanted any of them to think of her as a killer, but it was better than risking her being hurt or killed. Then when she'd started slowly losing her mind and scratching at the walls the night the werewolf poison was in her system, well, Jezzie wouldn't have blamed anyone for thinking she was absolutely nuts. Ness didn't seem to have an aversion to Jezzie, and Zach and Abi's shyness didn't seem any different than normal. They still sidled up to her when they went to the room next door and visited Collin.

And she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that – like her – maybe the three little ones were wondering about their family and friends. She knew Zachary and Abigail had been victim of at least one Volturi attack recently, and Nessie lived in the heart of a wolfpack. As vague as Jezzie was in her explanations, how could these kids not overhear or intuit what exactly had been unfolding in
recent months. They were young, not stupid. They must've been very worried. Because Jezzie was worried as all hell.

In a very serious way, Paul had concluded that Jacob was probably not dead. He was pretty sure that he would've felt it if the Alpha had died. Not to mention it would've accounted for some serious hierarchy shufflings. Nessie's tranquil state corroborated this. Paul was also sure that Rachel was fine… and, by extension, probably Addie. And while Jezzie was glad to hear this, she wanted more. What about Collin and Brady? Seth and Anna? Leah? Kim? Noah? Her dad? Veronica? Embry?

She couldn't help it but, that last name and face echoed around her head and into her consciousness more often than anyone else's. Completely uncalled for and unbeckoned random glimpses of his face or his laugh or the sight of him punching Quil in the arm would drift through her mind like tumbleweeds. And the more she thought about Embry, the more she began to think about the rest. And the thought of losing any of them, of losing Embry, made her throat close up; her stomach would churn, and without her permission she could feel the tears sting her eyes. All this could elapse in the course of a few minutes. And that's why Jezzie kept herself constantly busy when she wasn't asleep.

Because they hadn't heard from anyone. No one was picking up their phones. And Paul couldn't hear anyone the spare few times he'd gone outside to phase. Jezzie got so angry – how could they not call to tell them they were okay? How could they not know how worried they were here? – that she knocked the ice bucket and strategically stacked free toiletries over. Paul had just raised an eyebrow but told her to let it out.

Having Paul around helped. Having Paul around helped a lot. The Beta wolf calmed the minds of Pack with his presence. Not necessarily because Paul was a naturally peaceful being, though he'd definitely mellowed out in recent years. After Jake, Paul was the most dominant male wolf. He had a whole Pack underneath him. Men, women, boys, girls, wolves, humans, vampire hybrids. Pack responded to ranked wolves.

Jezzie wasn't alone anymore. Because as much as Collin was Pack, he was still a kid. And Jezzie refused to lean her adult responsibilities on him – even as they fought a supernatural battle to reestablish the world order. And then he'd had to leave. And when he'd been totally knocked out of commission? Jezzie had the most horrific flashbacks to the first battle. To Sam. To Jared. They'd lost Jared, because the size and scale of his injuries had made him beyond both Jezzie and Carlisle's help. And as Jezzie held Collin's skull together and prayed to God it would heal at least fast enough to keep his brain where it belonged, she realized she couldn't do it alone.

She had Nessie to watch after. Nessie was a child, despite her advanced intelligence. Then there was Zachary and Abigail, who were wonderful children but she didn't blame them for being wary near her. They didn't know her very well. The last time she'd seen them was when they stayed at her house prior to the last battle, a whole year ago. And Jezzie also had to make sure that Collin sort of stayed alive. When Paul came crashing through the trees after Azrael's attack outside their motel, she would've cried tears of joy if she had been thinking clearly. She had another adult to lean on, but they were both exhausted.

Paul had taken Collin duty at night – to make sure he didn't go unconscious, or experience any strange symptoms (though they were admittedly running blind at this point with his internal injuries; he could still understand, and talk, and hear, and move his arms and legs and they declared that a temporary victory) and he and Jezzie alternated during the day. Today, Paul was asleep. And Jezzie and the little ones were spending the sunny, cool day drawing in the middle of the motel parking lot. Zach was drawing the Mercedes; he seemed to like cars, Jezzie noted, he'd asked her quite a few
questions about it over the course of the week. Most she couldn't answer. Abi was drawing a cheese burger, and Jezzie suspected she was getting hungry so close to lunch time. Nessie was drawing wolves and the sight of it made Jezzie both pleased and a little sad. Nessie was far more affected by Pack dynamics. The trials of being imprint by the Alpha. Jake's absence had set Nessie off-balance. She had no prior experience being separated from her Dad. Jezzie had felt out of place mothering any of the three, but they had responded well to the nurturing. Hugs, and good night stories, and being toted around on occasion – they had grown moderately comfortable with Jezzie after spending a week in car with her.

Jezzie watched as Zach started making engine noises, and Abi drew what might've been french fries. Nessie used her fingers to shade blue into the eyes of one wolf's profile. Seth. Seth was the only wolf with blue eyes. Jezzie grinned, noticing that Nessie had even incorporated his goofy grin. She suddenly paused in her creation, the chalk poised over the pavement. She held entirely still and only turned her head, taking in her surroundings.

Jezzie heard the girl mutter something. "What'd you say, Ness?" Jezzie asked as she drew two wheels for her ice cream truck.

"Daddy," the girl whispered audibly this time. Jezzie's head snapped up and she glanced around and followed Nessie's line of sight. Nothing.

"You'll see him soon, Nessie, I promise. We'll talk to him tonight when we call home, okay?"

"Daddy?" the girl said again, not responding at all to what Jezzie had said.

"I don't hear anything," Zachary noted. Jezzie trusted his senses as they were apparently as good as the vampires and shapeshifters.

Jezzie opened her mouth to speak, but Nessie stood. "Daddy!" The small girl screeched and took off at a run – and Jezzie was briefly thankful that it was at a human pace – before making it to the end of the parking lot.

She glanced at Zach and Abi. "Stay here, you two. Paul, watch the kids!" she shouted. Jezzie stood and ran after Nessie, still so exhausted she couldn't even feel her legs moving beneath her. Nessie disappeared around the corner and Jezzie lost sight of her. "Renesmee!" she shouted before coming to a dead halt on the sidewalk.

Jezzie watched as the small child jumped inhumanly into the arms of an almost seven foot tall teenager, grinning from ear to ear. "Daddy!" Nessie cried in delight. Her jaw dropped at the sight not ten feet from her and then her knees almost followed suit when she saw Embry Call standing only an arm's length behind Jacob.

She froze.

Embry closed the gap between them in a few short steps and enveloped Jezzie entirely in his arms. For a moment her brain disconnected but then remembered how her limbs worked. She wrapped her arms around his neck, strong enough to choke, and her sore legs wound around his waist in a scissorhold. She gasped an inhale and he felt her tears against the skin of his neck where her face was buried. He felt her nails digging into the skin of his back and it was actually vaguely painful. It was the best feeling in the world.

His Jez was alive.

He wound his arms around her, broad hands across her back, willing her breathing to calm. "It's
okay, Jez. You're fine. I'm fine." Since when had he become the voice of reason? Jezzie was always the rock. She never wavered in her steadfast determination on anything. She smelled like pain, and poison, and anxiety it was about the most awful combination of smells on the poor girl. It had been a long week for everyone.

Body counts for their side were still tentative. Paul had left Jasper and host of other werewolves in the Midwest. No one had heard from Sam or Quil coming home from Alaska. Anna, Brady, and Seth were unaccounted for. All the power to Olympic Peninsula had either been knocked out by a storm and the fires. They'd had no word from the any of the vampires or the Plains Pack.

Paul and Jezzie talked about it. It didn't make it any easier.

Jezzie breathed Embry's scent and absorbed his warmth with selfish abandon. She didn't care; she could feel his nose in her hair, too. She pulled at where she could reach, willing him impossibly closer as he hugged her tight enough to make it ache.

"I was so worried about you, Jez," Embry said quietly.

He felt her nod against him. "Embry?"

"Yeah, Jez?"

And he finally actually got to see her face as she pulled far enough away from them to see each other. She stared downward for a while before making eye contact. "I killed someone."

Jake and Embry and Jezzie and Nessie made their way back into the parking lot to find a confused Paul and two expectant children. He informed them that he'd woken up when he felt Jezzie falling apart. Ever aware of Pack dynamics, even in the dead of sleep. Surrounded by all ranking Pack members, the responsibility that had been propping Jezzie up for the past week – and especially the last twenty-four hours – had been pulled from underneath her.

People always described overwhelming responsibility as a burden, which made Jezzie think of something you had to carry. But she thought it was a lot more like a crutch. The only thing that kept her from refusing to get out of bed, the only thing that kept her from going completely emotionally non-responsive was knowing she was responsible for other lives – for Nessie and Zach and Abi and Collin. But now that top ranking wolves had arrived? An alpha, who had mastered calm-assertive energy that could mellow out the most high-strung. Paul had been slowly ironing out her kinks since he'd arrived. And Embry. Embry was alive. (If Leah had arrived, Jezzie probably would have just gone comatose with endorphins or something…)

And then she melted. She thought that was the best way to describe it. She didn't crumble and she didn't shatter. She kept together, but with nothing to prop her up, she caved to the emotional turmoil that had crippled her.

"I came half way across the country and Paul tells me you've been in a walking coma." Paul had taken the Batmobile and the kids to go get dinner (they were going a little stir-crazy) that night. Jezzie and Embry had allowed Jacob a moment with his pup – and the Pack's Omega – and the pair sat on a bench in the motel's front grass.

"Azrael got me," she told him. Might as well not sugarcoat it.

Embry looked at her through narrowed eyes before proceeding to sniff around. His hands eventually found her waist and carefully lifted the hem of her shirt. He couldn't see the laceration or Paul's stitches beneath the long patch of gauze and tape, but he could smell it. Blood and werewolf. He
hadn't distinguished from the fucking myriad of medical smells coming from Collin. He concentrated his anger and kept it in check. That bastard was so lucky he was already dead.

His hand almost instinctually reached to cover the weak spot, the source of pain, on his mate. Jezzie's hand reached to cover it and held it there.

"That's what Paul meant when he said you were sick?" Embry asked quietly.

Jezzie nodded. "Partly. The cut's really shallow but I got enough… werewolf contagion… for my body to have to fight it off. I had a fever and then chills and it was pretty painful. But it was mostly out of my system the next day. It was a pretty terrible night. My body still hurts all over and it's only getting worse. I'm not sure why. Paul took good care of me. He's done a good job."

