

For a while it had seemed to Felix as though the storm had cleared, as though the clouds parted overhead so that the sun could shimmer down and warm his skin and fur with its gaze. The ground became soft and pleasant, and the scent in the air shifted to the sweet floral touch of wild nature, ever-present, always watching, yet keeping as respectful a distance as he did from it. Still everything was there, but he had started to feel like he belonged instead of stuck out.

Now that was gone. As he trudged through the thick underbrush his footpaws caught and scraped along dropped twigs and low-lying thorns, or bumped his knee against a fragment of ancient asphalt jutting a ragged edge up through the thick layers of soil blown in and gathered over the years. He would fall and catch himself on his bad arm, and then the foul, hostile world swam around him for a few seconds, shadows lengthening into inky blackness speckled with the starbursts of pain, seas of green twisting and tossing him upon their cresting waves. When he looked up to the sky, towards the distant sun, it was only small spears of light that came down and prickled at his fur. He could not see the sky through the webbing of boughs and branches far overhead, stretching towards and even beyond the limits of those skyscrapers that still stood, like the skeletons of some great beast fallen to the ground, drying out, dying away, then housing the new, glorious growth of something else. Sections of trunk bulged oddly out around where the heartwood had grown in against chunks of concrete; twisted, rusted rebar stuck out like branches here and there; fragments of tarp and cloth and paint decorated sections where someone used to live.

There was verdant existence all around him, and yet the intrinsic *energy* that coursed beneath life seemed to swell away like a river around a boulder. Ahead of him there was Askia, *somewhere*, the wild dog prowling like any other forest predator, radar-dish ears up and swiveling constantly, posture crouched so he could leap and dodge and evade at the slightest reflex, snout wrinkled but lips closed. He traveled as though he had no idea he were being followed, yet also like he cared not if he was: behind him he left broken branches, trampled bushes, the clear signs and marks of passage.

Felix was no hunter, and yet he could easily maintain pursuit. And day after day, night after night, he followed, never coming close enough to speak with him, never drifting far enough away that he lost track of the wanderer. He ached to return to the heat of the wild dog's campfire at night, to feel himself folded in the unspoken safety and warmth of his presence and watchful eye, but he dared not come even close.

The first night the opossum had legitimately feared for his own life in Askia's trail, and hunkered down into a shallow alleyway with a tarp drawn before the opening, knife clutched in his other paw, knees drawn up to his body, shivering for the cold of night and chill of loneliness. Each sound out in the city set his heart to racing and dampened his fur with sweat, sleepless imagination constantly envisioning Askia sweeping that tarp aside with a swing of his own knife, or the metallic barrel of the pistol nudging just far enough in for him to see it. There were footsteps outside pattering by, pausing, moving on; a deep, low, almost mechanical rumbling, haunting in the way it vibrated through the air; and off in the distance the sound of conversation, though fragmented and senseless, voices that had captured and repeated the words without knowing their meaning.

The second and third had been a little better, with him managing to camp down within the same general space as the wild dog, though still keeping his distance. Then the fourth, this prior night, they had shared the first floor of a ruined building, separated in between by the concrete and structure of the floor above having fallen down through the ceiling. Felix could hear the crackling of Askia's fire, and the rummaging of his movements, and then at one point the soft, musical twittering, chirping, cheeping of his little clockwork box.

He thought he had heard Askia weeping, and it pulled at his heart and put tears in his own eyes, but still he kept his distance. And today as the invisible sun began its descent behind the unseen horizon, Felix felt like a scab solidifying over an open wound. The pain was still there but distant, and when he poked at it it flared up for just a moment and then faded into aching numbness again.

Suddenly the wild dog's progress ahead of him stopped. Felix continued on for a few more steps before he noticed, his ears perking and his nose twitching to determine the obstacle; Askia stood in place, slightly crouched, one paw clutching his knife and the other hovering over his holster. Felix felt his heart quicken, then slow again: he crouched down as well, listening with his head tilted, eyes dancing between each and every movement of the thick foliage around Askia in front of him, waiting for whatever it was to happen.

