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4045 Words

Wolves' Journey

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Cold snow drifted down onto Yap's fur as he crouched on all fours in the dead grass. His prey grazed on what little vegetation remained in the cold wasteland, its antlers scraping the tree branches as it tore the limbs from the tree and chewed. All around it, the other members of its herd chewed on the other trees. He crawled through the brush towards its blind spot but froze when an unseen branch hidden underfoot broke under his paw.

The Elk's head snapped around to face him. It brayed loudly before it darted off. The other elks' heads looked in their direction before following the runner.

Yap snarled and jumped from the grass to chase after them. He panted heavily as he ran, his stomach growling alongside his barks as he tried to catch up to the group.

Unlike the grey wolf chasing them, the elk herd had been on the receiving end of more positive luck when it came to finding food for themselves. The wolf quickly found himself falling behind the healthier bucks and does as they crossed the local river and disappeared from his sight.

Yap came to a stop at the river's edge and snarled. He ran over to a nearby tree and raked his claws down the bark, drawing several long gouges into the bark. He stopped after five sets of claw marks adorned the wood. He paced a few times before he turned away from the river and began his trek home.

#

As soon as his pack's den came into view, tiny Geer appeared from the burrow's entrance in a flurry of motion. Yap danced around his daughter's excited attempts at tackling him.

"Fa, Fa," she yipped as he moved out of her way. "Did you get any elk?"

Yap's head rose as his mate Li exited the den, her frame thinner than his. His gaze fell back to Geer as she sat on her haunches, her tongue lolling out as she panted. He looked down at the ground. "No, Geer. I'm sorry. They were too fast for me." Geer's ears fell at his words and tears appeared at the edges of her eyes.

Li's eyes narrowed as her mate slunk to the burrow's entrance and disappeared into it. She turned back to Geer, whose ears fell at Yap's words. "Geer, come." The pup perked up at her mother's words and rushed to her side. "I shall show you where there are some rabbits. I noticed them yesterday before your father left."

Geer licked her lips. "Bunnies, yum." She bounced up and down.

"She's too young," They turned around at Yap's voice as their Alpha exited the den. "I will go and hunt them." His eyes landed on Geer and he jerked his head back in the direction of the den. "Geer, go back into the den."

"But, Fa," Geer said as she stood her ground.

"Now, Geer." He growled.

Li's gaze followed their child as she slunk back into the burrow before her eyes narrowed and her head faced Yap. "What was that?" She asked, her voice low and dangerous.

"Exactly as I said it. She is too young. She's going to be just about as old as," his eyes fell to the ground, "Jay."

Li's glare softened. She trotted to his side and nuzzled him. "I feel our son's death as much as you do."

"We couldn't do anything for him." Li had to strain her ears to hear him.

"Just as we couldn't do anything for Fal or Ken." Each name she spoke made Yap's head sink lower and lower.

"I just want her to be safe."

Li butted her head against him. "As do I, but you have to realize that she needs to grow up in order to survive." Yap nodded at her words and began to walk off into the forest. "Consider that while you're hunting," she called after him.

#

Yap trudged along through the snow, his nose only occasionally sniffing for prey. He came to a ledge overlooking their small piece of wilderness and focused on the horizon.

In the distance, a flag bearing a red leaf bordered by white and red flew over a small clutch of buildings. The town was a small one, only consisting of about ten buildings, all human homes. In the streetlights, small figures moved about with haste against the cold, and a few vehicles rolled along the road connecting them and the rest of the human world.

Yap sat down and looked up at the stars gleaming above him. "Mother, Father, Give me a sign. Show me something that will ensure my pack's survival." A flash amongst the stars made

him turn to see a streak of light fly off into the south. "Father?" A second shooting star flew down towards the south. "The Promised Land."

Before he could continue his meditation, a harsh growling in the distance made his head turn back to where his den was. His eyes narrowed in confusion before they widened. "Li. Geer." He rushed back into the forest.

#

The scene Yap came into was completely alien to the environment he had lived in for close to half his life. He could see humans hefting long machines that tore through the surrounding trees with sharpened teeth. Behind them, several trees had already been felled by the machines. Yap avoided them with ease in the dark as he ran past to his den.

"Li, Geer, where are you?" He barked. Several of the humans responded to his howl with shouts of their own in their foreign tongue. Yap didn't respond to them as he rushed through the trees into the clearing where Li stood watch outside the den. Geer peeked out from the entrance but pulled back every time that the machines roared.

"Yap, what's happening?" Li asked.

"Humans. They're tearing down trees. I don't know why."

