Beyond the Storm

by Ringcaat

Summary

At the end of Arashi no Yoru ni, it seems our heroes are finally headed for their happily ever after - a simple life in a place where they can be together. But can anything as wonderful as a life ever be truly simple? If you're curious what the future might hold for a pair of natural enemies brave enough to be friends, I hope you'll enjoy this day-by-day continuation of their moving story.

(Includes elements from the 3D kids' TV series, Arashi no Yoru ni Himitsu no Tomodachi.)
The 1st Day

Chapter Summary

* Are we really safe?
* Do you miss your pack?

Chapter Notes

Hi there, everyone! I was introduced to this movie by a friend in 2009, and somehow it recently surfaced in my mind as something I wanted to revisit. So I made rewatching it my reward for a week of goals. I achieved my goals, got sushi and watched Arashi no Yoru ni for the second time… and it clung to my heart.

This second time, I couldn’t shake it off. I watched the entire 3D kids’ series, dumbness and all, and the story was still settled happily in my heart. I looked at art and read all the fanfic I could find, which wasn’t enough. I told a friend I was doubting the wisdom of writing fanfic for a thirteen-year-old movie without a huge following, but he said if I wanted to write it, I should write it, and not worry about who might care to read it. And after a few days of wavering, I gave in.

The stories I like best are the ones that seem just a little incomplete to me. In other cases, it feels right to flesh things out or explore alternate timelines. But here, a simple continuation seemed best, so that’s what I present. I hope you enjoy it. I’m planning to post a new chapter every Monday.

Oh—and please leave comments! I love getting comments, even if they’re on things you didn’t like. The more comments I get, the more likely I’ll be to see this through to conclusion. :-)

[EDITED ON 8/2/19 TO ADD: I saw it through to conclusion! It's 42 chapters long with an optional bonus chapter and it's done! (You should still leave comments though since comments are good.) ;-) ]

Well, this was it. This was forever.

There was something about the endless blue sky and the endless lands it dappled that seemed to contain a question. Mei had always wondered what that question was, let alone what kind of answer it might have. It was something along the lines of, What is it all good for? Or possibly, Where does it all lead? But when he’d asked these questions of his mother as a kid, he’d known they were wrong as soon as they’d left his mouth. His mother had smiled and rubbed him with her forehead as she tried to make sense of her child’s wonderings.

The search for a question had stuck in his rumen all his life, even when he wasn’t thinking about it.
These days, the question was more like, *Where does forever lead?* It was a form of the mystery Mei was comfortable with. But the idea the mystery existed in the first place made him open-minded. It had kept him from running at a certain pivotal moment, a moment in the clear of day when nine out of ten goats would have turned tail and run, but Mei had hesitated and thought about the mysteries life had to offer. And now, months after that amazingly unlikely encounter, Mei was starting to feel at last, to his surprise, like he had not just a grasp of the sky’s question, but even the first inklings of what the *answer* might be.

There were meadows outside his cave with no trace of the life he’d known. None of the strongest, most familiar scents. The full moon was down beneath his hooves somewhere, conducting its journey beneath the land, and the sky was brightening in the dawn. But in the cave behind him, a wolf slept, and the presence of that wolf was everything.

*This was where forever led.* And that snoozing wolf was the reason this place was a step on the path to forever.

“This is the first day of forever,” said Mei to himself, so quietly the rising sun couldn’t hear. He drew a deep breath and started tentatively to muse about what, exactly, that might mean.

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**ARASHI NO KANATA: BEYOND THE STORM**

**PART I: ALONE AT LAST**

**The 1st Morning**

“Good morning, Mei!”

Mei looked back, as if he needed some kind of confirmation that his companion was really himself, that he hadn’t reverted to his amnesiac state in the night. As if the tone of his voice didn’t make that perfectly clear. There he was, chipper as ever, graced with a huge smile despite the menacing length of his snout. “Good morning, Gabu.”

The wolf left their cave as if climbing into the world; then, once he had his balance, he bounded over. Mei’s hair blew in the gust thus created, and he told himself he was wincing at this, not at the sudden approach of a predator. Mei’s winces weren’t very big anymore. “How’s things? How’s the grass? Is it tasty as ever?”

The truth was, the grass here wasn’t as delicious as it had been at home. Sawa Sawa Mountain was a special place—there were reasons Mei’s old herd lived at its foot. This place over the mountain had thinner grass—less lush, and with strange flavors grown in. But it wasn’t bad, really—and the flowers here were amazing. “Tastier,” he replied. “I couldn’t enjoy much of anything when I thought you were gone.”

Gabu slumped. Mei knew he was still taking in the weight of his recent experiences—fighting for
his life, triggering an avalanche, believing himself about to die. He’d forgotten his memories—Mei couldn’t imagine what kind of suffering might bring on something like that. His friend seemed to be all right, but it would be a while before either of them could be sure. And in the meantime, they would have other problems to deal with.

“I’m sorry, Mei. I wish I could have arrived here together with you. Think how grand that would have been—coming together through the snow and seeing that amazing valley!”

It would have been wonderful, yes, but not all the best moments in life are ones we get to live. “That’s true. But what matters is that we’re together now.”

“We are!” There was so much joy still fresh in Gabu’s voice. “We really are, aren’t we? And no one is going to try to make us split apart!”

Mei imagined the birds or squirrels pooling up their courage and coming forward to make a complaint. “No, I think we’re all right. So long as there aren’t any more wolf packs around here… I think we’ll be fine.”

Gabu planted his haunches back and took in a deep, almost greedy breath through his nose. At last he let it out. “I don’t smell any other wolves!”

“Neither do I. We’re safe!”

The wolf seized Mei up and swung him around, dancing. “We’re safe!” he echoed. The irony was that Mei hadn’t been ready for the embrace and couldn’t help but flail his legs. But that was just reflex. He knew he could trust Gabu with his whole self. He hugged back and shut his eyes.

As sure as the rising sun, Gabu set Mei gently down, unharmed aside from a little dizziness. “You should show me around, Mei! You know where everything is…”

Mei smiled. “I’d be glad to. I’ve already seen most of the features nearby… but it’ll be like seeing them again, now that you’re here.”

And sure enough, everything in their little domain seemed to have more color, more vibrancy, more importance, now that Mei was no longer alone.

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The 1st Evening

Gabu yawned as he padded back to the cave, Mei steadfastly at his side. He was getting used to being up all day and sleeping all night, though it wasn’t easy. They’d agreed to try to keep the same schedule, which was worlds better than trying to carve little snippets of time out together while off living different lives. Gabu’s pack had always been more active during the day than most, so it made sense for him to adapt. On some level he realized that he needed more sleep than Mei did, but he wasn’t letting it show through. This was a new life, and it called for an endless supply of energy!

Still, he couldn’t help yawning after a long trek like this. They’d seen everything! New forests, flatter than the ones they were used to, with fragrant berries and trees neither of them knew the names for. The regions were smaller here, with no truly vast meadows or craggy expanses. One type of land gave way briskly to another on this side of the mountain, which made it feel like a place for small families. Just right for a pair like them.
It seemed like Mei was similarly happy to show Gabu around. But as they walked homeward, ready to turn in, he seemed melancholy. Gabu wondered if he should ask why. Maybe it would be better to stay quiet and let his friend have his space. After all, if they were going to be together most of the time from now on, it was important to let Mei have his own thoughts, wasn’t it?

It turned out that forbearance wasn’t needed, though. Mei spoke on his own. “Gabu?”

“Mmm?” It was all he could do not to respond with a fond ‘Yes, Mai?’

“Do you miss your pack?”

The question felt something like a lightning strike, far above. Scary, but not too scary to handle, not anymore. “Mm… I’m not sure yet. It hasn’t been all that long, and I don’t remember all the time I’ve spent away from them.”

Mei stared ahead as he strode. “I miss my grandmother. And my friends… I thought about them last night. I was lying there with you, but I was thinking of them.”

“That’s okay, Mei!” It wasn’t like Gabu was going to get jealous of memories.

The goat looked him in the eyes. Wow—there was still such power there. Gabu wondered if he’d ever get used to the full force of Mei’s attention. “It’s strange… knowing I probably won’t ever see them again. Mina… and Tapper, and everyone… my whole life is different. It was all taken away.”

“Ohh. I’m sorry, Mei!”

A smile came. “It’s okay! I made the right decision. We made the right decision. But…”

“They meant a lot to you,” Gabu finished.

A glum nod. “I’m still taking in everything I’ve lost. Every day… every hour, I remember another thing I’ll never do again, or another place I’ll never go.”

How was Gabu supposed to respond to that? It made him sad, and now he was starting to remember his own relationships… though the most motivating aspect of his life, if he was being honest, hadn’t been any of his packmates—it had been his ambition to rise in status within the pack. Life had been one big, exciting game which it seemed Gabu couldn’t do anything but lose… but lately—before meeting Mei—he’d been losing less! And eating more. And… oh, now his stomach was growling again. Stupid appetite.

“Do you have anyone you’ll miss?” Mei asked. “Anyone from your pack?”

“I do,” he admitted. “There was a girl I liked. I was… I think I was starting to get her to like me back. Or… maybe she liked me the whole time, and I was just starting to see it!” Distance suddenly made Gabu’s perspective very stark.

“Was it Lala?” Oh, right--they’d discussed Gabu's feelings for her once or twice before.

“That's right. She… it was obvious she was special. You could see it at a glance… the way she moved, the way she treated people… I never figured out what was special about her, aside from being the beta’s sister, but that was the joy of it! And…” He almost stopped moving for a moment as he realized. “I think she saw something special in me too.”

“Well, you are very special,” said Mei, giving Gabu a friendly glance.
“Why… thank you? I guess I must be special, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“Unless it was just fate that you happened to be caught in the same storm I was, in the same place!”

He had to wonder. “Do you think any other wolf would have done the same as I did, in the same situation?”

Mei switched his tail up diagonally. “Do you?”

Gabu couldn’t say he hadn’t thought about it. “No,” he admitted.

“Why do you sound so sad? You’re special. Where others would have seen only a meal, you saw a friend.”

And now look where it’s gotten me, he wanted to reply. But that was a horrible notion; he banished it from his head with a jerk. “I wonder what Lala would have done, if she’d been the one you met in that barn.”

Mei studied his face carefully. “I wonder, too.”

They arrived at their hilltop cave and lay down outside. Close enough to dart within if danger or bad weather struck. Safe and healthy. Lords of their little domain.

“I wish I could have known her,” said Mei. “Isn’t it strange how we haven’t told each other anything about the people we knew? We talk about everything else, but never that.”

Gabu reflected. “I guess I didn’t want to remind you that I came from a pack, not a herd.”

“I may have felt the same way,” said Mei. “But I almost want to think that, even back when this all started… I realized that I wouldn’t be able to stay with them.”

Gabu’s eyes went wide. “You realized even back then what would happen?”

The goat reflected. “I don’t know… I think it was just a feeling that I was on my way somewhere.”

Huh. Gabu gave this idea the silence it was due before asking: “Where did you think you were off to, Mei?”

Mei shrugged, looking over the meadow. “Somewhere different than where I came from.”

That was all he said, and it was all Gabu needed him to say. He rested his snout on his forepaws, relaxed, and thought wistfully about the place he’d come from.
The 2nd Day

Chapter Summary

* Do you suppose we ought to make friends?

* Should I tell them about you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 2nd Morning

Morning was still delicate and new. It was a gift, really. Mei still expected to wake up among his herd in the meadow. He still expected to have to fight for whatever he really wanted out of the day. If he wanted to see Gabu, he would have to struggle—to send signals, to avoid being seen, to cover his tracks literally or metaphorically…. He’d acquired the habit of waking up belligerent, ready for a secret fight against those he loved. But no. No, said the sun’s gentle rays and the sweet, husky smell of the cave. No, sang the birds outside. You don’t have to fight today. You already have exactly what you want.

During their final days on the run, after the river but before the mountain, Gabu had sneaked out each night to do his hunting. It didn’t hurt Mei to think of it anymore. His friend hunted; he needed meat. But tonight, the warm, shaggy body had never left the den. They’d agreed to try both being active during the day while sleeping at night, and it looked like Gabu was keeping his side of the bargain.

So it was as if Mei had his own special tuffet for sleeping in, like a herd elder. His head lay comfortably against Gabu’s flank. The lupine smell was nice, because it was him; even Gabu’s breathing was pleasant, like the breath of the high winds that steer the clouds. Mei felt his head rise slightly and fall with each exhalation. He closed his eyes. He was happy… but was there such a thing as too much happiness?

Was there such a thing as too little struggle?

“Good morning, Mei!”

“Good morning, Gabu. Did you sleep well?”

“Very well, thanks. I’m… well, I’m looking forward to a bright new day!”

Mei had the sense Gabu had been about to say ‘I’m hungry’, but thought better of it. He didn’t press. “Is it all bright new days, from here on out?”

Gabu brought his head around in a loop, as if stunned by the question. “I guess maybe it is! That
wouldn’t be a bad thing, would it, Mei?”

“I suppose not. I just wonder…”

“Hmmm?”

Mei crept to the opening and peered out. Gabu crept forward to join him. Mei didn’t feel ready to ask a question as weighty as what he felt, and he didn’t know how to put it into words, anyway, so he settled for: “Do you suppose we ought to make friends? Here, in this new land?”

The wolf’s ears flared up, a sign of sudden thought. “Well… there is something to be said for friends. Indeed, you might call friendship the greatest thing in the world.”

“That’s true!” agreed Mei. “It’s what brought us this far, after all.” Whatever this far meant.

“And I guess it would be sad only to have each other as friends for the rest of our lives.”

“It would be rather sad, wouldn’t it?”

“And yet!” Gabu lifted his forebody, but slumped after a few moments. “And yet, making friends might be a little challenging.”

Mei nodded. “That’s just what I was thinking.”

“I don’t think there are any goats out here. At any rate, I haven’t smelled any trace.”

“Yes. I think you’re right.”

“And if any of the animals out here are willing to be friends with one of us…” said Gabu.

“…they probably won’t want to be friends with the other,” Mei concluded.

“…Exactly.”

Mei sighed. There was silence for a while.

“I think we should try anyway,” put in Gabu. The trace of a smile at the corner of his long mouth caught Mei by surprise; he couldn’t help but grin.

“All right, Gabu! We’ll try.”

The issue resolved, Mei stood up and walked into the sunlight, looking for a sign. Were there any friends out there? Or was friendship with anyone but Gabu a thing of the past?

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**The 2nd evening**

Mei was surprised to realize that today had been the first routine day since… well, really, since before the storm. Meeting Gabu had upset all his routines, even if he’d put up a front of normalcy to his herd. In a way, today hadn’t even been routine either, since he and his companion were setting routines. But the first day of a routine was still a routine, wasn’t it? He wanted to think so. He was ready for life to be normal again, even if normal was a lot different from what it used to be.

The core of Mei’s day was eating, as always. He’d found a sumptuous little place with a bit of sun
and a big rock face for cover. There weren’t any huge meadows around here, true, which meant the
dangerous woods would always be near, unless he stuck to the hilltops. But he’d found a place
where he’d at least have time to respond to any attack—if there were even any predators in these
parts larger than badgers. Gabu had looked over the spot the previous day and given it his smile of
approval—he agreed it was safe.

So now, that spot, which Mei was thinking of calling Sneaky Bluff, was set to be the heart of Mei’s
day. He took grass there and ruminated, then enjoyed some of the soft brush by the edge of the
woods. From there, he climbed up to the top of the bluff and chewed his cud while he looked down
over the area, getting a feel for it. Exploring made up the next portion of Mei’s day, though he’d
promised Gabu he wouldn’t go into the woods proper. So he stuck to the high ground instead, or
else went down to heath and meadows and ventured close enough to the trees to watch the squirrels
and chipmunks there. So far they hadn’t spoken with him, but Mei couldn’t blame them: for all he
knew, they’d never seen a goat before!

Mei decided that he should spend a portion of each day trying to make friends. He’d take it slow, at
first. He didn’t want to scare anyone, and he knew it would be hard to insert himself into the social
fabric of a new place, especially if he was bigger than most of the animals he met. Being friends
with a wolf was another complication he didn’t even want to think about introducing.

But he had to think about it eventually, didn’t he? And ruminating wasn’t just for digesting food—
it was for digesting ideas, too.

“Gabu?”

“Yes, Mei?” Still that unfailing warmth in his voice. Mei wondered what kind of fire must burn in
the flesh of a wolf for Gabu’s response to be so consistently adoring.

“I was thinking today. If I do make friends at the edge of the forest…”

The wolf’s head tilted back toward him, ears receptive. They’d met up at the base of the hill where
they’d been reunited, and were now walking homeward together, the last part of what Mei hoped
would be their routine.

“…should I tell them about you?” he asked.

The wolf’s jaws cupped quickly shut. Mei felt guilty for the question. As he waited for a response,
they walked up a ridge, the land spreading itself to their right in piecemeal glory.

“I don’t know, Mei. It might make them not want to have anything to do with you.”

“It’s sad, but that’s what I was thinking, too.”

“But then again, do you really want to start out a friendship with a lie?”

“Well.” Mei sighed. “It isn’t really a lie if it’s just something I don’t mention.”

“But…!”

Yes. There was such a thing as a lie of omission. “You’re right. If we make friends, we can’t keep
them in the dark about us. That goes for you too, Gabu.”

A little whine. “That’s fair. I just don’t know who around here would want to be friends with
someone like me.”
A pang of injustice struck Mei’s stomach. “Anyone would be lucky to have a friend like you. I think that stormy night was the luckiest night of my life.”

“But Mei! That kind of thing only comes along once in a lifetime!”

That was true. Mei walked silently for a while. “If I do make friends, I’ll mention you,” he decided. “Maybe not right away. But before too long. And if they won’t accept our friendship… I’ll just look for someone else.”

“But then all the creatures around here will know!”

Mei grimaced. “I wouldn’t be surprised if they know anyway. We’re not disguising our friendship. Here we are, out walking together.”

“That’s true.” Gabu gulped. “But if you meet someone who does still want to be your friend… even in spite of me…”

“I’ll introduce you,” said Mei with a cautious smile. “And then we can all be friends together.”

Gabu looked forward and put his chin to the wind. “That sounds good to me!”

“I just don’t know if I’ll find anyone that brave around here,” Mei groused.

“Don’t worry about it, Mei. There are so many animals out there, in the forests and meadows and wetlands… I’m sure among all those animals, at least one will be willing to take a chance!”

The wolf’s optimism was contagious. “It’s just a matter of time!” Mei agreed.

“That’s exactly it! Just a matter of time.”

It was a clear night. The moon was waning from full, but still generous with its light.

Chapter End Notes

So much for posting a chapter every Monday! I still intend to do that, but a foolish mistake led me to losing a weekend’s worth of progress on this story, so I focused on getting that back rather than establishing a regular schedule. It’s not like this piece has any devoted readers yet! On the plus side, I learned a bit about Scrivener and file recovery software.

I’ve decided to use the Chapter Summary field, which I’ve never done for any previous AO3 works, to make up for the chapter titles being just the numbers of days. At this point, all the chapter summaries are just questions. That’s kinda weird, right? I can’t promise it will stay that way.

Edited to add: The little chibi doodle at the end of this chapter is the first of many
illustrations in the novel created by FlyingMambo, a fan! I paid for the last three but the rest were a labor of love. You can find her work on DeviantArt.
The 3rd Day

Chapter Summary

* Why did you leave, Mei?!
* Can monkeys ever be anyone’s friend?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 3rd Morning

Mei’s dreams usually faded quickly. When your life could depend on fleeing at a moment’s notice, it wasn’t any good to come slowly out of sleep. But here, in this safe cave, with a toothy guardian to protect him, Mei found he was starting to remember his dreams.

Moro had been there. It seemed Mei’s fat herdmate had only just noticed that Mei had been missing, and asked irritatedly where he’d been. Mei couldn’t stop himself from laughing, even as a storm rode in. Slowly, he’d realized what the storm meant—his life was about to change again, and this time the luck it carried might not be good.

But the older goats started to move in, staring, with the gray vortex swirling ominously behind them, and Mei realized with a shudder of horror that the first storm had been bad luck. He’d lost everyone in his life but one person, almost everything… and somehow, he’d only now realized how terribly he’d been hit. Somehow, he’d been under the delusion that losing his entire life was lucky. Did that make him a fool, too?

“The second storm is never as good as the first,” said Tapper, looking stern as Mei turned to face him. “Did you bring this?”

Mei didn’t know, yet somehow, he did. “I’m sorry.”

Moro spoke through the cud in his mouth. “You should really spend more time at home. It’s dangerous to be out and about so often.”

It was comical that he didn’t know this wasn’t Mei’s home anymore. But at the same time, it was tragic. Giving up one’s home, and all the lush grass in it, was one of the stupidest things a person could do. To give up every single person you know… all your traditions, all your culture… Moro was staring at Mei with a low acuity he couldn’t remember ever seeing on Moro’s face, as if to say, Who’s the fool here?

