

LONG JOURNEY HOME



JOSHIAH WARBAUM

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A Velorian Adventure

Joshiah Warbaum

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Dedication

This book wouldn't have been possible without generous contributions and donations from my patrons. Thank you to everyone who has supported me on Patreon over the last few years!

I also have to give a special dedication to Jon Sanders for allowing me to use his character likeness in this story. What started as four chapters of adult content quickly evolved into a story beyond my own grasp, and it brought a new character, Likita, into my personal fold.

A final and always necessary dedication goes out to Rose, for starting the New Year not only as my fiancé, but as one of the most patient people I've ever met. Someone who can love you while you e-mail them, demanding that they throw pizza at you and call you trash is definitely worth marrying.

Preface

We're **just** short of ten books. That's...kind of insane.

I'll be honest: when I first set out on publishing books, I never thought I would get anywhere close to this total, and yet, as I type these words, I sit poised to publish another nine books before the year is over. Feels crazy, doesn't it?

If it isn't an addiction, it's damn close to one. There's something intoxicating about the adventure of sitting down in front of a forest of pages, navigating through with nothing more than a pen and your own wisdom.

What's funny is that the hardest part of writing this book, in all honesty, was jotting down the preface. After going through so many words and giving what I thought was a proper ending to Jon and Likita's adventure, I didn't know what to say about it, or to you readers. I could thank all of you once more (you certainly deserve it,) and I could give some notes about the characters, but a fun fact is that the preface is more intended for an author to sit and talk to the readers, than to give notes about the characters or anything of that nature.

Following the rules, even in my line of work, hasn't been something I've excelled at, so I'm happy to say that those of you who know Jon will find him to be true to his character, and those of you who know nothing of Likita will find her to be a charming and kind-hearted woman, compassionate to even the darkest of souls. Her inner strength is greater than any give her credit for, however, and I'm excited to say that she'll be getting more features, not just in the world of Veloria where this book takes place, but in my other literary universes, as well.

There's a host of other characters for you to meet in the realm of this text, as well. Their intentions are shrouded in mystery, and where they consider societal change to be a game, they think of Jon as nothing more than a pawn for them to toss around.

Maybe you feel sympathy for him, identify with him, or just want to join him on his adventure. In any case, I hope you'll enjoy your stay in Veloria, whether this is your first time visiting, or if you're making a return trip.

Long Journey Home

Joshiah Warbaum

Waking up without the blinding light of the sun in right in your face was always a blessing.

Waking up in such a situation because you'd been knocked unconscious and dragged into a tent was **not**.

"I was really beginning to think that you would never wake up. That's quite a wound you have upon your stomach, otter."

Flat upon his back in the dirt, Jon was just faintly awake enough to reply. His eyes were only flickering open, and thanks to only the lightest of golden beams of sunlight sneaking in through the small flap in the front, it was dark enough that he happily would have stayed asleep.

A soft, subtle touch upon his cheek from the fur of a delicate paw wouldn't allow him to rest, however.

"Wh-where...what...h-happened?"

"Shhh..." came a voice of comfort and reason. "Save your energy, otter. You don't need to speak just yet. I'm simply glad to see that you're alive."

Consciousness seemed like a wonderful thing at the moment...before Jon's nervous system finally kicked back into gear, and horrible pain radiated from his stomach and spread across the whole of his torso. Immediately, he flashed back to the massive, beastly bear that he was hunting in the woods outside of his tribe lands, and that one little root that stuck out of the ground...

...It was just enough to trip him, and very nearly cost him his life. Whatever fate smiled upon Jon, the bear didn't see him fit to be killed, and with just one swiping wound across his stomach, he turned and ran away.

Luck would have it that he was hunting right on the edges of the land of another tribe, one that was quite peaceful to outsiders.

"Hurts...it...*really* hurts..."

"I'm sure that it does. You were almost gored by that creature," the voice continued to speak, and Jon's eyes squinted, hoping to get a better view of the source. He could tell that it was female by ear, and her touch was as smooth and soft as a ribbon of silk, but he had no idea what she actually was.

Tired eyes finally focused enough to see a thick, full coat of brilliantly white fur upon a canid body. The full, thick shape of her snout and her shorter ears made it clear that Jon had wandered into the land of the white wolves, and this one in particular was quite beautiful. *I just hope the blood loss isn't clouding my judgment*, Jon thought.

It certainly wasn't. "Truly, the fates smiled upon you, otter. Had I been even a moment later, I'm sure that you would have bled to death...but it does my heart well to see you recovering. Might I have your name?"

Reaching over with his right paw, Jon rubbed the last of the sleep out of his eyes. His mouth opened to speak, but for a moment, his lower lip simply hung there, as his cleared eyes took in the view of a stunningly gorgeous creature. Her fur was truly pristine and neatly kept, and her eyes shined like two gems of amber in a field of snow. Her smile was as kind as her words, and though she preserved her modesty with set of leathers that functioned as a tank top, there was little that could hide the sizable curve of her bosom.

All of this would have been wonderful, if not for the stance that Jon's tribe took against the white wolves...but beauty was a powerful thing. Just for the time, her own was so great that it allowed him to forget all about the feuds of the past.

"J-Jon...you can call me Jon," he finally spoke again, smiling up at the white wolfess from his back. He wished that he could sit up properly, but his body was still recuperating from the failed hunting trip, and he would still need more time to be able to function again, much less go out and continue his expedition. "And who are you?"

"I am Likita, of the White Wolves, and I have watched over you for several days, Jon. I do not know what an otter was doing wandering so close to our lands, but you certainly aren't an ordinary specimen, are you?"

Now that reality was further into the picture and Jon was fully conscious, it was easy to remember the features that might have made him a little bit different.

Unlike the rest of the otters in his tribe, Jon was gifted with an extra set of large, sharp fangs, thanks to his unusual birthright. He was indeed an otter by all accounts, but the fangs were a gift from his mother, and his father was actually a member of the very beast that Jon was trying to hunt; a civilized bear. Because of this, he never quite fit in where he came from, and though he was considered a member of the otter tribes, he was wont to stray from them and do things on his own.

Being a loner simply made his life that much easier, in all manners *except* for the hunt.

"I've heard that one before," Jon replied glibly. "I guess I must look quite unsettling to you, if you don't really know who I am..."

"Actually, I think your appearance is rather charming. It's not always a bad thing to be unique, Jon," Likita pointed out to him, smiling as warmly as a mother would upon a curious child. "I'm sure you're actually quite the **popular** otter, when it comes right down to it."

At first, Jon didn't notice Likita's eyes wandering down the smooth, toned

muscles of his abdomen, but the moment he thought he felt something upon his member, he felt his cheeks burning bashfully.

It only then occurred to him that he was **entirely** naked.

"What...Likita, what the hell happened to my loincloth?"

The only clothing Jon was allowed to keep was the necklace that clung tightly to his throat, much like a collar. It was decorated and adorned with a number of different sized gemstones, but all of them shined an exceptionally bright blue, like the clearest of summer skies. In respect for his traditions, Likita left it upon his neck...but his loincloth had to be removed.

"I had to make sure that you weren't smuggling any other weapons into our territory," Likita assured him, "Other than the one you're still carrying, of course."

The overly playful and surprisingly forward *entendre* left Jon to do little more than gulp, but despite her advances, Likita seemed to keep a sense of modesty about her. "*Relax*, Jon. All of your weapons are being safely kept here in my tent, and your loincloth will be returned to you when you leave, as well."

Jon had a home to go back to, but not one that he truly looked forward to being in. If it were all the same to Likita, he'd happily stay among the White Wolves for as long as he could, but to ask that kind of hospitality from them when she'd already welcomed him into her home and nursed him back to health felt like it might be reaching a bit too far.

Still, it was best to make sure they were on the same page. "And when do I have to leave by?" Jon asked, letting out a low, agonized grunt as he finally managed to sit up next to the kneeling wolfess.

"That has yet to be determined, but we cannot send a wounded stranger out into the wilderness. As my own woman, you are welcome to stay here in my tent for as long as you need, and if you can find a niche in our tribe, you may be welcome to stay even longer."

Jon didn't want to look too far into the implications of Likita's statement, but she sounded entirely sincere, and perhaps a little *too* eager to have Jon stay with her. Of course, she'd already gotten to know him much better than he knew her, and though he might have had something to hide before, he wasn't allowed to have any secrets. Just by his belongings and dress, Likita knew he was a hunter, and with no clothing to preserve his modesty, she knew everything about his body, as well.

"Perhaps tomorrow...if I'm feeling a little bit better, you can show me around your village?" Jon wondered aloud, looking to Likita with hopeful eyes of gray. Likita actually took a moment to ponder the thought, and suddenly, her welcoming and friendly nature was put on hold as she actually considered the

implication of her actions. "If you think that you'll be feeling up to it, I can walk you around the village, I suppose. Just remember to stay close to me all the while, okay?"

Jon nodded, but he tilted his head thereafter. "Why is that...?"

"Because," Likita started to speak, as she stood up and walked for the exit of the tent, "Outsiders aren't allowed to wear any clothing, and I'm sure you'll have more than a few people looking to steal you away."

The conflict of Likita's welcoming spirit and the potential danger of what lurked outside of the tent left Jon feeling entirely nervous, but his body was still too exhausted to try and make a break for it. Sitting up took every ounce of energy in his body, and even smiling at Likita as she walked outside was an effort, one that she could clearly see.

"Get some rest, Jon...We'll talk a little bit more tomorrow."

Jon was very quick to appreciate the way of life that the White Wolves seemed to carry.

The next morning, Likita was there waiting for him, sitting upon a small, wooden chair and watching over him as he rested, taking her duty as his caretaker **very** seriously. She allowed him to wake naturally, and when he did, she presented to him a small, crudely carved wooden plate, adorned with a variety of different filets.

"I wasn't sure exactly what kind of food otters were interested in, but I know that your kind tends to reside in the water, so I thought perhaps a couple different kinds of fish would be the proper gesture...?"

The questioning inflection in Likita's voice was searching for approval, and as Jon sat upright and rubbed his eyes, the familiar scent of fresh, running water and tender, juicy meat filled his nostrils. He could feel his tongue dripping with salivates just at the wafting scent, and it all led to a grin that he couldn't wipe away if he tried. "A plate such as this is a delicacy where I come from," Jon admitted, much to the delight of Likita. "I really don't think I'm deserving of such treatment..."

"I know our tribes don't agree on everything," Likita suggested, "But we do honor our hunters, and I was quite sure that your tribe followed the same customs, in that regard. You were wounded trying to find food for others; that alone is deserving of reward."

"I...well..." Jon trailed off for a moment, filled with a swell of regret at accepting the food. Likita tilted her head just slightly and gestured the plate a little closer to him, trying to encourage him to take it. "I wasn't hunting for **others**, Likita..." Despite his confession, Likita kept the plate right where it was. "That necklace is a clear sign of a tribal affiliation...were you actually looking to feed only yourself with that bear?"

"I would have shared it with the rest of my tribe, certainly, but...I'm just not that much of a part of it."

"That's their own loss, then," Likita said. "You seem a very kind and resourceful hunter, and if you're feeling able, I'm sure you'd be welcome to hunt alongside my tribe, in the days to come."

The implication wasn't lost on Jon. "Does that mean you've conferred with your tribe?" he asked, the hefty rudder of his tail starting to brush the dirt with excitement.

"It does..."

"And what did they say?"

"As just an ordinary outsider, you'd be forced to leave when you were healthy enough...but as my chosen servant, you'd be welcome to stay as long as you like."

"W-wait...wait a second. You told them I was your **servant**?"

Likita giggled. "Not yet, I didn't, though I won't deny I was giving it some thought. It would be a shame to let such a handsome animal as yourself wander away without getting proper use out of you."

Jon gulped. He tried to hide his nerves, but there was no hiding the lustful intentions behind the mischievous amber of Likita's eyes. It coated her very actions with an air of sexuality, to the point that when she grabbed a small, perfectly filleted slice of fish and lifted it toward his muzzle, he worried that she might notice his cock starting to jump up and poke the underside of the plate.

"D-do...do you mean like...helping you out around the tent, and taking care of chores?"

"If you don't mind doing such tasks, I'd happily ask for some assistance," Likita replied, "Though that wasn't *exactly* what I had in mind. You're sweet, and perhaps a little innocent, Jon, but you're **not** naive...I can see that in your eyes..."

Jon opened his maw slowly and took the piece of fish in, chewing it as quietly and politely as he could. If he didn't know any better, he'd think that Likita was infatuated with him; his every action seemed to draw a giggle or a lewd glance from the wolffess. As if he needed confirmation, he got an eyeful of it as Likita set the plate down upon the dirt and looked into his lap, able to see the way that his member jumped up in delight at her attention. "My goodness...you **must** be feeling better! I've heard of morning wood before, but I thought that happened while you were still asleep!"

"It usually does!" Jon tried to suggest, but Likita was gazing over his flesh with all of the hunger that he felt for his own breakfast. The long, flat muscle that was her canine tongue slipped forth and slid across her lips, wetting them with just a faint glisten of saliva as she drew closer to his manhood, but never quite came so close as to touch it. For the moment, this would only be a visual feast for Likita, but while she had Jon in such a compromised position, she wasn't going to let him off the hook so easily. "It...just...y'know..."

"No, I **don't** know, Jon...care to elaborate about this impressive display?" she asked him, putting him right under the spotlight. "It sure is awfully stiff, and I haven't so much as put a paw on it yet!"

Likita inched closer and closer, but her pace was that of a snail, and Jon wasn't sure if she was actually getting any closer to him, or if this was just her version

of foreplay. The look in her eyes alone, giving the impression that his cock was the only thing in the world that she could see, was more than enough to draw a small bead of precum from the very tip, and with an equally slow gait, it drooled down the underside of his shaft, aided by the pulsing of his flesh as blood rushed to his groin. "That...that **look**," Jon finally spoke, "I've never been given that look by a woman before..."

"The female otters don't know what they're missing, then. I can't imagine they would pass so easily on a slim, smooth body like yours, with quite an impressive little rod to boot." Likita took a moment to glance back up into Jon's deep, gray eyes, knowing that she had him on a string; she could tug him around and do anything she wanted with him in an instant...but it was early in the morning, and as far as she was concerned, they had a whole day ahead to tease and play with each other, so long as Jon was willing. "And fangs like those could make any of my other suitors jealous...not to mention that big, **thick** tail...I can only imagine how fast you can swim when it's wiggling back and forth..."

Jon was nearly kicking up dust with the sway of his tail, but Likita didn't seem to mind, even as the immaculate coat of her white fur became faintly tainted with a dusty coat of tan. "Y-you actually **like** my odd features?" Jon questioned, his voice filled with a legitimate wonder. In his own tribe, he'd been treated as an outcast since birth because of his unusual appearance and unique features, and yet, here was a goddess of a woman, praising every single thing about him that he once regarded as a flaw.

"Just because a wolf lives in a pack doesn't mean she can't appreciate the ones who stand out from the crowd. That just makes you a special target for me, Jon...I'm sure the other ladies in our village would be green in the face to see me parading you around."

Being so obsessed with the string of compliments, Jon's usually sensitive ears managed to ignore the bit about other suitors, but it started to creep back into his mind when she mentioned displaying him to other women. "Just what kind of servitude do you plan to put me in, Likita?"

"If you accept, whatever kind I want..."

There was no hesitation in her response, and her voice was confident and unwavering. Her lips were no longer turned in a kindly smile, but a defiant smirk, one that simply **dared** him to try and speak out against her idea.

Jon was lost for words, and he knew that he couldn't resist Likita, or her wiles. It was only a matter of **how** he would concede to her, and as his lower lip hung open, he half expected her to lean in and steal a kiss.

She never did. She left him waiting, more than happy to savor the visual morsel that he was and lean over his body, ever-threatening to go after his flesh or taste

his member. She was forcing him to answer her, though the meaning behind her move wasn't purely sexual. Jon, of course, never could have guessed that.

He could only find the courage to muster up a response that Likita might have guessed. "C-can...can I have a little time to think about it?"

The same defiant smirk was turning to a devious grin, but it quickly softened back into a warm, welcoming smile once again. It made the moment that much more shocking for Jon when Likita finally leaned over and pressed the tiniest of kisses upon the very tip of his member, allowing the string of his precum to follow her muzzle back up as she slowly stood up from his resting form. It wasn't until her tongue broke through again and licked her lips clean, sampling the delicious, slick fluid that the strand was finally broken, and just from that feather soft touch, Jon worried he might end up making a mess of the place.

"I'll give you until the end of the day to think it over," Likita offered. "For the moment, if you're feeling up to it, you should pick up that plate and come for a walk with me. I'd love to show you the rest of the village."

If Likita was anything, she was diverse, and she could change the pace of a moment or a conversation on a pinpoint. Jon was still overly conscious of the way that his cock throbbed between his legs, and though Likita did occasionally cast a glance upon it, she was all business in mere seconds. She stood by the entrance to the tent and waited, keeping a close eye on Jon and making sure that he didn't need any help standing up to his footpaws.

After dealing with a painful wound that nearly crippled him for life, Jon was actually shocked at the ease with which his legs sprung to life, and the muscular base of his tail pressed against the dirt, aiding in his ascent. He leaned back on one of his paws and pressed up with it, until he could kick a leg under his rump, and finally, the footpaw there pressed firmly into the dirt, and with just a slight wobble, he stood upright. The tight, cloth bandages that were wrapped around his chest and stomach refused to budge, and Jon was relieved to see that no blood managed to seep through them.

"Glad to see that you're feeling more like your old self, Jon. If you're in any sort of pain, just let me know...I'll be sure to come up with something to aid you."

It wasn't until he was actually up and walking around the tent that Jon noticed a myriad of different herbs, salves and potions lining the little bit of furniture that Likita kept in her tent. Her apparel, being little more than a tank top and skirt, made both of leather hides, didn't hint at her having any greater purpose to the tribe, but having such a deep wound heal so rapidly made it clear that she had abilities that she wasn't speaking of.

"Likita...two things before we go."

The wolfess paused, still holding the front flap of the tent open. "Of course, Jon.

What is it?"

"Well, for starters, what exactly do you do in this village?"

Jon simply wanted confirmation of his suspicions. "I'm a medicine woman and a healer. I'm beginning to wonder if it was truly luck, or fate that allowed me to stumble upon you in your time of need. No one else in the village could have possibly saved you," Likita admitted, and in turn, confirmed everything that Jon suspected. "What else did you need?"

This time, Jon glanced bashfully at the ground. "A-are you *sure* I can't have my loincloth back?"

Sticking out straight and still pulsing, Jon was hard as a rock, and his body was determined to stay that way. Likita couldn't help chuckling at his predicament, even if she was almost entirely the source of it. "Just focus on our walk around the village, Jon. I'm sure no one is going to complain about getting an eyeful of **that**."

Jon couldn't help groaning a little bit, and the only real distraction from his burgeoning erection was the fact that his stomach was starting to rumble again. Going so long without food had actually ruined his appetite, and now that he'd eaten just a tiny piece of fish, his eyes turned to the rest of the plate. He made sure to pick it up and carry it with him as Likita escorted him out of the tent, and into the painfully bright sun of Nadurra Valley.

"You may want to shield your eyes a little bit," Likita cautioned, though her words came a moment too late. It was only by pure luck that Jon didn't spill his plate of fish, and his legs froze in place as the sun rained down upon him with a golden energy that was invigorating to his flesh and fur, but simply unpleasant to his eyes. "Spending the last few days in my tent has probably made the sun a little too harsh for you to handle."

"No kidding...by the gods, that's **bright!**" Jon complained, holding the plate in one paw and shielding his eyes from the sun with the other. "I'll definitely need a minute to adjust to this..."

"You should try to start waking up before the sunrise, like I do," Likita suggested. "If you wake up with the sun, it is far more kind to you..."

Likita's explanation felt purely tribal. "And how do you figure that?" Jon questioned, never having been the biggest fan of the essential star, even when he was a younger boy in his tribe.

"Because you have done it a service and respected it," Likita explained. "This planet, all things upon her, and all things around her, are gifts to us...and if we neglect them or treat them poorly, they have no qualms in returning the favor." Jon wasn't the type to buy into all of the spiritual elements that he'd been raised with in his own tribe, and Likita's explanation didn't really help his cause in

believing. He was sure that it was just the physical act of his eyes adjusting to the light, but the more he thought about her words, the more he realized that the mornings he woke up a bit earlier, the easier it was for his eyes to adjust to that sunlight.

Whether it was because of her belief, or in spite of it, Likita was quite the intelligent woman.

"I'll make a note of that," Jon acknowledged, as he started to lower his paw. Now that everything wasn't a blinding shade of gold, he could see the village wasn't quite what he expected: almost every structure in the village was a tent, and the area it took up couldn't have been more than a couple square miles. On a day as clear as the one they had, Jon could literally see almost the entire village, and in the middle of it was a large, wide clearing, dug out and made by the White Wolves themselves. Only grass and dirt was upon it at this time of day, but there were already other canines starting to gather near it, carrying with them trinkets, food, herbs and the like.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Jon," Likita said, and she left it at that as she brushed his arm just slightly, urging him to follow her. "We have a very simple village here, and we live, for the most part, a very simple life...this large clearing is where people can freely set up shops every day," she told him, walking as she talked, and pointing to the unnatural clearing. "And on all sides of the clearing, people take up residence in these tents. The richest of us have wooden shelters, but those are a little deeper into the woods, and often are covered with ferns and greenery to keep them hidden from outsiders. We've had issues in the past with a couple of our guests becoming greedy for the wealth of others."

"And how do you punish those greedy people?" Jon wondered aloud, seeing nothing that resembled a prison.

"We banish them. We have no other place to put them, and we want them to know for a fact that they aren't welcome here anymore. If they actually attempt to steal something, they are branded permanently, and then banished for life...to return once you've been branded ends in your certain death, so make sure that the only greed you feel comes from your stomach."

Hunger overwhelmed Jon to the point that he hardly realized he'd nearly finished his plate, and despite the morbid warning Likita gave only moments earlier, she still managed a giggle when she saw his reaction of surprise.

"Don't worry. You've been unconscious for days and I haven't been able to feed you in that time. We'll get you properly fed and have you as good as new in no time," Likita offered. "I'm sure there will be rich and flavorful delicacies in the market today that you've never so much as heard of."

"Sounds wonderful to me," Jon said, his lips curling up into a genuine smile for

the first time since he'd arrived in the village.

Likita kept her pace and walked Jon out toward the edge of all the tents. Sensitive, keen ears upon Jon's head could hear the tranquil rush of water running casually along the bed of a creek, and as they drew closer, he was stunned to see just how crystal clear the water was. "This is the same creek that I caught your fish from. We're low in the valley, but we've created a dam just north of this point from cut limestone...it purifies the water as it passes through, giving a source of both fresh drinking water, and healthy fish that are safe to eat...further down the river, we've dug out and created a small pond so that people may bathe when necessary."

"Only when necessary?"

"Some bathe a little more often than others. I like to take a bath at least every other day," Likita admitted. As a creature who naturally spent so much time in water, Jon was often clean by nature, but despite her supposed pattern, Likita had a scent about her that could only be described as natural and feminine, as though the earth herself blessed her with a warm, welcoming aroma. After his days spent unconscious, Jon was sure that he smelled *awful* at the moment.

"I suppose I should make my way down there pretty soon," Jon murmured. "I should thank you for putting up with my stink for the past few days."

Snickering, Likita gave his shoulder a gentle nudge. "You smell fine...it's not like you can work up a sweat while you're sleeping," she pointed out, though she had to remember the rules of her tribe. "I'm afraid you can't head to the bath without me, though. For the safety of our village from nearby tribes, outsiders can only attend the bath when someone from the tribe is with them."

Just like that, Likita was back on the teasing end of things, and Jon had no way to avoid it. "I don't suppose I could trouble you to make a trip down there tonight?"

"I already had a bath this morning. I certainly don't want to abuse my privilege," Likita mentioned, "But at the same time, you did make a nice little mess of my fur in the tent...and you didn't even get to *touch* me! Perhaps I'll make my way back down there this evening and have you repay me for the kindness I've shown you."

A quick wink before Jon could reply assured him that Likita did what she did out of the kindness of her heart. She truly didn't expect anything out of Jon, and as long as he returned home happy and healthy, she'd be able to rest easy. "I've been told I'm a natural in the water...I'm sure I can be of some use in a bath."

This time, it was Likita who felt her cheeks flushing just the tiniest bit. "We can put that to the test later on...for now, I think we'd better get some more food in your stomach. I can hear it rumbling all the way up here!"

Gurgling with such a force that the slim, toned muscles of his abdomen began to tense, Jon couldn't have hoped to ignore his hunger, if not for the delightful company he was keeping. She was more in tune with his own needs than he was, and already, Jon was losing count of how many times he felt thankful for her presence.

Night was falling fast, the painful light of the sun was fading, and Jon was only just starting to realize how great his exhaustion really was.

The process of replacing all of the blood in his body meant that Jon's skeletal system was working overdrive, as bone marrow was being sapped on a regular basis, and he was only just starting to get back to normal. He'd engorged himself on delicious food, some of which he really never had even heard of, and Likita shared a meal with him in the privacy of her tent. Jon was lucky enough that no one made a comment about his third leg, but there were quite a few glances cast between his legs by both men and women alike. It seemed that the White Wolves had a truly diverse community, and it didn't much surprise Jon to see gray wolves, pumas, raccoons and even red pandas among the denizens of the village. What did surprise him was how quickly he fell asleep after his meal...he didn't even realize that he'd passed back out until he felt the cool air of a nighttime breeze caressing over the outside of his thigh, begging him to come back to consciousness.

"Mnnnr... N-no more...food...too full..."

The sleepy murmurings were lost to the wind, as there was no one in the tent that could have heard them. A stronger breeze blew through the tent and finally brought Jon back to real consciousness, despite his being slumped against the edge of the small cot in the corner of the tent that Likita called a bed.

Somehow, she'd managed to sneak out of the tent that evening without waking him, and with a quick spin of his head, he could see that she left no trace of herself. She didn't take anything with her, wherever she went, and it was only then that Jon remembered his offer of service to her, earlier that day.

"Oooh...oh, **shit!** I was supposed to help bathe her this evening...I hope I'm not too late!" he exclaimed, only remembering halfway through his statement to keep his voice down. There was a wide enough distance between the tents of the village to keep quiet conversations private, but too loud of a yell would make Jon a terrible guest and neighbor. He bit down on his tongue to keep himself quiet and shot right up to his footpaws, shocked with the kind of vitality he felt in his muscles.

It had taken almost four days in total, but Likita nursed Jon back to near his full health, and he simply couldn't imagine leaving her unpaid for that.

Leaving his loincloth behind, Jon stole into the darkness of the night, guided only by the ethereal, silvery light of the moon overhead. Having such a wide

clearing in the center of the village and no clouds to obstruct the moon, the night air was almost as bright as the day, and Jon was captivated and entranced by the heavenly glow that rained down upon the field. It actually slowed his pace and toyed with his mind as he made his way across the clearing, trying to remember how far the creek was. He didn't want to step in the water at a place where it was supposed to be pure, but the moonlight reflecting off of the babbling creek was like a field of diamonds: impossible to miss, and beautiful to the point of sorrow. Jon shook his head. He could easily watch the liquid diamonds spilling over small rocks and a creek bed all night if he allowed his mind to wander, but even from the higher point at the creek, he thought he could see the moon reflected against the surface of the pond down below, and he quickly moved to the right. An experienced hunter, it was easy for him to navigate through the thickets of green overgrowth and tall, powerful tree trunks that lined the path down to the bathing pond, but his lack of experience with women left him completely speechless when he poked through the last thickets of ferns.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of Likita in the buff. Her fur was soaked through and matted down, making the delicate pink flesh of her nipples stand out proudly from her freshly cleaned coat. The long, gorgeous tresses of white headfur that she normally kept in a ponytail behind her were let loose and free, spilling down over her back like the cascades of a roaring waterfall. Her back was arched, lifting her bosom up toward the sky, and she was only so deep in the water that he could just see the slack of her tail, sitting over the curve of her rump. The rest of the treasure that was her body was covered by the accursed water, but the sight alone was so great, Jon couldn't help taking in a gasping breath.

It was a fatal mistake, as Likita was snapped out of the peaceful tranquility of her moment. Her ears flickered, and her eyes immediately turned to see the otter who might yet be her servant, and an offended glare quickly relaxed into a welcoming, kindly smile.

"I was beginning to worry that you ate yourself into a coma, Jon. I'm glad to see that I was wrong..."

There was no power on Earth that could help Jon to find his voice. Even though he'd been discovered, he still stood behind the trunk of a tree for the most part, poking only his head and part of his torso out from behind it. "..."

"It would seem you didn't quite listen to me this afternoon, however. Didn't I tell you that you weren't allowed to come here without one of us?"

Having to defend himself in the eyes of such a beauty was cause enough for Jon to whip his vocal chords into shape. "B-but...you're here, aren't you?"

"Yes, but I didn't **escort** you here. I just happened to be here, and lucky for you,

I'm alone. The others might not be so generous with their punishment if they caught you in the act."

"Punishment?!" Jon cried out, perhaps a bit too loudly.

He also didn't realize how far away from the village they really were, and no one else seemed to be awake to use the bathing pond. They could be as loud as they wanted, and that was exactly what Likita was planning on.

"Yes, punishment. You're an outsider to this village, and you directly disobeyed me...it's a minor transgression, but one that I can't overlook, all the same, and it just so happens I've finished washing myself, so I'll have to be a bit more creative with your discipline..."

"What...what are you gonna do to me?" Jon asked, fidgeting on his paws and damned glad that the tree was hiding it from her view.

He was still just a little bit slow on the uptake, even as Likita turned to face him in the water. The side profile of her body was amazing, but the full frontal view of her naked figure was downright *stunning*. Even if he was fearful for his life, Jon couldn't help the fact that his length was starting to grow again...and he wouldn't be able to hide it much longer, as Likita lifted a paw to the otter and crooked her pawtip, beckoning at him.

"Come on into the water, and I'll show you."

Likita wasn't at all surprised to see Jon's length starting to grow again as he slowly crept out from behind the tree. After all, she'd been teasing him throughout the day, and in her mind, subtlety was overrated.

Jon's gait was nervous and innocent, and his steps unsure as he walked down from the shore and dipped a footpaw into the water. It was cool, but after a day in the blazing sun, that same cool sensation was refreshing, and inviting enough for him to take another step closer. "I'm s-sorry, Likita..."

"Don't be sorry, Jon. Just learn from your mistakes," Likita warned him, as her legs began to spread apart just slightly. She took a step closer to the shore, and Jon stopped dead in his tracks. The water was just about at thigh-height, leaving no sensual part of them obscured, but the gently matted fur kept the finer details on Likita's body a bit harder to see. Her clit, despite being erect, was only just barely visible from the front...but when she turned away from him with a devilish grin and lifted her tail, exposing both her womanhood and her asshole in a single move, there were no secrets left to be had. "And enjoy your *punishment*."

Likita didn't have to spread her folds apart for Jon, despite how tight they were. There was just a slight pout in her labia, and the crystal clear water of the bathing pond dripped down from it, mimicking something much naughtier that would soon be doing the same.

