

"This isn't like home at all." I say, pressing my nose against the glass which allows a nice view of the frozen tundra that's become outside.

"I know Ogechi, it will take a lot of getting used, but it's lovely." My mom rubs a paw along the back of my ears. I look up at her and purr in agreement, she continues, "It's important for us to be here, I have to go where my work takes me, and the more work I get done, the better for you."

I hear her words, but they play against a scene of grass, flowers and trees; bright wonderful sunshine to awaken me in the morning, sweet air to breathe, even the blistering heat in summer felt comfortable. That was home. "But, it's just so...cold. Nothing grows, and I hate having to bundle up so much. The other boys tease me about it."

She laughs, stepping away and walking to my bed room door. She's moving a lot slower lately. She used to be so fast, known for it even; I saw the photos from when she was in college, winning races, even beating other cheetahs to the finish line. It made me so happy, it gave me an idea what I would do when I was older. I would win races, like mom. Well, like mom used to.

My jacket and scarf are hanging on the doorknob, and then fall to the floor as she opens it to leave, "We'll have to get you something warmer, winter will last quite a while, and you've been shedding a lot. A little help with the clean-up this weekend would be nice." she shakes her head, "I should have never bought a dark colored couch."

"I will mom, promise!" With that she turns away and leaves me at my desk. Snow-flakes keep gliding down to my window sill, some stick to the glass and keep my attention, way more than any boring math homework could. Fourth grade is easily the worst grade yet, they're adding letters into the numbers, and it's hard to focus. New school, lots of new cubs and kits, and I'm the only one with spots like me, but at least gym is fun. Lots of fun, basketball has given me a chance to show how quickly I can race around the polar bears and caribou, though I think it makes them a little mad. Not that I mind, not at all. They're better at all the math and stuff, so I gotta take what I can.

Mom's in the kitchen, water running and I think she's heating up food in the microwave, it has this hum which stays in my ears for minutes after the little bell goes *ding*; I'd ask for something to eat, but I've had the chicken with veggies a few times this week.

"Hello, this is Amara." Guess that beeping was mom's phone. She has one for the house, which doesn't ring a lot, but the one she keeps in her pocket, goes off all the time. There's a silence and I can't pick up anything being said on the other side, not that I ever can, but I'd like to know what is so important.

"Is the power source holding out?" She asks, and there's another long pause, "Well, if it vanished than that's progress, but if we can't get the bounce-back engaged correctly, then it's pointless. And that's my design, so yes, I'll be there in ten. Don't touch anything please, I need to be hands on."

My tail lowers to the ground, this happens a lot. She has to go in late at night. There's a very nice fox next door who watches me, so at least I'm safe. I hear her finish her conversation and smell her coming into the room.

"I'm sorry Ogechi, I have to go in again."

"I wish you wouldn't." I know that won't stop her, nothing does.

"Miss Powell will be here in a few minutes to watch you, just finish your studies

and I'll see you in the morning before school."

"Why do you have to go?" I close my book, "I need you here, I have questions and all this stuff doesn't make any sense, my eyes are moving so fast I just can't slow down and concentrate and it's—"

I feel her arms around me, her muzzle against my cheek, "I know, I had the same problems. Miss Powell could probably help you."

"I want you to help me."

"I have to go take care of some things, important things. I know you may not like the snow and cold, but I'm doing a lot of things to keep this place safe for the people that do it. And look, when I'm done, when I know it's okay, then we go home. I promise." She nuzzles against me and stands up, I listen to her leave; in just minutes her car is driving down the road, and I'm looking at a jumble of numbers.

I sit like that for a while. Ms. Powell checks on me, but I just nod and grin and say I'm okay. But it's tricky not knowing: what's she doing, where is she going, what is so important? She always seems so worried, so busy, and I struggle with what I can do to help her. It'd be terrific to make her smile, just like in those pictures, when she won races and held trophies and flowers and...

"That's it!" I say, springing from my chair. I remember seeing some of the girls in school wearing flowers in their fur, and seeing some growing, even in this weather, along the side of the road. They were really buried in the snow or close to rocks, but they were there and I know mom would just love them. I grab my jacket and throw my scarf around me, making sure to avoid Ms. Powell by going down the hall, through the side door to the kitchen and out the back.

The wind blasts me in the face, and I shiver as I step outside. My boots crunch and sink into the mix of ice and snow, my tail swishing quickly back and forth and my fur standing on end. It's dark, a lot more than expected, but the image of flowers growing is fresh in my mind, I must have seen some around the house, or down by the street. I step carefully, out into the yard and out towards what I think is the road. Hard to tell as there aren't a lot of cars driving at this hour, and we only have one street light which goes off and on when it pleases.

But despite my caution, everything looks the same covered in ice and snow, and what looks like ground may actually be a lake. My legs begin kicking as my feet fall out from under me and into the water which I thought I was avoiding. My head goes under water for a moment and I do my best to hold my breath, as ice continues to break away and leave me without anything to hold.

I try to scream, but water goes in my mouth and I quickly shut it, hoping the bright lights I see are a car. Someone must have seen me fall, as the lights are getting closer. Red and blue and gold lights flicker, way different than any headlights I've ever seen, and even though my legs are strong enough to keep my head bobbing up and down, I'm unsure how long I can hold that for.

Then the lights disappear, replaced with a single yellow beam, like a flashlight, which shines down on me at the same time I feel a paw reach in and yank me from the lake. I feel an arm around me, holding me close and brushing my fur up and down to try and get me warm again, as I'm walked back to solid ground. I don't care who this is, I cling to them, burying my face in their chest until I release their smell is familiar. My rescuer shares the same spots as

me, and when he smiles down, I can tell his wide blue eyes match mine. On his wrist he wears what at first appears to be a watch, but it's a bit bigger, almost like he strapped a video game controller to his arm. It blinks red, blue and gold in a circular motion, and there's a clock showing the date, and seconds counting down. Something will happen in minute, but as I wonder what that might be, his paw tilts my head up.

"You need to be more careful, okay? I know your mom has been tired, but trust me, she's doing a lot of good." He shines the light towards my house, "Just follow the light that way, it's all solid ground." I nod, can't argue with that suggestion, and I quickly step away to go back inside. He grabs my shoulders as I start to walk. I turn around to face him.

"And one last thing, here, take this." He reaches into his coat, pulling out a small bouquet of flowers. I snatch them up and run inside, only turning around once I'm in the doorway to wave goodbye to him, but by then there's only a flash of lights, much like I saw from under the lake, then nothing.

Mom is home only a few hours later, she looks very frustrated. From I can tell, it sounds like something didn't come back, she talks on the phone about needing away plan returns, then hangs up the phone with a growl. I meet her in the hallway with the flowers.

"Oh my dear sweet cub." She takes them and brings them to her nose to sniff, then leaning down to nuzzle against me and purr, "They're lovely, thank you." She looks past me to my room, and I wonder if her eyes can tell I haven't filled out any of my school work. I almost step back, worried how she might react, but instead she pulls me into a hug.

"I promise, starting tomorrow, I'll help you with whatever is giving you trouble. I know I haven't done the best job, but if you can't count on me to help you, who can you?" I nod.

"Thanks mom, I'd really like that, I know you've been busy and--."

She shakes and ruffles the fur on the top of my head, as her other paw fidgets with her work badge, and I glance at the picture of her smiling against the blue, red and gold backdrop, her words causing my spirits to lift "Don't worry, I always have time for you."