

THE WHEEL TURNS

Leah Clearwater suffered a great deal almost from the moment my family arrived in Forks, though we had no idea the kind of ripples our presence was creating in the fabric of the Quileute community. Responding to an ancient call of survival, the tribe's dormant shapeshifting gene awakened, prompting young people to morph without warning from human beings into wolves, with all of the inherent consequences of such a mind-bending transformation.

Sam Uley was the first to suffer from the effects of this alteration and, though no one ever acknowledged it directly, Leah Clearwater was the second. Forbidden to know what was happening to her love, who simply disappeared with no notice and no explanation, she was left to agonize and to doubt both him and herself. Then she lost him altogether to the magic of imprinting when his devotion transferred instantly and irrevocably to another woman—her cousin and close friend, Emily Young.

As time went on and the tribe's teenage boys one by one began to change and form an exclusive clan, Leah found herself living the nightmare of the transformation herself, becoming the first female werewolf in the known history of the Quileute tribe. No one knew that, as such, she would be forced to choose between her blood-born duty to protect her tribe from its mortal enemies and her hopes of one day becoming a mother.

Losing Sam was the first of many losses for Leah. She lost her father, who died as a result of the invasion of vampires my family unwittingly drew to Forks. She lost her friend, Jacob, to his pining for a girl whom Leah felt was unworthy of him, and she saw her brother, Seth, form a friendship with the filthy bloodsucker who had stolen Jacob's girl.

To escape the misery of her membership in Sam's pack and being privy to his innermost thoughts, which centered on Emily, Leah defected with her brother to Jacob's pack, a move which forced her to protect the vampires she despised from members of her own tribe. When Jacob subsequently imprinted on my half-vampire daughter, Leah was compelled to defend a child she believed to be an abomination.

Leah's world had become untenable to her in so many ways that she wanted nothing more than to escape the devastation of her existence on the Quileute reservation. As a dutiful tribe member, however, she stood as Jacob's second when the Quileute wolves defended my daughter and my family from a foreign vampire threat.

After the dust of the averted battle had settled with only one life lost, Leah was dealt a final blow when Sam and Emily found they were expecting a baby. The news spread quickly through Sam's pack, then Jacob's pack, and then through the tribe at large. It was simply too much for Leah to bear and so she took a page from Jacob's book of heartbreak and ran away.

Just as Jacob did when Bella and I became engaged, Leah submerged her human soul inside her wolf's body to blunt the pain of knowing another woman carried her true love's child. Emily's happy condition brought home to Leah with distressing clarity the fact that she would not experience such an event herself, having become sterile for all intents and purposes since transforming into a werewolf. Unlike the other wolves, all of whom were male and fertile, Leah was a genetic dead-end, yet one more sorrow for her to bear.

Leah disappeared shortly after our great standoff against the Volturi. Not wanting to cope with her mother's supplications to stay, Leah phased and took off without telling anyone, taking comfort in living as a lone wolf, and losing track of place and time. Images I

saw in her mind later were of snow-covered mountains and glaciers along a great cold sea, from which I inferred that she went to the northernmost reaches of Canada near the Arctic Circle.

Despite the turmoil Leah had brought to both Quileute wolf packs in the past, she was missed. Jacob had become reliant upon her as his second, especially after he imprinted on Renesmee and his attention was focused so much on her. Seth was lonely for his bossy, nagging sister, though he didn't like to admit it. Sue missed her daughter terribly, which caused Charlie to miss her by proxy. Sam and Emily regretted Leah's departure as well, for they had hoped to enlist Leah and Jacob as their baby's godparents.

Month after month passed with no word from Leah, much to Sue's dismay. Many of us wondered whether she would ever return. Then, after almost a year of silence, Leah's thoughts broke into the pack mind and news of her impending arrival flashed through Jacob's pack like wildfire.

Leah's back!

I heard the silent cry that Seth, Embry, and Quil issued simultaneously from our yard. As it happened, Jacob had come inside the house to collect Renesmee for a forest outing.

"You'd better go talk to Embry, Jacob," I told him as Seth's yelp of delight floated through the air. "The pack has news." I couldn't help but smile at the wolves' unexpected enthusiasm.

