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HIDDEN VOICES

By

Alexandra Ashe

An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for Honors

In

The Department of English

Abstract

My honors project is the culmination of two semesters spent first studying the point of view of animal narrators and their unique understanding of the world, and then applying this knowledge to my creative writing. My project is a series of short stories told from the perspective of different animals, each with its own individual voice. While each story varies in terms of plot, mood, and undertones, they all share the theme of animals considering their place in the natural world that they inhabit alongside their human counterparts. The stories situate readers thoroughly and consistently inside the minds of animals and hopefully challenge people to view themselves and the human race as a whole in a new light.

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Thank you.*

An animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language.

— Martin Buber

Imprint

Charlie could not understand. Without any warning, without any gesture of goodbye, his mother had suddenly disappeared and left him behind.

The sun had been warm the day she had abandoned him. The very first thing he had seen when he opened his eyes was her face, a light-colored head covered in golden yellow feathers and large dark eyes. She had chirped with joy at the sight of him, and he felt love and belonging swell inside him.

He had learned many things from his mother that day. That he looked just like her, that his name was Charlie, as that was what she had declared his name to be, and that she would be the one he would follow for his whole lifetime. She would be the one to give him a life of happiness and protection, to show him the ways of life, to teach him to grow and defend himself.

But then she disappeared. One moment she had been standing before him in the tall green grass beside the pond, and then she was gone. But how could she do that? How could she leave her only offspring?

How could she leave him with creatures so unlike his own?

“My son, you are mistaken. *I* am your mother. That was a human female, and she is not your mother.” That was what the leader of the creatures his mother left him with said. He was sure that he could detect the slightest bit of amusement in her voice.

The leader was female, large in size with a gently curving head and a wide, flat nose the color of the clusters of tiny yellow flowers he had learned were called buttercups. Her body was covered in sleek and mottled brown feathers. She was also

always surrounded by many other creatures that looked like smaller, miniature versions of herself. Her own offspring, he guessed.

“And this is your brood,” She would try to explain over and over again, gesturing towards the nest, a large wreathing of twigs and grasses brimming with her squawking miniatures. “They are your siblings. *We* are your family, not that human female.”

It was impossible. How could she possibly be his mother? She did not even closely resemble him. Charlie knew he had a light-colored head of golden feathers and a pair of large dark eyes just as his mother did. He knew what was coming from the creature’s mouth had to be some sort of trick.

“No, you’re wrong.” He would always declare. “You are not my mother, and they are not my family.”

The creature would sigh. “My son, what happened was an unfortunate accident. I had laid seven eggs in that nest. You were one of them. But a sudden storm of violent rainfall caused the pond to flood onto the bank and destroyed the nest. The water scattered all of my eggs across the bank. I was able to find them all, except yours. Yours drifted somewhere unknown to me. I was devastated.”

“*So?*” What was she going on about?

“So,” She continued. “When you hatched, I had not been the first thing you saw once your eyes opened. That human female was, so that is why you remain convinced that she is your mother and that you are a human. But you are not. I am your mother and you are a duck just like the rest of us.”

A duck? So that’s what they called themselves.

“But if you are so certain you look like that human female, then have a look for yourself.” She ordered, craning her head towards the shimmering surface of the pond. All right. He would do it. He would be victorious, as he would successfully prove her wrong and maybe then she would stop uttering such ridiculous things.

Charlie waddled towards the pond and peered down into the darkness.

In the reflective darkness of the pond, flanked by stones and wildflowers and cattails, a creature stared at him. A creature that looked just like the duck—the large body, the curving head and the flat, yellow nose. Only its head was different than the creature’s, a bright luminous shade of green richer than any type of grass, plant or leaf.

What? No. Impossible. It had to be some sort of trick. It just had to be.

“Well? Now do you see?” The duck asked.

“No. I do not believe you. You are not being truthful.”

Charlie had been able to get the duck to finally stop saying such things, for she had decided to give up, as she had put it. So he was able to feel a small triumph in the midst of his confusion, nonetheless.

Charlie grew older. He saw many of his own kind—humans, as the duck had referred to them as—wandering through the grasses and wildflowers beside the pond every sunrise and sunset, but none of them had ever been her. His mother. Not even the ones who tossed him pieces of some sort of soft and chewy food supply that always caused him to expel trails of feces in the pond.

All throughout his time as a juvenile, Charlie called out to his mother, beckoning her to return to him, but she never did. It was perplexing. The humans seemed to gesture

and communicate in a way unlike his own—myriads of unintelligible sounds. He tried to waddle up to some and do the same, but all that seemed to emerge from him were a series of quacks.

Just like the ducks.

He eventually fell silent with acceptance. Though the loss of his mother saddened him, the ducks she had left him treated him kindly, as though he truly was one of their own kind just as the one claiming to be his mother had said. Even as Charlie grew, she never once admitted she was not his true mother and that they were not his true family. She just seemed utterly convinced that he would eventually come to that realization one day.

It was a sunrise when the so-called mother duck declared that the time had come for Charlie to search for a suitable mate. She introduced him to a young female duck that closely resembled herself.

That? He was supposed to court that?

The two returned to the mother duck that sunset. The young female was livid. She reported to the mother duck that Charlie had failed in the simplest act of courtship.

The mother duck shook her head.

“I am afraid I do not think there is any place for you here in our family, my son.” She said sadly. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps you belong somewhere else. I’m sorry, my son, but I believe it would be best for you to leave the pond.”

Charlie left the pond without any form of protest. Quite the contrary, he was satisfied. The mother duck had finally accepted the defeat and admitted he did not belong

with them. If that was not evidence that the ducks were not his true family, and would never be his true family, he did not know what was.

He spent his days wandering through the tall grasses alone, never failing to believe that he would eventually return to his mother one day.

He was sure of it.

