

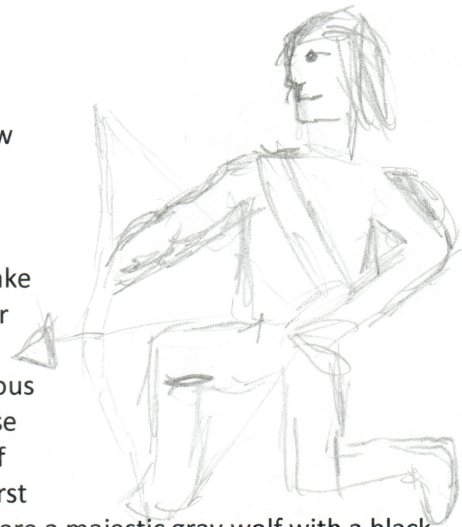
Jake and Rek

By: Elizabeth Lu

Don't give up on those you love. Keep fighting, you will succeed in the end.

Jake

Jake's bow creaked as he aimed the drawn arrow, quietly stalking a herd of wild geese. Green fronds hid him from the view of the squabbling, white birds. He sucked in a deep breath and was about to let the arrow fly when he realized something was wrong. Jake was not the only predator here. Something bigger, stronger, and much more fierce was also stalking these geese. Jake was starting to feel uneasy. He lowered his bow and slung it over his shoulder, slowly standing up from where he was crouching. Jake carefully backed up. As he was about to run away, a victorious howl rang from the clearing. Furious squawking and feathers rose above the trees. Jake froze. He recognized the howl. The howl of an old friend. But it couldn't be. Jake hadn't seen him since he first arrived on this desert island. Jake ran back into the clearing, where a majestic gray wolf with a black stripe down his back was digging into his kill. It was him! A warm feeling expanded inside Jake's chest as he shouted, "Rek!" Jake was jogging towards the familiar wolf, arms out to either side.



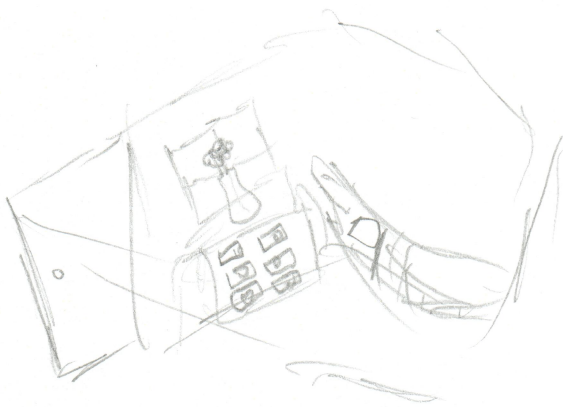
Three years ago, Jake's ship was caught in a storm and smashed to pieces against the cliffs of his island. Jake was the only one who survived. Bloody, hungry, and tired, Rek had found Jake stranded on the beach of this desert island. He had taught Jake how to find food in the ocean, live in the forests, and how to climb the mountains beyond. But at the end of last year, Rek had disappeared into the mountains and Jake hadn't seen him since. Now here he was. Jake and Rek could live together happily!

But as Jake neared, he realized there was something wrong. Rek had raised his head to growl at him, and Jake could see that Rek's normally sky-blue eyes were red. His stomach was unusually large, and he walked with a lolling gait. Needless of that, Jake reached out to scratch Rek's stomach -- Rek growled and lunged at Jake. Jake stumbled back, startled. Rek bared his shining teeth, then charged. Jake ran away from the clearing as fast as he could, but he knew that Rek was gaining on him. The wolf's rancid breath was at Jake's heel, his growl ringing in his ears. Jake was slowing down, his breath coming in heaves. He soon realized that his only chance of getting out of this unharmed was if he climbed a tree. Wolves are much better at climbing mountains, swimming, and running than humans, but humans can climb trees, and wolves can't. Jake grabbed onto a nearby branch and heaved himself up, ignoring the scratchy twigs and leaves. His only goal was to climb out of reach of Rek.

Jake grabbed onto another branch, but before he could pull himself up, Rek jumped up and his claw sliced a thin cut down Jake's neck and bare back. Jake ignored the pain and wooziness and hoisted himself higher and higher, only stopping when the pain overwhelmed him. He looked down, spots

dancing before his eyes, to see Rek growling up at him. A warning growl. Don't come near me! Rek's eyes seemed to snarl. Then he disappeared into the jungle. Jake stayed up there for a long time, not daring to go down. Only when the sun started to set did Jake climb down. The blood on his back had

dried up, though the cut throbbed. Jake made a mental note to wear thicker clothes when hunting. His rough, knee-length breeches and bandelier crossing his bare chest did nothing to help or protect him from what had just happened. His golden hair was tangled up with branches and leaves, and sky-blue eyes (same as Rek's) were dim and sorrowful. He began trudging towards the only place he felt safe -- home.