It still surprised him. Suddenly the predators slid from between the branches, bearing the dirty, tattered remnants of clothing that so many of them did, holding weaponry from makeshift to masterful. Three of them – a jungle cat, some kind of dog with floppy ears and a long muzzle, and then a wolfess who looked like she had smeared her fur in mud, oil, and blood, completely changing the arrangement of her markings and partners. The three closed in on Askia, desperate in their movements; they had completely missed Felix some few stones' throws behind him.

The cat hoisted a spear with a head assembled from three different jagged, rusted spikes of rebar, far too high and far too heavy for him to skillfully wield; the dog had two knives to him, one similarly rusted, the other with the handle wrapped in cloth; and the wolfess went in with nothing more than fangs and claws.

The one with the spear lunged, but was effortlessly dodged and countered with a sidestep and swing of the footpaw, sending him sprawling across the earth with his makeshift weapon clattering to the side. Askia briefly danced with the second, skillfully avoiding twin knife strikes with his single, and in a swift pair of movements managed to fend off the other dog; though Felix hadn't quite seen what had happened, the other canine flopped to the ground and did not stand back up. The spear-wielder climbed back to his feet, ignored the weapon, and tried to sneak up on Askia from behind, only for the wild dog's tall ears to perk back. He swung his leg again, once more knocked the cat down to the ground, and -

And Felix had to turn away, sickness rising from his stomach to the back of his throat and heat pressing out behind his eyes. Even so he still couldn't help but hear the thick, wet *smack, smack, smack* of the butt of Askia's knife against the side of the feline's temple, garbling his cries and shouts for help and mercy, turning them into senseless noises, then to distant grunting, then into silence beneath the repeated beats. When the opossum finally looked again the body was still twitching and convulsing in place, misfired signals ricocheting out through muscles already gone limp, the heart dead without yet knowing it. Off to the side the other raider, with the knives, had spread a pool of deep crimson out across the leaf-littered ground, the limits of the puddle gradually growing.

Then the wolfess approached, posture hunched, weapons of her own bared in glittering claw and fang. Chest heaving with unsteady breaths, muzzle speckled in its normal cream, cinnamon, and chocolate now with splashes of bright red as well, Askia took a moment to come back to himself and then stood back up, hoisting the spear with him. He tested its balance, rolled his paw back and forth along it, eventually settled on a spot rather close to the rigged head, and turned to face his last prey.

Felix had seen some like her before. Those who had either sacrificed the last remnants of their humanity, so to say, or had had it forcibly stripped away from them, watching the world around them and falling back into its feral, animalistic ideals. He had been fortunate enough to see it happen only three times before, with the last being an entire pack of mismatched people-shaped animals, no longer capable of communicating in anything more than grunts and noises and body language. The thing was, though, he couldn't argue with the results: wherever these types descended, more often than not they came out on top, well-fed and uninjured.

The wolfess leapt, and Askia responded. One paw went back while the other came up and around, narrowly missing the raider's sleekly muscled body; he dove to the side, used the length of the spear to his advantage, and rolled right back up, facing the point towards the wolfess as she trod right over the corpse of her fallen companion and came back in for a second swing. This time the two traded blows, Askia's other shoulder jerking back beneath a swipe of a surprisingly powerful paw while he traced a line of red through her pelt with his knife. Then back and forth, back and forth again, her adjusting her aim every time she leapt at him, him dancing to one side and then the other, down, up and around, parrying, dodging, countering, parrying, dodging, dodging, dodging.

Felix took a step forward through the muck, then a second, then a third. The spear was knocked from Askia's grasp, his wrist pivoting painfully with the yank; pain flashed across his face and he looked like his body wanted to drop, but he remained standing. Both bore signs of their encounter now, fur splashed with blood, teeth bared, eyes wide, breath coming in thick, wet panting, but neither wanted to give in. So the wolfess bore down, swung a leg out behind her, bunched it in, and then leapt again – and then her eyes fixed on Felix just a short distance behind Askia, then back to the wild dog.

