

A *click* and then a *click*, loud in the spacious lands.

This was Nova's only reprieve from yet another coming self-reprimand--which she saw fit to take. She stayed strung up on the repeated *clicks* of her own hind-claws on the hardened ground, aimless fore-claws wrapped around her stomach. A leathery mess of mane, barely ruffled by the winds, hung loosely over her body in a tangle.

Going bipedal wasn't exactly practical. But having a goal in mind would have helped, and she couldn't see the point in planning.

Maybe she'd walked too far, or slept too much. Or thought too much, but whatever the case, the miniscule crags in a pale expanse fit all too well. She'd hadn't placed too much stock in this theory, this being a time-worn, time-tested claim on her end. And yet part of her insisted otherwise. The part of her partway hysterical by now.

And despite her desire to stay calm, stay rational, her mind sped on ahead. The moaning of blood in her ears felt like a testing blow from some playful outside force. Every sharpened stone was a warning. Every shadow a harbinger.

Quite a worrying cycle.

Nova worried at her lip. If only someone else were here, to greet or to threaten.

Escape never lay in her claws alone.

Wen wasn't feeling well.

As expectant as he was of this sickness, being prepared never helped. And yet he could only try.

Elephantine limbs lumbered with a kink in their tread. His misshapen tail bumped along behind him, the base curving up with every flick of his hind-legs. Rock scraped against the soft underside of his coat-tail of an appendage. They tickled and itched.

For a beast of his caliber, aching muscles and bones were no oddity...and yet with a comorbid worry, a simple and primal sense of 'wrong', this seemed the scariest moment of his life. *Just have to keep going. I can't think! I'll starve.*

Shouldering his way through the daze, Wen's head swung low. Still so aware of his own scent. Rotten and stale. Clinging and cloying.

Fleshy ears fanned out as jaws parted in a yelp.

There was no real benefit to wasting his breath, but he carried on anyway. The vibrations were pleasant in his chest. A reminder that he was alive. Maybe--

He froze in mid-step.

What was that smell?

Idiot, cursed the familiar tumult in Nova's head. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*. Heading off alone, all foolhardy. Just asking to be treedevil fodder. She kept glancing over her shoulder, half-ready by now for her life to be snuffed out in a flurry of brown-gold fur. Ready for slitted yellow eyes to blink open in the shadows. The *star in the sky*, as they say. One little glint in the shadows is all you'd see.

Not that this would help. Even the crunchiest of pebbles were smothered by their silent paws.

Nova inclined her head into the wind, breathing deep, taking in the aromas of unfamiliar flora and gases boiling up through the ground. This was uneven earth, at least. Should keep on moving on, anyway.

Just take the situations as they come. Bevel, bevel, pave and revel.

Threats upon the mortal plane were only the tip of the iceberg. There were other forces out there. Outer forces. Forgotten gods, vengeful and proud, roaming free with no names or appearances to tie them down, beyond bargains and bindings, hungry, lustful...*See, this*, she mused, *is why we stay in a group. Our brains can never deal with this shit alone.*

Hooked claws scratched at her stomach. And then caught in her collar, giving one, then two little tugs.

Click, and then *click*, fading back into her ears.

One thought to cling onto. One motive.

Simple enough.

Tilting his head, Wen let the scent streak through his flaring nostrils.

Pungent and fresh...*life*.

The usual few rotas flickered in his mind's eye and he batted at them in his brain. He often forgot how re-assured he felt merely knowing that others were around, conspecifics or not:

fellow beings and their breaths and their build. Just sharing the space, at absolute worst. Some jostling and roaring to determine who was boss. And there were few distractions more failsafe than a good, hard, fuck. Whatever happened, happened.

With a little more vim to his vault, he advanced over the ridge.

Looking upon the source of the smell...plants, of some species unknown to him. Scrubby little scraps. Small and numerous. So very many of them.

Wen's jaw slackened. He didn't fight the sense of calm settling over him like starlight.

Plants were no good to him. But they might be enough for someone smaller.

He carried on down, stomping heedless over whatever lay in his way. More tiny patches of leaves, cradling bundles of petals in their midst. Blossoms on stalks that danced in the wind. One he recognised as some form of tree, wrapped and throttled by vines that curled at their ends, spiraling in the vein of vibrissae.