And as the nannies started bleating, the storm picked up and blew closer until the whole sky was one huge gray spiral. Yet the rain hadn’t come. Somehow, despite all of this, the rain hadn’t started falling.

“Why did you leave, Mei?!” demanded a shrill, desperate voice. He turned to find Mii—rearing up, demanding an answer. Demanding that Mei not leave again.

He knew she deserved an answer, so he tried to formulate one for her. Words swam in his head—
how could he explain? But then, as soon as he finally had it, as soon as he finally knew what he was going to tell her, as soon as he opened his mouth to speak—the first drop of rain suddenly hit him on the muzzle.

It was the heaviest drop of rain Mei had ever felt. It woke him up. His path to consciousness was like the swirling of a windstorm.

He sat up in the cave. His eyes were dry, but he wished the rain had touched them. He wished he were crying.

Softly Gabu snoozed beside him, and for a moment Mei cursed the mound of brown-furred flesh for a thorned flower, a false treasure that had led Mei to give up everything. Mei was still drenched in the horror of realizing he’d done the stupidest thing possible. He sobbed and bleated to himself, restraining himself from waking up his only friend. Then, giving in, he collapsed into the fleshy mass and heaved in sorrow, trying to bury his head in the earth. Except the earth was a predator. The earth was a wolf.

The earth moved. Oh no. A grunt followed, and then… “Mei?”

“I hadn’t wanted to wake you,” Mei whispered.

“Oh. Well, now you have, so.” Gabu seemed sleepy. “Are you okay, Mei?”

Mei tried to find an answer, but instead just sobbed into his friend’s side. Trying to cling to the one thing he had left.

Gabu shifted and rose so that they were holding each other. “Oh, Mei! There there. Please, Mei… it’s all right. Whatever it is.” Mei felt Gabu’s head rest against his own. “Did you have a bad dream?”

“Ye-e-es,” Mei bleated. He felt like such a fool. Slowly, the reasons for why he’d acted as he had came back to him. But not fast enough. Not fully enough. He was in the dark in a cave with a wolf and his home was gone, his family was gone, he’d thrown everything away, just to be here in this terrible place…

“It’s okay,” the wolf repeated, continuing to squeeze. “I have nightmares too. More nights than not, I have a bad dream. But I just remind myself that it’s all over now. All the bad times are over.”

Mei continued to sob and heave for a while. He wondered what Gabu’s nightmares were like. He remembered his fondness for his friend and the impossible situation they’d been put in. The terror started to fade away.

“Will you tell me about it?” asked Gabu, holding his friend lightly in the starlight.

“I don’t know if I can explain,” Mei stammered. “I was back at home… and there was a storm… and… somehow, I suddenly realized that I’d given up everything, and it was for no reason, and…” He looked around as if to see all the good things he surely must have… but of course, the cave was empty.

“Oh, Mei.” Gabu’s eyes were moist. “Do you really think you made a mistake in coming with me?”

Mei sat down. He tried to think. “I don’t know. I don’t think so, Gabu. It’s just that… the dream hit me so hard.”
“Would you rather have tried to get me to tell you my pack’s secrets? Even while I was trying to get you to cough up yours?”

Mei remembered that fatal meeting, the secret rendezvous that it seemed the whole world was watching. At that time, it really hadn’t seemed like he’d had a choice. How could he go back to a herd so caustic as to make him do something like that?

“No. You’re right. I’m glad we got away. It’s just…” But he couldn’t give voice to his sense of the magnitude, the magnitude of all he’d lost. Real, imagined, in between… all gone.

“You know I love you, don’t you, Mei?”

Mei shut his eyes. Gabu had never used that word before. But it was true, and it wasn’t an empty thing.

“I know. I love you too.”

A tense shroud lifted from the cave, or seemed to. The two companions resettled themselves on the cave’s floor. Gabu draped his foreleg over Mei’s back. It was good there; it grounded him.

“The sun’s coming up,” Mei murmured. “We should probably go out.”


So they did, and their place of repose was made warm together.

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**The 3rd Evening**

Gabu was relieved to see Mei silhouetted in the flower field. Not that he hadn’t been there faithfully the last two days—Gabu had just felt some kind of danger mounting as the day had gone on, to the point he was worried his friend wouldn’t be there. Then, as he started to run, he remembered what Mei had told him about running to reunite with Gabu on the hill, only to find Gabu changed…

…and he wondered how terrible it would be if Mei was changed somehow—if he couldn’t remember that the two of them were friends…

But that didn’t happen. Mei leapt at Gabu’s approach and they shared a nuzzle. “I’m so glad to see you,” said Gabu.

“Me too. I know I should ask ‘How was your day,’ but I just want to stay here and be happy that you’re here for a while, first.”

“Is it strange that I feel that way too?”

Mei chuckled. They didn’t walk back home right away. Instead, they lay down in the flowers, which Gabu had never done before, but he felt just fine about it.

“I guess it’s nice just spending time with your pack,” he thought aloud. “But you’re my whole pack! So I depend on you more than I’d depend on any single wolf.” He laughed at the absurdity. “I hope that doesn’t bother you.”

“Not at all,” said Mei. “And I depend on you. But I guess I see it differently. It’s difficult, coming to a new place and adjusting to a new way of life. So I feel like we’re both under a lot of pressure.
And we need to be reassured… that everything really is all right, and that we haven’t made some terrible mistake.”

On impulse, Gabu pressed the top of his head into Mei’s side and twisted left and right. “Well, Mei, guess what! Nothing terrible happened today! In fact, something good happened, in a manner of speaking. I met some potential new friends!”

“New friends? Really?”

Gabu had been proud on the way over, and was proud now. Was he really going to beat Mei to making new friends, despite everything? “That’s right! Guess who they are?” Mei seemed uncertain, so he went on. “In fact, they’re monkeys! They live in the mango trees at the foot of the path into the forest. I heard a lot of sound from the canopy, so I decided to watch them. At first I thought they would run away, or swing away, to be more accurate, but some of them stayed behind to watch me. So I talked with them, and I think I may be able to win them over!”

“Monkeys?” Mei rose, but not all at once. Gabu watched his legs straighten. “You met a band of monkeys?”

“Well, at any rate, we had a conversation.” It hadn’t been the best conversation. They’d asked him over and over if he ate monkeys, and he’d truthfully been able to answer that he’d never eaten one yet. “Admittedly it did involve mangoes being thrown, but they stuck around even so.”

“That’s… interesting. Do you think you’ll go to visit them again tomorrow?”

Gabu nodded confidently. “I told them I’m the only one of my kind here, and so long as they stay up in the trees, I’m no threat to them. I even tried climbing a tree, just to prove I can’t!” They’d tittered and shrieked to each other when he’d done it—it hadn’t been the laugh he’d expected, but it was something.

“Gabu, you’re incredible. But do you think a monkey would ever come down out of its tree with you around?”

He shook his head—not to mean no, but to shrug off the question. “I have no idea! But maybe in the meantime, they can follow me as I walk along. I’ll take any glimmer of friendship I can get.”

“It’s possible I ought to take a similar attitude,” Mei admitted. “I tried chatting with the squirrels today. While they didn’t shut me down exactly, I can’t say they were friendly. It’s more that they didn’t care I was there.”

“Aww, that’s too bad, Mei. Maybe you need to find something you have in common to talk about.” Just like a certain fateful night, Gabu didn’t add.

At last they started wading through the flowers back toward their hill. “I wonder if monkeys can ever really be anyone’s friend,” reflected Mei. “I just think of them as creatures that screech and yell and throw things. But then again, I wouldn’t have thought a wolf could be anyone’s friend, either.”

That wasn’t something Gabu liked to hear, even though it was meant well. But he smiled and nodded. “What do you know? So all things considered, I’m keeping an open mind.”

“That’s probably a good policy,” Mei replied. “Did you learn any of their names?”

“Not yet,” Gabu admitted. “But I’ll tell you what I do know, so you’re kept abreast of how things are going.”
“I like that,” laughed Mei. “I’ll try to keep you abreast of my developments as well.”

Gabu proceeded to tell the story of how the monkeys tried to scare him off, and how he wore them down. He liked the fact that he and his only friend were on their way to a cozy cave on a hill. Their exciting day among would-be enemies and indifferent natives was about to give way to a pleasant night at home, where both animals had a one hundred percent guarantee of friendship in abundance. That was what packs were supposed to be like, he reflected. That was the way things should be.

The thought struck him, even while he was talking—how funny that a goat should turn out to be better at serving as a wolf pack than a whole pack of wolves were!

Chapter End Notes

It’s kind of a funny challenge, writing in an almost completely natural setting and having to avoid metaphorical language that only makes sense in terms of technology or actual history. It means occasionally having to invent terminology like “[cursing someone] for a thorned flower.” I’ve included some borderline cases, but I’m always trying to justify how any cliches or metaphorical language could make sense in the given setting.

Oh, and Moro the goat is one of those elements from the TV show I mentioned I was going to include. Basically, just assume that a few weeks passed after our protagonists met and before they were outing forced to betray each other or flee. There may be references to events from that period in the story to come.
Chapter Summary

* Why crying?
* What's your favorite flower?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 4th Morning

It was bad again. Mei’s thoughts were heavy as he stared at the cave ceiling. As he listened to Gabu’s gentle wheezing. As he smelled the strong scent of wolf and knew he’d let it get familiar.

The worst right now was knowing he was fully awake. He hadn’t been dreaming, or at any rate he didn’t remember his dreams. He’d just woken up burdened with the knowledge that coming here had been a terrible mistake.

And he didn’t want it to be. He didn’t want to have made a terrible mistake. He wanted this to clear up, like it had the day before—for everything to seem okay again. He wanted to wake up and remember why this was for the best.

But Mei was already awake. And he still felt the same dread he had the previous morning.

He moaned. But this time Gabu didn’t wake up. And Mei didn’t want to wake him. He stretched instead, stood up, and left the cave even though it was still night. If fresh air and getting his blood moving didn’t fix this, he didn’t know what would.

The wind was blowing the flowers’ scent straight up the hill. It washed over Mei like the taste of fresh strawberries. He wanted to swoon and lie down, but forced himself to keep walking. The moon was still bright, the stars were friendly. The grass he was walking on wasn’t the lushest, but it was soft under his hooves. He was awash in the sense that things were all right.

Now he began to cry. He sat and cried over how confusing it all was. How different his life had become from what he, and his grandmother, and everyone else had expected it would be. He cried because he’d taken one irreversible step on the path to forever. Maybe two. And forever was still a long, long way away.

“Why crying?” asked a little voice.

He looked down and saw a meadow vole. Black-furred and black-eyed and sitting up. “Oh,” said Mei. “I didn’t realize anyone was there. Hello.”

“Hello. Why cry?” asked the little creature.

There was no way he could explain, so he kept it simple. “Because I’m a long, long way from home.”
“Oh.” The vole made a jerky motion that Mei imagined might be a sob of sympathy. “Why so far?”
“I had to leave,” Mei explained. “There was no place for me there.”

“Then sad,” said the vole. “But place here!”

Mei blinked, taking in the creature’s furry body in the dawn light. “You think I have a place?”

“Exactly place. Time for uncring.” The creature tittered with laughter that felt as fake as the sobbing, yet somehow real.

“You’re rather sweet. Do you have a name? I’m Mei.”

“My name Bepo.”

Mei giggled at the sound of it. “Pleased to meet you, Bepo. Do you live around here?”

“Best choice! Live around. My home hole.”

Given that this creature obviously wasn’t the most articulate, that would have to do. “My home is a hole, too,” Mei explained, smiling. He gestured back at the cave with his tail.

The vole marveled at the lair. “Hoofy hole? So larger.”

“It’s larger than I need, that’s true. But I’m not alone in there. I’ve got a friend.” It felt good to say it—so good, in fact, that Mei realized he’d gotten the relief he needed.

“Friend?” The vole twitched its nose over and over. “Then belong!”

Mei chuckled. “It’s kind of you to say so.”

“Goodbye, hoofy. Thank you for stop cry.”

It was easy to smile with this creature for company. “Will I see you again?”

“If keep live, then see! Goodbye and sometime again.” With that, the vole dove away into the grass and made a winding track down the hill.

“Goodbye, Bepo! Until we meet again!”

Mei was smiling outside and in. Not only had he been reassured—not only had he forgotten his dread—but he’d actually made a friend. This counted, didn’t it? It hadn’t been much of a conversation, but sometimes the most meaningful conversations could take place without much being said at all.

“Gabu?”

The pile of fur rolled over happily, clearly not burdened with the same weight as Mei. He smiled his way into consciousness. “Yes, Mei?”

“Something nice has happened. Would you like to know what it is?”

“Of course!” The great tail started to move.
“I think I’ve made my first friend in this place.”

Gibu swung around and sat up. “Really?”

Mei nodded and recapitulated the conversation. Gabu listened in rapt attention, wide-eyed.

“Mei! That’s wonderful!” His tail was really wagging now.

“It is wonderful, isn’t it? And I know… this new friend of mine may not be very intelligent. There may be things we can’t talk about. But it’s nice… it cared about me crying… and it’s a start, Gabu. It’s a start!”

Gibu chuckled and lifted Mei, nearly bumping his head on the roof as he twirled about. “It’s a start!”

They laughed together; Mei was set down and walked to the cave entrance. The sun was rising. “So I guess, Gabu, I have a favor to ask.”

“Oh? What’s that, Mei?”

Mei smiled brightly, feeling the sun on his coat. “When you go hunting today, could you try not to kill any voles? I wouldn’t want you to eat Bepo or one of its little friends by mistake.”

“Oh!” Gabu’s paw went to his breast. “No problem! I won’t eat a single vole.”

Mei laughed and winked. “I knew I could count on you. I’m headed to the Sneaky Bluff. Time for breakfast!”

Gibu was in good spirits as Mei turned away. Things were looking bright. This meant there was hope.

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**The 4th Evening**

Gibu had made up his mind that day to go to the forest and wade in deep.

That didn’t mean just wandering in a long way. It meant following anything that caught his nose, or his eye, or his ears. It meant looking for adventure and maybe for trouble. In all likelihood, it meant following the monkeys wherever they went. He fed himself as quickly as he could on two squirrels and a rabbit to make sure he felt full and safe. With that out of the way, he went to the forest entrance and paced on in, watching the canopy.

It was like there was an eternal breeze up there, cutting from one side of the path to the other. The monkeys leapt across like riders on the chill. Even when the path disappeared, the strange cold current remained. Gabu had never been in a forest so cold. And it was coldest around his head, tickling his ears. Wasn’t hot air supposed to rise?

The monkeys didn’t speak the way Gabu did. They used their own words, and they pronounced them with screeches and shrill tones and even whistle. But sometimes they did speak in a way Gabu could understand, and he talked back, trying to pretend his spirits were high. In a way, pretending made it true! He chatted with the monkeys as if they were already his friends, in hopes that would eventually become true, too.
They avoided him, swinging and leaping far over his reach. Some of them asked if he could climb trees and teased him when he revealed he couldn’t. But he laughed along with them, and asked questions about their lives, and dodged when they threw mangoes at him. He pretended it was a game they all enjoyed. He was getting their attention—that much was something.

And to his surprise, it was dark by the time he left the forest. Time had a way of flying at the strangest times.

Mei was in the flowers, bent over sniffing one. There was no doubt this time: the adventurous part of Gabu’s day was done and the safe part was about to begin. Was there anything that could make a wolf’s heart flush with warmth so quickly?

Already smiling, Gabu pranced through the flowers and leapt, landing before his friend. Mei rose abruptly to face him, and though the moon was behind him, Gabu could tell he was smiling—he could see the shape of his ears in silhouette. Gabu sometimes wished he had goat ears, they were so expressive!

“Good evening, Gabu,” said the friendly goat.

“Good evening, Mei,” Gabu murred.

“It’s nice to see you.”

Gabu liked how the affirmation came even before ‘How was your day? ’ “It’s great to see you too, Mei.”

Mei turned back upward toward their hilltop burrow. “Would you like to head home with me?”

The field of flowers seemed so warm, somehow, compared to the forest, even though he could feel breezes whooshing over the hilltop. “I’d rather stay out here a while first, if that’s all right.”

“Of course!”

Mei pronked in place, a maneuver that made Gabu sputter with laughter. Then he marched along, and Gabu happily marched after. They stopped in deep places, surrounded with flowers, then marched a while longer. The moon seemed so bright tonight!

Mei asked Gabu which type of flower he liked best. Gabu was barely able to tell one from another, but he stumbled through an answer, and Mei grinned and kept walking.

“How about you, Mei?” asked Gabu eventually. “Do you have a favorite flower?”

The goat’s tail whacked against a tall spire of purple on which many flowers grew, sending it swinging. “Do you know what they call this one, Gabu?”

Gabu sniffed the plant. “It smells like honey!” he exclaimed. “Is it a honey tree?”

Mei looked back and winked. “You’re not the only one who thinks so! But no. This is a wild lupine.”

“Lupine? But that means ’wolf’!”

Now Mei laughed. “Indeed! Now, how do you suppose a flower like this got a name like that?”

Gabu enjoyed guessing games, but he was at a loss. “I don’t think I can guess, Mei. It doesn’t look like us… and it certainly doesn’t smell like us.”
“That’s true! It got the name because some creatures find it poisonous to eat.”

This puzzled Gabu. He bopped the plant and watched it sway. “It’s poisonous? But how is that like a wolf? We aren’t poisonous.”

Mei watched the plant stop swinging between them, leaving the two of them face to face. “I suppose that’s true. I never tried eating a wolf!”

Gabu recalled their role-reversal games by the stream on the other side of the mountain. “That’s not true! You’ve tried to catch and eat me a few times!”

Mei stuck out his tongue. “But you weren’t a wolf then. You were a goat!”

“Ahh. I guess we’ll never know if wolves are really poisonous.”

Mei tilted his head. “You know, that actually reminds me of something. Do you remember—well, no, you don’t. You forgot everything that happened while your memories were gone, didn’t you?”

Gabu slumped a little. “I’m afraid so. Can you tell me?”

“It’s just…” It seemed like Mei was reluctant to bring it up.

“Please, Mei. I’d like to know what I did when I wasn’t myself. Tell me.”

The goat nodded. “While you were holding me in the cave, waiting for the full moon, I told you that we were friends. And you didn’t believe me. What you said chilled me…”

It chilled Gabu too, but the scent of flowers all around somehow made him feel warm. “What was it, Mei?”

“You said… that goat meat was your absolute favorite food.”

Gabu gulped. His friend’s eyes were fixed on him. “I… I did?”

“Yes. And I was just wondering… because you told me once that you never used to like goat meat… was it true?”

Gabu closed his eyes. He could still smell the fragrance of all the flowers, but the scent of his friend carried through. “The truth is,” he said with difficulty. “Goat meat used to be my favorite food, yes. But I’ll never eat it again. You know I won’t.”

He opened his eyes and found Mei’s face pained, tears at the corners. “Oh, Mei, I’m sorry!”

Mei shook his head. “You were just trying to spare my feelings. I understand. And Gabu…”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry that you’ll never be able to eat your favorite food again. I feel terrible for taking that away from you.”

Gabu hung his head in shame.

Mei’s gentle nose touched his jaw and nudged it up. “Thank you. For being honest with me.”

Gabu’s eyes started to water. “See? We wolves aren’t poisonous. I don’t ever want to hurt you.”
Mei sniffed the wild lupine. “I know. You’re as gentle as a flower.”

With a wink, Mei crunched through the top of the lupine, tearing loose a chunk and chewing it.

“But Mei! You said it was poisonous!”

“To some animals,” he said through his full mouth. “But only to some.”

Chapter End Notes

The speech patterns of Bepo the vole are very similar to a certain strabismic, paraphasiac wizard character I played on a My Little Pony MUCK once upon a time…

I originally ended this chapter sooner, but it struck me as too short, and I had a note that I wanted to include a reference to Gabu’s remark about his favorite food… so I added the last part, about flowers. :) I’m very happy with how it came out.

The question about Gabu liking goat meat was the initial focus of an AOL Instant Messenger roleplay I had years ago with the friend who introduced me to the movie. :-) It was great to re-read it recently, which is part of what led to me choosing to write this novel.
The 5th Day

Chapter Summary

* Why is accepting people so important?
* Why did they need to chase you down?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 5th Morning

Gabu woke up while Mei was still asleep. It was an effort of will. He’d gone to sleep knowing he had to wake up while it was still dark, and somehow he’d remembered it even through the dark time between dreams. When he opened his eyes, the stars were still shining into the cave, and he smiled.

Mei was there. Not smiling, but not yet shaking in his sleep, either. Gently, Gabu rolled over and slipped his forelegs around his companion. He let his head down softly, so softly that it didn’t weigh on the goat’s flank, but lent its pressure lovingly. There he lay, nervous but comfortable, waiting for his friend to awaken.