Curiosity

You can surely imagine the surprise I felt when I had opened my eyes to see the most astonishing creature outside the entrance of my den.

I could tell that the weather above the ocean's surface was bright with sunlight, for my whole world was illuminated. The floor of clean pale sand, rippled softly by the ocean's grace, sprinkled with pebbles and the abandoned shells of mollusks, shimmered. Tall fronds of kelp drifted lazily about. Scores of tiny fish skittered past, their scales blinking in the light. It was absolutely breathtaking, but not nearly as breathtaking as the creature itself.

I thought maybe my eyes were playing tricks on me, since I could not say that I had the strongest eyesight—the world around me had always been a bit hazy and colored in different shades of gray. But no. It became clear to me that it was real. I could detect its subtle motions with my barely functioning ears.

It was such an unusual looking creature indeed. Its form was dark. Darker than the ocean when night falls. I had eight arms, but it only had four of its own. And none of them looked at all soft and fluid as mine were. They were long, strong and tough as coral, and moved through the water as powerfully as the tail of a shark. Two of its arms were tipped with what looked like whale tails, as they moved gracefully upwards and downwards, propelling the creature forward.

But most oddly, it was bound in something. There was a length of something strong tightly wound around its form and eyes and forced down its throat. I had no idea what it was, but I knew for a fact that it was certainly not gentle seaweed. Not at all. Even

more strangely, the mysterious bindings seemed to be attached to something on the creature's back.

An enormous sponge? No.

Whatever it was, the creature did not seem to pay it any mind. I wondered if it even realized that it was there. I began to feel a genuine concern. Was the creature in distress? Was it *lost*? My world had always been peaceful and quiet. Even occasional arrivals of sharks hardly brought me any disturbance, as I had always been able to escape their sight thanks to my flesh, for I had been gifted with the ability to make it take on the color of my surroundings as swift as a blink. But I had never seen any creature that even closely resembled the one outside my den before.

I could not understand why it was completely unaware of its bindings. I cautiously and silently slithered out of the entrance of my den, the thinnest sliver in a pile of rocks. I am a shy creature myself, and it would have been odd for me to have ventured out of my den for any reason other than feeding, but my curiosity towards the creature grew.

The creature stiffened, suddenly aware of my presence. I wondered how it was able to sense me, as its eyes and mouth were bound. One of its arms reached warily towards me. It seemed to have wanted to make contact with me, but in the end it did not. The arm quickly retracted, as though the creature had suddenly thought better of what they were about to do. But why? I had given the creature no indication that I was hunting in search of prey and saw it as a valuable food source, so it should not have been

distrustful of me. Perhaps it was just shyness. I too had always preferred to remain solitary. But this seemed different. The creature seemed genuinely frightened—

Of course. I knew it.

The extraordinary creature was trying to beckon for me to assist it because it was being attacked by the predator on its back, for it had it trapped, making it suffer.

Forcing it into submission.

I followed the creature's movements and reached out my own arms—all eight of them and grabbed for the binding covering its eyes, using all of my strength to attempt to free the poor creature. I suddenly felt the creature's panic beneath my arms. It began to violently thrash and tug at my form. There was no consequence, for my form was so soft that I felt no pain from its touches. I pitied its suffering and hoped I would be able to free it swiftly without bringing any further harm to it. I felt rage at the predator. Rage at its cowardice. Frightened of its potential.

How dare it threaten and attack something so utterly extraordinary?

I was ultimately successful. I had released the creature's eyes and mouth from its bindings. Its eyes were astounding. They were as large as the pebbles that studded the sandy seafloor and colored such a pale shade that it almost looked as though there was no color in them at all. Two pale pools of light dotted with dark and tiny pupils. All this I saw for only a moment, as the eyes snapped shut almost immediately after I had freed them from the predator's clutches.

I thought the creature would be grateful towards me for saving it, but it did not appear to be in a state of relief or even contentment in the slightest. In fact, it seemed

even more panicked than when its eyes were bound. The way it wildly and blindly flailed its four stiff arms shocked and perplexed me. So much that for the first time I might have actually truly feared it for the first time. There was nothing more that could be done, so I fled, leaving behind a thick cloud of inky darkness.

I was able to successfully make it back to the safety of my den, but it took several moments for me to find the courage to peer through the entrance and have a look at the creature once more. It was swimming upwards towards the surface with a speed that nearly matched my own, as though it too was fleeing in terror.

But what had I done to frighten the creature and cause it to flee from me? I had not caused it any harm just as the predator had done. Or had I? If that possibility was the truth, then how exactly? Perhaps the creature lacked the ability to properly understand my intentions. I had only been trying to assist it in its time of distress.

Perhaps it was my simple curiosity that had ended up frightening the both of us.

Accidents

My name is Toby and I want everyone to know that Jake is the best human in the whole wide world! He always gives me the best belly rubs and cuddles! He gives me the most delicious food all the time and doesn't even tell me I'm a naughty boy if I have an accident in the house instead of going potty outside in the backyard!

My favorite thing to do with Jake is going for walks with him because he takes me to all these neat places! They always have lots of different scents and spaces to run and play and a lot of other humans that come over and pet me! Everything a Shih Tzu puppy like me could ever want! I also love sleeping next to Jake in his bed. Even though I have my own bed downstairs in the living room, I don't sleep in it that much because Jake always picks me up in his arms every night and takes me upstairs to his room. He always holds me and gives me pets until I fall asleep.

Things are kind of weird today. Jake is sitting on the couch and I'm lying down next to him. But he isn't giving me any pets or cuddles. He is just looking down at something long and skinny in his hand and pushing on it over and over again with one of his toes. Oh well. He probably just forgot I'm next to him. I growl to get his attention. Not too loud because I don't want to scare him or anything. He doesn't look up. This time I let out a bark. He hears me because he looks at me! Great!

"Quiet, Toby!" Jake is mad at me because he says it loud.

