

Divided, We Fall

There is an archetype known as the lone wolf. An aggressive, solitary character who prefers to keep others at a distance. The problem with this, however, as those who found themselves obsessed with real-life wolves as children will point out, is that a wolf is rarely alone. Of course, some wolves, upon reaching their adult age of two, will disperse from their birth packs in search of a mate. But that rarely lasts more than a year and it always has an end goal of finding a new family, starting a new pack. And for good reason; the pack is the wolf's greatest strength.

They don't do well alone.

Sometimes, a wolf doesn't have to be alone in the literal sense. Rifts within a pack can mean danger for all members. One such pack, somewhere in the deep wilderness, shared their territory with a rancher.

Though the cattle were enticing, the pack made sure to steer clear, knowing better than to get near a creature who, with one simple *BANG*, could kill any of them from a distance. Still, it was their territory and they were always near. Howls rang through the night, and the scent of urine and elk blood made the cattle skittish, despite never even having *seen* any of the wolves before. The rancher, seeming to sense the herd's distress— and hearing and smelling the wolves as well— would stalk the forest at night with his old shotgun in search of the wolves.

This was illegal. The wolves, of course, didn't know this. They did understand more than one would assume, knowing that they were being hunted because their mere presence had scared the cattle which had scared the rancher, and that fear led to anger, which in turn, led to violence.

For a very long time, the pack and the ranch coexisted like this. As the rancher grew older, he no longer carried the same drive to stalk the forest every night, and stopped worrying so much about the wolves. And as several generations passed for the pack, even the eldest members couldn't remember a time when the rancher was a pressing threat, though they still understood to stay as far away from the ranch as they could, for their own safety. It was a paranoid, tense peace, but it was peace and that was all the wolves could hope for.

Until, one night, after a long and exhausting hunt, an older wolf named Clover had been on her way back to the den, a chunk of flesh in her maw, dripping blood into the mangy brown fur on her neck. And in the dark, she had misjudged her route and ended up at the edge of the ranch. She saw the cattle at the same moment they saw her, and they began *moo*-ing in fear at the monster from the forest, shuffling closer to the house. Shotgun ready, the rancher burst out into the night air, and began firing at Clover before he could even properly see her. She escaped into the brush, and one of the rancher's bullets hit a cow.

In the following weeks, the farmer went back to his nightly hunts, and this time, he brought friends. Clover recounted what happened to the rest of the pack, and after seeing the rancher's determination to eradicate them, several debates followed over what should be done.

"Should we leave?" asked a non-confrontational yearling named June. "There must be parts of the forest where the rancher and his men can't reach us."

"But this is *our* home," replied Prophet, a gentle giant whose two-month-old pup, Blessing, was currently playing a game of trying to pounce on his tail. "We shouldn't have to leave when we haven't done anything to harm anyone." He made a face. "Well, we haven't harmed the rancher or the cows, and neither of them care for the elk."

"Right," said Achilles, a strong and eager young adult, "they only care about themselves. And if they are going to treat us as if we have harmed them regardless of what we do, then I think we *should* start attacking the cattle."

There were murmurs of agreement from the younger subordinates and the yearlings, but the older pack members were hesitant.

"You have the right attitude, and your willingness to defend your home is admirable," the alpha, a grandfather named Taro said to the pack, "but it would be needlessly endangering all of us. No doubt it would stoke the humans' fear further. And, if we are going to attack anything, then it must be the rancher and not the cattle, for the rancher is the one with the power to kill us. To attack the cattle would only be petty and reckless. But for now, we should keep even farther away from the ranch, until their fear dies down again, as it did before we were born."

All of the wolves nodded solemnly. All but one.

"You're all wrong," announced Xavier. "How can you blame the man? He is doing the right thing, protecting the herd from *monsters*. I don't blame him. If it were me in his place, I would have shot all of you dead by now."

Xavier was a strange wolf. His fur was a beautiful white, and his eyes striking blue. He was in perfect shape—strong, fast, with a powerful howl and soft, silky fur. He was the type of wolf who was photographed and whose photos ended up as stock images. He looked overall majestic and mysterious and all sorts of other things that made him appealing to humans, to look at on a screen and think about how much of a powerful lone wolf he must be, how all the other wolves must bend to his will.

Right then, during the debate in a forest clearing, the pack was mutually thinking something along the lines of *here we go, mister "I'm-better-than-all-of-you" is whining again*.

Taro, the true alpha, was as civil and patient as they come. He cleared his throat. "Grandson," he said, "the rancher has reason to be nervous, knowing our nature and what we are capable of. But the detail we are worried about is that his fears are exaggerated and he is seeking us out to kill us over... well, *nothing*. We have done nothing to him."

"Yet," barked Xavier. "What do you expect him to do? Sit around and *wait* for you to attack his herd?"

"... But we are *not* going to attack the cattle," Prophet pointed out.

Xavier didn't seem to hear him, not fully. "Your mere existence is a threat to their safety, to their families. The man must have children, think of them! Would you—"

"Okay," interrupted Blue Jay, the runt of her sisters, Cardinal and Robin, and with enough stubbornness for all of them, "you tell us problems and you tell us justifications for the man's violence, but can you tell us solutions?"

The entire pack turned their attention back to Xavier, awaiting his answer. For once, he was silent.

He opened his mouth. And closed it again.

"Well, maybe," he began, "the rancher wouldn't be so frightened of wolves if you hadn't been so *frightening*."

"...*Me?*" asked Clover.

"All of you," Xavier proclaimed. "All of you who have been seen by the rancher in the last few nights have only made things worse by scaring him further. We had *peace* before now. You're making him think all wolves are frightening— you're dragging *me* down with you! If I wasn't with this pack, the rancher wouldn't care for me, because I'm normal. *I'm* not frightening."

Several angry shouts rang through the forest, choruses of *you think this is about you?* and *what do you mean you're normal? Are we not?* and *you think you would be safer without your pack?* Of course, to the human ear, this argument just sounded like barks and snarls and the occasional yelp, but it was still loud and angry.

And the rancher had been nearer by than they had thought.

In their collective distraction, the pack hadn't noticed him until the first gunshot rang out. It hit its target, and Clover fell into the mud. Then another, and Prophet lurched forward.

The wolves had turned their anger to fear by the time the third shot was fired. It was a frenzy, wolf trampling over wolf to escape the clearing and make it to the cover of the trees. Taro barked as loud as his old lungs could but he could not direct his shattered pack, instead resigning himself to scooping up the pup, Blessing, and running for the trees himself.

Scattered, alone, and panicked, each wolf left an easy trail to follow. It only took the rancher and his friends a week to find and put a bullet in most of them. Xavier, nonthreatening as he was, was the last wolf to be killed.

But he was a wolf. And he was killed for it.