And there came the shivers. Gabu held tight. He felt his skull bouncing slightly, and it reverberated through his neck and down into his trunk. He carefully tightened his hold and remained steady. And—wonder of wonders—the shaking subsided! Gabu could actually feel the goat’s muscles relaxing. Unconsciously, he licked his lips. Then he realized what he’d done and bit his tongue. Gabu lay there, breathing slowly, trying not to think of relaxed goat muscles. Trying to think just of his friend’s happiness.

The stars left and morning arrived. Still, Gabu lay steady, relaxed. As calm as he could be, his paws exerting a steady pressure on both sides of his friend’s body. As if carrying him through the night.

Finally, Mei awakened. Not with a start. Gently, with a yawn.

Gabu’s throat was raw from hesitance to swallow. “Good morning, Mei,” he rasped.

Mei yawned again. “Good morning, Gabu.” Then he seemed to notice how intimately he was being held. His eyes widened and he chuckled nervously. “…Gabu!”

Slowly, Gabu slid his paws away from the goat’s soft hide. “I’d noticed you were having bad dreams,” he explained.

Mei blinked sleepily. “…You did?”

“So I thought I’d see if I could ease your mind. Did you sleep well?”

A look of understanding dawned on Mei. He grinned and chuckled. “I did, actually. I slept very well.”
Gabu’s heart sprang in its cage. It had been worth it! “Did you have any sweet dreams?”

Mei reflected for a moment. “I think… I think I was talking to Tapper. My friend, the one who kicked you. He was… he was really disappointed in me when he found out about you.”

“Oh.” Gabu crossed one of his forepaws over the other. “I’m sorry to hear that. What did he say in the dream?”

Mei took a deep breath. Without answering, he walked outside. Gabu’s ears perked; he got up after a moment and followed.

It was a clear morning—no clouds to stop the orange sunlight from flooding the flower field. “Do you know, Gabu? I think the reason I’ve been sleeping poorly is because I keep dwelling on that question. ‘How could you do this?’ How could I choose to give up everyone—my herd, my family… all for one friend I’d only just met. And a wolf, besides!”

The question should have terrified Gabu, because it was a very good one, and the fact Mei was so concerned with it suggested he might be thinking of leaving. Or at least, that he might regret coming here. But Mei was giving him the gift of his innocent face, his earnest cobalt eyes, and somehow Gabu wasn’t scared. “It’s an interesting question, to be sure! I sometimes can’t understand how I made that decision, either!”

Mei shut his eyes happily. “Well, I think I’ve worked it out!”

Now Gabu wanted to laugh. “Really?”

“When Tapper asked me in my dream the same thing he’d asked in real life—how I could possibly pick ‘that wolf’ over my entire herd—I suddenly had an answer. In real life, I confess I didn’t know what to say, but in the dream it all made sense.”

Gabu wondered if his sleepytime cuddling had helped with that. “You have to tell me, Mei! I’m dying to hear!”

Mei laughed. “Well, it’s just this. You never told me that you wanted me to leave my herd. You never once suggested it. I don’t think the idea even occurred to you. Am I mistaken?”

Gabu scratched behind his ear. “Well, no, you’re not. I wouldn’t have wanted that.”

“And likewise,” Mei continued, “I never once told you that I wanted you to leave your pack.”

Gabu nodded. “That’s true!”

“And yet, when my herd found out I was meeting you… they told me I’d have to stop. They made me meet you one last time, to wring you for as much information as I could… and after that, I would never get to see you again. They made it into a choice between you and them.”

“I guess that’s true. My pack did the exact same thing. Except they were going to kill me if I didn’t obey.”

Mei nodded grimly. “So they were the ones who made me choose. Not you. You would never have done that.” The goat’s face lit up even further. “And Gabu, that makes all the difference! In the dream… I told Tapper that if one friend isn’t willing to accept another… but the second friend is happy to accept the first… you have to side with the friend who accepts both. You simply have to! Even in the extreme case that one friend is a creature who hunts and kills your kind for a living, and the other is… everyone in your entire life.”
This touched Gabu, but also confused him. “But… but why? Why is accepting people so important?”

Mei took a moment to think before responding. “Well, people should try to get along, shouldn’t they? Even if it’s hard. Even if it’s not in our nature. You can try to get along with people who don’t agree with that… but the moment they keep you from getting along with one other person, the moment they put their hoof down… you have to choose the person who isn’t doing that. And not the person who is.” He took a breath. “Does that make sense? I’m not even sure it makes sense, but I’m certain it’s right.”

Gabu sat down and thought. “I think that may make sense, Mei. But I’m not sure. What good does it do to pick the friend who doesn’t make you choose? You only get one friend either way.”

Mei looked down the sloping meadow toward the forest, the bluff, the wetlands in the distance. “But there aren’t just two people in the world! Or two groups. And if you make friends with people who are willing to share your friendship… then your circle of friends can grow and grow!”

It seemed so perfect and obvious to Gabu, in hindsight. “You know what, Mei? You’re entirely correct. You can’t let people bully you—whether it’s who you can be friends with, or who gets to eat first, or who gets stuck on all-night patrol! You’ve got to surround yourself with people who care about you!”

Mei frowned. “Well… that may be true… but I feel like it’s not quite my point.”

Gabu chuckled. “Well then, you’ve two good reasons for what you did, not one!”

The frown became a cautious smile. “I guess you’re right.”

“And you know what? I promise that I will never tell you who to be friends with. You could be friends with the grass, or with the stars in the sky, or with the ugliest spider in the world, and I’ll be just fine with it.” He nodded resolutely. “You can count on that.”

Mei beamed at him. “Oh, I don’t think I could ever really be friends with the grass. But thank you, Gabu. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.” He ambled over and gave Gabu a nuzzle on his chest. “I really couldn’t ask for a better friend than you.”

Gabu was boiling with happiness that he had trouble keeping inside, so he let it out as a rough laugh. That had been exactly what he’d wanted to hear, too.

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**The 5th Evening**

They sat on the far side of the hill tonight, staring up at the mountain. There were fewer flowers here, and more bare ground. The mountain was still draped in snow—ominous, a fearsome neighbor. But by spending time near it, the two could mitigate that feeling. And in that way they could approach, just possibly, the idea of someday crossing back over.

“I don’t know if I ever want to go back that way,” said Gabu, breaking the silence. “There’s too much to remember. If we did go… I’d want to find another path.”

Mei absorbed this. He spoke after a while, making an effort not to hold anything in. “I don’t feel
quite the same way. It’s true… I did get very weak, and hungry. And I did think I was going to
die.” A flash of amazement struck Mei—amazement that after all that, he didn’t die; amazement
that he’d been willing to accept it. “But I don’t regret coming. And I don’t regret saying what I
did… in the snow cave.”

He saw Gabu twinge and felt a little bit sorry for bringing it up. Should he even acknowledge that
for a brief minute, both of them had decided it was best for Gabu to eat him?

“I don’t know how many of them died,” Gabu eventually murmured. “That’s what hurts the most.
I still can’t believe I survived that avalanche.”

“We were closer to the other side than we’d thought,” said Mei. “If we’d kept going, and if the
wolves hadn’t caught up… we might have made it.”

“I don’t remember what happened,” uttered Gabu. “But I think I know. I think I know how I
survived.”

Mei tilted his head. They hadn’t discussed this. He couldn’t guess what his friend was about to
say… unless. Oh. Suddenly, Mei guessed.

“I think I must have eaten one of them,” Gabu whimpered. The avalanche must have killed some of
the wolves… and there must have been at least one left behind. I wouldn’t have had the strength to
get through if I hadn’t had food… and there wasn’t any other food.”

Mei felt his throat racing. “I’m sorry, Gabu. I was afraid you’d say that. But I think you’re right.”

Gabu sniffled. “I could have been the only survivor. I don’t know. But I ate someone in my own
pack. I ate my own kind. I must have. It’s no wonder I repressed my memories of that night. First,
you… made your offer, and then…” He shook his head gently. “I just couldn’t take it.”

Mei hurried over to Gabu and sat next to him, watching the mountain. “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “If
I’d known how much it would upset you… I would never have told you to eat me.”

Gabu looked at Mei. A brown ear twitched. “No, Mei. You wanted me to live. I respect that.”

Mei swallowed nervously. “If we do go back, someday… we can find another path. We could even
prepare for a long trip and try to go around.”

“We’ll have to fill our bellies and pack extra provisions,” said Gabu.

“And we’ll have to go when the weather looks good.”

Gabu nodded. “It would be nice to visit the old places… even if I can’t ever go back home. And
you… I really hope you can see your herd again, someday.”

That was true. Now that he knew what he would tell them, the need was growing. “I really hope I
can, too. Of course, we’d have to be prepared for things to go badly.”

“It’s the trip over the mountain I’m worried about,” Gabu replied. “But I guess we also do have to
worry about my pack, or what’s left of it, hearing about us and deciding to chase us down.”

Mei had been thinking more about his grandmother’s disappointed face… but Gabu had a point.
“Gabu, why do they care so much? Why did they need to chase you down, all the way into the
snowy pass? We were gone… why wasn’t that enough?”
He shrugged slowly. “A traitor is a traitor. And when you’re a wolf, you don’t let traitors live.”

It might be better not to ask, but… “Gabu?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you consider yourself a traitor?”

Gabu had to think about that. “I guess so,” he eventually decided. He sported an uneasy grin. “But don’t worry—that doesn’t mean I’m going to hunt myself down and kill myself!” He offered a wink with this rather macabre joke. “I think my values have changed, that’s all.”

“I’m glad,” said Mei. “But I guess that means they won’t forget about us anytime soon.”

“Well, it’s something to think about. I don’t think we should go back too soon in any case. Next spring, maybe. Not before that.”

Mei nodded in agreement. “That way, things can cool off.”

“Exactly! Including us.” The long face tilted toward Mei and smiled slyly. “I for one think we could do with a bit of quiet.”

“That’s true!” Mei’s mind flashed back over his day, trying to decide how quiet their life here really was. “Oh!” he remembered. “I forgot to mention—I made a new friend today!”

Gabu’s sly smile turned into a joyful one. “You did? That’s wonderful, Mei!”

“She’s a tree squirrel. Her name is Jenny… she showed me the tree where she lives, and told me about where her family lives, and showed me how she remembers where she buries her acorns.”

“Ohh. That’s so precious! I’m really glad.”

Mei nodded. “I didn’t tell her about you yet, like we agreed. But I’m hopeful! She thought I was friendly enough—I’m sure she’ll enjoy meeting you too once we’ve given it some time.”

Gabu nodded. “I look forward to that! And of course, I’ll leave it to your judgment as to when to tell her.”

Mei nodded. That was for the best. “Mm. Oh, and of course this means you shouldn’t eat any squirrels, if that’s something you’ve been doing.” Not that Mei wanted any details of Gabu’s hunting practices…but at least now he was comfortable discussing the topic.

Gabu’s smile faded; his jaw hung open for a second. Then he caught it up with a snap and the smile came back, just a little forced. “Sure, Mei. That’s fine. No more squirrels!”

Mei nudged him kindly with the side of a horn and looked back up toward the mountain. “Things are looking up, aren’t they, Gabu?”

The wolf leaned into Mei, who leaned back, forming a little triangle like a mountain in miniature. “I think they really are, Mei,” he replied.

Chapter End Notes
The first section of this chapter includes what may be the first expression of what I imagine being the central theme of this story. Like in many of my works, there’s a bit of philosophy here, and a fair bit more to come.

If you prefer “Secret Friends” Gabu to “original flavor” Gabu, imagine him saying “kiddo” instead of “to be sure”! I’m glad I went with the movie version of Mei, who seems to be about as old as Gabu is, but the lack of age difference means I can’t justify the use of ‘kiddo’ anywhere in this story… which is a pity. :-)

Common wisdom is that no one deliberately chooses to do evil. But how many people called ‘traitor’ do you think accept the label for themselves?
The 6th and 7th Days

Chapter Summary

* Are there more words to that song?
* How far does the world go on?
* Is it all a joke?
* BONUS: "Gabu's Song"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**The 6th Day**

“Hyululu hyululu! I am the wind that’s free!”

“Hyululu hyululu! I know you can’t see me.”

“Hyululu hyululu! I spread my wings and glide!”

“Hyululu hyululu! I’m always by your side.”

The song ended in laughter as surely if as laughter were the last line. Mei always felt exhilarated to sing with Gabu, pacing side by side. For one thing, the very idea that Gabu’s mother and Mei’s grandmother had taught them the exact same song was deeply funny. Sometimes he wondered whether his herd might have been softened toward ‘that wolf’ if he’d only thought to mention it. But beyond the coincidence, it was a gas to pretend to be the wind; to soar above earthly troubles and natural differences and be a gentle, sprightly friend to all things. Mei imagined himself and Gabu as the twin incarnations of the wind, manifesting before creatures around the world—it made him giddy with joy!

Gabu’s rear end was plopped down on the grass, but his tail still wagged. “Do you know any if there are more words to that song, Mei?”

Mei thought about it. “I think there may have been. But if there were, Grandmother didn’t sing them much. She may have just been making them up.”

Gabu perked up with excitement. “Maybe we should make up our own words!” he suggested.

“That’s a great idea,” Mei concurred. “Just so long as they’re true to the song’s spirit.”

So they spent the next hour doing just that—wandering wantonly and pausing with one leg raised or tail askew to try out new lines. They’d decided it was just too lonely spending all their days apart and coming together only in the mornings and evenings. A shared oncoming sadness had sparked this one-day rebellion against what otherwise seemed like a natural schedule. It meant that any and all creatures might see them together, but in the end, Mei didn’t mind being seen with his best friend. If rumors must fly, then let them. He and his best friend were up to it.

They let their minds prance free, then returned to swap ideas. They strolled a bit further down to the wetlands for a drink, talked quietly, and finalized the song. Then they raced up the slope,
singing together and trotting side by side:

“Hyululu hyululu! I am the wind that’s free!
Hyululu hyululu! I know you can’t see me.
Hyululu hyululu! I spread my wings and glide!
Hyululu hyululu! I’m always by your side.

Hyululu hyululu! I’m with you in the spring.
Hyululu hyululu! Of greenery I sing.
Hyululu hyululu! I make the pollen blow!
Hyululu hyululu! So that the plants will grow.

Hyululu hyululu! A pleasant summer breeze…
Hyululu hyululu! I’m always sure to please.
Hyululu hyululu! I sail along the beach
Hyululu hyululu! I’m always out of reach.

Hyululu hyululu! I’m with you in the fall.
Hyululu hyululu! You can’t refuse my call.
Hyululu hyululu! The leaves blow in my air!
Hyululu hyululu! Until the trees are bare.

Hyululu hyululu! A cruel winter blast!
Hyululu hyululu! I’m sure to freeze you fast.
Hyululu hyululu! A cold and frosty day
Hyululu hyululu! You’d better hide away.

Hyululu hyululu! I soar the world around!
Hyululu hyululu! I can’t be kept or bound.
Hyululu hyululu! You can’t say what I’ll do
And so I sing to you… Hyululu hyululu!

Hyululu hyululu! I am the wind that’s free!
Hyululu hyululu! I know you can’t see me.
Hyululu hyululu! I spread my wings and glide!
Hyululu hyululu! I’m always by your side.”

Over the course of these seven verses, the two friends passed from the wet uplands to a stretch of heath, and from there through a low thicket into a modest meadow in the shadow of the woods. The changing of scenery around them seemed to underscore the universal quality of the wind—how it travels the world’s lands unbound by cliff or sea or mountain. Mei settled in the slightly prickly grass and laughed. “Did you realize, Gabu? We came over the mountain, just like the wind. We’re almost as unbound as it is.”

Gabu looked at the distant peak, barely visible over the trees. He laughed roughly. “Well, to the creatures here, I guess that’s the way it must seem! We’re the windiest things around, Mei.”

Mei slumped to his side, extending his upper legs. “We must seem like such utter strangers!”

“Mmmhm,” agreed Gabu. “I’m not sure the animals around here have even seen a wolf. They may have no idea what I am!”

Mei thought back. “I’m pretty sure I heard some animals calling ‘Wolf’… that’s how I knew you were back. But they may have lived their lives without ever having seen or smelled one.”
“What about you?” asked Gabu. “Do you think they know what you are?”

“I don’t honestly know,” Mei realized. “How strange—think of not knowing what a goat is!”

“We might as well be spirits of the wind,” said Gabu.

Mei could almost think of himself that way—a messenger, sent by the wind from the far side of the mountain to let the creatures know—what? To let them know that times were changing, perhaps. “Does that mean we’ll just keep blowing and blowing?”

“Until we happen to come down,” Gabu agreed. “Though I don’t feel the need to blow any further than this, to be honest. I like our lair on the hill. It has a nice view of the mountain.”

Mei looked at the peak for a while as he rested his legs. “It is nice that we can see the mountain from here. I think it actually reminds me of home.”

Gabu lay gazing the same way for a while. Then he turned and looked the other way, past the wetland. “Mei?”

“Yes, Gabu?”

“How far do you think the world goes on?”

Now that was something to think about. Mei tried to focus on the far distance; he couldn’t do it. “I don’t know if it ever stops, Gabu.”

“But how is that possible? Doesn’t everything stop, if you go far enough?”

Mei laughed nervously. “Well, that’s the question, isn’t it?”

Gabu returned his laugh and rolled onto his back, letting his paws dangle. “I suppose it is!”

Mei couldn’t help grinning as he lay there, watching his friend’s movements. “Do you know what, Gabu?”

He rolled partway closer, paws still dangling. “What, Mei?”

“I love you.”

Gabu’s eyes went wide. Was it really some kind of revelation? After their exchange the other day?

“Aww, Mei. I love you too!”

Why had he felt the need to say it just then, at that moment? Was it the way Gabu had moved… or the fact they were staring into the far distance? Or was it the fact they could trade contemplations so easily?

“Do you know what, Gabu? I hope there are some things that never stop.”

Gabu rolled until he was lying side by side, staring past the wetland toward the horizon. It was a good while before he agreed, “I hope so too, Mei.”

Mei didn’t say anything. But he felt his tail perk. It was good that Gabu had taken the time to think about it.
The 7th Day

Gabu wandered the far meadow with an optimistic heart. Steady breaths filled his body with warmth. The weather was warming, he noticed, and pollen scents were everywhere! That meant that even here, beyond where any wolf he’d heard of had ever trod, the seasons still turned. In a deep, guttural way, that reassured him. He’d come far from home, but he hadn’t come so far that this had changed. Spring was still what it had always been. Gabu’s stomach trembled, but he felt safe.

Tread, tread, tread. His paws pressed earth and grass. No squirrels, no voles. No problem. His nose stayed alert, dipping often to the ground. There were lots of animals here. Mice in the meadow, though he’d have to compete with badgers for them. Then the idea struck, fresh and funny—why not go for a badger? They looked pudgy and toothsome. He bet he could outrace one, too. They were predators like him, true, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t try for one. Maybe the mice would even thank him.

Gabu chuckled to himself. Now that was a funny thought! Imagine being thanked by a mouse! He hissed laughter through his teeth.

For that matter, imagine being told ‘I love you’ by a goat. That was a funny thought indeed. But why not take it further? Imagine traveling with a goat. Living with a goat! Being best friends with a goat.

Imagine putting a goat at the center of your life. Now was that a joke, or was that a joke?

It was hard to keep down his laughter together with his doubts and tears. All sorts of emotions were mixing in Gabu, but he was hunting. He had to stay cool. He imagined joking with Zack and Beach about all this, the way he used to. He knew they’d have found these ideas funny. Gabu had known how to make people laugh, once. But now he’d gone too far. He’d crossed from joking about ridiculous things into the actual world those jokes described, and that had been too far for his old friends. They wouldn’t laugh at him now. They’d cried no tears for him in prison, but had treated his impending execution like a sort of joke in itself.

Then they’d chased him. And they’d tried to kill him. Zack and Beach could be dead now, for all Gabu knew. And all because of these jokes turned real.

Was a goat really at the center of Gabu’s life?

Yes, he was. That was real. That was actually Gabu’s honest-to-goodness life now.

He shifted his tongue uneasily in his mouth. Gabu’s emotions were changing on a leaf’s drift. He sniffed, missing Zack’s wild laughter, Beach’s steadfast loyalty. Boro’s earnest devotion. Boro was the only person ever to look up to Gabu—now that was gone. Gabu wanted parts of his old life back.

Not all of it. Never all of it. He hated the way his pack had thought… the way most wolf packs probably thought… and he didn’t want most of that back. He didn’t want to revisit the places they’d hunted, especially where they’d hunted goat. And he had to admit he didn’t really miss working for an alpha. But it was okay to miss some things, wasn’t it?