Oh.

I guess I'm being a naughty boy. I lower my head and whimper because I feel sad. I didn't mean to be naughty. It was an accident. I really hope Jake won't be mad at me for a long time. Probably not. He never does because he's the best! Even when he scolds me he gets happy again really fast and pets me! He probably just didn't like that I barked. Okay. I'll be a good boy and try not to do that a lot anymore.

I stand up and walk across the couch and cuddle up close to him. But he doesn't give me any pets.

Today Jake brought someone into the house. I'm so excited because I love meeting new humans! Jake's friends are always so nice to me!

His friend is a female. Maybe his mate! She walks in through the door and I jump up on her to say hello. I sure hope that she'll notice me and give me pets!

She does notice me. But when I jump up on her she doesn't bend down to pet me. She moves backwards away from me really fast like I hurt her or something and I fall back down to the floor. I would never ever hurt anyone! How could she possibly think that? I sure hope I didn't do anything wrong!

And then she shouts at me.

"Get down!"

Then Jake says the same thing. But then he also says I'm a bad boy. Now I'm really confused. And really sad! It was an accident! I didn't know that Jake's friend didn't want me to jump up on her. I just thought she would do what every other human

Jake has let me say hello to did and be really happy to see me and pet me. I didn't mean to make her and Jake mad at me. I just wanted to say hello to her.

Jake rushes over to her. I wonder if I really did hurt her! I hope not! If I did it was an accident! I didn't mean to! Jake's friend is mad. I can tell by her voice. She's saying something to Jake but I can't understand it. Her voice sounds like me when I get really annoyed and growl.

"...*hate dogs*..." I hear her say that, but what does that mean? I just don't know.

Then Jake and her walk away from me and head towards the kitchen. I follow them. Jake is putting on his coat. That means that he's going out of the house and get in his car to do something and I won't see him for a long time. I don't like whenever he does that because I really miss him. Sometimes I like to lay down in front of the big window behind the couch and look out it at the street to see if his car is coming home. Sometimes I see kitties and bunnies and squirrels outside. Sometimes I even see other humans! They always get me really excited so I bark a lot. But nothing gets me more excited than when I see Jake's car come back into the driveway! As soon as he walks in through the door I leap off the couch and jump all over him because I just missed him so much!

Now Jake walks out the front door with his friend. *What?* He didn't even say bye-bye to me. They just walk past me without saying anything and leave me all alone in the house. Oh no! I think that means they're really mad at me! I hope they'll come home so I can have a chance to be a good boy again, so Jake won't be mad at me anymore.

I'm not a puppy anymore. I've been growing up. Jake's friend lives with us now. I found out that her name is Isabella. She still doesn't like it when I jump up on her so I try really hard to remember not to. She actually doesn't do anything with me. Not like Jake does. She doesn't give me pets, cuddle with me, give me yummy treats or take me on walks to cool places. It almost seems like she doesn't even know I'm there a lot.

But when she does notice I'm there. I don't really like it. Isabella isn't really nice like Jake. She scolds me a lot. Tells me *no!* and *get down!* a lot. One time she even hit me because I had an accident in the house instead of outside. She hit me with something soft, so it didn't hurt, but it still made me feel sad. Sometimes I wish Jake would tell her *no!* when she's mean to me.

I really miss Jake. He doesn't really cuddle with me or pet me as much as he used to. He just always seems so busy. Too busy to play with me or take me on walks. He won't even let me sleep next to him in his bed anymore because Isabella sleeps there now. So now I have to sleep downstairs in my own bed or on the couch. I don't really like it because the dark make me feel scared. And really lonely. I also feel sad too because Jake is never busy to cuddle Isabella or do fun things with her. I sure wish he would do those things with me again.

Jake and Isabella have a baby now. He's a male and his name is Mikey. He's so cute! I really want to go near him and give him licks and love but Jake and Isabella get really mad at me if I try to. So I can only lay on the floor and look up at him while they

hold him in their arms and give him cuddles. I think they think I'm going to be a naughty boy if I'm allowed to go near him. I would never though!

Jake is sitting in a chair in Mikey's room and holding him. I remember when he used to always do that with me and I feel sad. I really miss it still. Jake's eyes keep opening and closing so I think he might be falling asleep here. Mikey's already asleep. His eyes are closed. He's so cute! Maybe I can look at him up close really quick while Jake is sleeping. Just one quick look.

I stand up against Jake's leg to see Mikey better. But I think I scared Jake because he makes a loud noise like one of my favorite squeaky toys and I feel his whole leg shake really hard. I fall back down to the floor.

Oh no!

Mikey falls out of his arms to the floor. That happened one time with me. Jake had me in his arms and slipped. I fell out of his arms and onto the floor. It only hurt a little though, and I felt better really fast because Jake rushed over to me and picked me up and gave me lots of hugs and cuddles, talking to me in that soft way I really like. Jake does the same thing with Mikey. Mikey woke up and is making really loud crying noises. That must mean he's really hurt! But he'll be okay. Love and cuddles from Jake will make him feel all better!

Then I feel something hard hit me in my side. It's really hard! So hard it hurts and makes me squeak. *Ouch! What happened?* I look up. Isabella is in the room and she's looking down right at me. And she's screaming. Screaming really loud. So loud it hurts me ears!

She kicked me. She hurt me. Really hurt me!

But why did she hurt me? What did I do wrong? Isabella runs past me and goes over to Jake. She picks up Mikey from him and screams in Jake's face, pointing at me. Jake looks really scared. Oh no! I had been a bad boy because I went near Mikey when I wasn't supposed to! So now Jake and Isabella are really mad at me!

Even after Jake and Isabella went in their bedrooms and left me downstairs to sleep in my own bed, I could still hear shouting from upstairs. I felt scared. What was going to happen now? Will they be mad at me forever?

