

The hunting fields

It was clear to everyone that the dry season was coming to an end once more, based on sightings of distant storms and how the suffocating heat of the arid savannah was increasingly disturbed by strong winds which replaced the heat with nearly as suffocating dirt and sand clouds. Not that this was considered to be a downside to the two cheetah clans inhabiting the region, as heat was harder to escape from than dirt... and as every year, the temporary discomfort heralded the coming of comfortable times.

Apart from relief from the oppressive heat, new clean water sources, and rich pickings among prey, both clans know that this changing of a season will be particularly momentous to both as one three-cycle period has ended and thus the fabled hunting fields would change ownership from one clan to the other in the same ritualistic manner as many times before. A great joy to many, an exciting thought to others, a change of duties to some, and great source of nervousness to few.

In short, the hunting fields are a lush valley in the huge caldera of a long-extinct volcano – although the cheetahs themselves wouldn't distinguish it as different from any other valley, their life simple and devoid of unnecessary facts. What does matter to them is that unlike the arid highlands which surround the valley, to prey animals the valley itself offers a sanctuary which essentially never runs completely dry even during dry lean times. Which in turn means a reliable food source to the cheetah clans themselves... but as the valley's resources have a finite rate of replenishment, the ancestors of the sapient cheetahs decided long ago that competition over the valley would likely either destroy it and both clans along with it, or lead to a long stalemate with unnecessary suffering.

Hence they had devised a system to share control of the valuable territory – one clan at a time would lay claim on the valley by sending four of their best hunters down to it so that they would be able to provide its abundant prey for the whole clan, allowing the clan to reproduce easily and to let everyone grow strong. In the meantime the other clan would practice subsisting on the minimal resources of the highlands, forfeiting reproduction in favour of training their chosen batch of new hunters for their turn.

The part in this system which causes such nervousness to a few members of the clan which is about to pass the valley to the other clan, is how the most important part of the ritual transfer goes... as the ancient decree of the ancestors dictates how the hunters who have claimed from the valley for their clan, shall be claimed by the valley at the end of their period, to maintain balance and to appease the natural gods which the cheetahs believe are inhabiting the valley to care for it. The original purpose of "maintaining balance" has long been lost to history as far as the clans themselves remember, however the strong belief which maintains the tradition has ensured that neither clan's population expands beyond safe limits.

None of this is any particular comfort for the four hunters who approach their clan's large encampment in a lazy stroll, their latest and which will also be their last catches, swaying between their legs inside their greatly distended spotted bellies... each of them having done their best to gorge enough for their underbellies to sag a tad below their knees. As they enter through the narrow opening in the crude palisade wall, they actually have to form a single file to easily get through as their spherical bellies are much too wide to fit past otherwise.

Two males, two females, this is the composition of the hunting team which unhurriedly walks past the other feral cheetahs who are all fast at work with the palisade or their simple dwellings as they prepare for the upcoming rainy season, all four hunters and their awkwardly swollen bellies receiving plenty of admiring gazes as they head towards the cliffside which marks the other end of the camp.

This part is the one which the four look least forward to although it's perhaps the most important aspect of their careers... namely, disgorging their mildly digested catch so that it can be distributed to the other immediately or stored temporarily in the coolness of the natural cave which makes up the 'vomitorium' and food/treasure storage. The process itself is simple, and only involves some carefully selected herbs to be ingested while helpers use their forepaws to knead the bulging flanks of the hunters to ease the pain... each spotted belly shrinking steadily as they cough up slimy meat chunks which are briskly spirited away in crude clay bowls and pots.

Later on as the sun's last rays begin to die out, the four relax in their private corner of the encampment around a sunning rock, sprawled out on their sides or backs to nurse their slender and sore bellies while safe from prying eyes thanks to an extension of the palisade. Not that it's easy for them to relax as evidenced by flicking tails and restless fidgeting, with the smaller male of the two clawing the rock constantly as he lies on his back beside it.