He smelled a vole. Ignored it. Turned sharply, kept treading. There were chipmunks in the undergrowth—maybe he’d head that way. There were rabbits in the tall meadow. Plenty of animals
to hunt, and he was getting good at hunting without a pack. Spring was here. Life was good.

Out of nowhere, Gabu remembered Lala’s face and wished he could tell her everything.

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**OKAY PEOPLE IT’S TIME FOR A BONUS SONG!**

This song doesn’t fit into any obvious place in the narrative because it’s about the movie itself, while the story is a sequel to the movie. I’m putting it here because (1) this chapter would otherwise have been the shortest one, (2) it’s an eerie, dark song and I’m posting this two days before Halloween, and (3) this chapter also has a song, so why not two?

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**Gabu’s Song**

*(To “I Will Follow You Into The Dark” by Death Cab For Cutie)*

Best friend mine
Quite soon you may die
But I’ll be close behind
I’ll follow you into the dark

I once hoped
To stuff goat meat down my throat
But now I prefer the goat
On this mountain pass so stark

If your herd and my pack
Say that they don’t want us back
Consign us to our fates
And abandon our track

And if the cold wind’s chill
Should extinguish your spark
Then I will follow you into the dark.

Hunger’s pull
Around which our lives revolve
Vicious as goats and wolves
But it can’t be denied

Through endless wars
‘Tweem your mountain and my gorge
Our friendship was hard to forge
But I’m in it for the ride

If your herd and my pack
Say that they don’t want us back
Consign us to the cold
And abandon our track

And if this blizzard’s bite
Proves as harsh as its bark
Then I will follow you into the dark.

“Live,” you say
“Eat me and walk away”
But I just can’t do it, Mei
There’s some things you can’t pretend

Since our shared fright
When we met one stormy night
Everything’s felt so right
I can’t forget that you’re my friend

I howl to the moon—!

If your herd and my pack
Say that they don’t want us back
Consign us to the snow
And abandon our track

If I’m still here beside you
When your soul embarks
Then I will follow you into the dark.

Yes, I’ll follow you into the dark.

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Chapter End Notes

The wind song’s first verse is from the TV show. It’s kinda pretty! They even use the melody as their theme for the ‘next time’ segments at the end of each episode. So I thought I’d extend it to celebrate the wind all year round.

Here we depart from the pattern of one day = one morning + one evening. But don’t worry—the naming of sections for days will continue, just with a bit of irregularity.

I originally forgot that Mei had weathered the winter when I wrote this chapter. I was preparing to push the story forward into the first chill winds of autumn—then rewatched the ending and realized my mistake!
The 8th Day

Chapter Summary

* If you were a butterfly, what would I be?
* We really are alike, aren't we?
* You think I should meet her?

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The 8th Morning

Mei was awakened by something sharp; for a moment he thought the cave had been invaded by… by what? A wolf? Oh. Right. There was still a moment’s dissociation every morning when he remembered that a wolf was the creature he shared his life with. What? Is life really so strange? demanded his recently wakened subconscious. Yes—yes it is, he replied with a certain satisfaction.

There were other sharp-toothed creatures out there big enough to slay goats—this he knew from faraway stories passed through vagrants and elders. But what had wakened him was only a jag of chilly wind. The lyric he and Gabu had concocted, A cruel winter blast, came to mind, but then he remembered that it was springtime, and such things were getting scarce. He rose and walked to Gabu’s side, slowly lowering himself to rest against the heaving flank. It was his weapon against the wind. It was his copse and his tuffet. And it smelled so nice.

“Mm-hm,” uttered the sleeping Gabu.

Mei smiled and lifted his tail. He was tempted to ask Gabu his dreams.

White butterflies sailed across the lower reaches of the hill, frequenting the flowers. They were beautiful… at a distance, they reminded Mei of his herd, white specks thriving amid greenery.

“Are you watching the butterflies, Mei? I see them too.”

In sudden amusement, Mei wondered what wolves thought about butterflies. “Do you like them, Gabu?”

“Oh, I… hmm.” Beside him, Gabu’s long form settled rump-first into the grass. He watched with one eye just narrower than the other, as if making up his mind. “They’re kind of pretty, aren’t they?” he decided.

Mei chuckled. “They certainly are. I’ve always thought butterflies were the nicest insects. They’re almost like birds, but more delicate.”

The wolf’s gaze shifted from the foot of the hill to Mei. Perhaps Gabu was considering him delicate. But he didn’t let it bother him.
“If you were a butterfly,” Gabu said eventually, “what do you think I would be?”

Now Mei laughed out loud. The question was surprising, and on top of that, the tone! Gabu seemed almost vulnerable in asking such a silly thing. “Oh… I don’t know! I guess you might be a warbler, flitting around.”

“How warblers eat butterflies?” Gabu asked.

Mei grimaced. “Not ones they’re friends with.”

Gabu reached a paw past Mei’s back and pulled him close, cuddling. “I’ll always be friends with you, Mei. Sorry for asking stupid questions.”

“It wasn’t a stupid question, really. It was just funny! Imagine being a bird.”

Gabu rose to his hind legs and extended his knobby forelimbs to either side. “It would be so exciting! Like being the wind.”

“Only you’d get to actually have a body,” returned Mei.

Gabu staggered a few steps uphill, unwieldy with his legs out like wings. “I guess it’s nice having a body.”

“Most of the time, anyway,” said Mei. He always enjoyed watching Gabu walk upright.

The wolf’s tummy chose that moment to rumble. “Yeah,” he agreed helplessly, going down to all fours.

That rumble reminded Mei of something. “Oh, that reminds me. I was by the tall meadow yesterday and I heard the rabbits talking.”

Gabu’s head rose, alert. “You did? What were they saying?”

“They were watching me,” Mei admitted. “And they were afraid. I really think they have no idea what I am.”

“How funny! I knew what goats were before I knew how to talk.”

Mei tried to imagine Gabu’s parents teaching him about goats and found he didn’t like it. But he forced a smile. “I’m planning to introduce myself to the rabbits, so they at least know I’m safe.”

“Oh! Well, that’s a polite thing to do,” said Gabu, smiling sheepishly with a paw behind his head.

“It would be a shame if a colony of rabbits were all afraid of a goat!” Mei continued, grinning at the thought.

“I agree!”

“So… I’m hoping you’ll stay away from the rabbits,” Mei said. “I know they may look tasty to a wolf like you… but I think they may make for good friends, eventually.”

Gabu stood with his jaw open. His eyes refocused. “You… want me to stop eating rabbits?”

“If that’s okay. I just don’t want them to be afraid of me, and since I’m always with you…”

A blink followed. Mei could see a lump going down Gabu’s throat. “…Okay, Mei. No problem.
No problem at all!"

Mei hesitated. “Are you sure it’s okay, Gabu? I don’t want you to go hungry.”

The wolf rubbed the back of his head. “Of course it’s okay! I don’t mind being a little peckish if it’s in the interest of friendship. Besides, there are plenty of animals around! I can find something else to hunt.”

Well, that was a relief. Mei relaxed, then found his eyes following the white butterflies again. “You know, the butterflies have just arrived from warmer parts,” he explained. “They leave for the winter and come back when it’s warm enough.”

“They do? That’s clever.”

“Cleverer than us, I suppose! Leaving a comfortable home to trek over a snowy mountain.”

“I guess it’s the heart of springtime now, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Mei lay there happily.

“Do you know what, Mei?”

“Mm?”

Gabu’s tail wagged. “Spring is my favorite season of the year!”

“Really?” Mei chuckled briefly. “Mine, too!”

Gabu gasped, then shut his mouth. He relaxed easily in the soft grass and draped one foreleg over Mei’s back. “We really are alike, aren’t we?”

Mei sighed, enjoying the weight of the leg on his back. By now he knew that he and Gabu were different in many ways, and not just physically. He was starting to pick out their differences, day by day. Things Gabu said that Mei wouldn’t have thought of, whole approaches he wouldn’t have chosen. Gabu had a thicker silly streak than Mei. He was more eager to please by doing, while Mei was happier to just bring joy through acceptance. Gabu had never known true acceptance, and Mei could tell he still hungered for it. Mei, on the other side of the leaf, found acceptance a bit dull, having known it his whole life. Moreover, he had a sense Gabu wasn’t as… well, ‘bright’ wasn’t the right word. His soul really did shine brightly. But perhaps the wolf wasn’t as deep as Mei? It was hard to say, from the outside.

But this wasn’t the right time to bring up any of that. “We really are, Gabu,” he replied. And somehow, he brought himself to mean it.

The 8th Evening

Gabu stumbled home to his cave with a certain satisfaction. He was definitely hungry, but he’d taken a chipmunk, so his belly wasn’t completely empty, and he’d scared a badger badly enough that he expected it would be possible to catch them with practice. More to the point, he’d spent the late afternoon with the monkeys… and one in particular was starting to put up with him! Not just as a target for mango hurling, but as a companion of sorts. She’d stayed in the trees the whole time while he’d stayed down below, but she’d invited him to follow, and even talked with him now and
then as if she liked it. So that gave him hope.

He was a little disappointed when Mei didn’t meet him at the foot of the hill, but the goat’s scent was clear enough to know he was home. Gabu also smelled another creature—a squirrel, he thought—and wondered if Mei’s squirrel friend had paid a visit.

When he finally saw Mei, the goat was facing away, examining the grassy outer wall of their lair rather than watching for his friend. To Gabu’s relief, though, he turned at the scent of approaching wolf with a proud smile on his face. “Gabu! You’re home!”

Any misgivings were gone, just like that. “I’m home,” agreed Gabu, stopping a bit short.

“It’s always so nice to see you. Look!” Mei pointed his horns toward the side of the den, where a little pit was neatly dug against the green wall. “We’ve been making improvements!”

Gabu paced over apprehensively. He didn’t like the idea of change that happened without his participation. “We?” he asked.

“Myself and Jenny,” Mei explained. Oh, of course—the squirrel friend. “She asked where I lived, so I showed her… and at that point, she noticed your scent, and…” He looked askance with embarrassment. “Well, I had no choice but to tell her about you.”

“Oh!” Had things gone well?

“But she didn’t run off,” Mei continued. “Instead, she wanted to help make our home a nicer place! So we dug this pit, for when we have to relieve ourselves… with a pile of grass right here to kick over it…and we’re working on a few other little things inside.”

Gabu’s stomach churned. He wanted to be happy, to feel as happy at this news as Mei was. But he was nervous. “Mei… you changed our den?”

Mei’s smile fell away. “I thought you’d like it. Um… come inside!”

Gabu looked inside. It wasn’t much different. There was a tidy niche in one wall filled with flower blossoms and a smattering of nuts… and a patch of moss in one corner. He looked a question at Mei.

“We put in a food nook… for when we want a bite without leaving home. Think how nice that’ll be when it rains! And a mossy pad for… well, for standing on, in case you want to feel something different under your feet!”

Gabu sniffed the flowers. “But Mei… are you…”

The goat tilted his head.

“…Are you really comfortable with me bringing food into the den?” That was something he hadn’t dared do—he’d barely even considered it.

Mei’s face contorted in thought. That was normally a nice thing to see—Mei had a habit of saying interesting things after he did some thinking. But this was an ugly change, and it could only be because of an ugly thought. Gabu found himself ashamed.

“Of course you can bring your food in, Gabu,” Mei said eventually. “The nook isn’t just for me. Think how cruel it would be for me to say no!” His face beamed with kindness, but Gabu had a hunch that Mei realizing it would be cruel was the only reason he hadn’t said no.
He looked at Mei’s haunches. They were twitching. Gabu’s snout drooped. “This is nice, Mei… it’s nice that you and Jenny found something fun to work on.” He forced himself not to voice his disappointment—it would sound too much like jealousy… and Gabu wasn’t entirely sure it wasn’t!

“It is, isn’t it? I think squirrels have an instinct for making up nice homes. After all, they have to live in tiny little dreys all winter long!”

“Dreys?”

“That’s what you call a squirrel nest. They eat acorns, and I explained that we don’t have a lot of oak trees where we come from, so I haven’t acquired a taste for them. And there aren’t any in the spring, anyhow. But she brought me some early tree nuts, and I think I’m coming to like them! And that’s why we’ve laid some in.” He picked up a slender nut cutely and let it shape his smile. “Maybe you’d like to try one?”

Gabu’s belly picked that moment to grumble—of course. He just knew the nuts wouldn’t agree with him, but… “Of course I’ll try one,” he said. “What’s to lose?”

So they chewed nuts together as Mei described the rest of his day. Jenny had explained how to find tree nuts, and Mei had found he had a talent for butting them off of branches, so he’d practiced that for a while. It sounded great, and Gabu longed to tell Mei about his day with the monkeys, but something nagged at him. He just had to ask:

“When you told Jenny about me… did it bother her?”

Mei took a breath, started to answer, and stopped. His lower lip pulled up tight before he spoke. “Well… she was a little confused. But then again… who wouldn’t be? She asked if you were the… the ‘monster’ she’s been hearing about. So I described you… and she nodded. ‘Yep, that’s the monster,’ she said.”

Gabu’s paw came to his chest as he rose to his hind legs. “I’m a monster?”

Mei was sorrowful. “I’m sorry, Gabu. It’s just what they call you. No one here knows what a wolf is.” His smile came back, apologetic. “And it’s not so bad. She didn’t leave. She just said ‘Okay!’ and paused a little. I think she was a little uncomfortable, but she’ll grow to like you once she’s met you, I’m sure of it.”

Now Gabu’s worries were overwhelmed by a sudden joy. “You think I should meet her?”

“Well, of course you should meet her, Gabu. She knows you exist, and she knows we’re friends. Why wouldn’t you meet her?”

Gabu shook his head with wonder. He sat down. “What if she’s afraid? What if she runs away?”

“I’ll tell her in advance that you’re nothing to fear. That you wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

Was that really what Mei thought of him? “But Mei… if a fly lands on me, I swat at it!” With his tail and paws both…

Mei laughed. “It’s just an expression. I’ll make sure Jenny knows you’re safe. I’m sure she won’t run away.”

Gabu sighed happily. “Well. That’s good news!”

“It’s certainly good news,” Mei agreed, beaming.
Gabu swallowed his nuts. They weren’t great, but they were a gift, and that felt good. And Mei was willing to let him bring meat back to the den... and soon he’d have a new friend... and the den was kind of nicer now, even if... even if he did kind of miss it without the improvements, the way it used to be.

He felt like he wanted to quake with nerves. But he shouldn’t feel that way, he knew. Life was good. He was probably just hungry. That, and nervous about meeting Jenny. His and Mei’s first shared friend. It was an exciting thought, but a bit scary, too.

He lay down facing the entrance so that he couldn’t see the moss pad or the food nook and, taking a deep breath, started to tell Mei about his day.

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Chapter End Notes

Yes, warblers eat butterflies.

Gabu is excited about meeting his and Mei’s first shared friend. Astute viewers of the TV series may object that their first shared friend was actually the river otter, Tao... but they never expected to stay long with him, so Jenny rates to be the first friend they’ll be able to share in perpetuity. And that really is a big deal, isn't it?
The 9th Day

Chapter Summary

* Are you going to see Jenny today?
* Did you bring the monster here?
* Did you kill a chipmunk yesterday?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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The 9th Morning

The junction into the woods yawned before them, green within green, signaling the end of the daily walk. This was where the flowers thinned and the promise of darkness began, and it was where the two friends had become accustomed to separating each day. They’d come to acknowledge that they couldn’t stay together at all times; each needed a life of his own, and they had different needs to attend to. But this parting was often difficult, with a tendency to linger, and there was really no time limit. Sometimes they hugged and wagged tails and laughed at the fact there was no time limit.

“Are you going to see Jenny today?” asked Gabu, tail wagging.

“If I run into her, yes. We have more to do at the lair, and I’ve offered to help her with her own home, too.”

“Really? But doesn’t she live in a tree?”

“Yes, but there are materials she’d like to do some building with, and she said she could use my help harvesting and carrying,” explained Mei.

“Oh! That’s kind of you to help.”

“It’s my pleasure! If I can repay her for the help she gave us, I’ll jump at the chance. What’s more, it should bring us closer together.”

“I’m happy for you, Mei.” The speed of Gabu’s tail bore testament to this fact.

“I’m planning to ask Jenny if she’d like to meet you tomorrow,” said Mei, smiling.

Gabu’s forebody lowered in excitement. “Really? That’s wonderful, Mei! I hope she says yes. I’m really looking forward to meeting her.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will! She’s a brave squirrel. And she trusts me. If I say you’re safe, she’ll know it’s true.” Mei beamed with the joy of trust.

Gabu leapt a little in place. “I think I’ll ask my monkey acquaintance if she’d like to meet you, too. She probably won’t want to come to our lair with us, but maybe she’d come to the edge of the
forest, where you could visit her.”

Mei’s tail wagged too, now. “That’s a great idea! Maybe she and Jenny could even make friends.”

“I’m so excited, Mei! We’re going to have friends!”

Mei laughed. “I’m excited too, Gabu. Maybe over time, we’ll have a whole herd of them!”

“Or a pack,” said Gabu.

“I wonder if there’s a difference.”

“When we have friends, we can ask whether they’d rather be called a herd or a pack!”

Mei grinned. “I guess we will!”

“Goodbye, Mei. Until sunset!”

Mei nuzzled the wolf warmly. “Until we meet again.”

Gabu looked back as he trotted away. He wanted to say goodbye again; to reiterate how excited he was; to say once again how much he loved Mei. But that could wait for tonight. When you had forever to share your feelings, you could let some of them bubble and ripen.

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The 9th Day

Mei stood at the foot of a camphor tree not far from the edge of the sparse wood. The sunlight dappled through in jagged stripes. He drew a deep breath through his nose; the scent of squirrel was thick in the air. Was Jenny’s scent part of it? He didn’t know her scent yet well enough to tell it from other squirrels, but he was confident he’d get there eventually. He sort of thought he could detect it even now! “Jenny?” he called for the second time. “Are you up there?”

There was a rustling at the top of the tree, where the foliage was thick. Chittering was heard, followed by another chittering voice, and then the hostile chirrup squirrels used to intimidate each other. Mei was taken aback. He backed away from the tree, perplexed, and watched carefully.

There was another rustling and then the sound suddenly stopped. Silence followed.

“I’m looking for Jenny,” Mei called as politely as he could. “Is she up there?”

There was the sound of feet on bark, and suddenly Jenny appeared, heading face-first down the tree. “Stop!” shouted another voice from above her, raspy and protective.

“I need to,” Jenny rejoined upward.

“Jenny!”

The tree squirrel ignored the voices above her. She skittered down to Mei, who by now was nervous and confused. “Is something wrong, Jenny?” he asked.

Jenny just ran past him, deeper into the woods. She shot a harsh look back, giving Mei the sense he
was expected to follow. He did; Jenny ran ahead and didn’t stop until she’d reached the end of the woods.

Mei hurried after, finally setting a hoof in the middling-length yellow grass beyond the trees. “What is it, Jenny?”

The squirrel turned and spread out in the grass. She stared at him with black eyes. “Shaniku is dead.”

Mei blinked. Shaniku? Had he even heard that name before? “Who?”

“My friend. Shaniku. A chipmunk. She was foraging along the east stretch. The monster ate her.”

Mei drew a shaky breath. “The monster?” Could it—did she mean—?

“You brought it here. Didn’t you?” The little squirrel didn’t blink.

No. This was terrible. Mei felt disgust washing through him. What had he done? Unable to speak, he fell back to a sitting position—his bottom in the earthy shade of the woods, his forehooves in the yellow grass. “I’m sorry.”

Now Jenny shifted a little in her ultra-quick way. “You brought the monster here, didn’t you?” she repeated.

“Yes.” But Mei had to clarify. “He’s my friend. He’s… oh, stars, Jenny. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t look for me again,” said Jenny. She paused for a moment—just long enough for Mei to wonder Is this really happening?—before dashing away into the woods. Mei looked back after her, but she was out of sight in an instant, and out of earshot a second after that.

Just like that, his one friend was gone. Forever.

No, he reminded himself. No. Not his one friend. He had a friend. He would always have a friend.

Mei hung his head. He swore in anger. Bitter anger. Then he lay down and wept in shame.

This was his fault. He’d brought a monster with him to an untouched land. He was companion to a killer. He was an accomplice in this. Because of him—

A surge of wind rolled over him, prompting a deep breath. Mei shut his eyes and took a moment to get his priorities in order.

No. He wasn’t ashamed. He was sad, and mad, but not ashamed. He would always stand by Gabu. Always. Gabu was his rock. Not a squirrel. Not a chipmunk. Mei was with Gabu, now and always.

More deep breaths followed the first. Mei wanted to eat, but he couldn’t. He stood by a monster. He’d led a wolf to a land lucky enough to have no wolves. That was his lot in life. He had chosen that lot. He had led himself down this path.