This is so great! Jake isn't mad at me anymore because he's taking me for a ride in the car! He knows how much I love going for rides in the car so he must think I'm a good boy again who deserves a special treat! And it's going to be just me and Jake! Isabella stayed home with Mikey. Finally! Some special time together!

I feel the car slow down and stop. I stand up to look at the window. I know where we are! We're at the park! Hooray! I'm so excited! It's been a really long time since Jake took me to the park! There's lots of space to run around in, lots of humans who like to come over to me and say hello and give me pets, and even other dogs to play with sometimes! I can't wait!

I wait for Jake to pick me up out of the car and put me down on the grass. That's funny. He didn't put my harness on me and didn't bring my leash with him. That must mean that I'm allowed to run around wherever I want! I start panting and wagging my tail

and look up at Jake. But for some reason, he doesn't look happy. He looks really sad. But why? We are going to have so much fun together!

And then he gets back into his car. And drives it away until I don't see it anymore.

What?

But where's he going? He took me to the park so we could have fun together. And I'm still here.

He left without me.

It's nighttime now. Even though I'm not a puppy anymore I still don't like nighttime. It's scary and dark. Now it's even scarier because I'm all alone in the park and Jake still hasn't come back.

All day today I got to meet a lot of humans who were really nice to me. But I didn't feel happy because none of them were Jake. I kept waiting for him, but he never came back to me. I even walked around the park looking for him, but I couldn't find him. What happened to him? When will he come back? Will I ever see him again? I sure hope so!

Wait! I know what those are! Those two bright lights in the dark mean a car is coming! That means Jake is coming back to get me! I can't wait to see him! The car slows down until it stops and I run over to it so Jake can see me! The car door opens and a human comes out. But it isn't Jake. It's a female. *Isabella? No.* She doesn't look like Isabella at all. Isabella is really tall. So tall I can't see her face a lot of the time. This

human is short. I can see her face. She also smells different than Isabella too. She looks down at me and I come closer to her.

“Hi, there.” She says, stroking me behind my ears just the way I like it. She’s really nice. I can feel my tail wagging.

She’s starts talking to me, but I can’t understand what she’s saying. Her voice is soft though so I like that a lot. I recognize one word. *Family*. She says it like she’s confused. But I’m happy now! Family must mean she’s going to bring me home to my family! Maybe she’s one of Jake’s friends and I just never met her before! That makes me really happy so I jump up on her and start barking because I’m so excited! She picks me up and puts me into the car. Hooray! I’m going home! I’m going to see Jake again!

She didn’t take me home to Jake and Isabella, but I really like it here. Her name is Maddie. She calls me Bobby even though my name is Toby. But it’s okay. I love her so much. She gives me everything I could ever want. Everything that Jake used to do with me—love and cuddles, yummy treats, long walks to neat places, and sleeping next to her in her bed. I still haven’t seen Jake and miss him a lot, but I really love Maddie.

I think I want to stay with her forever. She’s stroking my back as I cuddle up next to her in her warm and cozy bed. She talks to me.

“*You’re a good boy.*”

I feel my tail wag.

To Hunt

I.

Swift Runner crouched, positioned in the brambles of a blackberry bush, ears erect and pupils wide and dilated, watching a mouse foraging for food.

It was good. For the mouse held no interest in the blackberries, making it unaware of his presence. It was digging beneath the bush's roots. Why? Swift Runner did not know and did not care. He only knew mice were nothing but lowly fools. And much needed food.

It was within striking distance. Like all foxes, Swift Runner's powerful hind legs pushed and jumped high into the air. The mouse heard, it had given away his intent. But it did not matter. It was too late, for the mouse's tiny brown head perked up, Swift Runner's jaws were already clamping down on its neck, biting hard and crushing the bones.

The mouse squealed in pain. Only once before it went limp. Swift Runner tasted the warm blood pooling from his jaw.

Success. As always.

He had been hunting ever since he was a young kit and no prey had ever been successful in escaping him. It was his paws. They gifted him with a swiftness no other member of his pack could achieve. He sneered at the thought of his pack's hunting skills. Only he had been gifted with a swift speed, a patient crouch, and a silent pounce ideal for ensuring no prey could escape.

Swift Runner was satisfied, for he had emerged successful today. Winter would be arriving soon, so the pack would need all the prey they could find.

He headed for the den.

II.

It was nearing nightfall, the lightest hour behind Swift Runner as he entered the den, a small tunnel beneath the twisted, dangling roots of a fallen oak, hidden by fronds of fern and goldenrod, a mouse clutched in his jaws.

He trotted down the entrance tunnel, passing the main den where he could hear the muffled barks and whimpers of his family, to the hollowed-out chamber where their food supply was stored.

His younger sister was there, a young and pretty vixen called Honeysuckle, as their mother had compared her good-natured temperament to the sweetness of honeysuckle nectar. She seemed to be taking note of their rations. Noticing his sudden appearance, she turned and greeted him, uttering a soft, high-pitched whine.

“Hello, brother,”

She shuffled out of his way to give him access to the food pile. Swift Runner slowly approached it. He felt perplexed. Besides the heaps of dried berries and fruits, their rations were made up of nothing but two rabbits, a squirrel and a chipmunk. It was certainly not enough. He lowered his head, dropping the mouse onto the pile before turning to face his sister.

“Hello, Honeysuckle,”

“This is not good, brother.” She sounded troubled.

“How have the hunts been?”

“Bleak. With winter fast-approaching, the forest no longer trembles with life. Prey is becoming scarce.”

“What about the others?” Honeysuckle lowered her head solemnly.

“I am not certain how Ash is faring,” he saw her bristle. “but I would rather not inquire.” He had always known his sister to be rather meek.

Swift Runner’s eyes narrowed. “And Meadow?”

Honeysuckle did not answer for a moment. She looked as though she was searching for the right words to say.

