

Anger's Cure

A male two-leg walked among yellow flowers and turned sky-blue eyes on Patch.

Come on, Patch. We're leaving. A boyish voice and sharp teeth woke him.

I'm awake, Hairy. Let go!

The younger wolf dashed away.

Patch stood on the pine needle-covered ground and shook his head to get the strange dream out of his head. As the image blinked back at him before disappearing, Patch wished the two-leg had been real so he could kill it and his brother's laughter that ridiculed him each day.

He didn't care if slaying a two-leg was forbidden.

Patch stretched his horse-sized black body and joined his pack at the creek. After drinking their fill, they padded softly through the summer morning after Tooth, his father, the Alpha.

Stop, Tooth's voice echoed in all of their minds later that afternoon.

Everyone froze, ears alert.

What is it? Stalker, Patch's mom, asked while walking up to him.

Two-legs, Tooth growled.

The rest of the pack came up beside the silver wolf. In the mud were the strange, five-toed prints of the two-legs. They looked only a few hours old.

Let's track and kill them, Claw, Patch's oldest brother, said.

Remember the rule, Claw. We can't kill them, Stalker replied.

Why not? He snapped. *Nothing would happen if we did. They're too weak.*

Tooth rumbled deep in his throat. *We aren't going to kill any two-legs.*

The Alpha stepped over the tracks and led the pack deeper into the forest.

Patch stopped to look at the marks more closely before following his family. The sweet scent of the two-legs tickled his nose. He wondered why his pack hated these fragile creatures so much. But then he supposed it didn't matter; because everyone did he would kill one to gain attention.

As the light faded, the pack left Patch and his two younger siblings in an aspen grove to hunt elk.

Why can't I come? Hairy bounced up and down on short legs. *I'm old enough to hunt now.*

You're not ready. You'll scare the elk with all the noise you and Star make, Tooth replied.

The pack walked away, melting into the trees' shadows.

Patch wished he could have gone with them. Sure, he had fallen off a deer on his first hunt and hurt himself, but he had improved since then.

As he lay ignoring his brother and sister's calls to play with them, he recalled the two-legs' tracks from earlier. He glanced at his siblings. They wrestled each other like bickering chipmunks and would be fine alone.

Patch stood and thought to his siblings, *you two stay here. I'll be back.*

Where are you going? Hairy asked, leaping to his feet.

Star rose, looking like a porcupine with the pine needles sticking out of her dark brown fur.

To scout the perimeter.

Hairy and Star whined, and Patch growled deep in his throat. The young wolves sank onto their haunches and quieted.

Stay here. Patch darted through the forest, making as much sound as wind brushing through foliage.

The tracks were several hours old, but it wouldn't take him long to reach the creatures. Then he would corner and kill one. It shouldn't be too difficult, even if the two-legs were on horses, for Patch was faster and stronger, and the two-legs had nothing to defend themselves with that he knew of.

Patch tried to ignore his queasiness and focus on following the tracks. When darkness descended, he picked up his pace; the pack would return to the aspen grove soon and might eat his portion if he wasn't there.

Suddenly Patch stopped, nose quivering. The scent of blood mingled and nearly obliterated the hint of the two-legs' tracks. Warily, he left the prints and crept over to a spiny bush. Crouching down as if preparing to lunge at prey, he peered around the plant.

A white wolf laid there, dried blood matting its fur. Fresh blood oozed out of a deep wound on its side and other wounds on its neck and legs.

The injured creature opened blue eyes and said in a faint voice, *please help me*.

This wasn't the first time Patch had seen an injured wolf; sometimes wolves starved, froze, or were attacked by animals. His pack always left them since his father said he didn't need another mouth to feed.

Please help me, the wolf whimpered. He had closed his eyes again, and besides the faint rise and fall of his side, he looked dead.

Patch almost turned and walked away like his pack had done many times. But as he gazed at the wounded wolf, he no longer saw it, but his sister's body gouged with another pack's teeth and claw marks. Remembering Sneaky's warm tongue on his wounds, her head nudging him when he fell, and her four legs standing guard over him, Patch made up his mind.

He licked the wolf's wounds. *I'll be back*, he said, and darted into the night.

The pack was devouring six elk carcasses when he arrived and another one lay untouched to the side.

Patch's mother looked up from the slab of meat she was tearing, her muzzle bloody.

Where have you been?

I was scouting around the two-legs' tracks to make sure they didn't come back.