"Paul doesn't give himself enough credit, most days," Embry agreed.

"I'll have three more ugly scars to add to the collection," she said blithely.

Embry looked up at her doubtfully. "Yeah… that's it."

"They're not going to heal right," she told him matter-of-factly. "I can tell. They feel funny. I don't like them."

She wrapped her hands around her torso in a defensive way that was so canine Jezzie might've fooled another shapeshifter. "Jezzie," Embry tugged the girl seated next to him and she willfully moved closer and into his embrace. "Scars happen. They're proof you survived some gnarly shit."

"I have enough scars on the inside from my MS slowly tearing apart my brain. I don't need to be any uglier on the outside."

Embry pulled Jezzie closer and into his lap, being careful of her stitches. He wrapped his arms around her middle, leaning down into her back and resting his chin against her shoulder, forming a protective posture. He could smell the salty tinge of tears. "Jezzie, I have seen quite a bit of you over the past year and I have yet to see a single ugly part. So pardon me if I don't believe that for a fucking second."

"Don't you think you might be a bit biased?" Jezzie whispered quietly, her hands on top of his own.

"Oh, I'm definitely biased," he assured her. "But I didn't just get that way over night, Jez. You convinced me, because you're smart and pretty and a helluva lot of fun. And I think there are far worse things in life than being biased in favor of the most beautiful woman who's ever agreed to associate with me."

His hand skirted down and underneath the hem of her shirt. His palm rested flat against her bandaged abdomen. "You're not ugly, Jezzie. Not by any definition. You're actually kind of fucking wonderful, because you're gorgeous inside and out. And I'll tell you that every day until you believe me."

Jezzie uttered an unbelieving sort of laugh and swiped at her eyes. "Oh!" Embry started. "That reminds me… I think you're up for some good news anyways. Wanna hear it?"

"Sure," Jezzie shrugged noncommittally. She wasn't quite sure anything was going to put her into a joyful splendor at this particular moment, but she welcomed the effort.

"Well, remember how Leah and I were doing research into where the hell I came from?"
Jezzie nodded and offered a wet laugh. "Yeah. You told me about how you found your dad. And... you told me about the potlatch stories. About all those women that got killed."

"Okay, so there's an Act II that we managed to dig up," Embry replied excitedly. Jezzie hadn't heard Embry this excited in a while. "After all those women got killed and their other family members started phasing to protect the rez full time, all the guys that had lost a wife or sister or daughter swore they'd never love another woman like they'd loved the ones they'd lost."

"And?"

"And they didn't," Embry replied simply. "Something clicked inside these new wolves heads and they never loved anyone like they loved the women they lost. They took a really unnatural control over their emotional lives. Sometimes we don't choose who we love. Quileute imprinting kind of takes that massively overboard. And Makahs trend the other way. Love is active, not passive. Makah wolves choose who to love and how."

"So..."

"I will never imprint, Jezzie."

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**Tuesday, April 29, 2008**

The following day four skin-walkers and two valkyries showed up in the motel parking lot. Jezzie stood – wan, pale, and emaciated in the window and stumbled back a few feet until she bumped into Embry. She watched as Jacob left the room next door – with Zachary hot on his heels – and they greeted the newcomers.

Whoever ran this motel was going to think they were such weirdos…

Moments later the group turned as Jacob led them towards the door Jacob had just come from. They were gone for a while and Jezzie heard mumblings next door, but she mostly just tuned it out as she curled up and rested.

Awhile later she heard the door next door close and then saw the same caravan make it's way to the door of the room she was currently residing in. "No," she whined, turning her face into Embry's shirt and conceding an early defeat. "No more supernaturals. I can't do it anymore..."

"My senses say this is gonna be a good house call, Jez," Embry replied. He submitted to her tugging need for closeness as Jacob launched the door open.

"Jezzie Sullivan, I've found you another supernatural doctor!"

Jezzie stared mostly dumbfounded as Jake explained that whatever was happening to her was obviously not normal, and clearly they needed help, so he'd called up some of their allies still in a holding pattern in the Appalachian mountain range.

Jezzie didn't know why he hadn't just called Carlisle. But she began to read between the lines and that's how she ended up leaking silent tears through the majority of her exam from the two doctors.

One valkyrie – Lena – was a cheerful young woman with short dark hair. Aaron from the skin-walkers had more snark than most people could've handled and therefore got along swimmingly with Paul. The two M.D.'s took their time looking over Jezzie and asking her a myriad of questions. She explained to them that she had MS – a preexisting condition she was already feeling flicker back to life before her werewolf encounter.
Aaron sat in the desk chair with his feet up, and Lena sat on the desk with her legs swinging beneath it. "So what do you figure, Ice Queen?" Aaron grinned at the tall, dark-haired woman.

Lena observed her toes as she thought. "Well, she mentioned that she was already feeling the symptoms of an exacerbation before she was attacked. Stress is a trigger in many auto-immune disorders, but--"

"Wait, wait!" Aaron sat up suddenly, his feet hitting the ground. "MS is the result of an overactive immune system. Her body attacks itself, and in this case it's focused on the myelin sheaths in her brain and spinal cord."

"Very good," Lena nodded. "You pass Epidemiology 101."

"No, no," Aaron continued on with his apparent epiphany. "Think about it. Her immune system is just getting geared up to destroy a little more of her brain, when all of a sudden it's introduced to an actual viral infection. The force is overwhelming and her immune system diverts the course from her brain to the poison in her system."

"Bluntly put," Lena nodded. "That explains why she was able to fight off the small amount of poison, but not how she's feeling now. The physical symptoms don't really match up with the mental and emotional to create a picture of shock or trauma that makes sense. Oh!"

"What is it?" Aaron egged her on.

"Werewolf poison is quite potent. And while it is feasible to believe that a human can fight it off, it would require an exceptionally strong immune system. What if her immune system backed itself with even more strength to rid her body of the poison and when that was finished returned to its original mission?"

"And now her super werewolf-fighting immune system is giving her the mother of all MS flares," Aaron concluded sadly.

"Yes," Lena nodded. "Which isn't helped by the fact that she apparently has zero medication with her."

Jezzie just stared up at them from the bed. She'd been watching them volley back and forth like a tennis match. "The drugless girl is moving into the worst MS flare of her life. Good. Thank you for your help, and confirming that I'm probably going to be okay, eventually. I'm going to bed for, like, eight days now."

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

"I'm sorry." After sleeping – really sleeping – for sixteen hours curled into Embry's side, they'd gone for a walk and Jezzie led them to the stretch of beachfront off the main road. Just a line of jersey barriers before a six foot drop to the rocky breaks below. Georgia was nothing like La Push.

"Why the hell are you apologizing to me, Jez?" Embry offered as he sat on the concrete wall, his feet dangling over the rocky breaks and sloshing Atlantic along with Jezzie's.

"Remember the first battle?" she asked, not meeting his eyes. Her back ticked slightly, the muscle twitch barely perceptible underneath her clothes, but Embry didn't miss the grimace. "When we lost Jared?" Embry only nodded. "You woke up from nightmares that night. So bad they made you sick. You felt like a monster for having to kill. And I tried to talk you out of it. I tried to talk you out of feeling the way you did. And now I'm in your place. And I think I would just flip out if someone
tried to talk me out of it. That's why I'm apologizing. I'm sorry."

"Jez," Embry reached tentatively, unsure how she'd feel about human contact. "You didn't try to talk me out of my feelings. You convinced me I wasn't a monster. Yeah, it took a while to sink in, but you were right."

"It's different," Jezzie shook her head. "Embry you're born for this. You're born to protect people. So it doesn't make you a monster if it's natural. You're a natural protector. But this?" Jezzie held the heavy empty pistol in her hand. She hadn't let it out of her sight at all. "This is not natural, Embry. This is not a natural extension of myself the way your wolf is. I shot someone in cold blood. I killed them."

"I'd say it's no different. You kill a person, you kill a person. Tearing them apart with your teeth is pretty awful and no amount my telling myself that it's what I'm born for makes me feel any better. Just like there's probably not a lot I can say to make you feel any better. You shot a werewolf in the heart with a silver bullet to protect yourself and the half pints and probably saved Collin's life in the process. You didn't just go on some killing spree, Jez. It was self-defense. Even that holds up pretty well in a court of law. And, yeah, I wish you could go through your entire life and never know what it's like to take a life. But I'd rather have you shoot the bastard than wind up dead. Call me selfish."

Jezzie only rolled her eyes. "I think I've been thinking too much about it. It was sick; I actually started feeling bad for the days he used to be human – like it was my fault or something..."

"It definitely doesn't make sense sometimes," Embry agreed nodding. "There wasn't a lot of the humane left in Azrael. All bets are off when you start wantonly attacking people. He did almost kill you himself. You had to make a hard choice, Jezzie. You had to make a hard choice, Jezzie. Risk you and four other lives – or kill a man. You picked the lesser of two evils."

"Doesn't mean it's not evil," she countered.

"That's debatable," Embry conceded. "But one bad action doesn't make an evil person. Are you sorry you did it?"

"I didn't have a choice," she muttered trying to justify it to herself, swinging her legs about staring at the gun resting uselessly in her lap. "This is going to mess with me for a long time," she told him honestly. "I hope you don't get impatient."

"It gets better," Embry told her. "And I screwed up big time with you once, Jez, I'm not about to do it again."

"Promise me something?" she asked and finally lifted her eyes from the rocky beach below.

"Sure."

"Promise me that we're going to go home. That we're going to go to school and become adults and lead normal lives. Even if we're living with a Pack of wolves that went from universally persecuted serfs to the winners of a supernatural world war. Promise me that you'll help make sure power is used benevolently so this never happens again. Promise me we're just going to be normal and happy."

"Normal?" Embry quirked a brow. "Probably not. Happy? I think we can work that one out."

Jezzie smiled slightly and nodded. She would take that. She weighed the unnatural metal object in her hand one last time before holding it by the barrel and throwing it out to sea.
Embry's hand wrapped carefully around Jezzie's back, and he could feel the alternating tension and relaxation in her different muscle groups. Underneath the sadness, and the sickening werewolf poison, and the anxiety there was a familiar and pervasive tone of physical pain.

Truth be told, she looked absolutely awful. She'd lost weight in the few short days of battle, attack, and recovery. Her skin was so pale Embry might've thought a whole other species of monster had sucked her dry. And she was just generally hunched, tired-looking, and miserable.