Askia yelped out, and in the dying light of evening sparkled a spray of blood alongside the glittering metal of his knife flung to the side from a senseless paw. He dropped to one knee and hunched over, panting, but Felix's eyes were on the wolfess as she shifted her sights to him. Red dribbled from so many nicks and slices across her body, and bestial rage showed in her eyes and on her face, her lips pulled back, frothing saliva dripping from her chin. Forward she advanced, blood-smearred claws ready, muscles twitching in anticipation, though step slow so as to judge Felix's threat first. He looked from her to where Askia hunched in the clearing, then back to her, then back to the wild dog again – and then she leapt, using his split attention to her advantage.

But she stumbled, a weakened ankle going out from under her and flinging her dangerously towards the opossum's body. He felt himself tighten and move to react, as drilled into him over so many evening practices with Askia before – and then he leapt aside, patting at his side for his knife, unable to find it. Surprise flowered into panic; he gasped and crouched down, back now to Askia, staring at the wolfess where she stood... and then he frowned in confusion. She lifted an arm, slowly, weakly, and there wedged underneath the joint was his knife buried to the handle. Pain visibly lashed across her muzzle; she reached with her other paw, took the haft, yanked it out without a second thought – and out spurted a flow of rich crimson, pulsing with each beat of her heart, staining her fur oily red, squirting, spraying, arcing out across the ground. She stumbled towards him with that arm outstretched, shakily, before it dropped limp to her side. Then the other, and she growled, sleepily; then she crumpled as well, gave a last twitch, and also ceased moving.

Felix's paws shook. Nervous, carefully, he took the step and a half to the side to where she had tossed his knife, picked it up, wiped it off on his clothing, and sheathed it again, then hustled over to where Askia knelt. The wild dog panted through gritted teeth, similarly bleeding from many cuts and gashes and

scrapes. Felix grunted as he tried to hoist him up, not trusting himself with words; as far as he could see the wild dog bore nothing downright life-threatening, but it would still be good to get him out of the open and to somewhere he could care for the wounds.

Night had well fallen by the time Felix had accomplished this. Askia seemed to regain some of his composure near the building and shrugged the opossum off, though still made no move to speak with or even look at him. Felix busied himself with gathering materials for the fire, positioned underneath a gaping hole in the ceiling that punched through the next several floors. He obsessed over the construction, moving the kindling this way and that, shifting the chunks of cement he used for the base back and forth, stacking and restacking the logs, just so that he had something else to focus on.

*Is this really it?* he couldn't help but wonder, though. *We fight, and split apart, but then still end up hanging around each other?*

Again and again he glanced up at where the wild dog sat, forlorn by the entrance of the building. He had made no move to handle any of his wounds, instead letting them seep slowly through his fur; most of them had since sealed or started to scab, but some still passively oozed. Felix frowned, hunkered down, and struck at the as of yet unlit fire, then once more, and again, until finally it ignited. Bit by bit he coaxed the flames, teasing them higher, further, until the thin wisp of smoke began curling up through the hole.

Part of why he had built the fire was because Askia usually advised so strongly against it, but now the wild dog didn't even care to look his way. One ear remained angled, but that was all. Felix poked and prodded at the flames, worrying over it more than he should, but before long he sighed, rose to his feet, and approached.

But not *too* closely. The dog's other ear flicked to face him.

"Askia..."

The other hunter sighed. "You should have let me die."

Even though he had expected something like this, hearing it still surprised him. The opossum frowned and tilted his head; *first off*, he thought, *I can't imagine anything being actually able to kill you without your express permission, and second...*

"Why?"

"Why do you think?" Finally he looked up at him again, mismatched eyes flat in the dancing firelight. "I left the community so that I could find Jason. And guess what? I found him. Mission complete. Mystery solved. That was it. We were going to find each other, and go home together, and... and..." And he trailed off, looking back out the ruined entrance again. Camping on the ground floor of the building was another mistake that Felix had hoped Askia would call him out on. "And that was my future. There's no alternative. Nothing left for me."