She looked at him a moment more, then continued eating.

You missed an awesome hunt, Patchy. Too bad you can't hunt well enough to go, Jumper, Patch's third oldest brother, remarked. *I took down a deer quicker than a lightning strike.*

I killed two in the time it took for you to take down one, Claw said smugly.

Both of yours were tiny. Rip added his voice to the fray. *Mine was the largest.*

Patch's brothers bickering could turn into a fight at any time, so he stepped closer to the pack and raised his mind's voice. *I found something when I went scouting.*

His brothers circled one another, and the others continued eating. Patch growled and practically yelled in his mind, *I found something in the forest!*

His brothers stopped arguing and stared at him.

What is it? Tooth asked, his long, blood-covered teeth gleaming.

You have to follow me. If he told them it was a wolf, they wouldn't go, and he didn't want to drag the creature all the way here by himself.

His father resumed devouring his carcass. *We'll go once we're done eating.*

But—

His father snarled, and Patch walked over to the cast-aside elk. Its warm scent made his mouth salivate and stomach roar.

When not one elk bone remained, Patch led the pack to the white wolf. Fresh blood from his wounds glinted in the starlight.

A wolf?! You led our pack near another pack's territory for a hurt wolf? Tooth turned away.

He's hurt and needs our help.

We've seen wolves hurt worse and didn't help them.

Yes, but he asked for our help. This was practically unheard of, since no wolf wanted to be regarded as weak. *Once he's well enough to hunt, you can make him leave,* Patch continued.

Fine, Tooth barked. *But you have to take care of him, Patch, and if he slows us down, we leave him behind.*

Okay.

Now we must move. We're too close to the other pack's territory. Patch, you'll have to find a way to carry him.

Patch glanced down at the creature at least twice his size and wondered what he had gotten himself into.

The pack stopped near a creek. Patch stood panting. He had pulled the white wolf all the way here on a log he found.

What's his name? Hairy asked, glancing down at the prone wolf.

Without opening his eyes, he replied, *Snowy*.

Once Patch could breathe easier, the three youngest wolves pushed Snowy with their heads onto the forest floor.

Patch drank deeply from the stream, then he lay down next to the wolf.

Thank you, Snowy said the words Patch had never heard before as if he were half-asleep.

Although Patch had only decided to help Snowy because the white beast reminded him of his sister, the act helped him forget the rage brewing inside him. Instead, he felt warm and light inside, similar to the sensation of sleeping in a ray of sunlight.

For three days the pack stayed near the creek, digesting the elk they had gorged on. Patch was thankful for the respite, for he didn't want to lug Snowy around as the pack looked for prey.

Patch made sure the wolf licked his wounds, gave him water to drink using the leaves, and tore squirrels apart for him to eat.

Hairy and Star soon got bored with the quiet invalid and scampered about, chasing birds and rodents. The rest of the pack ignored Snowy, except for Tooth, who glared at him and Patch every so often.

On the third day Snowy's wounds scabbed over. That night, as the pack sprawled on the ground, Snowy lifted his head and spoke with his mind loud enough for everyone to hear, *I would like to tell you all something*.

Star and Hairy immediately sat down in front of him. The others stayed where they were, but looked at him with suspicion. Patch lay across from him, his head on his paws.

I'm glad that you let Patch take care of me and allowed me stay in your pack.

Tooth sneered. *You are leaving as soon as you can hunt.*

That's fine. Now I wish to tell you something else. His gentle eyes pierced every member of the pack's.

What? Tooth asked.

I'm sure all of you know that the two-legs have always lived on top of the mountains. But we, the beasts, have not always lived here in the valleys.

Where did we live? Hairy wondered.

On the summits of the mountains as the two-legs do. But we didn't just live where they do, we were them.

There was complete silence for a moment. Then Tooth growled, and its ferocity made Patch's hair stand on end. *You speak foolishness. We have always been wolves and always will be. Everyone go to sleep. Don't listen to this stranger's odd words. They'll just confuse you and your ability to hunt.* He glared at the members of his pack, daring them to argue.

Of course no one did; he was Alpha.

The pack turned away from Snowy, and the white wolf lowered his head.

Snowy's words intrigued Patch, and although his father had forbidden it, he couldn't help asking the wolf, *we were really two-legs?*

Snowy turned his placid blue eyes on Patch. *Yes. A long, long, time ago. The beasts have forgotten what they were, but it doesn't change the fact that they once lived differently.*

What happened?