Jezzie reached out and made desperate contact with his knee. He took her iron grip in his free hand, and he couldn't quite see her face. However, he could hear her sharp exhale as a spasm reverberated up the side of her back.

"Embry," she muttered around a swallow. "I really need my meds."

Thursday, May 1, 2008

"So, uh, Jezzie?"

"Yeah Jake?"

"I think we're gonna need your help. Again. You game?"

"Jacob, I think we're past the point of formality where you guys have to 'ask'," she noted as she worked to pack the spare remnants of all their belongings into the trunk while moving as few muscle-groups as possible. They were headed home today. Embry had left this morning to catch up with Jasper so he didn't have to leave the Midwest alone. Jezzie had to force him out of the parking lot after proving that despite the pain that had begun to cripple her, she could walk by herself. Embry had begged her not to lie to him, and Jezzie had assured him that she'd be fine with Jacob and Paul and that she would see him back in Washington. It was really hard to do, because mostly she just wanted to curl up in his lap and not move for hours on end.

"Lay it on me," she told Jacob.

"Quil needs your help."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. "Tell him he knows Veronica as well as I do and if he wants to get laid, he can figure it out himself. He's gonna have to work for it."

"No," Jacob shook his head. "Not that kinda help."

Jezzie shuffled a few things around and turned towards him. "Jake, what's wrong? Just tell me. You were gone for a while this morning trying to figure things out with the Pack everywhere. Embry's headed home. The Plains Pack is bound for La Push for layover before negotiations, the rest are headed south from Alaska, and the other shape-shifters have gone home. What's going on?"

"During the battle," he replied. "Something happened to Quil. No one can tell what. And he can't phase."

"Human or wolf?"

"Wolf," Jacob confirmed. "He's... he's blind, Jezzie. He can't see a thing. But... yeah, no. He's blind. There's something else going on, also. Paul can feel it, too, but we don't know what it is. There's still too much chaos in the Packmind. But something's wrong. And right now the least we can do is get Quil some help."
Jezzie just stared at him, her mouth agape. "And Carlisle's…"

"Dead," Jake confirmed her suspicions. Jezzie heard a door slam behind her and figured that Collin and Paul had just finished closing up their two motel rooms for good. Her hands fumbled in the trunk and she dropped what she was holding. Her brain stalled and she couldn't even remember what she was holding.

"Really?" he nodded.

"And I can't let Lena or Aaron on to our land, unfortunately. Not yet, anyways. The Council is on DEFCON 1 after the fires, and I have no idea what other shape-shifters will do to the rez kids with phasing genetics."

"Okay," she took a breath. "All right… um, Paul? Paul! Can you and the rest make for Boston in the Batmobile by your lonesome?"

"Yeah," Paul nodded carrying a last trash bag, while Collin followed with Nessie on his shoulders. The first few days of Collin's recovery had been slow and tedious. Beyond speaking, seeing, and processing information no one knew what kind of damage his brain had sustained and whether the wolfy genes would heal it. However, on the third day he actually stood up on his own to go to the bathroom. The next day he ate solid food and walked outside by himself. He was prone to splitting headaches, something Jezzie suspected he might be stuck with, but he agreed it was a small price to pay for being alive. Lena and Aaron couldn't do much for him without imaging, but no one smelled any internal bleeding and he otherwise tested out mostly fine.

"You guys don't want to join the clown car?"

"Nah," Jake offered offhand. "I don't think we can."

Paul looked at his Alpha appraisingly before turning to Collin. "Hey half-pints? Go turn in the room keys and get us checked out?" He tossed the two key rings to Collin who rolled his eyes at the brush off but didn't say anything, and took Zach, Abi, and Ness with him. He didn't speak again until the pup was out of earshot. "What's up, kids?"

"Jake and I are gonna have to fly back," Jezzie told him.

"And not just because you don't fit in the clown car," Paul added.

She shook her head.

"Quil's all fucked up, man," Jacob offered. "We haven't been able to get a read on him or Sam because they were making their way back from Denali in human skin. Quil couldn't phase and I haven't heard from Sam. Leah and Seth went to help and when they came back with them… Seth doesn't even know how to tell me what's wrong and Leah's shutting down. Plus, I need to figure out what the hell it is that's making us both feel off-balance. Something's wrong and you know it."

"And Collin needs to get back to school. He's already missed the better part of this week and I can't get him out of more than that."

"Collin in school: check. So… what's Quil's deal?" Paul offered. "He okay?"

"He can't see a fucking thing and no one knows why," Jacob replied. "Something that happened during the battle and Jezzie's the best thing we got since Carlisle was taken out."

"Christ," Paul sighed and leaned against the open trunk. "God, that fuckin' kid of mine… All right,
I'll make back for Boston. I've got enough Red Bull to keep awake and this thing drives like a gift from God so we should be back for Collin to get to class tomorrow morning; the half pints and I'll hang around your place until you get back, Jezzie. No rush."

"Thank you, Paul. Keep them safe," Jezzie nodded towards the now returning brigade.

Paul glanced towards her. "I'll keep your pup safe," he nodded. "You go help mine."

Rachel had gotten a phone call from her brother at the most unholy time of 3:17AM. Because Addie slept liked the dead, Rachel was the one to crawl across the bed and her spouse to reach the cordless phone. She glanced at the number and scowled.

"Jacob you either better be dead or in jail."

"Neither," he quipped. "Do me a favor?"

"You paying?"

"Bring Addie, and I'll buy you a pizza."

"Deal. Now dish. What'd I just agree to?"

"I need you guys to get to La Push."

"Oh…" Rachel's tone changed. She'd known that tensions among the wolves and the vampires had reached their boiling points lately. But the flares were prolonged and spread over time and the country. Rachel and Addie had not been able to afford to leave Seattle and their jobs for such extended periods of time. She knew Paul had gone to the Midwest and some of the others had headed further north. They hadn't been able to get in touch with anyone along the coast for days due to a storm. "What's going on? Is everyone all right?"

"No," he offered without flourish. "Quil got hurt Rach, and I need someone to go tell Veronica. I'm in Georgia, and I can't assess his mental condition. God only knows what he'd tell her. I want you to head down and see if it's safe for her to see him. If we have to tell her, we have to tell her. But I'd like to avoid spilling the Pack secret only to have her dump the guy because he's crippled."

"Way to sell the girl short, Jake," Rachel replied as Addie mumbled something incoherent.

"I'm the Alpha. It's my job to assume the worst."

"So what do I do if Quil's gone fruity?"

"Keep her away. Make up an excuse. Tell her he's in some out of town hospital. I don't know. You're a better liar than me."

"And if Quil's otherwise mentally sound?"

"Make up a corresponding excuse before you let her in the house."

"Two pizzas."

"Two pizzas. And send Addie to check on Leah. Her head's nothing but chaos and I'm worried."

"Ten-four, little brother." Rachel hung up and nudged Addie awake beside her. "C'mon, lady, we got a mission."
It was definitely a good thing that Rachel judged Quil to be of totally sound mind because when she told Veronica that he'd been hurt in an accident after filling in for Paul in drydock and gone blind, well, she was quite certain no human strength would've restrained the girl from finding the guy.

Quil had the blessing and curse of not actually remembering what happened to him. "I don't know what happened!" Quil shouted at her after Rachel had tried to prod his brain.

"Well neither do I!" she'd yelled right back.

The town was all but dead of shape-shifters when Addie and Rachel drove in. Quil was confirmed in town and so were Seth and Leah. Brady and Anna were apparently combing the better part of Western Washington to confirm their coast was clear. Rachel had not heard from or seen any of the other wolves, except her brother. And according to Jacob, Leah was around but losing her marbles a bit. Addie had volunteered for that mission.

"Well, just make something up. I've got to tell her why I can't see anything! The last thing I remember is coming back from Denali with Sam."

"Okay, you know what?" Rachel announced. "We're going with an industrial accident, all right. We're just going to tell her you got something in your eyes working down in drydock. That's where she thinks you've been anyways."

Rachel didn't know how to break it to the girl, so she just laid it out there for her. She told him he'd been hurt at work. He'd gone blind. Veronica had hung up almost immediately. Rachel was sitting on the Ateara's front steps with Claire when Veronica came into the driveway on two wheels, peeling up at least six inches of packed earth. Claire laughed. Rachel was scared shitless.

"Where is he?" Veronica demanded, barely able to put the car in park before jumping out and moving across the lawn at record speed. Rachel stood and met her halfway. She braced her on the shoulders, but Veronica just pushed back. "Where is he!?"

Rachel didn't take offense, knowing the girl was reasonably upset. "Veronica, you need to calm down, all right? He's okay, but you've got to get a grip. You can't go in there like this. Take a deep breath for me."

Veronica obeyed, and focused on trying not to appear so manic, when she felt little arms wrap around her leg. She glanced down to see Claire. "Vonica, Quil can't see nuffin'. Now he doesn't know when my shoes don't match."

Veronica offered a sad and slightly choked laugh, as she bent to pick up Claire. "Well, let's go see him then. I promise I won't tell that you wore one green and one purple shoe today."

Rachel took a deep breath, hoped for the best, knew it was a long shot, and opened the door letting Claire and Veronica inside.

Veronica didn't know what to expect. She'd never met a blind person. She lived a small-town, sheltered life. "Qu-eeeeee-l!" Claire wailed in excitement when they stepped inside the living room. The small girl was clearly unfazed by the seriousness of the situation and Veronica was inclined to think that was best.

"Sounds like my two favorite ladies," Quil offered with a small grin.
Veronica couldn't help the way her feet dragged her and Claire across the floor, or the way she threw her one spare arm around her boyfriend seated on the couch. "Don't tell your Mom or your sister that," Veronica offered with a small laugh.

She was now even more slightly hysterical seeing that Quil was okay. She'd heard 'accident' and didn't know what else could've been wrong. A million horrific possibilities had flashed through her mind in the short time. She leaned back slightly, Claire still on her hip, and now more or less half sat on Quil's lap. She used her spare hand to grab a hold of Quil's face and give him a once over.

"Ronnie," Quil offered quietly, "I'm blind, I didn't sever a limb or get a body transplant."

"Shut up, Quil," Veronica sniffed. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Vonica, you're squishing me," Claire spoke in muffled tones from her spot mushed between Quil and Veronica.

"It's a love squish, Claire," she smiled.

The weight of Paul's statement hung in Jezzie's mind and on her chest the whole way to the airport, up through when she bought the tickets with the last of her loan disbursement. (This was so not what you were supposed to do with financial aid money). Jacob finally prodded her while they sat on the tarmac, waiting for take off.