Still he felt the rage seething inside of the wild dog, evident in the way he clenched and unclenched his jaw, how his ears flicked this way and that, how his eyes danced around even though there was nothing outside. His very aura seemed to simmer in the still night air; Felix wanted to come closer, yet each

instinct, every reflex in his body warned him away. It felt the same as creeping near a bed of wires somehow still active after so many countless years, as when tending the fire, as when walking beneath the interwoven boughs that he knew formed a raider camp between the buildings far overhead. This was the same.

*Danger. Do not approach. Stay away. Danger. Danger.*

“So you’re just...” It took conscious, deliberate effort to keep his own emotions down and out of the way. Felix paused to catch his breath, balled his fist at his side with his bad paw, felt the aching pain lance up towards his elbow, and squeezed even tighter. When he released it, that entire side of his chest throbbed. “Giving up? That’s it?”

Askia scoffed. He opened his mouth to speak, thought about it, closed it, then opened it again. Without moving his head he glanced over in the opossum’s direction.

“Wouldn’t you?”

Frustration boiled together with disbelief into rage of his own. Felix gritted his teeth so hard he felt his jaw pop and was certain that he cracked a tooth. Countless thoughts fired up in his head and streamed towards his mouth, yet sizzled out before they quite reached it. He realized a moment later he was shaking, and breathing heavily through nostrils flared with that frustration, and still Askia did not even look at him. He raised a finger, opened his mouth, clamped it shut, paused... and tried to center himself.

*Inhale. Hold it. Exhale.*

“If there’s anything I’ve learned from my time out here in this hell of a world,” he began, voice low, “it’s that there’s *always* something else. I don’t need to explain to you again how I lost my family, and all my friends, and everyone I ever loved. I don’t need to explain how I kept on going even when everything else had gone. And Askia? I *thought* that finally I had found something new. I thought that you would be there, maybe for just a short time, maybe not forever, but at least for today. Always for *today*. And now I see I was wrong.” The opossum tromped back over to the fire and swept his bag up onto his shoulder, bearing himself through the spears of pain again. “And I don’t need to be here for the sake of someone who will do nothing but bring me down. I’ve learned that I can’t truly rely on anyone other than myself, and I need to prioritize myself first and foremost.” He adjusted his bag on his shoulder. “So I’ll be leaving.”

Askia lifted his head from where he had rested it on his knees and perked his ears, though still did not look his way. He froze like a predator that had located its prey, and was waiting for the time to strike. Felix just kept on going, the words forming themselves without him even thinking about them.

“I suppose I won’t be missing much, really. You’ve taught me how to take care of myself at least a little better than I used to be able to, and it...” He reached anxiously across himself to cup his wounded wrist, still throbbing faintly. “It’s not like I’m getting any more care for my injuries than I could do on my own. You’ve become... you’re self-destructive and reckless. And frankly, it’d be irresponsible for me to continue tagging along when you’re like this. So I’m going.”

To his surprise again the wild dog scoffed. “In the dark? At night?”

But Felix had already turned to start approaching the open doorway, a thin layer of glass sand still dusting the ground from the window that used to be there. He looked over his shoulder; behind him the fire snapped and crackled, one of the logs giving way and crashing onto those underneath it.

“It’s safer than staying here.” And this he knew to be true. He hoisted his bag on his shoulder again, sighed, and then stepped through into the darkness beyond.

It was still strange, though, how immediately he felt the grasp of the natural world around him. For so long – how many weeks? Five? Six? – he had traveled with the faint knowledge in the back of his head that, no matter what, he would have Askia at his back. The strong, intimidating predator who could kill him without a second thought, yet still worked to preserve both of them. So many years had Felix been on his own that stepping out here into the cool, humid night felt at once like returning to somewhere familiar, yet that familiarity came laced with anxiousness, anticipation, wariness, danger.

