



A Change in the Air Part 2

by Tony Graham

The smell was maddening. He waited patiently, unmoving, knowing his prey would break cover if he held position.

There. He felt the movement before he heard the slight rustling. Before he could see his prey, he sprang over the heavy tree root rising out of the forest floor. The ground squirrel, fat from a summer bounty of nuts and seeds, had no chance. Two violent shakes of his head snapped its spine, killing it. It was small, but made for a perfect snack. He sat, licking blood from the fur around his mouth.

A mate should be grooming him. Kirna. His mate. No, his wife. Riem recalled the task before him. His purpose.

A short run through the trees up the rocky slope brought him to the summit. Before him, the Fall River Valley lay open. The fresh breeze stirred his mane, cooling him. He stood, looking over the vista. Below him, to the east, was the two-leg Fort Cascade. He could see it past a rock outcropping. The wind blew from the west, robbing him of the smells.

Nothing unusual. Nothing out of the norm. He dimly recalled the patrol, his purpose. Half done. There would be prey below: chickens, sheep, perhaps even a cow. A few hours of daylight left. He could rest here, go raiding after the sunset. He wasn't necessarily hungry, but food was always a consideration.

His purpose. Patrol. He turned back to the forest, descending the rocks to the soft floor of fallen trees, leaves, brush and occasional patches of grass. The smell of the stream called to him.

He stood still next to the tree, hidden beneath its canopy. Not hunting. Wary. The stream gurgled a few steps away, dirt and small rocks leading right down to the bank. His thirst had brought him this far. Then he caught the scent of the two-leg hunter. They could be dangerous, these two-leg hunters. He waited; listening, watching.

The two-leg hunter broke first, creeping slowly down to the bank, crouching to drink. Cautious, but not vigilant enough.

Or perhaps she was. Female this one, and keen. She straightened, last handful of water held to her lips, staring right at him. She held her empty hands out and bared her fangs.



Not threat. Smile. Friend. Not two-leg hunter, but two-leg ranger, bow on her back, stag-hilted war knife at her belt. Riem crept down to the bank, drank his fill as the two-leg watched, his golden eyes meeting her blue.

Part of Riem knew this was good. Other patrols were out. Good, good. He had a long run back this day. The two-leg ranger watched him disappear into the forest. He paused, but she did not pursue.

A fine pace through the forested hills. Late afternoon, heat dying to evening cool. He keep his focus on returning to the den, not hunting. He was not hungry. It was the

smell of spoiled meat that stopped him. Upwind across the rocks. A small sound. He moved lightly up the escarpment, lowered himself nearly to his belly as he approached the edge of the rock to peer over.

M'teoulin. The stench of their small camp flooded his nostrils, sour with corruption and stale with decay. He had never been this close, experienced it this strongly. In the past, he had found old camps, the places of weaklings driven out to die. The m'teoulin were alive in this camp. Many of the foul two-legs. They moved like men, but did not smell or feel like men. None seemed old, weak or sick. It was a scout party, all warriors. No sign of the dark sorcerers of legend. Perhaps they were still hidden in the deep caves, fearful of the Emperor, his magic and his guard. Riem knew he must warn his people. A group this large was unknown in his lifetime. For the m'teoulin worms to leave the caves and caverns in this number was a threat unlike any his people had faced in generations.

The scent faded, the sounds grew less clear. Riem became aware of the chill evening air on the skin of his back, the warmth of the rock on his belly. He lay naked on the escarpment above the m'teoulin camp. His mind had filled with too many man-thoughts. He had lost the change.

Riem slowly and carefully moved back down the rocks. He crouched next to a boulder,



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slowing his breathing, seeking to release his thoughts, to simply be aware of the forest. Wolf: wind in his mane, tilt of the head, step of the paw, twitch of the nose.

He rose on his four legs, sharp nose assuring him the only possible approach of danger lay downwind. He quickly moved deeper into the trees, settling into a distance-eating gait that would bring him back to the den by sunset. There was news to share.



Illustration *Change in the Air* by Andy Underwood.

“M'teoulin” created by Thomas Ryan in *Rain in the Spring*.

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