"You okay, Jezzie?"

She nodded vaguely. "Just thinking about what Paul said…"

"He's putting his trust in you," Jacob offered sagely, seeming to know what she was talking about without her explanation. "He loves Quil – Quil's his pup – and he's worried as hell. And if he can't be there, well, he considers you the next best thing. You're trusting him to get the rest home safe. He's trusting you to go help Quil."

"No pressure," she squeaked, gripping the armrests with a tension that had nothing to do with takeoff.

"Who else is gone, Jake?" she asked quietly. "You really threw me with the Carlisle thing. I had no idea."

"Damn," he grimaced. "I'm sorry. I keep forgetting who I've told and who I haven't. I feel like I've run over it a thousand times. All right so… We know Carlisle's gone. I think the rest of the Cullens are fine. Jasper and Rosalie are orchestrating that crap. We now know Azrael's gone. We lost Elizabeth from the Plains Pack. I don't know about the rest of the shape-shifters, but we're down a few skin-walkers and at least one Nagual. As for us, well… you, me, Ness, Collin, Paul, Embry, Quil, Leah, and Seth are accounted for. I've heard nothing either way about Anna, Sam, or Brady. What little I've heard about Quil and Leah isn't good. Is that everyone?"

The confused expression Jake offered Jezzie only served to remind her just how young Jacob was.

"What about our enemies?"

"Jasper finally got his revenge and polished off Maria, I heard. Esme went ballistic after Carlisle was taken out. She decimated that Volturi wife. Who was apparently the brains behind the operation. She's following them all back to Italy to make sure they don't fuck anything else up. Apparently, she was mad as all hell. Why no one thinks to tell the Alpha these things, I don't know. The Romanians
are intact, those slimy bastards – would you believe they actually showed up? Never got within a stone's throw of the real carnage. They just watched the rest of us duke it out. Granted, they look more feeble than crepe paper – do not tell anyone I told you that. No one's seen most of the nomads since the fighting broke out, and I think we're just assuming the worst. And last I heard, Demetri’s keeping the Egyptians from completely annihilating what remains of the Volturi. They're really chomping at the bit."

"What makes him do that?"

"He used to be one of the Volturi Guards."

"Loyalty?"

"Not so much," Jake shook his head. "Actually, I think it's more his sense of the rules of war. He reminds me a lot of Jasper. I talked to him on the phone the other day. Technically the Romanians and Egyptians didn't win this – as much as they think they did. They just didn't lose. They have been having a massive bitch fest with the Volturi for a while, but all the bloodshed has been here and now. The Volturi were swiping up old Romanian and Egyptian territory without anything more than grumblings. It was the shifters that started the bloodshed when the Volturi started marching around this side of the Atlantic like they owned the place. They were using Maria and Azrael. Alice's suspicions were correct."

"So the shifters won the war. Which means the Egyptians and Romanians don't get to dictate terms of peace."

"You're catching on."

Jezzie didn't register much else between Charleston International Airport and when she and Jake finally made it inside Clallam County lines. She snuck into her house – that's right, snuck, because there was no way she could quite explain to her father why she was popping in for a few minutes in the middle of April – and retrieved her MS meds and old EMT bag, the one she hadn't taken to Boston and made their way back to La Push.

They had agreed to Addie's request to stop by the Clearwater place before heading to the Ateara's. Addie was worried about Leah. Jezzie agreed to simply wait in the car, while Jake hopped out. Seth slid into the driver's seat moments later after coming out of the woods, and they didn't go anywhere but his story certainly took Jezzie miles and miles from where they started...

According to Seth, Leah had been in the back yard for three days now. Ever since they got home. Jake could believe that considering the yard was littered with bottles and there was a new line, worn into the dirt and completely devoid of grass. Leah just kept pacing. She didn't seem to notice when Jake rounded the corner of her house.

"Lees?"

She looked up at him and what he saw horrified him. He'd never seen that face on Leah, and he'd seen a lot of Leah's emotional planes. They all had. Her eyes were wide and empty, her mouth was set and her forehead was tense. She was shaking slightly, too, but not from the effort of trying not to phase.

"I've been pacing back here for three days," she said quietly. "I have consumed a liquor store's worth of scotch in sixteen hours and it's done nothing except make me pee twice as often."

Jake approached her carefully and braced his hands on her arms. "Leah, what's going on? Tell me.
Seth hasn’t said anything and I haven’t been able to get a read on you while phased so far away. You’re too good at hiding your head, Lees."

Her eyes focused on some indiscriminate point somewhere over his shoulder and he saw a muscle twitch in her cheek.

"Sam's dead."

And with those words, Jacob felt something click into place as part of his soul dropped from his consciousness. The chaos he’d been feeling inside, he’d assumed it was a result of the war and having to shoulder everyone’s turmoil. He thought it was because a pup and a human had been attacked. But even Paul had said that things felt no different – no less off balance – since they found out both Jezzie and Collin would be fine. The off-kilter feeling never left, but it was because they’d lost a packmate. Sam Uley. The former Alpha. Twenty-one years old. Newlywed. Made some of the best food in the county when Emily let him get spatula in edgewise. Tortured soul. Never stopped thinking about the devastated woman standing across from him.

"I'm sorry." Jacob was torn from his own inner spiraling as things clicked into place way too quickly. He looked up and could see Leah, still looking at that same spot over his shoulder, but this time she was leaking silent tears. "By the time Seth and I got there, he was gone. The vamp snapped his neck. It was quick. Quil was unconscious from the hit he took."

"Where is he?" Jake asked. Had they buried him in the Canadian woods halfway between Denali and here? "Sam."

"In my room," she mumbled, biting down against her lip. "I couldn't leave him there, Jake. I had to bring him back."

The mental image of Leah Clearwater, the Alpha female, carrying Sam's body, an old flame and a packmate, all the way home from the Canadian Rockies helped it click into place for Jacob. She had a lost him, a friend, a packmate, a family member and there was nothing she could do about it. And then she brought his body back home. To Jake's head, that spoke volumes more than any words could ever hope to. Leah lost Sam in a way that Emily would never be able to take from her. Leah insisted he changed after he imprinted and those that knew Sam both before and after the event silently agreed.

Sam and Leah had reached some semblance of peace after the first encounter with the Volturi last winter. Things hadn't been good, per se, but the outright warfare had stopped. Leah was no longer hostile. The bitterness was replaced with a fleeting nostalgia. Sam, however, continued to labor mentally over everything. Jake knew this, because he got no peace from any of his wolves' minds.

Leah had lost, along with Sam, the chance for things to get any better. She had hoped for at least peaceful acquaintance if not casual friendship at some point in the distant future. It was never an option for them now. He’d never grow old, he’d never have kids, he was barely old enough to buy beer and he was gone so quickly.

However the thing that made Leah’s insides lurch the most – the thing that made her world feel like it had reversed its poles and changed the direction of its rotation – was the feeling of relief. Relief for herself. Relief for Sam.

They were free.

They were finally free from each other. Sam was no longer tied to mortality and an imprint that Leah knew – just knew – he had to question all the time, but was too terrified to destroy another
relationship in an attempt at self-discovery. He was free from his own demons. Never again would Leah feel his gaze trained on her back from a distance, knowing he was daydreaming or thinking, but feeling that the path of his stare was somehow significant. She was free from feeling guilty for wanting the past back. She was free from having the seething hate for her cousin poison all aspects of her life. She was free from feeling guilty about moving on.

This was the final sign – if there ever was one – to let go, move on, and be free.

Then without warning, Leah wrapped her arms around Jacob's waist and buried her face in his shirt. He could feel her tears melt through the fabric almost immediately. He was surprised by the gesture. However, his wolf recognized a packmate – his alpha female – in need of reassurance. No… this was something different. It wasn't the Alpha. It was just Jake. And she was just Lees. And they were entwined so naturally together.

Carefully, he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. Still much larger than her, he folded her into his embrace as she sobbed. He let his chin rest on the top of her head, guarding and protecting her from any outside forces. It was the inner battles that Leah would have to fight herself.

He placed a kiss on the top of her head. "You did good, Lees."
Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter, guys. It came as quite a surprise as I was writing then realized: holy shit, I just finished the story? I really didn't think it was that close to done. Unedited mess is, as per usual, unedited.

Thanks to those that have reviewed and invested time and effort into this story. I know it was special goings at times. And a big thanks to StealthLiberal. I bow eternally at the altar of her knowledge. Her assistance has helped me craft a story that, I hope, does not misrepresent or offend tribal communities of the Pacific Northwest. And without her uncanny ability to talk me off my ledge this shit never would've gotten done.

Internet hugs forever.

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.

J.R.R. Tolkien

Friday, May 2, 2008 (cont.)

"Jake," Jezzie spoke, her hands feeling a little shaky as they rounded the bend to the Ateara place. "You know I might not be able to fix him, right? I mean… probably. If this is some kind of battle injury… I can't make him see again. I'm a med student, not Jesus."

"I know that, Jezzie," Jacob reassured her as he parked. "But it's better to get a semi-professional opinion before we resign the guy to a life of darkness. He and Embry are my best friends. Just... do the best you can."

Jezzie's eyes were red, but she showed no signs of tears. Jake had assumed that Seth told her about what happened. Jacob had climbed soundlessly back into the car after Leah shoved him away and told him to go help his best friend. Addie agreed to stay with Leah.

"Seth says Quil doesn't know," Jezzie mentioned quietly. "Maybe it's because he didn't see it for himself, but Seth says he hasn't really acknowledged anything that's happened."

"Maybe he doesn't remember it," Jake shrugged. "Leah said he was unconscious when her and Seth showed up. He didn't come to until they made it back to La Push."

Quil was inside, sitting on the couch with Veronica. There was a small bassinet near the armchair
and Jezzie could hear Kim talking in the other room. Quil had that vacant stare she knew she probably ended up with during her last flare when she couldn't see anything. "Little Red, is that you? No one I know wreaks of so much of coffee."

"Hi, Quil," she grinned despite herself. "Yeah, it's me."

"Home for Spring Break, Jezzie?" Veronica asked quizzically. She looked confused to see her.

"Uh…" Jezzie faltered. "Reading period. Before finals? I have a week off before finals."