*But it’s nothing I haven’t been through before,* he reminded himself, and stepped forward. He would hug close against the walls of the buildings alongside the street, and climb up above ground level as soon as possible. *And now I’m better equipped, physically and mentally, than I ever have been. So if I’ve made it through every night before, I can make it through this one as well.*

He kicked himself for wasting all of that energy building a fire that neither of them would take any benefit from, though. If he was on his own he would have to be much more conscious about his movements and efficiency. He would start having to wake up in the middle of the night to scout around his camp, no matter how remote or well-hidden he had made it; he would have to spend time out of every day sharpening his knife, and he would need a new spear, and likely some kind of ranged weapon as well for hunting, and... the list continued on as he wove his way through the roads of the city, coursing like great earthen rivers along the floor of the forest. He constantly kept his paw over his knife at his side, eyes glancing this way and that, working at retraining himself to maintain peak vigilance while traveling.

Yet still the burden of sleep began to weigh down upon him. Multiple times he found himself drifting or leaning against one of the walls of the building, and before long he had shifted his focus from putting distance between himself and the wild dog to seeking somewhere to bunk down for the night. A small ruin of a brick building partially flattened beneath the weight of one of the gargantuan tree’s huge lower boughs provided a rusted walkway up to the roof, and from there Felix was at least able to clamber his way up into a cranny between the branch and its trunk, completely filling the skeleton of the taller building beside it and swelling out the cracked concrete and bent rebar like dried rubber.

There he settled himself, brushing away some of the debris and evidence of past visitors – long past, thankfully; the only scent that lingered was that constant low acidity that the outside world always had – and curled into the corner. His instincts screamed at him for finding a place with only one way in or out, but at this point the opossum was far too exhausted to care. He slipped his cloak around himself, spread some of the dirt and leaves and twigs around to cover his presence at least a *little* bit further, and then slipped off into sleep.

Then just as suddenly jerked back awake from a thin slant of sunlight crossing his muzzle. Around him the world was silent save for the gust of wind always blowing through the upper bounds of the forest, weaving the sound of distant, interminable whispers throughout everything. But there was something *wrong*, though: his paws shook as he sat up and swept his cloak off, his whiskers twitched as he swung it

back over his shoulders and tugged his backpack on, his ears danced back and forth, side to side as he stood up.

Felix looked over to the building roof from which he had come up here. Instinct told him that he should not return that way. So instead he continued out along the vast branch and started to climb down, then saw that with a little bit of work he could instead ascend to a level further up. That would always be the safer option.

Still, though, he could tell that he was being followed, and instinct as well as logic told him exactly who it was. The opossum glanced over his shoulder when he could and saw there exactly what he expected to: no sign of his pursuit. Frankly put, he was a prey species, and Askia was a predator. He would *always* have the upper hand. Along the way through the forested city he tried to focus himself, to figure out where he was going.

*The rumors of great, flowing seas of grass, open meadows, pure lakes outside the city. I'll go there. But even as he tried to make this resolution he knew it was a distant dream, like his older brother's one day I'll see this city burnt to the ground. As far as Felix knew, as far as anybody knew, there was no "outside the city". Nobody had ever left it. His parents had been born here, grew up here, and died here.*

And he would do the same. Hunger began to harass him as the flashes of sun barely visible through the boughs overhead tilted and slanted towards noon, the opossum gradually working himself further up along the floors of the skyscrapers enclosing on either side. Something he had noticed in his ample time traveling through the streets was that the relative destruction of the buildings lessened as the height increased, with most of the structural damage coming from the massive trunks growing amid these concrete skeletons. Close to the ground entire walls and floors were missing, bared metal bones protruding and rusted, while further up it was more often just the organic wear of weather and movement of natural forces from within. Sometimes up near the distant canopy there were even windows still intact, though opaque from age.

Almost as if something long ago had struck up from the earth and shattered each building at its base, sending spiderwebs of instability through the structures. Felix often found himself wondering if the trees came from *in* the soil, or rather *underneath* it. It was just another thing to add to all the others, something that he would reasonably never know or find.

Today's hunger was something he could solve, meanwhile. At a certain level the bushes began sporting small berries, the sunlight up here just strong enough to allow the growth. He picked them as he went and popped them into his mouth, licking the dark juice off his fingers; it was an excuse to keep his knife drawn, as these berries often grew in bunches hanging off from the extremities of the bush. Easier to snip the stem at the base rather than pick them one by one.