Some caught in his fur. The mauvaek brought a hindleg up with some difficulty, scratching away at his side. He wouldn't assume them all as dislodged for even a second, but that was future-Wen's worry. Dropping to a stance one may take as a play-bow, he looked askance at the earth, and didn't feel quite as inclined to rise up again.

In a satisfying ripple of muscle and soil, his forepaws stretched, flexed. Alllll the way...there. With an arch of the back, too--oh, yeah, that's the one! Mmm...now, time for a little more focused exercise.

Digging was not his forte, but elegance was no real precursor to results. So, on he went. Forelimbs mired deep in the soft, unyielding dirt, he scooped out earthen loads by the pawful, shunting them under his stomach with every backward thrust. Thick hindlimbs struck out in tandem, stretching for the piles under his body, kicking debris out in rhythmic droves.

His intentions were threefold. Maybe some hapless little treat would be uncovered for him to snap up. Also, he just wanted to, nay, *needed* to act.

And, also again, he'd be helping spread a rich and enticing smell. Bringing the denizens in from the boundaries (if there were any) of this land. To witness one telluric cornucopia. Perhaps someone his size. He could fight them.

There was dirt rimming his eyes and nostrils. His fur spiked up. He wanted to gag.

And then the winds shifted.

Narrowing his eyes, the mauvaek felt his belly scrape low, tickled by all manner of grasses. As obstructive as they were, his ears were unimpeded, filling out ever higher as they filled with the sounds of absent movement. He remembered the landscape of a few seconds prior and closed his eyes fully, briefly, picturing the next scenario in detail. Muscles contracted under an unkempt pelt. If he could just get closer...

His nostrils slitted, and the mouldering stink rolled off them. He was downwind. He was sheltered.

This could work.

The winds shifted slightly, and their messages did in turn. ...

A reek of sweat-marred fur and skin...of a stale mouth...a haggard pelt loaded with all manner of debris, plants, remnant meats...

This scent was undoubtedly *animal*.

She let out a silent snort, and whipped around.

White and wind. As far as the senses could suss.

Slipping. Nova took her face in her fore-paws and set her jaw. Her breaths were laid harder, her head thumping, a mess of seedpods and carrion and grit slewing about in her gut. An earlier impulse meal. The kick helped, but...

Hunching her shoulders, she began to preen as she walked; mouthing at skin clammy to the touch.

They'd bitten through to the bone around her brain, there were cracks outside the cavity--

Will I miss you three? A thick and heavy exhale shook her throat. *Will you miss me?*

There WAS someone there, another presence in buttfuck nowhere with her and their cute little game was *not helping*.

Whoever or *whatever* they were, there'd be plenty less tax on two minds if they just showed up *now*.

Thorns were catching on the meat of his paw-pads, and the stink of his own stale breath was growing firm and sickening, but Wen didn't care.

Partway over the next incline, he saw a creature. In this place and frame of mind he had no better phrasing. Heaped crags of flesh covered the top of an otherwise pinched torso, grown in the shape of ribs. Some attempt at deceit to one with a worse sense of smell than his. There was substance, there, sustenance. Diminutive, slight, leathery. But vulnerable. And so small! What fool force would grant them such wastrel genetics?

His nose brought him news. Tilting his head, he flehmed. He could discern no aim, no dispute, no sex, no sound. But what he could sense was all he needed.

Fear-scent. A weakened gait. The heat and sweat of at least some bulk.

Careful paws brushed through scrub, heavy-set claws leading the motion. He could sense the divide, where grass gave way to shingle.

Feeling his throat tighten, Wen gave the slightest of coughs. Taking more than a little pride in such a subtle motion. Then his legs were straightening, gait transferring from stalk to lope, and the loose scrabble of rocks played out under his paw-pads.

The *thud* was a flash of frost through her flesh.

Loud and powerful, shaking the ground under her claws. No treedevil had that tread.

There were...protrusions, like split tree branches, curving up from the motley scrub.

Then they shifted and carried a vast body into view.

From the eyes of vacillants, almost anyone was large, and yet the sight before her still set her lip a-quiver. Those bifurcated spines were lodged in the curves of boulder-like shoulders, a thick neck resting like a growth between said masses.

That was not a denizen of the planet she knew.