With his lack of experience and a lump in his throat, however, Jon needed one more push...and Likita was ready to shove him right over the cliff.

"In case it wasn't clear...your punishment is to inspect my nether regions...and make sure that my bath was a success," she explained to him, looking back over her shoulder at him with a playful giggle. "**Orally**, of course...I better not feel any pawtips in there."

Jon knew that he wasn't in any real danger, the way that Likita was acting, but he still couldn't keep a tremor from running through his entire body as he stepped a little closer to Likita and knelt down in the water. Pulsing rapidly, his cock actually stood tall enough that even from a kneeling stance, the very tip still poked through the surface, giving Likita one more thing to feast her eyes on as nervous paws shook and trembled, coming to rest on Likita's thighs. Leaning forth and gulping one last time, Jon opened his muzzle and let his tongue creep out, past his maw, right up to the delightfully warm and perfectly moist flesh of Likita's cunt.

With just one long, slow brush of his wet, slick tongue, and just one taste of the sweet, earthy tang of her juices...Jon was **addicted**.

"Mnnn...that's nice, Jon, but that's n-not nearly deep enoooooooooooo-!" Likita was going to tease Jon one last time, but before she had the chance, Jon buried his tongue deep into her folds, his own slick muscle coursing through the webs of arousal that coated the inside of her moist treasure. "Oh, b-by the gods, Jon! What's gotten i-into you?!"

Paws quickly turned from nervous to eager as Jon gripped tightly upon Likita's thighs and held her body in place. It was as if he'd transferred his trembling into her body by mere touch, as he came to a still in the water, and now, Likita shook violently as the otter swirled his tongue along whatever surface he could touch. Inexperienced, but certainly not uneducated, Jon dipped the very tip of his tongue back down and swirled it around the buzzing nub of Likita's clit, nearly buckling her thighs with the subtle touch...but it was followed by a rapid, flicking and darting of the same over her slit. She immediately threw her paws down into the water and gripped the ground, knowing that her legs couldn't hope to support her weight with such a mind-blowing pleasure running through her body.

Like the canine she was, Likita began to pant rapidly in her excitement, and she couldn't help pushing her hips back into Jon's muzzle, trying to force his tongue deeper into her waiting folds. "And h-here I thought you were a sweet, *innocent* little otter...you're tonguing me like a pro, Jon!" she complimented his technique and only wished that she could reach back and use her paws to spread her slit even wider for him. Her quick push of the hips joined into a rhythm of jabs, and

her breasts, soft and natural, began to sway just slightly as her rear end bucked against Jon's maw.

Jon wasn't sure what it was that came over him. He didn't know how just one taste of a woman could change him so dramatically, but he didn't particularly care...he was enjoying himself too much to question it, and a small trickle of precum that leaked into the bathing waters was just visible to Likita's naked eye. She didn't want to stop his oral assault, but she simply couldn't have that kind of tasty treasure going to waste.

"I'm **sure** I'm clean now, Jon...but I don't want to s-stay that way..." Likita grunted, as she regrettably moved a step away from the otter. He was so entranced by her delicious juices that he licked the air for a moment before realizing that no more of them were collecting on his tongue. "Hehe...you r-really are cute, Jon...and if you're even half as skilled with t-that massive tool as you are your tongue...I'll need another bath, for sure."

Likita didn't need to spell things out quite so fully for Jon, this time. He might not yet be a dominant, alpha male, but Likita was glaring back at him with a grin and a lust in her eyes that a blind man could see. One paw was placed upon her rump, pulling to the side and spreading both her folds and her asshole for him, though she knew which one he would choose. She looked away to leave herself in fake suspense, but moaned and cried out in pure, authentic pleasure when she felt the tip of his manhood spreading her slit apart and pressing inside of her body. "Y-yes, Jon...that's it...don't hold back, and don't d-deny yourself!"

Unsure of what she meant, but also somewhat uncaring, Jon stood fully behind Likita and made himself comfortable. He rested his paws upon her hips and took a firm, but not painfully tight grip, and began to push forth with his hips, just as he'd seen the other otters doing to each other in his own tribe.

He didn't know if a female otter would be as tight as Likita. He also didn't at all **care**.

"B-but...what if I...?" Jon trailed off, knowing that he couldn't finish another word without gasping in delight. His own knees started to buckle slightly as he continued to press forth, until the whole of his length was swallowed up by the moist, welcoming warmth of Likita's womanhood.

His concern was part of the innocence that she loved, and even as she squealed with delight to feel a second thrust, she giggled, as well. "H-hehe...when you're r-ready, Jon, just...*gods, that's fucking good...* just p-pull it out...and coat my back w-with your seed..."

Jon knew his endurance was at a low point; inexperience and nearly being in a coma from a stomach wound would do that, but he had no idea how close he'd put Likita to the edge by eagerly tongue-fucking her folds. Now that he was

plowing into them proper, Likita pushed back and did her best to match his uneven, novice pace. Not knowing for sure when or how he was going to move kept Likita in suspense with each pass, and it gave her that much more ecstasy as the long, soft fur of her tail curled around Jon's back, encouraging him to stay in close to her until the very last second.

"Li-Likita...it's t-too much...I **can't take it!**"

Wanting to help her young otter along, Likita reached back with a paw and began working two of her pawtips vigorously at her clit, wanting to catch up to his level...and it didn't take much. A few quick, feverish swirls left her pawtips coated in a thin layer of her own liquid desire, and her clit responded in kind, as excessive pleasure began to rock her body, leaving her to tremble against her interspecies lover. "I want to **feel** it, Jon...l-let it out, baby! Cover me in your cum!"

Jon **almost** waited too long. He could feel the familiar buzzing in the pits of his stomach that he knew from his times experimenting as a teenager, but nothing in his life ever felt so amazing, and he couldn't dream up a sensation that would ever top the loving embrace of Likita's womanhood. With the deepest of regrets, he pulled free and used his paw to stroke himself, working the thick, drooling layer of her juices into his own shaft until his orgasm finally left him so wracked with pleasure that he couldn't help leaning over her rump and spraying his mess upon the both of them. Streaks of thick, creamy white cum landed in long strands on Likita's back, and her own climax began drooling down the insides of her thighs from the lewd sensation. Slumping over Likita in sexual and physical exhaustion, Jon could feel his cock squeezed between his own tummy and her back, and still, it continued to spurt his essence between them with *impressive* volume. Her back and his torso were soaked through in seconds, and the pair cried out to the light of the watching moon, having no shame left about the pleasure they shared.

"J-Jon...I'm..."

"Me too, Likita...I'm **cumming!**"

"Yes, y-yes! Do it! *Ooooooh, gods...* I'm cumming too, Jon! Nnngh...f-fuck yes!"

Likita couldn't have known how long Jon had gone without a climax, but it still shocked her system when she felt streaks of the mess spilling down over her rump and trailing down her thighs, coming dangerously close to spilling into her womanhood. She kept quiet about the single drop that trickled into the pucker of her ass, but the way her tongue hung out the side of her muzzle as she finished was a clear sign she enjoyed it.

The panting of a pair of wild animals was the only sound in the Nadurra Valley that night, once the splashing of their rigorous mating finally settled. It took all

of the effort that he had left, but Jon managed to stand upright, taking with him a large portion of the mess he left on Likita, even as it started to sink into the flesh of her back. "I...I don't...don't know what to say..."

"Most men say 'thanks,' or, 'that was nice,'" Likita teased, immediately back to her old, playful self once she caught her breath. "Tell me honestly, Jon...was that your virgin climax?"

It was a meek, but obvious nod that came in response.

"Then...thank you for the honor, Jon. I'll carry the title of being your first with me long after I'm no more than a spirit."

Jon simply wasn't used to being treated so nicely. His cheeks were burning with bashfulness, and the soft kiss that he felt upon one of his tusks only added fuel to the fire...but there was indeed a comfort behind it, one that he couldn't help clinging to.

"Nyah! Hehe...a little affectionate, aren't we!" Likita teased, as she wrapped her arms around Jon's lower back. "Does that mean you'll be accepting my offer of servitude?"

Jon nestled into the pillow soft, lukewarm embrace of Likita's breasts and let out a rumble of content. "Call it whatever you want, Likita...but I'm **never** leaving this place."

I'm never leaving this place...

They were bold, heavy words that carried with them a certain sense of purpose. They were even words of betrayal, in a sense, to prove that Jon would never return to his home.

No matter how hard he tried, or how many days went by, he couldn't shake it from his own mind that he'd said something so treasonous.

"Your wounds are healing up wonderfully, Jon. In a couple more days, you'll have nothing more than a nasty looking scar there!"

Of course, it was easy for him to lose focus in the whirlwind of events that brought him to such a decision. He was still lost in thought about the fact that only a couple weeks beforehand, he'd fallen unconscious, an open victim to the harsh elements of the world around him, and it was only because of the kindness of a stranger, one that he once thought was his enemy, that he was graced with a continued life.

That gorgeous stranger, the ever-smiling Likita, had allowed his residency in her camp to continue, even after Jon was back to full health. His wound still appeared a bit ghastly, but it was no longer painful, and thanks to her practice in the ways of medicine, Likita made sure that it would never become infected. She had, in turn, infected him with a small nip of romance, and their nightly bathing routine was **quite** far from an activity of cleaning. They spent plenty of time in the water together, both for the way that Likita enjoyed the feel of it upon her nude figure, and the way that Jon felt most at home when he was splashing around in the water.

"I know you keep telling me that I'm embarrassing you, but I really can't thank you enough, Likita."

"I deserve no thanks for doing what I should have done."

Jon slowly sat up out of his cot and stood upright in the tent so that he could offer a quick, friendly peck upon the pristine, white fur of her cheek. "I disagree. I truly do owe you my life..."

"I...I'd been meaning to ask you about that, Jon. About your life."

Likita's tone was so solemn that Jon couldn't help a small frown when he slowly pulled back from her cheek. "Wh...what about it, exactly? I haven't offended someone in the village, have I?"

"N-no, not at all! The others, though...they are starting to wonder what it is you'll be doing around here. As I explained before, we have very little currency, and

shopping is mostly a novelty, but everyone in the village has some sort of a skill that they share with everyone else..."

"I could be a hunter, like I was in my old tribe-

"You could," Likita cut him off, but before she finished her reply, her eyes began to glint over with a thin layer of concern that Jon couldn't ignore. "But I don't know that I could live with the thought of sending you out to do something that nearly got you **killed** once before. I'm sorry...I know it's very selfish of me to ask you to set aside your true nature this way."

"If it's out of concern for my life, it isn't selfish," Jon assured her, "Although, I'm not sure what other way I could possibly be of help to the village, otherwise."

"You could always become my apprentice, Jon. I'd love to have another set of paws to help me out around the tent...and not just in the dark of the night."

Jon's frown began to grow as he slowly sat back down on the edge of his cot. Likita flattened her ears, looking him over with yet another veil of concern, this time much greater than before. "I'm afraid I don't qualify...by the laws of my own people."

"You're not governed by your own people here, Jon. You're in a place where you're free to make your own decisions."

"I wish it were as simple as that," Jon admitted. An angry scowl began to spread across his muzzle as he cast his eyes to the dirt floor of the tent, not wanting Likita to think that his frustrations were with her. "Our people...we take medicine very seriously, and in my youth, I was sure that I could be one of the most skillful doctors that our tribes had ever known. I wanted to help people...but my lineage didn't allow for such a thing. I was born and bred to be a hunter, instead."

"It isn't too late to change your fate, then."

"Yes, it is. In our tribe, when you've sworn yourself to a position, you've sworn it for life. It's a bit old fashioned, and perhaps even silly, but it's still a law that we live by. It helps to keep family lines pure...it keeps the peaceful and compassionate people from breeding with those who would happily kill for the smallest form of currency..."

Likita covered the end of her muzzle to fight back a quiet gasp. "Th-that's terrible, Jon..."

"Terrible, but effective. It means that those of us who are bred to hunt have no remorse about killing the things that we do, be it our prey, or those who are foolish enough to try and take it...and on the flip side, or doctors and medicine women are the most compassionate and forgiving people you could ever know, who would heal anyone or anything that came to them with a wound. The two are not meant to interlink or intermarry, and yet, I couldn't keep myself from looking back and wondering. I won't deny that it's got a lot to do with why I find

you so captivating, Likita."

In truth, though Likita knew Jon wasn't foolish or naive, she had no idea that he contained such a mental depth, or such a checkered past. "That's very flattering of you to say, Jon, and I really do mean it when I tell you that you can be whatever you want to be in this village. You're not sworn by your old laws, so long as you live here."

"It's not just about them. It's about me."

"So...your mind is set on becoming a hunter with our tribe, then?"

Jon nodded silently.

"You must have been truly skilled at it to take down the beast that you did singlehandedly. I won't deny that it weighs heavily on my heart, Jon, but if that is what you feel inclined to do, I have no right, and no power to stop you."

"Thank you for understanding, Likita."

"However..."

"Hm?"

"To be a hunter among wolves, you must prove yourself yet again by undergoing whatever initiation our hunters deem necessary for you. I have no idea what form the test will take, or when it will occur...only that it will take place some time after you've informed our chieftains of your decision. It could even happen the moment you stepped outside their tents."

"Will you take me to see them, Likita?" Jon asked, trying to pretend that the lump he'd gulped down his throat was just a dry spot, and not the nerves he truly felt.

"I can take you there," she replied, "But I **can't** enter with you. What goes on inside the tent is between you and the chieftains, and I may not interfere."

Jon could tell just how serious the moment was, able to see a stern expression across Likita's muzzle that he'd never seen upon it before, even when she'd first taken him in. "I understand, Likita. Thank you."

"I have just one request left for you, Jon, as we may not see each other very much anymore after your initiation is complete."

"Anything, Likita. **Anything.**"

"Please, when your meeting this evening is complete...come and join me in the lake for one last bath?"

"And you're certain this is your wish? You truly won't have things any other way?"

The inside of the tent of chieftains was certainly larger than the others in the village, but no more complex. Animal hides propped up on large tree branches with small vents cut into them so that the smoke of their fires could pour out into the night sky, and small trinkets sitting on wooden benches strewn about in the dirt were the only decorations, just like the tent that Likita inhabited.

Somehow, though, it still felt more imposing for Jon to be standing in such a place, just knowing that there were three people sitting before him, judging his every word for its merit.

"This is the only skill I was bred to have. I'm sorry that I can't offer more to repay the kindness your village has shown me."

"We are all able to change," the chieftain in the middle explained, sitting at the center of the tent to impose his seniority. "I truly see in you that if you continue down this path, the spirits of war and chaos will never leave your side. This may be the last chance you ever have to leave them behind and lead a peaceful life, Jon."

"Those spirits were born within me," Jon muttered, "And they still reside in the depths of my soul today. It isn't enough to simply turn away from them..."

"If you turn away from the sun, it no longer blinds you, even if it is still there."

"I...I don't understand."

"There are things in this life that are within and without us that we cannot escape: the stars stay ever in the sky, the sun shines on every day, and the spirits in the air pass through us as though we were blades of grass...but if we turn away from them, we can ignore them, for a time. You can still turn away, Jon. You can leave that part of your heritage in the past, turn away from it, and start again, a new person."

Jon glanced down at his paws and lowered his tail, feeling that there was no right answer that he could give. "I'm sorry, Chieftain. I truly believe this is what I was born to do."

"Then...we accept your skills, Jon. Your initiation will take place soon enough, and you will be baptized into our tribe however the hunters see fit. I advise you to be ready at all times, young otter...and do **not** allow chaos to consume you."

Each of the three chieftains lowered their heads and stared at the ground, and Jon quickly caught on that it was time for him to leave. He gave a small bow of

respect, as was customary in his own tribe, and backed out of the tent, into the moonlit commons of the village.

Despite how heavy the conversation was only moments ago, the way that the shimmering moon bathed the valley below always made Jon feel light as a feather, as if the light around him were actually blessed water from the lunar orb, allowing him to float and drift above the grass without a care in the world. His spirit was at peace, at least for the moment, and his body was quite the opposite, as his manhood already began to tremble under his tiny loincloth, knowing what awaited him at the lake.

Deft paws kicked through loose blades of grass and careless dirt as Jon quickly jogged down a path that he'd become familiar with. He knew every single root that was sticking out of the ground, every place where the dirt wasn't quite level, and every tree branch that he had to duck under or weave around to make it to the water unscathed.

When he arrived, however, Likita wasn't her usual, smiling self. She was still standing nude, bathing in both the cool waters of the lake and the enchanting glow of the moonlight, but when her ears flickered to the sound of his presence, she turned her head to gaze at him, with something in her eyes akin to disapproval.

"Likita..."

"So you wouldn't change your mind, would you, Jon?"

"H-how...how could you possibly know that?"

"Every day that I've spent with you, as I've healed your wounds, I've seen the chaotic nature of a purebred hunter coming back to life in you. You had a peacefulness about you when you weren't concerned with hunting...one that I was sure had to be a part of you. Perhaps it's my mistake. It must have been the painkillers."

"No, Likita! That...that was all **me**! I promise you, that's who I am!"

"If you're so pure of heart...if you're so certain that you want to help people and be a good person yourself...why would you return to such a barbaric trade, when you had the chance to be something else?"

It was a loaded question, one that Jon's mind couldn't handle, especially in the face of such pure, unbridled beauty. "I...I don't..."

"If you truly don't know, then your mind is wrapped in a chaos that my medicine can't touch, Jon. I'm sorry that you made your decision...I can only pray that in time, it won't tear us apart," Likita said in a low, drawn lament. She slowly turned her body to face Jon, and though he'd lost track of it, her right arm was crossed under her breasts, holding the left one at the elbow...as her left paw gently rubbed about her standing clitoris and worked her own natural moisture

into it. "My mind is filled with fear for you, and my heart, perhaps...perhaps something that I would call *love*... and while you've angered me with your choice, you've aroused me with your presence, as you always do..."

Jon felt as though he were at a crossroads when Likita finally turned to fully face him. He could easily see the way that her nipples stood erect under the soft, plush fur that just managed to surround them. He could, even from a distance, see the trickling flow of her own natural arousal spilling over her pawtips and down the insides of her thighs, and yet, her words seemed to imply that she didn't want him to come any closer.

"We may not have much time. This isn't a moment for indecision, Jon. It's perhaps your last chance to share the love with me that I've seen in your eyes, and felt in your touch."

That kind of onus, however, he **had** to answer to. Trying not to appear hasty, Jon rushed his way into the water as quickly as he could walk, uncaring of the loud, splashing ripples that soaked him up to his thighs and broke the glassy surface of the lake. He wasn't at all worried with the way that the water kicked up around him as he halted to a stop in front of Likita when her arms came to wrap around him.

He was only worried with enjoying perhaps his last night with the first woman to show him such an affection. It wasn't by choice that she'd be leaving him, but by the duties he would soon carry, and as he stood still in her arms, he already came to regret the thought. It might not have been too late to go back to the chieftains and beg them to understand the confusion in his mind, but that same confusion only grew worse as Likita slipped her paws down the small of his lower back, and traced two delicate pawtips along the underside of his long, thick tail.

"I remember the way you reacted when I first touched you here, Jon. Most males reject such an advance...but you *welcome* it. I never quite understood it...but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate it."

Likita's paws were so gentle and skillful that it was rare for Jon to think of her as anything but sweet and innocent. Her pawtips proved the opposite to have a strong argument, however, as they pressed into Jon's waiting asshole and began to penetrate it, using nothing but her own liquid arousal as a lubrication for the act. Jon stiffened up against Likita's other arm, still holding him upright as her slicked digits began to pass into the tight grip of his inner muscles, prompting his member to grow against her inner thigh.

"That's it, baby...don't you resist even a moment of this. If it's the last chance we get, I want us to leave everything out there...leave our inhibitions to the wayside and do whatever comes to mind, no matter how depraved..."

The words of the wolffess alone would have been enough to leave Jon throbbing

between her legs, but the added touch of her pawtips stroking around and exploring inside his anus had the tip of his member dripping precum into the water in slow, oozing drops. "F-fuck...Likita, please...please don't-

"Don't what, Jon?"

"Don't s-stop," Jon managed to finish his words, just before biting down on his lower lip. He pressed his hips down into the open paw of the pristine, white wolffess and tried to force her pawtips that much further into his body, and she happily obliged, letting each one sink inside up to the second knuckle. Jon was full, but not so much that he could handle a little more abuse.

Just when the moment was to become truly heavenly, and Likita was lowering her hips into the very head of his cock, letting the juices upon it coat the pouting lips of her labia...all hell broke loose for the ill-fated couple.

"It's no wonder this guy wouldn't leave the tribe! He was getting with the **one** female no one had ever touched before!"

The small ripples in the water that destroyed the glassy tranquility of the lake paled in comparison to the thundering stomps of the wolven hunters on the shore. Jon and Likita had been so indulged in each other that neither one of them were able to hear the troop coming, and now, caught in the throes of passion, they were utterly defenseless.

"Don't stop on our behalf," the leader of the hunters told them, as he stepped forth from the bunch. "I've always wondered what it would look like to see Likita getting *destroyed* in this lake."

"You speak of her as if she's a piece of meat," Jon shot back, glaring over his shoulder at the hunters. "She isn't something as simple as that, much less an object to be spoken about like food..."

"To hunters," the leader began to explain, "Everything is something to be consumed. That's in our nature. It's in **your** nature...and if you try to deny that part of yourself, you'll be entirely worthless to us."

"I would sooner let Likita consume me than the other way around. I wouldn't be worthy of such a feast."

"That's a bit more like it, rookie! Now you're actually talking about her like she's a meal!"

Jon gritted his teeth together, baring the large, unusual fangs that hung from his muzzle. "That isn't what I meant at all! A word can have more than one meaning, you imbecile!"

Upon the shore, two other wolves began to follow the leader into the water. The rest stayed and formed a perimeter around the lake, making sure that no one could interfere with what was clearly going to be Jon's initiation.

He was sure that he would have been ready for anything, but this seemed like nothing more than a bunch of monsters taking advantage of a wounded prey.

"You've got quite a mouth on you, otter...and a rather dangerous looking set of fangs. I'd say that you were fit to join our ranks on tenacity alone, but **I'm** the top dog around here, and no one barks that kind of disrespect at me and gets away with it. I had a feeling you wouldn't survive initiation..."

"What?" Jon asked, letting out a low, rumbling growl. "You gonna kill me? Drown me in the lake and feed my body to the wild beasts?"

"That would be far too easy, and not nearly satisfying enough," the leader replied, as he drew closer to the interspecies pair. Regretfully, Jon pulled his member away from Likita and turned to face the leader, but to his shock, it was Likita that stepped forward to defend him.

"Ulrus."

"Likita."

"This initiation is a farce and a disgrace...you're only using this opportunity to spy on my most private moments and confirm your suspicions about our village guest..."

"So you **are** bedding him on a nightly basis."

"Who I share my tent with is my business and my business alone...the same as

who I bathe with, and who I share my meals with. If your jealousy has clouded your vision so much, I truly weep for the future of our village."

"I weep for the future of it when peacekeepers like yourself think that they can talk back to someone with more confirmed kills than the rest of the hunters in the tribe put together...you've got some kinda balls, y'know, considering you're a chick."

"And since when has my gender been any sort of a hindrance on my ability to take of your wounds when you get too carried away with senseless bravado?"

Ulrus grunted, baring his fangs wide under the soft glow of the moonlight that bathed Likita with such ethereal beauty.

"You're going to have to put those skills to the test in a moment, Likita. The otter is coming with us. He needs to complete his initiation if he's ever going to be a **true** part of our village."

Likita was truly wise, and she knew full well that Jon would never return alive from that test, if he were to make his way to it.

"...Then I forbid him to go."

"He made the decision in front of the elders himself! You have no right to deny him his chance to join our ranks!"

Likita whirled around to face Jon, catching the otter, and herself, by surprise. She'd hoped to see the glazed look of passion in his eyes that was always so evident when they made love, and yet, all she came to see was the angry, tarnished hatred of a warrior in the middle of the hunt. Wishing that she could protect him, and already feeling a sense of regret that she didn't forbid his attempts to become a hunter, her ears folded back, as if she were the prey, instead of the predator.

Jon certainly wore the look a bit **too** well. "Listen, Jon. You don't have to sacrifice yourself like this. There's nothing you can do to prove yourself to Ulrus...if you follow them into the woods, they'll slaughter you the moment you're out of my sight!"

Before Jon could try to argue his point, Ulrus interjected. "That's not entirely true, Likita."

"What...?"

"Jon...you truly love Likita, don't you?"

Though Jon found it hard to speak to Ulrus without snarling, he managed to find a way through his fangs to create the words. "More than someone like you can appreciate."

"There's nothing to stop us right now from killing you, and if we were so inclined, killing her. We're professional hunters, every bit as much as you are...we can make the whole thing look like a lover's quarrel that simply got out

of hand. You have **no** chance to escaping this moment alive unless you comply." The most brazen of heroes would be beside themselves in trying to find a strategy out of the moment, and Jon was more levelheaded than most. Though it angered him to the point of blinding fury, he managed to keep his cool just enough to take one single step away from Likita. "You want me gone. I get it...if you trade her safety for my leaving, I'll be gone before the morning comes." Ulrus snickered and shook his head. "You're in no position to make demands, Jon. You've got no chip to bargain with...but we **do** want you gone. We just can't let you leave without having a little fun, first."

"I'm not bargaining with anything. I'm telling you that I won't leave without a guarantee of her safety. I'll happily die fighting before I see her slain."

"You've got quite a mouth on you, don't you?"

"And if you have a scrap of honor left about you, you'll agree to my terms."

"We wouldn't actually kill the best medicine woman in the entire region, and certainly not because she decided to have a fling with a slim, lithe prey like yourself. Stop being so melodramatic," Ulrus muttered, giving another brief, small shake of the head. "You have my word that she will be safe...but you will be gone long before the morning sun rises, and you won't leave without finishing."

"Finishing what?"

"We clearly caught the two of you in the middle of something," Ulrus explained, as a pair of the other wolven guards walked out into the water. Jon would normally have braced himself, but as per his agreement, he held still, knowing that they were coming for his arms. "We just wanted to make sure that you didn't leave the lady unsatisfied."

Likita twisted her face up in disgust, slightly regretful that the juices of her arousal were still trickling down her thighs from before. "Ulrus, don't you **dare!**"

"It was all going to be part of his initiation, anyway. You should feel honored that you get to be a part of it," Ulrus stated in faux respect. The guards took Jon by the arms and pushed his knees out, forcing him to fall down into the water with a haphazard splash. Several of the other hunters drew near, and Ulrus gripped Likita by the wrists, keeping her from lashing out at any of them as the lined up behind Jon, one by one. "We heard a rumor that the poor little otter likes certain things that other males aren't usually into. Why don't we see if the rumors are true, hm?"

Lowering his head shamefully, Jon knew exactly what was coming. Likita thrashed against the powerful grip of Ulrus as the first of several wolves knelt down behind Jon, coated their pawtips in a thick, healthy coating of saliva, and began to rub the very tips of their paws around the tight, exposed pucker of Jon's

anus. "Stop this madness at once, Ulrus!" Likita growled at him, knowing that she couldn't overpower him, but still fighting against his hold nonetheless.

"If you join in the fun, it'll all be over much sooner," Ulrus suggested, giving an ultimatum for the situation and leaving Likita with the chance to save her lover from the fate...but her humility wouldn't let her give in so easily. She was too proud to be defeated, and too shamed to engage in such a lewd act in front of all of the hunters of the village. Word would travel fast, and she'd be branded a whore and a slut by the commoners...such a fate wasn't befitting a medicine woman, and though it pained her, she could only wiggle against Ulrus and watch...

...Watch, as two wolves grabbed Jon's backside and spread it wide open, while a third buried his muzzle right under the thick, rudder tail of the otter and slurped his tongue back and forth over his asshole. As twisted and perverse as the moment was, Jon shuddered with a pleasure that his body wouldn't reject, feeling the long, flat, *slick* tongue of a male wolf, gliding over his backside. The small ring tightened up and tensed around the threat of penetration, and yet a fourth wolf came forward, rubbing his pawtips in the messy saliva before he began to prod at Jon's orifice.

Likita didn't want to enjoy what she was seeing. Being wrestled from the throes of passionate sex in the way that she had, her body was still sexually charged, but her mind knew better than to enjoy what she was seeing. It pained her to watch a man that she cared so deeply for in such a compromised position, and as a flush burned under the thin fur upon Jon's cheeks, he weakly moaned into the water, feeling a pair of long, thick canine members upon his forehead. Precum drooled down between his ears and over the bridge of his muzzle as the wolves humiliated him, and Likita, save for one option, was powerless to stop him.

"...If I do it...you'll release him?"

"You have my word," Ulrus confirmed, sounding entirely too calm for the display that was going on just feet away from him.

"Your word is worth less than dirt to me," Likita admitted, "But at the risk of dishonoring your entire lineage, I hope that it has some value left."

"So you'll do it?"

"...If...I must, Ulrus. I'll do it...for Jon."

"You hear that, otter? It sounds like the lady truly cares about you after all!"

Ulrus called out, and though his voice was little more than a taunt, Jon felt a true rising of warmth from the low, cold pits of his stomach. He was already realizing that their relationship could never be, and that he'd have to leave the village to save her life, but if she truly felt such a way about him, then it would all have been worth it, at least as long as it lasted. "Clear the way, boys...let's see just how

skillful Likita really is with that tongue of hers."

Ulrus finally released Likita, allowing her to escape his grasp mid-thrash so that she would fall into the water with an unceremonious crash. The water helped to cradle her fall, at least a little bit, but she still felt pain radiating from her paws and knees as she stayed low, crawling over to Jon, who was now open and waiting for her advances. "...I...I'm sorry, Jon...I'm so sorry it turned out this way..."

Jon refused to open his mouth to speak, for fear that one of the wolves might take advantage and stuff their thick, heated flesh into his open maw. Instead, he tried to glance back at Likita as she crawled around, coming to settle under the rudder of his tail. "Don't hold back, Jon...just let everything out. Release your frustrations into the calming waters of this pond...and when you're done, be gone from this place, **forever**."

No...that...that isn't fair, Jon thought, his mind still juxtaposed between the pain and suffering that he felt from having to leave Likita, and a rather immediate spike of pleasure as her pawtips came to rest on either side of his asshole. She gave it a quick, easy spread, and slipped her tongue forward, gliding it back and forth over the already slick, sticky pucker. Content to prove her skills to Jon one last time, she circled and swirled the very tip of her tongue around his flesh in a slow, teasing draw, while a third pawtip finally pressed and sunk in to his backside.

"I'm not into that myself, but I think any one of us would be lucky to have a tongue like that on us!" Ulrus commented, refusing to allow Likita to simply perform her act in silent shame. Instead, he made sure that each and every moment of it felt as depraved as it truly was, as the wolves continued to try and force their way into Jon's muzzle, spilling more precum over his face and his lips, all while Likita began to gently pump her pawtip and finger his tight, waiting asshole.