Still every time he could, he looked over his shoulder, and still he saw nothing. It wasn't until the next evening that this finally changed, Felix's footpaws stinging from the unbroken movement, his shoulders aching from his pack, his mind and body both exhausted from the constant paranoia that he had almost forgotten belonged to a prey species out here in this world. Maybe about a third of the way off the ground to the buildings surrounding him, he found a branch that trailed out from within a shattered window and guided his way inside, giving the space a cursory check to ensure that, for now, he was the only inhabitant. As usual there lingered the remnants of a past visitor: the remains of a tattered tent long

since fallen to rot, from someone who never returned; the imprint of a fire that had been dead for so long the logs had disintegrated; and then that general distant *sense* of presence.

But that was ubiquitous within the city. In each and every one of these buildings, each and every one of these rooms, people used to do... *something*. Felix couldn't be certain once. But they used to be here. People used to travel the roads like he did now, only many hundreds, perhaps even thousands, more than the survivors he occasionally encountered. And now there remained only ghosts.

He slung his pack off his shoulders and dropped his cloak as well, glad for the respite. The opossum began preparing his usual camp, the movements ingrained into his subconscious after so many repetitions throughout the years, though kept his ears angled back. Suddenly there was a sound from behind him, sending an anxious alert throughout his system: he froze where he knelt, took in a breath, swallowed, reached for his knife... and then was up and around in an instant, hunching slightly down into the fixed yet fluid fighting position that, he realized, Askia had taught him.

There the wild dog stood, one arm holding his other, big ears splayed down and to the side, eyes and presence both empty. He stood there a moment, twitched his jaw, shifted his head, moved a little bit – and Felix raised the knife further.

*You use your superior height to your advantage, the opossum knew. Your limbs are longer. It's foolish for me to aim for your core. I need to go for your extremities first, to allow myself to be able to come in close to your range.*

Askia took one step forward, then another; Felix took a step back, keeping his bad arm close to his body and out of the way. He shifted his footpaws before and after each step, ensuring that he maintained good footing.

"I told you," the opossum growled, "I'm done with this. I'm done with you. I don't know what you want from me, but you're not going to get it. I'm-"

"Felix..."

He had been prepared for a physical advance, but not *this*. The opossum felt his resolve waver; Askia swallowed and half-raised a paw for him, then dropped it again. For the first time this was an actual *person* standing across from him, with fear and hurt in those mismatched eyes rather than aloof anger. His snout curled with strain, and though he showed his fangs it was in a grimace of tense distress rather than the usual snarl that he had come to associate with him.

"Please," and another step forward. The opossum raised his knife again. "I've lost everything. You're all I have."

Felix's mouth formed the word, but he couldn't quite get it out: *No. I'm not. You've lost me, too.* What was he supposed to do in this situation? He knew when it was time to turn tail and run during a life or death encounter with a predator, feral or otherwise. He knew how to bind wounds and repair some of his weapons, but *this*?

Askia still approached. Felix felt his resolve wavering, but still kept his knife up. He forced himself to imagine swinging it across like he had in so many of their sparring sessions, only this time cutting past air

and through fur and flesh. *Start with the wrist and fingers if I can, move in from there. Artery of the arm in the elbow, then tendon underneath the shoulder. That should be enough. Saw it in that wolfess the other day. If not, I can probably make my way around to the hamstring, and-*

Suddenly another burst movement and his heart leapt. *He tricked me*, he thought, moving to leap back with his knife out in front; *he tried to get me to let my guard down so he could come in unchallenged and – he –*

The breath left his body as Askia's arms wrapped around him. Felix's knife clattered down to the dusty concrete floor, and a thin trickle of warmth oozed down his arm where he had slashed out at the wild dog. Taller than him, Askia had to crane his head down to nestle his muzzle into the opossum's neck and shoulder; he felt his breath puffing out, hot and tight, shivering in small, unsteady sobs, soundless at first.

