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“Are you paying attention? We need to focus.”

“Yes yesss,” Nan’to shot back. He was, in fact, not paying attention.

His older brother and he had been tasked with gathering stinging nettle that evening. At first, he had been quite attentive, retelling himself everything his brother taught him as they picked nettle across malms for hours. He had learned the hard way the safe method to pick the leaves by bare hand, and his left arm was marked all over with red splotches to prove it. It hurt, and he’d cried then, but the jewelweed they’d chewed up and lathered on felt so much better.

That was behind him now, though. They had quite the amount between them in several bags, tucked away in the eldest brother’s pack.

“Please stay focused,” Nan’a said. “It is dangerous by the river this time of year.”

He stuck his tongue out, but Nan’a didn’t see him, having spotted another good specimen to harvest. He watched him kneel down near the roaring waters, enjoying the mist in the air. The melting water of their ice-capped mountains made the world smell so fresh and lovely. He enjoyed the moment in childish bliss, bringing his arms up to balance himself on the rocks, watching his brother move down the river’s edge.

“Mussst we continue this task until dawn?” Nan’to asked.

“Yes. Our family is not the only ones in need of herbs.” He got up from his knees, not bothering to dust himself off. “We will continue this tomorrow and the next while the otherssss continue the Hunt.”

“Noooo...” Nan’to whined. “I want to hunt too...”

“It’s not that exciting,” Nan’a said, getting up from his quarry. “Most of that hunting is prowling slow and waiting for the Strangers to appear.”

“I’m good at waiting!” Nan’to argued.

He snorted. “You? Good at waiting?”

“I am,” he nodded confidently.

“Then you can wait until you’re older to join the Hunt.”

Nan'to gasped. "Cruel! You're the worssst!" Nan'to pouted, crossing his arms. "Sssneak me in a pack tomorrow, won't you?! Don't you love me?"

Nan'a crossed his arms. "I won't be so irresponsible as to take you into danger before you're ready."

He kicked at the rocks, whining. "I really want to go! It's not fair!"

Nan'a sighed. "I know. I know you want to go. But we have important work to do, too."

Herbs and tea leaves? He curled his face up in disagreement. "Is it ssso important that we can't do anything interesting?!" Nan'to demanded.

"Botany is plenty interesting," Nan'a said, only to stiffen as his younger brother hissed at him loudly.

"Shhhure, if you're *boring*!" He groaned, pulling his head back. "I wish I'd ssstayed with Apha. Maybe then I could've sssnuck away, and—"

"Don't speak with such disrespect," Nan'a snapped. "You listen to our mother's wishes. We do as she says. Her word is *final*."

"Then I'll be an outssider for all I care!" Nan'to turned tail, moving up the rocky edge, deciding to flee his brother's attendance over a fallen log.

"Hey!" He yelled at him. "Get back here! It's not safe!"

Nan'to turned his heel on the branch, his arms outstretched again, balancing. "Neither isss hunting, but everyone does it!"

"You'll never join the Hunt if—" Nan'a cut himself off as he watched his brother's foot slip slightly. The younger boy gasped, staggering. Rushing waters still roared below him.

"Stay still!" He called out. "Don't move. I'll get you."

"Nan'a, I..." The boy took a step back, realizing the predicament he was in.

"You idiot, I said don't move!"

But in his fear, he turned around to look at his brother.

And slipped.

Then the cold mountain waters engulfed him.

—

Every time he thought he could get a breath in, it seemed like the waters pushed him down again. What little air he could get from small breaths he managed wasn't nearly enough. Where even was up? His limbs felt tired and struggling to surface grew more difficult. His head hit something hard. He swallowed water instead of air. The world grew darker and colder and colder and darker until...

He knew nothing.

—

It was bright. So bright, and so, so warm.

Was this what it felt like to hug a flame?

He was not uncomfortable, though. On the contrary, he couldn't feel his body at all.

A quiet wailing filled his hearing. A small infant lay crying in their mother's arms, taking their first breaths into the world.

In absolute bliss, he stared. They were adorable. He wanted nothing but happiness for them and their mother. Nothing but love. Trust. Warmth. It echoed like a sound...

He faded into it. He saw through their eyes. A beautiful, black scaled woman looked back at them, brought to tears by the beauty of life.

They felt those things again. Love. Trust. Warmth.

They could live again. They could cry safely.

This...was...

—

p a i n f u l .

Bright.

Painfully,

p a i n f u l l y

Bright.

He coughed weakly, lungs waterlogged, his drenched body, too heavy to move. He lay against a bank the river had lowered into.

His energy was spent. He had no idea where he'd ended up, and no energy to leave. The air felt thin. Every breath he tried to take was suffocating him.

Opening his eyes again brought stabbing pain through his head. He groaned.

Someone... help...

But what he hoped to whisper was silenced in his throat.

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“NAN'TOOOOO!”

His name was being called. Who was that, calling for him? It was his name, wasn't it? He heard it again. His name, that was his name. He wanted to call back, but he was so tired.

His name echoed over and over in his ears, and he fought to stay conscious, holding onto the voice like the last strand on a fraying rope.

Quick steps approached him, and suddenly, he felt hands shake his body.

“Nan'to! Nan'to, wake up!” Nan'a cried. “I'm sorry! I didn't mean to call you an idiot! Wake up, alright?!”

He felt his body moved onto his side, felt a hand slam his back with a fist. He shuddered violently and threw up bile and water.

Nan'a gasped, only to slam him more heavily. Nan'to coughed out of reflex, over and over. It stung. It burned... It was agony, coughing up water. Did it even help?

“Sss...sss...ssstoop,” he whispered, panting desperately.

“Oh Menphina, I'm so sorry,” Nan'a whispered back.

Those shaking words struck Nan'to's heart like a harp's cord. His attempt to comfort him came as nothing but a wheeze. He felt himself lifted up carefully, sat up against his brother's back and carried with arms under his legs like a little kit, too sleepy to walk.

“You're going to be fine, hear me?” Nan'a said. “Hear me, ahbi, you are safe. Stay awake, now.”

Despite his orders, Nan'to fell in and out of consciousness as his brother walked back into the comforting darkness. His vision still painted his eyelids. Who was that beautiful woman? Why did she have black scales? He had felt so much trust... So much love and trust and warmth.

Time passed. How much he had slept, he did not know, but the forest was daytime dark, he knew that much. Were these trees growing familiar? The ferns, the moongrass... They looked of this area's resting home.

"Nan'to," his brother started, "we're almost there. I'll run and fetch a healer from the Hunt. Apha will take care of you until then." He felt his legs squeezed by his hands. "Don't cry, okay? I'll come back."

He said nothing more, merely trying to replicate the squeeze with his arms over his brother's chest. It wasn't until the moment his father had taken him off his back and into his arms that he wished once again that he could go with Nan'a at that moment.

I saw something wonderful. Let's see more wonderful things. Take me with you.

He had nearly died. But it filled him with hope. That next life was so, so beautiful. Why couldn't he take a hold of it? Was he unfinished here? Was there something more he was meant to see?

He did not know. He was a child, whose understanding of the world was limited to his forest and the tales of its surroundings. Whatever it was that he was meant to see, he knew now at least that he would see this again, one day, when he inevitably left this body. That all his journeying would continue. That there was love and trust and warmth in the world.

As he was laid down to rest, these thoughts brought him peace.