He'd already been close to reaching his peak when the act started, and though he was given a second wind by the arrival of such trouble, Jon knew that he couldn't hold out much longer, and in truth, it would only make things worse for him, and more importantly, Likita, if he tried to hold out any longer.

Able to feel those familiar chills creeping up into his groin and spreading through the slim muscles of his torso, Jon gasped, and the moment he did, his orgasmic moans were muffled by the thick, drooling cock of Ulrus, who had been waiting for just such an opportunity. He gave only one thrust, gagging Jon on the girth of his manhood and forcing him to drool around it while his inner muscles clamped down around Likita's pawtip and trapped it, milking and working around it while spurt after fresh, sticky spurt of his cum splashed down

into the glassy surface of the moonlit water, causing tiny ripples as each virile strand sunk to the bottom of the pond below.

"That's it, Jon..." Likita whispered rather calmly, pretending that there was no one around to ruin the moment for the pair, as they had. "Just let everything go...and please...don't hate me for this..."

I could never, Jon thought, feeling his cock pulse and throb against the air. With her spare paw, Likita reached forth and gripped the base, giving his member a few quick, gentle strokes to help the last of his oozing essence out of his body, knowing that he'd need a little extra encouragement to release the final few drops. Shuddering in her grasp and finding it hard to stay on all fours, Jon wished that he could just lean back into Likita one more time, but he knew that the hunters would never let him.

What did shock him, however, was the way that Ulrus so easily slid his cock back and out of Jon's muzzle, leaving it to rest on his nose and spill precum between his nostrils. "I **could** sit here and fuck your poor, pathetic throat until words would never escape your lips again," Ulrus claimed, coming off as the boast that he truly was, "But Likita is right...I can't dishonor my family line by betraying my word. We upheld our end of the bargain," he reminded them, as the wolves that had left Jon's face smeared with a sticky mess finally stood up and backed away. "Now it's about time that you keep up with **your** end."

It was a shocking relief to see Ulrus standing up and walking out of the water with his troops, but what it left behind was a blanket of despair, as Likita slowly climbed over Jon's back and allowed her nude form to rest against his. Her arms draped weakly around his shoulders and clasped around his neck, and for just a moment, Jon was sure that he heard her sobbing.

"Likita, please..."

"Don't. Don't you say a damned word," she said, fighting through quiet sobs as she did. "I warned you against making such a foolish decision...I gave you **every** chance to change your mind and do something better with your life, because I didn't want to see you become one of them!"

"I would n-

"I said not to talk," Likita reminded him. "Truly, I...I don't want to hear another word out of you, Jon. An apology now would be no better than treating the wounds of a dead man."

Blinded by his own ambitions to prove his self-worth once again, Jon had overlooked the person who saved him and gave him a chance to lead a new life with her, instead. As Likita rested against him, trying to fight back a slow, long series of sniffles, Jon could only rest on all fours, acting as a pillar of physical support for her, while his own eyes welled up with tears.

"You should go, Jon," Likita suggested, as she slowly climbed from the back of the otter. Standing next to him, she offered him a paw one last time, and without hesitation, he took it...and embraced Likita one last time, using the offered paw to bridge the gap. He truly feared she would have rejected the hold if he did it any other way, and that thought alone was painful enough to leave his tears flowing. "Don't...don't let them see you as you leave. I fear that they have no intentions of letting you live, all told."

Still holding that paw, Likita gave Jon's wrist a quick tug as he started to walk away, and he hesitated, before feeling something wrapping around his wrist. Blinking, he looked down to see a rather simple cord, with the symbol of a two paws and a beam of light coming from them upon a tiny piece of steel in the middle.

"I just wanted you to have this...I was going to give it to you when you became my assistant. I want you to wear it as a reminder that you don't have to follow destiny any more than you have to follow the stars," Likita explained, as she finally turned away from Jon and began to walk to the shore. "It's a reminder that you really are a good person. I saw the light shining through you when I first found you, Jon. Go capture it again..."

Jon wouldn't move. He **couldn't** move, until he finally saw the last flicker of Likita's tail before she disappeared into the line of trees around the pond. It was as if he were watching a ghost phasing through the walls of a small house when she finally did disappear, and he wiped the tears from his eyes, hoping that she might appear again.

She never did.

I'll be wanting that bracelet back some day, Jon...please don't disappoint me,

Likita thought to herself as she held her arm across her breasts with a renewed sense of shame. She scampered quickly back to her tent for fear of her own safety, while Jon stole away into the darkness of the night, staying as close as he could to the river that fed the pond...knowing that it would be his best chance to survive the evening.

There were only bits and pieces in the mind of Jon when he awoke to the blistering heat of the sun, lost once again, and worse, wounded once again. Darkness had been closing in on all sides. Each step he took, he could hear the panting of wolves chasing after him. The sensitive rounds of his ears picked up on the tiny, seemingly insignificant sound of drool spilling to the ground as they pursued, and despite knowing that they could easily have tracked him down, they never came.

Whether the claws that were ripping at his flesh were his imagination or perhaps some lesser beast, he couldn't be sure. He wasn't mortally wounded, as he'd been before. He was merely scratched up, perhaps even at the hands of small branches and rocks as he fell down to the dirt in his self-provoked exhaustion.

The fear, the panic, and the pain all paled in comparison to one other thing, however: **disappointment.**

"Why...why couldn't you just stand up to them, Likita?" Jon wondered to himself, thinking out loud and shaking his head as he tried to work the cobwebs out of his mind. The sleep was thick in the pits of his tear ducts, and after sleeping so soundly upon the ground with Likita, he had a terrible night of sleep on his own in the woods.

Despite his mission to stay close to the river, he was definitely a bit further away from it than he had been, and without a trail to follow back home, he couldn't be sure which way he should head to return to the village of the wolves. Worse still, he had no idea how to get back to his own village, and given the level of treason he'd committed by deserting it, he might be better off that way.

He didn't mind being lonely; he did have a bit of a problem with being alone, though.

"If I hurry, perhaps I can find a small area of salvage and set up a camp before night falls again," Jon muttered, his voice a low, angry grumble as he spoke to himself. It took only seconds of being awake for his frustrations to set in again, and his mind was lost to the miasma of his rage as he brushed the dirt from his torso and planted his footpaws upon the ground. The minor sting of the small wounds he'd collected barely registered to him behind the anger he felt, but the clarity that followed might have been even **worse.**

If I had just stayed, he thought, Likita would have been safe. I might have been beaten or killed, but...goodness only knows that she's likely suffered an even more terrible fate because of me.

"Becoming her apprentice was the best thing I ever could have done for myself...or for her," Jon rationalized. He closed his eyes and let out a heavy sigh, inspecting his own wounds with a delicate, skillful pawtip. None of them were deep enough to truly need treatment, and the trees all around him were overgrown with different vines of medicinal properties. In just a few weeks around Likita, he'd learned enough to diagnose his own wounds and figure out what was and wasn't safe to use to treat them. He plucked a leaf from one of the nearby trees and spat into it, before rubbing the leaf into a fine, green mess between his paws. It took on a thick, rigid texture as he applied it to one of the deeper marks upon his chest, and within seconds, the wound started to fill in, preventing infection from setting in first.

It was only the beginning of the day, and Jon was too aware of just how thankful he had to be for Likita's presence.

Getting back to her might prove an impossible task, and if Jon were unwise, he'd only be putting her at further risk, if she'd even survived the night. He had no way of knowing such, and though it felt cowardly, he was having trouble deciding if he should go back and try to help her, or simply go on his own way, assuming that the best had happened for her, rather than the worst outcome.

"I have to return someday. Just dunno when that day is ever going to be..."

Jon put the rest of the self-made salve to work on his bigger wounds, and once it was all used up, he wiped his paws the fur upon his thighs. He almost didn't want to admit that without Likita, he might have been filled with disease through his wounds in a short amount of time, but as he looked upon the bracelet that now adorned his right wrist, he realized what a fool he would have been to think so arrogantly.

"Wonder what it means..." he pondered, gazing over the bracelet as his footpaws, heavy with regret, finally started to move again. His ears could still pick up the faint, peaceful sound of trickling water going by, and he trekked his way to the right until he could see the clear, flowing liquid of a gentle river nearby. It was growing wider the further he went upstream, and just judging by the path he was taking, he was sure it was the same river that would ultimately lead him back to his own people, where he never felt he belonged in the first place.

He was beside himself, trying to think of which option would be best. He could easily follow the river back down to the pond where it gathered and wait for Likita to appear once again, knowing full well what kind of danger that would put her in, or he could follow the river back north to the lands of the otters.

I may never see her again...I don't know what kind of punishment I'll face for this desertion, but...at least she'll be safe, Jon convinced himself. *At least she won't ever have to see that evil in my eyes again.*

Jon still wasn't sure just what it was that Likita had seen coming out of him as she healed his wounds, and he couldn't imagine being such a violent person unless he was faced with defending his own life, but he was sure that she'd softened him up a bit. He was more in tune with his compassion than he'd ever been, and though his home and heart were nowhere near the same place, he actually felt a mild fondness at the thought of returning to the land of the otters once again.

Clenching the tiny pendant of the bracelet in his palm, he made up his mind, truly believing he was doing what was best not just for Likita, but for himself.

"You could have let him stay, Ulrus. There was no need to be threatened by someone so much smaller and weaker than you."

Jon's mind would never have been at ease if he knew the kind of verbal abuse that Likita was enduring, and he'd likely never know what other kinds of punishment she'd been through, as she sat just outside of her tent in the commons of the village.

She'd been stopped mere steps from the front, where she would have been entirely safe, before Ulrus and the hunters dragged her further into the woods. Far away from where the otter she loved was setting off on his own journey, Likita was kept on her knees by thick, powerful sets of arms, but she refused to lower her head in the respect the hunters **thought** they deserved.

"Smaller? Sure. Weaker? Absolutely. Someone I can trust on a hunt? Not a fucking **chance**," Ulrus explained, his tail turned upward as he paced back and forth in front of her. "He set the terms, Likita. I just played by them. He wanted to be a hunter in **my** pack, and he wasn't worthy. Plain and simple. He had to be dealt with..."

"So you kicked him out of the village entirely and embarrassed the both of us in what should have been a private moment...was that truly necessary, Ulrus?"

"I wanted to get the message across in case he ever felt like coming back to the village."

"If he were to ever return, I'd take him under my wing as my apprentice, whether he liked it or not!"

Ulrus rolled his eyes. "Like an *otter* could ever be a useful doctor."

"He has skills that you know nothing about," Likita explained, "And I could feel the care for natural life in his heart, before you **monsters** showed up and ruined everything!"

"I told you...he set the terms, Likita. I'm not going to feel bad about what happened."

"Fine. Be a dick...that's really not my problem," Likita replied, letting out a deep, shaky sigh. "But you'd better let me off of my knees and get out of my way. I need an actual bath, this time."

"And if I don't?" Ulrus asked, raising a brow and snickering down at Likita. Her ears flattened nervously as she could hear a set of devious chuckles coming from the hunters above her. "Not like your little otter boy can come and save you now..."

"You would **dare** to defile the only medicine woman in the village?" Likita asked, putting the onus of such an act upon Ulrus in the hopes of dissuading him. "If you were caught...the punishment would be worse than banishment...and far worse than death!"

"You say that as if you think I care..."

Likita felt her eyes shrink in fear as she gulped. She tried to stay still and conserve what little energy she still had left, knowing that thrashing about likely wouldn't get her anywhere.

"Looks like you're **finally** taking me seriously!" Ulrus exclaimed, letting a wide grin spread over the venomous lips of his muzzle. "I may not be one of the elders, Likita, but without my hunters and I...they don't eat. **You** don't eat. No one does...unless they happen to be one of the rare herbivores who pass through, of course, and guess what? I fuck all of them, too, because they think they need my protection from the wild beasts that wander around from time to time!"

"If you're truly so insatiable, you've got plenty of men under your command to interact with," Likita snarled at him, narrowing her normally calm, lovely eyes at Ulrus. "To take advantage of your position in such a way that all of nature bows to your whims...do you truly enjoy that?"

"Like you wouldn't believe, Likita...you think those poor doe girls were meant to take a guy like me?"

"Ulrus, I'd suggest you b-

"They're not," Ulrus cut her off. "But they still squeal and moan with delight when I give them what only I can..."

Likita spat at the ground in front of Ulrus, refusing to even gaze upon him anymore. "So you're a nymphomaniac with the body and wiles needed to live out your every fantasy. Congratulations. I'm still not sleeping with you."

"Wasn't a question of your willingness, Likita..."

The wolfess was biding her time, until she could only just barely feel the arms of the other hunters upon her. They no longer took her as a serious threat, and that was their mistake to make; Likita was crafty enough to escape a dangerous situation, and wasn't about to be kept in this one any longer.

"The only way I'd come anywhere near your pathetic manhood is if I had a knife in my paws," Likita explained, as she gritted her fangs and flipped her wrists up. Each of the hunters on her side took a shot right to the testes, dropping them down to their knees and taking their arms off of her. In all ways, Likita was outnumbered and overpowered, but she was still close enough to the village that she could at least make her way there and notify the elders of Ulrus' treachery.

"Likita...think about what you're doing!" Ulrus called out to her, showing only mild concern for how easily she escaped. "This won't end well for you!"

Sprinting with every ounce of energy she had, Likita was panting within seconds as she tore across the woods for her village, worried that something else was going on...something **well** out of her control.

Sing with me and come along, adventure waits around the bend. Tell me of your favorite song, we'll carry it until the end...

Jon was running out of different rhymes to sing to himself before the sun was fully overhead, and he had no idea how far he'd gone. He knew that he was marching back toward his own tribe, and likely to a terrible punishment, but he was trying to keep that from ruining the good mood that was starting to infect him.

It could have been the familiar sound of rushing water as the river grew wider and wider with each few hundred feet, or perhaps the way that he could enjoy both the comforting heat of the sun, and the soothing shade of the canopy over his head. In some way, he had a feeling that Likita was okay, being entirely ignorant of her plight elsewhere. It would be impossible for her to forget her so quickly, but there was a comfort, albeit somewhat empty, in accepting that he'd done the best thing he could for her.

"Can't go too much further without getting something to eat," Jon said to himself, "And if I wait too much longer, the river will be a bit too heavy to safely fish from. Guess I'd better stop here for a bit and set up a camp."

Plenty far enough from the lands of the tribal wolves, Jon felt that he didn't have to worry about any uninvited guests at this distance. He wasn't sure how much further up the river it would be until he reached his own lands, but he was sure that the wolves wouldn't come that far out of their own territory just to track him down. It was just about the perfect location to gather up some sticks, build a small shelter, catch some food, and rest for the evening before the final stretch of the journey home.

Mingled dirt and grass kicked up as Jon jogged around the spot he'd picked, picking up the larger branches that had fallen from tired, old trees over the years. They were no longer strong enough to fight the elements, but they were plenty strong enough to help shield Jon from them, and he was reverent in his appreciation of the fallen wood. He was thankful to the earth around him for all of the help that it provided, and thankful to the water for quenching his thirst and providing a bounty of fish for him to choose from.

"Not a bad little shelter," Jon whispered, slightly out of breath as he wiped the sweat from his brow. It was a simple loft of branches and a couple of ferns to provide cover from rain, and a bare spot of dirt to sleep upon; not the most comfortable surface for a good night of rest, but certainly, it was one of the

safest. "Should suffice for the rest of the day, anyway."

Fish were splashing about and jumping up through the water next to Jon, and immediately, his stomach took control of his thought process. He knew just how bountiful the waters were from his time living in the otter village, and drool started pooling on his tongue at the thought of just how tasty a fresh fish was when it was eaten right at the source. There was something so crisp and delightful about it that he couldn't help tossing his loincloth aside and diving right into the rushing waters of the river, certain that he could grab a fish or two with ease in such shallow waters.

...At least, he could have, if there weren't something in the water to impede him. Jon winced his eyes shut as he dove in, but rapidly threw them open as he bounced, just under the surface of the water. His paws slipped right through a couple of square holes, and Jon had only himself to blame for his thoughtlessness.

I must be closer to the village than I thought...this is a fishing net! Jon panicked, refusing to open his maw for fear of water rushing down his throat. He tried kicking his legs, but he could feel that he'd already snagged one of his footpaws, and wiggling about would only serve to tangle him even further within the net. He thrashed about for a moment, trying to get his paws free, but they'd been pressed together for his dive, and now, they were trapped within the netting, his wrists stuck together as if they were being bound in place by a rope. A pair of hunters had been waiting for a large catch by the net, that afternoon...but Jon was *quite* a bit more than they'd bargained for.

**

"Damn it...did he really have to be so heavy?"

The words were groggy and uneven as they crossed Jon's ears, but the sound of frustration rang true in them, all the same. "He's not even that big, man. He's just about the same size as the rest of us...and he has the same markings."

"Definitely don't recognize him yet."

"Neither do I, but...he's also kind of covered in dirt and grass, now."

Jon did his best not to panic when he'd jumped into the river and gotten caught in the net, but while the hunters watching over it did pull Jon from the river and save his life, they didn't do it before he nearly drowned and passed out in the process.

"If anyone knows him, I'm sure the elders will..."

"Yeah. His face looked kinda familiar, but I don't think he wanted to be found, honestly. Shame the poor fool had to go and get caught in our net like that."

You're telling me, Jon groaned, keeping his thoughts to himself for the moment. He had no idea how long it had been since he blacked out, but the sun was just

beginning to set in the distance, and he'd been dragged an unknown distance across fields that were mostly dirt and grass. He was filthy with the mixture, and only wished that the pair of hunters would have stopped to adjust his head a couple times. He wasn't sure how many rocks he'd banged his head on, but it was a number higher than he cared to count.

"Well, at least there were a few good fish in there..." one of the hunters grumbled, clearly frustrated with having to haul the dead weight that Jon had been for easily a few miles.

"I have a feeling the elders will be a lot more excited with this catch than we are, Delor..."

The conversation was droning and obnoxious to the headache that Jon was starting to develop. He kept his eyes winced shut tightly in the hopes that sleep would come and take him away again, but his ears were too sensitive to allow it, and his mind was racing with the possibilities of where he might actually be. He knew he was heading closer and closer to the tribe lands that he'd once lived in, but he didn't think that he was so close to be getting caught in one of their fishing nets.

At the sight of a familiar landmark, he knew that he was wrong.

*Trees with red trunks and blue leaves...the trees that have long since served as a warning to turn away...this is **definitely** my homeland...s-shit...*

Jon gulped, trying to keep the lump in his throat as silent as possible as sticks and dirt kicked up into his fur and scratched the flesh underneath. His fears and concerns were coming to a head as he recognized other things from his checkered past: a small cliff that several otters could be seen playfully diving from, a row of different huts, tents and even small houses that his people had come to call their own, and a large, open field that was once healthy, plentiful grass, now beaten down mostly to dirt by the constant travel of people across it. The way that shops and huts lined the dirty commons, Jon almost felt as though he were being dragged back into the village of the wolves, but that was truly wishful thinking, and Jon didn't have that kind of luck.

"...Well well...I never thought I'd live to see the day that you'd come crawling back to us, Jon."

His luck was cursed, at best, and he knew that there would be no easy, nor pleasant way out of the predicament he was now in. He clung desperately to the hopes and prayers that Likita wasn't suffering a similar fate as the net around his body was slipped away from him, and the other two otters carried the net away with the fish that it still held.

"Go figure, we'd literally have to throw a net around you and drag you back here, but I had a feeling that your path in life might bring you back here, some day. It's

only natural for someone to desire to stay among their own kind, like they're **supposed** to."

The voice that loomed down over Jon was a powerful and domineering one; confident, bordering on arrogant, and so sure of itself, it inspired confidence in others at the same time as frustration. It was the voice of Terek, one of the greatest hunters in the Otter Village, and one who was finally nearing the end of his time as an active hunter in the field.

"Come on, Jon. Say something. I know you're not sleeping down there..."

"I have nothing to say to you, Terek."

Standing tall over the curled up weakling that Jon was in comparison, Terek was slim, like all of the otters, but there was a musculature hiding just under the surface of his fur that made him the kind that no one **dared** to talk back to. In his more timid days, Jon wouldn't have bothered with a reply, knowing that nothing good could come from it, but in the time since he'd left, and the trials that he'd survived, he found himself to be far brasher than he ever was before.

"That's an awfully bitter way to greet an old friend after several years away. Are you upset that Delor and Arten dragged you back here in a net full of fish?"

Jon rolled his eyes. "That **has** to be a rhetorical question."

"Of course it is," Terek shot back. "When I heard about the markings and the fangs on the otter who was trapped in the net, I knew it was you...and I made sure that they treated you the way that a **deserter** deserves to be treated!"

It was only a matter of time before Terek brought the subject back around to Jon leaving the village, but for Jon, it was much like taking a needle: he knew that the sting was coming, and that it would be over quick, but nothing could quite prepare him for it. "I didn't belong here, Terek. I didn't fit in, and you're the one who was always driving that point home!"

"That's just how guys are to each other, Jon. If you couldn't take the abuse, then clearly, you really didn't belong."

"Then why are you so pissed off that I left? Why are you being such an asshole to me now?!"

Terek snickered. He brushed the thumb of his paw under his chin as he gazed up at the sky thoughtfully, closing his eyelids over the candy blue irises of his eyes for a moment. "Because you still have a duty to your tribe, and to your kind. You might be tainted with the blood of other animals, but you were born here, and at heart, you are an otter, Jon. Leaving your home isn't just going away...it's abandoning everyone that you know and care about. It's removing an important piece from the puzzle and expecting it to still look the same and function the same when all is said and done. It just doesn't work."

"You sure seem to have gotten along fine without me, honestly."

"We had to adjust to the lack of a whipping boy," Terek admitted, refusing to go more than a few words without insulting his old companion, "But even if the most useless member of the village leaves it behind, the fact of the matter is that the slack they left has to be picked up by everybody else. It makes life a little bit more difficult for those who decided to stay."

Grunting, Jon finally leaned up from his side and sat back on his haunches in front of Terek, his eyes shooting right past the lengthy loincloth that kept the taller otter modest, and up to his smug, cocky expression. "You say that as if I was the first person to ever leave the village. Others have left before me, and I'm sure others will leave after me. Nothing is going to change that fact."

Terek let out a quick, grunting chuckle. "*Heh...* I wouldn't be so sure about that if I were you, Jon."

"And what makes you say that?"

"I really didn't expect that I would ever see you again. Most people don't come back to the village after they leave, for whatever reason. For most of them, I'm pretty sure it's a swift and untimely death, but for you, it sounds like it was just a stroke of bad luck."

"You could say that again."

"Well, it's only going to get worse from here, so you might want to start biting your tongue..."

Jon could feel his ears flattening before he even opened his muzzle again.

"W...what?"

"I think it's fair to say that you had pretty rotten luck when you lived here, Jon, and I'm guessing by those wounds on your body that it didn't improve on the outside, but...I'm not going to have any mercy on you for your desertion."

"Hmmp," Jon grunted and turned his gaze back down to the ground. "Be my guest. I'm sure I've dealt with worse."

"...Fine, Jon. You want to be an arrogant little prick about this?" Terek asked, his cocky smirk finally turning down into a frustrated scowl. "I was just going to incur the usual punishment for desertion, but if you want to be that way about it...I'm going to make a fucking **example** out of you."

It was rare for Jon to see Terek wearing anything **but** a smirk. The idea that he'd truly drawn the ire of the bigger man was a bit frightening, but his thoughts were still twisted up in a confused mess of strings, pulling him back to the village of the wolves, and tugging him in another direction, any other direction than the one Terek was about to take him.

"Tonight, in front of the whole village, you're going to learn just what a mistake it is to walk out on **my** village, Jon. I will sear it in the very fabric of your **soul**."

Jon spent the rest of the day, and the earlier parts of the evening in the same fashion that he spent most of his life in the otter tribe lands: in a tent, recumbent and feeling lazy.

This time, however, his eyes were covered with a thick, leather blindfold, and his paws were bound behind his back, making him the image of the very prisoner that he'd become. From the moment he was trapped in the net, he knew that his life was going to take a turn for the worse, but he truly didn't think Terek was capable of going to such extremes. He didn't think he could ever be as bad as the wolverine hunters had been to him.

Unfortunately, Terek was now determined to prove that he was far **worse** than Jon's former captors.

"The moon is just starting to peak overhead, Jon. Seems that Terek is ready for you in the commons."

Jon thought he recognized the voice that was speaking to him, but he didn't much care to try and identify it. He didn't much care about anything other than escaping, but he knew that it wasn't possible in his current state. He'd been given only as much water as he needed to survive, and very little food, to boot. He was tired, sluggish and frustrated, and even if he were brimming with determination, his paws were still bound, and his eyes were still covered. He didn't even see the paw that reached down and tugged at his shoulder, forcing him to stand up and follow, though his ears did pick up the sound of another otter following behind him, making sure that he didn't try to escape his punishment at the last second.

Terek is going all out this time...why me? What the hell did I do that was so terrible?

Terek was aware of what made people recognize someone as a great leader, and merely having Jon defy him and talk back to him translated as a show of weakness in a world far more primal than our own. Even if he never left the village, Jon was going to have to be punished just for that.

The mental anguish that was starting to settle in was worse than any sort of physical pain he might endure, however, as he realized who might actually be watching in the crowd.

"It would seem our lazy subject has finally arrived to accept his punishment, and thus, allow himself re-entry into our ranks. Jon...you have done our village a great disservice in leaving us behind, but I have graciously accepted your desire to return, and upon completion of your trials, I shall deem you a member of our

ranks once again!"

There was a slowly building cheer as Jon marched across the arid dirt and sparse tufts of grass, until he felt a small kick at the back of his thigh. It was weak, but perfectly placed to buckle his knees and leaving him on the ground...the mere air as he sucked in a gasping breath was all he needed to taste to know that Terek stood over him, once again.

"Jon, as a deserter, you forfeit any right to a trial, or any right to request a lighter punishment. You are subject to whatever I deem acceptable tonight, and the punishment must be carried out in full view of the entire village, so that you might know the shame that they felt when you left them behind!"

The entire village. No...please no... The passage rang out in Jon's mind over and over again as his core clenched up, keeping his body from going fully off-balance and falling flat to his face. Though he didn't have any proper parents in the village, all of his closest friends would be there to see his embarrassment, and perhaps worse, a few of his cousins...regardless of how distant they might be, the mere thought of being blindfolded and tied up in front of them was mortifying.

Worse still, he'd been stripped of his excuse for a loincloth, leaving him fully nude in front of the public.

"Bring me the log...let's show this wretch the price that's to be paid for abandoning your own kind!"

Another cheer ran across the crowd, this time like a deep, powerful crack of thunder as Jon shivered in place, not knowing what to expect. He thought that his life might be forfeit; a log could merely be a club, and with one swift blow, Terek could end his life...and that would be the more merciful route. What was brought forth wasn't any sort of a weapon, however, but a long, thick log with a couple of branches that still clung to the trunk, whittled down for a very specific purpose.

"Good, good! Tie him down...we can't have him trying to back out in the middle of this, after all!"

Several otters were tending to Jon all at once now, and his body, weak as it was, was easily lifted onto the log with minimal effort. The temptation to make a break for it was lost long before he was ever placed on his knees, and any hope of escape was sealed away as his arms were freed, only to be wrapped up in ropes again and tugged down around the sides of the log. His body was forced to hug the fallen tree, and the small branches left were suddenly a very clever facet, as his paws were bound to them with thick, powerful ropes. Even at his fullest strength, Jon couldn't have broken free from them, and his hind legs weren't even allowed to continue shaking as they were tied down to the back end of the log.

All that was left was his tail...and rope wasn't necessary to keep that lifted. "I gave you every chance to apologize, Jon...and you didn't...so now, you'll feel the same humiliation your fellow otters did when you left them all behind!" Terek declared, as he walked around to the back of the poor, bound otter. Jon could only open his muzzle in a silent gasp as he felt his tail being tugged harshly out of the way, and pulled so tight that it stretched and strained the muscles within, until Jon felt a fierce burning just above his rear. The three otters who had helped to bind him to the log were then given their due, as the first of them, still nameless, rubbed his paws together eagerly and stared down into the tight, winking pucker of Jon's ass, knowing that he could do whatever he wanted with it.

Jon was at the mercy of whatever perverted wiles they could come up with, so it was nearly merciful that the first thing he felt was the brushing of a smooth, slick tongue across his asshole, offering it at least a little lubrication for what was still to come. "Don't go too easy on him, now. He has a lesson to learn," Terek reminded them, as the tongue slipped back and forth over the warm, tight entrance, only to start poking and prodding away at it, dipping the very tip of the tongue inside so that it could taste Jon as intimately as possible. He could feel his whole body shivering against the log as people watched on, and his ears flattened to try and drown out the sadistic voices of their cheering.

They **wanted** to see Jon be used as a sex toy, and it was just one more reminder to him of why he left the cruel, twisted place.

"He's shaking like a leaf on a tree," Terek joked, making a direct reference to how Jon was actually tied down. "He must really be enjoying this...don't stop now, boys!" he ordered, and no sooner than the words left his lips than did Jon feel a sharp, sudden prod at his backside, in the form of two thick, devious pawtips pressing against his tailhole and massaging all around the anus, forcing his inner muscles to tighten up and contract. He had to relax to keep them loose so that he wouldn't get hurt, but he couldn't find himself a comfortable place, just knowing how many different people were watching the display...and worse still, loving what they were seeing.

His paws clenched tight around the branches, his only respite, as one pawtip finally pressed past the firm, taut resistance of his asshole and penetrated him, finally drawing a deep, heavy moan from his throat and making him wince under his blindfold. "Nnnngh...ahhn! *S-stop!*" he cried, feeling the most unusual combination of pleasure from the touch, and yet, embarrassment at being made a literal example of. His maw hung open after he spoke, and deep, panting breaths carried forth as he tried to adjust to the feeling of the pawtip sliding in...slowly, past the first knuckle, easing up toward the second and forcing Jon's member to

stiffen up against his own body, with nowhere else to grow.

The discomfort of the penetration, coupled with the way he was pinning his own cock to the log and the cheering crowd truly made Jon think things couldn't get any worse.

As his tail was released, however, he realized his one, last, fatal mistake.

His maw was wide open.

"Mmnnuf! Nnf!" he groaned, moaning around a sudden mouthful of thick, pulsing manhood as Terek took the open spot and slipped his cock right in, refusing to let any part of Jon go to waste in the moment.

"For just a moment, there was an air of hope around you, Jon...as if you really thought the worst of this was behind you..."

Jon tried to stay silent around his mouthful, but he felt a second pawtip grinding in against his anus to join the first, and quiet, pathetic whimpers vibrated all around Terek's impressive manhood, nearly buckling the knees of the imposing hunter.

"We're just getting started with you, old friend...and I think we've got a new position that you can fill...r-right away..."

Just one night of humiliation would probably have been enough for Jon, but it wouldn't have been nearly enough for those who felt that he'd betrayed them. Different perspectives often resulted in a different idea of what was fitting, however, and Jon could still feel pain across his backside, every bit as fresh as it was the moment that his torture started.