Wet heat seeped into the thin fabric of Felix's shirt and his fur underneath. He stared out across the ruins of the city partially visible through the broken window, obscured by the twisting trunk of this great tree, while Askia squeezed tighter around him. The scent which he had come to know as *his* lanced up around him, tugging at his instincts and his heart – *predator, danger, canine*, then also *fear, distress, pain*, and beneath all of that, *Askia*.

"I can't," the wild dog murmured, breathless. "I can't lose you, too."

"You already-"

"No. Don't say it. I can't bear it." He sniffled over the opossum's shoulder and adjusted his grip, holding him tighter. Slowly the two sank down to the floor; Felix grunted as his knees hit the rough concrete, Askia's arms slipping down his body towards his midsection. "This world... changes who you are, Felix. And I miss who I used to be."

*Who you used to be?* Despite himself, despite the discomfort pounding through him, the opossum could still feel the weight of Askia's grief and worry tugging down at him. He swallowed, glanced over to his knife, looked down to this strong, stoic wild dog weeping against his chest, holding him tight, burying his muzzle in his fur... and let one arm come up to stroke over his back. His fur was at once coarse yet plush, thick yet rough. *Who are you?*

"But – *this* is who I am *now*, and I need to learn from my mistakes. I can't..." Askia lifted his head, mismatched eyes foggy with tears. He sniffed again. "Can't return to the community because – Jason was the only thing it had to offer me, and now he's gone. I can't save everyone, and that *hurts*. More than anything else I've ever felt. But hearing you say those words, and seeing you walk away, and keep on going..."

Felix looked back at him, mouth open, ears up. Askia glanced back and forth from one eye to the other, then swallowed again. His ears twitched upwards, lowered back down, splayed out again; he leaned in until the opossum could feel his breath on his cheek, and then rested his muzzle in his shoulder again.

"I can't do everything," the wild dog went on in a whisper. "But that doesn't mean I shouldn't try. Right?..."

“Askia...” Felix moved, shifted his paws to his shoulders, tried to push him back. The wild dog plied his superior strength here as well. “This isn’t right. You’re – a danger to yourself as well as me, I-”

“Please.” Those fingers tightened on him. “Please. *Please*, Felix. Stay with me. I need you. I didn’t realize it, but I – need you... please, I...”

The sobbing continued, the thick, deep convulsions of his body bouncing through Felix’s and out into the relative silence of the evening. The most disconcerting part was seeing someone so strong and assured everywhere else suddenly breaking down like this. *Askia knows how to handle everything*, Felix thought, paw coming up along his back again. Absentmindedly his fingers dug into the wild dog’s fur, pushing through to the warm skin underneath at the nape of his neck. *That was clear when we first met. Everything I was doing, he could do better. He has more experience, and more knowledge, and more skill, and-*

“I just can’t lose you, too,” the murmuring went on. “I can’t be alone. Not again. I don’t... think I can...”

Then suddenly it hit him, with the force of the experience itself. Felix felt his world swim around him, and then he had to blink frantically to clear the tears from his own eyes.

*He’s never grieved before. He’s never had to. His personality in this world, he just takes all of that with him and carries it forward; if everything is temporary, why grieve when something ends? It was going to happen anyway. But this is the first time it’s been something that has really mattered to him. The only thing, the only person, in this world that he cared about more than himself.*

*It’s a process.* Felix took in a breath, held it, and sighed, settling in to let himself wrap around the shivering wild dog. One paw slid down towards the small of his back while the other came up, ran between his radar-dish ears, and held him in against his shoulder; Askia tightened as though surprised, then began convulsing all over again, the sobs coming unbroken. *He’s here for himself, now. But I’ve been in this same spot. And I wouldn’t wish it on anyone else.*

*There’s always something else*, he had thought, back when he had first left Askia’s presence. *And this time, that something else is you. If I didn’t know where I was going next, well – I do now.* He turned his muzzle to the side, nuzzled gently against Askia’s cheek, and there took in a slow, gentle breath of wild dog, the scent sharper than he had tasted it before, richer, stronger, fuller. He took it in, held it, and let it back out.

*And truthfully*, he realized, *I don’t think I could bear to leave you, either.*

Felix wet his lips. “That’s just how it works, though, isn’t it?”