"Are all of you ready for tomorrow? Or, should I say, are all of your stomachs ready for tomorrow...? Especially you, Trey, we can't carry you should your trembling legs fail like they almost did today.", one of the two females says after flipping over and hopping onto the rock to stand on it, her eyes fixated on the smaller male who freezes and splays his ears. "Miiiish! I'll be fine, just... don't wanna think about it, my stomach's in knots already.", he snaps back at her with a whine, and turns away to trace random marks in the soil with his claws. In the meantime, the other pair simply stares until the larger male clambers up to shake himself.

"I'll go for a quick run now that it's cool enough – and I know that you enjoy tormenting him, Mish, but cut him some slack – he did a good job even if he's a bit of a runt, and none of us will see the next nightfall anyhow. You joining me, Kirr?", he tells Mish before turning his eyes to the other female behind the rock – flexing his large muscles and stretching his body at the same time. In response, Kirr merely flicks her tail and rolls onto her other side. "I'll pass, Hrau. My stomach hurts too, need to rest before tomorrow.", she replies, all three of them following Hrau with their eyes when he nods and abruptly launches himself into motion to dash towards the encampment's entrance. "Yeah, can't see the next nightfall, fun... dunno how you're so calm...", Trey mutters and earns a derisive chirp in response from Mish, before all of them fall silent to settle in for the night.

Apart from Hrau's eventual return from his nightly stride, the night is uneventful enough for even Trey to fall into restless sleep during it... the four of them waking up to not-so-distant cracks of thunder as the sun rises. Even if none of them are especially eager to leave their cozy spot for the trek to their final fate, each of them nevertheless diligently rises up with plenty of meows, chirps and hisses mixing into the sounds of thunder as the quartet of cheetahs yawn and exercise their sleepy bodies.

Once they agree it's time to leave, Hrau and Kirr assume the point as usual, with the smaller duo of Trey and Mish right on their tails as they stroll through the encampment one more time with their tails hanging low and ears drooping some despite their efforts to look brave. And as usual, Trey appears to be especially terrified as he almost crawls along with the others, barely keeping up with

them.

Their departure is poignant as there's no celebration, no last words, no cheetah patrol to escort them – everyone else simply sits up and follows with their eyes as Hray, Kirr, Mish and Trey exit the encampment two at a time and set on to the weathered path towards the valley without looking back, as there would be no coming back for them after this.

The journey towards their destination is quiet as they all know the way rather well and there's an air of trepidation over all of them which stifles any chatter, and even when Mish's ears turn backwards in frustration over Trey's perceived cowardice, she refrains from saying anything because he's keeping up with them regardless. The orange glow of the morning sun turns into daylight just before their destination is in sight... a tall cliff and its overhang which overlook a large oval lake, with dried streams coming from all directions. At the moment, the water in the lake is low, but they all know it will soon rise because some of the streams are already carrying a trickle of water, and the trickles are going to swell to rivers in a short while.

However, they do not head up to the cliff yet but instead towards the pristine beach beneath the overhang where a small number of cheetahs can already be seen sitting in waiting – the four new hunters of the other clan, two male/female pairs. Under the golden morning sun, all of them look rather dashing with their vivid well-kempt pelts and well-sculpted slim figures, or so all the four thing as they hastily choose their appropriate counterparts to sit on their haunches in front of them.

"Greetings, you must be Hrau, Trey, Kirr and Mish? My name's Curr, and my companions are my brother Cnar and the fertile duo known as Fnirr and Fnarr.", he addresses Hrau after nuzzling his cheeks in traditional greeting, the others doing the same before turning to listen to Curr. "We are the new hunters, as you undoubtedly know, and our first duty is to assist the valley in claiming the previous hunters as the decree goes, before we are allowed to begin our part. As you know, your last meal will be part of the valley itself, before you plunge yourself to the depths of the sacred lake... all of this is known to you as well as us, however, so I will not repeat any more of it. We should pair up and begin so that we'll be finished before night.", he explains while getting up, his paws leaving deep prints in the wet sand.