That was several nights before, and though the poor otter was showing a simply incredible resolve, he only had so much energy left to give. No matter how many times his ass was smacked with a paw, stick or a club, he could still feel a terrible sting running up from the base of his spine and burning in the bottom of his skull. No matter how many of his fellow otters came around to finger his asshole or insert something more sinister into his body, his inner muscles still clenched as tightly as they could, trying to prevent the forbidden penetration. If it carried on much longer, however, he truly believed that the treatment would **break** him.

"I've gotta admit, I was pretty sure that you would have passed out from exhaustion by now," admitted Terek, who somehow managed to stay out and awake the entire time that Jon did. He took a twisted, disgusting pride in watching Jon suffer, and acted as an overlord to the act as the otter struggled against his bondage. His wrists were burning and nearly stripped of their fur from the tight, painful ropes that bound them, and his back was stiff to the point that even if he were freed, he wasn't sure that he would be able to move. "That kind of endurance will serve our village well, especially when we decide that you're fit to actually **serve** us again."

Such a fate wasn't something that Jon relished, but the river of hope that ran through his heart was suffering a drought that he didn't think he could ever recover from. Keeping Likita in his thoughts was the only thing that had gotten him this far, but as worn down as he was, he could scarcely remember her name. *Can't...see straight...anymore...*

Even thoughts were escaping Jon, anymore. His efforts to cling to consciousness were so great that it helped him to forget just how hungry and thirsty he was, but survival instinct could only take him so far.

His body knew that going into shock would be a better option than trying to hold on any longer.

"Has everyone who wanted to take a turn had a shot at our poor little slut?"

Terek called out to the crowds that remained. Over the course of several days,

the initial, booming crowd of otters had dispersed, and most of them were back and about their normal lives again. A few, truly sadistic members of the crowd matched Jon in his determination, however, and refused to give his body any sort of a break.

For the first time, just past the point of three days, one of the males didn't experience any resistance as he twisted a singular pawtip against Jon's anus and pressed it forth, digging into the exhausted, loosened orifice. It was such an easy task that one might think Jon was actually enjoying himself, but Terek was the one who saw the reality. He was still busy pounding his hips into Jon's muzzle, filling the tied otter's mouth with a full, thick cock to keep him from replying, when he finally saw the glazed look that overtook his eyes.

"...Never mind, I guess. We've really run this poor guy into the ground."

Splashes of saliva and semen were soaked into Jon's fur, all across the small of his back and the curve of his rump. His asshole was stretched, finally to the point that his inner muscles couldn't properly clench anymore. His manhood, once stimulated to the point of stiffness from all of the contact, was drooling precum all over his own stomach, but was in horrible discomfort from all of the pressure that it endured over the course of the week. His limbs felt as though they were ablaze from how stretched they were, and the ropes around them refused to give him any sort of a break, even if Terek was finally finding the littlest scraps of mercy about himself.

There was no part of Jon that was sacred anymore, thanks to the otter tribe. He was used and abused, far beyond the point of recovery, and he'd finally succumb to the clutches of proper exhaustion.

"Untie him and take him back to the tents. He's been fully broken...nurse him back to health, and make sure to alert me when he wakes up," Terek instructed, keeping a close eye on Jon as the lesser otters came to undo his bondage. Heavy, desperate eyelids finally came to close as a stupefied look was painted upon Jon's muzzle, right between the errant stains of cum across his cheeks and lips. He likely didn't even know what planet he was on anymore, and when Jon awoke, only further torture would bring him back around...Terek would make **very** sure of that.

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Perhaps the last bastion of Jon's hope, Likita, was moving like a blur across the plains, using the guise of the evening darkness to keep her figure hidden.

"Even the elders can't be trusted," she groaned, as she clutched a spear tightly in her paws. Her footpaws were swift and careful upon the ground, taking great care not to fall and spear herself, but she knew that she had to move quickly, and she wasn't sure where she could go. "Ulrus must have already spread rumors of

false treachery by now..."

It might have been wiser of Likita to go straight to the elders, as she'd planned, but she was nearly exhausted, simply from escaping Ullur and the other hunters. She worried that going back to the village would be a death sentence, and though her better judgment told her that she'd be protected as the only medicine woman in the village, she'd seen the truly dark side that Ullur kept hidden from her before.

He'd always been a thorn in her side, of course, and always been an arrogant ass, but she always took that as his method of trying to court her. Being boastful and overly outgoing seemed an all too typical way for wolves to try to attract a mate, but that was often mere fluff that could be debunked later. Likita truly believed the best in all people, no matter how gruff or obnoxious they were on the surface.

She'd be sure not to make that mistake again.

"Jon went north...that's all I can know for sure," Likita thought aloud, unable to keep her thoughts purely in her mind as she ran. Voicing the words helped to pace her breathing and keep her from getting too wiped out, but she'd need to rest before too long, and already, she could feel the callouses on her footpaws tearing and bleeding. She had only pure adrenaline left in the tank, and sweat poured over her forehead, leaving an ethereal gleam upon her fur in the moonlight.

She was a pale, silvery blur, moving across the blueish-green of the tall grass, but her elegance was little more than pure desperation. She was lost, she was scared, and she was alone, but she was alive, and she knew who she wanted to find.

Thoughts of a white-furred wolf escaped Jon as he was kicked awake by a harsh, cold splash of water upon his face.

When he first arrived at his village, she was all that he could think about, and the thought of seeing her again someday was keeping him hopeful, but it was a new day, and after his prolonged torture, he'd almost forgotten ever meeting her.

"Com...o...wa...Jon!"

The occasional sound was still reaching Jon, but his ears weren't properly dissecting them. His arms were still too exhausted to even reach up and rub the sleep from his eyes, and his paws were radiating with pins and needles, still numb from their prolonged bondage.

"Move you...lazy ass, Jon!"

As the sounds became proper sentences, and Jon begrudgingly accepted the reality of waking up once again, disgusted memories began to swirl in his mind, and behind them, a sense of regret formed. He'd scarcely struggled against his captors, and in hindsight, he realized just how easily he relegated himself to his fate, even knowing that he still felt some sense of loyalty to Likita.

Just the thought of her name sent a burning across his mind, like a wildfire tearing through the dried fields of a waning meadow.

"There we go...there's a couple eyeballs!" Terek declared, as Jon's eyelids finally managed to lift. Even that action seemed like a bit of a struggle, and moving was simply out of the question, as Jon hadn't consumed a single thing in almost four days. He'd had only water to keep his body alive, and the splash of it upon his muzzle seemed like more of a waste than anything. "You still with us, Jon? I know you're **alive**, at least!"

Jon couldn't possibly reply...not so quickly and easily. Accepting consciousness was such a nauseating effort that he was looking for the nearest container that he could respectfully vomit into, and there didn't seem to be any antidote for what was ailing him.

The small plate of food nearby didn't look even the least bit appetizing, and he didn't expect that it was meant for him, anyway. "You've gotta give me some kinda response, Jon. I'm starting to think you've just got rigor mortis or something!"

Even cracking his jaw open to reply felt like such a struggle for Jon that he wasn't sure he could muster it. He wanted to try; to open his maw and scream his lungs out at Terek for what he'd done, but no matter how wholly he focused on

doing just that, he couldn't manage.

He didn't know if he could make a single sound.

"Well, I can tell that you *hear* me, even if you don't feel like saying too much, yourself," Terek continued, as if Jon actually had replied. "Your eyes aren't entirely glazed over anymore. That's **good**. We really need all of the help we can get around the village anymore...and I'm guessing you would have preferred a slightly different form of explanation."

Jon could only muster a half-lidded glare in reply.

"You weren't going to get that. You forfeited such a grace when you decided to run away, all that time ago...we don't owe you **anything**," Terek explained. "You have to deal with whatever we feel is fitting, or, rather, whatever I feel is fitting. If you ask me, we've honestly been too easy on you, but at least you were able to prove your mettle. You *could* still be of use to us, after all."

"Useful...?"

"Yes. I still think you could be useful."

"After a-all of this time," Jon stammered, trying to embrace his own anger as his voice was roused back to life. "All you can think of is *usefulness*?"

"That's the kind of thing you're forced to think of in moments of crisis, Jon. You ran away from proper responsibility...you don't know anything about that."

"No," Jon growled, though he gave up the sound when a pain arose in the depths of his dry, arid throat. "I had to survive **without** a tribe, on my own, without any sort of shelter or companionship. I wouldn't know the f-first thing about responsibility."

Terek rolled his eyes. He crossed his arms over the slim, broad space of his chest and tried to keep his composure, something that Jon wasn't used to seeing out of him. "You brought all of those hardships on yourself when you decided to leave. You won't find any sympathy for such actions, here."

"I don't want sympathy. I want freedom."

"That isn't going to happen."

"Why not?"

Rare as it was for a leader to show any sign of weakness in front of someone that they didn't respect, Terek actually turned away from Jon and glanced to the side of the tent they were sharing. "Because we actually need you here, much as it pains me to admit it. It really doesn't matter what you're doing...we need more help around the village, and we need the kind of help that can work on very little food and water."

"And after what you just put me through, you really think that I'd offer to help you?"

"...I thought for sure that we'd broken you, Jon. I'm surprised you have any fight

left in you at all."

"For a moment, I think you did," Jon was surprisingly quick to admit, "But you gave me a chance to catch my breath."

"Hmmp. That's really all it took? Just a quick splash of water to the face?"

Jon reached over to the food on the plate near his side, uncaring of if it was meant for him or not. The shortbread crumbled in his paws, and he stuffed the crumbs rudely into his muzzle, refusing to look away from Terek. He could almost sense the discomfort upon his fellow otter, and even if it paled in comparison to what had been done to him, he still wanted to make his frustrations entirely known. "That, and hearing just how badly you needed me to do something for you...can't tell you how fired up it gets me to think of you failing as a leader...all because I wasn't willing to cooperate."

"You really feel like spending three more days tied down to a log, getting paws shoved up your ass and cocks stuffed down your throat? I'd be more than happy to accommodate you, honestly!"

"I've had worse."

Jon was like a wall of stone, and Terek had to keep his gaze averted. He didn't want to show just how frustrated he was with the smaller otter, and certainly not give the impression that Jon might be in control of the situation.

"I **will** break you down, Jon. You'll rejoin our tribe before long. I don't know what it's going to take to make you see just how serious this is, but I've got plenty more ideas to exact upon you."

"And I look forward to turning you down **every single time** in the future, Terek. There isn't a damn thing you can do to change my mind, at this point."

Terek grunted and gritted his fangs. An essence of hatred poured from his eyes as Jon sat defiantly before him, taking another quick bite from the cheap roll of bread he'd found.

"I'll make you eat those words tonight, Jon. You'll regret having ever defied me..."

"I've heard that one before."

The quick, resilient snicker was the one of the last sounds that Jon was allowed to make, that evening.

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For otters, trees were a symbol of strength and respect. They were a provider of so many different resources that it was considered sacrilege to abuse them, and if one were to be cut down, it couldn't be done in vain, and certainly not wastefully. Trees were much like hunted animals: every part was to be used, until nothing was left, and anything that might remain was to be thanked and adored.

All of those facts made the way that Terek chose to punish Jon that much more

humiliating and degrading.

One of the many wonders of nature was how mortal men often tried to imitate it. The fallen log that was used to keep Jon in bondage the days previous was a good example, and the ropes that strained him to it were the only artificial addition.

That night, Terek was determined to go a little bit too far, and he wasn't at all concerned with just how disrespectful the action was.

"Is this really how far you've fallen, Terek? Do you really think that this will prove anything? That this will **change** anything?"

Terek spat at the ground as he gripped Jon tightly by the tufts of his ears. "I'm well past the point of caring about such trivial matters, Jon. The choice of whether you rejoin our village and assist us is going to be a matter of life and death, before too long. I'm doing this for myself."

"You'd commit such a blasphemous act...all for the sake of your own twisted enjoyment?!"

Chuckling, Terek tensed his forearms so fully that veins began to pop up through his fur, and he pulled Jon's head through the small hole in the tree. It was such a tight gap that Jon was shocked his head fit through it, and he cried out in pain as he felt his ears nearly being ripped from his head, but Terek didn't show even the faintest hint of remorse for his actions. "*Heh*. Does that really surprise you, Jon?"

It would have been a forlorn thought for Jon, who was trying to grit his fangs together, wishing that he could drown out the grunts of pain that seemed to force themselves from his lungs. "*Nnnnngh...graaah!* What in the blue hell is wrong with you, Terek?"

"More than you and I have time to cover this evening...but it's nothing that a little physical abuse can't help me through."

Jon gulped. His head was stuck right through the trunk of the unique tree, and before that had even occurred, his body was leaned against the trunk, and his paws were tied around the front of it. There was no way that he could possibly pry himself away, and his shame about defacing the respectable tree with his nude body was sadly the **least** of his concerns. He was slumped and hunched over, forcing his backside to stick out and away from the trunk, and even if his footpaws were to slip, there wasn't a thing he could do to stop a passerby from having their way with him.

If the situation was just a little different, Jon might have liked the idea, and he could even think of a couple people that he wouldn't mind happening upon him, but as it stood, he was having trouble imagining a worse fate.

"You won't be subjected to the entirety of the village this time, Jon. I don't think

that they **appreciate** the abuse that you can endure like I do. I don't think that they really want to abuse you the way that I do. They've just learned their lessons, already...and it was easier to comply with my suggestion to punish you than to speak out against it."

Jon thought to question just *how* Terek managed to have the entire village in such a deadly, unwavering grip. He didn't understand how the fear of famine and drought made it so easy for Terek to control everyone that he once knew and cared about, but he'd seen it in the way that they so obediently and blindly obeyed his every order. The village wasn't such a place of debauchery when he left it, and the change was something that didn't sit well with him.

He thought to question it, but he didn't get the chance.

A thick, frustrated grunt was muffled by the feel of Jon's own loincloth being stuffed into his muzzle, as Terek quickly silenced him. "But I really do appreciate you, Jon. I honestly missed you when you left...and I couldn't figure out why I did. You were just a common, failed hunter, looking for any sort of purpose in the village. Perhaps I pitied you for being so terrible at what you did...perhaps I envied you for not having the kind of responsibilities that I did. I really can't be sure," Terek started to explain. He paused his monologue as he walked around to the back of the tree, taking his time in visually appreciating the way that Jon's body had a natural, submissive curve to it, as if it were beckoning him to mount the trapped otter and have his way with him right then. "It almost sickens me to admit that I have any kind of a fascination with you, but I'm not sure what else to call it. All I really know is that I'm not going to let the others in the village see it..."

The particular tree that Jon was bound to was as far away from the village as it could be, while still resting on the otter's tribe lands. It was dangerous to flirt with the borders of it, even when the creatures were living in a time of moderate peace, but it was the easiest way for Terek to insure that Jon wouldn't be disturbed.

It should have been a perfect plan, and Terek was downright cocksure of himself as he stepped right behind Jon, sliding the dull, blunt tips of his claws along the perked rear of the trapped otter. He was simply arrogant in his safety, even as his pawtips slid a little further down, gliding along Jon's firm, swollen sack, teasing the very base of the delicate, sensitive flesh before he finally let his thumb rest upon Jon's asshole once again. Even after his mild break, it was still stretched to the point that Terek slipped in easily, without even a sliver of remorse.

The ground beneath his footpaws was softening as his hubris soiled the earth, and deadly karma was approaching from behind, as Jon was taken in the same way.

Waking up on the brink of death would have been a welcome change for Jon, when he gazed up into the morning sun, still bound within the grasp of a tree so old, it could have been part of a legend.

Compared to the ravaging treatment that he endured the night before, Jon felt that burning in the fires of the five hells would have been preferable, but there didn't seem to be anyone around to sympathize his anguish. The trees didn't have ears, no matter how often the rest of the otter tribe prayed to them, and the soil didn't have sorrow for those who would trample upon it.

There was just Jon, alone with his thoughts, his legs quivering with exhaustion, his muscles burning with an impossibly deep ache. His asshole was **still** stretched out from the depth and repetition of Terek's penetration, and keeping his tail pressed down over the abused orifice didn't change the fact that he could feel what he feared was permanent damage done to his body.

It was easy for Jon to fear the worst, when that was the story of his recent life. His thoughts didn't have to wander far to make it back to the memories of Likita and the way that she'd given him up so easily. He was *humiliated* time and time again in the presence of the white wolves, and for all that he knew, they were still scouring the countryside, hoping to get their own chance to defile his body before they literally stripped the flesh from his bones, and tanned his hide.

There was no safe place for the otter anymore, if his own tribe was so quick to turn on him. Escape to a further land was the only answer he could hope for, but he didn't know anything outside of the otter's tribe lands; what he'd seen of the white wolves' territory wasn't enough to plan an escape route through, and heading back in that direction seemed a foolish plan, at best.

If he carried on through his old home, he would eventually reach the shores of the feline tribes, but that presented a new challenge for him, and then, his only choice would be to sail for a new world, and like his fellow otters, he knew **nothing** of what was waiting beyond the ocean.

"At least they wouldn't follow me...certain death is said to wait for anyone who tries to cross the Jagged Pass."

Knowing only what his parents and friends had explained to him about the far reaches of the ocean, Jon decided that it might be in his best interest to put those theories to the test, rather than waiting for Terek to come back and put another terrible beating on his body.

Unless he were able to teleport his way to the edge of the continent, however, he

wasn't going to make his escape in nearly enough time.

"Rise and shine, tree stump. We've got a few things to discuss, don't we?"

Word traveled fast on a continent that was relatively small, and Jon knew that it would only be a matter of time before a wayward traveler made their way to the village and completely undermined any sense of innocence that he could feign.

"Turns out you didn't just abandon us for a life of freedom. You decided to go and try to shack up with the white wolves, did you?" Terek accused Jon, never even giving the smaller mustelid a chance to respond. "Thought maybe that you'd come across as an exotic species to one of their bitches? Perhaps she'd take mercy on you and let you knock one of them up; is that it?!"

Whatever rumors Terek was being fed, their content was less important than the fact that he simply heard them at all. If anything negative could be brought against Jon, they would have every excuse to welcome him back into the tribe at the **lowest** possible position, forcing him into a life of degradation and servitude that no one would be willing to question.

It was just the excuse that Terek was looking for, and Jon knew that it was little better than a death sentence for him.

"Did it ever occur to you that I didn't *willingly* go to the white wolves?"

"Do you think I care? Do you think anyone in the village will care about your willingness? A proper warrior would have fought his way through their ranks, and died an honorable death...even a common fisher or a hunter would have at least put up a fight, but you? **You** decided that it would just be the funniest damn thing ever if you **fucked** one of their kind!"

For the sake of his own safety, Jon knew that he had to deny the crime of fornicating with an outsider. There was a good chance that Terek was brandishing a weapon, even if Jon couldn't clearly see it.

After what he'd been through, he was perfectly fine with the idea of a blunt object crashing down on the back of his skull. "It didn't have to be a joke, you know. I didn't have to do it for a laugh. Maybe I just found one that was prettier than any girl in this village."

Rubbing salt in the proverbial wound should have made things worse for Jon. He was so sure of his fate that a phantom soreness began spreading across the back of his head, and he could nearly *hear* Terek shaking with frustration...but no blow ever came.

"You've made your jokes, Jon, and you've made your point. Comedy was always your strongest suit, but I'm not here to laugh...I'm here to get information."

"What kind of information could I possibly have that would be of any use to the wise and powerful Terek?"

That time, Jon did wince, as he felt a firm, domineering palm swatting against his ass, no doubt a response to his candor. “Whether you really slept with one of their own or not, the fact is that rumors are spreading of your visit to their territory, and some of our scouts have reported sightings of the white wolves nearby. I’d have to be a fool to think that these things weren’t connected, and given the way that trouble follows you like a vulture to rotting carrion, I’d wager you got yourself into another mess while you were their visitor, weren’t you?” When he found someone that deserved his faith and trust, Jon was quick to open himself up to such a person. He’d done that for Likita, and in a moment of foolishness, he wondered if he might be able to play up to Terek’s sympathy, making Likita and the rest of the white wolves out to be villains. If he played his cards right, he might be able to escape the harshest of punishments, knowing that the worst was still to come.

“It was hardly my fault, but you didn’t want to listen to my story before, Terek. You just wanted to make an example of me in the middle of our village!”

Both of the otters were playing off of each other, each one speaking minor falsehoods to try and get something out of the other. Jon was acting as frustrated as he could with the abuse he’d endured the night before, and Terek, in a move that Jon couldn’t possibly believe, set his palm down on the small of Jon’s back, and rubbed the pads of his digits comfortingly against the base of his thick, sore tail.

“That...that was wrong of me, Jon. I’m sorry.”

Jon hated to admit that the delicate, brief touch was soothing, but for the briefest moment, his legs stopped quivering, and he forgot about how physically exhausting his pose was. “That’s a really easy thing to say when I’m stuck in this damn tree, and you’re up there controlling our entire dialogue.”

“You know I can’t let you out of there, Jon. Not just yet.”

“I’m pretty sure that you’d never let me out of here, if it were only up to you.”

“It **is** only up to me, and because I’m capable of mercy, I’ll consider letting you free a little bit early if you can help deter a potential invasion.”

Jon cocked a brow. “Why on earth would the white wolves invade your territory? What could they possibly want from our lands that they don’t already have in their own?”

“You’re an educated fellow, aren’t you, Jon?”

“That...seems to have nothing to do with this, but I’d like to think myself fairly intelligent.”

“Why do tribes go to war, typically?”

Jon rolled his eyes. The conversation seemed to be little more than Terek enjoying the sound of his own voice. “Ideological differences, religion, tribal

politics...?”

“**Resources.** That’s the be-all, end-all for everything you just listed. If you can rally the members of your tribe around a cause, then you can get them to march and die for just about any reason, and right now, the white wolves are running *dangerously* low on clean water, thanks to the limited inlets of fresh water in their territory. We’re much closer to the ocean, and we live between several different inlet rivers with clean, purified water...if they manage to take our land, then they will control all of the waterways leading in to the center of the world.”
“Continent.”

“...The **known** world.”

“Either way, you really think that they’d be foolish enough to launch an assault on our lands? And besides, you told me that we were running **low** on food, water and flesh!”

“Gotta keep the people inspired to work somehow, right? The less they know, the better,” Terek addressed his first lie with utter disregard for the wellbeing of his people. “And I’m asking you, Jon, if you think they’d be foolish enough. You were gone for a very long time, and there’s no doubt in my mind that you spent a good portion of those days in the loving embrace of a few of their bitches. Perhaps they were just as loose with their tongues as they were with their privates?”

Jon’s fur bristled. He was thankful that his long, heavy saber teeth curved just right to avoid his own flesh, as he gritted his fangs at the needless insult.

“I can hear you rumbling, Jon. Did I strike a chord? Is there a canine slut waiting for you to return home to her?”

“The women of their tribe treated me with much more *respect* than the women of our own, but they didn’t do it because I was different, or exotic. They did it because they had a moral code that would prevent the kind of behavior that **you** encourage, and that’s exactly why I don’t trust you to release me if I tell you anything!”

The brief, soothing touch came to an abrupt end, as Terek clenched down on the base of Jon’s tail and squeezed at the flesh as eagerly as a psychopath would squeeze the neck of a frightened victim. “Throwing insults at the man who literally controls whether you live or die is probably not the best plan of action, Jon. I hope you’ve got something better for me than **that**. I couldn’t give less of a damn about their moral code!”

“You wanna know what they’re up to? You’re gonna have to release me. That’s my offer.”

Neither otter could trust the other one in their current position, but Jon had nothing left to bargain with if he gave away all of the information he had right

then, and Terek was incapable of trusting anything the smaller otter had to say while he was in such an enraged state of mind.

The stalemate would have to end sooner or later, but Terek was determined to come out on top of the exchange quite literally, if he couldn't do so figuratively. "You've had every opportunity to do the right thing and warn your fellow tribe members of what danger is to come, Jon. At any time in this exchange, you could have told me what the white wolves were up to, and saved *countless* lives. Instead, you decide to remain true and steadfast to them, controlled by the head on your cock, rather than the one on your shoulders."

There was a brief pause for Jon to reply, but he kept his lips sealed tight.

"If sex is really the only thing that you think about, I'm more than happy to oblige your twisted little mind. It's not like the other villagers are going to do anything about my actions, anyway...the other otters look to **me** for guidance, and if they catch me pounding my dick down your throat, that'll just encourage them to do the same!"

Terek was arrogant, perhaps, but he knew that he was in full control of the situation. He was sure that his ability to dish out pain was greater than Jon's ability to tolerate it, but he'd made a slight miscalculation, in preparing to interrogate the trapped otter.

He was sure that no one else was around him at the time, and he was certain that Jon didn't have the strength left in his body to move at all.

An arrow into the side of the tree that Jon was trapped within made it clear that he was wrong about the first, and Jon's startled, jumping reaction, although subdued by his bondage, showed Terek that his ability to anticipate a situation needed a little work.

"Jon...this is your **last** chance to tell me if there's something you think I should know about your little canine buddies."

"I'm pretty sure the time for that would have been before they snuck into the woods and surrounded you, Terek."

"...Duly noted."

Taking out the full extent of his frustrations on Jon was all that Terek **wanted** to do, but he was wise enough to reserve his strength for the fight to come. He bit down on his boiling anger and kept it trapped inside, hoping that he'd be able to tap into it when he most needed to, but he knew that he couldn't aggressively rush into battle; the arrow that missed him was an *intentional* miss, and trying to run for it would only leave him to die tired.

He was every bit as trapped in the woods as Jon was, even though his body was free to move.

"I believe you have something that belongs to us, stranger. It'd be awfully nice if

we could have it back.”

“I really can’t stay much longer, but I thank you for your hospitality. You’re sure that the road southwest from here will lead me to the tribe lands of the otters?”

Escaping from her own territory undetected was a struggle enough for Likita. She was a brilliant fighter in her own right, but there were certain realities about her physical body that she couldn’t overcome, and picking off the entire pack of hunters assigned to catch her, one by one, would have proven an impossible task. She didn’t know which of the gods to pray to for thanks, but she was keeping all of them in her thoughts as she sat upright, bringing a brief sway to the hammock she rested in.

“It will, though I can’t fathom why you’d want to go there.”

Knowing little of the world outside of her own home, Likita **thought** that the river she followed away from the white wolves should have taken her right to the home of the otters, but instead, she went all the way to the Risen Coast, and found the home of the cougars. Had she found them from the northeast, she might not have been able to overcome the deadly crags and treacherous mountains that made the felines impregnable from that direction, but fortune smiled upon her, and she found the trade routes that entered the Risen Coast from the southwest, just on the other side of the otter tribe lands.

“If you were an otter who was stranded away from your home, where would you go?”

“I’d come here. This place is much friendlier to those who have lost their way. You...don’t really know much of the otter’s culture, do you?”

Likita was able to use her practice as a medicine woman to heal a wash of fevers that was spreading across the realm of the cougars, and in return, she was given a place to eat and rest in their village. Compared to the fading home of the otters and the relatively quaint home of the white wolves, the land of the cougars was a bustling metropolis, and the wolfess was still adjusting to the sheer size and scale of everything around her.

“I only know of one otter, and he didn’t seem to approve much of his own culture. I don’t know where else he would have gone, but I can’t imagine that he would be happy there.”

“Not to add stress to your mind, but I can guarantee you that he isn’t happy. The otters are known to heavily punish their own for desertion.”

Pentia was one of the lucky cougars who had come under the healing touch of Likita’s abilities, and though it would have been forbidden in other cultures, she

was sitting behind Likita in the hammock, resting her paws upon the tummy of the naked wolfess, embracing her with all of the tenderness of a dedicated lover. Other tribes referred to the land of the cougars as a place of hedonism and evil, but Likita was already coming to understand that the pleasures of the flesh were nothing to be ashamed of, and it was with a hint of regret that she'd be leaving the place, knowing that there was a good chance she'd never be able to return.

"If I'm lucky, perhaps I'll be able to get there and change their minds before they're able to do serious harm. His body was nearly destroyed the first time that I found him...I can't fathom trying to put him back together a second time."

"Trust in your abilities, Likita." The cougar gave her temporary bedmate an affectionate squeeze around the torso and sat upright next to her, just as barren of clothing as the wolfess. "You came here a stranger, and you'll leave here a beloved medicine woman, welcome to come and go as she pleases. If one person can do so much good for the world around her, I have no doubt that you can save a single boy from himself."

The touch was comforting, but it didn't remove the weight of her own regrets from Likita's shoulders. "Saving him from himself will be the easier task. Saving him from the rest of the world might not be so easy...you...you really can't send me **any** assistance?"

"I hope that wasn't the only reason you slept with me, Likita."

"N-no, it wasn't that," the wolfess stammered, knowing that her cheeks were burning under the cover of her pristine fur. "Business and pleasure should always remain as far apart as they can. Mingling the two is what got me into this mess in the first place. I shouldn't expect anyone to help me clean it up."

Pentia offered a brief, affectionate lap of the tongue, brushing it over Likita's cheek and hoping to soothe her, in what the cougar knew must have been a tumultuous moment. "It is the will of all who reside in Felinar that we do not take part in the wars of others...as soon as you take sides in the war of another tribe, you've made yourself an enemy for the day, and another one for your children to deal with later."

"If all of the people in Felinar are as kind and wise as you are, the rest of the world stands to learn a great deal from you, Pentia."

"If everyone in the world was as willing to learn as you were, there'd never be another war to fight, Likita," Pentia replied in kind, and smiled at the wolfess as she stood to dress herself. "I cannot offer you weapons or soldiers, but if you're able to retrieve the otter, I can promise you a home here to call your own, or safe passage to a ship across the sea. I'll let you make that choice, if and when you return here."

Likita was still getting used to the idea of seeing another woman in the nude

when it wasn't for the purpose of a healing tincture or a ceremonial bath. She would have been more focused on the erotic display, if not for her ears perking upright at the mention of the sea.

"Did...did you just say a boat across the sea?"

"No, I said a ship across the sea," Pentia teased. "Don't tell me that you wolves are still clinging to the old theory that trying to take a boat off of this continent will end with certain doom?"

"We live closer to the middle of the...w-well, what we **thought** was the whole world. In our lore, the ocean is the edge of the world, and sailing too far past it is the equivalent of trying to get into the afterlife early."

Thankful for the hammock to catch her, Likita slumped back down a bit and grasped the side of her head. It was hard enough for her to embrace the fact that she was about to undergo a veritable suicide mission, but to have such a bombshell of knowledge tossed at her so casually was making her lightheaded.

"It's true that the way the mountains of our continent formed left terrible, deadly crags in the water off of the shores, and if you don't know how to navigate them, you're sure to shipwreck. The only saving grace is that you're likely to drown before the waves churn your body into nothingness," Pentia explained the reality of the geography with an utterly nonchalant voice as she eased her way into a pair of long, loose pants, woven of thin leather. "However, if you know the secret routes around the crags, whirlpools and deadly storms that fill the so-called Sea of Death, you can make it to a distant land that no one here will ever find you on."

"A distant land?"

"A place called Mid Isle. I've never been there, myself, but more and more travelers are arriving here all the time, claiming that there's never been a better time to leave it. It's putting our little town into a bit of a population crisis, honestly."