"It's really good to see you," Veronica stood up and offered Jezzie one of her full-body hugs. Jezzie tried not grimace or cry in pain. Veronica didn't know that Jezzie's entire body felt like it was slowly crumbling to pieces. Her Dad had been home when she snuck in the front door to get her med bag out of the foyer closet. She was going to have to wait until he left to sneak in the back and get her leftover meds out of the fridge. "I'm gonna take a bathroom break and grab some of that food. Want something furball?" she grinned ruffling Quil's growing hair.

"I actually think I'm good. No wait! We have leftover pizza!"

"Only if you promise to share."

"Deal!"

And with that Veronica was gone to the bathroom.

"Does she…" Jezzie asked.

"Know? Nope," Quil popped the 'p'. "Thinks I got shit in my eyes from work. Depending on your prognosis, Doc, we might have to tell her about this wackadoodle life we all live."

It was then that Kim peeked into the living room. Her face wasn't in the old expression of happiness, the one that Jezzie had known a while. However, it also was not the face of her emotional vacuum. That was a scary expression Jezzie hadn't gotten very used to in the weeks after Jared's death. However, the small time Jezzie had in La Push after Noah had been born seemed to uplift Kim. Jezzie didn't know if it was just the effects of having given birth, or if it truly represented a shift in her demeanor. Today, Kim's face was set. She looked tired, she looked like she was upset and hiding it – maybe for Veronica's sake if she was ignorant – but she looked strong. Kim didn't look like she was going to keel over like she did in the days after Jared died. She didn't look like she was going to burst into tears like she did the days before her son was born.

She looked like a woman – not a girl anymore. And she looked like she was shouldering a lot for the benefit of others. She had a dishtowel over her shoulder, and her hair was tied back in a long braid. She was holding a Phillips head screwdriver and a baby bottle in her hand.

"Kim, it's good to see you," Jezzie remarked. Kim offered an unconvincing smile and nodded.

"You too, Jezzie. I've been helping out," she indicated towards Quil. "Veronica's been lucky enough to visit this weekend but her semester isn't over yet. What with the injuries from those too closet to the fire recently and everything, Joy hasn't been able to get out of her shifts at the hospital. It's the least I can do. Besides," she chided nudging Quil with her hip as she walked past. "This goof here keeps knocking into things in his blind daze and breaking them. I'm currently reattaching the knob to the back door so we can actually use it again. No more hip checking the infrastructure, please, Quil?"

Kim nodded to have Jezzie follow her into kitchen so Jake and Quil could talk. "Here," she tossed Jacob the bottle, "if you're gonna occupy the living room, you can feed my son." Jezzie laughed and
followed Kim. The girl kneeled back on the kitchen's linoleum floor and began to position the doorknob properly. "So," Jezzie began sitting down on the ground beside her. "Besides the obvious, how're things here in La Push? I haven't heard about anyone else?"

"Things have been better," Kim noted flatly. "The storm that swept through was pretty bad, though provided a convenient cover for the fires... Yeah," Kim nodded at Jezzie's surprised expression. "Everything at my end of the rez is too damaged from smoke to be inhabited."

Jezzie was surprised at how much anger she heard in Kim's voice. "Fuckin' psychopaths," she muttered. "Like we don't have enough shit to deal with? Now we have half a dozen families with unlivable homes and goodness only knows what they'll be able to salvage of their belongings. It was lucky, actually. I knew a contingent of them had arrived when I saw Anna and Seth bolt through someone's yard phased. Fortunately it was only two rogue ones. But I couldn't sleep after that obviously. Later I saw the smoke, and it got way too close, too quick. I strapped Noah into his back carrier and ran up and down my street banging on doors at 3AM. By the time the street was empty, I could see the flames in the treetops in the distance. And Anna, Seth, and Brady were running up the street to warn us to get out."

"Is everyone all right?"

"Yeah," Kim nodded. "Where the hell everyone will live in the meantime is another thing. A few of the families are still holed up in QTS. I made Seth watch Noah for an hour and broke into Paul's place." Jezzie couldn't help but grin at that.

"He's been gone anyways, right? We were roommates once under much more unpleasant circumstances, he can tolerate me again for a week or two. Plus – and he'll swear otherwise – he loves Noah. Paul's a hardcore baby guy. Little known fact. I'm lucky. Not everyone else is. Emily," Kim grinned in an odd way and laughed once. "Emily and Sam live way down the end of the street from me. I had to drag Emily out of the house. She was losing it. Has been losing it since Sam left for Alaska. It only got worse when..." Kim paused and Jezzie looked up.

"She knew," Jezzie mumbled in recognition. "Just like you knew." Emily had known the moment Sam had died.

Kim nodded evenly. "Yep. I didn't have the heart to tell anyone. Leah and Seth were already gone to help Sam and Quil, anyways. I can't even imagine... Anyways, after the fires were out, Emily just drove back to Neah Bay. When Anna went to check on her, she said she was fine, but she wouldn't open the door. Apparently she's in the process of losing her shit. Like full-on nervous breakdown."

"Wow," was all Jezzie could get out before Veronica entered the kitchen and began looking around the fridge. Kim tightened the last screw in the doorknob and the two seated girls stood. Jezzie leaned close and discreetly whispered. "I gotta check Quil out. Keep her busy for five minutes?"

Kim nodded seriously and Jezzie ducked out of the kitchen and back to the living room. Jake was sitting in the armchair and had helped himself to baby patrol. Apparently, Noah had yet to fully master bottle manipulation. Jezzie gave Jake a pat on the head and a smile as she sat carefully on the couch with Quil and pulled her bag close.

"All right, let's make this quick." Jezzie opened her bag and yanked out her penlight on top. "Can you see anything, Quil? Shadows? Changes in light? Movement?"

"A little bit," he nodded. "Like I can kinda tell when you move a lot – I could tell Ronnie stood up to hug you. But... I don't know if that's all the other senses compensating. It feels different – better – than when it first happened."
"Are you seeing darkness or shades of gray?"

"Neither," he shook his head. "It's like when you close your eyes. You don't actually see 'black' when you close your eyes. You see… whatever it is you wanna call it. It looks like that. Except I know my eyes are open."

"And you said it's getting better?"

"A little," he agreed. "Now it's kinda foggy. It's clearer if I concentrate, but that gives me a killer headache."

"Any idea what caused it?" she asked.

"Probably that spray of vampire venom I got to the eyes," Quil mentioned nonchalantly.

Jezzie tried not to swallow her tongue. "Oh… How'd that happen?"

"I was too when one got torn into. I don't know if it was because it had sucked someone dry too recently or what, but something spewed out of the body and it burned like a motherbitch and I haven't been able to see since. I don't remember anything after that either. Or anything much before it for that matter."

Jezzie grimaced. For all intents and purposes, it sounded like a chemical accident, a burn. And if that was it, he probably wouldn't get his vision back. There was also the issue that Quil was apparently still oblivious to the fact that Sam was dead.

"Okay," she mumbled. "I'm going to check your eyes out, is that okay? I don't want to hurt you further."

"No that's cool."

Jezzie moved closer on the couch and carefully lifted one of Quil's eyelids. She flashed her penlight to peer inside. "Hey I can kinda see that! Was there light?"

"Yeah, my penlight," Jezzie nodded. "You can see that?" Quil nodded happily. That was a moderately good sign. "Not too shabby."

Jezzie could see obvious burn scar tissue in his eyes. It wasn't like anything she'd ever seen before. She wasn't quite ready to chalk that up to vampire venom, given her limited experience with optometry. But it looked to be healing quickly enough. It concerned Jezzie though, that for all the healing Quil still couldn't see anything worth a darn.

She sat back and thought for a moment, hearing Veronica in the kitchen she knew she had to do it quick. "You're healing part way," she noted. "The scar tissue in your eyes is obvious but healing. What concerns me is that your vision isn't returning on par with your healing like all other wolfy injuries tend to do. But you are regaining some vision."

"So what do we do about it, doc?"

She mulled it over. "This is completely ethically unsound, but do you think we could get Sue or Joy to write a script for some steroids? If we add those into the healing process it might help jump-start your vision. Honestly, Quil, I don't know if you'll ever get it all back but maybe with the steroids you'd at least be able to get around without trouble."

"Time for a visit?" Jake offered.

Sue was amenable to writing Quil a prescription for some basic steroids. However, Jezzie – ever the
moral high ground – insisted that he do take them properly. She wanted it to be as legit as possible. Something about not fostering a lax approach to the abuse of prescription medication.

Jezzie took the car back to her house to sneak in the back door and get the last of her meds out of the fridge while her Dad left to grocery shop. Veronica asked for a ride into town to pick up some stuff. Jacob told Jezzie go 5MPH under the speed limit to give him time to tell Quil about Sam.

Jezzie was glad she didn't have to stick around for that talk. Jacob got in the car later, shaken. Quil really hadn't remembered a thing. It had all been news to him.

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_Saturday, May 3, 2008_

"Fuck it," Quil sighed in exasperation as he fired an article of clothing across the room. It missed the hamper by at least three feet and flopped to the floor.

"What's up?" Veronica leaned out of the bathroom across the hall, toweling her hair dry. Joy Ateara had been monumentally kind in allowing Veronica to spend an undetermined amount of time at the Ateara's. Veronica had the sneaking suspicion that Joy knew more than she let on, but her brain was not up to processing capacity and there was no way she had time to pester the woman. She was at the Ateara's for at least half the week and she had everything and nothing to do.

"I can't even fucking see straight enough to dress like a normal fucking human." He gestured indiscriminately towards the wall where the hamper was. "Is it blue? Is it purple? Do I even own purple shirt? I don't remember! And now I'll never know! All I can see is vague blurs of something that might've once been color. Just figuring out it was a fucking shirt has given me the worst headache I've had in really long time."

Veronica just listened to him rant and rave. She didn't think her heart could fall any further than her knees but it did. She watched him. All six and a half feet of him looked so small for the first time. He was sat on the edge of his bed, his head was in his hands as he tugged at his hair. She watched as he rubbed the heels of his hands into his eyes and blinked.

She padded across the small room and approached him carefully. He stilled as she came close, sensing her presence. She tucked the towel wrapped around her body into itself and reached her hands down. She wrapped her fingers in between his and gently worked his hands out of his hair. Her fingers wrapped around his wrists and down his forearms.

He slid from her grip and took her hands in his. "Your hands are cold," he said.

"Yeah," Veronica offered a half grin. "Mom's got awful circulation. I'm lucky enough to have her singing voice, but cursed with terrible blood flow."

