

Summer wolves
(December '09 – April '10)

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I. Wolves

1.

The rear view mirror showed nothing but dust. The warm weather had turned this little uphill road in a collection of sandy pits and bumps. The four wheels of my old pickup were creating quite the sandstorm. It was surprisingly calm out here. I left the borders of the nearest city 25 miles ago and almost immediately the continuous assault of noise and activity gave way to peace, quiet and nature. Even when I entered Ellister, the small town that was my destination, the calm remained. There was some activity out here, but people seemed to go about their day very quietly. I could not wait to park this thing and get out of the pickup, the sound of it was completely out of place here.

There were no houses along the entire length of this dusty road, except for an old farmhouse at the top of the hill. It didn't really belong to anyone until several days ago, when I bought it. So far, I had only seen pictures of it, and as I neared the house, I knew those pictures hadn't done it much justice. It was made up of a number of buildings : the main house and several smaller barns and cottages. Each of the buildings had large roofs easily stretching two meters past the walls. Everything was made of dark wood. Between the main house and the nearest and also largest barn, there were two tall apple trees, providing plenty of cool shade all over the front yard. Even though it was still morning, it was already very hot out here and those shadows looked inviting.

I parked the car on a small patch of sand near the house and walked over to the shadowy area in front of the house, the bright light outside of the car nearly blinding me. As I neared the shadow my eyes had started to make out some of the detail in the almost complete black in front of me. The first thing I could identify stopped me in my tracks. A large dog was sat under the nearest tree, looking at me. No, it wasn't a dog – it was a grey wolf.

Shielding my eyes from the sun with my left hand I tried to make sense of the situation – the last thing I expected to see here was a wolf. I didn't move at all, not wanting to startle the animal. Wolves don't usually attack humans, unless they felt threatened, right? I was about to start walking backwards towards the car when I made out someone else in the shadow. An old woman, sat in a chair against the far end of the wall of the barn. Maybe it was a dog after all and someone had just taken it for a walk and decided to cool off here in the shadow.

I said "Hi there", cautiously. It was aimed at the old woman but my eyes remained fixed on the wolf or dog, whose eyes were fixed on me.

"Hello" came the answer.

"Is this your... wolf?" Pretty sure it was a wolf now. I heard of people with stranger pets, so why not a wolf?

"No, I don't own her. She listens to what I say, though... sometimes."

"Oh..." The wolf got up and casually walked towards me. As it left the shade its grey fur seemed to turn to silver in the bright sunlight. The animal brushed my leg, turned around and sat down right next to me, looking straight ahead of itself.

"Kiara seems to think you're all right." The old woman said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"Kiara, huh?" I carefully put my right hand on the head of the wolf and started scratching it behind the ears. That didn't yield a noticeable response from the animal. "I'm Nick," I said.

"And I'm Eliza, pleased to meet you."

Time to leave the searing light and walk over to the shade. The wolf followed me and sat down beside me when I stopped. Was it guarding the old woman? I scratched Kiara behind the ears again, and she didn't seem to mind. Her fur felt smooth like silk.

"So, you're from around here?" I asked.

"Aye, I haven't seen you here before, you must be the new owner of this place."

"Correct... Beautiful town Ellister is."

"Aye it is. You don't mind me sitting here do you? It was getting a bit warm out there in the sunlight, you know."

"I don't mind at all." No need for me to be a difficult person right away. Besides I didn't want to tell someone with a wolf to get lost. "Well, I had better get started unloading my stuff", I said and went

back to the pickup to grab the first of the cardboard boxes, packed with the few belongings I had. The wolf stayed in the shadow of the trees this time.

Back at the front door and already half inside the house I asked "You want something to drink?". I was getting thirsty as well.

"Some water would be nice, thank you."

I grabbed two glasses from the cardboard box which I had labeled 'fragile' and filled them with surprisingly cool water from the tap.

Walking over to where Eliza was sat, I started asking "Does..." interrupting myself when I noticed another wolf lying on the ground only a few feet from Eliza. It didn't seem to notice me, or maybe it just didn't think I was interesting enough. As I handed her the glass of water, I was still trying to finish my question : "Does... Do... Where did this guy come from?" My eyes had gotten used to the shade, and I was sure this brown wolf wasn't here when I entered the house. "Anyways, do the wolves need some water as well?"

Eliza produced a smile "Thank you, that would be most kind."

I filled the largest bowl from my 'fragile' box with water, meanwhile noticing that everything in the box had survived the bumpy trip, and went to put it near the trunk of the closest tree. The brown wolf took note of it, but didn't move. Kiara came closer, briefly sniffed the water and lapped some of it up.

I went back to the pickup to get another cardboard box. I wanted to have them all in the house before I had a look around the place. On my third trip from the car to the house I noticed the brown wolf had gotten up and was drinking from the bowl. However, there was still a brown wolf lying on the ground near Eliza, so this must be yet another one. I stopped halfway to the house. What a big one this was, too. I had never seen a wolf before today, except on pictures, but this one was way bigger than I could ever imagine. Easily 3 and half feet to its shoulders. I looked at Eliza but she was looking the other way, Kiara was sitting not too far from the large wolf, also staring at nothing in particular and the other brown one seemed to be asleep. Everyone was ignoring me. Was this some kind of prank? Were they going to attack and eat me? However, wolves don't normally attack people and Eliza didn't seem worried at all. Oh well, I continued towards the house, boxes first, and I'll worry about the wolves later.

With each extra box I unloaded from the pickup another wolf appeared in the shadow under the trees. Now there were 6 : Kiara, two brown ones, 2 grey and really dark brown wolf, nearly black. Not once did I see one arrive, almost as if they were waiting until I wasn't looking in the direction of the patch of shadow. Kiara and the large brown one were sat, looking at nothing in particular, one of the grey wolves had just arrived at the bowl of water and the others were lying on the ground. Perhaps it was a bad idea to have placed that bowl there in the first place.

I put the last box down on the wooden floor. If I had more boxes with me, would there be more wolves? Maybe the heat was making me see things that weren't really there. Let's have another glass of cool water.

It didn't help – I was standing on the porch and seeing 6 wolves in the front yard. In my front yard. Wolves. And I seemed to be the only one thinking this was strange. The animals seemed at ease and so was Eliza. However, they're still wild animals, who knows when was the last time they had something to eat. There was a large forest only half a mile from here, there was bound to be plenty of stuff for them to hunt, right? I was trying to figure out whether they looked skinny or not as if that could tell me whether they were even considering to have me for lunch and noticed Kiara was now looking at me. I only had to take one step backwards and close the door in case one of them would make a suspicious move. Then I'd be all alone out here with six wolves outside and I didn't have much food with me. Bad idea.

Instead I crossed the porch and sat down on its front edge. Kiara walked towards me and sat down in front of me, still looking straight at me. I could not resist scratching her behind the ears again. It was the first time I could study her face. Her coat was uniform silver all over her body and glistened every time a ray of sunlight managed to get through the foliage of the trees. Her eyes were a remarkable

bright blue. I had no idea wolves could have such eyes, then again, I had never seen a wolf or any animal with a coat that looked like silver either. This was a remarkable, beautiful animal all right. My hand slid down her neck, went over a shoulder and came back up to gently scratch her chin. She let it all happen, closed her eyes and produced a quiet rumble deep in the throat, I guess it was the equivalent of a cat purring.

"So are there many wolves around here?" I asked carefully. One of the animals turned an ear in my direction, but otherwise the sound of my voice didn't startle any of them. Good.

"Quite some." Came Eliza's answer.

"They don't seem to have any problems being around humans."

"Nope, people in Ellister live close to nature and nature lives close to humans. It hasn't always been a straightforward and trouble-free relationship, but we're getting along... most of the time, anyway."

"Good," And I really meant that, "life in the city isn't all that interesting... you are in danger of forgetting about the real world that is out there... out here actually. I can't remember ever hearing this many birds before..." There had been a continuous chattering of countless birds ever since I came close to Ellister and together with the faint breeze and the warm weather and to a certain extent, even the wolves it all felt so natural, as if it had always been summer here, as if the birds had always been here as well as the wolves, as much a part of the season as the weather itself.

2.

Time to have a look at the house, at first sight everything looked okay, but I got the house so cheap I was expecting a lot of things needing repair. The guy selling the house claimed someone had been looking after it and even though no-one had lived in it for almost twenty years, it was in perfect shape. I figured that was just marketing talk. I bought it on a whim, all I needed to be convinced were several pictures of some of the rooms and a few overview shots of the area outside. There were no wolves on those photos, however.

The seller wasn't lying about some furniture being present. A medium sized wooden table and four chairs to the left of the living room, an ancient leather three-seater to the right. Nothing fancy, but I never cared about fancy. I already preferred this stuff over the plastic table and chairs back at my apartment in the city.

The kitchen had plenty of cupboards, more room than I had stuff to put into them. No oven, but I brought my microwave. A small fridge, probably as old as the sofa. I plugged it in and by doing so I confirmed there was electricity in the house. There was no heating, but I'll worry about that when I need it.

A small bathroom with all the basic things you'd expect in one and none of the fancy stuff one didn't really need. Finally, a small bedroom, which, to my surprise, did have a bed with a new mattress, just like the seller said there would be. Again, nothing fancy but it looked more comfortable than the contraption back at the apartment. I felt a bit stupid buying a sleeping bag and a thin camping mattress. An honest salesman, wow. Could this day get any stranger?

And all of this was just the ground floor. A wide stairway led to four large rooms with plenty of windows all over. There was no attic, so in the center of the room, it was about 12 to 13 feet high. I spent quite some time looking out of all the windows, enjoying the scenery. There was nature, mostly in the form of trees in the distance and sand and grass closer by, everywhere, unless I looked in the direction from where I came. The city wasn't visible from this distance, but there was a dark grey blot on the horizon with a hint of brown fog about it. A small cancer on an otherwise perfect vista.

The inside of the house looked great, so where is the catch? Perhaps the house itself? I made another trip through all the rooms checking the wooden walls. They looked good as far as I could tell, both inside and outside. Was the house really more than 300 years old as the seller claimed? Can a wooden house even survive rain, wind, winters, summers and what not for so long?

Maybe there was something horribly wrong with the other buildings? I checked the two in the backyard, which once probably served as tool sheds and besides some signs from being used, they seemed to be in good health. There was a medium sized barn to the right of the house, close to where I parked the pickup, which could have been a garage of sorts for tractors perhaps, it definitely looked big enough for that purpose. No problems there either and that left only the large barn in front of the house, across the patch of shadow.

I crossed the distance between the garage and the main barn without any of the wolves or Eliza paying any attention to me. Fair enough. How long were they planning on being here anyway?

Again I could see no problems at all. The barn was huge, there was no additional floor and no walls dividing the building into smaller rooms. No windows near the ground, but a row of small ones some 10 feet above the ground. A walkway around the entire inside of the barn allowed one to see through the windows and from up there I also noticed there were some cracks in the roof, probably due to aging. These would have to be fixed if I ever wanted to do something with this building. Now only the sun was peering through them, creating rays of dust filled light, which looked somewhat poetic, but they would also let in the rain.

I stayed in the barn for quite a while, enjoying the view from the windows until the sun started touching the rooftops of the forest, in the distance. I didn't find a catch at all. Granted, the place was old and lacked the kind of comfort modern middle-class people claimed to need, and it was probably a bit too far away from the city with its jobs and malls. For me, it was perfect. Even the 30 years I had

spent living in cities and apartments were not enough to get used to the noise, the stench and the everlasting, pointless striving, working and fast living that came with it. With some luck, I would never have to go back again, I thought while leaving the barn.

The temperature outside had dropped a bit and the birds were getting quieter as the evening set in. Going around the corner of the barn on the way back to the house, I noticed Eliza and the wolves had left. She had probably gone home and the wolves were off to the forest for the night most likely. I didn't hear them leave, but I didn't mind them being gone either. The seller didn't say anything about wild animals – maybe that was the catch. Still not once did I think it had been a bad idea to spend nearly all my savings on this old house. In fact, it may turn out to be the most intelligent thing I had done so far in my life.

Time for me to get some sleep as well, it wasn't that late yet, but I got up early hoping to be able to leave the city before the morning rush saturated the streets with frustrated people in bulky SUVs on the way to their jobs. It had still taken several hours just to get out of the city in the end. I stayed outside a while longer, enjoying the sight of encroaching dark without streetlights, neon signs, the noise of nearby bars and people working out their frustration on one another after a day of pointless work. The fact that I didn't have to get up the next day to go to a job made it all the more enjoyable. Time, however, will tell if it was smart to quit my job at this time, having just spent most of my money on a house...

Looking over the contents of the front room I knew where the wolves went to sleep : right here. Two were on the sofa, one under the table and the others had chosen random spots on the floor. Still standing in the doorway, I called Eliza, but no answer came. Obviously, she wasn't here anymore, not that I think she could have done much about this situation. I could always sleep in the pickup instead of the house with the six wolves... no wait, there were seven now. Another grey one had joined the pack. How many more are going to show up, I wondered. One more for every time my back was turned?

No, I wasn't going to sleep in the car. I didn't buy a house so I could sleep outside while wild animals were inside, it ought to be the other way round. But how am I going to persuade seven wolves to go outside? I didn't think it was a good idea to wake them up in the first place. Instead I filled another bowl with water and placed it on the floor somewhere where I thought no-one would be stepping in it and hoped the wolves were house-trained. If one of them woke in the middle of the night, hungry and thirsty, maybe they'd go for the bowl first instead of me. Too bad I didn't have meat in the house.