"I'd tell you to send some of the extra citizens toward the lands of my people, but I have a feeling that my word isn't worth a damn thing to them anymore," Likita admitted. "It might be for the best if I never returned there."

"So, don't. Stay away from there and start a new chapter in your life."

The willingness of the cougars to shed their old lives was almost concerning to Likita, but the lands of Felinar were a place that represented the chance for a fresh start for not only for the new people flooding to it, but for Likita and Jon, if she could convince him to follow her there.

"But if the white wolves came here for me-

"Let them come. Do you really think that they have the military might to overthrow our population?"

Pentia was every bit as arrogant as Ulrus was before her, and it was the only thing that Likita disliked about the cougar. The difference between them was the fact that Pentia thought her words through before she uttered them, and where Ulrus was the type to make a ridiculous boast, Pentia wouldn't say anything without knowing that she could back it up.

There was a reason, after all, that no one ever attempted to conquer the cougars, or any of the lands of Felinar that they protected.

"All of the people I healed would mean **nothing** if I were to be the cause for an invasion of your lands, Pentia. I don't know if I could live with myself..."

"Don't underestimate the might of our people, or the stupidity of your own, Likita. You can't beat yourself up over what *hasn't* come to pass, when you're still busy dealing with what *has*."

Ever used to being the one to dole out the words of wisdom, Likita felt a comfort unlike anything she'd ever known to have someone offering intelligence upon her, instead.

It left her *speechless*.

"Dress yourself and make your way to the land of the otters, Likita. You're a medicine woman; you should know that my words are only a bandage on your soul. If you don't fix the cause of the problem, your spirit will fester, and no earthly substance will heal the scars that are left behind."

The intense questioning that Jon underwent was getting worse by the moment. It was bad enough that Terek was standing behind him, acting as a shield of flesh **only** because he was convinced that the smaller otter still had information. There were multiple other figures appearing out of the thickets of trees, and though Jon recognized some of them, it wouldn't have mattered if he didn't know a single one of their faces.

The canine shapes of their muzzles were all he had to see to confirm his worst fears, and their presence left him without a leg to stand on; he was sure that Terek would have killed him right then and there, if not for the fact that it would have been an utter waste of energy.

"I know you don't owe me any information, but I have to ask...what the hell did you all do to this pathetic excuse of a mustelid to keep him quiet about your invasion?"

Terek still wasn't sure where the arrow came from, but he could see a few different archers stepping out from behind the trees. It didn't appear as though the wolves were planning a full scale invasion, but there were certainly enough of them present to make sure that Jon wouldn't be able to sneak off a second time.

He was already resigning himself to his fate when the last person he ever wanted to see stepped forth, coming out from behind the thick body of a full, healthy tree.

"Invasion? What the hell would I want with your dying lands?" Ulrus was just as happy to insult Terek as he was to insult Jon, and both of the otters were forced to stay in place and deal with the verbal abuse, at the behest of several archers, arrows trained on the pair. "You've farmed your home to the point of near extinction, your people flee from your tribe lands in droves, and you exercise the littlest sign of respect for the world you poison...to invade this place would be easy, but **pointless**."

Jon knew that he didn't have a dog in the fight, but he couldn't help cracking a small grin at hearing Terek so *completely* berated. "If you were really so bold as to attempt to invade my lands, I might have a little respect for you," Terek shot back, "But it looks to me like you wasted the time and efforts of all of these soldiers...just to collect one little otter, didn't you?"

"Consider it a waste if you like, but I wouldn't expect you to understand anything about honor, or tradition...and our tradition says that this little shit

defiled my honor, and I **will** be taking him back to my territory to exact the full punishment on him!”

Terek snickered. “So he’s wronged you, too? Get in line. I’m not done with him yet.”

There was some sense of comfort for Jon, in thinking that his two worst enemies were about to tear each other apart in a needless battle.

That comfort was fading fast, as Terek and Ulrus quickly established a common ground.

“I could care less if you send him over in pieces, or all at once, but this otter needs to stand trial by **our** laws. By the looks of it, you aren’t exacting anything close to a strict enough punishment on him.”

“He’s been shackled up to the inside of this tree for the last two days with just enough food and water to survive. What in the world more would you have me do to him?”

“Stopping at starving and dehydrating him wouldn’t be nearly enough for such a hardened criminal. There are much worse ways to punish him, if you’re going to bother with it at all,” Ulrus claimed. As he stepped a little closer to the old and twisted tree that Jon was trapped within, he made a quick gesture to his archers, and slowly, they pulled back their strings, and steadied their bows. “I don’t suppose you’ve done a single thing to his asshole? That would be the *proper* way to go about humiliating him.”

Terek grinned. “Perhaps our cultures do have something in common after all,” he claimed. “One of the first things I did when he returned to our village was break his tiny, tight little asshole...bet you could fit a whole fist in there if you really wanted to.”

This CANNOT be happening.

Jon was afraid to speak. He wasn’t afraid for his life anymore, but he was worried that his sanity might be slipping; his two worst enemies were becoming fast friends, all over the concept of putting his body through even further abuse. It was only a matter of time before they were giving each other ideas, and there was a living canvas of flesh for them to brainstorm upon.

“That...wasn’t the agreement, Terek. You know it wasn’t.”

Ulrus would have mentioned how much he enjoyed the idea of making Jon into his own, personal flesh puppet, but he was interrupted by the presence of a small force of otters, emerging from the trees on the other end of the clearing. Their hunters were among the best in the known world, and in their own territory, they knew the routes to travel better than anyone else could hope to learn them; even Terek wasn’t aware of their arrival.

“I’m the greatest hunter among our people. I was given the right to carry out

whatever punishment I saw fit!”

One of the otter archers stepped forth and drew the string on her bow, aiming it not at the white wolves, but the back of Terek’s skull. “The elders declared that you would carry out the punishment that night, and not a moment longer. You **stole** Jon away so that you could inflict your own twisted desires on him here, away from the prying eyes of the village. This is a betrayal of the elders, and an act of treason...but if that weren’t enough, it appears that you’re conspiring with the very wolves you warned us about!”

Ulrus lifted his bow once more, and as his archers mimicked his actions, the small band of otters met the challenge. “Conspiring with us? This weak, pathetic cumstain?! I wouldn’t work with him if the fate of the living world depended on it!”

Training his arrow on Ulrus, Delor stepped forth and narrowed his eyes on the target, still feeling a deep-rooted respect for Terek. “You should watch your tongue, wolf. You’re **deep** in the territory of the otters, and there’s nowhere you can run. I think it would be for the best if you all went home, and left us to deal with these two criminals our own way.”

“Who the fuck are you, kid?” Ulrus was indignant as ever, but in his arrogance, he kept his focus on Jon. “This doesn’t concern you at all, so why don’t **you** run on home to your little village, and leave this criminal to us? When he’s paid his debts to our people, you can have the remains!”

Jon was trapped in the middle of a boiling confrontation, and as tempers reached a fever pitch, his ears were overwhelmed not with the shouting of boastful voices, but the quiet desperation of arms growing tired on drawn bowstrings, and the ache of those same materials as they strained to hold together.

No one was willing to give an inch in either direction, and he felt some sense of guilt in thinking that he might be one of the only people to survive the standoff, miraculous as that would be.

“Don’t you **ever** threaten my hunters!” Terek shouted, and though he had no weapon to defend himself, his presence on the battlefield still commanded a certain degree of respect; such was the strength of his reputation. “Leave this place at once, *wolf*. If you go now, perhaps we’ll show mercy and let you keep your lives!”

The sharp, foolish insults being tossed back and forth between warriors and hunters that shared no real quarrel were drowned out by the sound of an arrow passing by Jon’s skull. The subtle ***fwish*** of the feathers passing by his ears was the only thing he could hear, and because of his bondage, he was only able to tell that it came from the side of the otters; he’d never know for sure who the one who loosed it was.

Like the entrance of a god among men, the arrow silenced everyone in turn, and all parties whirled around to watch the arrow stick harmlessly into the trunk of a tree...but not before it nicked the arm of a wolven archer.

“Guess we’re gonna have to take out the rest of the trash before we get to the one in the tree; **archers! LOOSE!**”

Ulrus gave the command, and the response was immediate. Aim was already taken, and several otters went down on the word, their flesh torn asunder by the cruel barbs and unusual cuts of the wolven arrowheads. Without needing Terek to direct them, the otters fired back, and both armies scrambled into the woods, looking for whatever cover they could find.

The thickets of trees were doing a splendid job of obscuring vision, and the grove that was full of angry soldiers appeared to empty in mere seconds, leaving Jon, Terek and Ulrus in the eye of the storm.

Both forces took positions once again, and the silence was broken by the hailstorm of arrows that followed, with trees and dirt absorbing the majority of the blows. A pair of unlucky wolves dropped from behind their cover, and they barely had time to clench at their wounds before a series of further arrows punctured their flesh, and they moved no more.

Terek and Ulrus were too busy with posturing to feel any guilt, but it was weighing heavily on Jon’s mind before he could even confirm that anyone had actually *died* from their wounds. He could still hear their bodies slamming helplessly against the ground, and there was something different about the sound of an arrow piercing flesh, when it wasn’t for the purpose of hunting.

They can’t really be going to all of this trouble just for the right to punish me. Maybe Terek was telling the truth...was Ulrus leading this campaign just to try and invade the otter villages?

A jaded and defenseless Jon sagged into his bondage, keeping his eyes on the ground. He quietly hoped for an errant shot to find its way into his heart, but as the arrows continued to fly in the distance around him, his body was blocked on both sides once more, as Terek and Ulrus descended on him.

“I told you to back off, otter. He’s **ours first!**”

“You planning on carrying him back yourself, dipshit? You’re not gonna have an army left to take him with if you don’t surrender!”

“I know you aren’t used to wearing any kind of armor, but trust me...these leathers are thick enough to stop an arrow from 50 feet. You’ll be glad you had them if you’re really going to try and rescue that boy.”

Pentia’s words were chafing on Likita’s mind just as much as the armor she’d been given was irritating her body, but there was a new sense of confidence in the wolfess, just from having worn it. Where she usually only wore thin leathers to protect her breasts, and a loincloth for the sheer sake of modesty, she now wore long, thick pants that troubled her body with their weight, but filled her with a sense of security, knowing that she’d have an extra layer of defense against potential hunters and thieves.

The slim cover upon her breasts had been upgraded, as well, and though it wasn’t quite a flattering outfit, a long, black tunic of similar leather now covered her entire torso, and if Pentia was telling the truth, it would be all that Likita needed to stand up to the legendary archers that were said to guard the outskirts of the otter tribe lands.

Likita wished that she was visiting on friendlier business; the anger that was boiling over in her heart dulled her vision, and robbed her the chance to properly appreciate the beauty of the forest that she was wandering through. Typical trees of brown bark and green leaves surrounded the territory of the white wolves, and they were beautiful in their own right, but to actually see the brilliant, red bark and confusingly blue leaves upon the trees was something that Likita would never forget. She didn’t feel as though she was walking through a forest, but a **mine**, surrounded by tall, ruby shafts that blossomed petals of sapphire.

If not for the twisted way of life that surrounded the otters, Likita would have wondered why Jon would ever have left such a beautiful place.

“I have to imagine the otters aren’t a proper reflection of the beauty of this place,” she thought aloud as she wandered. Her ears were perked and constantly twitching, picking up on the sound of every tiny critter that wandered through the bushes, and every insect that skittered across the dirt. The ground was such a bland shade of light tan that it seemed to disappear in the presence of the gorgeous trees, but Likita couldn’t help but notice the utter lack of grass.

It would have made more sense in a properly arid climate, but the air wasn’t as dry as she’d expected, and she could remember plentiful fields of tall, soft grass covering the plains outside of Felinar. Less than a hundred miles to the southwest, she couldn’t imagine the weather would have been so different as to

cause such a change.

That fact only amplified her sense of concern as she continued to move carefully through the forests, ever wondering if there was an arrow being aimed at her head. Her leathers were emblazoned with the mark of Felinar, which Pentia assured her would grant safe and easy passage, but there was no indication of how long it had been since Pentia ventured into the home of the otters, herself, and even **if** she were safe there, she'd have to lose those garments to make it back to her own lands without being called a traitor.

If I ever go back, that is.

Her mind was still torn on the subject, but Likita didn't have time to think about that. Her mind was busy commanding her legs to bounce forward over a small inlet creek of saltwater, and allowing her eyes to appreciate the glow of shimmering, cyan blue as the sun beat across it. Her feelings were being pushed down, little by little, until she could feel them like a proper weight on her stomach, as if she'd gorged herself on unhealthy meals for the entirety of her stay in Felinar...but it was a feeling she was familiar with.

Many times in the past, she had to bite back and swallow down her feelings. It was the duty of a medicine woman to heal all of those in need, regardless of their species, their culture, or their lifestyle. She wasn't the type to ever judge for such petty reasons, but it was with a bitter heart that she was forced to heal some of the same hunters that treated her like less than a living being; that kind of work was poisonous to the soul, and she needed to release those toxins before they reduced her mind to a quagmire of rage.

She wasn't expecting to have an opportunity cleanse herself so soon.

“I don’t need an army to carry a pathetic waste of flesh over my shoulder, and if I have to carry you along with him, *so be it*. If you’re going to stand in my way, then you’re going to die a hero...which sounds like it’s to your benefit. You wouldn’t want to live a criminal...after all, you **are** the greatest hunter in your tribe, aren’t you?”

So great was the desire for revenge that Ulrus was willing to sacrifice all of those who’d helped him to arrive in the tribe lands of the otters, just to get his paws on Jon one last time. His need for recompense was far beyond the reaches of obsession, and Terek was fearful, not that he was seeing himself in Ulrus, but seeing what he *could* have become, if he allowed his fascination with punishment to continue.

He also wasn’t sure if he was too far gone to stop himself, as he looked down Jon’s quivering, helpless form, and considered what he could still get away with before his own people brought him to a trial.

“So great that I could kill a wolf without a weapon...even when he was pointing an arrow right at my forehead.”

Ulrus was legendary in his stamina, and his wrists weren’t so much as flinching as he continued to hold a perfectly trained arrow on his target. “All I have to do is let go of this hold, and you won’t have a chance to back up those words, otter.”

“You could have killed me at any time, by that logic. Is there some reason why you’re holding back?”

“Because I’m arrogant enough to admit that I want an apology from you for causing all of this.”

The arrows were still flying all around them, and mindlessly, the members of each tribe were picking each other off, one by one. When arrows ran low, the wolves began drawing their hatchets, and the otters removed their knives, and the combat turned truly vicious; even their leaders refused to look and acknowledge the violence that occurred.

Jon wasn’t so lucky. If he dared to pick his head up in the slightest, he’d be forced to gaze upon the corpse of an otter with a pair of arrow shafts sticking out of his neck, the light not yet fully gone from his eyes. He could see streaks of blood painting the ground, and finally, at the sight of a knife boring into the temple of a white wolf, he winced his eyes shut and hung his head in disgust, still blaming himself for the entire battle.

Even in the confines of his own mind, Jon couldn't find peace, and he started to whimper in place, pushed to a breaking point by a pair of men that were more concerned with tanning his hide than they were with saving their own people. "**You** invaded our land, wolf. It's one thing to send a messenger and *ask* for a fugitive, and another entirely to bring an entire hunting party and start flinging arrows at the locals!"

"Your forces loosed the first arrows, otter. We acted purely in the defense of our own lives."

It was a poor excuse, and even Jon would have been quick to admit that, if he weren't afraid to speak.

"If you hadn't put your lives in a dangerous situation in the first place, then none of this would have been necessary!"

CRACK!

Ulrus didn't get a chance to reply. A thick, swollen tree branch nearly broke upon the back of his head, and before Terek had the chance to mock his opponent, his eyes were filled with the vision of what looked like a falling tree. It was the same branch, wielded by a furious wolfess, playing savior to the otter who once stuck his neck out for her.

Another sickening **WHACK** followed the second blow, and Terek fell right back, thumping the back of his head on the ground and leaving him unconscious before his skull had a chance to bounce a second time.

"**You** caused this by chasing down an innocent otter that you were jealous of," Likita growled down at Ulrus, kicking his dazed form in the gut multiple times as she spoke, "And **you** caused it by treating Jon so poorly that he was forced... to leave...in the first place!"

Likita's shin was bruised from the force of impact, but behind the dull, radiating pain that ran up along her leg, there was a blissful sense of satisfaction welling up across her body. It warmed her soul to the point that she felt goosebumps from the release of her frustration, and the catharsis was so great that tears began to well up in the corners of her eyes.

No time for tears now. Save Jon now, cry later.

Ever proving her resourcefulness, Likita brushed the forming tears with the back of her arm and gazed upon Jon with such a great sense of regret that it washed away the good tidings of her vented anger. He was even *slimmer* than he was when she first saw him, and his body was covered in small cuts, a sign of the way that he'd been literally dragged back to the village. She was certain that bruises covered his flesh underneath the coat of his fur, and even if she couldn't see them, she could nearly feel the ache radiating from his body as she approached it.

A mentally broken Jon twitched at her approach, but she refused to give him the space. She hastily tugged at the natural bondage of the tree, doing all that she could to release him from it, and naturally, to pull his head free from the twisted trunk, she had to grip him by the base of his thick, tired tail, and give it a firm yank.

In any other situation, Jon was sure that he would have enjoyed it, but as he fell back into the puddle of Terek's blood, slowly forming from the side of his battered face, he met with freedom like a starving child to a banquet meal. His mind couldn't wrap around the concept, and through misty eyes, he gazed to Likita, shook his head without thought, and stood up on trembling legs. They could scarcely carry his weight, but his exhaustion wasn't enough to overcome his trauma, and one rickety step after another, he began sprinting off into the woods, stumbling the whole way.

"W-wait! **Jon!** I'm not going to hurt you!" Likita cried out after him, able to see in the pits of his irises that he recognized her. "You need to come back so I can treat your injuries!"

Likita would have found catching up to Jon an easy task, if not for the small rain of arrows that flew past her, missing by mere inches. One arrow put her armor to the test, and while she winced at the impact of the arrowhead, she didn't see any penetration, and regretfully, she held completely still.

"I didn't see this one at the start. She doesn't look like quite like the others, either..."

Delor was one of the lucky few to survive the battle. Each side began with a little over twenty of their own, and where the otters were down to just five, the wolves appeared to be entirely decimated, save for the lucky few who were able to retreat before the arrows found them.

"She's got the mark of Felinar on her armor. Wrong place, wrong time?"

"Wrong place, wrong time," Delor agreed. "Feels kinda rotten to claim a war prisoner that wasn't even **in** the war, but...here we are."

Delor made the mistake of reaching out to grab Likita, who was shaking with rage all over again. She met his grip with her own and held his wrist tight in her grasp, and her eyes narrowed on him with a passionate hatred that even Ulrus wasn't familiar with. "You let Jon get away from me...I came **all this way**, and you idiots let him get away from me!"

"So you *were* part of the army that was here to steal him away from us?"

"No," Likita paused and forced out a heavy, steaming breath. "I came on my own, and I want nothing to do with you, or with Ulrus. I just want to get Jon out of here, and take him somewhere that he'll be safe!"

Delor broke his wrist free, and only his better sensibilities kept him from striking

Likita down. “That traitor just caused dozens of us to be killed, and probably sparked a war between the otters and the white wolves. It doesn’t matter if you consider yourself aligned with them or not...you and the big guy are coming with us. I’m not gonna let a pair of valuable prisoners slip through my grasp.” Though wounded, the archers that remained weren’t going to miss Likita from such a close range, and though she had faith in her new armor, she didn’t think it was intended for repeated uses.

Most importantly, her head was still exposed, and as long as it was on her shoulders, she was going to use it, rather than thinking she could outrun an entire band of hunters once more.

“Just keep your paws off of me, stranger. I’ll go peacefully.”

“Smart girl, aren’t you? Perhaps there’s some hope for you after all...”

Delor kept his sights trained on Likita, and the rest of the hunters kept their arrows upon her body. She could feel an ethereal sting, as if they’d already pierced her flesh, and it kept her from trying to make any sudden or heroic moves.

She’d already been sidetracked in her mission to save Jon once before; this time, however, the tables were turned, and the otter that she saw running away from the battlefield wasn’t the one that she’d come to save.

Running. Just keep running.

Footpaws were already bleeding, and leaving a thin, messy trail that any experienced hunter would be able to follow, if they wanted to.

Still hear noise. Arrows? Knives? Doesn't matter. Keep running.

Jon didn't trust his muzzle to open for any reason, other than to draw air to his lungs. His mind was poisoned from all of the torture, and it was growing delirious from the lack of sleep and nourishment. The ruby brilliance of the trees betrayed him as his exhausted mind saw pillars of blood bursting up from the ground, and he foolishly winced his eyes shut and continued to bolt forward, with only good intentions to protect him from crashing into a rock, or tumbling over a cliff.

Whatever powers ruled over the land that Jon called his home, they watched over him just long enough for his body to accept the realities of what had been done to it. He was stripped naked, and while the daytime climate was plenty warm enough to support such a lifestyle, the evenings were too chilly to be comfortable, much less to be safe. His body was completely empty of nutrients, and even stepping in the shallow bed of a saltwater creek was enough to halt his forward progress.

Gracelessly, he tumbled over, and his mind ignored the impact. Survival instinct left him scrambling around himself to drink blindly from the river he'd just stepped in, and at the first taste, he thought it was just his own crimson essence that he was tasting. A second pawful revealed the salt content to be from the ocean, rather than his own body, and Jon's beaten, shattered consciousness was left on the edge of a decision.

Jon knew that it was wrong to run away from Likita as he had, but his legs ignored the better judgment of his mind to stay and allow her to help him. If he'd done that, he might be in better straits than he was, but he had no idea the kind of trouble Likita was in for her sacrifice, and as well as he knew his own territory, he couldn't possibly guess at where he'd run to, or how far.

It would have been easy for Jon to decide to be a raving lunatic and wander around mindlessly, panicking every time that he came across adversity...but someone very close to his heart had taught him that to run endlessly from a problem meant that it still controlled you, no matter how far you ran, or where you ran to.

On the very brink of collapsing into insanity, Jon instead settled his head down

next to the shore of the creek, opened his eyes for a moment, and gazed up to the sky.

The sunset was casting a shimmer of gold onto the otherwise pristine, blue water, and as his eyes followed the light, it carried his gaze toward the ocean, where the inlet came from.

My destiny isn't on this continent. I'm not sure what my life is meant for, but I won't find it here, just waiting around to die...

As a boy, Jon had trouble believing that there were any other species in the world, save for the otters that he knew. His hybrid ancestry seemed like a cruel joke until he met other races in his adolescence, but even then, he couldn't imagine the world being much bigger than the territory that he was forced to call his home. As he grew older, he watched the world expand around him, and each time he decided to try something new, or go someplace he'd never been, his life improved, until he finally met Likita.

She didn't make that sacrifice so that I could just lay here and accept my fate. She made it so I could change my life.

That someone could care so much for him was still a foreign concept to the otter, but with a sigh so deep that it left him lightheaded, Jon released as many of his inner demons as he could, and began crawling across the dirt, looking for some errant grass. The warmth trapped in the soil would fade before too long, and he was determined to make it through that cold, bitter night, and many more to come.

“So you two **do** have a history.”

The elders of the otter village realized their mistake in trusting Terek with what seemed to be such an important task, and this time around, they decided it was best to go through the interrogation process on their own terms.

Compared to all of the other otters she'd ever seen, Likita had to admit that these particular mustelids were thick around the middle, holding shapes that didn't lend themselves to being great hunters, or even *swimmers*.

“I lived in the same village that he currently does, and I was the practicing medicine woman until he turned into a treacherous snake. After that, I felt it best not to remain in the village any longer.”

The otter in the middle, perhaps the largest of all, leaned forward from his rear and cocked a brow at Likita. “So where does Jon factor into all of this?”

“Jon was wounded outside of our village. I'm still not sure of the cause of his wounds, but he surely would have perished if I hadn't found him.”

“Yours is a kind soul, Likita,” the otter replied. “But you've give aid to a criminal. This is an offense that cannot be overlooked.”

“Where I come from, criminals and innocents alike are to have their wounds treated. A medicine woman is not allowed to discriminate who she heals, and who she does not.”

“We aren't in the land you come from, Likita. Where your actions may have been rewarded in your home land, they are punishable by severe consequence, here.”

Likita resisted her inward urge to spit at the ground. “His crime was desertion, prompted by the treatment he received from the other hunters in the village. Is a logical response to being abused **really** a crime?”

“Jon never brought his concerns before our council,” the otter to the right chimed in. Even to that point, Likita wasn't given the honor of their names.

“How are we supposed to right a wrong if we aren't aware of it?”

“Was he ever given the chance to do so? Is there some sort of tribunal process wherein he would be allowed to address the elders with his concerns?”

The only thing keeping the wolfess in check was the fact that Ulrus and Terek were forced to kneel by her side, while she was allowed to stand before the council. Being shown a sliver of respect was enough to keep her temper in check, but as the otters continued to dance around the question, her frustration grew, and she worried about her ability to control it.

“We are a truly busy council, and our time is extremely valuable,” the otter to the left finally chimed in. The three mustelids at the back of the tent were taking up almost all of the room inside of it, leaving Likita closer to the Terek and Ulrus than she ever wanted to be. “Our years left on this mortal plane are limited, and *bullying* is not a concern which the council is equipped to handle!”

“So you allowed fifteen of your own kind to be pointlessly slaughtered, to retrieve one member of your tribe; one that you continue to suggest is useless? Is there **any** logic to your decisions?!”

To hear it uttered out loud would make anyone laugh at the concept, but the elders remained steadfast in their positions, both of determination, and their literal inability to move without sincere effort. “We would not expect someone of a canine nature to understand our decisions,” the middle otter spoke up once more, “But we can assure you that we give no orders in a hasty manner. We carefully consider all options before we make a decision, and when we suspected treachery in Terek, we sent out a small hunting party to deal with him. The death of your fellow wolves, and our own people, can all be attributed to the fact that Jon deserted us.”

Likita was speechless, leaving her jaw to hang open in shock as she tried to force out a single word.

No sound ever came.

“If Jon doesn’t desert our village, he never meets you. If he doesn’t meet you, then you never have to betray your own people. If you don’t betray your own people, Jon isn’t forced to run back to us with his tail between his legs, and if **that** doesn’t happen, then the wolves have no reason to come and hunt him down. The source of that battle is literally one slippery little otter, and **you** helped him to escape our grasp, yet again.”

“That...that is the *worst* train of logic I’ve ever heard! What happened to having some decency and self-control? If cooler heads prevailed, the wolves would have realized that Jon didn’t need to be hunted, and your people would have realized that Jon’s desertion wasn’t a crime, but an act of self-preservation!”

The middle otter scoffed and turned his chin up at Likita the best that he could.

“You mock our laws by suggesting such a thing! You may have no appreciation for our culture, and it seems that you have forsaken your own, but that doesn’t mean you get to live outside of the laws that are in place! Jon will be captured, he will be returned, and he will stand trial before us!”

Ulrus was still suffering the nausea and lightheadedness of a concussion, but there was no state poor enough for him to not feel rage at being denied his chance at revenge. “He has still wronged the wolves, kind elder. If you claim that he must stand trial, then he must **first** stand trial before us!”

“He wronged us *before* he wrong you, Ulrus of the white wolves. You seek not for recompense, as we do, but for blind and passionate revenge over a slight. Jon will repay his debts to us through whatever punishment that we deem fit, and then, you will be able to collect on your revenge from him.”

Terek kept utterly silent. Even if his jaw wasn’t broken on the right mandible, he had no desire to admit to Likita that Jon was already put through terrible humiliation for his crime; anything further was just the council of elders being greedy.

“If we allow him to stay in the otter territories, we won’t ever see him again... I’m not a fool. We need to be allowed to exact our revenge on him first, so that we can guarantee our honor and traditions are kept. Surely, the way of the otters is to show kindness and patience to outsiders, is it not?”

“That you still live is an insult to all of the people who have died, partly at your behalf, Ulrus. That we allow you to kneel in our presence is a greater kindness than you deserve, and more patience than you should ever expect...asking for more is nothing short of spitting in our faces.”

“Tell that to my hunters that were needlessly felled because of one of **your** kind. We may not agree on much, but we both know that none of this would have happened if not for the presence of that skinny little prick, floating his way down the river and into the heart of a traitorous medicine woman.”

Likita wasn’t going to deny her affection for Jon before the council, and there was no longer any point in hiding it from Ulrus, but she worried that her confession would only make matters worse for the poor otter when he returned...and she was losing faith that he would ever make his way back to the village.

“To deflect an act of war onto one of our own is inexcusable, Ulrus. Jon may be a deserter and a disgrace, but your hunters ultimately invaded our land. Of this, Likita is correct, and this council will not sit by and listen to you make such *vile* accusations.”

The ability to speak back over their own words was one that the council was sure to abuse, and it was a pointless interaction, given how helpless Likita and Ulrus were in the face of their power. They’d already explained their logic of blaming Jon for everything that happened, but to the public, they could blame Ulrus and his hunters for the death of their own people.

No matter what the elders told to the rest of the village, the mustelids would be on their side, and Likita would be seen as any enemy by anyone who she might have to heal later on.

She didn’t imagine Ulrus would be lucky enough to have to worry about that problem.

“I was certain that you would sit by and listen to them,” Ulrus claimed. “Even as I am now, I could outrun you to the edges of your territory, and my hunters would be there, waiting to shoot you down as your bloated bodies crossed those lines.”

Likita turned her head, casting a gaze of shock upon her former tribesman.

“**Ulrus!** Have some damned respect, you idiot! You’re going to get both of us killed!”

“That won’t matter. My hunters are surely on their way back to the village already, spreading the word of what happened when we were so *kindly welcomed* by the people of the otter villages. A force of white wolves will be descending on this pathetic realm within days, and the only way you’re going to escape with your lives, is if **mine** is safely guarded until they arrive...I don’t really care what you do with the bitch.”

Even if she knew that a betrayal was in order for her, Likita couldn’t contain her emotions any longer. Turning to Ulrus in her stance, she kicked the ignorant fool across his muzzle, and though his fang tore a small gouge into the top of her foot, she won the day, as the tooth was sent flying, along with a small hail of blood. She was winding up for another strike when the guards at the front of the tent finally accosted her, but they could never contain the burning embers of hatred that were her eyes, trained entirely on a man that she once considered to be a fair and equal leader.

“If I **ever** get free of this place...there will be no corner of the world that you can hide in, Ulrus!” The elders gestured to Likita to be taken away, and even as they pulled, she kicked and struggled against them, gnashing her fangs through the air and making sure that Ulrus would never forget the sight of her. “If you flee to the ocean, I WILL DROWN TO MAKE SURE THAT THE WATER DOESN’T GET TO KILL YOU FIRST!”

Her words were barked with such volume and authority that otters across the village couldn’t resist their curiosity. They poked their heads out of their tents, shacks and homes, and watched as the only example most of them know of a canine was dragged, kicking and screaming, across the middle of the village...a sight that the elders knew would be burned into their memories.

Baby steps, Jon. Baby steps.