He nodded and pursed his lips, appraising the trade off. He brought Veronica's hands to his lips and cupped them together to breathe warmth on them.

"I'm going to be trapped in my head for the rest of my life," Quil admitted quietly. And now her heart was in the foundation. She was going to have to get a leash for that thing.

He stood quickly, and she stepped out of his way. He moved across the room, like he might've been pacing, and only just barely missed the dresser. She didn't know what his intention was or where he wanted to go but he nearly fell inside the open closet as he groped for some portion of wall as an anchor for his whereabouts.

She stepped in front of him quickly and grasped at the hand that fell through empty space to catch his
"For fuck's sake – I can't even walk!" He dropped to the floor without flourish, and Veronica made a much more graceful crouch until she was on her knees. She pulled him close and he buried his face in her abdomen, wrapping his arms around her. It was unexpectedly intimate, and felt very vulnerable. It felt soul-bearing the way he just submitted to her touch like that.

"I am stuck inside my body…" he muttered in defeat. "I'll never see anything worth seeing ever again. I won't see you ever again. I won't see my Mom, my sister, my friends, nothing…"

"No, it's not true," she rebutted quickly. "Really."

"Really, Ronnie? Because if you've got a miracle cure, I'd die to find out." He sniffed and she crouched lower. "I used to be able to do shit. I could function like a normal human being. I used to—" He growled in frustration. There was still a lot he couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell her that he was born and bred to protect, and now he was the one that needed to be watched. He needed a handler. And as much as he knew it was stupid to feel like less of a man and less of a human with no sight, he felt that way anyways. He felt like an invalid and a child.

"Quil," she continued in desperation. She was desperately plumbing her reserves of comfort for something to say that didn't sound stupid or completely wrong or offensive. "You're gonna have a hard time with this for a while. I mean, you can see a little bit and your going to have to learn how that works. But you have other senses, Quil. It amazes me sometimes how you can hear me before I even enter the room, or you can tell what your Mom is cooking before you're even in the house. You have so many other ways that you perceive the world."

"Still doesn't make me not blind, dear," he replied bitterly.

"Well," she fumbled. "Maybe not in the strictest sense of the term, but you'll learn. You're not gonna be helpless, I promise. Okay? It's going to be really hard, but I'm here, all right? I'm here and I love you and I'm not going anywhere and we're going to figure this out together. I know that waking up and being able to see the time on my alarm clock and walk to the bathroom without needing full arm extension is a gift, but you can still function, Quil."

Quil didn't respond, but her babbling didn't seem to be uplifting him yet. She suddenly felt like she was drowning – more so than she'd been until this point anyways.

"You can still hear me, right?"

"Clear as day," Quil's muffled reply came.

"And you feel me?"

"Definitely."

"Can you smell me?" He nodded soundlessly. She carefully made to stand, and brought Quil with her. "Okay. Close your eyes. I know it sounds stupid – don't roll your eyes at me – just do it."

He obeyed her and stood in the middle of the floor with his eyes closed. She released his hands and stepped away, she backed to the far side of the bed, around its corner.

"You can't see me, but you can hear me. You can smell me. You can feel me. Take a deep breath, try not to psyche yourself out, and come find me."

Veronica was surprised that Quil actually listened to her, but she watched him visibly exhale. He
paused for a moment, only to make a rather smooth if slow progression towards her. She backed in towards the wall with a small grin before his hands pressed into the sheet-rock on either side of her. "Gotcha."

"I know it's going to be hard, Quil. So hard I will never have any idea how hard it is. But you have some pretty weird preternatural sensory skills. Being blind isn't going to trap you inside your body."

"One small step," he acquiesced.

"Next the giant leap," she smiled, reaching up to brace her hands on each side of her neck. However, before she could say anything else, she felt Quil's muscles contract underneath her touch. His breathing grew shallow and when she drew her hands back he took a small step away from her.

"Quil?" she asked tentatively.

"I don't know where that came from…" he admitted worriedly.

Jezzie spent the interceding weekend at Jacob's. She didn't want to impose another appetite on Sue Clearwater or Joy Ateara, and Jake's bigger couch combined with his apparent ability to cook good food ("Jezzie, I've lived alone with my Dad for five years, now. It was either learn to cook, or die.") was splendid. She felt bad not going home, but she would have absolutely no way to explain to her Dad why she was home for a random week in May. She'd just as soon let that one lie.

It was interesting living with the Alpha – even just for a weekend. Jezzie watched him single-handedly orchestrate final peace negotiations. With Paul in Boston for the time being, Jasper and Embry on their way home, and Quil slightly less than focused on his Pack-duties Jake was the one-man show. It was Jake and Leah – with some occasional input from Brady and Anna. And a lot of input from Kim and Rachel. Leah was moderating the Plains Pack and was focused entirely on being able to get them to come back out West.

Watching Jacob talk on the phone to the remnants of the Volturi and the Romanians and the Egyptians was about the weirdest thing in the world. Until then, the Egyptians were allowed to consolidate power insomuch as preventing the remnants of the Volturi from running rampant across the planet. Again. Because like hell was Jacob sending shape-shifters to keep track of their shit. And they all had to listen to Esme. Though that was understood more than spoken. Jacob got the impression that Esme Cullen scared the shit out of most of the European vampires.

"Look," he said, pacing across the kitchen floor while Jezzie indulged in his pulled pork. "I'm not giving you carte blanche, here. We haven't even agreed to peace terms yet. But neither of us want those Italian bats going berserk again. Keep them in check until then and leave the other covens alone. If they get out of line, let me know and we'll decide what we're gonna do about… I don't care how old you are and I don't care how long ago you were in charge. You lost the war. You lost a couple of wars. La Push calls the shots now. This isn't an unreasonable request… Okay, okay… OKAY! Can we just stay calm please? It's not to say things won't change but this is just until our little peace summit in June when we can hash things out for real. Okay? Yes. Esme is in charge until June. Why? Because I don't trust you as far as I can throw you. A single toe out of line and she will make the perp regret their existence… Wonderful. Thank you. Yeah… Call me if you need anything…"

Jacob hung up his phone and his head drooped against the counter top. "Tell me you had better luck with the shifters than I had with these emaciated bats?"

"If it's any consolation," Jezzie offered, swinging her feet around from the too high stool. "This
sandwich is really good, Jake."

"It's all in the oregano," he mumbled to the formica countertop.

"Really?"

"Uh huh," he mumbled. "I learned when I was fourteen that everything except baked goods is better with oregano."

"Hm," Jezzie hummed appreciatively and flicked her phone to life. "Well, I just got an email from the Valkyrie flock in Greenland and—"

"They emailed you?"

"Yes, Jacob," she replied. "They're from Greenland, not yurts of Siberia. They do the internet thing in other parts of the world."

"Anyways."

"Anyways," she continued. "They're good to go. They'll be here on the… thirteenth. They're flying in. And then they're flying in, so no one needs to go pick them up at the airport or anything. We'll need accommodations for… three."

"The skinwalkers don't want any part of it but I think that's because I freak them out a little bit. I feel like they're a little cynical, so Leah's gonna chat them up. And I should hear back from the Nagual Pride in the next hour or so. How're the vampires?"

"Pissy as ever."

"How many are coming along?"

"Between the Romanians, the Cullens, the Volturi, and the Egyptians? Eight."

"That's a lot of vampires so close to the rez."

"They'll be in Seattle. Any closer to La Push and we'll have grade school phases popping out of the ground like daisies."

"Do you think we'll have enough time between now and then for me to go home and fail all my finals?" she asked.

"You're not going to fail, Jezzie," Jacob rolled his eyes.

"I missed the last week of school, and my entire reading period. This batch of exams is not looking good for me."

"Go home, Jezzie. Pass your exams. We'll see you in June."

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**Sunday, May 4, 2008**

Veronica was convinced she was one hundred percent out of her depth. Her and Quil were up talking for quite a while – it was mostly lighthearted for once in a long time, since they'd learned of Sam's death.

Anna was asleep, and Joy had gone to bed hours ago. Veronica had stood to make for the couch,
when Quil refused to release her fingers. She folded like a napkin to his teasing and had ended up falling asleep right beside him.

She had also woken abruptly when he'd sat bolt upright in the middle of the night gasping like he'd just surfaced from the bottom of a lake. He was alternating scratching at his own throat and reaching out frantically into the nothingness.

She glanced around blearily. "Quil?" It took a few moments for her to realize that he was still asleep. "Quil!" she reached out to grab ahold of his wrists as Anna came crashing through the door.

When the door crashed against the opposite wall as Anna slid on the rug, Quil's frenzied movement slowed and he seemed to slowly awaken. Veronica just sat there, her hands still around his wrists – a cold sweat had broken over his whole body – she was now also out of breath.

"Holy shit," Quil muttered.

"What just happened?" Anna muttered. "I heard something, then I felt something…"

"No, no, no, no, no, no," Quil muttered to himself as he reached around without purpose. Veronica thought this was a gesture that had nothing to do with his inability to see. "That can't be right. Oh, fuck… who am I kidding? Leah!" he shouted the last.

Veronica jumped. "What?" she asked in confusion.

"Leah!" Quil repeated as he jumped ungracefully out of the bed. "Where's Leah? I need to talk to Leah. Right now."

"Quil it's 2:37AM."

"Right now!" he insisted.

Anna raised her hands in defeat. "I'll go give the woman a call."

Quil had not the patience to wait, so Veronica followed him out the door and halfway down the street. He seemed to be channeling his other senses well, as he made his ungainly though thoroughly upright way towards the Clearwaters. Leah came jogging up to meet them.

"Quil what the hell is going on?" she demanded. "I just got a call from your sister…"

"I… need to talk to you!"

"I… think I'll leave you two be," Veronica nodded, extricating her hand from Quil's and backing down the road.

Leah watched the girl retreat back down the road and into the Ateara's house. She flipped the porch light on and closed the door.

"Had a burning question at two in the morning, Ateara?" Leah asked sourly.

"It's about, Sam."

"What?" Leah choked.

"I… I don't know. I was asleep and it's like it all just dumped on me like a backhoe full of shit. I didn't remember what happened, Leah. I really didn't. I wasn't making that up. Jake had to tell me all about it and it was awful… But I've been feeling weird, and getting like these déjà vu moments. 
And… my dream… that shit wasn’t a dream.”

Quil could see her, but he could smell the salt in the air and he could hear the shake in her voice. "Tell me, Quil. Just… just tell me."

"I think I have to show you."