♥

After the ship crashed, Jake scavenged around the wreck and found pieces of splintered wood and cloth that hadn't been washed out to sea. He used these pieces in the next few weeks to build a house among the trees, after discovering the jaguars that prowled through the forests at night. Now Jake stared up at the cozy little house in the trees, the rope ladder winding down the trunk. He climbed up the ladder, muscles straining as his mind flashed back to the moment Rek lifted his head. Those cruel, bloodshot eyes, the lolling gait, it didn't seem like the good natured wolf Jake knew. He pushed those thoughts out of his head as he reached the platform leading to his cottage. More on that later.

The cottage Jake built looked a little plain on the outside, with sturdy wood walls, but it was beautiful on the inside. Jake had found clothes, and a hammock and silverware in addition to the wood to make his cottage. The leftover wood was made into barrels, a desk, and a beautifully carved cabinet, with six drawers, where Jake stored his clothes. The barrels were filled to the brim with fruit and water. The hammock hung in the corner, under a warm blanket and pillow. The windowsills were lined with flowers, silverware, and weapons were stowed in a side room. Jake breathed in the musty sweet scent of his home. Everything was normal and familiar here. What he had experienced was just a dream. It couldn't have happened. It just couldn't have. He stripped off his bandelier and went to bed.

Jake was running through the forest, wind whipping at his hair and branches tugging at his clothes. He didn't care about the pain in his legs, he just had to keep running. To find Rek. Finally, Jake broke into a clearing and clutched his knees, panting heavily. Before him stood, Rek. Jake stretched out a hand towards Rek.

"Boy," he whispered, his voice hoarse. "You are worthless and weak," the deep voice came from everywhere. Rek regarded Jake with a glare, then disappeared into the forest. Jake sat up with a start. He was sweaty all over, heart beating wildly. Pain erupted from his neck and back. Jake touched his

back, and his fingers came away with blood. So, yesterday's encounter with Rek was real! Jake stumbled out of bed and towards the cabinet, where he also kept medicine. As Jake bandaged the wound, his eyes felt hot and wet. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears at bay. But one slipped out and rolled down his cheek. How could Rek be so cruel? Jake shook his head and wiped away the tear. Mourning wouldn't do any good. He should be trying to help Rek instead of moping around. But first, breakfast. Jake climbed down from his cottage and gazed at the rolling sea and golden dunes before him.

Jake chose to build his house at the edge of the forest, so he could hunt in the forest as well as the ocean. Jake wasn't excited to go back into the forest, so he started towards the ocean. The sea was calm today and crystal clear. It seemed as if even the ocean was in shock and pain. Jake stood on one of the many rocks jutting from the sea and jumped in. The water was warm and tasted salty. Although the salt water stung Jake's eyes, the succulent clams at the sandy bottom of the ocean were worth the pain. Jake gathered around fifteen in his arms, then kicked up to the surface of the water. He waded to the shore and was just about to climb up onto the sand when a growl rang through the trees. Flashes of gray fur shone from the other side of the beach. A wolf was loping from out of the trees, picking his way across the sharp rocks. Jake dropped his clams and frantically dove under water. Rek growled and wined as he made his way closer to where Jake was hiding underwater, black lips lined with dark red blood. Jake's eyes stung as he strained to see if Rek was gone. The saltwater felt like agony against Jake's cut, the bandages were soggy and falling. His lungs were bursting in his chest, but Jake refused to go up for air. There was no place to hide if he came up, and Jake was too weak to fight Rek. Finally, a howl rang somewhere in the distance. Jake was safe.

Jake gasped as he broke the surface of the water, his breeches drenched, hair matted to his forehead. He hoisted himself onto a rock, shivering in the cold mist of the morning. He was such a coward, even afraid of his old friend! He could have changed Rek if he wasn't so scared. His vision blurred as tears trickled down his cheeks. And this time, Jake didn't try to hold them back.



Jake tossed and turned in his hammock, trying in vain to sleep. Jake had sat on that rock for the whole morning until he started to move again. He retrieved and boiled the clams numbly. His favorite dish now seemed dull and flavorless, which should have alarmed Jake, but he was too startled to think straight. After his lunch, he dragged himself to the water hole where he always bathed and stripped off his clothes. He scrubbed at the salt coating his crusty and hardened hair, at his body, soaking his body and removing whatever showed signs of his sorrow and guilt. He started screaming and screaming, until he lost his voice, not caring who or what heard him.