I closed the door but left the windows open, no sense keeping them from leaving the house when they wanted and tiptoed quietly to the bedroom. Very quietly.

I did close every window in the bedroom and put a chair under the doorknob after making sure there were no wolves under the bed.

3.

I stayed quiet for several moments and listened. I couldn't hear anything moving about in the house. Opening the door a tiny bit, I peeked to make sure the front room was empty. It was.

The front door was open, letting in the morning. The wolves were outside again, under the trees – no surprise there. Not all of them, three of them were missing, perhaps in the woods, hunting or whatever it is wolves do when they're not in my front yard, whatever it is they're doing here. Resting maybe? Then again there would be more shadow and quiet places in the nearby forest.

"Good morning." Eliza's voice interrupted my pondering.

"Morning," I said. She was sat in the chair against the barn wall again. "Hey, did you know that the wolves slept in the house last night?"

"Did they, really now?" She didn't seem the smallest bit surprised. I swear there was a smile on her face.

"Yeah... really." Oh well, first : breakfast, then : go to the local store for some more food. I poured water in a bowl for the wolves and in a glass for Eliza and dragged a chair outside as well, which I used to reach several juicy apples. "Apple?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Do you want an apple?"

"Oh, sure. Thanks."

After giving Eliza one of the fruits, I sat on the porch edge and cut off parts of the apple with a pocket knife. Kiara came closer, inspecting the scent of the fruit. I offered her a piece, and she ate it. Didn't know wolves ate apples. More strangely, didn't know that I'd ever have a wolf eating anything out of my hand.

"Looks like it's going to be a beautiful day," I said. It was already quite warm outside.

"All days are beautiful out here," Eliza replied.

I went back inside after eating about three quarters of the apple and letting Kiara have the rest. While inspecting the fridge and trying to decide what I wanted to eat this evening, I was writing down a few things I'd have to get from the local store. Getting ready to leave the house the peace and calm was violently interrupted by a gunshot, immediately followed by a yelp and a flurry of movement in the front yard. I ran outside to see what was going on out there and saw an elderly man holding a rifle, some ten feet from me. "Hey," I shouted, "what the hell are you do..." At that point I had to run as he pointed the weapon in my direction. Another shot. No impact, no pain. He missed. Good.

I charged at him and crashed into him, throwing him off his feet. He let go off the rifle, which landed on the ground several feet away from us.

"What... the hell..." my heart was racing "are you doing here?" The guy was really old, 80 at least. He stared through me and started babbling about something or other – I couldn't understand it. I went to grab the weapon and left him where he landed. I dug my cell phone out of one of the unpacked boxes, called a general assistance number and asked to be put through to the Ellister police department. How does a man of that age wander all the way out here with a gun – the nearest house was a mile away downhill. He must have shot at the wolves and perhaps got startled when I charged out of the house.

My thinking got interrupted by a voice on the other side of the phone line. "Ellister police, how can we help?"

"I just had a man shoot at me in front of my house."

"Is anyone injured?"

"No, and the shooter is disarmed, but he's still outside. He seems a bit... confused..." I didn't think the old man came all the way up just to kill me.

"All-right, we'll send a car. What's the address?"

I gave them the address, and they said they'd be here in five to ten minutes. I went back outside to see what the old man was up to. He was still sat on the ground, just outside the shadow of the trees, still quietly babbling about something. No sign of wolves or Eliza, I wonder if any of them were hurt.

Leaving the gun on one end of the porch, I went over to the old man, helped him up and got him to sit down on the other end. I offered him a glass of cool water, even though he tried to kill me. He didn't

seem to be aware of me at all, but was taking the occasional sip of the glass. I kept an eye on both, him and the rifle, while waiting for the cops to arrive.

After several minutes I could see a small cloud of dust at the far end of the road, slowly crawling up the hill. It took the police car a few more minutes to arrive at the house. Two officers came out.

"Is old Tucker causing trouble again?" One of them asked. Again? I wondered. "You're not supposed to be outside, you know." He continued, to which the other one replied "And you're definitely not supposed to be carrying guns and shooting at people." I agreed quietly. The old man didn't seem to notice being talked to.

While one of the officers, called Jeff, gently guided Tucker to the car and then took the rifle, the other one, Curtis was asking me about the incident.

"I don't know what he shot at, I was inside at the time, but I did hear a yelp. Could have been a dog."

"A dog, are you sure? We usually keep an eye out for stray dogs, haven't had any reports lately."

"I was inside, could have been a wolf."

"You seen wolves here?"

"Maybe, I saw one when I arrived here yesterday, but it could have been a big dog... I couldn't tell the difference. There was an old lady here too, maybe it was her dog."

"And old lady, huh? Lots of activity up here. Well, we will keep an eye out for a wounded dog, but if you see a wounded wolf out here, stay safe. Never know what the animal will do."

The other officer returned from the car, where he had put away the rifle. "You're the new guy right? You recently moved in here. Bet you didn't expect to get shot at this soon, aye?"

Curtis continued "Tucker is no criminal, he never hurt anyone in his life, it's just that lately, he's been a little... you know..."

"Confused?" I tried.

"Yeah, that's it. He has someone taking care of him, but sometimes he sneaks off, and then we get to go look for him. Don't know where he got the gun. I hope this incident doesn't cause you to think badly of this town. Ellister is full of good folk."

"This seems like a nice place, I'm sure not everyone is carrying guns around here." Trying to lighten the mood.

"Well... yeah, this sure is a nice place." There was a short awkward pause in his reply. "Anyways, we're going to return Tucker to his house and make sure he doesn't wander off again. If there's anything else, you know where to find us."

I watched them get in the car and drive down the hill again. Day one : seven wolves slept in my house, and I got shot at in my front yard. Not bad. Would I still have bought the house if I knew this was going to happen?

I felt a presence and looked down, Kiara was sitting next to me, I didn't hear her approach. I rested my hand on her head and asked "Are you okay?"

"I wonder what has gotten into Tucker. He was always a nice man. Polite, too." Eliza was back, sitting in the chair, as if she never left it, I didn't hear her arrive either.

One by one, three wolves came from behind the house and went to sit or lie in the shadow, at least I'm seeing these arrive and not suddenly appearing out of thin air.

"Did he hit anyone?" I asked.

"Orgo's been hit, but it's nothing serious," Came the answer, to which one of the brown wolves replied with a short wail. It sounded more like the animal was complaining instead of hurting. "Oh, quiet you. It's just a small flesh wound." Eliza said.

"Can I see?" I asked, while slowly walking over to Orgo, who was lying on the floor, keeping in mind what the officer said about wounded animals being unpredictable.

I knelt down next to the wolf, who wasn't really paying much attention to me. He had his legs stretched out in front of him and was resting his head on them. There was a small bright red gash along his left front leg and few drops of blood had trickled down his fur, but it had stopped bleeding since. The bullet must have brushed the wolf's leg. He was lucky the old man wasn't carrying a shotgun. I was lucky for the same reason. "It doesn't look like the bullet is stuck in the flesh. It went right past and luckily did only some small damage." Orgo let out a quiet bark. Ruff. He sounded annoyed,

whether he was annoyed with all the attention he was getting, or whether it was because he was shot at, I couldn't tell.

"So, do people often run around with rifles here?" What Curtis said before wasn't all that reassuring.

"Some do." Eliza said.

I wondered how many more such people I'd run into when I had to go to the store.

4.

By then it was nearly noon, and it had gotten a lot warmer. I had planned to go in the morning when it was still relatively cool. Going out with the bicycle would be suicide, and I didn't want to disturb the calm by using the pickup. Instead I took the bicycle and a little cart that attached to it and made it look anything but cool out of the truck, just so it was ready to go and went in the house to unpack the cardboard boxes with my stuff.

There wasn't that much to unpack. I never understood the quest most humans seemed to be on to gather as much stuff in a lifetime as possible. I installed my laptop (no internet up here, I would have to look into getting a wireless connection somehow) and the microwave and basically put everything else I brought in various cupboards and drawers. I ended up doing another tour of the house looking for things that might need repairing as I still couldn't believe the low price I paid, but I couldn't find anything worse than a few spots that needed varnish. I added varnish and a brush to my shopping list.

Leaving the house, I noticed the entire pack had returned to my front yard. It hadn't cooled down a bit, but I didn't feel like waiting anymore. I provided everyone in the yard with fresh water and announced I'd be gone for a bit. The only answer came from Kiara in the form of a short bark.

"What's the matter, girl?"

Wruff. A bit quiet. Could have been a question.

"You want to tag along?" What else was I supposed to ask?

Woof! Short and louder. Sounded affirmative, then again, it could be anything.

"I have to go to the town's center, perhaps not the safest place for you to go..."

Urff. Disappointment or agreement?

"How about this : tomorrow morning we'll go for a walk. What do you say?"

Woof! And tail wagging.

This is great. I'm talking to a wolf and pretending the animal is understanding me and on top of that I promised it I'd take it for a walk. Maybe this hot weather isn't all that good for me. I didn't want to end up becoming 'confused' as I put it earlier, like Tucker. I'm way too young for that.

I hopped on my bicycle and looked over the front yard with all the wolves. It was the strangest sight I had ever seen. Ah well. The good news is that it's all downhill from here to the center of town. I ought to get to the store with only a minimum of pedaling. All the sand and pits in the road kept me from going too fast and the wind in my face was welcome.

It took less than half an hour to arrive at the small market, which was nearly deserted at that time. I got what I needed and didn't spend more time there than necessary. I had left the door of the house unlocked, mainly because there was no lock and even though Ellister didn't seem like the kind of place where you'd have to live in fear of getting robbed, I didn't feel completely at ease. Maybe I had lived in the city too long and wasn't used to honesty in people anymore, or decency, for that matter.

Back at the start of the hill I realized the second part of my journey wouldn't be as simple. Uphill, cart full of groceries, sand, hot weather... it took me nearly three times as long getting up the hill as it did getting down. Perhaps the pickup would have been a better idea after all. Then again, I could probably use the exercise. Eventually, I'd get better at dragging myself up this hill but for now I was glad I made it without dying from exhaustion or thirst along the way.

After putting the groceries away, I walked out onto the porch and asked "Say, do you think..." I paused and realized this was going to sound strange "the wolves will eat these?" I held up a bone shaped dog treat. I bought a small pack of them at the store, didn't know why I did so. "I know it's for dogs, but..."

Eliza had a smile on her face. "Oh, I'm sure they will. They'll eat close to everything. After all, we've been living among humans for a long time." Did she say 'we'? It occurred to me she might be homeless – was I supposed to be offering her food or so? After all she had been out here most of the time, and I

haven't seen her leave, except last night. She continued "Quite some people here put out food for the animals that live here and in turn, they've gotten used to human food."

I put some of the treats on a plate and placed it next to the bowl with water, they had a very strong scent and almost right away, some of the wolves came to inspect the source of the smell carefully and after a few seconds deemed the treats edible.

I sat down on the porch, glad to give my legs some rest after that trip up the hill and closed my eyes. I became more aware of the faint breeze, the many different voices in the continuous bird chatter and the scent of summer itself. It reminded me of when I was young, during summer vacations. No school, no homework, no job. Lying in the shade of a tree and watching the clouds pass by in the sky. No matter where I spent summer or how far I went back in my memories it always smelled the same, like freedom. For the first time in nearly 15 years I could experience it first hand again.

There was no summer in the city. It was hot at times, but the pollution, noise and ever-present activity made it hard to enjoy the season. Not having a yard at the apartment or even a small park somewhere in the city made it feel so unreal. There was no nature around you to remind of what was happening in the real world. Calenders were no help, they only seemed to tell you when you had to work. During whatever time you could take off in the summer months, you were expected to go to some or other tourist resort packed with other people, all let loose from their jobs. All of them believing that this was summer. If only they knew one can only experience the season truly if one gets to sit in the center of it. Summer is about quiet, about rest, about not having to do anything for a change and just getting to enjoy life itself in its most simple, most natural form.

I breathed in deeply some more freedom.

"Glad you're out of the city?" Eliza asked.

"Oh hell, yeah. There is no life in the city anymore. People care only about jobs and money. About politics and rules... if only they realized how simple life can be. I guess people these days only think they're fully living when they have a lot of stuff or money. It's seems they always have to be doing something to remind themselves that they're still alive, instead of standing still for a change and looking at reality all around them."

5.

The evening had passed just like the day before, with most of the wolves finding a spot to sleep in the front room. Some of them had left earlier in the evening, perhaps to hunt or spend the night someplace else. The 7th wolf, which only seemed to appear in the evening was back as well.

The next morning, most wolves were in the front yard as well as Eliza. No surprise there. Kiara was looking at me and wagging her tail. Did she remember the promise I made the day before? Clever animal if she could understand what I said. I don't break promises, definitely not those made to wild animals. I grabbed my backpack and put a couple bottles of water, some sandwiches and apples in it. I was in the mood for a good walk.

"Can I take Kiara for a walk?" Still assuming these animals were Eliza's pets.

Kiara let out a quick bark before Eliza could answer. "That's Kiara's decision to make, and it looks like she'd like that." She said, smiling. "Where did you plan to go?"

"Into the forest." There wasn't much planning involved, I'd just walk in a straight line to the forest's edge and see from there.

"Good choice. If you let Kiara lead, she'll show you some nice places."

"All-right, let's go." I started walking and with a few leaps Kiara caught up with me.

The sand and yellow grass around the house quickly gave away to green grass, bushes, and eventually more and more trees. Within 10 minutes, we had reached the edge of the forest. Following Kiara through a patch crowded with towering trees, we reached a small path. The woods weren't completely wild – someone had been making sure the paths were clean and there was the occasional wooden bench and table along them.