He listened to the wind, his eyes closed, and wallowed in dark fantasies about what his herd would say about him now.
The 9th Evening

Gabu rounded the outcropping of woods and saw Mei waiting there in the flower field. Not sitting there comfortably and watching for him. Not standing and nibbling the petals. Lying. With both forelegs out straight and his ears sagging.

His excitement fading quickly, Gabu hurried over. “Mei?”

The goat turned his round face toward Gabu. It was frightening. The subtle slyness of his eyes was replaced with something darker. Pain, it seemed. His mouth held an uncertain frown. This was somehow even worse than when Mei had lain exhausted in the snow cave, waiting for death. Gabu didn’t want this expression to last.

“Mei, what’s wrong?”

“Hello, Gabu,” the goat responded.

“Hello, Mei. What happened? Did Jenny say she didn’t want to meet me?”

The ruminant shook, exerting his posterior muscles, and stood, shaking, on hind legs, then fore. “Jenny is gone.”

Gabu gulped. What had happened? “Gone where?” Had some tragic accident of the forest killed Mei’s friend?

Mei’s look was flinty. Again, he chose not to answer, but asked instead: “Did you kill a chipmunk yesterday?”

With a pang of hunger, Gabu remembered his sole meal since the previous morning, a few little tree nuts notwithstanding. “Y-yes?”

Such a look of sorrow flitted across that caprine face… just for an instant before turning to anger. “Gabu!”

“What?” Was Mei mad at him? He’d never told him not to eat chipmunks!

“That chipmunk was Jenny’s friend! She’s grief-stricken! Gabu, how could you kill Jenny’s friend!?”

He felt attacked. All he’d been doing was trying to feed himself, just a little, and it wasn’t like it was easy these days. He brought a paw to his ribs, sitting back. “I didn’t know!”

“You—you weren’t going to kill her friends! You promised! I was going to tell her that you were safe!”

Adrenaline wracked Gabu. He was back from a challenging day, but he’d at least known his one friend would be glad to see him. And now Mei was attacking him! The foundation of his world was teetering; it felt like he was clinging to a spire. “Mei, you don’t think I’m safe? You never told me not to eat chipmunks! Just voles, squirrels and rabbits!”

Mei shot Gabu such an angry look that it terrified him. “Did I really have to explain not to eat chipmunks!? Chipmunks and squirrels can be friends!”

“Oh, goodness, Mei, I didn’t know.”
“You killed her friend, Gabu! She’s gone now!”

“I didn’t know!” he wailed. Why did Gabu have to repeat himself? He leaned away from the frightening horned beast before him. Was this creature really his only friend?

“You could have guessed! You could have paused a moment to ask yourself—what if this chipmunk is Jenny’s friend?”

Gabu wanted to cry. No matter what he did to feed himself, it was wrong. “I was hungry, Mei! You already took voles from me. You took squirrels from me. You took rabbits from me! I’m already hunting without a pack. Do you know how hard it is to take another kind of animal off my menu?”

The harsh expression softened, but in its place was a face full of spite. “…No, Gabu. I don’t. Because you didn’t tell me! I asked if it was okay. You said ‘No problem!’”

“What am I supposed to do?” Gabu cried. “Tell you, no, sorry, Mei, my tumblly is rumblly so I have to eat your friends’ families?”

Mei’s eyes went wide and fearful. “I just want you to be honest with me, Gabu! Just be honest. I thought we could trust each other.”

Gabu’s heart seemed to burst. Not knowing what else to do, he threw himself to the ground and looked up weakly. “Well then, Mei, here’s some honesty… I’m starving! Is that what you want to hear? I’m STARVING!! Every minute of every day, I think about food… I can’t feed myself alone, and you keep taking animals off my menu…”

“Oh, Gabu!” It was a cry of anger, but he could still hope it was anchored by friendship.

“Blast it,” Gabu swore.

“I don’t want you to starve,” said Mei.

Gabu lay motionless in the flowers. Helpless. Was that the best Mei could do? Just wish for him not to starve?

He realized suddenly that the birds had stopped chirping. Every animal in or around the meadow had heard their fight. Only now, in the silence, did a lone finch start singing again.

After a long while, Mei plopped down beside him with a heavy sigh. “Well,” he said, “Having friends was a nice idea.”

Gabu’s ears tensed at this. He sighed, too. Then he slumped in place and cried. Later, he rolled on his back and howled. Finally, as twilight turned to night, he flopped back onto his stupid belly and wept some more under the waning crescent moon.

Mei was silent through all of it.

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Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter (at a laptop in the gaming room of a small convention) made me
cry. I had to keep wiping my eyes. Don't suppose I caught anyone else?
The 9th Night

Chapter Summary

* You're not about to eat -me-, are you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 9th Night

Sleep was scant that night. Gabu paced outside. He flumped in the grass; he flumped in the cave. The moon was shaped like the cruel, thick horns of a goat, ready to impale something. Inside, Mei shuddered and dreamed of horrible things. He dreamed that he was Tapper, hearing about his own indiscretions, his own secret. He couldn’t believe his friend Mei could befriend a wolf. And even so… he was amazed all over again that when things came to a point, Mei decided to abandon his herd. What would lead someone to do something so perverse? What twisted set of circumstances could possibly make a goat think such a strange decision was the right thing to do?

Mei dreamed of a youth that never was. He was taken by his mother to a vista of craggy spires, a badland called Baku Baku Valley. They crouched out of sight and watched the wolves prowl from their cave. Mei stared as the creatures sidled around each other, sniffed the air ominously, snapped at one another. He watched as the sky got dark and they started to howl at the moon. Mei’s mother told him they were evil—the world’s greatest danger, to be avoided by all costs. Mei nuzzled his mother with love. But the next thing he knew, he was racing into the valley, moonlit and buoyed by a warm breeze smelling thickly of wolf mange. His mother bleated and yelled for him to stop—he just kept running for the wolves. Their leader spotted him and licked his lips; Mei grinned and sprinted all the faster. “I’m coming!” he yelled to the wolves. They all faced him, their eyes gleaming with starlight. They were so happy to see him coming—how could he possibly be doing the wrong thing?

He woke up and found Gabu lying half in the cave, half out. On impulse, Mei flung himself down against the heaving, furry body. It jerked, paws flapping and jaws snapping. Mei shoved his head hard against his friend’s flank, as if trying to assert his right to use him for a pillow. He didn’t know the source of this strange anger, nor at what it was directed… but he definitely felt it. If Mei awakened Gabu, so be it. He’d probably be rescuing him from nightmares. In any case, it was important for them to be together right now.

Gabu moaned. It was a long moan, drawn out, followed by relative stillness. Mei could feel his breaths; with one ear up against the wolf’s rib cage, he could even hear his heartbeats. It felt like an invasion of privacy… but for tonight, and tonight only, Mei didn’t feel guilty. Tonight felt like an emergency. Tonight, there was no privacy.

Instead of waking, though, Gabu yawned obtrusively and rolled over, squashing Mei below him. The goat bleated, panicking. This woke Gabu, who panicked; finding Mei beneath himself, he reflexively jerked away, probably afraid he was trying to eat him in his sleep.

The two made eye contact. There followed a lupine sigh, breathy and hot, without words.
Mei realized that there hadn’t been as much softness as he’d expected in the experience of being squashed under his friend. His friend was less a soft pillow and more of a bundle of rocks. He really was getting thin. If Mei had let himself face head-on the truth of Gabu’s predatorial nature, he’d have seen that. Now it scared him, a little.

“Gabu.”

“Mei,” the wolf breathed.

“I want you to eat.”

“…Beg pardon?”

Mei could smell him so thoroughly, so heavily. “You need to eat. You’re running out of flesh on your bones. I’m scared for you.”

He didn’t know how Gabu would react. But before he knew it, a big, wet lick had slathered his body. “Thanks, Mei.”

Mei shuddered. “Thanks?” What was he saying? “Wait—you’re not about to eat me, are you?”

Gabu laughed like a wolf—harsh, rocky, despicable. Mei was struck by a heavy plume of hair that knocked the breath out of him for a moment. Oh!—it was just Gabu’s tail. “You know better than that, Mei. I couldn’t eat you in the mountains, when you asked me to. …Still, I won’t deny you look tasty. Right now… I could really go for a helping of goat meat.”

Guilt convulsed Mei. “I couldn’t blame you if you did. It’s my fault you’re starved.”

The heavy tail swung in for another soft whack. “I wish I had a goat to eat. I can’t think of anything in the world I’d like better.”

Mei couldn’t help himself. “You do have a goat to eat,” he pointed out.

“I don’t,” growled Gabu. “Not a single one. And it’s too bad. I could really tear into one. That tender rump flesh… the succulent shoulders… the satisfying liver.” He loudly licked his lips. “Stars, I wish I had a goat.”

Mei realized he was terrified. “You do,” he said.

Gabu’s jaws snapped sharply, shockingly, in front of Mei’s face. “If only!” he moaned.

“I’m lying right here.”

You. Are not. To EAT!” Gabu yelled.

Mei shivered again. “I want you to eat anyone you want. I don’t want you to feel trapped.”

Gabu paced back and forth, into the cave and out of it. His paws seemed huge, displacing rocks near Mei’s head. How could anyone have paws so large?

“Please. Eat anyone you want. Up to and including me. I take back everything I said about voles,
and squirrels, and rabbits.”

Gabu’s tongue slurped over him again… slowly. “Maybe I should go back over the mountain. Maybe I should go to Sawa Sawa Valley.”

Mei’s imagination flashed, registering this. “No.”

“Maybe I should go back over the mountains and eat your friend Mii!” Gabu growled.

Mei squinched his eyes, imagining it against his will. “Gabu.”

A big paw stopped near Mei. “Too much?”

Was it too much? Mei shivered again as he realized he wouldn’t be upset if Gabu ate him, but wouldn’t let him eat Mii. “I’m up for grabs,” he said. “If you ever need a midnight snack, I’m always here. But please, Gabu. Don’t joke about Mii.”

“I brought her home on my back once,” Gabu recalled softly. “It was all I could do not to let her wake up. I had to pretend to be you.”

Mei lay vulnerable, feeling his own uneven breaths. “I remember.”

“I don’t think I could eat her. Even if I were dying of starvation.”

“Good.”

The heat of the moment seemed finally to die away. Mei looked at Gabu’s ankle beside his head. He wondered if he should be apologizing, waiting for an apology, or trying to sleep.

“It’s strange, said Gabu, looking out at the sky. “Normally, I would only act like this if it were a full moon!”

Mei laughed, his nervousness dissipating. “We’ve both been acting strange, haven’t we?”

Gabu lay down and rested his head against Mei. “It’s because I’m scared. We fought, Mei.”

Mei scooted over until he was in the crux of the wolf’s neck. “I’m scared too,” he admitted. But he realized suddenly that he was smiling.

“I’m not scared when I’m with you, Mei. I’m glad you woke me up.”

“I was having terrible dreams. I didn’t want to be scared alone.”

A long leg slid over Mei’s coat and weighed him down. “We’ll be scared together.”

Mei chuckled, though his ribs fought the weight of that leg. “All right.”

They lay there a while, calming down. The crescent moon passed out of sight. Night no longer seemed to be on fire—it became just night again, blue and tranquil.

“I think we need to get back to basics,” offered Mei, cheerful despite the wolf’s leg weighing on his ribs. “We let everything else get in our way.”
“Mmm,” rumbled Gabu. “What are the basics, Mei?”

Mei considered for a moment. “No matter what… I’m with you,” he replied.

“Huh,” said Gabu, as if this were a discovery. He paused, then added: “Even if being my friend means that everyone is terrified of you?”

“Absolutely,” said Mei, before he could consider. “I want to make that clear. I would love to have friends again. But even if I never have another friend besides you…” Mei let his tail stand up. “…I’ll never leave you.”

“Really?”

“You could eat every single creature in the Emerald Forest. Bepo and Jenny and all the rabbits. I might be mad, but I’ll never leave you.”

“Never?” asked Gabu, unbelieving.

Mei sniffed. “It’s too late now. I’ve made my decision. I’m stuck with you.”

A gentle snout nudged his ear upward. “And you know I’ll never leave you, right Mei?”

Mei sighed contentedly. “Yes, I know it.” He shut his eyes, aiming for better dreams.

Ten minutes later, he was back asleep. Now he dreamed of telling Mii all about Gabu in the shelter of a huge tree… and instead of quailing in fear, she nodded and egged him on, asking questions. She was excited about the wolf Mei had met, this monster who’d chosen not to eat him. Excited to meet him someday.

Mei lingered for hours with Mii, not realizing it was a dream, but somehow not wanting to say goodbye.

While he slept, a shaggy brown tail brushed over him like a swaying branch.

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Chapter End Notes

While writing this chapter, I realized that this story, like many others I’ve written, was not going to be kid-friendly after all. This scene is just a little on the hot and heavy side for kids. -.-

Too bad!
The 10th Day

Chapter Summary

* Is normal? Hoofy and shaggy friends?
* Is there any way I can help?
* Can we just get it over with?!
* What if it only gets harder from here?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 10th Morning

Like a fresh sprout, Mei stood in the grass at the top of his hill. He was some distance away from the lair’s entrance, but close enough that he’d know if Gabu emerged. Both of them had slept late today, well past dawn. As Mei saw it, both of them had earned it.

Several things were still weighing on Mei… the fact that he’d never see Jenny again, just as their friendship had been blooming; the fact that Gabu still hadn’t eaten anything but nuts since he’d accidentally ended that friendship; the strange and disturbing things he and Gabu had said last night. He couldn’t understand why he’d behaved as he had—leaping against Gabu; waking him; offering himself as a perennial midnight snack. Yet something about the tension they’d been experiencing made it all feel right. Necessary, even. Mei had had to make a offering, and the offering had to be himself. He’d known it wouldn’t be accepted. Well, almost known. Gabu had been hungry, angry, vulnerable and hurt—if he was ever going to kill Mei, it would have been last night.

How strange. Mei now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that his friend would never eat him. And all it had taken was to wake up a sleeping predator eight times his size and say things no goat should ever say.

That was the second step on the journey to forever. He realized that now. He’d taken it almost by instinct, and now he was on the next leg. But where would it lead? Where could things go from here?

Out of nowhere, a perky voice from the grass. “Is happy?”

Mei panicked for a moment before realizing it was Bepo. They’d been talking occasionally in the mornings; he shouldn’t have been surprised. “Hi, Bepo. Um… I’m reasonably happy.”

“Last night. Big shaggy. In and out.” The vole scampered over, keeping a cautious distance, and stared at the hilltop lair.

“Um, yes. Big shaggy.” Should he try to avoid admitting that he knew Gabu? No, Mei realized. That was what had caused the tragedy with Jenny. He had to be honest. “He lives there too.”

“You and him?” The rodent sat up taller, apparently surprised.
“We live together, we traveled here together,” admitted Mei. He enjoyed how it sounded.

“Hoofy and shaggy?”

Mei smiled. “Yes, hoofy and shaggy.”

“Are mates?” asked Bepo.

This took Mei aback. “No, we’re not mates,” he answered. “But we’re very close friends.” Part of him had wanted to answer ‘yes’.

“Is normal? Hoofy and shaggy friends?”

Mei swallowed. “It isn’t exactly normal… where we come from.”

“Not normal? Only sometimes?”

Mei’s horns felt heavy. “Well, to tell the truth, so far as I know, it’s never happened before.”

The tiny black eyes blinked. “Never happen?!"

“We’re the first I’ve ever heard of. A hoofy being friends with a shaggy.”


Mei’s heart fluttered with the knowledge of it. “That’s true.”

“Bepo so lucky. Friend with first hoofy also friend shaggy. Suddenly special!”

Mei quivered with excitement. He wondered if, in all the lands of the world, across however many mountains and cliffs and oceans and forests there were, a pair like himself and Gabu had ever walked the earth before. But Bepo had used another word, too. “Are you my friend, Bepo?”

Bepo ran up and hugged Mei’s ankle, resting against him with eyes shut. “Suddenly Bepo special. Of course friend!”

So Bepo was grateful that it got to know someone so unique. It had been an ordinary vole among millions or billions; now it was special itself. Mei felt like a figure out of legend. His knees trembled.

“Thank you for being my friend, Bepo. I was just feeling like I needed one.”

The vole’s eyes popped open. “Always time. Can meet shaggy?”

Mei grinned; he’d been just wondering whether to offer. “I think he’d love that. How about we wait until tomorrow, though… just to get him used to the idea.”

Bepo nodded, chin vibrating almost faster than Mei could see. “Meet tomorrow!”

“Tomorrow,” Mei nodded. But he realized as the vole moved off—he’d left something out. And he only had a moment to decide whether to include it. Just that quickly, Mei’s moral strands had to
work themselves out… and they did. “Bepo, wait!”

The vole turned, already halfway down the hill. “Yes?”

Mei took a breath and prepared himself for the potential blow of losing another friend. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

“Tell?” asked Bepo.

“Shaggies… like my friend… eat meat.”

The rodent’s head tilted. “Meat eat?”

“They eat creatures like you and me. Only… Gabu won’t do that. He won’t eat me, and he won’t eat you. So you’ll be safe.”

“Not meat eat?”

“He won’t eat you if I tell him you’re my friend. Do… do you still want to meet him?”

The vole hesitated, but nodded. “Still want. If not eat, then meet.”

So simple. So beautifully trusting. “All right. In case, I look forward to introducing you tomorrow!”

Bepo nodded once more and dashed away. Mei remained in thought, watching the path he’d gone by, for some time.

A low, musical moan emitted from the cave behind him. It felt like the dawn’s rays, even though the sun was already a fair distance into the sky. Mei turned to the sound of Gabu’s voice…

“Hyululu hyululu! I’m sorry for last night. Hyululu hyululu! I didn’t mean to fight. Hyululu hyululu! You are my only friend. Hyululu hyululu! I’m with you to the end.”

In the wake of his verse, the wolf slunk out bashfully. Mei cantered over and managed to hug him on the muzzle, tricky though this was. “Good morning, Gabu!”

His face became a bouquet of delight. “Mei! You mean you’re not mad?”

Mei clucked his tongue in the negative, smiling. “What would I be mad about?”

Gabu’s face dropped. “I threatened to eat Mii.”

Oh. That’s right, he had. Yet Mei had never taken it seriously. “Don’t worry about it,” he said, giving Gabu a gentle nuzzle with his crown. “It was just part of the strangeness of the night.”

Gabu sighed. “I wish I hadn’t eaten that chipmunk.”

“I admit it was unlucky,” Mei replied. “But you really didn’t have any way of knowing. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”
“You don’t have to apologize, Mei. I feel terrible about it.”

Mei tapped the all-too-slack belly with a smart hoof. “You shouldn’t! Gabu, I want you to get out there and eat more chipmunks! And anything else you can get your teeth on. I’m worried about you. I won’t feel comfortable until you’ve got a full belly.”

Sure enough, Gabu’s belly rumbled, on cue. He looked down helplessly at it. “Are you sure? I could wreck so many friendships…”

“Well, you may want to stay away from black voles, just in case you run across Bepo. I told it about you just before you came out—it’s agreed to meet you!”

“Really?” Mei could see Gabu’s heart pounding. “It has?”

“I even mentioned that you eat meat. Gabu… I think I’m going to make that a rule from now on. We can try to make friends… but if I meet someone friendly, I’m not going to pretend you don’t exist, even for a little while. I’ll tell them about you on our first meeting, and I won’t hide the fact you’re a carnivore. If they don’t want anything to do with me after that… well, I can hardly blame them!” He was surprised to find himself beaming, but then, Mei always did take great joy in the discovery of principles.

The downside to closing his eyes with bliss was getting caught in an unexpected hug. Mei found himself hefted off the ground and swung; his legs shook and his innards juggled! He laughed in clear and earnest. “Gabu!”

The hug became a warm, proper squeeze before he was set down. If Mei had known this was what it was like to be caught by a wolf, he would have let it happen sooner.

“Do you think we’ll make any friends that way, Mei?”

“I don’t know,” he replied honestly. “…But if we do, they’re sure to be brave!”

Gabu chuckled. “That’s for the best, isn’t it?”

Mei looked back at his companion, now feeling the full warmth of day. “I suppose. But Gabu… before anything else, we need to get some food in you. I’m worried.”

“Oh…” The wolf patted his own belly with a broad paw, smiling. “I’ll be all right.”

But Mei was serious about this. “Is there any way I can help? I can come with you today if you think I could be useful.”

Gabu blinked. “Come with me? Hunting?”

Mei nodded. “If there’s any question of your being too starved to hunt, I want to help.”

The lupine heart pounded harder—Mei could almost hear it. “Ohh, Mei. You don’t have to do that. I’m not that far gone. In fact, there’s a certain benefit to hunger—it can make your senses all the sharper when you’re on the hunt! If I just listen to my belly, I’ll be sure not to miss my targets.”

