

Once again, Kai had missed his chance. The untested buck bounded away from his teeth completely untouched (save for its flank fur now slightly disheveled), and more confident from the failed hunt than before. Whatever surety the buck had now felt seemed to have been sapped directly from the wolf, because at this newest failure he seemed less sure of himself than ever.

"Oho, it was a valiant effort, but once again you have failed. I could have killed thrice in the moment you took to blunder once brother," the largest of the hunting pack, Rinrer, said, his yellow eyes flashing in the night.

"A valiant effort?" snorted another, direct brethren of the first (For remember, even if all were not born under the same mother, they were all brothers of the pack.), his fangs bared in a look of utmost contempt. "Who did he learn to hunt from? The jackal, or perhaps even the pig? His eye is spoiled and his strike is weak. Even if he had been able to catch the deer in his teeth and under his claws, he most surely could not have slain it."

A few other wolves, though not as vocal, were mumbling amongst themselves as well. And their speech resonated deep within Kai, each word against him another blow to his strength of mind, his self-esteem all but diminished. Even as Serilis, the largest and greatest amongst them rose up to defend him, it felt hollow and needless to him, as if he could not believe the words the large wolf spoke spoke.

"Leave him be. He is a young wolf, we must all remember," Serilis said, trying to seem taller to display some sort of authority amongst the increasingly chaotic party, "And despite his bloodline we are nonetheless all equal, and must treat him as s--"

"You speak of equality brother, but we all know the true reason for your 'diplomacy.'" Rinrer spat at his older brother, facing him muzzle to muzzle as if in challenge, "You speak so sweetly when he is around, but ah, ah! While Kai wanders about needlessly, out of reach of your words, I hear what you say, oh yes. 'He shames us, he is too weak. How can one born under the great pack leader be so worthless? Why is it one born to such a strong leader cannot be like the rest of us, find a female to mate with? Truly, if he dies, it could not be helped, for the jungle would have it so, and we cannot watch him forever!' Hypocrite." His imitation of his brother ended in the ugliest kind of bark. And all the while he kept his amber eyes fixed upon his blood brother's, the largest wolf having a look that was very grave indeed.

"You simply wish to stay on his father's good side, so that one day you may become leader of the pack. You know as well as I do that his endorsement alone would not make you pack leader, but it would still hold much sway," the haughty wolf's speech continued unabated, all those around him transfixed, "So that is why you feel the need to act in such different manners while in the company of such a weakling. You hope he shall crawl back to his den mother, whining and moaning, speaking of the one wolf who *tried* to defend him, even if it shamed him to do so. We all see through you!"

Rinrer's growls had suddenly grown soft, and he spoke in the lightest of tones, his voice carrying through their ears like the wind before the rains. "But you hate him just as much as me, as we. You hate him for his weakness and cowardice, and find him just as worthless. For remember, at his age I had already taken down my first buck, and you, months before that even, were feeding not only yourself, but the weaker members

of the pack with your kills. You try to forgive him, but like the rest of us, you cannot, and that makes you no better than the rest.” Rinrer’s acid voice burned Serilis’s ears, and the latter looked ready to strike, fury outweighing his usually placid demeanor.

“Enough!” The tension around them shattered as the yelp rang out, Kai’s pleading bark stopping the brother’s feud before it went too far.

“I know I am weak. You all have eyes, you saw my failure to kill even a young buck, one without the years of experience that make such an older buck hard to overtake. But let us not become like dogs. I have failed, and I shall take the blame that comes with it. No one else. And I do not ask that any of you defend, or feed me for that matter,” he said in a sorrowful tone, now feeling quite betrayed, for when the kind-hearted Serilis is confirmed to have spoken against you, it is a very bad thing indeed. “All I ask is that you leave me be, and not fight yourselves for my sake. If you hate me this much, then just spring upon me, and end it. If I am truly such a weight upon the entirety of the pack, then let your jaws fall upon me in a way that mine could not upon that buck!”