We followed these paths for quite a while, and I took note of the small signs that seemed to identify certain destinations, probably with local or perhaps even minor tourist significance. We were on the path apparently called 'River stroll', so I assumed we'd end up at a river sooner or later.

The atmosphere in the forest was very different. I felt like walking through giant, ancient arches and long hallways. The deeper we got in the woods, the darker it got – less and less light was filtering through the leaves, instead everything seemed to bathe in a faint green glow. The sound had changed as well, the chattering of the birds was distant and muffled. There were still birds out here, but far less, the forest was the realm of other animals. Often I saw small furry rodents dart away as we approached, probably more scared of Kiara than me. Whenever I took a pause and stood quietly, the forest came alive around me. Small animals were scurrying through the bushes, and sometimes I'd hear something high up in the branches of the trees or the distant call of something I couldn't identify.

We had been following the path for what must have been more than an hour when I slowly started making out the sound of rushing water. The trees started to spread out more, and in the distance, I could see the bright sunlight pour down on a small stone bridge over a river.

Kiara left the path before we reached the bridge, and I followed her for what felt like several hundred feet. We were still getting closer to the river, I could hear it more clearly, but trees and bushes were hiding it from sight. Quite suddenly we came to a clearing, and I was momentarily blinded by the sudden bright light from the sun, no longer obscured by trees.

Kiara barked, seemingly to indicate this was the place she wanted to show me. She walked over to the river, which was now only twenty feet from where I was standing and drank some of the clear water. It wouldn't surprise me if this was a place frequented by various animals to drink. Having already emptied one of the bottles of water along the way up here, I followed her example and filled the empty bottle. If the water was good enough for all the animals in the forest, it had to be good enough for me as well. It was very cold and tasted like summer.

I figured this was a nice place to take a break, so I sat down against a tree, and produced some dog treats from the backpack, which I gave to Kiara, an apple, from which she ended up eating about one third and a homemade cheese sandwich, which didn't seem to interest her all that much.

While I sat there enjoying the beautiful weather and the scenery, she took a nap in one of the few patches of shadow. Eventually, the sound of the river lulled me asleep as well.

6.

The sudden sharp sound of a small branch breaking not too far away woke me up. From the corner of my eye, I saw Kiara dart away and disappear quietly into the bushes. I didn't know how long I had been asleep and needed a few moments to realize that Kiara had run in the opposite direction from where the sound had come. What could scare a wolf? Should I be worried? The sound of breaking twigs and branches should not be uncommon to animals living in a forest... these things were all over the ground here and just moving about was enough to step on a few and... someone was here. Had to be. Any other animal wouldn't scare her, and I didn't think there were bears out here, though whatever was responsible for the breaking branch would have to have a weight closer to that of bear. No squirrel would be breaking branches like that.

If it was a human she might have smelled whoever was out there, and perhaps she was just being cautious. I stood up slowly and quietly, listening intently for any other sounds. I was too far away to be able to hear anyone on the path, and I could not think of a reason why anyone would leave said path. Then again, maybe someone else had found out about this quiet spot along the river.

Another footstep, more careful this time, as if whoever was out there knew someone might be listening. Finally, a voice, it was human.

"Hello, is someone out there?" It sounded friendly enough.

"Hi there." I said and in response footsteps were getting closer.

"Ahh, I knew I heard something out here." It took a few more moments before I saw the owner of the voice. The first thing that caught my eye was the large gun this man was carrying in his right hand. After yesterday, I understood why Kiara didn't want to be around. However, that still left me out here, probably too far from anyone else that could even hear a gunshot going off here.

I felt uneasy and he must have noticed me looking at the gun, so he introduced himself while hanging the rifle around his right shoulder by means of a leather strap. "I'm Duncan, the forester around here. I take care of these woods."

That was a bit of a relief, I figured it was not completely uncommon for someone like him to be carrying guns. Now that the rifle was no longer the center of attention, I did notice he was wearing some kind of dark green uniform. He was probably in his late forties and looked like he had always spent more time outdoors than anywhere else. I don't know the weight of a bear, but this guy looked strong and tall enough to match it. "I'm Nick. Just taking a stroll through the woods and I came upon this quiet place." I wondered if I was in trouble for leaving the paths. He did have a bit of a frown on his face.

"I don't think I have seen you here before, are you from Ellister?"

"Yes, I just moved in here a few days ago, the old farmhouse on top of the hill."

"Ah, of course. Glad to meet ya." His face lit up, he seemed to mean it. "How are you liking this place so far?"

"It's great, truly beautiful and that includes this forest."

"Aye, tis a nice place indeed, if you don't mind living next door to nature. A good thing I ran into you out here, I was meaning to pay you a visit one of these days, to tell you about a few things you ought to be wanting to know about Ellister. So if you don't mind, I'll do that right now."

"All-right, I'm listening." I grabbed my backpack and walked towards the path again, that seemed to be where he was wanting to go, perhaps not too happy about seeing people moving off the path, but not wanting to make a huge deal out of it.

"Well I see already found your way into the woods." He said while casually walking in the direction from where Kiara and myself originally came. "Which is no problem, of course," he quickly added, "but you might want to be careful around here."

"How so?"

"We got quite some wild animals out here. Not that they are a danger, as long as you know how to behave around them."

"Wild animals, really? No bears I hope." But I knew where this was headed already.

"Nah, no bears. Quite some wolves tho. They're somewhat used to people here and won't attack you, but they'll let you know when you're in their territory. If that ever happens, you just remain calm and

walk back from where you came. If you challenge them, they might become hostile." He went on to talk about several tourists who were attacked some years ago, but how most people in Ellister leave the wolves alone.

"Most?" I asked, "Not all of them?"

He sighed, "Well, I actually spend more time saving the animals from humans than the other way around. There are several... " He paused, looking for the right term, "nutcases... around here." I detected a hint of disgust in his voice. "Some people think they can just come out here and hunt, shooting at wolves and basically everything that moves. It's not always easy to get nature and humans to live together. My grandfather and dad before me and now myself, too, have put a lot of work in maintaining this forest, primarily for the animals. You'd be surprised if you knew how much life is out here, yet some people think they can destroy it. Obviously hunting is forbidden here." He looked at me as if to make sure I had understood that.

"Oh, of course." I quickly said, "I could never hurt an animal, I don't even own a gun."

"You don't?" He seemed a bit surprised. "Most people in Ellister do, too bad not all of them have the responsibility that is required when handling the darn things."

"I noticed that, I already got shot at once yesterday..."

"Ah, yeah, Tucker, right? I heard about that. He doesn't usually go out with a gun and shoot at people, though. I wonder what made him do that."

"I think he shot at a dog or something. I heard an animal..."

"A dog? Up there? I doubt that, might have been a wolf. Even though they don't show themselves as close to the town anymore as they used to." He paused, visibly thinking. "Well, no-one has lived in that farm house for quite some years. Possibly, nature has started to reclaim that piece of land again. The troubling part is that we might have a wounded or dying wolf out here..."

Should I tell him that the animal was doing okay? It might sound strange, even to a forester to hear about someone having a pack of wolves in their front yard or even in their house. "I looked around the place, saw some tracks, which could have been from a big dog or... or a wolf, no sign of blood. Tucker didn't seem like a sharpshooter, else I probably wouldn't be here talking to you."

"Aye, could be. Still, I'd better keep an eye out for a possibly wounded wolf. Not only can they become unpredictable and attack you, but their entire pack might start seeing humans as a threat. I suggest you do the same. Better yet, if you see a wolf hanging around your place, let me know. I can think of a few ways to coax them to go live closer to the woods again."

"All-right, I'll do that."

We walked along the path for a while longer, Duncan occasionally pointed out a few things of note, such as the nest of a very rare bird, high up in a tree, barely visible, or signs that told him squirrels had eaten someplace as well as several herbs rumored to cure various small ailments, displaying his knowledge of the woods and the animals here. "Now that I warned you about the animals, I sorta also have to warn you about the humans in Ellister..."

"Why is that?" I had to think about Tucker again and about being told more than once that people tend to carry guns here often.

"Well..." he seemed a bit reluctant to continue. "First of all, I tend to treat people as I treat wolves. Cautiously, and I avoid startling them... as they might get unpredictable." He was thinking again.

"Well, maybe that's not really a fair thing to say. Most people in Ellister are really great folk, I just think that not all of them are capable of living this close to nature." He paused once more then quickly asked "Have you actually met someone from Ellister yet?"

"No, not really." I didn't want to mention Eliza as that would probably lead to having to explain the wolves. "I have been busy unpacking my stuff and settling in and such."

"Aye, well, once you run into some people, they're going to be telling you some weird stories since you're new here and probably don't know much about Ellister's history."

Did this little quiet town of Ellister harbor some dark secret? I didn't feel worried at all, I figured I was about to hear some humorous anecdote about something that happened ages ago and was still of some importance here.

"It's not the stories, I'm warning you about. There just... stories, you know? Myths, legends, whatever. It's just that some people really believe they're for real and act on that belief... and that's where the

unpredictable part comes in." He seemed a bit uneasy about it, but continued. "I don't know how the story got started, but it has been around for at least two hundred years now and over generations of parents telling their children, things get distorted a bit, so I guess back then, there must have been several big wolves. Seeing how the wolves in these woods today are taller than average, I guess that's plausible. Maybe those wolves attacked and killed a few people back then or people simply got lost and disappeared in the forest or fell ill for no reason, and it got blamed on the animals... anything could be grounds for superstitious stories in those days I bet. Anyway, to get to the point, some people are going to tell you that there are werewolves out here." He laughed, but it was forced. He clearly wasn't sure to feel embarrassed or amused.

"Hehe, I guess a bit of imagination on a dark evening could turn a shadow into any monster." And I didn't give it much more thought beyond that.

"Well, not quite imagination, more like alcohol. This town has a history of people making their own booze, consuming too much of it, going blind, crazy or sometimes dropping dead just like that. However, that was until forty-fifty years ago, people still drink today, but at least they're getting the stuff in the supermarkets and pubs now. The werewolf myth seems to have a life of its own, people keep coming up with more details to try and make it sound as if it's all real, and every so often they tell me those stories, expecting me to agree with them because I work in these woods. They must be thinking that since I spend so much time in the forest that I should be knowing about these werewolves, but I keep telling them it's simply a myth, nothing more. So they leave and some days later they return with a slightly altered version, hoping to convince me. All of this is harmless, but some of the people that believe this stuff have been patrolling the streets, even until today and they are armed. Even worse, people put out poisoned food in their gardens, which attracts animals, which causes even more people so see things at night, which results in more hysteria, more drinking and more weapons." He sounded a bit frustrated and sighed before continuing. "It's obvious that this often results in problems. Luckily, I have the police department on my side on this thing. If they see people putting out food at night or leaving garbage, they'll tell them to clean it up. Repeat offenders will be fined."

A good thing the two officers didn't see the bowl of water out in my front yard.

Duncan continued, "So if you have pets or plan to have them, don't feed them in the evenings or make sure there are no leftovers outside during the night. Same deal with garbage, seal it tight away or keep it indoors. The less food the animals from the forest will find in town the more they'll stay away and no-one will get spooked by shadows anymore."

What if the animals were already there to begin with, before I started giving them food and water? The last thing I need is more people like Tucker dropping by with guns. Should I tell Duncan and perhaps look for a way to get these animals back to their natural habitat?

Duncan interrupted my thinking. "I don't have to tell you that people who drink, carry guns and who believe that bloodthirsty monsters lurk about in the night can cause some serious accidents. I mean you were almost in one yesterday morning."

Heh, maybe my beard and long hair made me look like a werewolf to Tucker. Didn't know having facial hair could be so dangerous.

"In the thirty years I have been a forester I had to take care of only a few wolves with shot wounds, possibly caused by out-of-towners coming here to hunt. The police and hospital, on the other hand, have to deal with one incident a week on average involving people getting shot at." He stopped walking at this point, and I figured we must be close to the place where I entered the woods this morning. "So that's why I say : treat these people like the wolves. Be cautious and don't startle them, especially if they're carrying guns. It shouldn't be too hard to spot the ones to watch out for, it's usually those talking the most about werewolves or other monsters roaming about during the night. There are also those who believe the stories but aren't afraid. In fact some go as far as claiming to be friends with the monsters and saying these wolves turn into people and have actually been living here for centuries amongst us... but, hey at least those aren't carrying guns and bottles of booze while patrolling the streets at night." He looked around a bit and said : "I have to get back to work, I was glad to have this talk with you, you know, before you ran into a believer... at least you have heard the sane side of the

story first. Don't start thinking bad about Ellister now, like I said, most people here are good folk. Anyways, here's my phone number. If you run into any kind of trouble with animals, real or fictional ones," he said while smiling and handing me a small card, "this is where you can reach me."
"All-right, thanks I'll do that." But not right away, as long as the wolves were near the farmhouse which was a bit isolated from the rest of town, they wouldn't be in town itself. Hopefully there wouldn't be anymore Tucker incidents.

"If you want to return to your place, just walk over there and after several feet you'll be able to see your house. If you follow this road it will eventually lead to town, it's about an hours walk that way. I'll see you later." And off he went.

I chose the short route and after walking for only a few moments the trees gave away to an open field, and I could indeed see the house from here. This was more or less the spot where I entered the wood earlier.