“Well, Ash insists that Meadow remain in the den until the springtime. He does not want her to take part in hunting in her condition...”

“*What?*” Swift Runner could not control the furious howl that erupted from him. Honeysuckle’s body began to spasm in fear, trembling uncontrollably. She let out a long hiss, begging him to be silent. She then stepped forward and peered her head out of the chamber, checking frantically if the others heard. It appeared as though they had not, she turned back to face him.

“I had not anticipated any lesser reaction from you, brother,” she whimpered gently. “But you know there is not anything we can do. Meadow and Ash lead our family...”

“But why *now?*” Swift Runner hissed. “She has not needed to remain in the den ever since she became with kits! Meadow has ascended to the role of dominant female

ever since Mother passed! She is the one that keeps our family strong and protected and fed! Without her, we may not survive! *Ash may have well as sentenced us to death!*”

In a gesture of affection and patience, Honeysuckle rested her head upon his. “I do not believe that to be true. Ash has never demonstrated he wishes us any harm. He is probably just considering Meadow’s wellbeing.”

Swift Runner’s mind was racing. “Come on, we must see them now.”

“Why, brother?”

“We must confront them about this,”

“Swift Runner, please do not make any unnecessary trouble when it is not needed. He is not doing anything wrong. You are the one who is thinking too much about this...”

But it was too late. He had already trotted out of the chamber towards the main den. Honeysuckle sighed and followed him close behind.

Three pairs of bright amber eyes snapped to Swift Runner and Honeysuckle as they entered the den. Only Shadow was happy to see them. She leapt up and bounded towards her brother, squealing joyfully. But then again, his other younger sister was always joyful, as she was nothing more than an ignorant fool. Her brains had developed no better than her form—mangy and clumsy and incapable of hunting or speaking. Her name suited her well, Swift Runner thought, for their mother had once quipped that she was better suited to the shadows of den than the light of the forest beyond.

Swift Runner spotted Meadow in a corner. She lay asleep in a nest of grasses and leaves, sprawled on her side, belly swollen and heavy, twitching with unborn kits. The

kits were fast-developing. They would be arriving soon. Meadow remained alert even as she slept. Her ears cocked back and a low growl escaped from deep inside her at the sensations.

It was strange, Swift Runner thought, to see his elder sister appearing so *vulnerable*. Their mother had birthed her on a frigid winter night. The meadow that she was named in honor of had been coated with glistening frost. Frigid is what Meadow remained for as long as Swift Runner could recall, aloof and proud but nonetheless fierce and devoted to protecting her pack.

Swift Runner felt his muscles tighten when he noticed Ash observe Meadow's movements.

Swift Runner always loathed Ash. Though he could not exactly understand why.

When Meadow returned to the den with Ash at her side one warm summer's nightfall, his form shocked Swift Runner. He was large and intimidating with an ugly scar that ran from his left shoulder down to his flank— "the mark of a warrior"—as the others call it. But most shocking, he had only a single amber eye. The other was a pale milky blankness. He had explained that eye had been stung by a bee shortly after he was whelped and it had never become clear again.

None of them knew where he had come from or whom he belonged to. All they knew was that Meadow had encountered him while out hunting and had become attracted to him, declaring him her mate and the dominant male of the pack.

Ash was just as powerful as Meadow, if not more. But not cruel. He led the pack with success, keeping them supplied with warmth and rations while the others followed

his orders obediently. He was admired and trusted, so what was it that made rage course through Swift Runner like a powerful wind at the very thought of him?

“Swift Runner,” Ash’s bark broke through his cloud of thoughts like a branch of lightning. He felt Honeysuckle cower behind him slightly. Shadow raised her head.

“Yes, Ash?”

“What is it that troubles you?”

Swift Runner took a steadying breath. “We are in a very bad situation. The food shortage is low. Winter will be approaching and the forest has become barren.”

Ash raised his head. “Yes, I am very much aware of that.”

“How has your success been with hunting?”

“It’s been just fine. But I believe this is about you?”

“My sister has informed me that you wish to keep Meadow in the den until the spring?”

Ash narrowed his eyes. “Yes, that is correct.”

“Ash, I understand your concern about Meadow’s current state, but until now she has never had any problem hunting under any circumstances. With prey becoming scarce, we will need to scout a wider range of land in order to find food, which means we will be needing as many hunters as possible.”

“And?”

“That means we need her. Our survival depends on it. If Meadow remains in the den, we can only depend on Honeysuckle and myself. Shadow cannot hunt and your wounded eye makes you an adequate hunter at best.”

He felt Honeysuckle tense behind him at his words. Ash, however, looked thoughtful.

“Your words are true, and I certainly appreciate your concern for our pack, but my mind is made up, Swift Runner and that is final.” Swift Runner felt rage building inside him.

“I see. And does Meadow have a say in this?”

“She is fine with it. She had already agreed it is for the best for her and our kits. Is that so difficult to comprehend, Swift Runner?”

“No, but—”

“Forgive me if I would not be able to forgive myself if anything should happen to them. I was under the impression that you would also share the same concern as I do. She is your sister, after all...”

“*I do!*” Swift Runner’s howl echoed through the tunnels of the den. Honeysuckle, who had been watching in some sort of frightened trance, jolted. Even Shadow was watching and listening, not appearing joyful for the first time.

“*Do not ever imply that I do not care about her!*”

Ash did not flinch. “Please lower your voice. Meadow needs her rest. As I was saying, I only wish for the good of my mate and my kits. I can say with absolute certainty that we will be safe and supplied through the winter.”

“*How?*”

“You do not need to concern yourself with that at the moment, Swift Runner. We will do whatever needs to be done. We will be fine. We always have been. I have never let us down before. Have I?”

“No...”

“ Good. Now, I must ask you to leave. It is nightfall and we will be needing sleep. You both, as well, Honeysuckle and Shadow.”

It was Honeysuckle who guided a seething Swift Runner out of the den.