Even in the despair of his voice, the plea for justice even at his own death, there was a resounding strength. Rinrer, ready only moments before to set himself upon Kai, would not dare move, and sat still as a statue. No one made a move against the white wolf.

“That is what I thought. Furless and dull-toothed wolves all. How quick you are to strike at me with your words when my back is turned, and more so even while I am around to witness it. But nary one of you will strike as you say you would. Whether you are spineless or simply of big talk I do not know, but nonetheless, do not speak of things you cannot do.” And with that, the wolf turned his back on the others, unable to look upon them anymore.

As he trotted away, still none of them having stirred, Kai’s strength impressed upon them for the first time. The white beast thought he heard the howl of “Good hunting!” as he left the pack’s territory, though perhaps it was only the deceiving wind.

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Kai wandered for hours into the deepest reaches of the jungle. His people usually stayed near the eastern edge. It was close to the mountainside for shelter, near large clearings for hunting, and a wellspring to drink. He was far from that now though, and despite still being fully aware of how to get back (after all, he would simply need to reverse his direction to do so), he was resolved to not do so. He was tired of being seen as a burden, held by standards too high. He was supposed to be powerful, wise, and most of all, a good hunter, simply because the only other white wolf before him was so. But as he learned from years in the jungle through his own experiences and others’, one cannot be strong simply because their mother or father was so.

So the wolf walked silently amongst the roots and brush, his loud thoughts more than making up for his soft footfalls. Why did he have so much trouble hunting? He was by no means weak. Even the others knew this, stinging words aside. When they fought, he could often beat the best of them, and more than once had both Serilis and Rinrer

laying down before him, ears low in submission. So why couldn't he hunt? He had never been able to do so in his life, and today's hunt had actually been the most successful so far, because at least he grazed the beast as it fled.

"Truly, I am a failure then," Kai said softly to himself, his heart heavy in him, "For despite my speed and strength, despite how much I have witnessed and practiced and fought, it is all for naught. The others were right to judge after all. Hopefully the jungle will finally take me as it should have long ago." Now it seemed to the wolf that he would die, for he was too ashamed to go back to those who so despised him, and he clearly could not hunt for himself.

The wolf did not walk another step, and simply let himself fall upon the ground in the most pitiable of fashions. His body had no more energy left, his despair like a weight around his neck. He lay there, simply wondering if this would be the spot where the jungle would finally take him, when his eye caught something. His eyelids suddenly shot open, and his fear bristled with surprise, as he looked for a trace of whatever it was he saw.

He could not find it again, whatever it was, and he had begun to think that in his distress he had simply seen things. Perhaps it was even hunger that pulled at his mind, for he had not eaten for a day, at least. So, when he was sure that the movement that caught his attention was no more than fantasy, his eyes began to close once more.

Sleep fell quickly upon him. A fitful, unhappy sleep. The kind of sleep one wishes they didn't have, and that leaves one more tired when they awaken. Dreams or nightmares did not plague him, bad emotions nevertheless overtook him in his slumber. Cries of his weakness, of the packs two-faced nature, of Rinrer's unbridled contempt bounced about in his head. He rolled to and fro, yipping and yelping pleadingly in his sleep, the anguished cries of the lone wolf carrying through the silence of the deep jungle.

Suddenly he awoke, growling and bristling as menacingly as he could. It took a few moments for his mind to catch up with his body, but he soon realized why he had awakened. A light poke was issued to his side, and like all others that shared his instincts, it caused him to immediately awaken and prepare for an attack.

But none came. Kai's muzzle darted left and right, looking, sniffing, hearing for some sort of attacker, some trace of whatever it was that prodded him, but he found nothing. Pacing around the tree he had slept near, and standing on his hind legs against the trunk to look up it, he found nothing. No rustling leaves that would imply a fleeing monkey or squirrel, and no hastened steps that spoke of a smaller scavenger testing him to see if he was dead or wounded. And surely, his scent would pick out something, but it found nothing as well.