I had only left the forest for a minute when I heard footsteps behind me in the grass. They were light and fast. Wruff! Kiara was walking next to me again, she must have followed us through the woods.
"Ah, there you are. Don't you like Duncan? He seems friendly enough." No answer. "You're not a werewolf I hope, or a shape shifter or something? Haha." Ruff. She didn't sound amused.

As we neared the front yard again, Kiara darted off, barking excitedly. She hopped around some of the sleeping wolves and nudged the tall brown one in the side with her muzzle while wagging her tail. The brown wolf didn't seem in the mood to play, Kiara obviously was the most active of them all. She returned to my side when I stepped into the yard and sat down, I let my fingers run through the fur on her neck.

"Had a nice walk?" Eliza asked, it seemed directed at both Kiara and myself.

"Yup, the forest is a beautiful place. I met Duncan, the forester"

"You're bound to run into him out there, he spends a lot of time in the woods. He's a good person."

"He had some interesting stories to tell, too," I said, while scratching Kiara behind her ears, which she seemed to enjoy, "none of these guys are werewolves, perhaps?"

"Haha, no," she said quickly, "besides, werewolves are people turned into monsters, these are just regular wolves."

"Why of course, maybe you are a werewolf, then, haha."

"Oh, hell no, I'm way too old to be a successful werewolf." To which Orgo replied with a short bark.
"Geez, thanks, Orgo," she said, while rolling her eyes, "he's agreeing on the old part. Either way, you're in for a treat in Ellister with these stories. If you let them, people will tell you some funny things."

That evening, after dinner I walked out on the porch again to enjoy the weather. Most of the wolves were out, probably looking for food. Eliza had left as well. I noticed something sticking from under the lid of the old iron mailbox, next to the front door. Mail? I hadn't told anyone my address and had seen nor heard anyone near the house today. Perhaps when I was at the forest, or maybe it had been there for a while, and I only noticed it now, I thought while I pulled at it. It was just a piece of paper with two lines of rather elegant handwriting, it said 'Treat the wolves well, and they'll be your friends for life.' From a believer or from Eliza? I wasn't even sure it was meant for me.

A while later, still standing in front of the open door, I saw Orgo walk around the corner of the house and onto the porch, there was no sign of the wound on his front leg hindering him at all. He stopped several feet from me and sat down, looking straight at me. He seemed to study me for several moments before getting up again. I took a step forward, no longer blocking the doorway as I figured that was where he wanted to go. I tried to figure out why they rather spend the night inside instead of outside. Had this something to do with the patrols in town and the hunters in the forest Duncan mentioned? Closely after Orgo found himself a spot to rest for the night, the 7th wolf arrived as well. It, too paused, but only briefly, to look at me and then calmly entered the house.

By the time I went to bed as well, all but Kiara and the tall one were in the house.

7.

The next morning started as all had done thus far. I was sat on the edge of the porch, Kiara sitting next to me on the ground, resting her head on my right knee, letting me scratch her ears. For a few moments already I had been following a small spot of dust slowly crawling up the hill. "Looks like someone is coming up here," I said. I felt Kiara's ears move, but whatever was at the bottom of the hill, was probably still too far away for her to hear it. Instead, she lifted her head and looked intently at the moving dust cloud and barked sharply, which resulted in several of the wolves in the front yard raising their ears. To me, it seemed there was a hint of caution in the behavior of the animals.

It took a full minute before I could distinguish another color in the brown-grey dust cloud. "Probably a red car, that's all I can tell." Kiara produced a low rumble, it sounded threatening.

"I think we'll play it safe and hide for a bit. If it is who we think it is, we rather not have this person see us." We, Again? She got up slowly, visibly with some difficulty.

"You can stay in the house if you want," I said, not really liking the idea of her hiding in the forest or someplace. Immediately, I wondered how she managed to come and go without me noticing, she had no cane and was walking quite slowly.

"Oh, we will be fine, don't worry, but thank you for the offer," she said and started moving in the general direction of the forest. Some of the wolves were casually walking in front of her and some waited a few moments before following her. I didn't think anyone being guarded by this many wolves would have many reasons to worry. "Would you do us a small favor and hide the bowl and plate? Just in case it's someone who shouldn't know there were wolves around here."

"Sure," and I got up to fetch them. Kiara lingered a few moments longer, she had stopped growling, but was clearly tense, then she disappeared around the corner of the house where the others had gone.

I was left to wonder if I should be cautious as well. The plate still had some dog treats on it and with no dog near the house, people who believed in werewolves might become... unpredictable. Yes, I ought to be cautious, remembering Duncan's advice.

Having put the plate and bowl away in the house, I returned to the front yard to see if there were any other signs that might give someone a hint as to which animals had been here. I could understand why the wolves might not want to be around, but why did Eliza leave as well? Was she some kind of guardian over these animals, making sure they weren't harmed or harassed by other humans? She seemed a bit too old for that, I couldn't picture her running through the forests or managing a pack of wild animals. Then again, these wolves seemed to live at the same calm pace as Eliza did.

A few minutes later, an old red pickup came to a stop next to the barn. A tall man with short blond hair stepped out. The skin on his face and forearms matched the color of the car, most likely from spending too much time in the sun. In the same weight class as Duncan and possible about the same age, this man wasn't wearing a rifle, but he did have a massive hunting knife on his belt, as well as a hip flask, no doubt containing something with alcohol.

"Hiya!" He shouted as he started walking to me, "I'm Buck." He held out his hand as he came to a stop in front of me, towering almost a full foot above me.

I shook his hand while telling him my name. "You're the new guy in town, right? Haha, good to meet you. I have made it my duty to welcome new people in town." Not giving me the time to say anything, he continued, "You see, most people that come to live here do so because they're tired of city life, but many leave again after a short while, simply because it's not what they expected. In case of this fine town of Ellister, there are a few extra things that might scare some people, so myself and several of my colleagues have been making sure this place is safe for everyone."

Let me guess : werewolves?

"Now, this might sound strange to city people, you probably never heard anything like this before since news from small places like Ellister is rarely considered important enough to make it to the city, but you ought to believe me." There was clearly a dislike toward the city and those he called city

people. I raised an eyebrow, to which he replied : "Yes, it would be smart to listen to what I have to say, and even if you don't believe it... just keep it in mind. Not doing so might cost you your life." He lowered his voice as he neared the end of his sentence and looked around him for a moment.

I remained silent, figuring that was the cautious thing to do.

"Those woods over there," he continued while pointing in the general direction of the forest, "have attracted quite some animals over the centuries and some of those don't like us, humans, being so close to it." His eyes remained fixed on the distant trees. "People have been attacked, killed and dragged into the woods to be eaten."

"What kind of animal would do something like that? I don't think..."

"Not animals," He interrupted me, "monsters." He looked at me again, and I noticed his eyes had grown wider, clearly this man was a believer in some or other variation on the werewolf myth, on top of that he seemed fanatic in his belief. A dangerous combination.

"But," he paused, "I," another pause, "am a hunter." Pride, his eyes shone with it. "During the day, they look like regular wolves, some say they even take on a twisted human form, but don't be fooled, they are dangerous monsters."

"Really? Wolves don't usually attack people just like that," I said.

"No," he shook his head, "no, not wolves. There are no wolves here, anything that looks like a wolf is, in fact, one of them, they have killed off all the real wolves ages ago."

"And they live in those woods over there?" Obviously I wasn't buying any of this, but I went along with it, not really wanting to tell this guy he was full of crap. Caution, remember what Duncan said.

"Yes, but there is no need for you to be afraid. Over the past two decades, me and my..." he paused, looking for the right word, "my associates have been making sure those things leave us alone. When we see a wolf, we hunt it, we kill it." He grinned, an unpleasant sight. "And you can help us."

"Oh, wow, well now, I don't kill anything..." he had surprised me. "I don't even own a gun."

"Humm, shame, being so close to the woods, this place would be a nice spot to keep an eye out for the monsters. Well, we often put out poisoned food, since some of the bastards are hard to catch."

"I don't think I want to do that either, putting food outside will attract them and what if they decide to eat me instead of the food?" If this guy hadn't been a foot taller than me and didn't have arms the size of small trees I would have just told him to get lost and never bother me again at this point.

"Good point," he was thinking about something, then said "well, here is what you do : if you see a wolf, you get inside the house and give me a call right away. I'll get here as fast as I can and shoot the bastard."

"Okay, though I sure hope it never comes this far..."

"And another thing, close your windows in the evenings and especially during the nights. These animals have been known to enter houses and attack people there."

"Damn..."

He handed me a piece of creased paper with some numbers on it. His phone number "You can reach me there anytime."

"Thanks..."

"All-right, then, I'd better get going again. You're bound to run into Duncan sooner or later and he's probably going to tell you that none of this is true. I don't understand his reasoning, but he'll get his comeuppance. Hanging out in the woods like that, one of these days, those monsters are going to tear his throat out." He threw an angry look in the direction of the forest before returning to the car.

As he turned the pickup around, I noticed a rifle hanging behind the driver's seat. He stopped and yelled "See ya later!" and started rolling down the hill.

I stayed in the front yard, watching his truck get smaller and smaller until the cloud of dust it was creating hid it from view. Nothing Duncan said prepared me for this guy, someone this fanatic is downright dangerous. Whoever else I ended up meeting in Ellister would probably sit somewhere in between Duncan and Buck, who I considered to be the two extremes. Duncan : clever, careful and not believing in werewolf stories and Buck : lunatic. At least, I hoped I wouldn't come across anyone worse than Buck.

I crumpled the piece of paper with his phone number into a small ball and went into the house to throw in the trashcan. I walked outside again just in time to see Eliza arrive at the chair and sit down, several wolves were with her.

"So what do you think of Buck?" she asked.

"He's a nutcase. Hope I don't ever run into him again."

"The good thing is that people in Ellister don't get worse than him."

"Yeh, I figured he was unique. Did he ever give you any trouble?"

"Aye, but that was some years ago, we haven't been close to the more populated areas of Ellister in a while now."

I said 'you', but she was talking about 'we' again. I didn't notice it then, but my subconscious did and came to haunt me with it during the night.

8.

I didn't get much sleep that night. My subconscious was on the brink of figuring something out, and it didn't want to let go. It wasn't the werewolf stories that kept me awake, I was more interested in what triggered them and why they persisted until this day. There must have been an unusual event, back then, something the people here could not explain. Perhaps in trying to understand it, they changed the truth in such a way that it made more sense, not wanting to accept the reality of it. Most likely, either the forest or the wolves were involved, it doesn't take much to go from large wolves to werewolves for the possibly less sophisticated minds back then. But if my theory was correct and the werewolf stories only exist to conceal an even weirder truth, whatever could that truth be?

Both Duncan and Buck had mentioned something else that was slowly gaining in importance. For Duncan, it was an afterthought, he had classified everything as werewolf myths, without wanting to consider there might be more to it. Even though Buck was clearly ready for the nuthouse, what he told me was more complex than a regular bloodthirsty-monster-in-the-night story. People weren't turning into wolves during a full moon, wolves were turning into people and weren't always plain mindless killers.

Why the discrepancy? Why did Duncan say there were people claiming to be friends with these creatures, while others, like Buck, seemed both angry and afraid. Such extreme sides to a story made me believe there was either more to it or there was something affecting the minds of people in this town en masse, each dealing with it in a slightly different manner. Maybe there was something wrong with the water, or with the booze. Or perhaps it's more innocent and is just the fact that it gets really dark out here in the night because there are barely any street lights. Darkness and a forest full of wild animals at the town's edge might get one's imagination running just as wild. Like mine was doing, I realized. Maybe I was just looking too much into it and was wanting to find meaning where there wasn't any.

That morning, somewhat tired from only having slept a few hours, I had figured it all out. My ponderings from the night before seemed so silly now. This was nothing but a prank. People here just liked to scare city folk. It started with Eliza, who was probably close with the wolves, perhaps having raised and trained some of them. She was here from the moment I arrived and slowly introduced the wolves to see how I would react, and they went from there. The next day came Tucker, someone clearly afraid enough of wolves to go shoot at them. However, he did hit one of them. I couldn't figure that part out, though they might as well have used blanks and the wound on the wolf's leg could have been fake. The police had to be in on it, too, not all of them, just the two that might have to deal with a gunman on the loose that day.

Then it was Duncan's turn, he had to warn me both about stories and people that believed in them. The day after introduced me to someone that was almost his complete opposite and so obviously out of his mind that it seemed he wasn't real, he was obviously playing some role, perhaps overdoing it a little. The proof that was required to confirm at least a part of what Duncan said.

They are going through a lot of trouble, it seems. I wonder what the climax will be. Maybe Buck dressed up as a werewolf, pretending to attack me in the evening or even during the night, appearing in my house, he was tall enough to be playing that role.

I walked onto the porch and made up my mind. I wasn't planning on spoiling their fun, I was too curious to see what they had in mind, I was going to play along, but was hoping to do it in a clever way, forcing them to rethink their strategy and having to come up with other things to scare me, like recruiting some extra actors from town to tell me stories.

What if I could make them believe werewolves didn't scare me one bit, that I had encountered such monsters before and dealt with them? I might even turn things around and dress up like a werewolf and scare the hell out of them.

"I have figured it out," I announced. One or two pairs of wolf ears turned at the sound of my voice. Eliza raised an eyebrow. "During the day there are 6 wolves and one elderly lady. In the evening, there are 7 wolves, but no humans." I looked at Eliza.

"What... are you saying?" She looked a bit surprised, clearly not prepared for what I had said. "You're not suggesting that I..."

"Yes, I'm on to you," I interrupted her.

She continued, "You don't seem the type that would believe in werewolves, Nick." The tone of her voice told me she didn't think I was joking. It seemed there was even a slight hint of worry. Good.