The beast had as white a pelt as she had a mane. Great clumps of matted fur hung over their muscular form. Their ears, almost a meter in length, turned to-and-fro in the tepid air, overlapping crests and folds framing an almost elegant, tapering head.

Part of her wanted to parley, maybe, look to a potential denizen of this realm for guidance (or at the very least, a little empathy), until she saw the eyes. Glazed and unfocused, looking milky beyond belief, but golden all the same.

Should she even laugh?

Through a filmy gaze, Wen shook his head. He wanted a fix on whatever creature was frozen in his way.

Fighting with himself again: his instincts. Who'd taken a flame to the wicks? Over and over again he felt the urge to bear down on the prey--that was conclusive enough to decide, they weren't getting away, where to go in a place like this anyway--and *get* them, rip them, tear them, their *MEAT*--

His stomach grumbled in protest. He was aware again of his own ribs, pushing hard enough to puncture. Choking on his own saliva, he let out a barely-perceptible cough and swayed on his legs.

All this time, he hadn't put enough thought into the actual hunt.

But, again, where would they go? If he *hoped* hard enough, then perhaps they'd see the light too...and submit to the darkness just a little way down his gullet.

A wet gurgle rumbled through his throat as he leaned further into view. His forepaws met the softer earth, and in they dug. Let the little scrap see him. Let them do as they wished. He didn't care a fig what they tried.

She was on all fours. When had that happened? Head craned in his general direction, neck stiff, Nova stretched her hind-legs with deliberate slowness; following up with a crack of her digits, a twist of her ankles, feeling and hearing air shoot through the joints.

What he was planning seemed obvious. Having spent a fair deal of time on some big wet rock, the vacillant could hazard at at least *some* of the rules of life.

This felt planned. So very planned. Not all gods were hands-on. Nova's jaw quirked with a terse smile.

Eyes as listless-looking as her own appeared to pulse slightly, their owner's head swaying on shaking shoulders.

Slowly, but surely, reassuredly, the being lowered into a crouch.

Muscles compressed under the leathery skin--taut masses twice the size of her own head. Claws entrenched in the soil with little effort. Waving behind him was a bulbous length of tail.

Were those the wet flashes of teeth? Was he about to--

Nova bolted.

Two astatic beings, rolled into one. Even on the empty lands, they veered and tilted. Wen's whole body was shot through with sheer focus.

Even before he'd begun pursuit, he couldn't and didn't fight back a sense of elation. Off sped his quarry, panting pell-mell, scampering along on limbs clearly not built for running, at what was so clearly their maximum speed that he had to choke down a snort. They'd only warm themselves up for him. This situation was only becoming funnier.

His flanks were slick with sweat, temples drumming away to a boil. Lungs swelling, gulping down as much air as was possible.

Each of the mauvaek's breaths began to deepen.

Already flagging, they were. The winds felt neutral. Their snare of a mane was dragging them sideways. As Wen bounded along on surging muscles, his fur danced in the breeze, the odd loose strand tearing free to scud through the air.

Ears flattened, legs held close as they ran. As streamlined as he could be. Getting any nearer? Closer, closer. Soon! This cursed tail--

The climax appeared to unfold in slow motion. Furred paws overtook hairless ones, and Wen's muzzle neared his victim. A craggy head whipped around, mane flying, and their jaws opened in shock--and any potential cry was pounded from their lungs as he *slammed* his upper body into theirs. He twisted on his paws with ease, figure swinging around to face them as they fell, and pushed forth, lunging, one fore-paw landing, scratching at achromatic flanks, then thrusting up again, pushing on and around their neck whilst the other veered down to grip at their rounded little belly.

The fur on his neck began to settle. His frills quivered. In the back of his mind he felt teeth and claws fixing in his skin. He tuned out the absent squawking and stared down, down into bulging eyes that would show their whites, if they had any whites to show.

Tongue lolling out, he squared his shoulders. *Where will you go?*

Nowhere!

Maybe now she'd be able to scream.

Paws like slabs of granite rested over her neck and belly, enough to hold but not to hurt and plenty enough to crush. If she dared him.

Alas, no.

Only now had she come back to herself, paws fisted and snarled firmly in his fur, neck following the curve of his toe as her teeth fixed in the flesh, body all gnarled up in a raging, frayed knot.

A breath flew from her lungs in a shaky rush.

