

A Song for the Dead

By Xaqtly

"Come on," she begged at him. "It's not much further now. We're almost to the meadow that grows alongside the stream. Remember the stream? Remember how we played in the water like a couple of cubs, ignoring the Alphas and doing as we pleased?"

"Water," he thought. "I need water," he tried to say, but the only thing that escaped his parched throat was a gagging cough, forcing him to stop again until it passed. His muzzle was dried and the metallic taste would not go away. He wished the stream could remove all his problems, as it used to when they were younger. His left leg twitched and sent another wave of agony through him and he gasped as the wound made its presence known once again. He wouldn't have minded that one so much, but the hole in his chest was causing him serious problems now. He was having trouble breathing, and couldn't run any more.

She stood next to him, her eyes beady and alert, looking in all directions. Her fur stood on end and her tail twitched pensively, conveying her state of near panic. As if he couldn't smell it. As if every nerve he had wasn't already on fire, adrenaline coursing through every vein. "We have to keep going," she said, still looking behind them apprehensively. "They're still coming."

"I don't care," he said painfully through his tortured throat. "I can't outpace them, and you know it. I don't want you to be killed. You need to leave me now, and tell the others what happened." He looked up to see her face, and was struck numb by her expression of horror and disbelief. "Go now. Not enough time to argue. I won't make it to the den now, not in this condition."

They locked gazes and after a few long moments it became clear to her that his decision had been made. And like always, when he made up his mind, it was final. His expression softened as he

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admired her beauty one last time, her silver fur made even more glorious by the moonlight, her firebrand personality all but extinguished now as she looked at him with pure sorrow in her eyes. She began to tremble and tears welled up in her eyes, never breaking his gaze. She reached out to touch him and a loud crack like thunder split the air. She yelped and a few feet away, a sapling was turned into splinters. He pushed her away and screamed "Go! Go now! Don't hesitate and don't turn around no matter what! I love you!"

Shocked into action, she turned tail and fled. She ran as hard and as fast as she could, crashing through thick brush and leaping over small boulders. Her mind was numb and no thoughts were formed as she tore through the forest towards the meadow. Brambles and nettles tore at her flesh as she mindlessly careened through the underbrush, heading in the direction that had always meant sanctuary for them.

Suddenly their lives began to play back in front of her eyes. The day they met as cubs, the endless summer days spent together playing and taking naps on the flat rocks in the meadow. Their coming of age together and the endless amount of trouble the two of them caused for the pack. Not all of it was intentional of course, but when the two of them got together things tended to get out of hand pretty quickly. They reveled in causing their elders misery, and they did it whenever they could get away with it. The look of exasperation on the Alpha's face was incentive enough to keep doing it.

As they grew older together, their feelings for each other had changed. What was once undying friendship and loyal companionship had become love and affection, a deep rooted need for each other that had always existed but had lain dormant. Their fire tempered but never faded as they settled and raised a family together. She remembered in vibrant detail how he would teach their cubs how to sneak and crawl so as not to be seen or heard. She remembered laughing as the cubs would jump on his back as he was crawling, yelling "daddy's a snake!" and he would pretend to be upset, and then when the cubs thought he was serious he would flip over so they would all roll off into the grass like little furry pill beetles.

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She remembered the warnings about the area outside the meadow, beyond the forest. Her parents had always warned her against going out there, just like his parents had warned him. She had heard the stories of the few who ventured out, never to return. She thought the stories were exaggerated, but she paid some heed nonetheless for the sake of her family. But this turn of the seasons, the game had been run down to nothing. There was no more food to be had, and the long days of summer were rapidly coming to an end. They had only just survived the last snow season, and they were becoming desperate.

"There has to be game on the other side of the forest," he had whispered one night. "There just has to be. And you know the rest of the pack won't go out there, they'd rather starve." He snorted derisively and rolled over to grumble at the wall of the cave.

"I know, but what can we do? You know the stories. And you're right; the rest of the pack will never go out there. We would have to do it ourselves."

He rolled back over and looked at her, eyes wide open. "You're right. We would," he said slowly.

A tiny seed of panic began to form in her chest and she stared at him. "But what about the cubs? What if we never come back? What if there is no game there?"

He looked down at the floor between them. "There's no game here. Every day we wait for more game to come along is another day wasted with nothing to show for it. The snow is coming, I can smell it. We have nothing now and there will be even less when the snow comes." He looked up at her again and grinned. "Besides, this is just the sort of thing the Alphas wouldn't want us to do."

She laughed quietly but quickly stopped as the seriousness of what they were going to do settled in. "When do we leave?"

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"As soon as we can. We have no time left to wait," he said, searching her face for any sign of expression. She merely nodded and settled down to sleep, knowing that this may be the last night she would spend with her mate and her cubs in their cave.

They had found game on the other side of the forest. But it was all contained behind strange containers and boxes, walls made of thin silver strings that didn't break easily under their jaws. They had finally managed to get to some of it and kill it. As they were preparing to take their kills with them, lights had appeared from the other side of the silver walls, and they heard noises coming from that direction. They collected their kills and ran out as fast as they could, and that's when the thunder started.

It was so loud they could barely concentrate on running away. Plumes of dirt flew up all around them as they ran, not knowing what was going on or what the noise was. They were running in a straight line back towards the forest when there was another crack and he yelped and collapsed. She turned and ran back to him and yelled "What's wrong? What happened?"

"I don't know! My leg, I can't move it!"

"The noise is still coming; you've got to run with me!"

"I can't, I... oh no." He brought his paw up to the moonlight and she saw that it was covered in blood, and not from their kills. "We need to get out of here as fast as we can," he said shakily as he drew up and proceeded to start limping on three legs as fast as he could.

She picked up his kills in her mouth and trotted beside him, looking wildly behind her for any sign of their unseen enemy. She heard a crack every now and then but it was getting fainter. "I need to stop," he said.

"You can't stop here; we're still in the open. It might be able to see us in the darkness."

"It sounded pretty far away. I don't think it's chasing us any more." He came to a stop and whined as he put pressure on his

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leg. "Something small and hot hit my leg. I think it went all the way through. Can you see anything?"

"No, it's too dark. I'll have to look at it later. We need to get you out of the open, this is too dangerous."

"But I can't keep running, it's too- "

Another crack shattered the air, and he felt something hot rip through the middle of his chest. He blinked in surprise and fell over, in shock and not knowing what to think about it. She yelped and grabbed him and dragged him off the path. "No! Come on, you have to keep going. You can't stop here. Come on," she begged at him, "it's not much further now."

CRACK!

The sound snapped her out of her memories and she tripped on a rock and went flying into a shrub and landed up against a tree. "Is it my turn now?" she thought. "Am I going to die now?" She checked herself for injury but found nothing, and then she slowly realized what that sound signified.

She raised her muzzle skyward and howled. She howled as loud as for as long as she could. She howled for her sorrow and her stupidity in thinking no harm would come to them from crossing through the forest. She howled for her cubs, and their blessed ignorance of what had happened this night. And she howled for her mate, her love, her life.

She sang a song for the dead, mercilessly splitting the silence of the night in half with her plaintive cries. Soon her voice was joined by many others from all the nearest regions as they joined together in the vocalization of their life's blood, the very spirit of who and what they are and how they have defined themselves for countless generations.

They are the wolfpack, and this is how it has always been.