"What do we do?" Li peered into the shadows of the surrounding trees. Bright white light shone through the trees from where Yap had just come from. "Can we hide?"

"You know humans as well as I do. When they're scared, all they do is kill." Yap told her as he ducked into the den, nudging Geer outside. "We must leave. If they know we are here, they will hunt us."

Li's nod was filled with uncertainty as she agreed. "Yes, you're right. Where will we go, though?"

"I shall tell you on the way. We must go, now." The source of the light drew closer and human voices filtered through the dead branches.

By the time they came to the clearing, the pack had disappeared, leaving naught but footprints trailing off into the distance.

#

The pack burst out of the forest and came to a screeching halt at the river where Yap had lost the elk herd. Geer dunked her head into the water to drink while her parents panted from the sprint they had undertaken.

Li turned to her mate. "I think we are far enough away from them."

"For now." Yap joined Geer at the river bank and knelt to drink as Geer pulled her head up out of the water. "With humans, I would rather be on the other side of the mountains by now."

"How is it you ever became an Alpha? I'm surprised you even survived this long." Li's harsh words stung more than Yap cared to admit.

"Why do you say such words, Li?"

"You turned tail and ran from the humans. It couldn't have been more than one or two. You are a coward who does not deserve his title." Li snarled as she circled him.

"The humans have been intruding more and more as of late. They have their own packs just like us. Whose to say their packmates wouldn't seek us out later on?" He asked her. "I saved us just now. Remember that."

Li scoffed and turned away. While Geer's head turned back and forth between her mother and her father, Li spoke up again. "Where would you have us go then after that? It's not like we can stay in these parts if your terrifying humans are moving in more and more."

"You're right." Li turned back to him. "When I was younger, just about to leave my pack, my father told me of a distant land that he had visited long ago. He gave me a vision of that place mere minutes before I returned to you."

"Pray tell, why should we go there? It's not likely it is much better off than this place."

"My father said that this area had a multitude of different prey that would keep us fat and happy for many years. I can only hope that it is still the same." Yap turned and began to walk.

Li sneered. "So, we survive on hope now?"

Yap paused. "Would you rather take your chances with the humans being mere moments from finding us?" Geer looked at her mother before she bolted after Yap.

"Wait for me, Fa." She came up alongside him as Li followed them with a grunt. Geer hopped around Yap as they walked. "What kind of prey did grandpa tell you about, Fa?"

Yap glanced down at her and chuckled. "Many kinds, daughter. He spoke of birds and elk. All of whom were so fat they couldn't run from his packs. Perhaps I shall catch a big elk for you when we get there, yes?"

"Yay, Elk." Geer yipped in joy and rushed ahead of them.

Li came alongside Yap. "She has your energy."

"I seem to recall you being as happy as her once."

"Times change when your family does."

"So they do."

#

The pack crawled up the hill until they reached the crest. Poking their heads over, Yap was greeted by the sight of a human settlement further along than the one they had lived near.

"It's huge," Geer whispered, her eyes alight with curiosity.

"It's more dangerous than the other town," Li muttered.

"Perhaps." Yap's eyes darted around as he examined the town. "This place is more populated but that means that we have more sources of food."

Li looked as if Yap had just dropped her in a pile of bird crap. "So we are scavengers now? No better than the foxes that come by and steal the bones of our kills?"

Yap rounded on her and fixed her with his glare. "We are not much better, remember? As I recall, our previous den was one that those bears used before they moved out."

Li scoffed but remained quiet.

"What do we do, Fa?" Geer asked.

"I'll go into this place and find some food for us. You two will circle around to the other side."

"But why?" Geer whined. "That sounds so boring. I want to come in with you and see this place."

"No," Yap barked. He stopped when he saw Geer's ears flatten, which made him take a breath. "Humans are dangerous creatures. If they saw any of us, they'd hunt us down faster than we could blink. I will go alone." He lifted his head to face the mountains in the distance. "The Promised Land is on the other side of those mountains. We just have to make it to the other side."

"I don't like this," Li said under her breath.

"Neither do I." Yap trotted down the hill towards the town. "I'll bring back some chicken if I find any." Geer's excited yips warmed his heart and drove off the uneasiness that had plagued him since they left.

#

A group of humans exited a convenience store and passed the bushes Yap hid in, laughing amongst themselves as they walked. Yap waited for the taillights of their vehicle to fade before he crawled out of the bushes and hurried around to the alley behind the store. He sniffed around the trash cans before he reared back on his hind legs and dragged out one of the bags.

Piles of food scraps and trash tumbled out from the plastic sheathing when he raked his claws down the side. Yap nudged aside stripped bones and empty Styrofoam cups before he came up with something that smelled faintly like chicken beneath the yellow coating. He broke the coating and was delighted to find that the avian meat did lie beneath the disgusting breading.