Her struggle for life had been futile from the start. No stamina to speak of. And having bear-traps for feet didn't help.

But she'd tried, and that mattered.

Right?

Now, as he stood there, sweat trickling down his pelt, the adrenaline petering off, exhaustion was instilled in their place. He was out of practice. Partway aware of his vision teetering, a buzz and ache in his limbs. His ears shook where they lay folded. Tears marred his cheeks. There he was. The frame of a reluctant skeleton and traitor muscles.

But he'd won. Succeeded.

The moment he reaped the spoils, that is.

Jaws gaped open. Lips pulled back. Saliva disgorged from his globular glands, flowing over his flabby, grey tongue, slickening up his fangs.

This, at least, he knew how to do.

What was with the *wait*? Staring with lifeless eyes, muzzle moist with crocodile tears?

Even as she'd let her instincts take over, she's had an inkling that attempted escape was a lost cause. A minute or so of lost hope was apparently miles over giving in. With a massive paw resting on her upper body and another digging into her abdomen, she almost felt relieved.

But *now* he was going to get cold feet? Nova's lip curled. Of course, he wouldn't make this quick, would he? Such a noble beast. They all were. Letting her head fall back, she let her gaze fall on the great and white expanses beyond, and considered.

If his paw shifted in just the right way, and she tore herself free at just the right angle, saw fit to evade two, or even three snaps and swipes, got on aching and weary limbs and plotted a due course for...buttfuck somewhere...in the span of three seconds tops of unhindered, impulse thought...was there use in that, heading off to die alone?

The sight of his opening mouth was conclusive. To both to them.

Fangs not unlike her own gleamed in the wet darkness. A great expanse of tongue lay out, shaking with the beast's heavy panting, resting among flabby gums and more than a few ulcers shining angrily up from the flesh.

His breath smelt stale. Each inhale was feeble, precursor to a wheeze of an exhale through enormous lungs. Every breath of her own felt harder, mostly taking in his warm, dense expiration. She wondered what exactly she was inhaling, flinching at the start of a hoarse cough.

The openings of salivary glands, fat and tubular, appeared to wink amongst the folds of the drooling cavern.

And, farthest back, but just now visible--the opening of his throat. Framed by massive carnassials and a sagging, pendent uvula. Strung with flimsy salivary welcome-banners. Pulsing, flaring ever wider, in, out with his arrhythmic gasps. Damp. Cavernous.

Ravenous.

With a final grumble from his stomach--in approval...encouragement...impatience--Wen leaned forward. He unhinged his jaws as far as they would go, letting loose a torrent of saliva over his victim as his tongue reached out, eager. Licking a fat, wet stripe up their torso, then up the side of their face, the burst of meaty flavour almost made him want to go in for another--but, no. No need to indulge. He already had them, helpless and ready.

Maw fully open, he bowed down, and engulfed their head and shoulders.

To say Nova was not ready would be an understatement.

A quick *glormpf* of the predator's jaws had ensnared her in almost total, moist darkness. Like the brush of blades of grass were the tips of wet canines. The mass that was his tongue ground against her, tasting her, smothering her in flesh and drool. She coughed, the invasive fluids in her nose, her mouth, thick and claggy.

Twisting instinctively, she only met the unyielding resistance of his paws on her body, and a weak hiss left her throat. She was overheating. Her tongue lolled out in a pant. Vaguely aware of her own saliva and sweat stirred into the liquid miasma around her.

She *felt* him leaning further down. A tickling sensation was at her feet, fluffy fur against the pads--the cuddly coat of a killer. All the world spun around her; the deep, dank portal approached with haste. Her mane brushed along a jagged range of palate. Sodden, ripped strands sagged against her skin as she slid deeper within.

As the flesh of his tongue glided along her belly, she choked on a snort.

Her throat clenched in protest, stomach tightening. Nova felt a jolt run through her as she wondered whether she *wanted* him to do so: spewing all over the meat of his taste-buds, hoping for enough of a shock to his system...but, almost mockingly, that tongue flattened out. A more finalising sense of lift came from outside, the beast's head raising again, lips sealing shut around her hind-limbs.

The light began to fade with the closing of his jaws, but still remained long enough for her to watch her forepaws meet the opening of his gullet. They soon plunged through the fleshy gate as her eyes did into darkness. Wheezing, hysterical, she felt her muscles tense, held fast by the esophageal walls that were continuing to drag her down.