"No, not werewolves. That's just a cover up. You can change into a normal looking wolf, at will."

She laughed out loud and it wasn't forced. Orgo, who was lying on the ground, raised his head from his front legs and looked at Eliza, probably trying to figure out what was going on.

"It makes sense," I went on to say, "I noticed you often said 'we' as if you considered yourself to be part of the wolf pack." Orgo looked at me now, then turned his head back in Eliza's direction. Was he looking for a reaction or simply trying to make sense of this exchange of sounds between the two humans? "I have yet to see you leave or arrive, yet you're not always here. You're not very quick and the nearest house is all the way down the hill. Now if you could change into a wolf, you'd be able to move about with much more ease, and probably without getting spotted."

She didn't respond, but just looked at me, and I couldn't see any particular expression on her face. Orgo was still turning his head back and forth between us. He whipped his tail on the ground just once, causing some dust to fly up, while looking at Eliza. She responded with a quick look at the wolf and a barely noticeable hand gesture. There was definitely some communication going on between the two. I shouldn't forget that these are still wild animals. How well had she trained them? Did Orgo read something in the sound of my voice that he considered a possible threat to Eliza? Would she let the wolves attack me? Perhaps Buck was the sane one, and Eliza and Duncan were using wolves to hunt people. Not as likely as the prank theory, but still, I shouldn't get careless.

For now I dismissed the idea that I might end up as wolf dinner, my curiosity stronger than my sense of self preservation. Orgo lowered his head on his front legs again, but his ears were still raised and his eyes were trained on me. I was running out of proof for my theory but still wanted to say a few things before changing course. "Perhaps this is a well kept secret in Ellister, but some people like Buck seem to think you could be dangerous. Not wanting to give up on being human completely, you still stay near the town, but far enough from people like Buck and close enough to the forest for the wolf in you."

"And you really believe all that?" she asked.

"It's a theory, and it works rather well, how else would you explain all the things I just mentioned."

"There's one problem with your theory, where's the science behind it?"

She made a valid point, especially since I always had an interest in science. I knew nothing I said made sense from a scientific point of view. Had I been too eager to turn the joke in my favor and was she on the brink of figuring that out? I chose to ignore the question. "Don't worry though, your secret is safe with me. I won't tell Buck you're here. I don't mind you and the wolves being here at all."

"Of course you won't tell anyone, because no-one will believe you and think you've gone mad. Even Buck." She produced a sly smile and was awaiting a counter argument.

"Well the wolves are here. I see them, I'm not making this up." I hoped that this didn't sound like a threat.

"Don't underestimate these animals, they're very clever." Counter threat : don't mess with the wolves, or else. She sounded serious and the smile was gone.

"Oh I know," I reached towards Kiara to rub one of her ears. She had been here the whole time, seemingly ignoring the conversation. "Like I said, I don't mind you all being here. And I don't plan on telling anyone, definitely not Buck that you, all of you wolves, are up here."

"Humm."

That evening I waited outside to see the wolves arrive at the house. I wanted to know if there was a change in the pattern, which could indicate that the things I said earlier caused them to rethink their plan and in doing so, might cause them to make mistakes.

There was no change, when I went outside, Eliza was already gone, she couldn't have left more than 15 minutes ago as that was the last time I checked. I walked around the house and barn to try and figure out where she might have gone. Unless she was faking the difficulties she was having walking due to her age, she could not have gone far, but there was no sign of her. A while later, the grey wolf walked onto the porch, just like it had done the day before.

"Good night, Eliza," I said. The wolf ignored me completely. It wasn't meant for the animal, but I had a role to play now and someone might be looking to see how I would react.

9.

In the course of the following morning Eliza had asked me if she could show me something in the backyard. I said yes. She got up and I offered her an arm, I didn't think the difficulty she experienced while walking was fake. "Thank you, I'm getting too old for this."

There wasn't much to see in the backyard, besides the two tool sheds, there was a small stretched hill, partially overgrown with weeds and grasses and about the same length of the house and perhaps 10 feet deep, which I figured was nothing but the border of the yard.

"We figured it's about time we tell you what is going on here, why we are here."

"And by 'we' you mean you and the wolves?" Did the wolves figure, too?

"Aye. You are obviously entitled to know what is happening here on your own property, and no doubt have you wondered about what I have been doing here and where the wolves came from. We just wanted to make sure if we could tell you." She kept her eyes on the hill. "I'll start from the beginning, but first, let me sit down." She turned around and went to sit on the edge of the porch. I sat down as well. "That hill over there is a grave," she said as she pointed. "The beginning was long before I was born, so not all of this might be completely correct and certain details are already lost to time. We have been here for several centuries, three at least, how long exactly I can't tell. Ellister back then was a small farmer community, made up of several families. Whether we were one of those families is not known, we might have come from there in the beginning," she pointed in the direction of the woods. "Personally, I think the latter is more likely. But we did live here from Ellister's early days. If the people here had been cattle farmers, they might not have liked us as much and things might have gone different, but we stayed in and near Ellister ever since. As we learned later, the reason why people tolerated our ancestors was because they believed we were responsible for the weather. Summers last long in Ellister and winters are very mild. They called us summer wolves. Word got out that Ellister was a good place for farmers and the collection of farms grew out into a real town. People did figure if the town kept growing at this pace, there might be too many farmers in this area where summer didn't seem to go away. After a while, they became protective of their myth and this protection in a certain way still exists today." Just like the stories, I thought. "People treated us well most of the time, even though not all of them believed we were connected to the weather, I'm not sure if I believe that either. There were those that believed it and figured if they'd kill us, farmers from Ellister would no longer have an advantage over those from nearby towns. It wasn't pretty, we defended ourselves, so people got killed, Ellister farmers defended us and some got killed, too. It didn't do our reputation much good and people preferred staying alive over being successful farmers. But we did have several good friends who stuck with us. Eventually, we had to be more careful, if too many people knew about us and the stories that surrounded us, it might draw enough attention to attract hunters again. We stayed close to the people we could trust, while in Ellister and spent more and more time in the woods again." She paused, looking at the forest. "This house has played an important role throughout our history. My great-grandparents have told me about them growing up around here, so this place has been here for at least 250 years." Four generations spanning 250 years? Doubtful, but I didn't interrupt her. "Some of our best friends have lived here, and so have we, to a certain extent, we still do, today."

"I was told this place hadn't been inhabited for twenty years."

"Oh, it was actually."

"You owned this farmhouse?"

"No, never did, well we never had the paperwork that said we did, some people did consider it our house, some of us did, too."

"So where do you live now, then?" I wanted to know.

"Here."

"You're squatters?"

"By 'here' I don't just mean the house, I'm talking about this area, including the forest in a way as well."

She wasn't making much sense to me. I was out of questions for the time being, so she continued. "To some we were nothing more than the cause for healthy crops and good weather. We had a positive influence on their income from their farms, so they tolerated us. Others didn't like us being here and

let us know, not always in a friendly manner. Few had grown into real friends. All in all, it was a rather good situation, until spite caused one farmer to kill some of the people who lived in this house, our friends. Obviously, we were blamed and despite attempts from relatives of the murdered people to defend us, a lot of us got killed and, eventually, we were chased off. I suppose that is where the positive stories surrounding us became negative, and we were labeled werewolves and monsters. We spent years in the woods, where I was born. We were left alone most of the time. Some people never give up on a grudge and tried to hunt us down out there, but the forest was our domain, we can't be killed there that easily. With us out of sight for at least a generation, the stories became myths in Ellister, and even though we never returned to the town, the people who lived in this house and their descendants invited us over to live here again. That must have been some 120 years ago I guess." Which means she was older than 120, which was not very likely, again. "We have been here ever since, even when the last inhabitant here died twenty years ago. Some people in town still know what really happened, but the werewolf myth was stronger and a lot people link this house with the myth and stay away from it. Which is good in a way as it gives us a relatively safe and calm place to live. Honestly, we didn't expect someone to ever come live in this place again, but here you are."

Okay, interesting story. I couldn't immediately link it to the joke, I was convinced they were preparing to pull on me. "So what is your relationship with the wolves? Are you some kind of trainer or herder, even?"

"One of them is my mate, one a younger sister, two are children, two are grandchildren."

This was getting too crazy. "What?"

"I am what you figured I was, yesterday. Are you doubting your own theory now?"

"What? No, I mean... no. So you really are..."

"Both wolf and human."

Damn. I went over the entire story she had just told me, replacing each 'we', which I thought were humans, with either wolves or humans turning into wolves. For the sake of what she told me, some things started making more sense. Of course all of it was made up. "Why are you telling me this?" I asked, playing along for now.

"We think we can trust you now. We knew both Duncan and Buck would show up as they welcome new people to town in their own ways. Judging from your reactions to what they told you as well as how you have treated us, we think we will get along fine. Everyone who has ever lived in this house has been a good friend of ours. I like to think you will not turn out to be an exception. Besides, who would believe you?"

"Buck, to a certain extend. But out of town, no-one, indeed."

"But you would never tell Buck."

"Of course not. What would you have done if I had been more of a Buck type person myself?" Feed me to the wolves?

"Chase you off, most likely. We are not harmless and will defend ourselves if needed. But convincing average city people to go live somewhere else doesn't strike us as a difficult."

"So the grave over there doesn't contain the remains of people you have fed to the wolves... or even eaten yourself, or something?"

"No, all of our ancestors were buried here. It was a custom started by the people who lived here, not us, they buried the wolves that were killed in the first hunt."

"Oh..." I didn't know what else to say to that.

"So you see, this place is rather important to us, it remembers us of our old friends as well as of our parents, grandparents and so on." She got up.

"Well I'm not planning to turn this place into a bastion of modern society. I like it the way it is and won't change it. I already told you I didn't mind all of you being here." I followed her as she started to make her way back to the front yard and offered her some support again.

As I arrived in the front yard again, some of the implications of what she told me became clear, being faced with the wolves again. If what she told me was correct, these animals ought to be both human and wolf as well. I returned to my usual spot on the end of the porch to ponder some more.

Why did she tell me all this? If it was correct, which is not an option I was wanting to accept, but maybe she believed it was the truth, sooner or later she would have to convince me of letting her stay here. It would be hard to stay here and try to keep such a secret completely hidden for a long time. If this wasn't the truth, then why tell me, it didn't seem compatible with the prank they were preparing. She basically confirmed my theory, which I came up with to draw them out. Perhaps they were using it against me now, to see how much I truly believed in what I had said the day before. If so, they made this story up to test me, which meant they could not have had much time to come up with something between the time I told them my theory and this morning. Chances are they didn't work out the fine details and didn't test the entire story to see if there were any contradictions. So, let's see how well they worked all of this out.

“You asked me about the science behind what I said yesterday. You should know more about it.”

“Actually, I don't,” Eliza said. That's one detail they didn't work out. “If you live more than half your life in forests, you don't get in touch with much science. We never took part in the human education system, and we never asked ourselves that question. We can live with what we are and don't ask why we are.” That was an acceptable answer.

I started thinking out loud. “There's not that much difference between all mammals, by which I also mean humans, after all. We eat more or less the same foods, have the same senses and organs. So something that looks like a wolf or human could be completely the same on the inside. If you change from one form to another, some organs might move around a bit, which might not be a problem, but what about the skeleton?”

“We have skeletons, that's for sure. I don't know how it works, it just does. Whether we are closer to humans or to wolves I don't know. Did we evolve from wolves or humans or are we something completely different? Changing form as you put it, is not that simple either, it takes quite some effort. Most of us, as you can see, prefer the wolf form and stay in that form for long periods of time.”

“From what you told me, it seems you have memories that as far back as 120 years. You don't seem that old to me.”

“I can't tell you how old I am exactly, since I don't know, but it's definitely more than 130. We definitely live longer, but the part of us that is both human and wolf ages just like animals and humans do. Our wolf form seems to be better suited to handle old age, and as we grow older, most of us remain in their wolf form when that happens, myself being an exception.”

“And all of the wolves here are like you and can take on a human form if they wanted?” Some things weren't very detailed in their story, but I couldn't find a contradiction and was running out of things to ask. Eliza nodded. Should I ask one of them to prove they can change shape? I'm sure they would have prepared a reason, so they wouldn't have to. “So these wolves ought to be able to talk, right?”

“No, it doesn't work that way. Probably, due to changes in lungs, vocal chords and whatever else plays a role, we can't use your language. Remember that it's your language, we probably just learned it somewhere along the road. We can still hear, understand and reason just fine however.”

Well, that was convenient. These could all be regular trained wolves and Eliza could be an old lady and not the shape shifters they claimed to be. They didn't provide me with solid proof, and I couldn't prove they were lying. For the time being, I was still playing along, so I didn't have to prove them wrong right away as that would spoil the joke. But the prank had taken an odd turn, did my theory put them out of balance and forced them to come up with something equally absurd or were they trying to make it all sound more plausible by providing more details? There's still the option that this is not a joke, and she was just plain crazy.

Turning around to head back inside, I realized she said the house might be as old as 300 years, just like the seller of the house claimed. It wasn't a traditional wooden house made out of planks, it was massive and felt like it was made out of trees instead.

The wood looked healthy, still. There were no signs that time had done any serious damage to it. Underneath the layers of varnish, the wood did look old and rough, but strong at the same time.

10.

I didn't know what day it was, and I didn't care. This felt like vacation, or maybe it felt like plain life yet seemed vacation because I wasn't used to it anymore after living in the city for years. City life was all about doing things, about having to do things because you were told that was the only way to live. How wrong that was. Out here you could just live... for real.