III.

The sun was just beginning to bleed red into the clouds when Swift Runner emerged from the den the next morning. He had not slept, but it did not matter. The anger still coursing through his body kept him from feeling exhausted.

What sort of leader disregarded the needs of their pack in order to put themselves first? How could he dare claim he was only protecting Meadow and their unborn kits? By limiting the number of gatherers, he had put them in grave danger! Meadow and her unborn kits would surely starve, and he was too pigheaded to realize that! If *he* was dominant male, he certainly would not allow that to happen! He would be a far better leader than *that!*

Swift Runner growled.

He recalled the day his mother had declared which of her four children would take her place upon her passing. It had been Meadow. Their mother had praised her strength and wisdom. Honeysuckle and Shadow had expressed their congratulations to their elder

sister, but Swift Runner had gone to his mother that same evening to inquire her decision, to ask why it had not been him whom she picked. She had looked at him with sympathy in her warm amber eyes.

“You are a brilliant hunter and gatherer, Swift Runner. Your incredible speed and agility astound me each day the Earth Mother brings us. But you pose danger to our family.”

He remembered feeling sickened. What had she meant?

“You were gifted with swift paws, but you were also cursed with a swift mind...”

“I...I do not understand, Mother...”

“You harbor no caution,” she explained patiently, “you do not possess an ability to plan—to wait and reason in the face of danger like your elder sister. You think only as a warrior, you are strong but also arrogant. You overestimate your abilities instead of understanding even you can be vulnerable to harm, and that sort of recklessness can get you into very deep trouble one day. Not only you, but also your family.”

How could she have said that? He was not any sort of threat to their family! He had just expressed that he would do whatever needed to be done to ensure the pack’s safety, even if it meant taking risks. He would prove himself, so his mother and sisters would not see him as incapable after all.

Had that been what she had meant?

And was that why he loathed Ash? Because he was envious of his role as dominant male? Because he managed to achieve what he had always dreamed of?

He felt a sullen shame.

Thinking of his mother pained him. She had passed from Mother Earth six full moons after Meadow's ascension from an illness not known to them; her chest had rattled with coughs that caused blood and mucus to drip from her mouth and nostrils. All four of them had mourned and grieved, Swift Runner especially, being the only male in the litter gifted him a closeness to her not shared by his sisters.

Not even during their mother's passing did Meadow's cold heart bleed, she had remained stoic.

How?

A sudden sound caught Swift Runner's attention. He stopped in his tracks and listened, ears twitching. He heard it again.

A splash.

It was distant, but his sharp ears caught it nonetheless. It was coming from the stream nearby. This was good. That meant the potential of fish or rodents. He scanned his surroundings through the tall grass, ferns and goldenrod. He was alone. He made his way towards the stream.

Swift Runner perched himself on a rock on a hillside overlooking the stream flowing fast below. Thickets of brambles surrounded him as he sat listening, head cocked, waiting for the sound again.

He had a small notch on one of his ears. That ear twitched at the sound of the splash once more. He turned his head in that direction and what he saw made his pulse quicken.

A human.

He leapt off the rock and scurried behind a tall stand of pine. He had heard about such creatures from his mother.

One of the very first lessons she had taught him as a kit was to beware of humans, that they were monstrous creatures capable of destruction and devastation. She claimed it had been humans who took the life of their father just the morning after he and his sisters had been whelped in the darkness of the den—they had happened upon a large pack of them while out hunting. Their sudden presence excited them and sent them leaping up and giving chase with long, thin objects in their paws much too sturdy to be tree branches.

A great blast louder than any crack of thunder filled the air along with a terrible bitter scent—the scent of execution, and their father was suddenly sprawled on his side, blood flowing from a deep wound in his flank faster than any river. She had only seen this for an instant. She had no choice. She had to continue fleeing.

She had lost the monsters when the forest grew thicker and darker and managed to make it to the sanctuary of the den and her kits, safe from the horror that had stolen their father.

Such creatures are dangerous. No one is to go near them...

That was the warning she had passed down to her kits when they had grown strong enough to hunt on their own.

Swift Runner shuddered in fear. He did not move until he was certain the creature had not seen him. When the forest remained still, he cautiously peered around the trunk of the tree.

He could scent it well over the stream and trees. He could only detail from the human's scent that it was female. The flesh of its face was the color of the sun's rays on snow. It had a long patch of fur on top of its head, flowing down its back like a waterfall of murky brown water.

Its form was strange. Very strange. Its hind legs were the color of the sky at night, while its belly, torso and front legs were covered in fur—the same color as the pelt of a wolf. It was obviously well-protected from any predators.

It sat on the bank of the stream. Its form was calm. Swift Runner decided it was because it had not spotted him. What was it doing there? He had never seen any such creatures in the forest. And not even did most prey emerge from their slumber so early.

He saw it move again, reaching for a musty-scented object beside her he had not noticed before. He did not know what it was. It looked like a large bird's nest—woven in the exact same shape. Swift Runner wondered if there were eggs inside. He did not know if humans consumed them the way his kind did.

The human female reached one of its paws into the nest and suddenly, Swift Runner's nostrils flared with an overwhelming rush of the sweet scent of kill.

He recognized the scent immediately.

Fowl. His mouth watered.

The human female had pulled out a piece of fowl meat from the nest and began to consume it. It was a fowl's thigh, he recognized, for he had caught one before one full moon ago.

Swift Runner wanted feeding. The craving crept through his form at such a speed it nearly propelled him downstream.

No! Are you rodent-brained? Remember what your mother told you! This creature is dangerous! You must not go near her!

He suddenly remembered why he had awoken before the others in the den. To hunt. To gather. The sun began to warm the forest, prey would be emerging from their dens soon. But the scent of the fowl kept him rooted to the spot. He had not smelled such a sweeter scent for many full moons now.