His targets. Mei was offering to become an apprentice hunter—a true accomplice. It fazed him
how unfazed he was. Think of what your mother would say, he imagined his grandmother saying. But then he imagined telling his mother about the amazing new friend he’d made. And he imagined his mother wiping her tears on the grass and telling him to pursue what made him happy. Yes, a wolf had killed her. But if a different wolf could make her son happy… it was redemption, wasn’t it? And wasn’t redemption a beautiful thing?

But this wasn’t redemption, was it? It wasn’t as if Mei had talked Gabu into giving up hunting. This was Mei offering to lower himself to the wolf’s level. This was corruption. Yet somehow Mei felt fresh and clean about it. He had no doubt in the world this was the right thing for him to do.

“You’re sure, Gabu? I feel guilty about the satisfying liver I’m not letting you have.” He winked. “Anything I can do… just let me know.”

Gabu sniffed with happiness and, Mei didn’t doubt, a smidge of hunger’s desperation. “What did I do to deserve a friend like you? But really, Mei… I don’t want you to have to see me hunt if you don’t have to. Tell you what—I’ll go hunting, and if I haven’t had any luck in a few hours… I’ll come back and ask for your help.”

Mei smiled and nodded. “I’ll be right here. My number one priority is to get meat on your bones.”

Gabu laughed merrily, rising for a moment to dangle his forepaws. Then he set his weight on them again. “Until later, Mei! I’m off to hunt!”

It made Mei happy his friend was comfortable saying the word now, and that he himself was comfortable hearing it. “Best of luck, Gabu!” He stood tall and grinned, his tail pert in temporary farewell.

Only once Gabu was out of sight did Mei lower himself to the nearest patch of grass and take a satisfying bite. For a brief moment, he let himself imagine he was daintily eating some poor creature’s liver.

Life really was funny, wasn’t it?

The 10th Day

Gabu threw himself into hunting with a vengeance he’d rarely worked up before. He hunted all day long. He didn’t stay in one place; once he’d startled the pace of life in one field, thicket, or patch of woods, he swung his head to catch some clue for where he should trot next, then sprang off to catch new creatures by surprise. He terrorized the Emerald Forest. It was actually giving him pleasure to leave no segment of land unhunted, to leave no one feeling safe.

It wasn’t that he wanted to scare people. It wasn’t that he wanted to be a monster. It was that he didn’t want anyone more to be surprised by the fact. He wanted it in the open. Gabu remembered a cub from his pack with a deformed nose—the mothers had whispered, the other cubs had made fun of him secretly. Eventually the poor thing had sprung angrily into a crowd, claws cutting the earth, hackles up, and yelled, “YES, I know I have a deformed nose! Can we just get it over with?!?”

Today, Gabu understood how that boy cub had felt. His hunt was fueled with energy drawn from
the same place. Yes, I’m a monster. I know I’m a monster. I hate it too. Fear me, spit in my tracks, curse me. Just get it over with. For the sake of all that’s good, please just get it over with.

It paid off. He killed four mice, two brown voles, a meadowlark, two rabbits and a tree squirrel. He terrified dozens more with ominous prowls and near misses. He even surprised a solitary badger hunting the same chipmunk he was, swerving to rake his back and crush him to the ground. The badger squawked in amazement—it must never have considered the idea that it, too, could be prey. In that moment, Gabu couldn’t help but imagine a larger animal sneaking up behind him, bending over to grab his hindquarters and yank. Even as he ended the badger’s life, he wondered whether there were wolf-killers in the world. He almost wanted there to be. It would only be fair.

He didn’t cry as he stuffed his gut, hour by hour, chase by chase. But he wanted to. He wanted to be the kind of wolf who cried over every creature he destroyed.

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The 10th Evening

Slowly, heavily, Gabu paced back to Flowery Hill. He could hear his own heavy breathing, laden with the scent of blood and meat. His belly felt tight, he’d eaten so much in such a short time. He wondered how long he’d sleep tonight. He was afraid Mei would see him and be disgusted. He was half disgusted with himself, if half proud.

“Gabu!” The cry came before he’d even smelled Mei’s approach. Gabu looked up, smiling despite himself—he was getting tired, his senses weary. Mei ran down the hill at a steep angle and came cantering to a halt just before reaching him.

“Hello, Mei.”

Mei laughed, looking him over. “I can see you ate well today! You even smell like blood.”

Gabu sighed in shame, letting his neck sag.

“Well done, Gabu! I was worried for you, but I can see I didn’t need to be. How do you feel?”

He gathered his strength to give an answer better than just a few weary words. Mei deserved a good answer. “Well, Mei… I feel like I couldn’t possibly chase down another field mouse, or eat another bite.”

The goat was so ebullient, it was like he wanted to bounce in place. “So you’re full, then?”

“Very much so. I feel like…” He wanted to call himself a disaster, one of the worst ever to strike this pristine land. But he didn’t want Mei to frown, so he continued, “…like I want to go to bed early tonight. You won’t mind, will you, Mei?”

Mei frowned anyway. “No, I don’t mind.” He looked up at their lair on the hilltop. “Would you mind if I joined you?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind either.” In fact, Gabu had almost been hoping for it. “I think that would make me feel much better.” He began trudging up the hill, strangely conscious of all the flowers
his huge paws were crushing along the way.

He lay facing away from the entrance. Wind licked at his tail, but he tried to ignore it. If it was saying hello, he wasn’t worthy, and if it was tugging at him to lay blame, he didn’t want to hear it. Gabu curled his tail beside himself. Mei watched him quietly for a moment before coming to lie down nearby. He didn’t rest directly against Gabu tonight. But that was for the best. Right now, the two of them needed their distance.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m not sure, Mei.”

Gabu was grateful for the few seconds that passed before Mei asked, “What’s wrong?” That meant this was going to be a slow conversation, and that was what Gabu needed in order to digest.

“I’m afraid,” he moaned, and set a paw over one eye.

“Ohh.” Mei’s utterance was like gentle spring wind over tall grass. “Well, Gabu. Whatever you’re afraid of, I’m here for you. And I’ll help, however I can.”

Silence. “Thank you, Mei. I appreciate that.”

Silence. “So. Would you like to tell me what you’re afraid of?”

Silence. “Sure, Mei. Let me just digest for a little while, and then I’ll see if I can put it into words.”

Silence. “All right, Gabu. I’ll be here.”

Gabu felt his stomach working on all he’d devoured. The good meat, the questionable, the water from the brook. At the same time, he felt his heart working through all the killing he’d done—alone, but not unsupported. It had been one thing to sneak in a furtive kill while Mei was asleep, or to hunt without discussing it while his companion ate his midday meal. It was another thing to go hunting at Mei’s urging, with his full support. He worried about what he was doing to Mei. Was he changing his best friend into something unnatural—something he shouldn’t be?

“I scared a lot of people today,” he finally murmured.

He heard Mei breathe in, breathe out. “I’d guess you’re right.”

“I didn’t leave anyone alone. Except the monkeys. I never bother the monkeys. I don’t think I could catch one of them.” He hadn’t seriously tried to catch any deer either, but that was because they were close to his own size and quick—he didn’t think he could take one alone.

“And you’re still hoping to make friends with them, right?”

Gabu groaned. “I guess so. I just don’t know if that’s possible.”

Mei’s breathing was almost imperceptible now. “Does it bother you that you scared so many
“Yes,” moaned Gabu without hesitation. He pressed his paw over both eyes, shutting out the light. “I just don’t understand why I did it. We’ve both agreed it’s best for us to try to make friends here. But how am I supposed to do that if I just kill everyone I see?”

“Well, you were starving. You had to fill your belly. Please don’t blame yourself for doing what you had to do.”

“I could have been more careful,” whimpered Gabu. “I could have stuck to just one field, or one… one patch of woods.”

“But if you do that day after day,” Mei pointed out,” all the animals will just avoid that patch of woods, or that meadow.”

Gabu knew that. He’d understood it even before he’d suggested it. “There must be some middle ground. I was out of control today. I’ve damaged everything.”

The gentle touch of woolly hair pressed against Gabu at last. “I know it seems strange to say it… but I honestly think what you did today was for the best. You’ve… let the animals know what they’re in for. You didn’t hold back. Later on, no one will be able to say they didn’t know what you were capable of.”

“No one is going to want to be my friend ever again!!” moaned Gabu, pushing against his face with both forepaws.

But the pressure at his side increased to match the pressure on his face. “It’s okay, Gabu. In the worst case scenario, we can just move again. I’d be perfectly willing to do that. We could start fresh somewhere else. And if there is a better way to do things, we can find it there.”

This thought actually did raise his spirits a bit. “Assuming there are no other wolves there,” he quibbled. “And assuming the rumors about us don’t get there before we do.”

“I’m sure this land isn’t the only place in the world without any wolves,” said Mei optimistically. “And I’m sure if we walk far enough, we can find someplace where no one knows about us.”

“All right,” said Gabu. “You do have a point. But how would we do anything differently there? I’m still a freak of nature who has to kill people to survive.”

“Gabu. You are not a freak. You’re just a meat-eater. It’s a very normal thing, really.”

Gabu whimpered and let his legs slump forward. It was normal for meat-eaters to stick to their own kind. That was the solution to this problem. That was the solution nature had found, and who under the broad blue sky were the two of them to say it wasn’t best?

All of this was just because Gabu and Mei were stubbornly sticking together. They assumed they’d always be together and went from there. What if that basic starting point was just fatally flawed, all by itself?

“Well, Mei. That’s not the only thing that’s bothering me.”

“Oh?”
Gabu set his chin resentfully on the soft earth floor. “Today, I was able to feed myself fine. But what if it only gets harder from here?”

“Harder? What do you mean?”

“What if all the animals learn to avoid me? I caught a lot of them off guard today, that’s true. But what if the ones who are left are wiliier, and smarter, and faster? I can’t imagine it getting any easier. They’ll learn how I hunt and figure out how to keep from getting caught.”

“Mm,” said Mei. “That’s true. I remember the elders of my herd were always trying to outwit the wolves… trying to figure out where you’d strike, and when, and where you wouldn’t go…”

“The sad thing is,” said Gabu, “we were willing to go pretty much anywhere there was food! So in a way it was futile… there was no escaping us forever.”

“Did your pack have elders who told you where to hunt to find the most succulent prey?”

Gabu wished Mei wouldn’t talk like that. “We had an alpha. Giro. He was as scary as anything. We all respected him but feared him too. And there was a beta, Bari. I was always trying to impress Bari, but the truth is, I was scared of him, too.”

Mei lay in thought. “I suppose that, given all the generations of wolves who’ve hunted generations of goats, we reached a sort of equilibrium. We had a home pasture and knew where to run when we were attacked. We knew more or less when to visit the fields with the nicest grass, but we also knew that sometimes we’d be surprised.” There was a tone of contentment in his voice. “We even established regular relations with the nearby herds, and once in a while we even brought our kids together for a field trip.”

Gabu remembered having his body fondled by eager goat children while he lay hiding in a bush. “It’s strange… how much you were able to get used to, I mean. How can you get used to being attacked, and your lives put in jeopardy?”

“‘I guess it’s just what we had to do.’”

“You got used to it because you had to?”

“Mm,” assented Mei.

“I guess that’s how it happened for us wolves, too,” he realized sadly. “How do you get used to killing other creatures? Creatures who, just like us, have families and loved ones?”

“Is it difficult for a wolf to kill someone?”

Gabu thought about it. “For most, no. For me… maybe a little.”

“You get used to it because you have to,” said Mei.

“I think it’s harder now,” replied Gabu. “I think I’ve gotten myself unused to it.”

Mei nuzzled his belly warmly with his crown, careful not to poke him with his horns. Gabu took that to mean there was nothing left to say for now.
But Gabu wasn’t quite done. “How can a person get unused to something?” he wondered.

“I guess he can see it in a new light,” said Mei.

Gabu lay down with his chin on his forelegs and waited anxiously for sleep.

Chapter End Notes

While Gabu hunts in a fervor, a third of a synodic month has passed since the movie ended.
The 11th and 12th Days

Chapter Summary

* Grandmother, why are there wolves in the world?
* How can we ever tell them they don’t have to be afraid?
* Taste my natural weapons, delicious goat!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 11th Morning

The wind whistled this morning, though Mei couldn’t say how. It was a quiet thing, and as it blew from the mountains, there was no way to know. Perhaps it passed through a crag just the right shape to make it whistle. He tilted his ears so as to hear it as best he could, and waited. It was a warm day.

Mei tried not to sigh as he remembered all the animals Gabu had killed yesterday, and all the others he’d scarred with fear. He’d stayed away from the black voles, yes, but Mei could all too easily imagine how flurries of gossip could suffuse the Emerald Forest and make their way to every ear. If he’d lost Jenny the squirrel from the death of a single chipmunk, it was altogether possible Bepo was lost now. It depended on how things fit together.

He was just wondering how long he would choose to wait when the familiar sound came: the click of a little cheek and the shifting of little grains of dirt, followed by a chipper voice. “Hoofy happy?”

Aww. Mei smiled with relief. “Bepo! Good morning. I’m doing well, thank you.”

The little rodent scrambled closer. “Last day, very tussle. All sides running!”

Mei assumed it was referring to Gabu’s hunting spree. “Were they really?”

The vole nodded. “All run, all scare! Some hide. Very special day.”

Mei did his best to keep a smile on his face and found it took no effort at all. “Well, that was just my friend Gabu feeding himself. I did mention he eats meat.”

“No Bepo?”

“No. He won’t eat you. I promise.”

“Promise promise?”

Mei laughed. “I promise promise.” He turned around, presenting his rear end to the rodent. “Here—you can pull my tail. I promise on my tail that Gabu won’t harm you.”

Bepo took him up on this, giving Mei’s tail a brisk yank, then darting back again. “Shaggy kill so many voles and mice. Not Bepo, though. Bepo special?”
“Well, yes! I suppose you are rather special. You’re my friend.”

“Is good feeling safe.”

“I agree. You know, Gabu is right in there.” He pointed to their cave. “He’d be glad to meet you. Should I call him out?”

The vole stood up straight and sniffed the air nervously. “NOT kill?”

“Absolutely not.”

Bepo nodded. “Then meet.”

In a spark of playfulness, Mei chose to revisit their old passphrase. “We met one stormy night~!” he singsonged.

After just a moment, Gabu poked his head from the dwelling and echoed, just as playfully: “We met one stormy night! Oh!” He’d noticed Bepo. Gingerly, his four legs carried him into plain sight and down the hill. Mei could see he was still a bit bloated from the previous day. That was a comfort to Mei, even if Gabu didn’t like it.

“Gabu, this is my friend, Bepo the black vole. Bepo, this is Gabu, the wolf.”

Bepo bowed for a moment, but flitted its head up immediately so as not to lose sight of the huge thing before it. “Am excited meet.”

“Excited meat?” repeated Gabu, confused. “Oh—yes, it’s very nice to meet you, Bepo.” He bowed in kind, bringing his head almost to the ground.

“Very big shaggy. Why so big?”

“Mm?” Gabu didn’t seem to know how to answer this. “Well, I guess when you’re a wolf, you have to be big. We have to run fast and….” He looked askance, licking his lower lip. “…and hunt down goats, like Mei. If we weren’t any bigger than they are… well, that might be troublesome!”

Bepo stared between the two of them. “Shaggy hunt hoofy?”

Gabu laughed nervously, scratching behind his ear. Mei knew he had to leap in. “Yes, in fact! It’s customary for wolves like Gabu to hunt white goats like me. But the two of us are fast friends, so I know I have nothing to fear.”

The rodent stood blinking, looking between the two of them. “Not afraid?”

Mei grinned, shutting his eyes. “Not afraid in the slightest!” He tried to forget Gabu’s professions of fear from last night.

“Mei knows I would never hurt him,” Gabu explained. “Our friendship is far too valuable! And if you’d like to be friends with me… I can promise you’ll be safe, too!” That big snout did leave room for quite the reassuring grin.

“Then friends,” said Bepo, lowering itself to all fours.

“Do you have a family, Bepo?” asked Mei.

The vole shook its head rapidly. “No family. Not yet.”
“Well,” said Gabu, taking Mei’s meaning, “if you do someday, just let me know! I’ll be happy for you, and I’ll promise never to hunt them, either.”

Bepo nodded rapidly. “All safe! Is good feel. Why eat meat?”

Gabu was startled by the sudden question, but Mei couldn’t jump in for this one. Eventually, the wolf swallowed and said, “Well… it’s just the way it is. Different animals eat different things. You eat seeds… Mei eats grass… and I eat meat. Um… look at it this way! If no one ate meat, then… if someone died, there would be no one to clean it up! And the land would get messier and messier… just covered with… um, corpses.” Gabu looked embarrassed.

“But scavenge,” pointed out Bepo.

“Um? I guess there are scavengers, yes. Still! Uhh…”

Mei chose to cut in now. “Do you know, I used to wonder the same thing when I was little. I asked my grandmother… ‘Grandmother, why are there wolves in the world?’”

Bepo was erect again, awaiting a response. To Mei’s surprise, Gabu, too, sat eager for the answer, ears pitched. “What did she say, Mei?”

Mei relaxed, lying down. “She said, ‘If there were no wolves to chase us, life would be too easy.’ So you see… in order to keep our minds sharp and our bodies quick… we need wolves.”

Gabu pulled back his head with a strange expression. “Is that true? Is that really why we exist? So the goats can be strong?”

Bepo’s little round ears twitched. Then it shook its head and tail so that little clods of earth flew. “No nope. Listen. Say goat need strong. Then goat strong! If no wolf, then pretend. Still run! Still fret.”

Mei hadn’t expected such a long thought from the little creature. “I’m not sure I understand, Bepo.”

“Not need wolf,” said Bepo, staring at Gabu.

Mei chuckled. “But then, wouldn’t we goats just get complacent? We’d just rest and eat all day, and never sharpen our skills.”

“Need sharp skills?” asked the vole.

Mei thought. If there were no wolves, perhaps they wouldn’t need to be sharp. But then again… “It’s good to keep our minds sharp. There are so many things worth thinking about!”


“I see what it’s saying,” said Gabu. “If you goats really needed to feel like you were in danger in order to keep your minds sharp, you could just play a game. Have some goats volunteer to be the hunters, and they would hunt the rest for a while. That way, everyone would have fun and stay quick, and no one would ever need any wolves.” He got more mournful as he finished his thought.

Bepo nodded. “Shaggy not needed.” It seemed almost like it was dismissing Gabu, telling him to leave.

“Shaggy is needed,” affirmed Mei. He went to stand by Gabu. “I wouldn’t be happy if he were
gone. And if I’m being honest… even though wolves are terrifying creatures, I’m still very glad
they exist. If for no other reason… if they didn’t exist, I would never have met Gabu.”

“Aww. Mei!” The wolf gave him a spontaneous slurp, which made Mei almost regret his choice of
rhetoric… but only for a moment.

“So strange,” said Bepo, watching them.

“Well… yes, I guess it is,” Mei admitted. “But you’re still willing to be friends with us, aren’t
you?”

The vole’s tail slapped the ground. “Yes friends! Is very strange, but very special. Special is good!”
Gabu laughed his beautiful bark of discovery. “I agree! Special is rather nice, isn’t it?”

Mei felt halfway full already… full of food for thought. “I suppose I am proud to be special.
Anyhow… I think that may be enough for our first meeting. Gabu and I usually spend the day on
our own, then come back at dusk to meet up!”

Bepo nodded twice. “Eating more meat?” it asked Gabu.

Gabu put his paw against his stomach. “Oh, uh… no. Probably not today. I ate a lot yesterday…
and I’m pretty full!

“Good. Then no kills,” said the vole. It sat for a moment. “Will tell others. No worries today!”

Mei and Gabu exchanged a glance. “I suppose that would be all right,” said Mei.

“Yes, that’s fine,” said Gabu. “I don’t want the animals to worry about me every day.” He sat back
with a sudden thought. “Mei, what if I only went hunting one out of every three days, and on the
other days, the animals could feel comfortable talking with me?”

Mei marveled at the oddness of it. “I wonder if that would work. It’s worth thinking about.”

“Well… I’ll have plenty of time for thinking today!” said Gabu. “It was wonderful to meet you,
Bepo.”

Bepo nodded. “Good meet. Thank you for not kill.”

“Oh! Um, no problem!” Gabu started laughing nervously, and soon Mei was joining in.

“Goodbye,” said Bepo, and, ducking to the grass, skittered away.

“Goodbye, Bepo! See you tomorrow!” Mei called after. Then he looked to his companion. “That
went… rather well, don’t you think?”

Gabu was grinning and beaming like Mei had seldom seen him. “I have to admit… my hopes are
buoyed!”

“Well then. I hope they stay that way throughout the day. See you later, Gabu.”

“See you later, Mei.”