"What is that? It smells nasty," Li's voice asked behind him.

"Not sure. Tastes like chicken though," Yap responded. He froze before he spun around. "Yi? What are you doing here?"

"Hunger does horrible things to one's patience," his mate replied before she and Geer stepped up beside him. The wolf pup sniffed the breaded chicken before she bit around the breading to pull off the meat.

"Were you seen?" Yap asked as he moved back to the alleyway entrance.

"Of course not." Li tore off and gulped down a piece of meat from a discarded drumstick.

"You would be spotted before I would with that grey fur of yours. Meanwhile, your daughter and I blend in much better in the shadows."

Yap grunted and rejoined them at the pile. "You're reckless. I would have brought food back for both of you."

"What if it hadn't been enough?" Geer asked.

"Then I'd just make another trip."

"And then you'd probably just get caught by humans," Li said before she finished off the drumstick.

Human laughter made their heads snap up. "Sounds like we should get going," Yap said.

"But I'm still hungry," Geer whined.

"We can find more later, little one," Li whispered to her before nudging her on.

The pack hurried down the alleyway away from the voices.

#

Cold gravel bit into the pads of Yap's paws as he hurried through the large pipe of the town's storm drains. A dead squirrel dripped blood through his fangs as he hurried back to the sewer junction where Geer and Li had taken shelter for the night.

The dull light of dawn filtered through the grate above him as he slowed down and entered the junction. He frowned when he saw only Li lying in the patch of sun. He moved over to her and dropped the squirrel at her feet. As he approached, she opened one eye and looked up at him. "Where's Geer?"

She jerked her head towards the pipe opposite the one he had just come out of. "She went exploring. I made her promise not to leave the pipes."

"She shouldn't do that. Who knows what's down here," he said as he started down the pipe.

"She'll do it whether you want her to or not," Yi called after him.

"Do you think I care? I'll protect her even if she doesn't want it."

"You'll regret those words."

Yap ignored her as he ran down the pipe. The blasted pipes stank of sulfur, which interfered with his ability to smell Geer. He turned a corner and strained his ears. Hearing nothing, he turned his eyes down to the grime. He felt relief when he saw Geer's tiny paw prints pushing holes into the silt that had accumulated. He took off after her prints, his eyes darting back and forth between the paw marks and the pipes ahead.

Fear started to grip his heart as he smelled the air get fresher and fresher the more he followed her prints. He turned one last bend and his heart dropped when he saw the sunlit opening. He hopped out to find himself on a riverbank just outside the town. He looked around before he found Geer's prints again, this time in the water logged mud of the bank.

He turned back to the pipe and howled into it as a signal to Li. She would know to come now. He turned back to the prints and quickly rushed after them.

"Damn that little one. When I get to her, she's going to regret—" He was cut off when he heard Geer's excited yapping. He leaped over a small hill of dried mud and fear slammed into him even more.

Geer laughed as she bounced around the mud. Standing in front of her were two small humans who watched her with smiles on their faces. The human watching her offered Geer a small piece of meat which she happily snapped up.

Yap snarled and barked at the group. "Geer," he shouted. "Come here, now."

Geer and her group had frozen at his bark and stare at him. Geer slunk over to him, her ears flat against her head. Yap bared his fangs at the humans and snarled again. The humans screamed and fled towards a group of houses.

Rapid footsteps approached them and Li appeared over the hill of mud. "What happened?"

"Our daughter left the pipes," Yap said, his voice quiet with rage. They both stared at her expectantly.

"I was hungry, and I couldn't find anything down there," Geer said, her own voice muted as she stared up at her father, whose hackles were still raised.

"I was taking care of it."

"What if I didn't want you to?" Geer asked, her hackles now raised. "What if I wanted to take care of something on my own for the first time in my life without you two looking over my shoulder?"

"You're not ready," Yap said, his hackles down.

"And I will never be ready so long as you keep doing this," Geer yelled. "Let me fail on my own and I'll show you I can survive on my own." She turned and stomped off.

"Geer," Yap called after her only for Li to step in front of him. "Li?"

"She's angry. Give her some room. We'll follow in a moment." Li butted her head against his shoulder in her way of comforting him.

"I can't lose another one, Li." He lowered his head against the ground. "I just can't."

"It's not exactly easy for me either. You don't see me crying about it though." Li stepped in front of him. "Try to let her grow. We certainly didn't learn anything when our parents hovered over us."

"It's not easy," Yap said.