"Has the madness begun to take me? Did my father catch some bad meat last time he hunted for us? If so, I hope he and mother are fine, but if not, then what game is this? Show yourself!" He barked into the darkness, challenging the would-be jester, and still, none showed himself. If he were any other sort of creature, he would not have been so afraid of this invisible attack. But he was a wolf, keenest sense'd of all the creatures in the jungle; he should have seen anything that would be near. After a few

minutes, Kai was ready to give up once again, this time believing that his mind was really no longer his own.

However, it was at this moment that he saw it, the movement from before. There it was, out of the corner of his vision, to his left. From what he saw it looked like a purplish-pink tip of a tail, an oddly furred thing, of a beast he had not yet encountered. When he saw it, he was sure it was what he had seen before, and not only that, that this was the offender that had woke him from sleep.

So the chase was on, the white wolf bounding after his "prey" with tenacity he had never before had. Was it because he was so infuriated by the small offender that he forgot himself in the chase? Who knows, but either way his gaze was continuously fixed on the tip of the tail. It always seemed just out of reach, constantly disappearing from his sight for just a moment, when he would bound around a tree trunk and find it again, the chase resuming.

This way and that it led him through the jungle, Kai constantly trying to pounce and pin the thing, but never with any luck. It moved like lightning, flashing jaggedly in the improvised path, almost teasing him. But he would not give up so easily, oh no. He continued the chase no matter how daunting it became, he would not let such a small thing get away with such brazen acts.

He did not know how long he chased after the tip of the odd tail, it could have easily been hours. Still, even with his great stamina and strength he began to tire before too long, and he feared that for all the ground he gained it would soon leave him again. His fevered rush finally began to slow to a pained trot, and he was sure that the tail was finally out of his reach. Turning right along the trunk of another particularly large tree, he found himself moving into a small clearing, and there it was. Hanging in the middle of a clearing like a stray vine, he saw the tail, motionless. It was indeed a long thing, reaching up high into the treetops, its source unable to be divined.

"I've never seen such a curious sight, but perhaps it belongs to a snake," he panted under his breath, "It would make sense then, concerning its speed and flexibility. Still, I have not seen such a snake, with fur, and a pattern so gay."

As he cautiously walked toward the tail (as any beast of the jungle would, for all knew that if a tail so large belonged to a snake, its hug would be the last thing one would ever feel), it began to wriggle like a trapped worm. Kai's body suddenly stiffened at the movement, once again fearing assault from the stray appendage. That was when the most curious thing began to happen. The tail slid further into view, revealing that it was indeed quite large and long, almost touching the ground in front of him now. And with so much of the tail revealed, it began to dance.

The tip rose into the air before the wolf, seeming to stare back for a moment, and he suddenly saw it twisting back in forth within the air, odd geometric shapes playing themselves out before him. It was an queer sight, incomparable to anything else he had ever seen, and he was fascinated. To and fro it darted, before languidly oozing into lazy swaying circles. His fur was no longer bristling, his fear replaced with a curiosity that ate him up from the tip of his snout to his own tail.

This way and that it darted, its movements slow and methodical at one moment, and the quick and chaotic the next. It twisted itself into odd knots, somehow always

pulling itself free gracefully, before looping back around itself. Soon he found himself swaying with it, though he did not seem to notice, the tail dance calling for all of his focus, which he happily obliged.

"It's such a pretty tail, do you not think so?" A soft voice suddenly brushed over the wolf's ears, as fluid and calming as a stream. Kai nodded, not even turning to see who spoke.

"It just continues to move back and forth, here and there, to and fro, never ceasing, never stopping, never thinking about its movements. It never stops moving, and drawing in whoever watches it. I'd even go so far as to say one cannot help but watch it." Kai felt the entity behind him move closer, vaguely registering its size, abnormally large. Not as large as one of the great elephants of the area, but it still cast a shadow before him. Still, he did not care. The voice was so kind, and so soft. It spoke to him like no one had before, so benevolent and soothing. He had never felt such an empathetic presence before in his life, and he did not care to question it.