Of course, for the wounded otter, it wasn't as simple as just taking one quick step in front of the other. When he awoke the next day, it really was a lot more like watching an infant try to sprint for the first time, instead of a grown man who was sure of his footing.

The stream wasn't any good for providing drinking water, and after almost two days of being given only the faintest rations to drink, that was his highest priority. He knew that fish would be likely to swim at least that far up the stream, but a freshwater inlet was going to be the true key to his survival.

Exhaustion stole him into the night, and the cool, brisk air of the morning shook him out of it. He'd had to work for every drop that he could find, but what little grass was left would collect morning dew, and that same vegetation could be wrung over a container, if he had one to work with.

"I'll waste my last hours if I spend them trying to strain water from a few blades of grass," Jon had to admit it to himself, even if there wasn't an apparent solution nearby. He didn't have any clothes to build a drain to catch humidity, and the morning sun was already cresting over the horizon and blinding him from a distance. "But if the ocean is to the west, then there must be fresh water to the east..."

Jon didn't relish the idea of heading further inland when he was trying to make his way to a boat, a raft, or even a sturdy leaf to carry him away from the island, but he wasn't going to make it to the coast alive if he didn't find a fresh source of water. He knew from his days in the otter territories that there was a number of different routes that he could use to make his way out to the ocean, but none of them were ways that would safe to take, anymore.

He snickered to himself as he continued to walk back to the east on wobbling knees. "I may as well change my name to 'resources.'"

Without heading back toward his home village, Jon knew that his name was going to be dragged through the mud for the rest of his days. He could already guess that he was being blamed for the wolveren invasion, and his desertion would soon be nothing compared to the war crimes that would be placed upon his head, like a crown of iron thorns.

He didn't have the charisma of Terek, and he wasn't the kind of underhanded snake that Ulrus was. He was just a failed hunter, lost in the woods and looking for a drink of water; it hardly felt fair to pin the war that was to come on him, but

he knew that's what was happening, even as he walked further and further toward the edge of the territorial lines.

The otter village of Muskaton, where the battle took place, was the furthest outpost in the land that made up the otter territories. There were no other villages proper for the mustelids to occupy, and this caused a sense of chaos, as the elders tried to maintain order over all of the different tribes of otters that dotted the land between the painted trees and the coastal plains.

As it was so many times in history before, the lack of reach by a centralized government failed to enforce regulation on the outliers, and everyone was suffering for the lack of organization. Signs of it were riddled along the stream as Jon continued to follow it, watching as small rocks gathered, little by little, forming brooks for the saltwater to run through. There would be some kind of a deeper run or pond nearby, and though it wouldn't be fully purified, it would be just enough for Jon to live off of, until he could find a better place.

He wasn't the first one to stop there.

A crude shelter of sticks and leaves was toppling over against a tree by the brook, and Jon wrinkled his nose as his nostrils accepted a disgusting truth; whoever was here last didn't do a good job of picking up after their own literal waste, and the pliable, sandy soil by the shore of the brook would easily allow for particles and sediments to seep into the water supply.

"Shit like this is the reason why Terek was trying to start a war in the first place. We've got all of the water in the world, but most of it isn't drinkable until it reaches the inlets by the white wolves. But...they were complaining about a water crisis, too. Is the problem coming from somewhere else?"

Jon didn't have time to dwell on the thought. Saving the world from those who inhabited it was a noble cause, but he had to save himself before he was able to do that, and finding a place to sleep wasn't the need he was trying to fulfill.

There would be better water further down, but the plentiful, fallen wood at the brook made it the ideal place to collect hydration. He looked down at his claws with a shudder, released a bitter sigh, and began ripping at the bark of the nearest tree.

Her drive to protect those she cared about was what first brought Likita to the decision to be a medicine woman. Though she didn't always agree with the people that she healed, there was an undeniable and very *real* sense of fulfillment in seeing that she'd saved a life, and she hoped that her good deeds would inspire those she healed to do the same.

She'd healed Ulrus plenty of times before after his hunting expeditions, and now, she only wished that she'd taken the arrows from his quiver and stabbed his eyes out with them.

"You know, if he were a real man, he wouldn't have run."

Metal shackles were keeping Likita from doing exactly that, not to mention the fact that Ulrus wouldn't be allowed to go anywhere near an arrow for the foreseeable future.

"If he were a real man, he would come back. He'd storm the village, hailing arrows from the trees and leading an invasion that would cripple all of these little river rats."

The leather armor that was so graciously given to Likita was stripped from her body, and though it was hard to be thankful, the wolfess **had** to thank her lucky stars that none of the males of the tribe decided to have their way with her when she was at her weakest point. To her surprise, it was the *females* who disrespected her body, taunting her for the size of her breasts and the width of her hips; such a body wouldn't be as functional for hunting and swimming, and the mustelid women made sure that Likita was aware of her supposed shortcomings.

Those insulting words came with the occasional grope of her chest and smack upon her rear, but the most sacred parts of her body had been saved, and thankfully, Ulrus was chained up to his own pole on the other side of the prison tent, keeping the biggest threat to her body at a safe distance.

"If he was a **real**, real man, he would cut through the side of this tent right now with a knife carved from the bones of his enemies, free us from these shackles, and turn against the people who so willingly betrayed him."

Likita was saving her breath, at first. Her arms were pulled behind her head and tied together at the wrist, where a series of ropes met with the metal binds that kept her stuck to a pole that was once a tall, mighty tree of ruby flesh.

Set upon her knees, the wolfess found her position to be exhausting, especially after the first two days, and she didn't want to waste any breath on her former

tribesman. His words, however, were striking every chord with devilish intent, and her heart was racing with frustration when she finally turned her gaze from the cold, hard ground.

“You do realize, you fucking idiot, that the bones of his enemies would come from **your** corpse? I don’t think that he’s got enough time to come back here and harvest the skin from your body before he makes this daring rescue that you’re counting on!”

“Counting on? *Please*. He’s long gone by now, probably off to some far corner of the world, and that’s if he even made it past the edges of the territory. He probably got poked so full of arrows that you wouldn’t be able to tell him apart from an oversized quiver.”

Chains rattled as Likita tugged against them, still filled with the fury necessary to lash out at the fallen hunter, even if her mind was aware that she couldn’t possibly move. “He is **alive**! He didn’t escape that battle just to be taken down by some two-bit hunters on the fringe of society!”

“That’s the reality that you’ve never had to deal with, Likita. You lived the pampered life of a medicine woman, and th-
“*Pampered?!*”

“And that means that you’ve never had to deal with certain realities, like bad luck,” Ulrus carried on as if the interruption never happened. “You see the aftermath of it in your safe, tidy little tent, but you don’t see it happening in the real world. You don’t get to see a group of trained warriors getting taken down by bandits. You don’t see the hunters that get caught off guard by a creature three times their size, and twice their strength. You don’t see a child on his first hunt getting stung by a rare and deadly insect, but these things **do** happen, and the reality is that Jon is the luckiest damn creature I’ve ever met. You can’t outrun death, and you certainly can’t dodge it forever!”

Likita was glazing over a lot of what Ulrus had to say to her. It was rare that he treated her with any respect, and his words rarely held even a grain of truth, but as a medicine woman, she knew the final line to be entirely true.

“...You and Terek are the only people who can change that, because you’re the ones who can keep death from coming for him in the first place. You two can admit that you’re wrong, stop this war from happening, and keep the people of the otter territories from being whipped into a frenzy, all to hunt down one of their own kind!”

Ulrus shook his head the little bit that he could. “It’s too late for that. The rest of our people will soon march on these lands, and there’s nothing that I can do to stop it. The otters are just as powerless to oppose it, so if you just wait a minute, you’ll be home again, and none of this will really matter.”

“I’ve got no home where you are,” Likita snapped back at him. “And you dare? You **dare** to tell me that it’s too late to do something when Terek is just a few tents away, being tended to for his injuries? I’m kneeling **in a puddle of my own piss, Ulrus!** They won’t even unshackle me to let me off into the damn woods to relieve myself! If there was ever a single drop of love in your heart for me, after all of the boastful claims that you made, you would at least **try** to prevent this, and beg for our freedom!”

It was too late for Likita to try and feign a romantic interest in Ulrus, and even if she were to do that, he’d see right through her charade, but she figured it was worth a try to appeal to whatever sense of good will existed in him, if there was any to be found.

“Eh. I kinda like the way you’re stinking up the joint, honestly.”

Likita dipped her head and closed her eyes, refusing to as much as look at the ground between her legs. “You are a disgusting fucking pervert, and I feel no remorse for whatever these creatures do to you when our punishment comes around.”

“In case you forgot, I pinned most of the trouble caused here on **your** head, and I think the elders are more likely to believe me than they are to listen to you, especially after the spectacle you made of yourself when you were dragged away from their tent.”

“I meant every word I said, Ulrus. If I found you drowning, I’d save your life, just so you could see my smiling face before I slit your throat and watched you drown in a pool of your own blood, instead.”

Ulrus swayed gently against his chains and snickered. “Those words lose a little bite every time that you utter them. I’m starting to think that you’re just trying to cover up some feelings for me, still.”

“And you sound like a raving lunatic, every time you suggest that I might feel anything for you beyond hatred.”

“Love and hate are best friends, Likita. Where one goes, the other will follow, sooner or later.”

“Then I guess I’d better kill you before I have the chance to forget what a piece of shit you are.”

It wasn’t love, but **obsession** that kept Likita from drifting too far into despair. She fantasized about the way she would choke him to death with the chains upon her arms if she could move, or how she’d happily beat him over the skull with the heavy, iron links, until there was no skull left to crush.

Just as Jon was only days before, she was teetering on the edge of madness, but she didn’t have the luxury of running from her problems. She was going to have to face them head on, as the otters prepared for a tribunal in front of the elders.

They wouldn't be foolish enough to trust in Terek to complete a punishment anymore, but those were the new ways, suggested by the younger generation of otters.

The elders would stick to the old laws, and those punishments weren't at all concerned with humiliating the accused; pain was a **much** more effective motivator.

So deep in her fantasy was Likita that she hardly noticed the sound of a trio of otters entering the tent, and she wished that she'd fallen unconscious when she looked up, as she saw a few of the slim, lithe creatures that had berated her before, still wearing the same devious grins that played upon their lips as they mocked Likita the first time they saw her.

"Get up, sugartits. It's not polite to keep the elders waiting."

Two of the females were assigned to Ulrus, treating him as the more dangerous of the wolves that were in captivity. He wasn't going to try and make any sort of a daring escape, given the level of prestige that his name carried, and he went so far as to bow to the mustelids as they released him from his chains, as if he actually respected them, or their customs.

Probably thinks he can get a quick fuck out of those two...Likita mentally groaned. If they're as shallow as they treated me, however, I don't think he's wrong.

"You girls have all of the luck," Likita's carrier suggested. "Getting to tote around that tall, muscular wolf like you own him...and all I've got is a girl who's good for spitting out babies and starting wars."

"If we're lucky, maybe we **will** own him when this is all said and done."

Likita rolled her eyes. She resisted her every urge to run when her shackles were released, but it was only the exhaustion of her entire body that allowed her mind to keep cool, and prevail.

She wasn't surprised anymore, when she felt the sting of an open, flat palm against her ass. She was actually *relieved* when she felt an arm crook under her breasts from behind, easing some of the weight from her back, even when she knew that wasn't the intention of the perverted mustelid.

"Do wolves enjoy a body like this? Do they prefer a girl who takes effort to move around in the middle of a fuck?"

Knowing that she was actually on the *slim* side as far as canines were concerned, Likita gritted her fangs together and kept her mouth shut. Arguing with the woman assigned to corral her would only make things worse, and she already knew that she was walking into a trial with a hung jury.

"I can **hear** that rumbling in your throat. I know you want to lash out at me... take me down and rip my heart right out of my chest, still beating; you should

keep dreaming, if that's the case. Hide in those pathetic little daydreams as long as you can, wolfess. You're going to be glad that your mind has a place to run away to when we're done with your body."

There was still a chance; a glimmering, brilliant chance for Ulrus to redeem himself and defend Likita's honor, or at least encourage the elders to take mercy on her when they delivered her sentence.

He never even stood up for her to the girls that carried her away.

Stumbling upon Jon in the middle of his morning routine would have looked fairly normal, once he was settled into it.

Each morning, he made a pilgrimage down to a small pond with a wooden bowl, and collected water from a place where more rock and limestone had a chance to filter it. He relieved himself in a place further away from the water to prevent any kind of impurities from reaching the clean reservoirs, and when he returned to the forgotten campsite that he'd claimed as his own, he lifted a spear, whittled down from the branch of a tree, and narrowed his eyes on the glittery surface of the saltwater.

THOOMP! The sound had become a point of celebration for Jon, as his ears perked to the flopping and wiggling of a fish that would often follow. All nature of different sea life wandered to the inlets that moved further and further toward the middle of the continent, and Jon knew that the ones that wandered too far would likely die from the lack of sodium content in the ponds, regardless.

He didn't feel an ounce of remorse for the bass, salmon and trout that he speared, and he was actually starting to collect an extra backlog of fish for days that he didn't feel like hunting. Wrapping their bodies in steamed leaves was a great way to preserve the flesh, and he only had to dig a small hole in the shade of the trees to keep them away from other predators.

If not for the fact that there would be hunting parties looking for him, Jon realized that he could have stayed there forever, if he really wanted to. This *could* have been his new home, in another life. Instead, it was little more than a painful memory of what he was forced to do, all in the name of his tribe's cruelty.

The first night was terrible. His claws were scraped down to the nubs, and he still couldn't remember how many times he had to wash out the bowl before his blood was stripped away from the bark. Even a few days later, his nails weren't fully healed, and the tips of his digits were rubbed raw from carving out the bowl by hand.

The spear was too long and cumbersome to do by hand, but his unique heritage came in handy. His fangs were every bit as sharp as they were thick, and though it took the entirety of a period of sunlight to accomplish, he was able to whittle down a spearhead from a fallen branch, and that evening, he used it to pierce his first fish.

The second night was better, now that he had tools to work with. He was able to

use the bowl to scoop out a small area of dirt, creating a divot that would keep him just slightly warmer at night, and hide him from less experienced hunters and predators, so long as he stayed under the cover of some sticks and leaves. It made for a terribly uncomfortable evening of sleep, but it was better than sleeping out in the open, and he didn't have the energy at the time to build a fire from fallen sticks.

By the third night, he'd regained enough energy from the raw fish that he ate, and his first warm meal in literal weeks was so refreshing that he'd lost track of the days. He knew it couldn't have been more than a few, but the thing that kept him harkening back to his sense of time was the memory of how cruel his own people were to him.

If they treated him with such disrespect and hatred, there was no telling what they might do to Likita, and what they might have done to her **already**.

The brief respite from all of his pain and suffering was more than he could afford to take, but as he sat over the small, cozy fire that he kept burning throughout most days, Jon found it hard to pry himself up from his haunches. The scales were just *peeling* away from the fish in his paws, and with each bite he took, he could feel a sense of confidence building up inside; the bites weren't nourishment, after all. Each time his fangs pierced the flesh of a sea creature, it was a reminder to himself that people were wrong about him, and he experienced a genuine sense of pride in knowing that he **could** be a hunter, if push came to shove.

Presenting the catch of the day and evidence of his survival might give him an "I told you so" moment to hang over his tribe, but for his crime of desertion, he would soon hang over all of them, dangling from the end of a rope and making an example to the other otters.

I can't save her. Even if I stayed here for a month and gained strength that I didn't have before, it's my scrawny ass against an entire village of trained hunters. I'd be dead before I got anywhere close to her.

Blind heroism wasn't going to work for Jon, and he knew it. He tried not to remind himself of it too heavily, but keeping his footpaws firmly anchored to the ground was going to save his life, and *keep* him alive.

It wasn't going to save Likita, however, and he really wasn't sure that he could live with abandoning her to such a cruel fate.

*I could try to sneak in at night, but Muskaton has changed a lot since I was there last. I have no idea where the prison tents would be, other than resting as far from the elders as possible, and that could be in **any** direction. It's a suicide mission if I try, but if I don't...she's as good as dead.*

Jon paused in the middle of a bite, and an errant scale rolled down the side of his

chin as he swallowed a final mouthful of roasted fish. The tail dangled from his pawtips, hanging in front of his muzzle as the wasted part of something that was once fulfilling, but now, he was completely done with it.

Even if I somehow saved her...there's nothing left for me here. There's no place I can go.

With a grunt, he tossed the tailfin back into the fire and watched as flames overtook the green and yellow scales of the fish. They burned through a series of gold and amber shades before charring to a disgusting black, and within the hour, there was no evidence of their presence in the first place, save for ashes that would be swept away by the wind.

His heart and his mind stayed locked in conflict as Jon began picking up all of the spare fish that he'd set aside before. He kicked saltwater over the fire, hoping that it would cool before any of the hunters from Muskaton would have a chance to find where he'd been.

It was a long way to the ocean, and Jon didn't have nearly enough food to finish the trip.

Being stripped naked in front of an entire village would have been embarrassing enough, but the otters weren't going to stop there, when it came to Likita. Ulrus was the real offender, but his testimony before the elders the first time around was enough to shift their focus of blame to her, and with all parties involved still blaming Jon for ultimately starting the conflict, she was the nearest link to him, and that was all that seemed to matter.

"Before the gods of the oceans and rivers, our blessed lord of the waterways, Aquenta, you stand accused of fraternizing with a deserter. There is but verbal testimony to prove your guilt, but only your own verbal testimony to defend your innocence, and one of your own kind currently voices his disbelief at your claim."

The tent around the elders was composed of a series of whale bones. Their ribs made for long, large arcs, and they adhered nicely to leather wraps with just a little rope to hold the entire arrangement together.

This made it very easy for the leathers to be pulled down, leaving only a cage of bone around the elders, and a clear line of sight for the whole village to enjoy the rare sight of a tribunal. This was one *exceptionally* rare, given Likita's status as a foreigner, and already, the otters seemed hell-bent on finding her guilty for crimes of the flesh.

"Am...Am I supposed to say something?" she asked, finding it awkward to speak when she could literally feel the eyes of the crowd crawling over her skin. Her fur was painted with red and purple marks, strained from the bark and leaves of the unique trees that surrounded the village of Muskaton, and upon her torso, a red line and purple line crossed each other to form an "X," a mark of accusation that she couldn't remove until she'd proven her innocence. "I'm not familiar with your traditions. I'm sorry."

"It was not your turn to speak!" the middle elder declared; he simply needed a moment to catch his breath. "As I was saying...you are accused, and have only your own word as your defense. I have conferred with my fellow elders in private, and we believe that your testimony will not prove you to be innocent, but could be useful in tracking down the whereabouts of the deserter. If your words are the compass to guide us to justice, then we shall reduce our punishment, and perhaps even allow you to leave the village upon completion of the tribunal."

There was another pause, and this time, Likita perked an ear forward, listening to

hear the otter sucking in a long, exhausted breath. “You may proceed with your defense, wolfess.”

“My fellow canine has lied to you, honorable elders, but not about what I’ve done. I...I deny nothing. I shall make no excuses for my actions, fraternizing with Jon. I allowed my duties as a medicine woman to fall to the side of passion and lust, and for that, my own punishments are in order.”

“It is not the will of this council to accept your punishments as sufficient!”

“I understand,” Likita nodded, “But there are greater problems to be dealt with than my personal affairs. Under the guise of a scapegoat, the one you call the deserter, Terek means to start a war with the white wolves, and my tribesman, Ulrus, wishes to do the same.”

The ring of otters standing around the elder’s tent was quickly ablaze with curious and angry whispers. Needlessly starting a war, *especially* without the permission of the elders, was a grievous offense. Terek would likely be put to death, without any opportunity to defend his actions.

“That is a bold and outrageous claim to make in our homeland, wolfess. Have your years of healing the sick and wounded left you with a tainted mind?”

“I implicate not only Terek, but my own kind,” Likita reminded them. “I cannot explain why Terek would wish to seek war with our people, but...something is poisoning the water supply to the home of the white wolves. Our territory is ripe with illness because of this, and the only way to find fresh water again is to expand our borders, or find where the infection is coming from. I...I wish that I could claim Ulrus’ expedition to be of a peaceful nature, but I am certain that he came this way seeking war, and I promise that there are more wolves coming.” One might have expected Ulrus to lash out at Likita for her testimony, but he knew that doing so would implicate him, and bring truth to her words. As long as he didn’t show a reaction, he was doing the best job that he could to keep the otters in the dark.

“If the canine people wished to have clean water, why could they not seek it peacefully?”

“They used Jon as an excuse, hunting him down to satisfy a so-called tradition; it was the same excuse that Terek used to justify all of the punishment that Jon has already endured.”

The middle elder scoffed. “We authorized **no** such punishment, and as such, we do not recognize it to have happened!”

“It is my testimony that it did,” Likita argued, “And your inability to get off of your fat asses and control your pathetic excuse for a village champion is no reason for Jon to have to suffer further!”

The crowd was aghast at Likita’s willingness to speak her mind, but the

awestruck silence was just what she was looking for. “You’re going to let the idea of a single otter deserting your people spark a war that could spell decimation for **all of us**, and one man leaving your village is a *pitiful* excuse to look the other way and do nothing about it!”

While the crowd gathered in the center of the village stood in awe of Likita’s brash decision, Ulrus couldn’t keep from snickering at her. He did everything in his power to silence the noise, but he knew that his lips were curled in a grin, and he wouldn’t be able to hide that forever.

Thanks for taking the heat off of me, Likita. I know you wanna rip my guts out and strangle me with them...but after that, you’re never gonna get the chance.

“This...this accusation is an **outrage!** Do you really expect us to sit idly by and take this sort of verbal abuse from some ignorant, canine whore?!”

“You’ve sat by and taken everything else that’s happened to you over the past few years, far as I can tell. What’s one more wolf bitch gonna change?”

Likita rolled with their insults with a small grin on her own face, and the sight of such wiped the smirk right from Ulrus’ expression. He was in utter shock, seeing that she was able to smile in such a degraded state, but there she was, defying his every expectation and showing true grace under fire.

He was sure that it was going to get her killed before too long, but no one among the crowd had the courage to step forth and oppose her.

“Y-you...you have **no** respect for our people, you indignant slut! You wish only to seduce our males and help your people invade our land!”

“I’m only worried about one male in particular, and if you want my help in finding him, you’re gonna have to give me my clothes back and free me from these chains.”

“Finding him? We’re going to skin him alive and **BURN** the remains while you watch, and from your knees, you will know your fate before you’re forced to live it yourself!”

Ulrus wasn’t sure *when* she’d been pushed to the breaking point, but now that he was seeing Likita unleashed, he was thankful that shackles were keeping her corporeal form from getting any closer to him.

“Fine by me. At least I won’t have to look at your disgusting faces anymore... tell me, has any one of you actually *seen* your dicks in the last five years, or do you squat to pee like the women of your village?”

Were they able to lift themselves quickly enough to catch her, there was no doubt that the elders would have come down upon Likita with a fury not seen in the world for generations...but their bodies were incapable, and their soldiers were too busy snickering to listen to any orders given.

The middle elder, heaviest of them all, was fighting off a cardiac event when he

lifted his arm and pointed a wrinkled digit at the accused wolfess. “Tie her to a post...in the middle of town...and leave her there for the other wolves to gaze upon when they arrive! We shall show no mercy when the hour of their reckoning is upon us!”

Ulrus thought he knew Likita, inside and out. She seemed like a truly simple woman; easy to read, looking only to help others and be happy in her life. It seemed only fitting that she would go after Jon so blindly, but along the way, she never had any intention to harm anyone else, and she often went *out of her way* to help others.

She’d just stirred a frenzy in the otters that would almost certainly be her undoing, and Ulrus was still trying to figure out **why** she would do something so foolhardy. The tribunal came to such an abrupt end that he never actually stood trial for the otters that he’d killed, and he felt genuine remorse for the fact that he’d never even have to apologize for the lives he’d taken.

Moreover, he’d never get the chance, and it only then occurred to him what a dangerous mind Likita possessed.

That was your plan all along...you evil, little bitch...

If there was one thing an otter was good at, it was getting into trouble, and Jon would be the first to jump and admit that such was the case.

Like all people, they were prone to getting lost in the wanderlust when the mood struck, and the natural beauty of the rivers and creeks that divided Felinar from the otter territories was something to behold. Walking alongside the stream that he'd become so readily acquainted with during the week was nice enough, but Jon soon found himself in a series of tributaries that formed a gorgeous delta, and in the morning, he awoke to see the sunlight reflecting off of *hundreds* of different river paths, reflecting a pyramid of gold back into the sky. It lasted only for fleeting minutes, and the further he chased it, the less of it he could see, but moments like that were what he needed to keep his mind off of more serious issues.

The world around him, gorgeous and pristine, distracted him from the reality of the choice that he'd made.

The point of a spear against his throat as bandits accosted him from all sides was a poignant reminder that he wasn't able to run away from his problems, no matter where he went, and if the cougars were nice enough, they just might agree to let him run free and meet with his problems head on, like he should have in the first place.

"An otter with saber teeth? This **has** to be the one that those hunters were talking about...bet he'd fetch a pretty penny if we were to turn him over."

The cougars of Felinar weren't afraid of an invasion, partially because of their massive population, but equally because of their superior military prowess. Their population was of a female majority, and the rest of the continent saw their way of life as backwards, but when push came to shove, there was a reason why they were able to maintain their traditions: no one had the gall to try and tell them to do otherwise.

"Think we should clean him off and notify those otters at the tavern? I'm sure they'd be able to offer us more than anyone else...after a little negotiating, anyway."

"He's going back to the otters...but not in chains."

The small band of cougars were discussing the best way to deal with Jon's presence as if he wasn't even there, but their words didn't come across as rude, and their intentions were purely monetary. Their conversation was cut short, however, by the presence of someone who wasn't after money, and didn't much

care what the other otters wanted.

If not for Likita's own adventure, Jon's life might have been forfeit.

"You three can tell those otters at the tavern to piss off. This one is coming with me," Pentia claimed, and Jon was dumbfounded to see how readily the cougars that had him pinned down released him from their grasp. "I'll return the little *coward* to Muskaton myself."

"Coward?" Jon asked, able to safely pull in a breath once the weight of the spear was off of his neck. "I know I'm not perfect, but after what I've been through recently, I'm not going to stand by and take that kind of an insult!"

The other cougars were generous enough to allow Jon to stand. Pentia, however, knocked him right over to the flat of his back and rested a strong, eager footpaw upon his chest. She dug the pads of her foot into his chest and allowed her claws to extend, scraping them upon his flesh as a mere warning of what she could do to him, if she were so inclined.

"The girl risks her life to go back to your village, a place that has **completely** forsaken you, and you repay her by running away with your life, while she lives in chains?! Coward is the **kindest** word I can think of to describe a worm like you!"

There was a certain irony to the fact that fate was smiling upon Jon, but the vessel to deliver that fate was scowling at him, wanting nothing less than to rend the flesh from his bones. It wasn't lost on him, and he knew that the wrong choice of words would end with a fate worse than any the otters might have planned for him.

"She...she looked s-

"**Don't.** Don't make any excuses for your actions, otter. There is nothing you can say to justify running from her, and I don't want to hear your pathetic voice if you're only going to use it to try and weasel your way out of what you've done wrong."

Jon gulped and shivered against the soft, cushy grass. Even when he felt Pentia's claws retracting from the small pricks they'd left in his flesh, he didn't feel safe from the threat of a swift and *brutal* death. "I would ask if you're talking about Likita, but it would seem my reputation precedes me...I guess I'm flattered that she spoke about me to you."

"Even when my head was buried between her legs, you were the only thing that she could talk about. I'd worry that her love for you borders on obsession, but in my affection for her...I couldn't deny her the right to pursue you. I **deeply** regret that decision, but you won't live long enough to regret yours if you don't pick yourself up and march back to that village to fight for her."

There should have been some kind of a bitter sting in the pit of Jon's heart at

hearing of Likita's lack of faithfulness, but they'd never made any formal declaration of a relationship; they'd actually be running from such a title since they first met, and for the short amount of time they'd known each other, it was hard to believe how much they'd become intertwined in each other's fate. So great was Likita's compassion for the otter, and his infatuation for her, that they were becoming inseparable, even when he was trying to get as far away from his past as possible.

"You got an army lying around that I can borrow?"

"It's funny. She asked the same thing," Pentia replied. "In a different manner of words, of course, but she had the same concern, that she would need a military presence to have any chance of breaking through the defenses of the otters. The fact that you're here means that she *didn't* need an army, and it means that you don't need one, either."

Jon cocked a brow. "It would definitely help, don't you think?"

"Felinar has no concerns for the war that your people are trying to start. If they're foolish enough to bring their lust for money and land to our port city, we will drive them to the far ends of the continent, but we're not going to actively engage anyone in battle...we are humble people, and we're happy with the lives that we have."

"So...you can't offer me **anything**."

"I offered Likita a spare set of leather armor, and I'm hoping that she found it to be of use, but I'm afraid that I don't have anything left to lend out. If you're going to go back to her, you'll have to do it naked to the world, and to **her**."

Pentia wasn't going to let Jon skirt his responsibilities, and she wasn't afraid to keep him pinned until she could see an honest intention in his eyes to go and right the wrongs he'd committed. The war that was being pinned on his actions *wasn't* his fault, but the terrible punishments that Likita suffered *were* all his own doing.

"I w-was gonna go back and get her," Jon admitted, and it wasn't nerves, but emotion that caused his voice to trip over itself. "But I needed to p-procure a boat first. I needed to make absolutely sure that we'd h-have a way off of this damnable island!"

"Then why did you run from her when she came to save you?"

It wasn't a simple answer, and Jon's eyes tried to tell a story that his mouth simply wasn't able to repeat.

"...You've been through some harrowing trials, otter, but you're being given a golden chance to turn around and go the extra step that you were unable to take before. I don't know what you endured, but a spirit of mercy descended upon you, and you abandoned it."

“It was the last thing I wanted to do. I don’t know what happened, I...I just *panicked*.”

“I don’t mean to undermine your suffering, but it really doesn’t matter what happened to you, otter. What matters now is what you’re going to do about it, and if you’re going to do the right thing and return to her.”

“And then what?” Jon asked. “Spend the next week fleeing back to a boat on the edge of the island? And even **if** we made it there, there’s no telling if we’d be able to get out across the crags, or past the wrath of Aquenta!”

Pentia giggled. “You...you still believe in the old legend, that there’s an angry god in the water that turns wayward travelers back into the island with one swipe of his mighty claws?”

Jon was utterly silent.

“It seems that you’ve been told more than a few lies in your time, otter. There are indeed sharp, deadly crags of rock that stick up from the bay, and there are terrible storms that circle around the edge of the island, but...they’re *just* storms. There is no vengeful spirit out there trying to turn you back to your homeland.” After everything that had come to light over the past few weeks, Jon should have found it easier to accept that the god he grew up fearing was nothing more than a myth, but there was still a wash of vertigo splashing over his mind, and it made him thankful that he was already lying flat on his back; the world was *still* spinning just a little bit.