The two-legs lived happily and peacefully on top of the mountains. But after a while, a pack of the two-legs didn't like their king anymore and wanted the respect and power he—

What's a king? Patch interrupted.

An Alpha in charge of all the two-legs, Snowy explained. This particular pack of two-legs wanted to live in a beautiful place like the king and desired the power he had, even though they had nice homes and plenty of food.

Something Patch had seen as a pup rose in his mind at the wolf's words. His pack had climbed some large rocks, and at the top he saw a striking, no, beautiful, as Snowy said, white thing glittering like a rock made from snow. He stared at the unusual sight for a long time and then asked his pack about it. They didn't know what it was and didn't seem to care. He wondered now if it was the place the Alpha two-leg lived in.

The angry pack of two-legs decided to kill the king to get all his possessions, Snowy continued sadly. Other two-legs learned of their plan and warned the king. The king and his people banished the murderous pack of two-legs farther down the mountain and told them they could return when they became satisfied with what they had and no longer wanted to kill him.

The white wolf looked out into the moonless night. *The two-legs did not let go of their anger, but let it consume them. Because of this, they became ugly.*

Their smooth, soft skin grew into shaggy fur, their long, nimble fingers became sharp, awkward claws, and their delicate faces, capable of smiling, turned into hard masks used only for roaring and ripping. The one thing the king made them promise to do, before they transformed completely, was not to kill the two-legs, and the two-legs promised not to kill them in return.

So the beasts left the towns and lived in the forests, where they could let their anger at the king and the two-leg traitors take root within them. Over time, they have forgotten they were two-legs, but have not forgotten their fury at the creatures that seem so much more beautiful and important than them.

Snowy's words whirled through Patch's mind like leaves in a windstorm. Part of him wanted to believe him, but he also knew the white wolf was lying. How could the snarling, bloody beasts come from creatures that live in gleaming white places, don't have to fight their siblings to eat, and wear clothes as soft and light as bird feathers?

But Patch couldn't stop the questions swirling through his mind. What would it be like to sleep without one ear cocked for danger every moment, to not freeze and be hungry for days on end or have others telling you that you aren't good enough? No, Snowy's words couldn't be true. And even if they were, why did it matter?

Why did you tell me that story? Patch growled at Snowy. *Even if it is true, which it isn't, we are—*

Patch! I told you not to listen to him, Tooth spat. He must have noticed the way the two wolves' heads were inclined to each other or heard Patch's growl. Snowy, keep your thoughts quiet or you won't have anything to think about.

Snowy murmured his apology and Patch fell asleep thinking about Snowy's words.

The next afternoon Tooth announced, *we're hunting today. Mountain lions.*

Patch glanced at Snowy. *Can you walk?*

I think so. Snowy slowly stood and groaned in pleasure.

Tooth told Patch he would hunt with them, and the pack walked up the mountain to the boulders where the mountain lions lived. Patch stepped on the tips of his paws, all excitement and nerves for the chance to prove himself. He was determined to kill one without help or hurt.

When the sun began its descent, the pack reached the boulders. They sank down among the trees below the rocks, sniffing the air.

I smell two, Tooth said. Patch, take the one to the northwest. I'll take the one to the northeast. Everyone else spread out and find your own prey. Hairy, Star, stay here.

But, Dad, I can hunt. I'm big now, Hairy whined.

The Alpha glowered at him, and the small wolf glanced at the ground. Tooth turned stony eyes on Snowy. *Make yourself useful and watch the pups. Do anything to them, and I'll kill you as painfully as I can.*

I understand. I won't hurt them.

Good. Now let's hunt. Tooth darted out of the shelter of the trees onto the rocks and the pack followed, separating once they left the foliage.

Patch slunk away to the left, leaping up and down the rocks nimbly. He caught the musky, moist scent of a mountain lion not long after separating from the others. He bounded over the rocks and ran swiftly into the forest again, focused only on his prey.

When Patch drew close enough to see the mountain lion drinking from a brook, he dropped into a crouch behind a tree. He crept toward the lion, prepared to lunge and strike as soon as he was close enough.

Suddenly another, more dangerous scent accosted Patch's nostrils, and he froze. Four wolves bounded out of the trees ahead of him. One bit the mountain lion's throat and stood over it proudly. The other three wolves came to a stop past him and stared down at Patch.