On my next trip to the center of town, spending a bit more time there than on my first visit to the local super market, I ran into several people who all wanted to welcome me and hear how I liked their town. All of them were friendly and had their own little anecdotes regarding the werewolf myths and although none had actually met or seen one of these fabled wolf people, they all knew someone who did. Whether their stories were part of the prank or part of the town-wide fascination with the myth, I couldn't tell. I also met an elderly couple who introduced themselves as Curtis and Irene Barrett. Oddly enough, they asked me how Eliza was doing. I didn't really expect anyone else to know she was up there. They wanted me to give Eliza their regards as well as a message. Again I wondered if they were sincere or part of the joke.

Back at the house, I found Eliza in her usual spot. Orgo was sat next to her chair, with Eliza's hand on his head between the wolf's ears. Only two other wolves were in the front yard.

"I met Curtis and Irene in town, they send their regards and wanted me to tell you it's been too long since you last visited them."

"Indeed it has been a while... They are old friends of us," Eliza said.

"They also wanted you to know that Tucker is doing fine and his daughter was here last week, and she said 'hi', too and hoped you were doing well."

"Glad to hear that."

"Is this the same Tucker that came up here last week?" I wanted to know.

"Aye. You see, Tucker's wife is part of the family that owned this house. When their family grew too big for this place, their children and grandchildren went to live elsewhere, but remained in Ellister, with Tucker's granddaughter, Anna, being the exception. It's her who's been visiting Ellister regularly to take care of both her father and this house, something her mother used to do, but she died several years ago. Tucker never believed in what we were, but his wife was a good friend of ours. Sometimes he came along with her when she went to check on the house, to him, we were just an old lady and a pack of wolves, but he had no problems with his wife being friends to us."

"Then why did he shoot at you guys?"

"He had a hard time accepting the death of his wife, years ago," Eliza said, staring in front of her. "He started to drink and eventually started losing his mind. We never expected him to fire at us, else we would have hidden when he came up here with the rifle. I'm sure that, in whatever memories he has left, there is a link between his wife and us, but he doesn't know anymore what kind of connection there was, exactly. Buck is spending a lot of time telling everyone who will listen about werewolves and monsters, it wouldn't surprise me if he told Tucker that we were responsible for his wife's death."

"Buck is a psycho," I concluded. As if it wasn't bad enough that Tucker had lost his wife, Buck was exploiting her death to convince others of his claims. "Something tells me he's going to cause more trouble."

"Not unlikely. Even though we have been staying away from the town for a while now, he grows more convinced that there are werewolves out here. He's no longer allowed in the forest, so he stays in town and uses his time convincing and recruiting other people."

"Quite some people in town seem to have their variation of the myth, but none of them seemed as fanatic as Buck."

"To some it's indeed nothing but a myth, others are just careful at night, some are scared. I suppose it's mainly thanks to Duncan, that fewer people are taking all of it too serious. He's a bit of a counter to Buck's insanity."

"So does Duncan know about you? He told me he didn't believe in any of it."

"He doesn't, even though both his father and grandfather did. He'd never harm a wolf either way and there's no sense in making him believe. The fewer people know, the better."

“Is that why Kiara hid when I met Duncan in the woods?”

“Well, Kiara is unique. I'm sure you've noticed that. What do you think would happen if the average human came across a wolf with fur that looks like it's made of silver?”

“Of course... better play it safe.”

“Aye, I'm not saying that Duncan would do something to her, but he'd only have to mention it to one other person and in days the entire town would know, including people like Buck. It wouldn't do us any good, and it wouldn't do the forest any good either.”

“Have there been others like Kiara?”

“No, she's the first and will be the last.”

“Last? Why is that?”

“The 7 of us, we are the last of our kind. Kiara and her brother Adahy will probably be our last generation.”

“Damn, I had no idea. Could there be others elsewhere, beyond Ellister?”

“I doubt that, but if there are, they probably live in hiding,” she said, while her fingers stroked the edges of Orgo's ears. “Times have not always been kind to us, but it's how nature works sometimes. Little one can do about it, but to accept it.”

As it turned out, the tall brown one was Adahy. I had already noticed Kiara had a slightly different relationship with this wolf and Adahy himself was also a bit more active than the other wolves, possibly being still relatively young.

11.

Over the course of the following week, Eliza told me about her childhood, living both in the town and forest of Ellister. She knew quite some anecdotes from other pack- or family members, some apparently dating back more than two hundred years. For a while, I had the impression she was coming up with these things to lend her original story more credibility, but there were no other developments in the prank that I could see, making it less and less likely that all of this was fake. Still, I could not believe the parts about people changing into wolves, and she was yet to provide me solid proof.

One morning I walked onto the porch to see someone sitting on the edge of it, next to my usual spot. Having visitors would not have been strange, but this one had long silver hair that reached all the way down her back. It took my mind a moment to make the connection and subsequently reject it.

“Kiara?” I asked. I felt foolish, but there was a vague recognition in the person that was sat there, her back turned to me. But how does one recognize a wolf in a person?

She turned her head, revealing a beautiful, young face that smiled as it saw me. Pale skin with a faint blush in contrast with bright blue eyes. The eyes, I recognized them, too. Having said nothing yet, she turned her head again. It all made sense now, but I wasn't ready to believe. Maybe I've been hearing too many stories and am starting to see things, just like so many people in town.

I walked off the porch and circled until I stood in front of her, keeping at least 6 feet distance from this person, just in case. She lifted her head to look at me, and I crouched down in response until my eyes were on the same level as hers. It was Kiara. But how could it be possible?

“Damn...” Barely a whisper.

“You seem surprised, Nick,” Eliza noticed.

“Who is... is this... Kiara? But how?”

“Who else would it be? I know you recognize her.”

“Yeah, but...” I started to say.

“You never believed it, right?” Eliza interrupted. She didn't sound angry at all, but she must have suspected this for a while, I'm sure.

“Aye,” I had to admit. Part of me still didn't want to believe it. “Kiara?”

“Hi, Nick.” She was clearly amused by my confusion and amazement.

Later that day, she had changed back to a silver wolf, without me seeing it happen. Perhaps they found someone with similarly colored hair and eyes to try make me believe they could really change form, but to me, that sounded less likely than the fact that these animals could change into humans.

The simple white dress she was wearing earlier was lying on the porch. Of course, wolves don't wear clothes. I studied Kiara's eyes to confirm they were the same as the ones the woman had. Kiara barked, perhaps not that happy with the attention.

“What's the matter, girl?”

Wruff. She took a few steps in my direction and lowered her head until she was gently pushing against my knee with the top of her head. I started rubbing the back of her neck, telling myself I was petting an animal, it might have been awkward otherwise. In response, she put her head on my knees and closed her eyes, enjoying the massage.

Over the days that followed, Kiara changed form nearly every day. As I got to know her better, which was easier when she was in her human form, she constantly amazed me with her intellect and insight. She couldn't read or write and had never gone to any kind of school, I couldn't tell if her common sense and cleverness came from living close to nature or from animal instinct, something which was still present in, yet mostly ignored by, humans.

We visited the forest several more times, sometimes I was walking or getting guided by a playful wolf, sometimes I took a stroll with a beautiful young woman, yet they were the same. The more time I spent with Kiara, the more convinced I was of that fact. I stopped looking for the science behind it all. Science doesn't know everything, I told myself.

12.

It rained last night. I didn't hear it as it happened, but it showed, the next morning. A wisp of fog clung to the trees in the distance, soon to disappear completely in the warmth of the sun.

It was the first rain I've seen in the month or so that I've been here, and asked Eliza about it.

"It actually rains here quite often, but almost always during the night. Together with the warm weather during the day it creates the perfect balance for the forest and everything in it."

It made sense, warm weather such as during the past month would have turned this place into a desert, otherwise. As I looked back on my time here so far, I couldn't recall having anything other than warm summer weather. Even in the warmest, best summers, there's bound to be cloudy and rainy days, apparently not so in Ellister. Not for much longer, I thought, autumn being some 4 weeks away.

As the sun removed the last bits of fog, I noticed a car driving up the hill, in the distance. It was a red pickup.

"Looks like Buck's about to arrive," I said.

"What could he want?" Eliza wondered as she got up. "We'll be in the neighborhood, but out of sight." And she walked behind the corner of the house with all the wolves that were in the front yard at the time, following her.

Turning back to watch the car get closer, I saw it was driving fast, very fast. Something in the back of my mind told me to be prepared. Prepared for what? I got up and walked in the direction of the road, stopping at the edge of the shadow cast by the trees.

The pickup came to an abrupt halt as soon as it reached the top of the hill, its brakes screeching. He didn't bother parking it next to the barn like last time, currently the car was blocking the way to the road to town. Buck got out, rifle in his hand and slammed the door of the car shut. He was visibly angry.

"Hey!" He bellowed, his voice unnaturally loud. It echoed in my skull and nearly stunned me. The birds nearby went suddenly quiet.

He stood next to the car for a few moments, before taking several long steps, which put him two feet away from me. He looked even taller than last time.

"What the hell are you doing up here?" He was still thundering, not as loud as before, but still too loud for comfort. If this was anyone else I would have asked if they could be so kind as not to yell, the frantic look on his face told me to be extra careful this time.

"Well?"

I tried to sound as calm as possible. "I live here."

He didn't appreciate that answer. "Don't be funny, little man." His voice was a lot quieter this time, but as such, sounded even more threatening. I wished he'd go back to his yelling now, which he did.

"Where is the old woman? I know she's been here and those god damn monsters, too." His eyes grew wider, and I could not resist taking a step back. How did he know? "Where?" Even louder, his eyes fixed on mine, spittle flying from his lips as he shouted.

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"Whatever. I know they're here and I will find them." He started looking around.

I didn't want this guy hanging around here at all. "This is my property and I want you off it."

He looked at me as if I had said the most stupid thing he had ever heard. As he realized I was being serious, he shook his head. "Try and get me off, then." He took a step in the direction of the front door of the house, then froze to the sudden sound of something growling behind me.

I turned around and saw Adahy standing just next to the far corner of the house, his teeth bare, front legs apart and head lowered, eyes fixed on Buck. I had never seen him like that, and even though I knew his anger was directed towards Buck, it scared the hell out of me.

Buck didn't move for several seconds, possibly paralyzed. The volume of the snarling matched the size of the wolf. Inhaling loudly, he was like a dragon, getting ready to spew fire.

Wooooo... A howl close behind me. I turned, expecting to see another wolf, but it was Buck. His eyes even wider than before and his mouth open, it looked almost comical. He's losing it, I thought. It was a strangely high-pitched sound to come from someone the size of Buck.

Oooooooffff. He snapped out of it and his face now bore a monstrous grin. "I'll get you, basssh-tard," he quietly said, drool was dripping from his chin as he slowly raised his rifle.

The growling suddenly stopped and Adahy darted away behind the house. "I'll get you," Buck repeated as he started to walk in that direction.

Almost immediately, I saw Kiara appear from behind the other corner of the house. Buck's back was turned to her, so he couldn't see her. I tried to gesture at her to stay out of it, but to no avail. Kiara started growling, too and she might have been a fair bit smaller than her brother, it was equally threatening, sending shivers down my spine.

This time Buck didn't waste any time, he spun and pointed the gun in Kiara's direction. On a whim, I turned to grab the twin barrels of the weapon, pushing it to the side and up. A shot went off and in response I gave him a kick to the groin while pulling at the weapon. He let go as he took a step back and went down on one knee, grunting, probably more surprised than in pain.

A quick look to the side of the house told me that Kiara had disappeared, there were some glass shards in the front yard, and I noticed one of the windows on the first floor was shattered. It looked like the shot went nowhere near her. Good.

"You... you..." Buck was getting up, and I was making sure there was at least 15 feet between us. "Why are you protecting these monsters?"

At this point, he was standing between me and the front door, where I wanted to be. To do what? Call the cops? Would they be able to help? Still it was better than doing nothing, so I started circling Buck slowly. "I know what's going on here..." Buck said as he took a step in my direction.

The gun was pointed at him, and I hoped that two barrels meant it had two bullets as well. Only Buck knew how many shots this thing had left. "Put the weapon down, kid... you might hurt someone, hah hah hah." The glow in his eyes returned as he took the huge hunting knife from his belt. "Yes, I know you are one of them."

Great, he thinks I'm a werewolf. Now he'll never leave me in peace, worse, he might decide to kill me. "I'll get you... you'll see." More than ever I felt I had to try and get inside the house. I looked to my side to see how far I was from the door. Only half way there.

In that one moment I wasn't looking at him, he had charged at me, unbelievably quiet and fast. Almost instinctively, I pulled the trigger.

He stopped four feet from me, dropped on his knees and looked at his stomach. A red spot was rapidly growing on his white shirt. He fell to his side and rolled over to remain motionless and face down in the dust.

Did I just kill someone? Now what?

My thoughts were interrupted by a voice, coming from behind me. "Nick! Are you okay?" It was Duncan, he too, was holding a rifle. He must have arrived here running, as he was still breathing heavily. "I heard a shot coming from here and ran to see what's up then I saw that idiot charge at you." I didn't get the chance to say anything. "Hey, I thought you said you didn't own a gun?"

"This isn't mine... it's Buck's." I started to feel nauseous.

"Aye, you're probably right... Buck always carried a double-barrel. What happened here?"

"I need to sit down, first," and I walked towards the porch, putting down the weapon on it. "Hell, I had better call the police or something."

"No need, I did that as soon as I realized that first shot came from the direction of your house. What was he doing up here?"