Where had the human female found it? Had it had gathered more than he could see?

Yes.

No sooner did the human female finish consuming the fowl did it reach back into the nest and pull out another.

Swift Runner could taste the fowl meat on his roof of his mouth. Meadow loved fowl meat. So did his younger sisters. They had not had it for a long time however, and he could only picture their barks of shocked joy if he arrived home with his jaw brimming with it. Meadow would attack it hungrily, feeding herself and her unborn pups. Honeysuckle would be calm and content and Shadow would be leaping with excitement.

It would certainly prove him far more competent at keeping their family safe than Ash.

The sound of rustling from the human female alerted Swift Runner out of his thoughts. It was rising to stand on her hind legs. And then it picked up the nest and began to walk.

Where was it going? Was it going to gather more fowl?

He had to find out where it had gathered it from.

He made up his mind.

He would not be in danger, Swift Runner thought as he began to follow it silently. He would not let it see him. He guessed humans were fast, but decided he was faster.

The human female led him along a narrow stretch of dirt he had never seen before that through the forest. He kept his distance, silently trotting from thickets of brush and ferns, but always knew where it was even when it disappeared from his sight for a moment behind trees. The wind blew her scent towards him, so he could always scent it.

It eventually slowed its steps, pushing aside a thicket of brambles with its paw and shuffled past it. When it disappeared from Swift Runner's sight once again he crept cautiously towards the brush. He peered through it.

He could not believe it.

The human female had led him to a large clearing of grassland. It walked up a small dirt path to what had to be her den—a massive structure almost as tall as the trees

in the forest. But that was not what interested him. It was a small den made from thin branches of trees. A flock of fowl pecked around inside it absently.

This was good.

Very good.

The pack would approve.

He checked to see if the human female was still nearby. It was not. It must have entered its den.

Good.

Swift Runner slowly made his way towards the den of chickens. He would have to leap over the branches in order to get to them. No matter.

“Hey!”

Swift Runner heard the human female’s shriek of alarm just as he prepared to pounce. He saw it for an instant, racing out of the den towards him, flapping its front legs angrily, shouting at him. It clearly did not want him there stealing its food supply.

He had no choice. He could prove himself to his pack if he paid with his life.

He fled.

But he fled only once. He did not let his failure disappoint him when he had made it home to the den last evening.

He had awoken at dawn before the others and found himself right back in the human female’s territory. The sky was still dark, so he did not doubt the human female would be still asleep.

He had to be quick.

The trotted towards the flock of fowl, each one curled in a ball, fast asleep and unaware of his presence. He poised himself to jump just as he had done the night before.

He made it over the branches and into the den with a soft thud into the dirt. The fowl only stirred. He sank his teeth into the neck of one. It had only time to shriek in alarm and agony before he had twisted its neck as swiftly as a blink. Its neck fell as though a broken stem on a flower, blood raining down and flecking the dirt below.

The other fowl began to awaken and panic, but he had already leapt over the branches and was racing back into the forest, his sanctuary.

Success.

IV.

The pack had been astonished when Swift Runner returned to the den later that morning. And skeptical. Ash demanded to know where he had managed to find such rations, but Swift Runner would not tell, he did not need the others knowing and hunting the fowl with him. This was his once chance of proving himself, and he did not wish to share his success with the others.

He scented Honeysuckle's fear when he offered the fowl meat to her. She had at first refused, acting as though the rations were somehow tainted. She even tried to coax Shadow away from touching it, but it was futile, Shadow always ate contentedly without protest.

Eventually, Honeysuckle gave into her urgings and feasted along with the others. Swift Runner knew she would. Honeysuckle was sweet and good and always listened.

Meadow kept eyeing him suspiciously, as though believing his findings were too good to be true. Swift Runner went out of his way to avoid her accusing glances.

Swift Runner returned to the human female's territory every morning for many sunrises and sunsets, each time returning to the den with yet another fowl. The number of fowl began to slowly decline. He wondered if the human female noticed.

His question was answered when he arrived one sunrise to discover the human female was not alone. It was gesturing to another human. A human male. The human female was obviously furious, shouting at him. Although Swift Runner could not understand their shouts, he knew they were angered at the declining number of fowl.

And by the human male's side, was an unearthly creature.

It looked like a wolf, but it was clearly not. It was of another world. Not Swift Runner's world. Or his pack's world. But the human world. Its scent was unfamiliar and Swift Runner quivered in fear. He turned to flee.

But it was futile. The creature had heard him. It barked louder than any sound he had ever heard and leapt fiercely.

The humans took notice and their heads snapped to observe what infuriated the creature. Then they allowed themselves to be led by the creature as it gave chase to Swift Runner.

Swift Runner ran, the creature's deadly barks booming in his ears. The humans had tried to follow him. It was good for them. The stunted, autumn-weathered underbrush made it easy for them to spot him as he fled.

Swift Runner managed to make it safely back to the den by the time they had caught up with him.

Something was intruding.

It was the human female's paw. The human female's paw was jittering in the entrance of his home.

Swift Runner froze. This was very bad. If any of the others knew where the sudden food supply rations came from, that he had stolen from the very creatures their mother had warned them to stay way from, the consequences would be fearful.

He heard shuffling coming from the main den. Had they already awoken? *Please.*
No.

He had to get the human female away from his pack.

He lunged forward and snapped his jaws down onto one of the long thin toes of its paw. He whipped his head to the side with great force, ripping it from its paw entirely.

He heard its piercing shriek of agony as its paw ripped away from the den's entrance. The warm blood streamed across his face and down his throat. It tasted sour on his tongue.

"Swift Runner," He turned, soaked in blood. The others had awoken. Honeysuckle's jaw hung open in horror. Shadow cowered behind her. Meadow looked disbelieving.

And Ash fumed, his voice a deadly ice cold. “What have you done?”

V.