Mei heard the wolf’s big paws pressing down the grass as he walked away. He took a different
direction himself, noting how his steps made much less sound, and thought about his
grandmother’s wisdom. Had she been right about the need for wolves? Or had she just been telling
little Mei what she wanted to be true?

With this much food for thought, Mei thought it was high time he got some food in his belly. So he grabbed a bite for the road and walked off for lusher pastures.

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**The 11th Evening**

Mei lay, facing the cave’s exit, on the soft patch of moss he’d helped Jenny put together. Had that really just been three days ago? They’d been such eventful days. Mei’s life was so much more interesting now than it the way it had been, with one day, one month, one season running into the next. It was strange—he’d thought he and Gabu had finally escaped to a quiet, peaceful existence…but now that they were free of pursuit, peace and quiet were turning out to be more exciting than strife.

He’d been thinking all day. Mei had always enjoyed thinking, but he’d never known how hard he could think until coming here. He really felt like he was on a path somewhere. He felt like he mattered. It was strange, since he no longer had a herd to matter to.

Mei wondered if Mii had found someone else to be like her older brother, if Tap had found a new best friend. He knew his grandmother must still be mourning him, but he wondered if she actually thought he was dead. And yes, he mattered to Gabu…but somehow, Mei felt like he mattered in a broader sense—like all the world was watching him. He couldn’t explain it, but he couldn’t claim not to enjoy the feeling.

He could see traces of cloud shifting in the distance. Somehow, these seemed worth watching, as if they might tell him something he needed to know. He watched dutifully, letting his mind drift, until the entrance was filled with brown fur and the most important person in his life stood looking into the cave.

“Oh! You’re already here. I didn’t think I would find you at home, but I can’t say I’m unhappy.”

“Good evening, Gabu. It is evening by now, isn’t it?”

Gabu glanced over his shoulder. “Well, it’s still bright out, but the sun should be down in an hour.”

“I filled up quickly at the bluff today, and I felt like visiting the edge of Tall Meadow. So I went to see if I could find any rabbits.”

“And did you?” asked Gabu with interest.

Mei nodded, not exactly relishing the memory. “There were three or four, but they ducked away when they saw me. I called out to them: ‘Wait, I won’t hurt you!’ But they wouldn’t come back. I saw a couple more later on, but they wouldn’t talk to me either.”

Gabu swallowed a lump. “Oh no! I wonder if they think you’re a meat-eater just because you spend so much time with me.”

“Or just your accomplice. It’s possible they simply smelt your scent on me and were afraid.”

Gabu crept into the lair. “And now they know my scent is something to be afraid of. Oh, Mei! I think yesterday was a mistake. If everyone is too afraid to talk to us, how can we ever tell them they don’t have to be afraid? It’s a paradox.”
“It’s a nasty bur in the fur,” said Mei. “But I did call out to them to tell them that they don’t need to be afraid of you today, and probably tomorrow too.”

“Oh! Well, if that’s what you said, I guess I’d better not hunt tomorrow, either.” Gabu patted his belly, which still seemed amply plump. “I think once every three days is enough, really.”

“So that’s the plan, then? Two days of friendliness followed by one day of hunting?”

“I think for now, that’s the plan,” Gabu agreed. He stretched out on the dirt floor. “I see you’re using the moss bed you made with your squirrel friend.”

Mei nodded somberly. “It’s comfortable. I wish she’d come back.”

“I wish for that too. I feel so… wrong. As if the way I’ve lived my whole life was completely wrong, only not a single soul around me realized it.”

“Believe it or not… I feel the same way.”

Gabu looked over. “Really? What do you think you’ve been doing wrong? And you can’t say ‘not making friends with wolves’, because you know as well as I do that wouldn’t have been possible.”

“Honestly, Gabu? I don’t know why I feel this way. Maybe we should have been trying to make friends with wolves, even if it wasn’t possible. Or maybe…”

“Yes, Mei?”

He shut his eyes, and the wispy clouds disappeared. “I just feel like we could have been thinking differently.”

He could hear Gabu’s breaths. The smell of well-fed wolf was powerful. Whatever the rabbits might think, this was the smell of safety now.

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The 12th Day

Gabu strode through the grass at the shallow edge of Tall Meadow, far from the treeline. His ears were peaked. He listened for the pouncing of rabbits through brush, watched for tall eartips, smelled the air at regular intervals. But he wasn’t planning to hunt the rabbits today. He wanted to know if they were watching.

The steady hiss of yielding grass sounded suddenly behind Gabu, and he took off running. Now two sets of legs were churning tall grass beneath two chests.

“Nooo!” he cried as he fled. “Don’t hurt me! I’m only an innocent goat!”

“The more innocent, the better!” yelled Mei in his most sinister voice—a voice that was still touchingly pure despite his best efforts. “The more innocent you are, the tastier you’ll be!”

“Noooo!” Gabu shouted, cutting at an angle toward the woods. He saw a rabbit leap away—good. He wanted them to watch this. He hoped they heard. “I’m too young to be devoured by a wolf!”

“But the contrary!” roared Mei. “You’re precisely the right age! Come back and get ready to go into my single-chambered belly!” With that, he drew within pouncing distance… and pounced!
Gabu let himself trip; Mei landed on his back. Cloven hooves combed the fur of his back, and he yowled as if being shredded by claws. This wasn’t the time to tell Mei he should try and grab his prey by the nose or the neck instead.

“Taste my natural weapons, delicious goat!”

“I’m not done for yet!” retorted Gabu, bucking gently. Mei flew from his back, and by the time he’d found his footing in the grass, Gabu had darted off again.

“Every minute you evade me just makes the chase more satisfying!” yelled Mei, dashing once more into action. He licked his lips and started to gain again on his quarry.

The rabbits sat watching in amazement, stunned and baffled. This was something they couldn’t ignore.

But what could they make of it?

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Chapter End Notes

Bepo is a cautious vole. It needs you to assure it two or even three times that you won’t kill it before it trusts you. ;)

The game of role reversal in the final scene is something our protagonists discover they enjoy in the "Secret Friends" TV show. I thought it was cute, even if it went on a bit long. It’s good to step out of your skin now and then.

And now, if you’ll indulge me, it’s time to introduce our final viewpoint character…
The 13th Day

Chapter Summary

* What could possibly explain it all?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 13th Day

It was a kind day. The sound of distant cracking ice cut the air. Lala the gray wolf—daughter of Sora, sister of Bari—glanced to her left at Muri Muri Mountain. “Good morning, my friend,” she said.

She didn’t need to look left all that often these days: the appearance of the mountain didn’t change all that much. But it did change a bit, over time, and from a certain way of thinking, that gradual change in appearance was the whole purpose of her journey. Indeed, one could see it as the whole purpose of her continued existence.

So she did look now and then. And she noticed the little changes. A patch of reddish gray penetrated down a little deeper into the shimmering ice on the second highest peak. The dark stone of the base was glossier here, as if coated with spring run-off, perhaps refrozen. The three peaks that had reminded her of lily petals were now nearly together, as if the flower had closed. And most importantly… more of the pass, such as it was, was visible from this angle.

Lala actually stopped walking to view it. It took a decent surprise to get her to stop in her tracks these days. Aside from the time she spent lying in wait for food, she’d been moving pretty much dusk to dawn ever since the breakdown, plus staying up into the early mornings. (She’d had to become an ambush hunter to survive—something wolves weren’t really known for, but which she’d turned out to be surprisingly good at.) Yet this was worth getting a good look at. It was a pass, all right. Rocky, snow-covered, icy, yes, but it went through.

Well, how about that. Now that Lala had circled nearly halfway around the mountain, spending all winter on the move, it turned out her epic detour had been perhaps unnecessary. There was a way through the mountain. But she wasn’t upset; she didn’t curse herself for a fool, or a coward. She laughed out loud. Her laugh echoed off the mountain’s distant side and no doubt scared away any animals hiding in the shrubs. She didn’t care. This was a good discovery, a good sighting. Her friend, the mountain that had sat to her left for months on end, had given her a beautiful present.

If there was a pass through, it meant someone might have survived. Not her brother, no. She wasn’t that lucky—the two hunters to make it back alive had spoken of avalanche, injuries, frozen death. If only they hadn’t named Giro among the dead—and Bari—the pack might have been saved. Those ambitious enough to stake a claim for control might have hesitated if they’d thought Giro might be coming back. To jostle for power was one thing; to usurp was another. Compromise and practicality might have saved the day, and by the time it became clear their great leader wasn’t returning, there might have been a new stable order.
Instead, the news had sparked instant intrigue. With only sixteen wolves left, the five remaining adult males had started courting the females and adolescents for alliances, had courted alliances of convenience among themselves. Lala had found herself simultaneously thriving—in her element at last—and utterly disgusted by the whole affair. If only Bari had survived! Lala would have worked herself to the very brink of exhaustion to install him as alpha. She would have found her limits and expanded them; guile, seduction, wit, muscle and tooth would all have been her tools and her weapons. But her brother was dead, and Lala, while suppressing her grief, saw nothing in any of the remaining claimants to inspire her. So she played peacemaker instead, mixed with stints as counselor, riddler, and heart-scryer. She wanted to know what made her packmates tick, now that the will of the weak finally mattered. She worked to keep the pack together… but her heart had never been in it. She knew that now. Her heart was somewhere over the horizon.

For a long time, Lala had been yearning for an excuse to go traveling. To leave her pack behind and find… something. She loved her brother, and she found the pack itself endearing, but she couldn’t say she loved her life. While she would never have said it, she’d thought of herself as someone who should have been born into a greater pack, a larger entity. She was already the highest ranking female in her pack by birthright, and if she hadn’t been, she would have earned that distinction in short order. She yearned for greater challenges! She was desperately hungry for them. She felt like a princess of mysteries, but birth had made her nothing but the belle of Baku Baku Valley. If only something would happen, she had often told herself while she lay on her favorite rock and watched the goings on. Hunting captivated many of her pack-sisters and brothers, and she did hunt capably enough, but for her, food was never the main course. If only something would happen. She was sometimes tempted to make something happen herself, but it wouldn’t have made sense. She was already as high as a female could rise, unless she was going to scheme against Giro. And she would gladly have done it, if Bari had asked her, even once—but Bari loved Giro. He didn’t want to be alpha, and he didn’t want Giro removed from power. So Lala had nothing to do with her days but dream, and wonder, and watch. Just in case. Just in case something, anything beyond the ordinary, should chance to happen.

Then one day, a low-ranking young male had started going off by himself, over and over. Lala missed nothing; she counted his absences. Five, six, seven. He made excuses; he went from being invisible in the pack to playing the fool; he made himself useful in every possible way except for hunting. By all accounts, Gabu was a terrible hunter. But he was a gifted tracker, a speedy messenger, a reliable cubsitter. How could a wolf with so much energy, so much eager motivation, be so good at serving the pack, yet so incompetent at the primary skill that made them wolves? Yet there were also stories of him chasing down, and perhaps catching, goats on his own! How was this possible? The clumsy wolf who’d been afraid to jump a gap between cliffs in his cubhood was suddenly doing daredevil tricks on the spires. He tutored Boro like a father; he started working out to hone his agility, his stamina, his strength. Suddenly this near-omega was a dominant force in the pack, in all ways but one—he could not hunt. Gabu wasn’t just a bad hunter. He was abysmal. His presence was more often a detriment than a boon to the hunting party. Tripping in the path of the other hunters… making inopportune noises… grabbing goats only to fumble his grip and watch them slip through his paws. Gabu was the worst hunter Lala had ever heard of. He didn’t make sense. Now this was an amazing, delectable mystery!

Suddenly, Lala was loving her life again. She watched Gabu, trailing him sometimes as far as she could get away with without being missed. She suspected he had a lover in another pack. It added up, more or less—that would explain his frequent absences, his new verve for life, his sudden drive for self-improvement. That in itself was juicy enough. Yet Lala hadn’t been able to shake the idea there was something more she was missing. There were two flaws in her hypothesis. One: Gabu seemed to have a crush on Lala herself, albeit a subtle one, and how did that jibe with a secret
lover? And two: it didn’t explain how he could be so good at so many things all of a sudden, yet so astoundingly bad at hunting.

What could possibly explain it all? Lala lay awake wondering, trying to find the missing piece. But it never clicked into place. She never quite put it all together.

Until one day, a scout had come back from recon with a strange rumor on his lips about a wolf who’d made secret friends with a goat… and it had struck Lala like a lightning bolt. She’d shot straight up in her seat; like the crack of a rock in a valley, it all clicked instantly. Of course. He wasn’t a terrible hunter—he was pretending. Sabotaging the pack on purpose. To protect the goats! It turned out this new force in their pack was a traitor! And not just a pack-traitor—a species traitor! (Could such a thing possibly exist?) Finally, it all added up. It had been all she could do to keep from letting her laughter ring out loud through the valley. Oh, this was exquisite. This was simply beautiful!

Now, there was no one around. Now she could laugh loud and free, without fear of interrogation. Because there was a pass through Muri Muri Mountain. It was still unlikely, but it was a lot more likely than it had been when she’d set out on her epic quest. It was starting to look like there was a real chance her longshot, the longshot she’d been nurturing for months and months, was actually going to come through.

There was a good chance Gabu, the species-traitor, was still alive, here past the edge of the known world. And if he was, there was nothing in the world Lala wanted more than to track him down.

Chapter End Notes

At last, I get to introduce our third viewpoint character! I really enjoyed writing this long-awaited chapter. Lala comes from the Himitsu no Tomodachi (Secret Friends) series, in which she appears in episodes 10, 16 and 20. Check it out--the story has art now! The image in this chapter, as in many of the chapters to come, is thanks to enthusiastic reader and artist DragonBlazerxxx. Look for them on DeviantArt!

So that everyone knows—the wolf pack depicted in Arashi no Yoru ni (both movie and TV show) isn't actually how wolves organize socially in the wild. The concept of a large pack with a dynamic hierarchy including alphas and betas was formulated by German animal behaviorist Rudolph Schenkel around 1940, but it later turned out his observations were only valid for wolves living in captivity. In the wild, wolves tend to live in nuclear family units. So in a way, the wolf as brought to us in popular children's stories is actually a mythical beast!

'Sora' is a unisex Japanese name meaning ‘sky’. It seemed like a good choice for Lala and Bari’s father, whom I imagine was strong (and blue-tinged) like his son, and an observant watcher like his daughter.

Just one more chapter, and we’ll close the book on Part I of this novel! And yes, it is
turning out to be a novel, and not the novella I originally expected. I counted the words I've written so far and was rather surprised! But it's not the first time this has happened to me. My Undertale fan novel, Alphys and the Queen, was originally intended to be just a short story.
Gabu walked the lands in peace. He was conscious of every footfall, every shifting of weight. He felt like a holy creature with the dry grass for his adherents, sanctifying his every step with a quiet rustle. He felt his tail swinging like a leaf-heavy bough. He listened for motion. But the land was quiet.

His belly was quiet, too. It was still reasonably full. He’d hunted yesterday, and he hadn’t gone as wild as three days before, nor had he had as much success. The animals had learned to fear him, as he’d feared. And he suspected they’d actually listened to Mei’s proclamations—that Gabu would hunt only every third day, and could be trusted in the meantime. They might not be ready to trust him on his safe days, but they’d seemed ready to hide and flee yesterday—when they knew he’d be looking for sustenance. That didn’t surprise Gabu. Fear was easier to risk than friendliness. The animals were just sticking on the safe side. But that hadn’t stopped him from catching a rabbit yesterday, and a ground squirrel, and two field mice.

It wasn’t a feast, but he actually felt better now than he had three days ago. He knew better than to gorge himself. His message delivered, Gabu was content to eat lightly for a while.

He wondered whether anyone noticed how somberly he was walking. It was almost ceremoniously slow. He couldn’t hear anyone, but he could almost feel eyes on his body. The animals were probably watching from the grass. He wondered what they were thinking. Were they thinking about how he was keeping his word? Were any of them working up the courage to come and say hello?

His slow footsteps took him from the edge of Tall Meadow into the low heath, which gave way in turn to the sparsely mossed moor that stretched past the hills into the lower crags of the mountain, a patchy sea of green and red. He wasn’t sure why he’d chosen to come this way. There weren’t really any animals here, aside from the occasional mouse or vole. The vegetation was thin enough he could actually see their little burrow holes. The mountain was stark before him, rising high with layers of rock, melted ice, melting ice and abiding snow. It seemed like winter never left the upper reaches of the snowy mountain. Maybe in summer, the peak would lose its white coat, but Gabu wasn’t going to hold his breath.

He realized he was holding his breath. Gabu stared at the mountain and forced himself to breathe. He stood with unexpected reverence, abject before the mountain much like the smaller animals were before him. He began to understand how hard it would be for them to come and say hello.

“So there he stands. The conquering warrior in exile.”
Panicking, Gabu’s first scrambled thought was that, to his surprise, the mountain was female. But had it really spoken at all? Surely it was one of the animals he’d been thinking of just now, and yet—and yet that voice had been utterly familiar. Even if it was the sort of familiarity that always stood apart by a pace or two.

And there she was. Like a vision visited. One of the only other wolves he’d longed to see again before he died.

Was she real?

“Still not hunting, I see,” said Lala, silhouetted by the sunlit clouds that lingered behind the mountain. “How do you stay alive?”

“Lala,” was the only thing he could say.

She rose to her haunches and bowed, one paw placed gracefully at her chest.

Gabu still wasn’t sure she was real. His wits left him. “I… I didn’t think I’d ever see you again!”

She returned, just as gracefully, to all fours. “I couldn’t stay away.”

Gabu couldn’t bear it. He stretched his four legs, standing as tall as he could. “Lala, are you really here?”

She laughed, and it was as beautiful as he remembered. “Do you think I’m a nature spirit?”

He swallowed, shrinking a little. “You could be.”

She eyed him thoughtfully, taking a couple paces closer. “You really did have a thing for me, didn’t you?” she observed.

This statement was so sudden, so incongruous, that Gabu didn’t know how to respond. “…Yes?”

She prowled closer to examine his face. A big smile cut across her own. “You did.”

Gabu swallowed. “It wasn’t just me. All the guys liked you, Lala.”

“Yes, they did, didn’t they? Yet I thought somehow you were different. Do you know, in my lifetime, how many wolves have come to me for advice on how to spruce up their relationships?”

He’d done that. He was instantly ashamed. “…A lot?”

Lala shook her head. “One. You. You came to me with news of a special friend. You asked me for the feminine perspective. Any other male would be asking their friends how to win me over. But you came to me for advice. On how to win over somebody else.”

Gabu’s knees trembled. “I’m sorry!”

A genuine, if chilling, laugh followed. “Good gods, Gabu, don’t be sorry! It was charming. And that gift package you gave me… when I was expecting a bundle of goat meat? You remember?”

Gabu took a step back, his legs bowing. “Of course I remember.” He remembered every word they ever said to each other, he realized with a chill.

“Three acorns, two minuscule bones, a stick and a funny rock,” she recalled. “It was almost like an insult. But it was so surprising I couldn’t take it that way. It was so cute! And there was actually a
precious gift in there, adding to the mystery.”


“The green flower,” she agreed. “Where did you ever find a green flower?”

Gabu tried to gulp again, but his throat was dry. “Actually… I didn’t. The flower was from Mei.”

Lala stared. “Mei?” she asked.

“My… goat friend.”

Now Lala gasped, drawing back. Again she laughed, but strangely this time, distantly. “Your goat friend put a gift into my gift bundle?”

“We gathered it together,” Gabu lamely explained.

“The two of you… gathered a bundle of gifts… for me?”

Gabu whimpered as he shrugged. “I couldn’t go back empty-pawed, so…”

“So you told your goat friend you needed help finding a gift for the girl who was stalking you,” she exclaimed in triumph.

“Um—I didn’t put it quite like that!”

Lala’s laugh rang, a hint of it echoing from the distant mountainside. “It seems this ‘Mei’ was a very patient goat.”

Gabu sank in place. How could this be happening? “Lala.”

“Gabu.”

He sat down, but looked mournfully at her face. “I’ve missed you.”

“Have you?” she asked coyly.

He nodded rapidly. “I think of you sometimes. More nights than not. Of all the wolves in our pack… you were the one I felt worst about never seeing again.”

“Even worse than little Boro?”

Gabu’s heart was struck as if by a jagged rock. Boro had adored him, against all the odds. He dearly wanted to nuzzle the little tyke again. “Yes,” he admitted. “Worse than Boro.”

“Oh, Gabu.” Lala’s voice was stricken with emotion. “I don’t know whether to kill you, seduce you, befriend you or walk away.”

Kill him?! “I… I’d rather you didn’t kill me.”

She sashayed closer. “Yet you were a traitor, weren’t you?”

Gabu tensed himself. “Yes. I was a traitor.” He’d come to accept the word during the arduous trek over the mountains. Let him be a traitor—it had still been the right thing to do.