"He asked for an old woman. I said I didn't know what he was talking about. He got angry, then a wolf showed up, and he shot at it. I managed to pull to gun from his hands and at that point he concluded I was a werewolf." I paused. "You saw the rest."

"Buck," Duncan said, standing two feet from the body and looking down on it, "you're a god damn fool." He turned to me. "Don't feel too bad about this, Nick. If you didn't shoot him, he would have killed you. This man was a danger to anyone in town not believing his stories."

"I know, but still..."

"I think I hear a car." Duncan walked to where he could see the road. "Cops are here."

It was the same two officers who came to pick up Tucker, weeks ago, Jeff and Curtis. "Damn." Curtis said as he saw Buck lying in a puddle of blood. Jeff went back in the car to call for an ambulance over the police radio and returned with a camera.

Curtis walked casually over to me, still looking at Buck. "Right, what happened?" I gave him the same story I told Duncan, with a few more details and pointed out the broken window.

"You get wolves this close to the house often?" he wanted to know.

"No, I see them at the edge of the forest sometimes, but never this close."

"Maybe Buck saw the wolf before and followed it up here," Jeff said, who now stood next to his colleague, having finished taking pictures of the scene and now picking up Buck's rifle.

"Possibly. And you say this gun is Buck's?" He pointed at the rifle.

"Yea, if it wasn't for the wolf appearing, I wouldn't have managed to take it from him."

Jeff confirmed. "Aye, I recognize it. Not the first time I pick it up from the scene of a shooting..."

"You were very lucky to have a wild animal appear just like that." It was an unlikely story, so I couldn't blame Curtis for not believing it right away.

Duncan, on his knees near the spot where Kiara appeared, said "These are fresh tracks. No doubt there was a wolf here recently." He got up and walked towards us, crossing Jeff, who went over to take some pictures of the tracks. "Listen, I heard a shot as I was in the woods. The moment I realized it came from here I called you guys then ran over here. I admit I suspected someone was hunting animals up here," he said as he looked at me. "But as I got closer, I saw him and Buck standing here. Then Buck literally leapt at him and that's when the second shot went off."

"Hmm," Curtis frowned, "I have known you for more than forty years, so I know you aren't making this up, Duncan. It all sounds strange to me, I have never known Buck to come up here. I thought he was afraid of the place, judging from his own stories."

"Well, we have known Buck for a long time as well. So if he came up here with the idea to hunt and Nick tried to stop him, we all can imagine what would happen. If Nick didn't fire when he did, he wouldn't be sitting there. It's that simple. If I would have been closer, I might have had to shoot Buck to keep him from attacking someone with that knife of his. He doesn't like me at all, so he might have tried to kill me too if I had seen him attacking Nick." He pointed at the corpse. "Of all these possibilities, I prefer this one."

"You're probably right. Either way, I'm just collecting statements, and it's not my job to play detective, so I'll not judge anyone." I heard another car and Jeff went over to talk to the paramedics, which arrived. Curtis continued "We'll clean this up and drive Buck's truck down as well. If we have any more questions, we will get in touch. For now we ask that you stay in town or at least let us know where we can reach you if you have to leave Ellister." He looked at the corpse for a few moments, then turned back to me. "And off the record... don't feel too bad. You really did Ellister a service, even if you didn't mean to kill him." It didn't make me feel any better.

Within half an hour, Buck was hoisted in a body bag and into the ambulance. Jeff took a few more pictures of the blood soaked sand and dust, before it was scooped in a bag as well.

Duncan watched as the three cars drove down the hill. Still sat in the same spot, I saw something move to my left and turned to see Kiara walk over the porch, towards me. She stopped behind me and laid her chin on my right shoulder.

"You okay, girl?" I asked, reaching behind me to scratch her on the head.

Duncan turned to the sound of my voice. "What did you say?" He noticed the wolf. "Hey! Where did that wolf come from?" He came closer, studying Kiara. "I haven't seen this one around here before. Is this your wolf? A pet perhaps?"

"No, not mine. She's been here for a while, as far as I know she has lived here her entire life."

"Is that the wolf..."

"Aye, she appeared at the right moment and might well have saved my life." Kiara got up and walked in the direction from which she came.

"Never seen a wolf like that. Then again, the forest is full of surprises. Hey, she's going inside the house!" He was obviously surprised.

“Haha, she comes and goes as she pleases.”

“And you don't mind that?”

“Not one bit. She was here before me. It's like you once told me, nature has started to reclaim this piece of land. To be honest, I had hoped that by letting Kiara remain here, instead of trying to get her to go back to forest, she would be safe from people like Buck.”

“Kiara? You gave the wolf a name? Does it actually listen to you?”

“Sometimes...”

“But Buck is no threat anymore and with him and his stories gone, the other idiots in town who followed him, might start to see reason once again.”

Duncan stayed a while longer, talking about his encounters with wolves in the forest, mentioning some were not suspicious or afraid at all around humans. Maybe some of them were getting used to be living so close to people, he concluded. “I won't force you to get the animal back to the forest. Sometimes I think these wolves are smarter than most people, so I assume that if she likes it here, she will stay, if not, she'll go back to the forest. Wolves know better than anyone what's best for them.” and with that reassuring bit of advice, he left, not down the road, but straight back to the forest.

I went back into the house a bit later. Kiara was asleep on the couch and, to my surprise, Adahy was in the house as well. He woke as he heard me enter the front room, and I kneeled next to him, putting my hand between his ears.

“Thanks for the help out there, buddy.” I spoke softly to avoid waking Kiara up. “If it wasn't for you and your sister, well, let's not think about how it would have ended...” I don't claim to be able to know what goes on in the mind of a wolf, but it seemed he was glad to have been a help and no doubt, glad with the outcome as well. Adahy closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

13.

I noticed a peace settle over the next week, as if some unspoken threat in the back of my mind had slowly vanished, together with Buck. I couldn't tell if the wolves felt the same way, neither Kiara nor Eliza talked about it past that day itself. But while Buck might no longer be something to worry about, I had no idea how the town would react to me, now, and I had been avoiding leaving the house and front yard ever since.

The time had come to drive down the hill and enter town, since I was out of food. What if I ran into one of Buck's converts? This shouldn't take long, I told myself and with that thought in mind, I pedaled down the dusty road.

I arrived at the store without anyone giving me any strange looks, or even paying any more attention to me than they would otherwise. I tried to be quick about gathering what I needed, without making it seem like I was in a rush. I saw a few people who I had met before, and some felt like having a quick chat, but Buck's death didn't come up. It was perfectly possible that neither Duncan nor the police had told anyone else, and since there was no local newspaper, things like that might spread real slow, if at all.

With enough stuff to last me a week, I made it out of the store without any complications. As soon as I was outside however, I ran into the Barretts and they were eager to talk about something.

"Hi, son," Curtis started, "How are ya? We heard about what happened up there."

"Buck had been causing trouble for so long, it was bound to end like this," Irene immediately followed up, "don't you worry about it too much. Better it ended this way than the other way round, aye?" I had to agree on that part. Concerning Buck, this was the only thing we talked about, the conversation moved on to less heavy subjects like the weather and life in general in Ellister.

Irene had the last say. "You're a good person, Nick. You know, all the people who had lived in that house up there, were all very good friends with the wolves. I'm sure it'll be no different with you."

Halfway up the hill, on the way back home it struck me how similar Irene sounded to the little note I found in the mailbox. Could it have been her that had put it there?

II. Summer

14.

According to the calendar, fall had ended two weeks ago, and it should be winter now. Not so in Ellister. It was not as warm compared to when I first got here, but it was still summer. No tree had shed any leaves and there were no signs of any animals preparing for winter, either.

Eliza has no memories of winters or even falls, and she has been around for a while. I wonder if there is a scientific explanation for this, or is it part of the same mystery that changes people into wolves and back?

A few years passed like this, there was a noticeable ebb and flow in the weather. In the summers, it could get really hot, in the winters it was still quite warm. It seemed to me that time flowed different here, maybe this is the cause of the seemingly everlasting summer, though it didn't explain why people and animals alike were growing older still. More likely I was so used to seeing a different season every so often that it only appeared like time stood still. Moving or not, I enjoyed my time here thus far. The peace and calm that I hoped to find is present in abundance and in Kiara, I have found good friend.

In all the time that had passed, I often still wondered whether this was really happening. Besides Kiara and Eliza, none of the other wolves had appeared in their human form. Eliza only changed back to her human form very rarely, but Kiara was changing back and forth every day, even though I still haven't witnessed it actually happening. Still, for a while now it had seemed more likely to me that she could actually change form, than someone playing a prank on me for several years.

On one of the increasingly rare occasions Eliza was an old woman, sitting in the chair across the front yard, I asked her about it.

"I'm feeling my age more and more," she said, "but it weighs less on me while I'm in my wolf form. It also requires increasingly more effort to change. Sooner or later I will have to give up on changing into a human completely."

"How different is it from being a wolf?"

"The world still looks, feels and smells the same. As a wolf I seem to be a lot more agile. What I miss the most is not being able to talk."

"Can you communicate with regular wolves?" I wanted to know.

"We more or less understand their language. They know we're somewhat different, but still treat us like they would any other wolf that's not part of their pack. We never lived as close and really got along with them, as well as we have and do with some humans, on the other hand, they never treated us as bad as some humans have."

"Besides Kiara, I have never seen any of the others in their human form, is that because of their age, too?"

"For some, that's the case. My sister is about my age and Orgo is even older than me. Most of us, by necessity spend more time being wolves, blending in the forest. Not all of us care as much about dealing with people and that's easier when you're a wolf. It seems our younger generations change less, Kiara being the exception. Adahy, who's about your age, I guess, is now the only one of us who has never even tried on his human form, but he seems to get along just fine with other the wolves in the forest." While she was talking, her gaze drifted into the forest and past memories that originated there. "Maybe we're becoming real wolves. It would be nice if that would happen before we died out. Even though it's as much part of nature as we are, the thought of us disappearing completely and taking all our memories with us is somewhat scary. If part of us could live on in a way amongst the wolves here, that would be something at least."

15.

Eliza was the first to go.

I woke that morning to a tortured wail, coming from the living room. It was the howl of a wolf, but quiet, and it spoke of grief.

Once in the living room, I saw all of them near Eliza, who was still lying down. I didn't see anything wrong until Orgo took a step forward and nudged Eliza with his nose. There came no reaction.

As I knelt down beside the wolf, a grueling chill ran down my spine. She wasn't breathing.

I buried her the same day, in the back yard, the wolves a quiet audience. The burial hill grew several feet with the new grave.

That evening the remaining wolves all went into the forest, I assumed it was part of them coming to terms with losing Eliza. I came here for the peace, quiet and solitude, but that evening I really felt alone.

Over the course of the decade that followed, Eliza's sister and two children also died. Each of them simply didn't wake up anymore one day. It occurred to me, years later, that I didn't even know their name. I had never talked to them directly, but there was communication on a different level that didn't require words. Did I think of them as friends? Perhaps not as much as Eliza. Did they think of me as a friend? Did it matter at all?

After years of having this many wolves around the house, it felt a lot more empty with only 3 of them left. Adahy rarely returned to the house, but we met him often in the woods, when Kiara and myself went for walks there. Orgo spent more time asleep than awake.

Summer was still here, but I felt it was growing old as well. The color of the light seemed to have changed only slightly, as if to announce the arrival of the evening throughout the entire day. What would happen if summer ended? Would Ellister get a more normal set of seasons instead, or would there be an equally long fall or even winter?

But for now, it was still summer. And what could be better than this? Enjoying the calm and the beautiful weather, in your own front yard, a good friend by your side. Growing old, together with the summer.

I had noticed I was not the only one getting older. When I saw Kiara for the first time in her human form, I guessed she was around 25 years old. Today, she still looked five years younger than me, but I expected someone with a life expectancy of around 150 years to age slower. Reminded of what Eliza once said, I suspected Kiara was aging much faster than she should.

One evening, I asked her about it.

"How have you been feeling lately?"

"What are you worrying about, Nick?" She was on to me surprisingly quick.

"Well... You change between your wolf and human shape nearly every day. Perhaps this isn't such a good idea anymore."

"Why do you think so? Do you want me to spend more time with you, as a human?" During the day she was usually in her human form, but in the evening she would change and venture into the forest, probably to visit her brother. Orgo would occasionally accompany her. But it had become a habit almost. Even when she stayed at the house, she would change into a wolf and sleep on the end of the bed.

"No, it's not that. Whether you're a wolf or human, it's still you, right? And I don't want you sacrifice the time you spend with your family to spend more time with me. It's just that I think that all this changing back and forth must have some kind of effect on your body, it might not be healthy."

"You think so? Changing feels natural to me, it doesn't hurt or anything and I feel fine."

"Yes, but it might be possible that you age faster because of it." I reached over to hold one of her hands in mine. I could be wrong, of course. Eliza did spend a lot of time as a human and changed quite often too, yet she lived for a long time. I never saw her children change, yet they died at younger ages

than Eliza. Could it be that their younger generations simply didn't live as long anymore? I was going to say something, but Kiara was first.

“We all age...”

“True, but I'm convinced that changing form often will tax your body. Muscles, organs, they all move about a bit. Your skeleton changes drastically. I could be wrong, but... perhaps you should change only once every two days or so.”

“If that will make you stop worrying, I can do that. Won't you mind if I remain a wolf for two days in a row?”

I was relieved at her answer. “Of course not, you're still my Kiara either way.”