"It never is." Li turned in the direction Geer had departed. "It never is."

A sharp yelp of pain had Yap's head snap towards where Geer was. Fear-filled yowling had the two wolves sprinting off into the woods.

Yap heard the humans before he saw them through the thick brush. He and Li crawled through the bushes until they came upon a sight that sent his blood boiling.

Two humans stood over Geer once more. Only this time, Geer hung from a tree in a large net.

"It's a young one, isn't it?" One of them asked. He wore a blue jacket while the other human wore a brown one and was older than the other, as evident from the lines on his face and the silver hair that slid out from his hat.

"Yep. Wouldn't be surprised if its pack is nearby," Brown Coat said.

"So what do we do?" Blue Coat asked.

Brown Coat reached into his pocket as Geer struggled in the net, her mouth at work as she tried to gnaw through the rope net. He drew out a knife and approached the net.

Yap saw red and he heard Li snarl. He burst from the bushes and jumped in between them and the net, his snarls loud enough for them to freeze.

Li barked as she rushed out of the bush and started to help Geer gnaw through the rope.

Yap stared down the humans with his fangs bared.

Blue helped Brown up and they faced the three wolves. Brown held up his hands towards the wolves. "All right, lad. Everyone, stay calm."

Yap smelled the stench of fear roll off of Blue as he glanced back and forth between Brown and Yap. "How can you stay calm? We're facing off against wolves here, old man," Red whispered as he backed up until he was behind Brown.

"This isn't my first encounter, lad. Just don't run," Brown said softly as he kept his eyes locked with Yap.

Yap snarled at them both as Li and Geer got through one of the ropes.

Brown started to back up, his pace slow. "Son, back up now. Slowly."

Blue was all too eager to leave as he shuffled backwards off into the brush. "What about the net?"

"Leave it. We can come and get what's left of it later."

Another rope snapped and Geer slid from the net to flop onto her back. She righted herself and hopped up behind her father.

"There, see? Problem solved. Let's go." The two humans picked up speed in their retreat until they were gone.

Yap sniffed the air and found no trace of human stench. He turned back to Geer, whose ears had flattened against her head.

"I'm sorry, Fa. I wasn't looking where I was going." She groveled near his feet.

Yap opened his mouth to speak but paused. He looked at Li, who watched him with narrowed eyes. He sighed and leaned down to lick her head. "No, I am the one who should be

sorry, daughter." Geer giggled at his attention despite her situation. He nudged her with his nose and she rose to her feet. "Come, the humans will probably be back soon."

Geer and Li nodded before they followed him away from the clearing. "Why are you so scared of letting me go, Fa?" Geer asked as they walked.

Yap's gaze fell to the ground as he slowed so that Geer could walk beside him. "We had three children before you, do you remember them?"

"A little bit. Jay was the oldest, right?"

"He was born first, yes. You and your siblings were born on the same day less than four months ago. In that first month, we lost two of your siblings to disease. Jay lasted longer. He went with me out on a hunt last month and a bear got him," hot tears stung at his eyes, "It killed him while I was dragging an elk back to the den." He lowered his head to look into her eyes. "I just couldn't stand the idea of you dying as well, little Geer."

"You don't have to worry, Fa. I'll stay by your side from now on." Geer shivered. "The world is scary."

Yap could only laugh at that. "It most certainly can be." He hummed to himself before he looked down at Geer. "How would you like to lead the pack for a little while, Geer?"

"Really?" Geer's tail wagged at his words.

"Yes, really. Just stay on the path to those mountains." He pointed at said mountain ahead. "We're going that way."

"Okay, Fa," Geer chirped as she rushed up a few paces ahead of himself and Li, who took Geer's place at his side.

"You're getting used to the idea of her growing up," she noted.

"She won't be young forever. Like you said, we didn't learn from our parents watching over our shoulders."

Li looked up at him, a spark of admiration in her eyes. "What do you know, you do have your moments."

#

The pack crested the final slope of the mountain that stood between them and the Promised Land. The snow crunched beneath their feet as they trotted down the slopes and into the verdant green growth on the other side.

Yap spotted several smaller amounts of prey crawling through the treetops and caught the scent of several larger prey. He detected almost no other wolves in the area except one pack. He froze upon recognizing the scent.

Li and Geer stopped when they saw Yap frozen. "Yap," Li asked, "What's wrong?"

"He recognizes our scent, dear lady." The two females of the group turned at the unfamiliar voice. A large pack of about fifteen wolves appeared around them and surrounded them.

"Mel?" Yap asked.

The wolf who spoke stepped forward and grinned. "Hello, little brother. Welcome to the Promised Land."