

[[CW: Infanticide, Ablism, In-universe breeding projects/Eugenics, Litter Culling, dehumanization of infant ketucari.

I'm so sorry Livia wound up in this piece.]]

"Orlaith?" Livia's voice was soft. Spoken somewhere near the back of Orlaith's tent. Soft.

Unreadable. "Orlaith, did you hurt yourself?"

She sat in her tent--a small thing, just to the side of her parents'. Enough for privacy. Soft green walls around her, a stark contrast to the dead terrain around them. To the crimson staining her paws. She stared at the crimson. Wet. Dripping. Sinking between her fingers. Staining her tusks.

*"One of your tasks will be culling." Matriarch's voice hissed. A thin kadin lay behind her, violet eyes dull. A month old tikadin suckled at her mother's teat, her fur a beautiful black and red, with soft curly down. She looked like Ruairi. Might've been Orlaith's cousin. Or perhaps another half sibling? Who knew? Three titoa however, sat in front of the matriarch. One as white as snow, with stark bands of Acid. Another in golds and blacks. The third... the third looked like her. A near mirror image.*

*They were kin. The kadin wasn't her mother. The supposed sire wasn't her father. Supposed.*

"Orlaith?" Livia's mandibles brushed against her back. She couldn't find it in her to flinch. Stared at the blood. "Your paws are bloody. Did you hurt yourself?" he asked again. Teeth in the thick feather-down along her spine.

"No." she said. She hadn't.

*"Toa exist for one reason only." Matriarch continued. She pushed Orlaith's younger, male doppleganger, towards her. He yowled, rolled under Matriarch's claws until he was on his back. Soft and vulnerable, his side pushed against Orlaith's paw. "To breed and look pretty. They must do both. These three are no good."*

*Of course they were no good, they were only a month old.*

*But weren't they pretty enough to keep for later breeding?*

*"They're out of season. Their parents were not to breed until next year." Matriarch's voice crawled down Orlaith's spine like knives. "The tikadin can live. One extra mouth will not starve us, and she can be sent to Llawe when she is old enough. These three piss poor excuses for pyrite however, have no place in our pack."*

Livia was right. This was blood on her claws. Not hers. Siblings. Kin. "Matriarch was very kind to me today." she said slowly. "She's teaching me."

Livia's mouth moved up her spine, between her shoulders. Working at a mat that was forming there where she couldn't reach. He hooked a paw over her back. Comforting. Or at least meant to be.

The kindness of a toa meant very little. Particularly a mere visitor to the pack.

"What did she teach you?" he asked. He tugged his tusks through the mat.

*Orlaith stared at her doppleganger. A near perfect mimic. Perhaps he'd have her horns? A glance at his dam told her no. Her horns came from her own dam, and the tired kadin bore*

*antlers. Long arching ones, those of Elk. If the titoa had horns, they would be antlers. Like her sire's Chital. Like his dam's Elk.*

*"Why... can we not keep the titoa?" Orlaith asked. Matriarch's eyes went wide. Her ears flat under the arching sweep of her own horns. The dam blinked, empty purple eyes turned towards Orlaith, a dull... hope? in her eyes.*

*Matriarch Moved. Stood to her full height, long feathers fluffed to their fullest extent. With a sharp movement, she grabbed Orlaith's wrist and Yanked her paw over the cub's belly. Pressed her weight down.*

*Something cold crawled up Orlaith's throat as she stared at the tiny body.*

*"We cannot keep pyrite in this Pack." Matriarch's voice was low. Dark. "We have toa and kadin who can create more like these ones. Healthy ones."*

*Healthy? Were the cubs sick? Her doppelganger Mewled, squirmed under her paw, his belly soft and round. So soft. So fragile. "Are they--"*

*"Out. Of. Season." Matriarch hissed. "Useless. Paltry. Pyrite." her weight pressed down on Orlaith's paw, and the doppelganger Cried. Behind Matriarch, the dam's eyes glazed over and she turned to stare at the tent wall once more. "You are to lead Nulla. You must know how and when to cull. These Pyrite are useless. Do. Your. Job."*

*Livia's mandibles were on either side of Orlaith's head now, his mouth working behind the budding horns behind her cheeks. Patient. Waiting for her.*

*Ice settled into her belly as she smiled. Looked at the blood on her paws. "There were out of season cubs. Four of them." she said. "A tikadin. Three little Pyrite titoa."*

*"Pyrite?" Livia echoed, twitched his mandibles.*

*"Fool's Gold. Useless." she laughed, the ice hollowed her belly. Spread. Empty and aching. A black hole that pulled the heat from her limbs. She lifted a paw, licking the blood away.*

*Orlaith's doppelganger was fist. His blood bubbled around her claws. Her kill claw in his chest. Three others in his soft belly. "This is for the good of the pack. These Pyrite are unhealthy. Out of season. They were not cared for properly." The hard edge was gone from Matriarch's voice. "Their constitution is weak. Their bones soft."*

*So are mine. Orlaith didn't speak the words, just watched her doppelganger's eyes widen. The sound leave his tiny lungs. He stopped squirming. His brothers cried out.*

*His sister lay at her claimed teat and suckled without a care in the world.*

*"Finish the job, Orlaith." Matriarch hissed, and stepped back, only to push the black-and-gold towards her.*

*Orlaith decided not to question her, and reached for the cub. The Pyrite. Pressed her kill claw between its shoulders. Its skin broke with hardly any pressure and it Howled shrill and wild. This one's ribs were stronger. Took Orlaith standing and bearing her weight down to push her claw into its soft innards. She sank her others into its back.*

*"The underside is faster. Crushing them only makes a mess." Matriarch advised.*

*Makes a mess. Didn't make them suffer less. Made a Mess. Took too long.*

*She yanked her claws out of the Pyrite's flesh, rolled it onto its back and swiped her talons across its belly. Once. Twice. Three times until it stopped Crying. She didn't wait for Matriarch to offer the Acid. Reached for it herself. Grabbed it with all the care of handling a ragdoll.*

"They were no good to the pack." her laugh was bright. She stood, ducked away from the satin toa beside her. Dodged his paw, warm and tingling against her spine. "So they needed to be culled."

She'd killed them. That was her. Not Matriarch. She could have refused. Could have walked away, given up her claim to the Nulla sub pack.

She hadn't. She'd killed. Culled. Mother would be so proud. Orlaith laughed. Couldn't stop laughing.

Her paws were sticky with blood.

There was still a tikadin at the dam's teat. A mirror image of her brother. The one who disappeared. Father's out-of-season bastard. A tikadin who would be sent to Llewe in the Bayan Plateau when she was old enough.

A tikadin. No titoa. No little brothers.

Toa were there to look pretty. To Breed.

Her laughter bubbled, and she had to stop, to sit. Her stomach twisted itself in knots.

"Orlaith?" Livia asked.

*"Where's brother, Mama?"*

*"He had to go away, Orlaith."*

*"But where?"*

*"Nowhere important dear. He was just a Toa."*

"Will you escort me to the stream, Livia dear?" Orlaith sang, hooked her tail over her back.

"Matriarch will be displeased if I don't get the blood out of my coat."