She followed my advice from then on. She'd spend two or three days as a human and then changed into a wolf for a couple days. As a result she did stay at the house more often. I couldn't tell right away if she was now aging slower because of it. She repeatedly told me to stop worrying about it, and over time, I did.

16.

I walked into the front room from the yard one noon to see an old man sitting in the couch. I had never seen him before.

“Hello Nick,” he said, a sly smile on his face.

“Hi Orgo.”

He was surprised for a moment, then started laughing. “Hah, I didn't expect you to recognize me this easily.” He spoke slowly.

“Well, I've known you for over 20 years now. Would be a shame if I didn't recognize an old friend, right?” It was the eyes as well as the color of his hair and beard that gave him away.

“Sit here for a bit, if you will.” He gestured to the part of the couch next to him.

As I sat down, I realized that he must be very old. He looked perhaps eighty, it could easily be double that.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked as he noticed I was studying his face.

“Well... to be honest I was wondering how old you were.”

“Hehe, I have no idea. Any guess you can come up with would be closer to reality than anything I can come up with.”

He was older than Eliza, and she died fifteen years ago at an age of 130 to 140, or so I guessed. “How about 160?”

“Sounds good to me, haha!” He may look old, but his spirit isn't – I could see it in his eyes. Experienced and wise, is how I would describe it. “It's been a while since I was in this human form,” he paused looking at his hands, then turned to me again. “Oh, by the way, I hope you don't mind that I borrowed some of your clothes.” I hadn't even noticed yet he was wearing one of my jeans and T-shirts. He continued, not waiting for an answer, “I'm not used to speaking this language anymore.” He had been speaking slowly, sometimes briefly pausing to look for a word or perhaps a way to pronounce it properly. “It's been so long since I talked to anyone. I just wanted to have a chat, but now I don't know what to talk about.”

So we sat on the couch for a while, in the relative cool of the room, looking through the open front door, where summer was bright and hot.

“There have been so many good times, here,” Orgo said, staring outside. “But, these days I can't help but feel things are changing. I've always known it to be summer, I can't even imagine what other seasons might be like, but I do feel summer is changing. As if it knows something is about to change for the worse... maybe it's in mourning. Heh, maybe it's me. Whatever the case, I enjoyed it here. What about you?”

“Same thing, and I still do. Glad I came to live here. Fortunate to have met all of you.”

“Yes, it's been good...” I couldn't help notice the morbid tone in his voice, yet he appeared calm instead of weary or even sad. It was as if he knew something negative but part of him had already come to accept it. Was he planning on leaving here or was his mood inspired by the state of summer?

“Promise me something...” He said while he turned to me, then paused.

“What is it?”

“I know you and Kiara get along very well. Take care of her will you?” I was about to ask why he's saying these things, but he didn't give me the chance. “With just three of us left, I'm starting to feel what it must be to be one of the last of us. It probably will be harder for her, Adahy seems to be coping quite well. I just don't want her to ever feel alone.”

The mood of the conversation changed abruptly after that, and lightened up as he started talking about some of the things that happened her before I arrived and even some of his childhood memories. I tried to imagine what having 160 years of memories must feel like. That was three times as many as I had. Orgo went on to talk about Kiara when she was young. How could I keep her from being alone, once I'm gone? She would live much longer than I.

He slowly stopped talking and just kept on looking outside, possibly lost in some or other memory. After a while, I left him to it and went into the kitchen to prepare me some food. Noon was slowly making way for evening. When I came back minutes later to ask if he wanted to eat as well, he was gone, the clothes he wore were on the couch.

I looked outside and saw him, back in his wolf form, crossing the front yard to sit next to Eliza's empty chair. He looked up to where she would have been if she was still with us, then laid down and rested his head on his forelegs and closed his eyes. He used to sit next to that chair often, with Eliza gently scratching his ears or letting her fingers run through the fur on his neck.

Several rogue rays of evening sun broke through the leaves of the trees and ran from his neck down his back.

Orgo died three days later. Just like the others, he simply didn't wake up one morning. Adahy was there the day before and stayed the night over, even though he usually doesn't spend that much time out of the forest anymore. Had he known? Had Orgo known? Looking back at the conversation we had, days before, he might have.

17.

Summer kept growing older, ever announcing the evening. It felt like late noon throughout the entire day. Kiara one day remarked she didn't recognize summer anymore.

"Humans tend to keep tangible objects as memories to those who have passed away. We don't have any real belongings, but this area, the forest, the air, even the season all seem to remember us. Are our memories keeping summer here for so long? Is it now slowly disappearing as more of us die? If we're all gone and summer's gone as well, who will remember any of us?" She didn't seem sad, merely stating something most likely inevitable and accepting it, almost right away. "Perhaps the house will," she said, while gently touching the aged wood of the walls with her fingertips.

Everything was changing. Duncan died of old age several years ago, taking care of the forest for as long as he could. No-one took over after him and with fewer and fewer people going for a walk in the forest, nature slowly took over all that man had put there. The benches weathered, the roads became overgrown, everything just seemed to become a bit wilder.

It was a good change, I figured. In the relationship between man and nature, rarely had mankind given something back. Only when left to itself, could nature truly regenerate and roam free again.

The air was not immune, either. The typical smell of mid summer blue skies was fading and with it, so did the constant chatter of the birds.

The only thing that hadn't changed, was the house. It looked still the same as when I arrived, but for something that's 300 years old already, another 25 probably doesn't seem that much. If it could remember, like Kiara said, imagine all the things it could have seen. More than ever before I realized the importance of the house for Kiara and possibly all the others of her kind that had lived around here. It was the one thing that hadn't changed throughout all their generations, the place where they probably spent a lot of time in the front yard, before eventually being buried in the back yard.

I ran my fingers along the surface of a wall, still strong, but visibly old and tried to imagine more than 300 years worth of memories, lifetimes and generations. The 25 years I had spent here so far seemed so short in comparison. How would it remember me? Perhaps as a mere visitor?

Ever since Orgo died, both of us spent more time in the forest, almost daily going for long walks. Kiara remained in her human form nearly all the time and only rarely went out into the forest alone. We made a habit of having a small pick-nick at the edge of the river several times a week. Occasionally, Adahy would join us.

It occurred to me that we rarely spoke. We were as close as ever, but there was often no need for words. Perhaps something I picked up from being around wolves for so long. To be beside her, whether we took a stroll in the forest or sat on the edge of the porch, in the light of fading summer, was all I needed.

18.

An unexpected chilly morning woke me early. Kiara was on the far end of the bed, curled up. Somewhere in the course of the night she must have changed back to her wolf form.

I reached over to stroke one of her ears, but stopped. My hand started trembling, but not from the cold. She was unusually still, I couldn't even see her breathe. When my fingers touched her fur, it no longer felt silky smooth as it used to and seemed to have lost its sparkling silver shine. It had become plain grey. "Kiara?" Barely a whisper. Her skin wasn't warm anymore.

"No... Kiara?" I suddenly started trembling uncontrollably all over, as the cold took a hold of me. It took several moments and all my strength to overcome it. I managed to kneel beside her. She hadn't moved at all. The dreadful truth came to me, it didn't care what I wanted to accept or not. Kiara was dead. There was nothing I could say or do that would change that.

"Kiara... poor child. My good friend, what am I going to do without you?" I buried my face in the fur of her neck and cried. "Why you? Why now?"

I managed to stagger outside and the cold was there as well. It was early morning still, but there was no sun. For the first time, here, I saw grey clouds covering all of the sky. It was unnaturally quiet, but I realized this was no nightmare, it was reality. "There will be no sun today," I said to myself.

I had to find Adahy, somehow. There was no way I could get into the forest, I felt too weakened. I called his name, but I doubt my voice would even carry to the edge of the forest. Eventually, I gave up and went back inside.

By noon, I had managed to put her on a blanket and carried her into the backyard. I was on my knees beside her. "Do I have to bury her this soon?" I wondered. She looked as if she was just asleep, but no matter how long I waited, she would not wake up again.

The shovel was leaning against the wall of the nearby shed. It wouldn't take long to add another grave to the hill, but I couldn't bring myself to it. It had never been easy, today would be the worst of all. I called for Adahy a few more times, but it didn't seem like anyone heard me.

While sat on the porch in the backyard, gathering courage and thinking about Kiara and some of the good times we spent together, a rustle announced Adahy moments before he walked into the backyard. It had been a while since I last called, I doubt would have heard me. Something else brought him here. The unusual weather perhaps told him something was wrong.

He slowly walked over to Kiara, gently touching her shoulder with his nose, just once. It seemed as he waited for any kind of response from her. He briefly looked in my direction, and I saw the grief in his eyes. Regardless of how I already felt, seeing that scene and the pain of the wolf, completely broke my heart. Once more, he nudged her, to no avail. He remained in that position for a few moments, his snout pressed against her throat, before walking over to me, his head low. He came to a halt with the top of his head against one of my knees. Laying my hands on the back of his neck, I whispered "She's gone, old friend... she's gone."

We sat there in the cold and silence for quite a while. Eventually, Adahy got up and walked over to the body of his sister and paused, before continuing towards the end of the hill, where he started scratching the soil. I figured it was indeed time to bury her.

After running my fingers through the fur on her neck and shoulder one last time, I put the four corners of blanket on which she was lying over her, one by one, until was completely covered.

Digging a shallow pit and putting her in it, was the relatively easy part. It took me a while before I could bring myself to close the grave again. The irreversibility of it all weighed heavily on me.

I remained on my knees next to the grave until Adahy gently nudged me against the elbow. He was looking straight at me for several moments, not making a sound, then he turned around and started walking towards the edge of the backyard. He stopped once more and turned his head to briefly look at me. Somehow I felt I wouldn't see him again. He continued towards the forest and slowly disappeared from my view, obscured by tall grass, bushes and eventually, trees.

III. End

19.

And that was the last entry in Nick's journal. Several days ago, I received a phone call from someone who claimed to have known my grandfather. I was asked if I could check on the house once again, like I used to do. As it turned out, the person who lived in it, had died. There were no relatives and no-one knew what was to become of the house. So they called me, knowing my family had built and owned the house.

It was an odd request, but it had been a while since I was in Ellister. Grandpa Tucker died only a few years after we sold that farmhouse. With him gone, the old house sold and no other relatives or friends living in Ellister, I had no real reason to go back there.

Ellister still looked very much like it had done the last time I was here, some 25 years ago. The nearby city had grown and crept closer, but otherwise it had no visible influence on the lives of the people in this little town. For a little over 5 years I had looked after the house by myself, before that, it was my mother and grandmother, and often I would go with them when I was still a child.

Eliza was there often. To me she was just a friendly old lady, often accompanied by a brown wolf. I knew she was a friend to both my mother and grandma and both of them used to tell me stories about wolves changing into people. According to Nick's journal these were not stories.

Outside of the house, it was clear it still looked the same, but something was missing. It was too quiet out here and too cold. I have never known it to be this chilly in Ellister.

Nick's belongings were still in the house, no-one had touched them, and I left them where they were, except for the hand-written journal. It wasn't a real diary, as it seemed he only occasionally wrote in it and didn't add any dates.

After asking around a bit in town, I learned that they figured something was wrong when he no longer showed up at the local store. He used to do his shopping on the same day every week and stayed in town for a while, talking to various people he got to know in Ellister. Someone came up the hill to see if something was wrong and found Nick, sitting on the couch in the front room, seemingly asleep. He wasn't ill, nor injured, there was nothing suspicious about his death. I figured he died within a month of Kiara's passing. Somewhere in his mid-fifties, about the same age as me.

I came back to Ellister occasionally, not as often as I used to before the house was sold. After all, I was getting older, too. On one of my visits, looking out a window, I saw a very tall wolf in the backyard. It was quietly sat in front of the hill there, for several moments. After a while, he got up and started walking towards the forest, picking up speed as he went. From out of the tall grass, another wolf appeared, nowhere as big as Adahy and ran alongside him, until they both disappeared in the forest.

From the journal, I was convinced this was Adahy, but who was the other one? Also one of them or was it just a regular wolf? Perhaps it wouldn't be too surprising if Adahy was living with normal wolves now. Maybe he had become a real wolf, something Eliza once hoped would happen.

After about 7 to 8 years, I gave up looking after the house. I was getting too old, I didn't know what to do with the place and there was no-one else who could look after it.

I still kept the journal and occasionally read in it. I, too had lived in the house, be it for only a short while, I never realized so many things had taken place there, that so many lives were somehow connected with it.

Some years later, I received another phone call from Ellister. This time I was told to evacuate the place as they were going to tear it down. There was no official owner of the house anymore and there was nothing I could do to change it. It seemed that whoever was in charge, at the very last moment, like an afterthought, figured someone might still care about the place.

Large parts of Ellister were missing, replaced by huge empty slabs of concrete. Future parking lots for future malls. The hill and the house were still there, that was about all. I didn't need any of Nick's stuff that was still where he left it. That's not what I was here for. I came to say goodbye to all of this. The house, all that lived in and around it, all the memories it held.

It was still cold and quiet, like it had been ever since I started coming back here. It was as if summer hadn't bothered to come back at all after Kiara died.

Out in the backyard, I found the skeleton of a tall wolf, in front of the hill. Poor Adahy, no-one had buried him. Had he known the end was near and come over here to die? Had he returned to be with all the others?

I didn't matter. Within days, the skeleton, the burial hill and the house were all swept away by mechanical monsters without care. The house took whatever memories it had with it.

Society slowly crept up the hill, like a plague. Everywhere it went, it left a trail of concrete, fast living, dead-end jobs and malls filled to the brink with mediocrity and ignorance.

The birds went quiet forever, and summer never returned to these parts again.