Leah steered Quil into the woods and the two phased. Quil could see for once. He might’ve been blind, but Leah wasn’t – and his brain still worked well and good. He could see everything she saw. But he’d focus on that later.

What is it, Quil? Tell me, or I swear I'll hang you from a flagpole by your hamstrings. I don't care if you're fucking crippled.

Okay, please stop with all the aggressive juju, I can't concentrate.

Leah calmed her mind, and let Quil's presence take over. Once she opened her mind, she was flooded with the image of woods. Not unlike the woods they were currently in, but the snowpack was thick. Wherever his head was, it was further north. They didn't get snow like that in La Push. She couldn't smell the sea, only the pine. It occurred to her just how all-encompassing and forceful this thought or memory of Quil's was.

She gasped and tried not to react when the fast and blurring visuals revealed a jetblack wolf. She saw him only briefly before things scattered and turned to chaos. She smelled the sickly sweet stench of leech and she had to open her own eyes just to remind herself it wasn't there. She felt the sensation of being choked, of oxygen deprivation, and through Quil's mind she could see that his throat was being crushed under a vampiric iron grip.

The black wolf bit the vampire around the middle, but she wrapped herself around his snout, clawing at his eyes and his throat.

There was wheezing and coughing and a dizzy feeling as the visual portion of the memory went fuzzy. Then a pair of hind legs kicked the leech off a crumpled, dark, furry form. The claws of those hind legs caught the throat and must've sliced the jugular. An awful, putrid liquid spewed from the wound where blood should've been. Leah winced as she felt the acid burn across her face and her eyes, feeling it seep into her nose and down her throat. She gagged a bit. She felt the cold snow beneath her paws as the blinded wolf whose head she shared crawled towards the downed black wolf.

The snow was stained blackish red, and the sticky fluids were tainting the ground in abundance. The crawling wolf whined as his partner struggled through a gurgle. Her vision of the black wolf was momentarily cut off as it lifted its paw to press the burned wolf's nose into the snow. The smaller wolf quieted and listened to its dying brother's last thoughts.

And then she saw herself… No longer was she viewing this entire scenario through Quil's consciousness. Now she was seeing Quil's memory of Sam's memories. It was in a strange form of third person, like she might've been a fly on the wall. Her hair was long and braided. She laughed from the table as Sam dropped a half cooked pancake on the ground with a splat.

A fading blur and she held her face firm as she told Sam his mom was a bitch anyways and hung his Stanford acceptance letter to her refrigerator – the Clearwater place of honor – with a Donald Duck magnet next to hers from USC.

Then like a flash her smile and her hair were gone. She looked a bit sickly, and she looked mad as
hell. Her shorts were ratty and she was visibly dirty. She sat in Emily's living room with the rest of the Pack but refused to look at Sam. She saw now that he watched her intently. He wasn't staring, just watching. But he looked so miserable. Why had she never noticed that?

Then it was wet and cold and muddy. They were sat on the ground in the mud outside Jezzie's Jeep as the rest of the Pack gathered around the open hood and Embry pulled the girl out of the truck and off Jared's body. And even through the pain of losing a packmate Leah could now feel the relief in Sam's disposition as he finally relaxed into her semblance of an embrace.

The last glimpse of herself she didn't quite recognize, though. Her hair was still short, as it was now, and she was buckled in half with laughter on pebbly First Beach. She looked so happy. She hadn't seen herself like that in a very long time. She didn't know when this was… She started backing away through her laughter but was unceremoniously tackled by Jacob with Nessie on his shoulders. Her butt hit the smooth rocky surface and as a small wave washed in, she shrieked when it got her butt wet. She only remembered the day after she saw recalled getting soaked in the seat of her pants, because she truly did not recognize the happiness in her own face. She didn't know when it had returned… Apparently Sam did.

The secondhand visions of herself disappeared and Quil's own bleary vision of the drowning black wolf returned.

_Tell her one last time that I'm sorry. Make sure she's happy_…

And through the slowly deteriorating vision of the second wolf, she could see as it crawled close and into a protective position around the its dying packmate, laying it's muzzle across the wolf's shoulder and issued a whine that echoed with sadness from the caverns of its soul.

_I'm really sorry, Leah_, Quil told her – though it felt distinctly dreamlike. _I'm really, really sorry. For everything._

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_Monday, May 5, 2008_

"Emily," Leah yelled through the door her cousin refused to open. "So help me God, if you do not come out of this house to attend your husband's funeral I will tell the Fuller brothers to make another casket, because I will drag your lifeless corpse back to that reservation!"

"Leah," Anna reached for the older she-wolf's elbow. "You're going to get us arrested."

"It's fine," Leah turned to Anna. "Embry and I know enough people in Neah Bay at this point."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Kim sighed in annoyance. She pushed the door of the Clearwater deathtrap open and stomped up the driveway. She was here against her will and wasn't shy about letting the others know. Jacob and Jezzie were taking care of Noah and had conspired with Leah and Anna to get her in the group of emissaries that was due to drag a slowly spiraling Emily to Sam's funeral. Emily hadn't answered any phone calls, and refused to open the doors. She showed no signs of life, but almost everyone – and Leah especially – refused to let her crazy her way out of Sam's funeral.

Like hell did Kim want to go to Neah Bay and drag the crazy imprint to her own husband's funeral. If Kim wasn't fond of Emily before, she downright hated her now. Kim knew exactly what was going in Emily's head. Kim had dealt with it more than a year ago. However, Kim _never_ considered not going to Jared's funeral. Ever. She would've gone vomiting on everyone's shoes like she thought she might've until Rachel showed up. Kim never would have run away, never would have run out like Emily did. Kim did a lot of things, but running was never one she even considered. Kim lost all
respect for the first imprint when she fled La Push – after all the fighting was over – and refused to even acknowledge that she was married to the man the entire population was mourning.

Anna was along to make sure that Leah didn't kill Emily and leave her body in the woods. It was considered a very real possibility, given the way her screaming at Emily over the was heard – quite literally – halfway across the reservation. No one was going to be able to stop her from dragging Emily from Neah Bay, but someone had to go with, and Jacob had just looked and pointed. He was mastering that Dad shit.

Leah was understandably not in a good place, but was at least now consuming more than scotch. Since Emily had flew the coop and Sam had no immediate family to speak of, Leah – and the Council due to Paul's long-distance strong arming – was orchestrating funeral preparations. Leah felt better being busy. Constructively busy. Her and Sam had never had a chance to hash out their issues totally and really make peace, though things had calmed significantly after the first Volturi attack last winter, when Sam had been hurt. And after seeing what Quil had shown her... she knew she'd be okay. She knew Sam would be okay. Leah made peace with herself, and her ex-boyfriend, by preparing a proper funeral befitting of a tribal protector.

And as much as she loathed Emily and would've been glad to never see her again, there was no way in hell that Leah was going to allow the woman that planted herself so steadfastly in all their lives during all that turmoil to skip her own husband's funeral. Leah was dragging her back to La Push for Sam's sake, and no one else. She wouldn't have the girl shame a dead man.

Kim didn't agree with Leah's logic, but she certainly didn't see it as her place to argue. Emily had been an ever more infrequent socializer after the first Volturi attack. Kim hadn't seen her once – except for Rachel and Addie's wedding – after Jared's funeral. She didn't fault anyone, really, for avoiding her like the plague for the months up until Noah's birth. She hadn't exactly been a pleasant person. But Rachel was the only imprint to help Kim. Claire and Ness didn't quite count, yet, but even the two young girls refused to let Kim sulk when they chose to play. Kim thought that it wasn't worth the effort to drag Emily back to La Push to make her pretend to be normal and strong when anyone that mattered knew she was anything but. Kim thought she had serious meltdown potential, and didn't think it was worth embarrassing Sam and his brothers and sisters during a memorial service should Emily decide to totally lose her marbles.

But Kim knew better than to argue with Leah. Especially about this particular topic. So she helped. Rachel – and the entire Pack, really – helped her when Jared died, so Kim was going to give a little back and help out Leah.

Kim stomped up the steps and unzipped her sweatshirt. She wrapped the fabric around her arm and hand, stepped around Leah and proceeded to put her fist through the double-paned glass on the front door. She reached around inside and undid the lock, and the door fell open a few inches. "After you," Kim insisted retrieving her arm from the shattered pane.

"You're all right, Connweller," Leah nodded once before marching into the dark home.

Five minutes later, and Anna and Leah were bodily removing a very thin, very pale, very unstable Emily from her parents' old house and dropping her into the car.

She hyperventilated and babbled half the way back to La Push until both Leah and Kim told her to shut up at the same time.

Tuesday, May 6, 2008
Quil got better. Slowly but surely shapes started to come back in the days leading up to final negotiations. Then colors. Then larger details. He hit a plateau about four days after starting the regimen and didn't get any better afterwards. Jezzie and Joy – the supernatural medical contingent – assumed that his healing ability and the drugs restored as much of his vision as possible.

He could get around mostly fine. He could make out shapes and colors to the point where he knew if they were people or shrubs, houses or cars, streets or rivers. He couldn't tell people apart without a voice, and he couldn't tell forks from spoons. Details were all lost. He also couldn't see road signs. That was a lesson learned the hard way. The day before she left for Boston to finish her semester, Jezzie gave him a final eye test – as best she could without any machinery of her own – she concluded that if he walked in to an optometrist off the street he would simply need a glasses prescription. Some really, really, really thick glasses – and even then his vision would still be severely impaired – but as far as legal blindness went, it could've been worse.

He wouldn't have to live in the dark.

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**Saturday, May 31, 2008**

The Pack had not been expecting the Cullens to roll back into town. At all.

"Why – for fuck's sake – are you here?" Jacob deadpanned when Jasper approached the Treaty Line with Rosalie during his patrol.

"Would you please put some pants on?" Rosalie requested with a grimace.

"Only if you say 'please'," Jacob muttered as he stomped bare-ass naked towards the tree he'd dumped his shorts at.

"We need to speak with you and Leah," Jasper said.

"Uh, we have phone numbers. You guys don't need to turn up in the flesh with all your vampire juju poisoning the kids on my rez."

"This is important, Jake," Rosalie explained calmly. "It pertains to upcoming treaty negotiations with the Volturi's alliance."

"You shitheads ran the show last time and almost got us all killed. Jasper, you're the only one in your family with a lick of tactical sense. The rest are fucking nuts."

"We've been dealing with these things for far longer," Rosalie reasoned.