Swift Runner never had the time to confess to the pack. To even respond. A river of liquid suddenly flooded down into the den, its noxious scent invading their nostrils and making their eyes burn and sting.

Honeysuckle wailed in fear, Shadow barked and skittered in alarm, Ash screeched “*Humans! Everyone out the back!*” and turned and dashed down the main tunnel of the den towards the back entrance. The others followed.

Swift Runner only had time to peer through the entrance of the den.

There they were. The human female, still screeching in agony, clutching its paw in fury. The creature still barking. The human male holding something in its paw. What was it? It looked like a tiny stick of wood. Then there was a tiny *pop* and the end of it ignited in a flame.

No.

Swift Runner bolted towards the back entrance just as the human male tossed the weapon into the den.

The den was engulfed in billowing flames.

“*MEADOW! GET OUT! NOW!*” was all Ash was able to shriek before the flames devoured him. And Shadow because her form was too unsteady. Because she was better suited to the shadows. And Honeysuckle. His sweet-tempered younger sister who warned him not to go searching for trouble when it was not needed...

All of them devoured because Swift Runner had blocked the back entrance in a rush to get Meadow and her unborn kits to safety.

VI.

“This is all your fault,” Swift Runner’s head snapped up in amazement.

Meadow was speaking to him for the first time in several sunrises and sunsets.

Only the two of them had managed to escape the fire and flee. They had found refuge—a space beneath a pile of large boulders draped in mosses and rot.

Swift Runner managed to find kill. It was not much, but enough. His paws remained swift—no prey had been successful in escaping his jaws still. His strength in hunting had not withered. But for the first time, his skills did not bring him satisfaction. They did not make him sneer at the very thought of the others’ hunting abilities.

Because the others were gone. His family was gone.

Swift Runner remained only grateful for his abilities because they assured him each hunt would end successfully, with him bringing enough prey back to his sister to keep her and her unborn kits properly nourished.

He rolled over onto his side to face her.

“You know perfectly well that I did not mean this, Meadow...”

“Why, Swift Runner?” She was whimpering. He had never heard her make such a pitiful sound before. “*Why?*”

Guilt seeped into Swift Runner’s heart.

“Our sisters our dead! My mate is dead! And it’s all because of you! What our mother said was true! You could never have been the dominant male because you have proven yourself to be nothing but a danger. What Ash said was true! He said you shouldn’t have concerned yourself—”

“I was just trying to—”

“To *what?*” She growled. “To serve our pack? No. You did this to prove *yourself!* You’ve only ever wished to serve yourself since the day you were whelped!”

Swift Runner had nothing to say. He knew her words were true.

“I never even had the chance to tell Ash...”

At this, Swift Runner’s ears perked up. “Tell him what?”

Meadow stayed silent for a long moment.

“The kits. They are not his.”

Swift Runner gaped at her. “*W...what?*”

It was the most astonishing thing. Meadow’s gaze softened, forlorn. “I had been out hunting. I had stopped for a drink at the stream. When I looked up, *he* was there. A lone male completely foreign to me. But I could see it in his eyes what he was thinking. Exactly what he was going to do even before *he* knew what he was going to do.”

“He...forced himself upon you?”

“Yes. I never told Ash out of fear. To hide my shame. The shame of being forced into submission, of harboring remnants of the destruction of another.”

“Oh, Meadow...” Swift Runner suddenly felt himself rising, making his way over to her. He rested his head upon hers, and to his enormous surprise, she did not recoil.

“I know what the others have said about me,” Her tone turned mocking. ““The freezing wind that blew the night she was birthed surely must have chilled her heart. She’s just as frigid as the winter meadow! Always carrying out her duties without even a trace of a smile and rarely saying a word to anyone!’

“If only they knew...”

Swift Runner closed his eyes against her.

“We have only each other now, Swift Runner...” Meadow whimpered.

“We are going to be fine, Meadow. We are going to survive. I promise...”

Her body lay beneath him, and for the first time, he felt her warmth. He felt the steady pacing of her heart that made him aware of the shattered inner being beneath the layers of coldness.

Another sensation alerted his senses. A soft touch against his flank, as though a butterfly had landed upon him.

It came from Meadow’s belly.

VII.

It was nearing sunrise when Swift Runner opened his eyes the next morning, but he could not tell. He could only see a world of darkness. Varying shades of darkness, but darkness nonetheless.

Meadow had suddenly begun kitting during the night. He had been awakened by the unrelenting howls and cries of her labor pain.

She had whelped three kits. Two males and one female. They lay asleep curled, content against his flank. Their bodies were tiny and soft, the dusky color of dirt.

Meadow had not made it. Something had gone very wrong. The amount of blood she had lost while kitting had been too great to save her.

His family was destroyed.

And it had been all because of him.

He could vision his mother standing over him. And Meadow. Honeysuckle and Shadow. Even Ash. He visioned his mother staring down upon him, that same expression of sympathy she always saved just for him.

He could see her so clearly he almost thought she had to be real.

But that was impossible, his mother was dead.

He saw Honeysuckle, sweet-faced and timid, looking at him with admiration just as she had always done. Shadow stood beside her, crooning contentedly. Though an ignorant fool, she always remained happy.

Meadow appeared beside their mother. He saw the genuine warmth in her eyes for the second time. Ash rested his head upon hers, protective of her until the very end.

He knew that he was all the kits had now. He could rebuild a pack with them. He could give them a life of contentment and security. They could be strong together.

His pack had been destroyed before his eyes. And now he had a new one.

A second chance.

A second chance to become the dominant male just as he had always dreamed. To prove himself to be a good leader that the others would respect and admire. To serve and

protect the kits. Swift Runner vowed no harm would ever come to them. Only safety and protection.

He owed it to them. And to Meadow and Ash. And to the others as well.

Honeysuckle. Shadow.

Their mother.

He owed it to their memories. It was the least he could do.