"That is a yes I would wager, my tired little wolf," the voice chuckled knowingly, "unable to take your eyes or mind off of it, just watching the entrancing dance... Feeling your troubles melt away with the dance." As he spoke, the tail continued to move in soothing shapes, always seeming to effortlessly move from one to the next.

"Yes, the tail, it has no troubles, it does not think, or feel any pain, or insecurities. It just dances, happy and confident in itself, does it not? Just like you feel at this very moment in fact. So safe and relaxed, every breath effortless, every thought falling away... No need to keep your guard up. After all, it's just you and the tail."

Was that a smile the wolf heard in the voice? Oh, it didn't matter, did it? No, all that mattered was the tail, even if the voice made him feel so good. For now the tail was no longer dancing as intricately as before, but just swinging back and forth in long, steady arcs, the wolf actually taking swaying steps toward it. And the voice stayed just as close and calming, no matter his movements. "Yes, go to it, let the tail take you, give you the same mindless happiness that it has. It is so at ease, and you wish to be too, do you not? You need to. You need to give up your cares and pain, and just join the tail in its dance."

"Yes, I do..." Kai found himself muttering helplessly, a smile on the wolf's muzzle. Oh, why not? If the tail was so happy dancing, he should be as well. Soon the wolf's shadow and the tail were no longer distinguishable, for the dance between the two had begun. The white furred brute traipsed clumsily (in a way that would shame any other wolf, no doubt) around the tail, jumping foolishly over it, crawling under it, all the while the tail happily obliging. There was an odd rush to it, so much so that giddy barks constantly came from Kai's muzzle.

All he could feel was the tail; its soft and pleasant fur brushing against him as he ran under, around, through its loops. All he could smell was the most pleasant of scents, one he could not identify, but one that still made him feel so good (for creatures with such noses are often very influenced by smell). It filled his nose and conquered his mind, and he did not care. The smell made him feel sleepy and foolish, most of all happy. Of course all he heard was that wonderful voice, still goading him on, telling him

how good it was that he was letting go, forgetting himself and everything else, and how right this all felt, for it did.

"Enjoy your dance little wolf. Lose your will in it. The will to fight. To feel pain. To think of all the worries of the world. Just lose it all to the tail, and let yourself go. It feels so good to focus on the tail, as well as my words, so you should do so. Lose yourself in them."

And what he saw through his glazed eyes was the tail. Had he a mind to think, he would have noticed the odd reptilian creature with fur instead of scales where he once stood; a dragon, the one the tail was attached to. The dragon had amusement in his eyes as he continued to stare at the wolf, and Kai just barked stupidly, not even registering him.

And like the chase from before, the dance seemed to last forever. He did begin to tire, but it took much longer this time. Instead of pain gripping him, his sides hurting from exertion and exhaustion, it was a good tiredness, when one feels accomplished, and deserves the rest they know that shall come.

So when the dance finally ended, and Kai found himself somehow wrapped tip toe (save his muzzle) in the tail, and he welcomed the embrace. It was so very comfortable and reassuring, and the cerulean orbs peering back at him made him feel at peace. "Yes, just relax young wolf, you have earned it. You felt so full of sadness before, but now, now I can wager that you cannot even remember why." Oh, the blue eyes just seemed to go on forever, he could stare and listen all day, he was a very contented wolf. His muscles relaxed and his body sagged, for even if the voice did not command it, his body had no other option.

"You were so unhappy, because you could not catch yourself food, because you were an outcast in your pack, weren't you little wolf?"

Unlike the questions from before, which he just let wash over him, he responded now, he knew he had to. The dragon's powerful gaze left no room for disagreement. "Yes, I was... I cannot hunt, I do not feel brotherhood with them, and I cannot find a suitable mate..." As he spoke, he felt a weight he did not feel before, suddenly lifted from him, and he sighed. This odd creature made him feel so good. It made sense to simply listen, let one so wise and kind think for him.