Gales of stale breath blasted her skin and raked at her eyes and nose. Drawn out by the stench, the cruel air and the heat, tears streaked Nova's face. The heat was already growing unbearable.

That was before her snout hit his throat.

His prey was flailing with no real purpose, and he couldn't help but enjoy how his gullet stretched around them, bit by bit. Sharp as those claws looked, they only slid off the slick walls within him. Loose, splotchy glutes were disappearing into his mouth. Slick as their skin was with sweat, they were only easier to get down. The mauvaek huffed at the salty topping to his meal.

So, he was going to swallow them whole. He'd went this far when spitballing. On an impulse he dug his teeth into their flailing legs, feeling blood well up across his canines. The metallic tang gave him such a buzz...so heady...he hungered for more.

Wen looked down. A kick from the scrap's hind-claws had landed true, shearing off a length of fur and leaving a bare stripe of exposed skin reaching up his right fore-leg--but that could only have been a fluke. Evidently that feeling earlier had been those digits gripping, now torn from his skin as he gulped their body down. That very same set of claws now wriggled fecklessly as they were sucked past his lips, not even aiming for any exposed flesh. Not that this would matter. He began to tilt his head...

There was a new taste on his tongue. With a low, musing growl, he felt the pressure on his taste-buds as the small creature's body slipped down. He could feel the tang of exposed flesh. Deliberately languid, he brought up his tongue, sliding along their oversized legs, up and in-between them--bringing out a fresh wave of weak writhing from them, much to his delight. They'd opened up to him, now, had they?

Hollowing out his cheeks, Wen closed his eyes, grinding the narrower tip of his tongue in close. He could place that new spice now. A fleshy sac was squashed into his papillae, exuded from their groin in a quivering pile. Those exhilarating struggles had died down even now, only the slightest of spasms wrung out of them as he invaded. So twitchy on his tongue. Reminded him a little of bodily collapse. Prolapse. Whatever the name was. He didn't go in for that brainiac stuff.

No shame in indulging further after a time like this. But his stomach had waited long enough.

Rising up from his chest came a deep rumble. Once-narrowed pupils now dilated as he lifted his head.

Slowly, but surely, the remainder of their body was pressed down through his throat.

As the suffocating, wet heat of the beast's maw enveloped her, Nova felt the breath make tracks from her lungs. Suffering the touch of his tongue on her junk had been exhausting enough. She still shuddered the slightest bit as her legs joined the rest of her, squashed down into a pulsing esophagus.

Her engorged sac hadn't seen the end yet, stroked and squeezed by the slick stretches of muscle...so many emotions were present in each ever-quieter moan. Saliva drenched her mane, weighing down her head to a painful degree, dripping and following the course of her curves. Flattened, crushed, her hind-limbs had been swallowed, digits made to bend lest they simply break. She could barely move a muscle. He was too big, his body too strong.

Sounding both ominously close and eerily far, the cacophony of bodily workings boomed around her--blood vessels almost groaning, engorged with their load; a powerful heart, each thump stronger than the last; lungs ballooning out like bellows, bloating with so much *air*. Air.

Through a pained throat, she took in a shaky, difficult breath--

Which was promptly squeezed from her lungs by the crushing grip of the cardia, pressing down on her head, neck, chest without mercy, her ribs feeling as if they'd buckle under the pressure--

Down.

Down she fell. Only but briefly.

The muscular sac widened the slightest bit as she was dumped inside. Then contracted in again. And again. Pressing. Squeezing.

Beefy fore-paws stretched. Great grey claws drew furrows in the pebbled earth.

Wen let out a yawn, feeling fat ropes of drool curl off his lips and teeth. They splattered to the ground. A scent drifted back up to him. Their scent.

One never really noticed. The lack of filling was what they felt.

A feeling that was leaving him so easily. Seeds on the wind. They would come back. But his energy expenditure was focused elsewhere at present.

Namely centric around his gut, full and gurgling.

So much movement down there. He could feel every puny kick and squirm. All they were pushing were liquids and gas. The mauvaek felt his breath catch.

A tightening in his chest was the harbinger, bringing a tiny exhale past Wen's lips, followed soon by--

BWWWUUUUOOOORRRP!