"I'll be right back, sweetheart," Jacob said to my daughter, as he raced out our front door.

My family looked to me for an explanation. "Leah's coming home," I told them.

"How wonderful," Esme exclaimed, clapping her palms together, though no one else expressed much excitement over the news.

Renesmee padded to the sidelight window by the front door to see what she could see.

We all heard the rumbling and yipping as Jacob's pack conferred before Jacob sent Seth and Quil to meet Leah and run her in. Ten minutes later, I saw through Seth's eyes as Leah skidded to a stop in a forest clearing where they waited for her.

Leah had never been anyone's favorite wolf, but she was still Jacob's second-in-command and the pack was glad to have her back. The two halves of Jake's pack, though separated, simultaneously raised their noses toward the sky and sent happy howls singing through the trees. Renesmee raised her nose along with them and attempted her own wolf howl, whose high, tinny pitch made all of us laugh.

Sam dispatched Colin and Evan (one of the younger wolf additions) to locate Jacob's pack and find out what the fuss was all about. When the two met Jake in our yard, the news of Leah's return raced through the second pack mind and Sam sent Paul to inform Sue Clearwater and Billy Black.

The rest of the story I saw later through Seth's eyes and by all indications, it was powerful. After catching up on the pack news and tolerating the pack's solicitous attention as well as my own family's welcome back greetings, Leah went home with Seth to see her mother. So unused to living as a human among humans, Leah was incredibly awkward at first, speaking in single syllables and using strange physical gestures to communicate.

The morning after Leah's return, Sam and Emily ventured to Sue's house to welcome her back and to introduce her to their son, not something Leah was anticipating with any pleasure and would have preferred to put off. Though her feelings had mellowed some during her time away, she remained painfully envious of Emily's good fortune.

Seth answered the visitors' knock on the Clearwaters' front door and Leah wandered into the living room to see who was there.

"Leah!" Emily greeted her quietly, but with great enthusiasm. "It's wonderful to see you." Emily rushed toward her and threw one arm around Leah's reluctant shoulder, a sideways hug necessitated by the large bundle strapped to the front of Emily's body. Leah avoided looking at the offensive, blanketed bulge.

"Yes, Leah, we're glad to have you back," Sam added, though he did not move to hug his former girlfriend. "I hope you're planning to stay?"

Leah, as yet undecided, merely shrugged.

"You must meet Fenix!" Emily said as she pulled aside the cloth that sheltered the baby from the winter's chill. He was sleeping, which at four months old and born six weeks prematurely, was his primary occupation.

No doubt with pain and dread in her heart, Leah prepared herself to feign happiness for Emily. This child would have been hers and Sam's if her life had proceeded according to her dreams. She stood, waiting, as Emily pulled aside the cloth covering Fenix's head and Sue and Seth gathered close by. The swaddled, copper-skinned infant yawned and opened his large black eyes, fixing them clearly on Leah's face. One short moment later, everyone in the room knew that Leah would never be the same.

It's almost funny now to remember the old Leah before she imprinted on Fenix William Uley. As much as she had mocked and derided Jacob for his overzealous attachment to our Renesmee, Leah

is at least as fanatical about Fenix. She is protective of him, cleaves to him, and is as annoying to Sam in her presumed ownership of his son as Jacob ever was to Bella and me.

How the wheel of life comes around! Where once Emily felt badly knowing that she had caused Leah's deep unhappiness, she now finds herself constantly aggravated by Leah's perpetual presence and interference in the raising of her child. Bella felt the same way when she awoke from her vampire transformation to find that she was sharing "ownership" of Renesmee with Jacob. How hard it was for her in the beginning, knowing that from her daughter's first day in the world, she belonged to Jacob as much as to her parents! The same is now true for Emily—Fenix is as much Leah's concern as he is his mother's.

It is an ironic and amusing twist of fate to see the much more pleasant version of Leah enthralled with the object of her imprinting. She remains as fierce as ever, as loyal and as devoted, but the subject of her dedication has changed forever. More importantly, she is no longer bitter and no more brokenhearted.

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