"Yes... It is because you feel there is something wrong with you, but this could not be more untrue my pretty little wolf," the voice from the long dragon muzzle was kind and disarming before, but now became sympathetic, enough so to make the wolf trust him completely. He deserved his trust. "You just lack confident my little canine friend. You are strong, and smart, but because you feel you are different, you feel insecure, and weak, and this drowns out the good feelings..." He hardly had the strength of mobility to do so, but Kai was nodding as the stranger did. It all made so much sense to his tired little mind.

"You feel different, just because you do not want to kill... This is how you feel, it must be true, must it?" Once again, the wolf could do nothing more than agree with the wise beast, for he knew he spoke the truth, and would never lie to him.

"Yes stranger."

"Well, I can help. I know that those back there feel no love for you, and you do not deserve such a heavy heart. I can take care of you completely, I can keep you happy, and safe, take care of all your needs... This is what you want, what you need, is it not?"

"Yes, stranger."

"It is Praadur, by the way."

"Yes, Praadur."

"So, just stay in this part of the jungle with me, my tired little wolf. Let go of your sadness and fear, and just live happily with me. You don't have to be strong, or worry unnecessarily. I shall watch over you, and can take all of your bad thoughts away, forever..." The dragon's muzzle was now only inches from his own, and the eyes seemed even bigger than normal, an infinite world within them; the one he spoke of, the world of no cares, no regret, and no insecurities.

Kai thought for a moment, if what he did could be called such a thing. This creature was one he had never yet encountered, and perhaps, was waiting to betray him like the others... But, no, the wolf did not feel such intentions from him. The dragon could have kill and eaten him, he already had the chance, but he did not. No, all he promised was happiness and an escape from all those who hated him. A chance to start over. Any last idea that he was otherwise was obliterated when the tip of the tail brushed the wolf's cheek, prompting him to open his eyes once more and see the calming blue infinities.

"Please," Kai's tired voice began to plead, the happiness in his voice more pronounced than before, "Keep me close, protect me, watch over me, let me be with you Praadur..."

"A strong choice you have made... Some would call it weak, but to ask for such a thing, to admit to wanting something like that, took strength not many have my wolf," the dragon's smiling muzzle spoke, giving him an odd lick to his nose, like the tender and reassuring lick of a loved one.

There was a squeeze all over Kai's body, as if squeezing the toxic feelings from him. Any last resistance and pain left him, and now all that sat in the inviting coils of the tail was a very sleepy, very mindless, and very happy wolf.

"Now, tell me your name little wolf. When you give me your name, you shall be mine indeed."

"Kai, Praadur," the wolf said instantly, the doubts washed away from his heart and mind. He was his now, and he did not regret it in the slightest.

"Good my little wolf, good..." the odd dragon said, giving the wolf's body an affectionate squeeze, "Now, it is time to rest, and think no more... That is my responsibility from now on."

And there was nothing more Kai wanted to do as his eyes finally closed, his body now as deep and lacking control as his mind. So happy and reassured, knowing that as long as he was with this odd creature, this Praadur, he would no longer have to think or worry ever again.

"Good, my little wolf. Do not worry, I shall take care of you." Praadur's words did not penetrate the veil of sleep that hid the wolf from the world, but it mattered not. As the dragon's tail pulled itself down from the branches, and the wolf with it, the dragon

studied his new acquisition. He saw himself in the small creature, a fellow beast forsaken by his own people. The dragon longed for years for someone to share his affections with, and perhaps, finally, he had found him. For, as the dragon mused to himself, he simply relaxed and forced the wolf's focus upon him. He did not put the large smile that now adorned the wolf's snout there. And as the dragon merged with the encroaching darkness of the jungle, he himself smiled as well for the first time in years.