“You don’t need to run, **or** hide. I spoke with Likita about such arrangements when she first went out to find you, and I promised her that there would be a safe haven for the two of you to call home, if you were able to make it here alive.”

Pentia’s kindness was so unusual to Jon that he had some trouble believing it. After being shown nothing but contempt and hatred by everyone he knew, it was foreign, and borderline *unnerving* for someone to offer him a genuine and unrequited act of good will.

He’d only seen it once before, in Likita, and that made it obvious to him why she and Pentia were such fast friends.

“If you let me up, I’ll go, cougar. I only have one question to ask of you before I leave.”

“If I feel you deserve an answer, I’ll grant it,” Pentia replied. She lifted her footpaw and leaned over, extending her fingertips to him in a friendly gesture. Jon took a hold of her palm and stood upright as she assisted him. “You were so eager to outfit Likita for her adventure, and promise her a place to return to. Why couldn’t you just go with her? Why wouldn’t you escort her if you knew that it was going to be so dangerous for her?”

“Likita is but one of many people who has come before, seeking my wisdom and

assistance. If I were to follow every one of them to the ends of the world, I wouldn't be here for the next one to come along."

Fate was always a strange concept to Jon, but if he could put a definition to it, the idea of Pentia being able to find him so that she could direct him back to Likita could be nothing less than the meaning of the word.

"Did...did you know that I was coming, then? Did you know that this would happen?"

"Of course not, otter, but if I didn't listen to my better judgment, you'd be halfway across the ocean by now, wouldn't you?"

Jon shook his head. "It's Jon, and...no. Without her, I'm not going anywhere."

"Pentia," she gave her name, and a brief, warm smile. Standing taller and thicker than he was, it was easy for the cougar to grip him by the shoulders, literally spin him around, and leave a firm swat upon his ass in an antiquated form of encouragement. "Now get going! I'd be remiss if this was the last time you and I met, but I'd be *heartbroken* if I never saw Likita again...and you don't want to be the cause of my heartbreak, Jon."

The otter bounded forward and rubbed his backside, able to feel a mild sting upon his flesh where she'd made contact. The gesture was a few notches **above** encouragement, but it was plenty effective at forcing him back down the road he came, armed only with the crude, wooden spear that he'd forged with his own bloodied claws.

His slim, diminutive stature no longer betrayed the spirit of the hunter that was living inside of him, and even Pentia would admit to respecting his aura, if he were bold enough to ask her.

Being a medicine woman, Likita was used to seeing all manner of terrible wounds, sores and infections. Her stomach was accustomed to the sight of foul things that most would be lucky enough to never see, or, if inflicted upon them, they'd only see it once.

She hated to admit that Ulrus was right about part of her upbringing, and that living such experiences wasn't quite the same as seeing them, or healing them upon other people.

The marks were shallow, to start, but the otters were displaying the utmost disrespect for her. She was an avatar for Jon, to them, and they treated her with all of the cruelty that they could muster.

The first act was a mere slap from one of the guards who had escorted her to the elder's tent. "For disrespecting them, this is **much** less than you deserve," she'd declared, but her actions were only the very tip of the spear, and every otter in the village was now holding the proverbial weapon and driving it deeper into the core of her being.

The adults were aware of their actions, and conscious of the decisions they were making. When the adolescents and children began to imitate them, Likita wished that she could merely hide her shame from them, but whenever a parent would strike her, the children would smack her ankles and her thighs, and she could feel the hormonally charged youth gazing upon her with shameless and lustful eyes, sometimes to the detest of their own people, and sometimes to the praise of their peers.

Jon had suffered terribly, but he'd never been made to feel ashamed of his body, or the person that he was. His crime was for not being *proud* enough to be an otter, but to be a wolfess among them was a travesty that Likita was sure she would suffer for until her last breath.

The only saving grace was that Ulrus was being kept in a special tent near to the elders, denying him the right to see the brutality Likita underwent; she knew that he'd get some kind of a sick thrill from seeing it, and no doubt, some of the other otters suspected that she enjoyed her treatment, thanks to the exhausted tremble of her legs, and the constant, high whimper from her muzzle.

It was a cry for help, whether or not the otters saw it that way.

I'm bruised...covered in blood and my own mess...can hardly breathe with my arms hoisted over my head like this...legs are killing me, arms are burning, I'm starving...do you...do you have any idea what you've condemned me to, Jon?

The same twisted remorse that filled Jon's mind was starting to fester in Likita's thoughts, and she was doing all that she could to bite back against them. She knew that it wasn't his fault for being so mentally tortured, but the moment that he stole away into the thickets of trees, her life was forfeit, and the otters weren't in any kind of a rush to actually deliver the deathblow.

I'm sure that he survived worse, at their behest. If he could make it through the ordeal, then...I'm sure that I can, too. I'm not going to let them break me.

She didn't have much of a choice, but Likita was of a truly unique will. She didn't know that she was inspiring courage and confidence in some of the otters of the village; her ability to endure whatever was thrown at her was seen as a mark of resilience that their kind didn't typically possess, and even among the white wolves, her endurance for pain would have been legendary, if they'd ever paid attention to it.

"THE SOUTH! THEY CAME FROM THE SOUTH!"

The only real trade routes that would take a traveler into the otter territories were from the northeast area near Felinar, and directly from the west, by the mountainous regions where the white wolves reigned supreme. Though it was riskier, and there were no paved trails to use, there were some old, forgotten roads from the southwest side of the island that would allow entry into the village of Muskaton, and thanks to the splintered factions of the otters, the tribes living in that part of the Ruby Forest didn't stand a chance against the invading force of canines that dawned upon them.

A cry of panic across the village shook Likita out of her constant daydream. She whirled her head around and looked to see the ranks of her fellow villagers rushing past her, but she'd been placed at the west end of Muskaton, facing the entrance that the otters would have **expected** the wolves to take.

The war was raging on behind her, instead, and an army of canines was rushing in from the maze of trunks and branches. They completely avoided the trails, partially to their own peril, but the element of surprise was already costing the otters *dearly*.

All of those terrible things she'd seen in the privacy of her practicing tent were coming to life and being replaced a hundredfold, and something inside of her actually wanted to see the battle as it erupted, but there was a thankfulness in that she was forced to gaze upon an empty and peaceful forest.

The juxtaposition of that sight as she heard flesh being ripped from bone, and organs being punctured with crude weapons made the trees simply come alive with their crimson glow, and a mild nausea washed over her as a small trickle of blood seeped in from behind her post, and soaked into the pads of her footpaws. Across the village, Ulrus was being paraded out by a small band of guards, still

held in his own shackles and used as an example. Treating him like a shield of flesh, the guards stood behind his large, thick frame the best that they could and fired arrows around his body, back into the invading force, and watched as white wolves dropped to the ground, riddled with shards of metal and fallen fangs. Ulrus was forced to watch as dozens of his villagers dropped by the minute, and yet, they continued to march onward, needlessly sacrificing themselves for the sake of a man who was leading them into a pointless war. He still had his voice and his wits about him, but he was too cowardly to actually **use** them to a fruitful purpose. He was trembling in his bondage, fearful that an errant arrowhead might find a new home in his flesh, and his legs shook with terrible purpose, hoping that an opportunity to run and escape might show itself. As he completely failed under the mantle of the leader that he was supposed to be, someone that was once considered entirely unworthy of the title rose to the occasion, and placed a crude, jagged blade to the throat of a rotund elder. “It’s nice to see you again, Bulro. I know you’re not the type to go anywhere fast, but it’d behoove you **greatly** to get your fat ass to the middle of the village...” Guards that should have been defending the chief elder were slumped down against their posts, unconscious and bleeding heavily. The otters had sharpened their own weapon, but without the means to control it, it was quickly turning against them.

“THE SOUTH! THEY CAME FROM THE SOUTH!”

Ulrus was grinning. It was a bit too early in the game to celebrate, of course, but there was still an inward sense of joy at knowing that the elders in his village approved of the rescue mission to save him from the otters, and if they sent the necessary forces, it would only be a matter of time before the white wolves controlled the inlets of ocean water that the otters currently presided over.

Whether there was some kind of infestation, or it was just the carelessness of the tribal otters living around the rivers, Ulrus would be an even greater hero to his people than he was before, and the waterways would belong to the canines.

“I’ve been warning you guys all week that this was going to happen. If you’d just let me run back to my village, I could have given the order to stop this madness before it started...how much blood do you think you can clean from your paws? Are the rivers here even pure enough to do that?”

Like most political prisoners, Ulrus was aware of what he could get away with, and he was intentionally flirting with the line of pissing off his captors as much as possible. He **wanted** to get a rise out of them, so when his people inevitably came, they’d be the first ones to rush into battle, and hopefully, the first ones to die.

If he’d been paying any attention to how tightly the otters adhered to their traditions when he saw them berating Jon, he would have known that the guards took their jobs extremely seriously, and weren’t going to leave his side, even when arrows started falling through the leather covers of the tent.

“Y...you guys might wanna, you know, **do something** about that?”

“We’ve been ordered to guard you.”

“I’m shackled up to the trunk of a fallen tree. I cannot move. I can barely even *stand*. What the hell are you still guarding me for?!”

“The elders have given an order that you are not to be moved, or left unattended, until a new order is given. It must be obeyed.”

Ulrus couldn’t see which of the otters were actually addressing him. All three of the guards were decorated in necklaces riddled with the fangs of the deadly fish that they’d captured in their lives, and upon their wrists, bracelets of rope and opal acted as a definition of their rank; this job couldn’t be trusted to ordinary villagers.

Down to the loincloths that hardly preserved the modesty of the slim creatures, the otters were as minimalistic as a species could be, and Ulrus knew that he

wasn't going to be able to bribe his way out of the tent.

"Bring the bastard out! Show them what we've done to their leader!"

It was convenient that he didn't need to trick his way out of the tent, but he didn't have a chance to run for it. The guards grabbed his shackles, unwrapped them from the trunk of the tree, and pushed him out of the front of the tent. The third guard stood behind him and pulled his bow from his back, and upon the string, a pair of arrows sat, ready to be loosed at whatever target he deemed necessary.

In a truly brazen and cruel act, the guard looked at the first wolf who spied Ulrus. Their eyes lit up with inspiration before a pair of arrowheads pierced them, sending a cascade of blood from his orbital sockets. The tips of the sharpened heads reached the brain, and Ulrus was forced to gaze upon the horrifying sight of a muzzle still crooked up into a smile, with a pair of shafts sticking out of the pits of his irises.

"Was he a good man, that one?" the guard asked, as he readied another pair of arrows onto the string. "He had a *beautiful* smile...even I couldn't take that away from him."

Shame unlike anything he'd ever known before draped over Ulrus like a weighted cloak, and though ethereal, the sheer gravity of it added an effort to his steps as he was marched forward, onto the battlefield. He dared to gaze to his left, and watched as one of his villagers was brought to an untimely death, choking on a flow of their own blood from a gouged throat. His eyes fearfully dashed to the right, but there, he saw the body of another villager, still gasping on the ground despite the seven arrows that were rising and falling with each movement of his chest.

A sickening gurgle followed each hurried, fearful breath of the fallen warrior, and Ulrus felt his stomach turn as he flattened his ears and tried to drown out the noise. Those lucky white wolves who had a chance to gaze upon their champion saw a man staring at the ground and trembling with fear, his ears wilted in submission, his gaze forlorn and devoid of hope.

It was a look that couldn't possibly inspire hope, but in some, it inspired rage, and the battle continued to rage on as Ulrus took slow, bitter steps toward the center of the village. In the distance, he could see Likita, still trapped at her post and gazing into the peace of the forest in front of her, but her ears were perked to the sounds of the brutality happening just behind her, and though she was exhausted, her head was held high.

Even in her darkest hour, the wolffess refused to let the otters get the better of her, and Ulrus had no control over the distant smirk that played out over his muzzle.

How she ended up a medicine woman, and I ended up a village champion, I'm not sure I'll ever know...

To imagine that he and Likita would return to their village at all was wishful thinking, and to be able to make it there alive was almost out of the question. The battle was nearing a fever pitch, and as canines and mustelids continued to fall to the ground in such volume that the color of the ground matched the ruby trees around them, a break in the action was finally delivered by the only source the otters truly respected.

“S-stop! STOP THIS MADNESS, AT ONCE!”

In the realm of fantasy, so many people still believed that a loud voice above a crowd would *actually* force everyone to stop what they were doing and look to the source.

The reality was a continued clash, like a group of squabbling children ignoring their overwhelmed teacher.

“You damned idiots, **I'm going to die if you don't STOP!**”

A few of the otters near to the sound were starting to calm down, but the white wolves weren't allowing for any sort of a break. Many of them took advantage of the openings and struck down their opponents, until another disgraced leader decided to make their presence known, even if they wanted to disappear into nothingness.

“WOLVES!” Ulrus barked with all of the strength that he had left. “S-stop...stop this needless violence!”

He wished that he could have seen the shock on Likita's face, across the village. That expression was surely echoed in the looks of his comrades, who stopped and turned to him with confusion in their eyes, wondering why they should hold on their assault when the battle was so evenly matched.

To see one of the mustelid elders moving around was usually a sign of some kind of a great occasion, be it a wondrous celebration, or the funeral proceedings of a great warrior, lost back to the planet that spawned them.

To see one rushing as fast as they could to the center of the village, carrying a much smaller, slimmer otter on the back was something that no one in all of the otter territories had ever seen before, and anyone who claimed such a thing, even after that day, would still be laughed at and called a liar.

“It's incredible, isn't it? I see at least sixty or seventy bodies in the field here, and a bunch more of you are bleeding out as we speak...and you're all **still** convinced that this war is being fought over me? I guess I should be flattered.”

Bulro could run no further. The elder couldn't remember the last time he actually ran for any purpose at all, and his knees collapsed under the weight of his own excess fat. The sickening **crack** of the bones snapping was only mildly dulled by

his plentiful flesh, and even those warriors who were wounded in battle made cringing face at the pain the elder must have felt.

“There’s no doubt in my mind that Likita tried to tell you idiots about the real reason for this battle...but there’s no point in trying to convince you all to believe something different, now. You never listened to me before; **none** of you ever have, and I’m not going to expect that to change. This is **your** war, and I’m not here to fight it. I’m just here to end it, and be on my way...Bulro? Why don’t you tell all of these wonderful people what you’ve already approved for me?” Otters and wolves stood side by side in a blissful moment of peace, and gazed down upon the elder, who was still pooled over his own injury and whimpering from the pain.

He wheezed as he still struggled to catch his breath, but the longer he took, the deeper Jon’s spear pressed into the side of his neck, until it was actually past the layer of fat and starting to penetrate solid flesh. “A t...trial...trial of Aquenta!” The white wolves were only so familiar with the customs of the otters, but the name Aquenta carried a certain respect with it across the entire continent, and even in Felinar, where they knew that no such being existed, there was a reverence to the title.

According to the lore of the mustelids, Aquenta was trapped to become the god of the sea because of his failures in battle. It was said that he lost in pitched combat to three wild creatures while fighting in a river basin, where an otter should have had the utmost advantage. For his punishment, the waterways carried his unconscious body out to the sea, and when his body was tossed upon the crags and torn apart, his furious spirit was freed, causing the storms that ravaged the coast without end.

To request such a trial was considered madness, but it was often the last bastion of hope for an otherwise hopeless man. In the name of Aquenta himself, the trial was one of combat, waged against three other participants. In the event of a victory for the party requesting the trial, their crimes would be absolved *regardless* of the wrongs they’d committed, and they’d be free to seek a new life in another realm.

“And how convenient it is that I’ve already defeated one of my combatants,” Jon claimed, as he stood over the quivering, wobbling body of the elder. “His courage in stepping into the arena of combat with me betrays the cowardice of his chosen champion, Terek...a man who couldn’t dare to face me when I was free to move my limbs. His weakness is outshined only by Ulrus, the white wolf who wished to take over your lands so that he could control the western half of the world!”

Jon’s claims were all completely true, but they sounded like the raving of a

lunatic to the otherwise uninformed members of the village. The display, arrogant and crazy as it was, had brought a temporary ceasefire on the battlefield, and for that alone, the elders owed Jon their eternal gratitude. They'd never dare to show it to his face, but they'd entertain his demands, at the very least.

"You who look upon me with confusion...I don't expect you to believe what I say. My fellow otters have turned their backs on me, and you wolves think that I've wronged you in some ancient and preconceived way...but you are **ALL** wrong! I've no quarrel with any of you...I merely wish to see my debts with your cowardly leaders settled. If this war is truly about me, then let my trial be the only battle that need be fought!"

It wasn't uncommon, even in those days, for two tribes to march their champions out to a field and order them to fight, just to see who had the right to land, resources, or even people. Usually, these squabbles occurred between tribes of the same species, however, rather than across the mammalian spectrum.

The wolves might not honor the result, and the otters didn't relish in the idea of seeing their champion defeated by the criminal that they were all trying to kill, but with Terek and Ulrus still acting as the figureheads of combat decisions, the pair of disgraced champions were more than happy to blame Jon one last time for their own shortcomings...and now, they'd have the chance to kill him, and be *praised* for it.

"You're all so quiet. What's the matter? Don't you want to cheer these fucking pansies on to victory? Don't you all have so much **pride** in them? Isn't this exactly what the fuck you've all wanted the entire fucking time?!"

Jon didn't realize that he was going to feel disappointed, in the heat of the moment. From the very beginning of his journey, he'd been running from his problems, and the further he ran, the more trouble he encountered.

Now that he'd ridden out to meet with his fate, everyone else was shying away from doing their part. There were no cheers from the crowd, no clapping, no chanting...there was just deafening silence, and the rage that continued to build up inside of Jon as he pushed the spear further and further into the elder's neck. Blood was starting to trickle down over the wooden tip and pool on the dirt below one of Bulro's many chins, and Jon didn't know how much more patience he had for Terek and Ulrus to be freed. He couldn't have guessed that both of the champions would fall to such a level in the time that he was gone, but Bulro didn't make it to the age and size that he had by accident.

There was always something up his sleeve.

"We...we accept!" he declared, able to find his voice above the pain that clouded his mind. "But our champion, Terek, is still wounded from the vicious attack of

the wolves. He needs more time to heal!”

Dividing sides again was the rallying cry that the white wolves needed to back their disgraced champion. “Ulrus is unable to fight in his current condition, as well! He needs to be given the night to rest!”

Jon spat the ground before the crowds could get carried away with their complaints. “I promise you that I was much worse off when they were done with me before...but I’ve waited this long for my revenge. I can give them one more night, so there’s no excuses when I skewer them...then you idiots can all go back to killing each other. I really don’t care.”

Pulling the tip of his spear from Bulro’s neck, Jon wiped the edge across the ground and walked backwards, away from the fallen elder, knowing that he couldn’t trust either side. “One last thing...the girl comes with me. I don’t know what you’ve done to her in my stead, but if your poisonous laws have exacted undue punishment on her innocent flesh, I will *skin* your precious champions before your very eyes, and send each and every one of you a piece of their bodies as a farewell gift!”

Some of the otters were foolish enough to think that Jon was still speaking from a place of recently born madness, but those who were more familiar with him could realize that his revenge was deserved, and that his words were born from a lifetime of abuse and excessive punishment. The wolves knew that they’d only contributed to the same, and where the only saw a slim and wimpy traveler before, they now saw a crusader of death, who could toe the line of bloodlust and mercy as easily as a vengeful god.

Even Likita almost didn’t recognize him, when he began releasing her from the binds of the pole at the edge of the village. His presence demanded a different kind of respect, but at the heart of it all, he was still Jon, and she’d never known such a grand and fulfilling comfort as feeling his warmth against her flesh once more.

“Tomorrow morning, then...w-we...we will allow the gods to determine your guilt, Jon! You’ve got nowhere left to hide anymore!” Ulrus declared, knowing that he would have to side with the otters, at least for the day, if he was ever going to conquer them.

Jon looked back over his shoulder with a quiet smirk. “The gods know that I’m innocent, Ulrus...the same as you do. If death means guilt in your world, I’ll be glad to dip my toes into it so I can see the look on your face when the gods take your last breath, before you have a chance to confess your sins.”

“We should leave. We have a sanctuary there, waiting for us. We have plenty of time.”

The small shelter that Jon had used to hide out for the few days that he did wasn't terribly far from Muskaton, but it was distant enough that neither of the recovering armies would waste resources to go looking for him, out there. Likita was quick to get over the shallow bitterness that she felt toward him, but her survival instinct was certainly helping with it. There would be plenty of time to punish him for what he'd done wrong, if they were to escape the trial with their lives.

If they weren't careful, they'd both be dead before the next evening, and though Pentia *claimed* that Felinar wasn't interested in a war, she had a feeling that the cougars would fail to keep their tails out of the ring if Likita were to be needlessly killed.

“The otters will follow, and the white wolves will follow them, behind. Everyone I've ever known will be killed in a pincer move, and the wolves will carry on toward Felinar. There's no way to minimize the losses, here.”

Likita wanted to frown at Jon's stubbornness, but she was too busy wearing a long, stupefied smile at the sensation of a healing salve against some of the minor cuts and abrasions in her flesh. It was flattering to her that Jon actually retained some of the little tricks that she taught him, and right then, it was literally saving her from illness and infection.

“Do you really think the war will end just because you killed the two of them? Do you even think you **can**?”

“Ulrus wants to grab all of the land he can to control the waterways. Terek wants to move inland to grab more of the mountainous regions. They both have the excuse of looking for fresh water and resources, they've both got the majority of their people brainwashed to believe them, and they're both using **me** as a spearhead to champion their causes. If I take them out, the elders will regain control of the public trust.”

“My elders *might* be willing to show a little mercy to your cause, but will your own be able to forgive what you've done? I...I wish I could have seen you do it, but you **stabbed** the chief elder in the neck and broke his knees! How can you possibly expect him to leave you alone after that?”

“My entire life, the people in the village have answered to Terek. The elders give out the commands, and he enforces them in whatever way he sees fit. People

respected him, but when he chose to tie me up in that tree, he betrayed the trust of the elders...and that put the people in conflict. I just need to keep everyone second guessing the will of the elders, and themselves.”

Likita glanced back over her shoulder. The familiar glimmer of amber mischief was still alive in her eyes, and Jon was overcome with emotions to see that she hadn't been broken by the horrid and constant torture she'd endured in his wake.

“I guess that faith is all we've got to work with, isn't it?”

Jon settled against her back and kept her in close. The fire was plenty warm enough to keep them safe regardless, but they'd both been looking for a comforting touch, only to find brutality wherever they went. It was likely they'd never have such a serene moment again for the rest of their days, and though Jon was eager to claim his revenge, that wasn't who he was, at the heart of it all. He was a lover before he was a fighter, and he didn't want to put his newly honed skills to use at killing people. He wanted to use them to build a new life for Likita, far away from the corrupting grasp of the people who had very nearly ruined him.

“Faith is a good start, but the beginning of a new life doesn't happen just because you believed it would. There has to be action.”

“You're taking more than enough action, Jon,” Likita assured him. “I think it's fair to say that we've both suffered plenty...a new life isn't just something we need, but something we deserve.”

“Apparently, it's up to the gods if we deserve it or not,” Jon replied with a brief snicker.

Likita giggled. “Still dealing with the culture shock, too?”

“More than I'd care to admit. I've got a feeling there's gonna be a lot for us to adjust to in Felinar.”

“I'm sure that Pentia will be more than happy to help us settle in to our new lives.”

Jon cocked a brow. He couldn't help a quick sneer crossing his muzzle. “Awfully happy to help you, I'd wager. Hopefully I won't be stuck in the corner, playing with myself while I'm forced to watch.”

Likita's eyes widened for a moment, and she gazed straight ahead. “She...s-she mentioned that, did she?”

“Crazy things happen when you're looking to be comforted in a strange, distant place. I know that much firsthand.”

Jon's response wasn't an outright forgiveness, but his memories of when he first met Likita, and the romance that so spontaneously blossomed between them made him more understanding of her predicament. He wouldn't bring attention to it right then...they had to survive before a potential love triangle was of any real

concern.

“I really don’t deserve you, Jon.”

“I’m the one who deserted you, Likita. I’d say that I’m the one who’s undeserving.”

Likita found her smile again, and settled her paws on the back of Jon’s own. Just being cuddled from behind and embraced was all of the comfort that she needed for every minute of the torture to be worth it, and in his touch, she could feel that Jon was just as happy to be reunited with her, even for all of the suffering he endured.

“The way that trouble follows us around, you’d almost think that we were made for each other, otter.”

“I guess that’s just what I get for going after such a desirable wolffess, even when others told me to stay away...kind of invites trouble, doesn’t it?”

“It’s bold, and it invites the kind of trouble that I think you *like* to get into.”

The river had already cleansed their bodies. Likita was free of the accusing paint, and Jon was clear of the dirt and mud that had caked into his fur. They looked as they did the first time that they’d been intimate together, and after such a long and painful separation, it was only natural that their minds would drift back to that sensual place, and what they’d done in the heat of the moment.

“Is this just another one of your treatments, Likita?”

“It’s a special treatment,” she quickly answered. “I’ve never shared it with anyone, but I’m told that it can bring great luck to a warrior who is soon to enter the battlefield...”

It was all a farce, and Jon knew that it was the moment that he felt her paw tugging down at his own and dragging it through the fur around her navel. It wasn’t long before he crossed her pubic mound and felt the tiny shimmer of moisture upon her womanhood, and she sucked in a tight gasp as his pawtip brushed at her clit.

“Does it have a name?” Jon asked, still willing to play along, as long as Likita was going to pretend that this was all still some kind of medicinal treatment. She clenched tightly around his open palm and held it flat to the crest of her labia, wanting him to feel every lazy, trickling drop of wetness that spilled from her body. “I’m sure this ritual goes by many names, Jon...but I think I’ve got a new one for it.”

“That was awfully fast. What is it?” he sounded genuinely interested, even if his mind was already trying to come up with silly guesses.

“A fuck for good luck.”

Heavy as the air was around them, Jon still found his lips were light enough to curl into a smile at that. “I’d be hard pressed to think of anything better, Likita.

I've only got one request for you."

"That I play with your asshole the entire time?"

Through snickering teeth, Jon shook his head. "Okay, **two** requests...but I think you'll find the second one to be more important."

Likita was easily able to spin around in Jon's loose, affectionate grasp. They'd never bothered to pick up any clothes on their way out of the village, leaving nothing more than their own willpower between them.

"You'd better say it quick. Something tells me that you're going to be short of breath in a few moments."

Allowing Likita to take the lead, Jon leaned back against the comforting embrace of the soft, yielding earth and looked up into a pair of molten puddles. He swam through them in the depths of his thoughts, and if they were the last thing he ever saw, he'd be happy to have drowned within them.

"Jon?"

He chuckled nervously. The words themselves weren't that hard to speak, but the gravity of their meaning was like a latch upon his tongue, keeping it flat to the floor of his mouth.

"Just don't let this be the last time, Likita."

"That isn't up to me," she reminded him, "But there's a clarity in your eyes that didn't exist before. I'm not afraid to say that I would have picked Ulrus over you in a fight **every** time when I first met you."

"Well, *that's* inspiring."

"Honesty is the best aphrodisiac, Jon, and the honest truth is that there's no one in the world that I'd pick in a fight over you, as you are now."

Her words were punctuated by the feeling of her body crawling across the lithe mustelid, setting his worries in a state of ease, while setting the rest of his soul ablaze with unbridled passion. He never lost the memory of her soft, delicate nipples against his chest, but the idea would never compare to the *reality* of feeling them against his body. Subtle as it was, the growth of the sensitive nubs against his fur created a mild tickle in his torso, and he tried not to giggle, even when she knew what was causing it.

"Just trying to build me up so I won't get slaughtered, then?"

"You don't need me to build you up. You just need to believe in yourself, the same as it ever was."

"I think we both need something else, a lot more than that."

"No, you still need to believe in yourself for *that*."

Likita shifted back on her knees as she felt Jon's excitement revealing itself to her womanhood. He was hardly aware of the fact that blood was rushing to his member until the tip of it kissed against the moisture upon her pouted folds, and

with a sheepish grin, his arms lifted to hold onto her own.

“Nothing inspires confidence in a male quite like bedding him, does it?”

She bucked down harshly against his cock, and her smirk revealed a glistening array of pearly fangs as she leaned down over him. “I don’t know, Jon. You tell me.”

How she could command such a fearsome presence and still be so sensually captivating, Jon wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to understand. She so finely toed the line between being an unconditionally caring medicine woman and a sexual goddess that even as her inner muscles eagerly clenched and squeezed around his shaft, he wondered if she could possibly be real.

He’d have to spend the whole night inside of her, holding her close and feeling every inch of her body, just to be sure.

“He won’t show. They’re probably halfway across the continent by now.”

“If he is, the wolves will hunt him down and bring his head back here anyway.”

“Look at them, judging us...they’re just waiting for us to let our guard down so that they can slaughter us! Why are we even letting this stupid trial happen?”

Rather than blending their cultures in the middle of the night and taking a step toward a lasting peace, the otters returned to their tents and left guards on watch, while the wolves retreated several clicks back into the woods, setting up tiny camps that were left deserted in the morning.

All eyes were turning toward the village commons, the only place that would appear like home to the canines. Muskaton was very similar to many of the other villages, with huts and tents set up around a common area, but the ground was arid and devoid of the water that they so proudly claimed to lord over, drawing a stark contrast to the flourishing commons in Likita’s homeland.

The blood that fell needlessly the day before was already all but soaked into the ground, and though the stains of red were left behind, the ground was dry and thirsty for the essence of further warriors. Everyone was already picking sides, but Jon was putting himself on his own team, and forcing the otters and wolves to band together against him.

It would be a shaky alliance, at best, and the elders were still trying to determine what his endgame was.

“What respite could his victory possibly bring him? He would be absolved from his crimes against us, but the white wolves don’t need to honor the outcome.”

“I hope the little shit dies in a puddle of his own blood and urine,” Bulro argued.

“To hell with tradition...if the champions fail to do their part, I’ll kill the bastard myself!”

“The trust of the villagers has already been shaken by Terek’s betrayal. If he finds a miraculous victory, we would completely lose the faith of the rest if we decided to intervene. You must set your personal grudges aside, Bulro.”

“If Aquenta deserves my prayers, he’ll see to it that Jon dies the coward’s death that he has coming to him.”

“And if the gods disagree with you, he’ll stand victorious and stride out of the village without our being able to lay a paw upon him.”

“We can’t stop the rest of the villagers, though. If their personal grudges run deep enough...”

“They don’t,” Bulro claimed. “He’s a hybrid, the son of a whore and another

hybrid...those garish fangs and his unusual body type are a constant reminder that we allowed impurities into our village in the first place, and I want those impurities removed! If he wins over the love of the people, something that I've worked to prevent his **entire life**, we won't have to worry about kicking him out of the village; we'll have to worry about taking orders from someone with tainted blood!"

"Bulro, you...you're allowing your passion for revenge to blind you. There is no scenario in which his death benefits anyone anymore, except for you."

The other elders were trying to keep a level head, as they discussed the events of the day to come. Bulro didn't see a need to keep his intentions a secret any longer, believing that the outcome of the trial would solve the problem for him, but thanks to his broken knees, he wouldn't be able to see the trial in person: there were no villagers left who were up to the task of moving him a second time, that weren't already tending to their wounds from the day before.