From their large shoulders and tall bodies, they were all male, and judging by their ragged scars, outcasts, males not able to find mates. They were the most desperate wolves and therefore, the most dangerous.

What're you doing in our territory, pup? A wolf the color of tree-bark rumbled in his throat.

Patch tried to look strong and intimidating, but his pounding heart was sure to give him away. *I didn't know this was your territory. I just followed my prey's scent.* He glanced at the mountain lion that should be at his feet, and resentment joined his fear.

Now you're in our land. You will taste good with our meal. He hissed, *get him*, and Patch turned and fled.

He heard their paws thudding in rhythm with the pace of his heart and knew he couldn't outrun them.

Something creaked and cracked ahead and above Patch, but he sprinted on, too terrified to care what made the noise. The snapping and popping sounds grew louder, and then there was a loud thud behind him, followed by whines and barks.

Patch didn't look back to see what had happened, or if the beasts were still following him. All he cared about was reaching his pack and safety.

A large, white shape leaped through the air and landed beside him. Patch stumbled in surprise, and then recovered.

Keep going. That branch won't hold them for long.

Patch met the white wolf's blue eyes. *Snowy, what are you doing here?*

I pushed a dead tree in front of the beasts following you. They could have just jumped over it, but it caught them by surprise. Hopefully will choose easier prey to hunt.

How did you know they were following me?

I took the pups to play on the rocks and heard their barks. I sent Hairy and Star back into the forest and followed your scent and the noise to the spot above you on the rocks.

Oh. Patch didn't know what to say. No one had done anything like this for him before. Then he remembered Snowy's words from a few days ago and chose to use them. *Thank you for helping me.*

Snowy winked. *I'm glad I was here to help.*

Patch slowed to a walk and gazed more fully at Snowy. *You're bleeding again.*

The wolf shrugged. *They'll be scabbed over again soon.*

The pack waited for them at the spot where they had separated, five mountain lion carcasses at their feet.

Why weren't you here guarding the pups, Snowy? Patch's mom raised her heckles.

Patch needed help, so I went to do what I could.

The mountain lions were too big for you, huh? One of his brothers teased.

Patch showed him his teeth. *No. A pack of outcasts chased me.* He told them everything that had happened, including what Snowy had done for him.

Once they finished, Patch's father told Snowy, *next time stay out of our problems. Patch needs to learn to do things himself.*

Patch knew his father just wanted to make sure he could live on his own once he left the pack, but his words still chaffed him.

How can he solve things when he can't kill one mountain lion by himself? Rip said.

Patch snarled. He could have easily killed the mountain lion if the foolish outcasts hadn't interfered.

He's a pup and will always be weak. Jumper's words caused the anger boiling in Patch to explode.

He lunged at his brothers ferociously. His teeth cut into fur, and his claws dug into soft flesh, hissing and snarling.

Jaws clamped down on the back of his neck and hurled him into the air. He landed on the ground with a thud, the air whooshing out of him.

I said stop it! Tooth glared at Patch and his older brothers who licked their cuts and glowered at the black wolf.

You don't have to live this way, Snowy's gentle voice rang out in the tenseness of their minds, *always angry and fighting each other. You can be beautiful again by not thinking you're better than everyone.*

Tooth clawed the ground. *The two-legs are the ones who think they're better than us, always riding their fancy horses and not looking at us like we're dirt or something.*

They do care, but they can't do anything. You must make your own choice of clinging onto your hatred or not, then you might be like them.

Why would we want to be like them? Tooth growled. *We may not be nice to look at, but we're powerful and get what we need.*

There are more important things than power, Snowy observed quietly.

I'm sick of your lies. All that matters is strength and respect. Tooth sprang at Snowy and grabbed his throat with his jaws.

The white wolf remained still, staring into the distance.

Patch jumped to his feet. *Stop! He saved my life, Dad. He's almost well enough to hunt, then he'll leave.* At these last words, Patch felt despondent and shaky; he didn't want his only friend to leave.

Tooth let go of Snowy, snarled at him, and tore into a mountain lion carcass. The others followed his example.

Strangely, the sight of his family gorging themselves disgusted Patch. It was the same feeling when he saw the two-legs. He didn't know if what Snowy said about becoming a two-leg was true, but he was tired of fighting all the time for food and worth.

Two days later, a howl woke Patch from a mid-afternoon nap. He jumped up and gazed off into the forest where Jumper's howl came from.