As the pairs are formed with Curr assigned to Hrau and Fnirr assigned to Kirr, Trey keeps lashing his tail until Mish surreptitiously pins in to the sand with her forepaw – earning a stifled whine from him while both Cnar and Fnarr look amused. "Little nervous, eh? I'll be easy on you, get up and c'mere.", Cnar chirps whereas Mish coaxes Trey to get up with repeated forepaw nudges to his side until her reluctantly follows the other male with his dragging tail leaving a faint line behind him. As for Mish herself, she pairs up with Fnarr without hesitation to follow her closer to the water's edge.

With all four pairs formed up, they separate to different parts of the beach to dig for the wave-smoothed rocks and gravel which litters the sand. Each time a suitable rock is found, the new hunter brushes it up some and sits to offer it to his or her pair to eat, helping to shove it into their gullet so that they are forced to swallow. After every few rocks, the older hunter is expected to scoop up a mawful or two of sand to gobble it down.

After engaging in some idle banter with Cnar, Trey is significantly less tense although he's not entirely comfortable with the sight of the smooth rocks he's supposed to ingest in a manner of moments... the lanky male shuffling in place while Cnar talks about his life and uses his paw pads

to clear the rocks of sand. "All done – down the hatch they go!", he proclaims eventually, startling Trey into a mewl after which he warily opens his maw. "Wait, I gotta – glrrrk!", Trey begins to say but suddenly has a rock in his maw, and the following push causes him to plop down on his rump so that he ends up sitting on his haunches while squirming and uttering muffled winces. Seconds later the rock already slides down his gullet as a lump on his fuzzy throat with an audible gulp. In his mind, Trey scarcely believes that he's doing this given how distant the whole matter seemed three cycles ago... but as the hard object travels uncomfortably down his esophagus and settles into his stomach with a strange heavy feeling, he can't deny it.

The realization that he has now a rock in his stomach, makes Trey pant in a distressed manner to the point where he nearly hyperventilates, before a few sharp jabs from Cnar to jolt the rock bring him back together. "Mreow, hey, you're not done yet, how about you tell me how you became a hunter before your eyes pop off your skull?", Cnar attempts to calm him, soon settling into a rhythm where Trey tells him of his less-than-stellar life as the runt of a litter while Cnar feeds him a new rock during each lull in the story. The first few rocks don't make a great impact on Trey's midsection although he grimaces at the audible muffled clatter when the third one goes down, but eating sand proves out to be yet another challenge which causes him to hesitate for quite a while until Cnar almost forces his muzzle into the sand and holds it closed while he gulps it down jerkily.

Sand makes a definite impression on the lanky male's belly and few more rocks adds up to a nice domed girth with noticeable lumps formed on Trey's underbelly by the rocks – but it's not nearly enough yet, and they both know it as evidenced by Cnar seeking and digging more rocks with his forepaws while Trey grits his teeth as he gets on his shaky legs to lumber after his pair. As the feeding continues, so do the stories about Mish taking him under her guidance to make a tracker and chaser out of him while Trey obediently swallows everything despite a few tears of pain rolling down his muzzle as his stomach gurgles and groans in protest. There indeed is plenty to protest as the hard and heavy fare makes his spotted belly sag more rapidly as usual, the upper spots turning into ovals from the skin stretch when the churning ball of rocks and sand expands gradually down towards his knees.

The severity of his torment is increased further by how Cnar expects him to walk along when he explores the beach for suitable feed... Trey's long back warping from the sheer weight at each step, while his legs buckle. But the thought of Mish's withering gaze compels him to endure the cramming of rocks and sand into his hurting stomach, and each bulge which runs down his throat distends his belly a little more. Finally, around the point where he's gasping for air constantly due to the agony which radiates from all over his midsection while his back is permanently arched downwards and his belly resembles a large beach ball with the lowest point well under his knees, Cnar decides that he's had enough after giving Trey's enormously bloated and trembling gut a number of experimental pokes with a forepaw. "You're ready now, Trey, you did well – we wait for the others now.", he congratulates him while he cries pitifully how much his belly aches.