"And look where it's landed all of us?" Jacob seethed. "How long have some of you been around? A couple hundred years old. The youngest in your coven is a hundred? You've had long enough to sort this bullshit out. No, now it's our turn. We're calling the shots now. If you're cool with it, Jasper, we'll still consult with you and Alice's visions can be helpful but we're leading the charge on this one."

"And if we refuse?" Rosalie spat.

"Then you can leave and never come back. Or if you want to fight us for it, well, bring it on."

Rosalie glanced towards her brother and finally Jasper took a measured step forward.

"What are your demands, Alpha Black?" he asked slowly. He held his hands behind his back and
addressed Jacob evenly. Military days had done quite a number to Jasper Hale.

"If you're staying, you're going to start pulling your weight in patrols. I can't keep running my wolves into the ground to protect the land we'll inevitably share. We could use your numbers and your skills – but I'm not going to force you guys to stay here. If you choose to leave, I ask you don't come back."

Sunday, June 29, 2008

"Hi there," Jezzie smiled as the sound of the screen door banged closed. She took her water bottle off the table where she left it and undid the cap, catching her breath as Embry - drowning in spreadsheets and graphs and charts - sat on her living room floor. He'd come home for his reading period, the last study week before his finals. Jezzie was skeptical about his avoiding his mother, but he explained that he just really needed to study without feeling mean by openly ignoring her. Apparently, if she thought he was spending his reading period in Seattle it wasn't as bad.

Jezzie just rolled her eyes and smiled. Embry was a grown man, but she knew he could only avoid Tiffany Call for so long.

Jezzie had finished her finals a month ago, and Collin's school year only lasted through June. They'd been home since the middle of the previous week.

"Whatcha goin' over?" Jezzie asked as she perched on the clean coffee table. For some reason, Embry liked doing his work on the floor.

"Factor endowments..." Embry muttered as he scribbled down one last thought. He dropped his pencil and glanced up at her. "Good run?"

"Seven miles," she smiled. "Not bad."

Embry reached forward and moved Jezzie's arm from her lap to glimpse her abdomen, exposed thanks to her only wearing shorts and a sports bra. His hand glanced carefully over the healing wounds that started at her hip and drew jagged fault lines below her belly button.

They looked nothing Emily's. If Azrael had caught her any deeper or if Collin had been the one to snag her flesh in the same place, they would've spilled her guts all over that parking lot. Embry never mentioned it - it gave him enough nightmares - and he largely suspected Jezzie was aware of how close she came of either dying or changing species. She subconsciously guarded her belly all the time.

"Healing well," Embry smiled.

"Considering the amount of Neosporin you slather on me on the daily," Jezzie smirked, "I would hope so."

"Only because I care," Embry nodded. He knew Jezzie was quite capable of taking care of her own scar tissue, but she'd indulged his need to help and protect her and let him be hyperfocused on her healing regimen. Truth be told, Jezzie loved having Embry focus on her stomach like a confused mother hen. At night he'd lean over from the floor as she read sprawled on the couch and he'd observe the way the lines moved arbitrarily over skin, his lips quirked in concentration. He read and compared the instructions and results of Neosporin and Mederma. One day he even came home with Echinacea. It was endearing.

Her Dad had been the one to come up with the Mother Hen analogy, though he still thought it was
because of her - now entirely disappeared - MS flare. Jezzie had no way to explain her scars to her Dad, so she didn't. And in the meantime, Embry got plenty of well-intentioned ribbing from Al Sullivan.

"I know," she nodded, reaching down to hold his chin. "It's cute," she grinned placing a kiss on his lips before standing. "I'm gonna hop in the shower and then we can head to Seattle. Ready to watch some international relations?"

"Darn..." he wrapped an arm around her waist, preventing her from leaving.

"You'd like to go to an international treaty settlement between four different species and god knows how many countries with me drenched in sweat?"

"Mhm," Embry nodded, burrowing his nose into her abdomen. "It's one of your best smells. That and post-orgasm."

Jezzie could feel him smiling against her skin. "Embry Call, there is no way I'm going to this thing smelling like sweat and orgasm when everyone else present can smell it too."

"Agreed," he conceded. "There aren't a lot of people I want smelling that."

Jezzie rolled her eyes. "You wolves are so weird. I'll be out ten."

A handful of minor guards had shown up to represent the Volturi. By Leah's tabulations none of their particularly skilled or ranked members were left. The Romanians were present as well as Amun and Demetri from the Egyptian coven. The Volturi and Romanians were mostly displeased to find that Jacob decided to keep them under supervision and let the Egyptians and Esme Cullen play the watch dog. The Volturi were clearly afraid of the woman – something Jacob found to be novel – though, Demetri assured him that Esme was a force to be reckoned with.

They could create no more members. They had to keep to their predetermined laws of secrecy. They had to cease all their warmongering and land grabbing. There wasn't much arguing or bartering from the clearly defeated Italians.

Both Jacob and Leah were mutually exhausted from orchestrating the treaty settlement, and were in no mood to play nice. Leah opened the negotiations by telling the Volturi that they sucked, ruined lives, and dragged the majority of the supernatural world into civil war. "So I baked you this thank you cake…” she told them. "And peed in the batter. In wolf form. You're welcome."

They clearly did not understand her form of sarcasm. The Volturi had put up little fight, though the Romanians were constantly hedging for more land or influence. They were all eventually dismissed and Jacob charged Demetri and Amun with making sure they made it out of the Americas and back home in a timely fashion.

The remainder of the winner's leading members were gathered around a Cullen dining table again. They always seemed to end up around a Cullen dining table. Except this time they were in Seattle. Jacob and Leah patently refused to allow any vampires besides the Cullens on the Olympic Peninsula. The Cullens had a conveniently located high-rise in Seattle that was used for negotiations. "And how will we be fashioning our postwar world?" Jasper asked quietly.

"We plan to head back home," Damian spoke. "We are agreeable to patrolling the Midwest and continuing to work with you. We'll watch out for new wolves and we'll keep an eye on your Packmates on the coast. Should anything come up we'll let you know posthaste. But we mostly we desire to be left to our own devices. We have no delusions of grandeur."
"No biting anyone," Jacob added.

"Of course not."

"Just throwing it out there," Jacob insisted.

"We will also return home," Kari replied serenely, from beside Liv. "We do hope you will keep in touch about any happenings here on the West Coast. We shall do the same for you about business in the East. This is an alliance that our flock would like to maintain."

"Agreed," Leah nodded. "If you need anything let us know."

Kari nodded her thanks. The Nagual pride voiced almost the same sentiment.

"We," Wyatt informed Jacob and Leah in a manner that reminded them far too much of Paul, "are going the fuck home. Praise be god that Mexican bitch is dead. We're awful pen pals. So don't expect to hear much from us. No offense."

"None taken," Jacob replied. "We don't have to be best friends to stay out of each other's hair. Not that we travel very far out of La Push, but we'll make sure none of our phased wolves end up further South than Reno and Salt Lake City. Your land is your land."

"Sounds good," Art agreed. "You folks are welcome to pass through, if need be. We're hardly an iron curtain. Just give us a ring so we can call off the hounds."

"Much appreciated."

"And you," Jacob turned in the direction of Jasper. "I don't care if you stay or if you go. If you stay, you're taking land patrol. Because like hell am I continuing to make my wolves pound the treaty line to make sure no bullshit gets through. You all can put in some man hours on security. I'm letting Leah and Embry go to college like normal people. Quil and I and Anna and Seth and even Brady are going to fucking graduate high school. Paul is going to finally get to hold down a steady job."

"Not unreasonable at all," Jasper nodded. "Is there anything else?"

"Don't try and pull a fast one on me. I'm eighteen, awfully young compared to any of you but I'm not stupid. The on-the-job training around here is pretty thorough. If you have any issues, any problems or plan on making any major decisions, I want to know about it. Because when you decide shit, you inevitably end up screwing us over in the process. Capiche?"

Monday, June 30, 2008

"Hi Mom," Embry greeted his mother as Jezzie pulled away from his lawn. Jezzie simply waved and smiled. The girl had finally gone home after feeling awful about lying to her Dad. She'd used her ridiculously painful MS flare as her excuse for being home early and during her reading period and assured him that Collin was not living alone in Boston. She would fly back to Boston in time to take her finals that she was assured she would bomb. However she conceded that being alive to redo her second semester of med school was better than being a werewolf. Or dead.

"Hi Emb," she smiled slightly from the porch, waving to Jezzie as she left. She was sitting by her garden boxes with her gloves and gardening tools out. Not much grew in their yard, but every year Embry's Mom invested in some good potting soil and planted enough wildlife to hang from every inch of porch rail and cover most of the perimeter of the porch. She grew herbs and flowers and creepy crawly plants that stuck to the side of the house. Some smelled good and others were really
brightly colored. A few would last for weeks and some only a couple days. Embry would still check on those ones every morning when he woke up – just like he did when he was a kid. Waiting for the temperamental plants to bloom was always the most fun, because they always looked the coolest. It was hard to wait sometimes and when he was young he got really impatient. But over the years he learned that the best ones were worth the wait.

"How was your final?" she grinned up at him as she pushed her bandana back with her wrist, clearing the few stray hairs from her face.

Embry sat on the steps beside her. "It went well," Embry nodded, thinking over the peace summit he'd just come from. His last final was yesterday but he'd used the excuse of an exam as a way to get another full day in Seattle to finish up negotiations with the rest of the supernatural world. He felt bad lying to his Mom – as usual – but was slightly appeased in knowing that his answer applied to both realities – invented and otherwise. "It went really well, actually."

"Very good," she nodded as she continued to pick the small weeds that had found their way – by bird or critter or wind – into one of her planters. "How does it feel to be done your freshman year of college, huh? That's a big step, Embry. I'm proud of you. I know it wasn't easy."

"Definitely not," he agreed and leaned back on his forearms. He was quiet for a moment, watching his Mom groom her little sprouts. "Hey Mom, can I tell you about something?"

She perked up in response and her hands stilled. "Of course you can, Embry." She reached up with a gloved hand towards his face, pushing a stray strand of his own growing hair out of his eyes. He had inherited his mother's unruly hair. He was at least lucky he didn't have her cowlicks. She accidentally left a few grains of soil behind. "I'm your mother, Embry. You can tell me anything."

"Okay," he nodded. "It's a really long story. And it's gonna sound really strange and really weird, but if you give me a while I can explain all of it. As long as you promise not to freak out."

"We've got all night, honey."

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The End.

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