

The Last Shedding

The last wisps of smoke drifted up from what used to be their home. The five wolves stood together, watching with light hearts as the last vestiges of their former lives wafted into the air. Many of their kith and kin stood nearby. Some on two legs, some on four. The Last Shedding was always an important rite. It marked the end of one's life at the fringes of Nature. With all of your worldly possessions 'released to oblivion', there was nothing to keep you from embracing your animal life completely.

Of the five wolves, only one stood clothed. The others had shed all but their true skins into the pyre, for they were ready to move on. The fifth stood slightly apart from his family. Unlike them, he was not yet ready to let go of his old life and embrace Nature completely. His love for the All-Mother was undeniable. He would die to protect Her. But he had not yet learned to take on his wild shape. That rite still lay on the lifepath before him.

As if on cue, the dozens of assembled observers all intoned, "Blessed be the root and the claw." Without another sound, the vast majority of them turned and strolled away. The rite was finished. They had done their part by bearing witness; it was time to return to their own lives. Soon, only the five wolves stood by the smoldering shell that used to be their den. The mother turned to the youngest of her three sons and looked to him with deep sadness in her eyes.

"Tren," she asked, "are you certain that this is your Path?"

His jaw was set firmly, though he could not hide the slight quiver of his lip, "Aye, Mother. I'm sure. My heart tells me there is yet more for me to do before my Last Shedding."

She reached up and caressed his face, stroking her thumb pad across his whiskers as she had done throughout all the years of his life, "Then go where your heart leads. May it lead you back to us when it is your time to Shed."

He felt as though his heart would crack in half, and he could not disguise the break in his voice and the tears welling up in his eyes, "Aye, Mother. May it be so." He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against her touch. It would be the last time he would ever see her like this, the last time she would caress his cheek in this fashion. Soon, the rest of his family would take on their wild shapes for the rest of their lives. Leaving behind all manner and practice of any life beyond that of an ordinary wolf, the spirit would be cleansed and a true knowledge and union with Nature would be attained.

He turned and walked away, determined not to look back. He must follow his own Path. No one would fault him for leaving to seek It. Many had done it before. They would only look down on him if he faltered, if he weakened in the face of the journey before him, and turned away from his true Path. He had not even walked ten paces before the impossibly deep baritone voice of his eldest brother rumbled right behind him.

"Would that I could go with you, little brother."

Trendane had to chuckle at that, "No," he replied without turning around, "You've never liked the idea of leaving the valley, Samuel. And you know as well as I do that that's exactly what I aim to do." He adjusted his pack across his shoulders. Though it carried everything he owned, it wasn't too heavy. Suddenly, a massive pair of arms wrapped around him from behind as Samuel embraced him tightly.

"Travel swift and light, little brother," he said, his own voice cracking as he leaned his cheek against the side of Trendane's head. Several tears dropped from the tips of his whiskers into Trendane's eyes, pooling with his brother's as they ran down his face.

He loved each and every member of his family with all of his heart and soul, but none so deeply as Samuel. His eldest brother had always been there for him, helping him to learn to take care of himself. They had been almost inseparable from the moment of Trendane's birth. His resolve began to waver. Trendane gripped his brother's forearm tightly and pulled free from the embrace, struggling to resist the sobbing that was building up within him as he took a hesitant forward, "Don't...please. I have to go. I have to...."

There was only silence behind him for an eternal few seconds. Then, the rushing sound of raw, natural magic as his brother took to his wild shape. He did not have to look back. He'd seen all of his family in their animal forms before. But his oldest brother's was somewhat unusual, being far larger than most wolves in the family. He was unusually large to begin with, but whereas most of the family just became regular wolves, Samuel's pure animal form was that of a dire wolf.

It took every ounce of willpower he had, but Trendane took a step. He poured his soul into each excruciating move that took him further from everything he had ever known and loved. He set his jaw firmly and walked on, blinking away the near constant stream of tears blurring his vision.

As the sun sank behind the mountain wall and day faded into twilight, he stopped and made camp. That night, in the cold loneliness of purest solitude, he finally broke down utterly and wept.

His heart had led him here.

His faith had set him on this Path.

Purification comes in many forms. For some, it is fire. For others, water will wash away all sin and regret. Some, however, have to lose everything to realize what they have.

After months of cold, hard travel, Trendane found himself waking in a warm bed in New Haven. This place felt right. There was much to do, much to learn. And even more to teach.

Perhaps, with a little patience, he could help bring some semblance of peace to these lands that would not fall on the end of a pike... or into the over-stuffed bellies of fattened crows.