With the taste of meat searing his tongue again--if only for a short while--Wen's throat reverberated with a chirrup of glee. He flared his nostrils, flehming, admiring how much more *raw* the sensation was, the *spice* of now-cooking flesh. Another churr rumbled through him.

He hiccupped.

The mauvaek cast a languid gaze from side to side. He turned in a slow circle, ears swiveling on their own axis, tubbier-than-usual gut swaying and gurgling. His hind-frills lowered, followed soon after by his tail-frill. His erection brushed up against his stomach. One he hadn't known he'd had.

Legs folding under himself, Wen lowered his grateful body to the ground. A flabby tail dropped behind him with a thick *thump*. His jaws creaked open once more, this time to release a second deep yawn. Slimy arcs of tongue traveled a lazy path, licking the last traces of his catch from his lips and teeth. Shifting slightly on his hindquarters, he shivered under another spark of pleasure.

Creamy eyes narrowed to slits, then closed.

Sleep came to him easily.

Sleep was also coming for one restless vacillant.

An easy 'out', and quite the dangling carrot for one stuck in the tangled weave of slippery mucosae, pressing in so tight she could scarcely even lift her head. Thoroughly exhausted and exhausting all options.

Even as she 'fought', barely able to give an inch against the damp grip of his guts, the urge was there in the back of her mind. As her body turned turtle amid the powerful surges of the walls, more and more of her being marinated in gastric juice.

The walls melded themselves around her...or maybe she was being melded into them. Rhythmic squeezes of muscle, each one feeling stronger than the last. Slowly, slowly being digested. Churned away.

Her tortured lungs shuddered away under her heaving chest. They couldn't gulp down enough noxious air to fuel the weakest of struggles.

Sticky liquids oozed out from the muscular curves, ground into her with every powerful contraction. Slathering her already raw flesh with moist warmth and a distant, menacing ache.

If she were able to see, Nova certainly wouldn't have been able to look askance. Any exposed flesh, being mulched down. Her captor's gut had folded in still further...whatever he'd now done had contracted the already narrow space, contorting her limbs and forcing them in close to her body. She thought briefly of her own sac, and a squeak died in her throat. Her tongue extended, weak, jaw twitching as her very being was compacted. The constant stinging, all over her form.

The vacillant felt her hips cant up. They twitched over and over, acids seeping into the cuts, into their component muscle. Paring away the skin. Her rear ground along pulsing muscles, stinging and flinching. With a gurgle, her tongue flopped out, hanging lifeless--almost relieved, she was, that her extremities were falling to torpor so quickly.

The acidic muck felt almost firm as she reeled back. Her limbs were leaden, her throat tight. She'd be starved for oxygen, very soon.

...and the next stage had only just begun. Eager walls squashed in, holding her tight. They disgorged ever more biting fluids. Nova's ears were filled with the agonised groaning of her tortured bones, the fleshy gurgles of skin disassembled by brutal pepsin. Even as her useless eyes squeezed shut, the chyme still found them. Her bowels shuddered and strained, and the panoply of stomach juices only felt thicker. Her stomach roiled. In a pained haze, she was aware of her own wretched squalling as her displaced organs were pushed up into the stiff bite of her ribs. They only made her head hammer. Skull split down the middle, opened up like a conker's shell. She only wished she could really scream.

She was being wrenched apart.

The acids were coating her so fully. Enzymes delving so deep. Air full of malodor. Breaths so painful. Heat. Burning. All over. Dark. Darker.

Snap. Crrrunch.

The pain was there. Hungry as the wet, fleshy folds and thick, meaty slurry that now held her. The vacillant collapsed, wrapped up warm and tight in one sickly sleeping bag.

Gwwwuuorrrp.

So cramped. So warm and *intense*. Gripped by the churning folds, groped, ground. Fluids surging through weakening orifices in a rush; sloshing, everywhere, in her ears, at her nose and throat. Every sinew being ripped apart, one by one. Limbs writhing and twitching on reflex, only basting her flesh further in acids and chyme and slime. Splashing the corrosive muck into her own eyes. Bowels shuddered and stuttered, only fouling up the morass of mulch ever more. Gases bubbled against sagging skin. A frantic heart hammered amongst flagging lungs. Her organs were floating. She--

Could only hide now in a cloud of blood. She was dreaming, right? Surely...