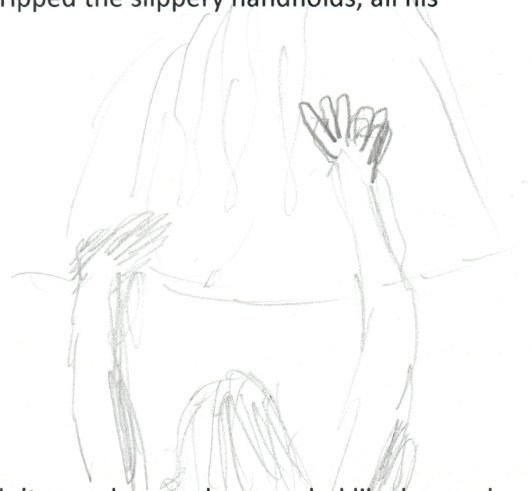
The wolf he knew would have comforted him, nuzzled him. But that wolf wasn't here and would never be again. He finally got himself home, his throat and body equally sore, and threw himself onto his



hammock, just wanting sleep to come. But it didn't. He sat up in his hammock, sighed, and got up. He was going to find Rek again. He would find out what was wrong and fix it. "But how will I find him?" Jake said aloud. As if Rek had heard Jake from halfway across the island, a howl rang from the mountains. A howl full of pain and sorrow, one Jake had never heard before. But there was only one wolf on this island, and he was the wolf Jake was thinking about.

Jake quickly stuffed some food from the barrels into a leather pack he had made and almost flew down the ladder, scraping his knuckles in the process. He didn't care. He ran into the forest, following the howls that came again. He ran for days, barely sleeping and eating, tracking the howls. Finally, on the fifth night, Jake stood before a towering, gray cliff. He had run all the way through the forest, just to find himself blocked by a cliff. He kicked the cliff in frustration (which only hurt his foot) and sat down on a rock. Jake buried his head in his hands, thinking about what he had just done. Run through the forest alone? How thick-headed was he? It was dangerous to go this far into the forest by himself, and he was lost. Rek probably wasn't even here. Just then, a howl came from a cave above. The same howl Jake had heard every night.

"Rek!" Jake called up. "Are you there?" His voice echoed, bouncing off the cliff. A series of yip answered him. Jake's chest expanded with joy; Rek was up there! Heedless of the steep drop, Jake unshouldered his pack and started climbing up the cliff face. Over the years, Jake had grown stronger as he lived in the wild. But rock climbing was torture. His hands gripped the slippery handholds, all his muscles tense. Jake pondered if he could climb back down, but he was too high up. The forest below him was tiny specks of color below him. The only place to go was up. Jake managed to climb a little higher and sighed. He was never going to make it to Rek. Just then, Jake glimpsed a small opening just a few above him, shrouded by vines. A mournful yip came from the cave. Rek was just a few feet above Jake!



A newfound surge of energy flooded through Jake as he pulled himself up and onto the ledge that led to the opening of the cave. Jake hesitated before he pushed through the vines, what if Rek attacked him again? But Rek didn't sound angry, he sounded like he used to. Jake decided to take his chances and pushed through the opening. Rek bounded on top of Jake, panting happily. "Hey boy!" Jake grinned, stroking Rek's silky fur. Rek's eyes were back to their normal blue and he seemed excited.

A puff of gray fur peeked out from behind Rek. Rek bounded off Jake and cuddled the puff gray fur, suckling it. Jake squinted at the puff and burst out in laughter. Rek was holding a baby cub! Everything now made sense. Rek had attacked Jake because she was in labor and pain, forgetting everyone she loved. Everything that had seemed wrong and unfamiliar before was just because Rek was pregnant. Everything would go back to normal now!

Wait! Almost normal. "Rek," Jake said aloud. "You're a girl?" Rek responded with a playful howl and turned her attention back to her cub. Now that Jake was watching the two wolves delight in being next to each other, tears brimmed in his eyes. But these weren't of sorrow. They were of joy. A tear slipped down Jake's cheek as early morning light flooded the room. Outside, the sun was flooding the island with light.

The sun is rising, Jake thought. A new and wonderful life is beginning. A new sunrise, signaling the start of a new and wonderful life.

Rek

It was a stormy night. The shiny-thing-that-flashes tore through the island, ending with a big bang. Rek huddled in a dark cave on the side of a cliff, damp and smelling of mildew. Her fur was wet and matted, and she was shivering. A pang went through her stomach, reminding her of her hunger. But there was nothing to eat here. She curled up, wining, trying to sleep. The storm would go away soon. She should take advantage of this time and take a long, long nap. Dreaming of the meal she would soon have, Rek fell asleep, tasting heaven.