He could only trust that Terek and Ulrus would be able to overcome their personal differences long enough to defeat a man who wasn't considered to be the equal of either one, on their own.

"The villagers are cheering..."

"It sounds as if Jon has returned for his trial after all. We should begin with the proceedings immediately."

Bulro shuddered in place, trapped by his own bulbous flesh. He quaked with anger, but all of the frustration in the world wasn't going to move his physical form any closer to the heart of the village commons.

He would have to wait patiently in his tent for the results, and he was already quietly praying to Aquenta that Jon wouldn't be the one to emerge victorious.

“STRIP THEM DOWN!”

Jon didn't have any garments to begin with, but of respect for the trial, he set his spear on the ground and stood upright in front of the entire village. The shame he felt in being seen in the buff was already a distant memory, and those members of his inner circle who still remained could no longer sting him with their eyes. Terek and Ulrus had to stand still as smaller, weaker creatures tore the leather and cloth from their bodies. Of their minds, it wasn't actually an insulting act, but it was meant to be seen as such, in terms of the trial. “As it was in the time of the ancient ones and the god Aquenta, these warriors may only be protected by the will of the gods that favor them; no armor shall be granted! Only by death, or by mercy of the victor can the trial be ended! Should the requesting warrior be crowned victorious, he will be absolved of his misdeeds, and his free passage from the village will be granted!”

There was no mingling of the crowds. Segregated by the sides of the elder's tent, a row of otters stood on one side of the village commons, and the white wolves stood across at the far side. There was never any official pact or treaty made to declare peace, leaving the air thick with tension and conflict as Terek and Ulrus stood side by side, closer than any other mustelid or canine in the village. Around their feet, tatters of their clothes began kicking up in the light winds that carried across the dusty plain, and nothing could be done to hide the shame of their nudity.

“That's all you're packing, is it?”

“Canines have sheathes. I'd assume that you're not very familiar with our anatomy...but you'd probably never have seen one.”

“Well, of course I wouldn't ha-

“Canines prefer to take their bitches from the back.”

Terek snarled at his forced teammate. “I was going to say that I've never been around a male canine, much less a naked one...but you've just got a quip for every situation, don't you?”

“I find that it's harder to put words in someone's mouth when they've said all that they have to say.”

“In other words, you never shut the fuck up, do you?”

“There's no need to stop talking when everything you say is a stroke of brilliance.”

“If you're such a damn genius, how do you plan to win this fight?”

Ulrus curled a paw closed into a fist and slammed it against an open paw. “Either one of us at half strength could tear this little bitch apart; he’d probably like it, being the little pervert that he is. We’ve got him on size, got him on experience, got him on technique...”

“BEGIN!”

SCHLAT! There was no opportunity for Terek and Ulrus to procure their own weapons, and Jon may have been the smallest of the three combatants, but he was easily the fastest, as well. He moved like lightning from an uncorked bottle and hurled his spear forth, scoring a deadly hit on Terek and wedging the tip of the throwing weapon between his collarbone and shoulder.

The otter champion was already down his right arm, and as Ulrus turned to check on his forced partner, Jon skittered right up to him and landed a deep, solid blow to his stomach, right on top of one of the arrowhead wounds that he’d suffered the day before.

As Jon’s footpaw pulled back from the kick, he saw fresh blood emerging from a gash that was just starting to close, and Ulrus doubled over, trying not to fall to his knees; somehow, the canine champion still valued his pride more than his own life, and in as much, he **refused** to kneel before Jon for any reason.

“Talking...bragging...**bullshitting**...that’s all the two of you ever did, and now that the go around has come around, you two aren’t even worth my time!”

While the champion of Muskaton and the champion of the white wolves sat on their respective thrones and patted their own back to stories of their greatness, Jon was actually forced to survive in the wilderness, an underdog with no one in his corner to back him up, or give him the credit when the day was done. He’d learned to survive for the sake of *true* self-preservation, rather than doing it to win the glory of a group of people.

The theory of the elders couldn’t have been further from the truth. The worried that Jon might try to rally the people around him in his victory, but as Terek fell backwards from his wound, Jon ignored the thick, startled silence of the crowd and reached over, gripping the shaft of the spear and twisting his paws around it. The head of the crude, handmade weapon twisted within Terek’s flesh, splitting apart the sinew and ripping the tendons to shreds before the weapon was able to actually be freed.

Even Likita, watching from her own position on the side of the village, thought it to be a cruel injury. She could think of no medicine or remedy for such a wound; Terek’s days as a champion were over.

“U...Ul...Ulrus!”

Terek was barely able to manage a word, but with the arm he could still lift, he pumped toward the sky, and spoke once more. “Ulrus! **Ulrus!**”

Starting a chant? Seriously? Jon thought, but to his dismay, the white wolves were catching on rapidly, and even the other otters were starting to join in the chant, despite the death and destruction that Ulrus delivered upon them only days beforehand. *They'd really rather see this murdering bastard win this fight?* There was some small, hopeful sliver of Jon's consciousness that told him to let Terek live, as a showing of mercy toward the otters, despite all of the wrong that they'd done to him. It was hanging on by mere threads to begin with, and he could feel those threads being torn asunder, one by one, until his grip on the spear was so tight that his skin nearly split under his fur.

The sound of a spear piercing through one's throat wasn't actually so loud that it could silence a crowd by itself. To some, the noise was a familiar one, and it would have brought a sense of comfort and achievement, reminiscent to the sound of a hunter killing his prey and assuring that they would have food for a cold, cruel winter.

Choking, coughing and gagging weren't usually the sounds that followed, but the triumphant chant that was building quickly faded as the segregated crowd looked on in horror and disgust.

Jon's face was completely painted crimson by the spurting essence as it gushed from Terek's jugular. Drops of the salty, vital mess spilled down from the ends of his long, deadly fangs, and when he turned his stare onto Ulrus, it was enough to free the canine champion in his tracks.

"I'm not sure what his fascination with me was. He spent even more time shoving things up my ass than you intended to," Jon murmured, still finding the particular method of torture to be unusual, albeit noteworthy. "It's almost a shame to kill someone who is so obsessed with you...it's like cutting away a close, long-time friend, isn't it? They're after you *constantly* and always pestering you, bringing you further and further into a downward spiral, until the only way to climb out of it is to leave them behind and watch them drown..." Feral bears, buffalo, elk and mastodons were terrifying to come upon in the wild, but Ulrus was always surrounded by his pack of faithful hunters. With them at his back, he felt taller than even the tallest of giants, and stronger than the most powerful creatures the world could throw at him.

Slim, short Jon suddenly stood taller than Ulrus could ever hope to, and the white wolf stepped back on fearful, quaking paws as the otter pulled his spear free once more, sending a final cascade of blood into the air like a sickle of crimson. Terek's body was still twitching and sputtering on the ground as the last few breaths were literally choked out of his lungs, and all of the advantages that Ulrus bragged up before the fight amounted to nothing more than his wobbling knees knocking together in a shameful display.

“Jon, y-you would have been given a **fair** tribunal and been allowed to leave when you’d paid your debt to our village!”

“I wouldn’t have left without her, and you just didn’t want to let that happen, did you?”

Ulrus managed a tiny snarl at the corners of his muzzle. “I’m not completely fucking obsessed with her the way that you are, otter! If you want the bitch, take her!”

“That’s not how this works,” Jon claimed. “Isn’t there some kind of sacred ritual you have to perform to relieve her of her duties? Some stupid decree you have to make, as the village champion that says she’s allowed to make her own path?”

“We can worry about that when my people and I return to the village! Right now, I need you to show a little mercy!”

Likita wasn’t sure what they were discussing, as they spoke in softer voices, so close to each other. The plea for mercy was met with a quick stab from Jon, who only managed to nick the canine’s flesh before he darted back, and as he backpedaled closer and closer to the line of his people, he was forced to flatten his ears to the sound of their cries of disappointment.

“Does mercy beget mercy, Ulrus? If I let you leave here alive, will you actually be a man of your word and free her from those binds?”

Jon truly didn’t know enough of the white wolves’ society to know that he was setting Ulrus up with an excuse to end the battle mercifully. He would have been talking himself into a trap, if he had any concern for stepping on the toes of societal traditions.

He’d lost any such worries somewhere along the way, and he wasn’t in any kind of a rush to find them again.

“You’d have no choice but to trust me, Jon. If her life is really that valuable to you...if her *freedom* is really that valuable to you, you need to let me return to my own territory so I can speak with the elders on her behalf.”

Ulrus truly had a snake for a tongue, and if he was given the chance to speak, he found that he could talk his way out of almost any problem he’d ever faced, before.

He also didn’t realize what kind of a problem he’d created for himself that time.

“Let you return, Ulrus? That’s a *fascinating* proposal. Should I let you leave? Should I let you hobble back to your safe, quaint little village and beg the elders to send more soldiers here so that you can try and take over the waterways, again?”

“I’ll give up the damned war with the otters if you just **let me go, you bastard!**”

A wide, long swing of the spear from the far end allowed Jon to swipe at Ulrus’ face, and though the tip was getting dull from the repeated use, the wood showed

impressive endurance at still gouging a long gash in the side of the canine's muzzle. Ulrus tried to grab the end of it on the back swing, but Jon safely pulled it back and hopped a few inches further away, and watched with a snicker as Ulrus stumbled forward.

"A silver tongue will rust if you leave it out for too long, Ulrus. You **almost** had me eating out of your palm, telling me everything I wanted to hear...but I don't really give a single fuck about the stupid otters, or your war with them."

Ulrus looked up from the ground and folded his ears back, looking entirely the part of a punished and defeated canine as Jon aimed the spear between his eyes.

"What? W-what are you saying?!"

"These aren't my people, Ulrus. They turned their back on me **long** before you ever had a chance to, and I really couldn't care less if a war between your tribes ends with the eradication of both races," he explained, inching a little closer, his spear still trained on the fallen canine. "One becomes impossible to trust if they tell you everything that you want to hear."

"You'd give up on your own people so easily?"

"Turnabout is fair play."

Jon knew the spear wouldn't penetrate bone, in its state of disrepair, but Ulrus' eyes never looked wider than they did right then, and his vision went red as the tip of the spear was thrust into his right eyeball and pushed on through. His reaction time was impressive enough that Jon wasn't quite able to push the crude instrument into the brain behind it, but Ulrus could only fling himself over in pain and grip the shaft of the spear, blind out of one eye while the other uncontrollably welled up with tears.

"YOU! Y-YOU FUCKING BASTARD!"

"Hold still, h-hold still!" Jon coddled the defeated wolf like a parent to a panicking child, and when the opportunity came and the shaft went still, he gripped it and yanked it free, pulling an eyeball with it and flicking it into the crowd of the wolves that looked on. "Damn it, Ulrus! I told you to hold still! Look at what you've done, now!"

There was a certain line of darkness that Jon crossed in his journey, and he knew that he'd never quite be able to come back from it. To treat someone with such disrespect in the middle of a reverent trial wasn't something he fathomed himself capable of, but he could still make things right, if he was quick about it.

He stared Ulrus down; he wanted to remember the sight of the white wolf's fur turning a deep, proud shade of scarlet as blood poured out from his eye socket and over his open palm, forming a stream down the side of his wrist. He wanted to burn the memory of the canine champion faltering into the back of his mind, and with his enemy down on one knee before him, Jon finally lifted his spear

once more, drove it forth with a cry, and pierced Ulrus right in the middle of his torso, poking a literal hole in the physique that he was so arrogantly proud of. “You speak of gods and trials, honor and mercy...this is the only mercy I will show you,” Jon said, as he lifted his right leg and kicked Ulrus across the side of the muzzle. The wolf was already struggling to breathe with a spear wedged into his diaphragm, but somehow, air still found his lungs, and his suffering continued. “If your people can find a way to carry your sorry ass back to your village, then perhaps, the gods wanted you to live more than I wanted you to die...but I very much doubt that, Ulrus. I very much do.”

The loss of blood was bringing delirium to Ulrus faster than he could realize it. Somewhere in his twisted, fading mind, his people were gathering around him already and hoisting him up to the sky, declaring him their undefeated champion and praising his name as they’d done so many times before.

Reality was cruel, however, and the people who once worshipped the ground he walked upon were speechless, standing beside their defeated hero. To have such a crowd fall completely silent created a sound that Jon could only imagine to be triumph, and though he was soaked from head to toe in blood, it was the blood of his enemies, not his own...and he wore it the way he imagined a champion should.

He already knew what question would be coming from the elders as he literally stepped across the dead and oozing body of Terek and made his way before them.

“An otter who was once lost, and has been found worthy again by the god Aquenta, our very own Jon has proven himself.”
“Shut the fuck up.”

Silence in the crowd was broken by a gasp that could be heard a great distance away. Jon was starting to like the way that his lack of fear aided his words, and without his concerns to hold him back, he wasn’t going to waste time on the ilk of the elders.

“Give Bulro my regards, and tell him that I hope he dies in a puddle of his own piss and shit, would you? I’d do the deed myself, but I think I’ve just about had my fill of killing people for the day...I’ve got better things to do.”

To reply whatsoever was a struggle for the elders, not because of their inadequate health, but their shock and disgust at having to recognize someone so crass as the winner of the trial. “That, uh...v-very well, Jon, we shall do that for you, if that is your request! You have proven yourself a worthy and...erm...*honorable* champion of the otters.”

“I’m not your champion. I’m leaving.”

“You’re **what?**! What about the war?” the elders cried back at him, even

knowing they were in earshot of the white wolves. “Terek is dead, and our numbers are dwindling! How can you possibly turn your back on your village once more?!”

“You brought this fate upon yourselves,” Jon claimed, as Likita strolled happily across the battlefield to stand next to him. “What kind of a society treats people the way you treated me, and then damns them for doing what comes naturally? I can’t, in all good conscience, defend a village that creates their own monsters, and then blames those people for doing what they have to, just to survive.”

“You **dare** to blame your behavior on us? On the other villagers?!”

“Mostly, I blame Bulro and Terek...but the rest of you stood by and did **nothing** about it, my entire life. If my crime was desertion, you were the cause of it, and if you have any sliver of dignity left in your fat, jiggling bodies, you’ll honor the outcome of this trial and leave me the hell alone.”

The silence returned once more, and the still naked otter made a groping gesture at his genitals as he backed away from the awestruck elders and placed his free arm around Likita. “Get fucked, guys. Have fun killing each other.”

Jon’s name would go down in history, that day. It wasn’t his incredible prowess on the battlefield, his skills in combat, or the way that he stood up to the elders that was carried on in song and legend, however.

It was the way that he exposed the truth of an entire society’s way of life, and the fruitlessness of a falsified war. The otters were left in a state of disillusion, and the white wolves, still watching their champion die slowly before their eyes, lost the will to carry on fighting a war that they didn’t understand.

The village commons reverted to their usual purpose before the sun rose on the next day, but there was a strange and uneasy tension over the entirety of the otter territories...

“Did you guys stop by the ocean to murder a whale on your way here?! What the fuck happened to you?”

Pentia kept a very clean home, and she took pride in the fact that of all of the houses, carved out of the stone side of a cliff overlooking the Jagged Coast, hers was oft considered the finest.

The blood on Jon’s fur didn’t quite wash off all of the way in the rivers that he and Likita crossed on their way back to Felinar, and the stench of the same hung over his damp, messy fur like a rotten aura, unshakeable and disturbing.

“Things got a little bit out of control,” Likita admitted. “As you expected, neither the otters, nor the wolves wanted to go about doing things peacefully.”

“I had gathered, but damn...did you kill **every single one of them?**”

Jon wasn’t sure why he felt so bashful at the suggestion. He wasn’t the type to be a conqueror, or to wear the mantle of a village champion, but he’d reached into a deep and primal place in order to survive. From that well of feral ability, a certain pride was starting to grow every time that his legend was told, and he wasn’t sure how to stop the sensation from building.

“Just two of them,” he admitted. “It’s...a bit of a hollow feeling, really. I didn’t expect to come away from the death of my two greatest enemies with a mild sense of regret.”

“Love and hate are separated by a very thin line,” Pentia murmured, and her words sent a chill down Likita’s spine, at how similar she sounded to Ulrus, right then. “No doubt, those men must have done something terrible to deserve such a fate from you, but to lose an enemy is similar to losing a lover. There is a void in your life that needs to be filled, and if you’re going to be staying here with me for a while, I’d prefer that you fill it with something other than a new grudge.”

In the pit of his stomach, there really *did* seem to be some kind of a hollow sensation, and Jon set a paw against his slim, toned stomach, as if his mind didn’t believe in the source of the physical pain. “A grudge is something that I can do without for a while, I think.”

“Felinar wasn’t built in a day, Jon. Many great and terrible wars were waged for this peaceful land to become a reality, and our people learned the importance of taking care of their soldiers after the harrowing trials of battle. For a true warrior, the fight doesn’t stop just because the battle is over...you must then battle the demons in your mind, and so often, they are **stronger** than the enemies we strike down with our fists.”

“I’ve seen it many a time, before,” Likita agreed. “Some of our best hunters come back after seeing an encounter with a feral beast gone wrong, and their minds are lost forever to the darkness. It’s something that I didn’t want to see happen to you, Jon. You of all people have suffered enough.”

“That’s very flattering of you two, but I’m gonna be fine, y-

“Your confidence is inspiring, but Miss Likita didn’t want to take any chances,” Pentia cut Jon off before he had too much of a chance to toot his own horn.

“Before she left, she made arrangements with me to perform the sacred ritual on you, under the condition that you made it back alive, of course.”

Jon gulped almost immediately. “M-more rituals? Already?”

“You must be weary from your travels to arrive here, and no doubt, the blood in your thoughts is still as fresh as the blood on your fur,” Pentia claimed. “As it often was in our warriors in the past, you put up a tough front, but the pits of your eyes cannot hide what you’ve endured. At the behest of your wolfess, I must recommend that you take part in the ritual.”

Still unsure of himself, but unable to lie to someone who was showing him such a kindness, Jon turned to Likita and found that she was smiling genuinely at him, suggesting that he had nothing to fear.

“Is there anything special that I have to do...?”

“There is a small pool in the back corner of my residence,” Pentia mentioned. “It is fed from a natural spring, and the water runs through a tight canal of limestone before returning to the source. You are to stand in it with your eyes closed, and clear your thoughts of any violence, bloodshed or death...and wait for what comes next.”

A fascinating home to behold, Pentia’s house was part of a rigid set of homes that were carved out of a once impassable cliff. The side of the mountain was mined for resources, and the hollowed out caverns that were left behind ended up making fantastic homesteads for those felines who decided to keep residence in the city. The cougars were considered the dominant race among felines that remained on the continent, but they didn’t act as if they were in a different class, or enforce cruel laws on their fellow cats.

Instead, they lived their lives to the fullest, and Pentia was a prime example. The very furniture in her home, from the seating around a common fire pit, to the table that she dined at in her kitchen were all carved from the stone, and the outer surface of the material had no signs of wear or fatigue. The pathways around the house were extremely smooth, and all of the light, cream-colored rock was pleasing to the eyes as Jon navigated through it, toward the back of the house.

There was a watershed on the way, with a place clearly intended for personal

relief and waste, and near to that stone orifice, there was a more publicly intended stream of water pouring in from the ceiling, and pooling to a deep bath for personal cleansing.

The one near the back of the residence, however, was more akin to a waterfall than a calm and casual rain, and though it was faint, wisps of steam rose in slow, easy puffs before evaporating into the air, leaving an atmosphere that aided Jon in taking long, deep breaths.

He looked around for a moment, and over his shoulder, he could see Pentia and Likita discussing something, but he didn't want to betray the traditions of another race, that day.

Of course, even if the honor of the cougars wasn't on the line, an otter would almost always be drawn to water, and this water was pure and clear, pristine as the day that it fell from the sky. If he'd happened upon such a feature in the natural world, he would have jumped right in, but given the respect that was intended, he climbed slowly into the high walls of the collecting pond, just short of his hips, and stood directly under the weight of the falling water.

His head was forced to beckon forward at the neck, but there was an instant sense of relief as the clean, heated water poured over his form and soothed the soreness out of his muscles. He didn't realize just how sore and aching he was until those sensations began to fade, but it only made sense, given how deeply he'd been wounded, how badly he'd been beaten, and how malnourished his body was.

Only a moment of allowance was given to those thoughts, before Jon sucked in a deep, moist breath and exhaled. The relief was instant, and under the sacred waters, he closed his eyes and did the best he could to follow Pentia's orders, clearing his mind of all the wrong that he'd done in the name of survival, and all of the wrongs that were done *to* him along the way.

He could imagine that the ritual was one of forgiveness, and he found it hard to forgive those who slighted him. Just trying to do so was creating a new wave of anger within him, but he was already losing track of time under the soothing stream of the water, and without so much as being told to do it, he was giving everything a little more time to settle in. No doubt, the ritual was meant to put everything into perspective for warriors who had seen the very worst of what mortal life had to offer, and though his own trials were harrowing indeed, Jon was sure that many others had stood in his place before after facing nightmares he couldn't *begin* to fathom.

Time doesn't heal all of our physical wounds, Likita...but wounds of the soul, perhaps?

An inquisitive moment thinned his lips, but in it, Jon was able to more

adequately clear his thoughts. The weight of the water became a welcome presence instead of a burden to his neck, and there was a greater warmth in the room, beyond even the heat of the water and steam.

He felt an open palm settle over his eyes, and a short, stout muzzle pressed into the side of his head, lending a soothing voice to his ear. "Proud warrior...let the servants of the seven felines put your soul at ease."

Only ever hearing Pentia's frustration before, Jon was shocked at how completely relaxing her tone could be, and for a moment, he feared he might actually **collapse** under the waterfall.

His ears stayed folded back at her tone, and even when the paw came away from his eyes, he took the gesture as a hint that they should stay closed, and they did, even as he felt the ethereal warmth of a few more bodies entering the intimate chamber.

"Your trials are past, proud warrior. Release your tension," Pentia instructed him, as she climbed into the pool and stood behind his body. Her digits were the stuff of legends, and Jon was able to feel something that was only spoken about in rumor as she navigated the pressure points in his shoulders and upper back with unequalled precision. His posture was forced to slump, but another woman was already standing in front of him to hold the burden of his physical weight.

He knew the scent, before the steaming water washed it away from her body.

"Give up your pain; your frustrations, your fears, and your shortcomings. Let them melt away from your very being," Pentia continued the ritual, and Likita rested her body against his own, keeping him upright so that the cougar could maneuver her paws over the rest of his spine, right down to the thick, tired flesh of his rudder. "Be reborn as a warrior free of the burden of yesterday, ready to meet with the light anew!"

A fierce press against the small of his lower back caused Jon to reel under the waterfall, but the skillful massage that trailed down to the spot continued without Pentia's touch. He could feel a series of fingers and pawtips pressing against his tired flesh, but no physical presence was there to actually complete the act.

He couldn't put his finger on what kind of magic Pentia wielded, but there was something truly special about her, and the ritual wasn't some kind of traditional farce, but a genuinely powerful act that would allow warriors to be freed of their unyielding struggles.

"Is this one worthy of honor?" Likita asked, as she began to kneel down before Jon, keeping her body close to his own to act as a pillar of support. "Has he earned the right to continue?"

"Just *barely*," Pentia couldn't hide the venom on her tongue completely, but if the warrior was to release his burden, Pentia, too, would have to release her

anger at him for abandoning Likita in the first place. “But continue, he **must**.” Standing in place and relaxing didn’t seem to be any kind of a challenge, and with Likita pressing her forehead into the base of his stomach, Jon couldn’t think of how the ritual could get much better than it already was.

He kept his eyes closed, but that became a terrible struggle when he felt Pentia drag her long, ticklish claws down along his lower back, around the base of his tail, and across the curve of his backside. Her palms pressed against it, and thumbs dug in right near the thin separation between the cheeks, before she rested the underside of his tail upon her head.

“I trust that you can handle *that* part of the inspection, Likita,” Pentia said, as she focused on her own part of the task. “But I’m afraid that I may need a little help to complete my task.”

Now, Jon *terribly* wished to open his eyes. He was sure that he could have gotten away with it, even with the water pouring down over his muzzle, but the deprivation of his sight was something of an unexpected treat; he’d never found his member to be so sensitive to the touch as it was when Likita absorbed the tip past her lips and began playfully swirling her tongue over the tip.

“It’s been too long since you asked for my assistance with this kind of thing. You shouldn’t be so greedy with all of the newcomers, Pentia.”

The voice was similar enough to Pentia’s own that Jon could infer her to be another cougar, but his mind traveled to the dirtier thought that she might somehow be **related** to the woman that was already rubbing a single digit along the back of his hanging, swollen orbs and smoothing it up to the tight pucker of his asshole.

He didn’t want to admit that such a fact would have made the whole experience even more erotic, but denying it to Likita would have been pointless; his length jumped to life and throbbed within the shallow entrance of her muzzle, and she blinked at the sudden stiffness, though she smiled around it all the same.

“If you’re going to complain, I can always send you away and savor his entrance for myself, you know.”

Jon could feel a heat greater than the steam that billowed up from the water. The caress of aqua upon his fur was blissful in a purifying sense, but direct, steamy breath upon the crux of his slowly yielding anus was a pleasure beyond compare, and as long as his eyes stayed closed, his every nerve stayed ablaze with greater sensations than he’d ever known.

Something about the sacred ritual told him to bite his tongue and hold back against the flood of moans that he wanted to release. It felt wrong to taint the water from the purified springs, but he could already feel precum leaking against Likita’s tongue, and he wasn’t sure if she’d be able to contain the whole of his

seed when his body finally wavered into orgasm.

It might have been sacrilege, but he had to ask: “Pentia? L-Likita? What should I do if I start to-

“Cum?” the stranger asked, still not having properly declared her presence. “Let it happen, little otter. The release of one’s innermost passions is the final step to expelling all of your inner demons and allowing you to be reborn. To withhold such would be *quite* unwise.”

A fresh set of paws gripped Jon’s backside, and he jumped forward, lunging his cock further into Likita’s throat. She was lucky to have a little extra room to give, but she still pulled back on the length and took a moment to breathe, before she hungrily went after more of his flesh from a safer angle.

If this is really what the warriors of Felinar have to look forward to after every battle, I can’t believe that they’re a peace-loving society, Jon thought. He knew that his mind was still laced with bitterness and sarcasm after what he’d endured, but he could feel those sensations melting away as Likita slurped up all of the clear, slick juice that he could offer, and Pentia began working her tongue against the growing gape of his anus, only encouraging his body to produce more of the same.

“He stretches out *rather* easily. Was this one into foul activities before he was captured, or did he simply endure that much torture?” the mysterious woman asked. Her claws pressed into Jon’s flesh and held it tight, keeping his cheeks spread apart so that Pentia could work without interruption. “Goodness, she’s already able to fit a second pawtip inside...I know a good many women in the village who would be jealous of your prowess, otter.”

“It’s J-Jon,” he stammered, unsure of what else to say. He was worried that he’d never be able to stop moaning if he started, but they’d already cautioned him against biting back on his pleasure; it was only selfishness that was keeping him from climax, and the most natural part of him that was begging for this treatment to last longer than it already had. “And I’m s-sorry about the m-mess...”

Likita’s eyes were already widening from the volume of *precum* that she was having to deal with. She wasn’t sure that she could actually handle a full load from Jon, even after emptying his body the night before his trial by combat. She knew how virile the otter was, however, and she stole away her resolve as her throat opened just in time for him to stab forward with his length. Breathing deeply through her nose, she found her own sense of peace in feeling the tasty, heated yield of her lover coursing down her throat and leaving his taste on the back of her tongue.

Pentia found frustration in all of it as her two digits were clenched and squeezed upon by Jon’s passage, and she narrowed her eyes on his flesh as if it could

answer for the natural reaction. Eager to show him his place in the pecking order, the cougar continued jabbing her pawtips at his asshole throughout the clench, keeping his knees wobbling and his body on edge, until he felt the third, unidentified woman reach under his thighs and grab his sack.

It only took one squeeze for his yield to increase desperately, and Likita felt the plentiful treasure spilling over her cheeks and down to her chest as Jon's legs gave out. Pentia yanked her paw free just in time to avoid an injury that would be equal parts humorous and devastating, and the whole bunch fell down into the water with a loud, messy splash, cascading purified liquid to the otherwise bone-dry floor.

What was left in the aftermath was a giggling Likita and a frustrated, but smirking Pentia, soaked down to their bones and looking upon Jon, flat upon his back and floating in the water without a care in the world.

"I think the ritual is complete, Savia. It's a shame you didn't arrive earlier."

"You always did try and steal all of the fun away from me growing up, didn't you?" Savia replied, finally identified, although their relationship was still unclear. "Though, as far as I'm concerned, the fun doesn't have to end just because the ritual is complete...and judging by the look of your warrior, it doesn't get much more complete than that."

Jon's member was finally starting to go soft, still glistening with small, pearly trails of mingled seed and saliva. His jaw was hanging open slightly, pointing his long, curved saber teeth up toward the ceiling, and his body was spread as it floated in the middle of the collecting pond. We he in a proper river, he might have drifted all the way out to the ocean before he realized anything was wrong.

"I really can't think you enough for all of this, Pentia. Are you sure that we're still welcome here, as your guests?"

The cougar crawled across the bottom surface of the pond and leaned over Likita, stealing a kiss from the wolfess, even though her tongue and muzzle were still a creamy mess. "I didn't offer the invitation to you as guests, Likita. Though it may have been selfish of me to hope for, I extended my invitation with the intent that you'd **live** here...not simply pass through here."

Likita was still adjusting to the concept of leaving her life as a medicine woman behind. She'd have to find a new purpose in the lands of Felinar, and though she could certainly go back to work healing the sick once more, she didn't want to do so under the same oath she'd taken before.

She was her own woman, now, with her own decisions to make, and her own oath to take for herself.

"I can't think of any place I'd rather go, Pentia. Jon...are you all right with this?"

There was still much to be settled between the three of them, but where Likita had already given a part of herself to both Pentia and Jon, she had to accept the reality that his heart and soul might still be lost in the wanderlust.

His face was so peaceful in the aftermath of the ritual that Likita almost felt guilty when his eyes opened, but in the depth of his soft, gray irises, there was a look about him that the wolfess had yet to see: a clarity that wasn't of purpose or determination, but one of belonging.

He was just an otter, lazing about in the water and being happy with his life, and the world around him. There could be no place that was more of a *home* to him than the one she'd brought him to, and his smile made it clear to her, as he turned his gaze to meet with her trembling orbs of amber.

"If you should find where the river ends, set up a tent, and find some friends," he murmured to her. "That's the only good piece of advice the otters ever gave me...I think it's about time that I listened to it."

Floating in the middle of the collecting pond with the trio of ladies that helped him to find peace, Jon realized that his tent was already set up for him.

Thanks so much for making it to the end of this novel, and congratulations for completing your own long journey!

There's plenty more stories to be told in the realm of Veloria, and if you're interested to read more about the fascinating characters that live there, I've got some handy links for you to follow!

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