What's going on? He asked Tooth, who also stared into the trees, shoulders tense.

I woke up and Hairy was gone. Jumper went to look for him. I think he's found him.

The pack took off after Tooth, and Patch couldn't stop seeing Sneaky's glossy, lifeless eyes.

Jumper stood at the edge of the river, ears and tail lowered like dead branches. Hairy was nowhere in sight.

What happened? Stalker asked.

With his head, Jumper motioned further down the river. A young wolf's prints led from the water to the grassy bank where they disappeared. Fresh bear tracks were beside and on top of the wolf's, and several two-leg tracks were scattered around the bear's and wolf's and looked at least two days old.

Patch whined, then howled. The tracks told the story. Annoying, playful Hairy had been taken and killed by a bear. Every pack member, even Snowy, joined in the keen for wolf who hadn't even gone on his first hunt.

Once their howls faded, Tooth said with dripping menace, *the two-legs did this.*

Patch stared at his dad in shock. *What do you mean? It was a—*

It was a two-leg. They broke their word not to kill us, Claw growled.

His other brothers snarled in agreement.

For this they must die, Tooth yelled and the other wolves howled, now with fury. Patch wanted to do something, but his family was beyond reason, and he was too small to stop them. Too weak.

Snowy walked and stood in front of Tooth, and the Alpha stopped howling and looked at him.

Don't do this, Snowy said. *It will only make you angrier. The two-legs did nothing to you.*

Tooth roared and sprang at Snowy. Before Patch could blink, the pack swarmed the white wolf, blocking him from view.

Patch pulled on legs and tails with all his might, desperate to save his friend, but only received bruises and cuts in return.

Finally the pack backed away, revealing a mangled, bloodied body without one speck of white.

Patch, are you coming with us? Tooth asked. *It would be a chance to show your strength.*

Patch stared at Snowy's body, vaguely remembering his desire to kill a two-leg to earn respect. Now, he felt a roiling desire to kill his family, so ugly and dirty in their blind rage. But as soon as he thought it, he shuddered. They were still his family.

Eyes still on the body of his friend, Patch sensed his father move away. *Fine. Everyone else to the closest two-leg pack.*

Patch heard them dart into the coming night. He sat by Snowy's remains and howled until his throat was raw and sore, thinking of the gentleness in the wolf's eyes and how he had rescued him. But his howls were not loud enough to drown out the shrieks and screams farther up the mountain.

The next morning Snowy's body was gone and a male two-leg stood in its place. He looked at Patch with blue eyes. It was the same two-leg from his dream several days ago.

“Are you ready to be beautiful, Patch?” The two-leg asked softly, for the rest of the pack still slumbered.

He stared at the two-leg. *How?*

“You know how. Let go of your rage. Be strong.”

Patch stepped toward the two-leg and a branch snapped beneath him.

The pack stirred and awoke.

Get out of here! They'll kill you.

The two-leg didn't move.

Rip noticed the stranger first. *Dad, wake up. We missed a two-leg last night.*

As the pack stood and opened their eyes, they looked larger, and stank worse of death and blood.

What are you waiting for? Tooth said, leaning forward. *Kill him.*

Anger rushed through Patch like an undammed river at his pack's reckless killing. The two-leg gazed at him with those unreachable blue eyes, and their peace made up his mind.

Patch leapt between his pack and the two-leg. Teeth and claws sliced into his fur and skin all the way to the bone and he howled. Then the pain ceased.

Patch opened his eyes to a bright blue sky. Yellow flowers waved in a breeze and the male two-leg walked towards him. Patch had entered his dream, only, it didn't feel like a dream. He could smell flowers, feel the whisper of wind against his cheek, and hear the footsteps of the stranger coming toward him.

“Who are you?” Patch asked, and the words sounded too loud.

“You know who I am.”

The two-leg grinned and Patch knew where he had seen those gentle blue eyes before.

“Snowy?”

The two-leg laughed, and Patch stared amazed at the deep, ringing tones. “Yes. Except here they call me King Lufiteab. Are you ready to come home?”

“Where?”

“There,” Snowy pointed to a white building glistening like a cloud illuminated by sunlight.

“I can't live there.”

“Of course you can.” The king grinned. “Look at yourself.”

Patch did and realized with amazement that his matted fur had been replaced by pink skin and two legs.

“I helped you shed your anger so you could come home.” The king offered a hand to Patch, and he took it, feeling worthy and beautiful at last.