In the meantime Mish casually strolls alongside Fnarr almost all the way up to the water's edge to peer into the sudden deep which begins mere metres after the beach ends, both of them conversing about hunting eagerly as they fish up healthy sized rocks together to form a haphazard pile out of them – at Mish insistence, they do not stay at one spot but walk most of the length of the beach to leave smaller piles along the way, with Fnarr repeatedly estimating how full Mish's belly might become with her forepaw marking how low she thinks her underbelly might sag.

"There we go, my last catch coming up... at least it's not going to run away! But let me tell you how once I –", Mish meows in a chipper manner before she carefully plucks the first rock with her teeth

while standing, and tips her head backwards to let it fall to her gullet – her neck visibly flexing and bulging as she swallows. Being apprehensively silent as she waits for the rock to slide down her throat, she is pleased to feel it in her stomach and resumes talking about some of her escapades during hunting while devouring the rocks at a steady pace. Rather soon her previously lithe belly has a noticeable lumpy bulge on it, something which she smoothens out to some extent by scooping up a large helping of water-dripping sand with her maw to ingest it, repeating the process and belching afterwards as her rounded belly burbles loudly.

Although she's quite receptive of her fate due to how she mentally prepared for this for months, Mish can't help but grimace when the hard rocks and sand shift within her stomach at the moment she starts walking towards the next pile with Fnarr – thus the other female licks her cheek soothingly before the eyes of the both are drawn to the figures of Cnar and Trey as the latter lashes his tail anxiously due to being fed by the former. "I'm so proud of him, he might come off as a whiny brat but everyone said that he would never make a hunter in my lifetime, and Kirr was worried earlier that he would run off in fear and shame our clan, but there he is, he certainly showed them all...", she muses wistfully and quickly averts her eyes to concentrate on her next course which she almost steps on, with Fnarr setting on top wash and sweep the stones a bit more with her forepaws while Mish diligently picks up one with her teeth to gobble it down.

Mish picks up the pace now and essentially swallows a rock between each sentence so that they slide down her gullet in an almost unending string, her stories now revolving around Trey's hunting career. In the meantime her spotted midsection gains girth and weight by each swallow, the shapes of the rocks shifting under her hide as they grind against each other and her stomach lining – a feeling which she takes in strides. After the second course her rotund midsection hangs low enough to sway visibly from her every motion, and Fnarr needs to wait for her to catch up when they head off to the next spot... the younger female seizing the moment to marvel that gut and gingerly trace a claw over it when they stop. "So this is how we will look like after successful hunts, right... looks uncomfortable but I'm sure I can get used to it."

Nodding, Mish takes a moment to stabilize her wobbly legs when she eyes the nearby pile, her eyes turning to Fnarr. "You are very correct, and you will also get used to it as it will be your only way to get prey back to your can – but, be a dear and help me?", she says and opens her maw in anticipation to let the other female place a rock between her jaws, after which she tips her head backwards to aid swallowing. Now that her constantly pounding and tender stomach begins to bother her more and more despite her efforts to ignore her suffering, their discussion becomes more haphazard while Mish's considerably distended belly sags further, her teats popping out one at a time over her underbelly as the tension grows. Towards the end of the feeding she hardly says anything anymore as she shuffles and takes deep breaths to ease her anguish, her eyes glancing at her grossly swollen belly and the two rows of erect teats which adorn it, her distraught expression turning rather surprised when she sees how her underbelly incredibly hangs down to her calves. "We... I... have to stop, I don't think I can move if I take one more bite.", she confesses with a wheeze, and wide-eyed Fnarr nods in agreement, motioning her to join the others who are also finishing up their struggles.

Now that all of the former hunters have had a large bellyful of the valley, including Hrau and Kirr with their respective partners, it's time for them to set on their last short trip which will take them to the oft-visited rock overhang above them – but this time none of them are sure if they will make it all the way the short but fairly steep path.