Rek yawned, exposing her long, white fangs. She licked her black lips, then stood up, alert for other animals. She had dreamed of a funny animal, and quite funny he was! The animal was panting and yiping in a high-pitched voice, standing on his two hind legs; Rek chuckled at the thought. Morning light streamed through the vines covering the doorway, and everything smelled fresh. Dew glistened on leaves and hung in the air as the-thing-that-is-cool-and-nice. Rek's stomach growled, reminding her of her hunger. She was in a good mood and not in that much of a hurry to eat. She mused over where she would go first, taking her time and enjoying the sun on her fur. The white-small-things-with-long-ears were tasty and chewy, with a sweet taste, but Rek realized they would still be hiding in their underground burrow, where she couldn't get them. That only left the sweet-salty-red-thing-with-pincers in the rocky terrain of the ocean, but Rek wasn't disappointed. The succulent seafood was just as good. Rek stretched and loped off to the ocean.



The wet-cold-thing sprayed Rek, dousing her fur and drenching her to the bone. The Sea Mother was angry today, slamming against the salt encrusted rocks as hard as she could. Rek didn't really care though; she already had her fill of food. Rek had a good catch. Her muzzle was stained with the red-sweet-stuff and her stomach was bulging. She was loping back to her cave when a bloodied figure came into view around the-big-gray-thing-that-is-hard. Rek sensed that it was on the verge of not-breath and felt a pang of sorrow for it. So fragile, easy to break, unlike the wolf. She pushed her thoughts down into the deepest darkest corner in her mind. It was the animal's fault it was so weak. She shouldn't be sorry for it. And yet..... Rek felt a connection to it. A strong cord binding the two creatures together. It wouldn't hurt to check on the creature, would it? She padded forward on soft paws and circled the creature. Rek hesitated and licked it. It tasted sweet and strong, and she was about to lick it again when it coughed. She sprang back in alarm as the creature sat up, groaning and retching. It blinked at her, then started yowling in a language that she would soon recognize as Tailless Talk. It tried to stand up, then fell back over again. Rek started nuzzling its sweet-smelling body, and it frantically waved its long fore paws in the air. One hit her on the muzzle, and she jumped back, confused. A loud noise from it sent her running away.

During the next few days, Rek kept trying to get close to the new animal. She brought him food and nuzzled him with a strange affection. She soon developed a name for this strange new animal, Tall Two-Legs. At first, Tall Two-Legs kept shooing her away, but soon he let her curl up next to him. A strong bond developed between them, and they were happy together. For a whole year, they loped together, swimming and hunting happily. *Pack Brother*, Rek thought. *My pack brother*.

But then something changed. They soon grew apart and a pain started gnawing in Rek's stomach. Pain made her eyes red and no matter how much she ate, she was still hungry. Her eyes clouded over and made everything blurry. Somehow, she found herself in the middle of a forest. She was stalking geese, squabbling in a green clearing. She had been in the mountains just a few seconds ago, hadn't she? She was really confused these days. But while she had prey, she should eat, right? She crept into the clearing and pounced on the biggest, juiciest goose. The rest scattered, and she buried her muzzle into her kill. Something came out of the fronds lining the clearing, then started running at her. She raised her head and growled at the thing, licking her lips. She couldn't see clearly and saw the thing as an enemy when it reached her aching stomach. She growled, then lunged at the thing. It shouted something she didn't understand, then started running away. She was just about to reach him when he started climbing a tall-long-stuff-thing-with-green-feathers and looked down at her. *Keep away* Rek barked, but she doubted the thing could understand her. She didn't care. It got her message. She looked at it for one last time, then disappeared into the jungle.

The next morning, she went to the ocean to clear her mind a bit. Loping across sharp, black rocks, she thought she saw the same creature she chased yesterday. But then it was gone, disappearing under the surface of the water. Rek twitched her whiskers and started towards the green forest. The calming sea air didn't help her at all. Besides, she was too in the open. As she maneuvered through the trees, a sharp pain held attacked her stomach and she howled in pain. She needed to lie down. But not here. Rek wanted to be in a place that always made her feel safe – the cave on the side of the mountain.

She was lying on the cave floor, the pain going through her whole body. Rek had managed to drag herself up here and was in severe pain from the climb. Her stomach convulsed, and a hard squeeze overtook her. Finally, after a lot of whining and howling, a cub lay at her back paws, wet and pink, its eyes squeezed shut. Joy flooded through Rek and the pain was gone. She felt relieved and happy with her cub. But as she suckled it, she had a dreaded thought to think about. That creature she didn't recognize, was that Tall Two-Legs? With a jolt of realization, she howled with pain. That was Tall Two-Legs. She whined and yiped with sorrow, but a scrabble of stone sent her to the cave opening. Tall Two-Legs was right below her. She was a frenzy of sounds now, and Tall Two-Legs heaved himself into the cave. She slobbered all over his face, tasting that sweet scent of his. The cub blundered into Rek from behind, squeaking with alarm. Tall Two-Legs laughed that deep laugh of his and Rek padded the cub with her paws. Rek was happy. She had Tall Two-Legs and her cub. Everything was just perfect.