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Of Empathy

After a whole year of travelling through forests, mountains and oceans, Peter, the leucrotta, arrived at Emmett's door.

"Wow! You are very handsome. I can't say I'd ever met anyone like you, " said Angelino, the duck, as he greeted him with a huge grin, "What are you?"

Peter sat down beside Angelino and explained to him that he was half hyena, half lion. He proceeded in telling the duck how his lion half brother John saved his life, and how he learned about not only his hyena mother's unusual love for his lion father Mark, but his half sister Wendy's deep feelings for Adam, the lion, as well.

"In my pride, they let all my brothers and sisters stay alive now. They are all leucrottas as you may imagine. Wendy was the happiest when the decision was made official. But just when I thought I understood love," Peter continued, "Wendy and Adam decided 'never' to make their love public."

Peter went on to describe how a war broke between his pride of hyenas/leucrottas and Adam's pride of lions. At some point both groups wanted to start a peace negotiation because too many lives had been lost. Each selected three from the prides to represent them and as luck would have had it, Peter, Wendy and Adam made up three out of the six negotiators.

They finally agreed on the division of territories and all sorts of other things, "The amazing part was that we even shook on not killing each other anymore. At some point during the process of the peace talk, Wendy and Adam came to the understanding that their love could not be made public, not in their lifetime anyway. 'Because people might think that we made peace because of our love for each other,' as the two of them put it. I knew how much this recognition pained Wendy even though she had long ago decided that she was going to love Adam, 'come what may', as our late brother John used to say.

"One day when Adam was away, I asked Wendy if she would have chosen someone, who have brought less complications in life than Adam if she could have lived again.

'No,' she answered, obviously having been contemplating the issue, 'it might have been nice if he were a hyena or I were a lioness and we could have walked together in public and he could even have introduced me to his family and friends. And I'd feel a stronger sense of belonging. I am not denying that these things are important to me. But the fact is that these things are not so important that I would want to trade my love for him - "' At this point, Peter stopped talking and his mood changed drastically.

Angelino sat patiently, waiting for Peter to say "but ...“ Yet Peter said nothing, nor did he ask any questions.

When the sky turned deep blue and the stars came out, Angelino invited Peter to share dinner with him. And then they both fell asleep while waiting for Emmett to return from his trip in town.

Early next morning, Peter opened his eyes and saw Emmett smiling at him, "So you are the leucrotta Angelino has been talking about. What made you come to us?"

Peter felt immediately so at ease with Emmett that he not only told him all the things that he had told the duck the previous night but he went further, "Well, the fact is that I, too, have fallen in love with a lioness in Adam's pride. She was on Adam's team during the peace talk. I fell in love first with her looks and her manners. And then the more I saw how she was able to put herself in others' shoes—her empathy—the more I loved her. But being a hybrid and being in love with a lioness would just cause my life to become more complicated than that of Wendy's, for the rules don't allow leucrottas and lions to have children. I don't know if I'm cut out for that kind of torment."

Both Emmett and Peter were silent.

When Emmett started to speak, he had a very pained expression, "Peter, what does your lioness think about all this?"

Slowly, very slowly, as if to chew on every word, Peter replied, "She thinks like Wendy. No cost is too high for her love. And even with no hope for a future change, her heart is set on being with me."

"And how do you feel, knowing all this?" Emmett ventured after a longer pause this time.

"I'm not sure. I'm attracted to the lioness because of her compassion but then maybe I'm not ready to step into her shoes. I may end up resenting her and her situation later. I can't decide. They say you are wise in these things, would you help me decide?"

This time, Emmett answered slowly, very slowly, "My dear, they may say all sorts of things about me and I may even have learned many things throughout the years. But only you can decide what you are ready for, even in empathy, because you are the only one who can live in your shoes, you are the only one who has to live with your decision...."