The new hunters take the lead this time with Hrau and Kirr behind them – the strong male has clearly consumed the largest load as his immense belly nearly drags the ground and forces him to

waddle forward with short deliberate steps, the rocks and sand so heavy that his midsection barely even sways instead of bobbing up and down a little with his upper flank hide stretching in a dangerous manner each time. His suffering must be equally great due to how his tail lashes furiously while he hisses and grimaces during each step... whereas Kirr who has taken it more easy and is able to walk fairly normally apart from her bowed back, constantly soothes him with cheek nuzzles.

In the rear, Mish and Trey take solace in each others company as their swinging and loudly churning bellies keep brushing each other due to how they try to keep together – their stomachs quite similar in size, something which makes Mish proud. "How are you doing, Trey? We're almost done now, keep up with me a little longer and we can... leave together.", she encourages him and receives a stifled bawl in return, a few tears running down his furry face as his head and ears droop even lower. "I just wanna be there with you know... it stings so badly...", he gasps and falls silent as he prepares to tackle the steepest portion with her. She understands his distress very well, as her own throbbing stomach stings and burns perilously from how the contents grind it from the inside, and she knows that would burst fairly soon normally... but at this point it doesn't really matter.

Regardless of the pace slowing down to a crawl during the hardest parts of the ascent, all four rock-laden cheetahs make it albeit barely, each of them tasting blood with their lungs burning and their bellies rippling excruciatingly as they advance all the way to the ledge above the sudden deep water. Trey is the only one who dares to go at the very edge first to peer down at the blue depths while the evening sky turns from a yellow to an orange hue gradually with incessant thunder in the distance. "Line up at the edge and face us, be careful not to fall down yet!", Curr explains and the four hunters languidly follow his orders as their bowed backs ache and their stiff legs shake so badly that both Hrau and Trey nearly collapse a few times.

Once everyone is set with the new hunters facing the old ones, Curr cocks his head and clears his throat with a chirp. "The cycle finishes, and the valley shall now claim you like you laid claim on its riches – and the same shall happen to us once our cycle is at an end. May your bellies never be empty in the eternal hunting grounds of our ancestors.", he proclaims while the lazily shifting huge bellies of Hrau, Kirr, Trey and Mish cast round shadows over the other four, the old hunters closing their eyes in anticipation while concentrating on keeping their aching bellies off the ground for a bit longer.

The first two to go are Hrau and Kirr who are almost simultaneously shoved off the ledge by Curr and Fnirr, two pained yowls being their parting sound before two splashes come from below while Curr and Fnirr peek over to see what happened. There's nothing to see though as the two have disappeared without a trace, two fading ripples being the only clue to their demise. At the same time, Cnar and Fnarr unhurriedly pad over to Trey and Mish, motioning them to sit down which they do hastily and with sighs of relief, their haunches spread wide by their swollen spotty bellies.

"Grab each others forepaws and take a deep breath - ", Cnar begins and places his forepaws on the widest point of Trey's belly as he falls quiet, followed by Fnarr doing the same to Mish while she speaks up - "... and you won't lose each other. Good bye.", she concludes wistfully just when both shove powerfully at the rock-hard bellies of their brief partners and predecessors, eliciting nary a whimper from the two when they topple over the edge.

The short freefall which follows is perhaps the most terrifying part to both and their eyes snap open as they try to cling to each other any way they can, their tails fluttering in the air and paws flailing just before they plunge into the cool water which surrounds and soaks them in a flash. At

first, Trey lets go of Mish to instinctively fight towards the surface but it is in vain as his hefty stomach drags him deeper irresistibly like a millstone while he paddles jerkily. However, just as he's about to panic, there's a gentle tug on his tail and he reflexively turns to look only to find himself gazing into the squinted eyes of Mish who yanks him a bit closer by the tail to press against him. And suddenly it doesn't feel so bad after all, even when daylight is further and further above them while their lungs almost burst from holding their breath and they both inhale water in their death throes, sinking into the murky depths together as they are lulled into the eternal darkness below...

The End.