“And a traitor isn’t supposed to be suffered to live, is he?”
Gabu scored the bare earth with his claws. “Please, Lala. I don’t want to fight you.”

She stopped moving. “How could you do it, Gabu? I’ve come thousands of miles, hoping against hope you were still alive… just to ask you: How could you do it?”

_Do what?_ he wanted to ask her. But he knew. “It was an accident. We made friends by accident.”

“Oh, come on, Gabu. How does someone make friends by accident?”

He backed away, tail swaying. “It was a dark night! We both had colds… we took shelter in the same barn…”

“You… didn’t see you were talking to a goat?”

“I didn’t! We talked for… I don’t know how long. We comforted one another.”

“By accident,” Lala repeated.

“By the time I realized, it was too late! We were friends by then. I couldn’t kill him.”

Lala blinked and asked innocently: “You couldn’t?”

It was Gabu’s turn to stare. “Could you kill a friend, Lala?”

Her shoulders rose, as did the fur on her nape. She smiled terrifyingly; Gabu braced for battle. But then she broke down laughing and her whole body relaxed. “Oh-h-h, Gabu. I couldn’t kill you, I’ve always been fond of you. Don’t you know that?”

Gabu wanted to hide. He nodded, anxious.

“So I guess the next question is… are you going to run me off your land?”

Gabu blinked, wide-eyed. “What?”

“This is your land, isn’t it? I’m a wolf from outside your borders. So the choice is yours—are you going to accept me, or run me off your land?”

There was no choice here, yet Gabu found the lack of a choice very difficult. “I would never run you off!”

She tilted her head. “So you accept me?”

It frightened Gabu how easily she worked her charm. “Of course I accept you. I’m—so glad to see you.”

She sat and smiled smugly, waiting.

“Did you really come all the way around the mountain?”

She nodded toward it. “All the way. We got to know each other rather well.”

“You—you and the mountain?”

She nodded. “Muri Muri Mountain. That’s what I call it. No one ever bothered to name it until you decided to escape to the other side.”

Muri Muri. _Impossible, unreasonable. Beyond expectation._ “It’s a good name.”
“I thought so. Yet here we are.”

“H-here we are,” admitted Gabu.

There was a moment’s unreal silence between them. Then Lala rose. “Well? Aren’t you going to show me your den?”

Gabu blinked. “Um.” Was this safe? Was this a good idea? “Of course! It’s just up the second hill, there. Follow me.”

This wasn’t good. Lala was too powerful for him. He’d never been able to stomach her, and he’d only ever had her company in little doses. What was going to happen if he had her around all the time?

Yet somehow, he couldn’t afford not to find out.

Lala was on cloud nine. All the months of daydreaming, fantasizing that somehow, maybe, that enigmatic goofball who’d managed to destroy her pack was still living, and she could confront him. In her fantasies, he was weak or strong, obsequious or flippant or defiant. He was alone and starving; he was with a pack who didn’t know his secrets. Now the fantasy was playing out in reality, and it was such a heady feeling! Moreover, Lala was clearly in complete control. Gabu was alive, but still weak, and still smitten with her—she could do whatever she wanted with him. The plethora of options dizzied her! She wished she could kill him and make him her mate. She wished she could do everything to this amazing, weak-willed male, and only logic itself forbade her. Oh, logic! You’re next! she swore.

The flowers here were amazing. Lala didn’t doubt they were contributing to her giddiness. She could smell multiple varieties just walking past them, and the way they covered the hills—! Oh, she was going to like it here. Idly, she scanned the flowers to see if she could spot any unusual colors, and the memory of that green flower jumped to mind.

That flower. It had been from the goat all along. Amazing. The goat had known about her and had given her a gift. Life was the strangest thing. Lala had worn the flower a good month—all along the first, exciting leg of her journey, not to mention all through the tumultuous pack drama that had preceded it. It had wilted, but she’d kept it in her fur, because it kept her on task. It grounded her. It reminded her of what she had been to the species-traitor, what she had been to her pack. She’d kept it stubbornly until half the petals had fallen off, and then she’d tossed it into a run-off stream and let her enormous friend the mountain wash it away. To hell with Gabu, she’d thought at that moment, but recanted in the next. Now, she dearly wished she’d kept the flower. Even wilted, it would have been a perfect gift—something to remind Gabu of the goat—the foolish goat for which he’d given up everything. She could tell that even if Gabu’s knees quaked for her, he still missed his goat, and it would be wise for Lala to respect that. If she was to make him love her, she would need to be sympathetic. Not just to fake sympathy, either. She would have to actually feel it. The green flower would have been a good start.

Well, maybe there was a green flower growing somewhere around here. A fresh, new one would be perhaps even better than the original. Regifting was regifting, after all, no matter how well-intentioned.
It was twilight now. The male led her halfway up the second hill and paused near the pinnacle. She could see a cave at the top from here—was that really his home? It looked like Gabu had scored the premium den of this whole region. “Hold on a moment,” he told her nervously. “I just need to—one moment.”

She sat patiently and waited, having no idea what she was waiting for. But that was fine. She’d waited so long to be here… she could certainly stand one more minute before—

Gabu lifted his head and crooned into the cave. “We met one stormy night…!”

“We met one stormy night!” echoed a gentle voice from within.

No. It couldn’t be.

…It was. The goat was still alive. The goat was with him. The goat was living with him.

The poor goat came out of the cave just in time to hear Lala laughing hysterically, unable to control herself. This was just too much. Somehow, the white goat had survived Muri Muri Mountain, and was here, with them. That made things so much more complicated.

Life was so funny. Life was beautiful.

^~.~^)

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter is going up so late in the day! I got distracted last night when my printer stopped working and I completely forgot to revise it before work.

Since I want to keep the chapters roughly in the range of 2000 - 3000 words each, I’ve decided to leave the second half of the 14th Day for next week. So… we’re not quite up to Part II yet. But now maybe you’re getting a sense for what’s in store.

Lala likes italics like some people like chocolate. Her thought processes have a lot of italics. Please forgive her.
The 14th Evening

Chapter Summary

* You won’t hurt him, will you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 14th Evening

Mei was home early, lying on the moss and staring at the flower blossoms in the niche in the wall. They would last another day or so before he went ahead and ate them. For now, they were scenery. He didn’t feel like staring at the door, waiting for Gabu’s return. Some days were fine for that, but today, Mei’s head was in another place. He was remembering all the places he’d been, all the stories he’d heard. He was escaping this place, if only for a little bit. It was healthy, now and then, to remember the possibilities of the past.

Abruptly, he was drawn back into the present by Gabu’s call. Which was fine—that built a bridge of sorts between past and present. Funny—he’d chosen to give their special passphrase rather than just prance up and peek into the cave. But then, Mei had done it to Gabu the other day, when it was time to introduce him to Bepo. Could it be that Gabu had finally convinced one of the monkeys to come home with him? Or some other local animal? Now that would be a treat.

Mei sang out the passphrase in turn and unfolded his legs to walk out. He was met, to his surprise, with the sound of unhinged laughter and a full, feminine voice—and if that weren’t enough, the smell of wolf was doubled. Frightened, Mei leapt to the entryway and took in… sure enough. A silver-furred wolf girl, thrust back on her haunches with laughter. Oh no. What was this? What had Gabu done?

“Mei!” Gabu’s voice was trusty, if ragged. “I’d like to introduce you to… someone very special to me. This is my friend Lala. You remember—we made that gift bundle for her once! Lala… this is my best friend, Mei.”

Abruptly, the laughter ended and the sweet-faced canine lifted her head to face Mei from halfway down the hill. She bowed deeply. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Mei bowed back out of sheer habit. “Likewise, I’m sure.” He definitely remembered hearing about Lala, but he’d never expected to meet her!

The stranger kept her distance, looking up steadily. “So you’re the one Gabu was always sneaking off to see. Do you know, I suspected he had a secret lover?”

Mei tingled with embarrassment. But what did this mean? Had the pack found them at last? “Gabu, are we safe?”

The visitor grinned. “Absolutely not. Hurt him? Gabu, the two of you are one of a kind, so far as I can gather. If you had… well, if you had a bone that was unique in all the world, would you break
it to suck out the marrow?"

Gabu’s eyes widened. “No!” But Mei couldn’t say he was terribly reassured.

“Well, there you are,” said the stranger with a flourish. “No, Mei, I swear on my honor not to hurt you. You’re far too unique… and, if I might add, remarkably cute!”

Mei’s embarrassment intensified. “Um… how did you get here? Did you come over the mountain?”

She jerked her head, indicating a direction. “Around it. I’ve been walking since the fall.”

“Since autumn? That long?”

She grinned, showing the impressive set of teeth Mei knew he’d find there sooner or later. “Since the fall. Of the leaves, yes, but also of the pack.” She turned her head to Gabu, whose ears were up. “Did you know, Gabu, that your clever escape destroyed us? You thought all you were doing was running away, didn’t you?”

“I just wanted to find a place where Mei and I could live!”

The she-wolf swished her tail. “Funny, how the simplest desires can wreck so much damage, isn’t it? Thanks to your little stunt, the pack you grew up with is gone. I tried my best to save it… but then again, maybe it wasn’t really my best, was it? Because a part of me wanted to see if I could find you. A part of me kept hoping you were still alive.”

Mei was only about seventy percent sure he could trust this stranger not to attack him. She’d sworn on her honor, yes, but was that something she actually possessed? Besides, he was half afraid she might attack Gabu. He shied back, but stayed alert, just in case he was needed.

“The pack? It’s… gone?”

She nodded. “There is no longer such a thing as the Baku Baku Valley wolf pack. Oh, there are still a few wolves in the valley. The young ones mainly found adults to tag along with. A couple of breeding pairs stayed together. But they’ve carved up the land into territories, and they won’t work together. About half of us left the valley altogether, for more fruitful pastures.” She winked at Mei, who wished she hadn’t.

Gabu sighed, his tail falling. “Did Bari survive?”

Lala’s jaw jerked and her eyes seemed to gleam with sharpness. “Your avalanche killed him. You weren’t aware?”

Gabu shook his head. “It almost killed me, too. I lost my memories for a while! I don’t remember what happened after the snow and ice fell… I wandered on my own. The next thing I knew, I was in that cave, with Mei… and everything came flooding back.”

“You lost… your memories?” Lala seemed to savor this revelation. “Oh, Gabu, how strange! It must have been such an ordeal.”

He twitched uncomfortably. “I almost ate Mei. I didn’t remember who he was.”

“How horrifying!” But she didn’t sound horrified to Mei—she sounded fascinated. “I’ve heard that sort of thing can happen for a while… but how long did it last for you?”
Gabu sighed. “All winter. I just came out of it at the last full moon.”

Lala clucked her tongue. “Remarkable. And you claimed ownership of that cave while you were out of your right mind?”

“I guess so! No one’s come asking about it, anyway.”

“May I come up and see?”

Gabu looked uncomfortably back at Mei, as if looking for approval. Mei didn’t know how to feel about this newcomer, but he certainly wasn’t comfortable with her entering their home. But what could he do? If Gabu wanted her here… he wouldn’t stand in his way, would he? Mei paced slowly away from the cave entrance and swung his horns toward it. “Feel free.”

Lala smiled and nodded courteously to him as she passed. He could smell her intensely. He was afraid. He tried not to show it. She walked into the den, and Gabu followed.

Mei stayed outside and tried to catch his breath.

“What a lovely cave!” said Lala. “And this… shelf? This wasn’t here naturally, was it?”

Hesitantly, Mei peeked inside. “No, it wasn’t. I dug that out, and put down the moss. But I had help from… a squirrel friend.” He realized that he just as soon wouldn’t have mentioned her.

“Oh? How surprising! Will I be meeting your squirrel friend?” asked Lala.

“She doesn’t come around anymore,” said Mei brusquely.

Lala made sudden eye contact with Mei. “What a pity.”

Mei shied away and sat outside the cave. He heard the muffled voices of the two wolves as they talked inside his home. He made out names, but none were familiar. Lala was giving Gabu the news—the gossip, really—of what had happened after the avalanche. Their leader had been killed—Mei gathered that much—and havoc had broken out. She spoke straightforwardly of the death of her brother, whom she claimed to have loved more than anyone in the world. Mei thought she certainly didn’t seem heartbroken. He sighed and walked away, not wanting to hear any more. This was trouble. This could be the end of… what? Of his friendship with Gabu?

Well, at the least, it meant sharing his attention. At the least, it meant constantly being anxious about this she-wolf and her doings. He hoped she didn’t plan to stay here for long. He wondered if Gabu would want her to. He wondered if Gabu still liked her the way he apparently had then.

Mei didn’t trust her. He didn’t trust her at all. He regretted giving her his green flower, all those months ago.

At last they exited the cave. Gabu seemed fully invested—sorrowful, but hopeful. He sprang along beside Lala—now on her left, now scurrying up behind on her right. She was smooth and graceful in her movements; he was quick and attentive. He wanted her—Mei could see that. He was warmed with a spark of joy for his friend, but this spark was overwhelmed by a wave of jealousy. There was no use denying it—Mei was jealous. He could call it suspicion, but he knew himself well enough to know jealousy when he felt it.

It was an ugly feeling.

Gabu looked back at Mei, his expression a little pained. Mei remained stoic as he stood there.
Lala followed the glance back and smiled to Mei. “Thank you for letting me catch Gabu up,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for a sympathetic ear for so long.” She seemed kind—Mei had to admit that.

“I’m glad you found him,” Mei heard himself say. “Condolences on the loss of your brother.”

She bowed her head and tail for a full two seconds. “He had a good life. But too short. The two of you seem to have escaped that fate.” She looked around, listening to the birdsong, smelling the flower pollen on the wind. “You seem to be quite happy here.”

“We’re doing all right,” said Gabu. “Lala… you will be staying, won’t you?”

The she-wolf’s face sprouted a fantastic grin. “Staying? Why, Gabu, I’ve been searching for you for months! I wouldn’t leave even if you tried to run me off.”

Somehow Gabu barked a laugh at this, even while it chilled Mei’s heart. “Mei—we have a new neighbor!” cried the happy wolf.

“Yes, it would seem we do,” he replied. “Welcome to the Emerald Forest.”

Lala gave Mei a careful smile. “I don’t want to intrude. Maybe I’d better go acquaint myself with the local flora and fauna.”

Fauna. Mei shivered in fear—was she going to be hunting? She had to, didn’t she? She was going to undo all of their social progress!

But Gabu didn’t seem concerned. “All right, Lala! We’ll see you later. Oh, I’m so happy you’ve come!”

She winked and turned her head toward them both. “Indeed! I think this is the start of something wonderful.” With that serving as a goodbye, she slinked off, caught a scent on the breeze, and pounced off in pursuit. Soon she was out of sight.

“Gabu.”

He came over, his tail brushing against Mei’s shank. “Mei?”

Mei swallowed. He could feel his lower stomachs shifting. “I’m afraid.”

Gabu blinked. “Afraid of Lala?”

Mei nodded. “And I’m afraid you’ll fall for her. I’m afraid the peace we’ve finally found here… will be lost.”

Gabu peered sadly. He lowered himself to press his cheek against Mei’s side. “You know I’ll always stand by you first, don’t you?”

Mei wanted to know that. He also wanted to ask if Gabu would drive Lala out, if Mei asked him to. But of course he couldn’t do that to his friend. He stretched his neck, touched his nose affectionately to his friend’s cheek, and said nothing.

The evening winds were starting to chill them. Mei wanted to go inside. But Gabu kept gazing after where Lala had gone. “I think she’s amazing, Mei.”

Well, perhaps. But that wasn’t everything. “I just don’t know if I can trust her, Gabu.”
“Why not, Mei?”

It was funny how they used each other’s names as punctuation. To show they really meant what they said—that they wanted serious answers. Or to show that they felt strongly about something. “She seems like she’s hiding her true feelings.”

“Well, doesn’t that mean there’s all the more of her to discover? Are you worried she’ll try to eat you, Mei?”

Mei looked seriously at him. “I’m worried she doesn’t have your best interests at heart.”

Gabu raised a forepaw haplessly. “But why wouldn’t she?”

The answer smoldered in Mei, inexpressible, but certain. How could Gabu not see the danger? “I don’t know,” he had to admit. “But please… be careful.”

Gabu still looked sad. Sad that Mei wasn’t happy for him, perhaps? “I guess I can be careful around her.”

A sudden, sharp spite ran through Mei. “You know you can eat me any time you want. You know that, right, Gabu? If I ever get too annoying, you can just eat me, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

Gabu fell down to a wide stance. “Oh, Mei! Don’t even joke about that!”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

Gabu shook his head nervously. “Well, you know I never will. Never. So even if it’s not a joke… it’s not exactly serious, either.”

Mei stared at Gabu as seriously as he knew how. He almost wanted to be eaten—for his friend to take him up on the offer. Almost.

“Please don’t talk like that again,” Gabu pled.

Mei kept staring, feeling the cold evening winds chilling his innards. “Okay, Gabu. I won’t.”

Gabu stared back until it was too much—he looked away. “Let’s go inside, Mei.”

So they did. And they lay together, and warmed up. But there wasn’t much more to say.

Outside, there wasn’t a trace of moon in the sky.

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^ - ^ END OF PART 1 v - v

Chapter End Notes
So, it’s happened again—I decide, partway through a story, to divide that story into Parts. I actually sort of intended for this story to have three parts from the outset—I was just wrong about where the breaks would come. But if my story length sense is worth a hill of beans (and it may not be), then this is approximately the one-third point of this novel. Part I is now retroactively titled: ALONE AT LAST.

Our heroes have now spent a fortnight together in relative peace. It appears that may be about to change.

By the way, the closing scene of the movie pulls rapidly back past hills and mountains and meadows, and as we pass the meadowland, a pack of nine wolves can be seen running. Given that exactly fourteen wolves were sent to hunt Gabu, does that mean we can infer that five died in the avalanche? Well, perhaps. But maybe that’s a different pack, included just to give us a sense that life and nature go on. Or maybe it’s reformed remnants of the pack that was. It’s a detail that seems to run counter to Lala’s account, but I think it’s too minor to be considered authoritative.
The 15th Day

Chapter Summary

* Do you really think she's forgiven us?
* Do you really think I deserved to die?
* Do you realize how many times I gave you an opening?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ARASHI NO KANATA
PART II: MEET THE NEIGHBORS

The 15th Morning

Warmth. A forgiving day. Plenty of birdsong. The bitterness of the night was lifted in the way only nature knew how to do.

Life was changed. They were no longer alone. It was funny how no path toward the horizon ever seemed to remain the same for long.

For now, the cruelty of Mei’s dreams clung to him like a wreath of thorns… but time would make it better. He felt himself breathing. He was warm. He would heal.

Gradually, he realized that Gabu, too, was awake. They’d both been lying awake for some time. And that was fine. They didn’t need to speak. Not for now.

But after a little while, Mei did speak into the silence. It wasn’t a noise out of nowhere; it was a natural extension of the warming morning.

“Did you really never think of her that way?”

Gabu’s sinews could actually be heard stretching as he hoisted himself up. “Lala?”

“Who else?”

Gabu took his time pondering. “Well… honestly, she was always sort of special for me. Do you know, Mei, I was never the bravest cub in my pack. Not by a long leap! I was actually rather clutzy. And Lala… cared about me. Even when I failed.” He paused, his jaw held in contemplation. “I never knew why.”
Mei set his head on his leg. “I wonder what she saw in you.”

Oops. That had come out too harsh, hadn’t it? Gabu remained silent.

Mei pushed himself to his hooves and faced him. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t. But it’s a good point. I don’t know what she saw in me either.”

“Did you have friends, growing up?” It was funny how he’d never asked before.

“Well… not exactly. There were other cubs my age… like Zack, and Beach. I guess they were as close to friends as I had.”

“You wouldn’t have called Lala a friend?”

Gabu’s eyes shrank as he considered. “…Oh, gee. I would have liked to have her as a friend. All the guys liked her, even back then. But we never spent much time together.” He shrugged, his thick tail flipping over with a thud. “It was only ever a moment, here and there. But, oh, what moments!”

Mei felt himself softening. “I wish I’d been there to see them.”

Gabu smiled wistfully. “She used to tell me it was all right if I failed today… the important thing was to keep trying, so that I could succeed tomorrow.”

Mei smiled at this simple wisdom. “Well, what do you think? Was she right?”

Gabu’s eyes crept back to their normal size. “I don’t honestly know, Mei! I feel like in a sense, I stopped trying. I left the field entirely.”

“And she followed you.”

Gabu nodded slowly. “She won’t give up on me, even after I’ve given up on everything I ever knew.”

“It’s strange to think. By doing what we did, we actually ended your pack. I’d wondered, but I hadn’t actually dared to hope—”

Gabu gave Mei a strange, sad look.

“Oh. I’m sorry. You must be sad to hear the news.”

“I liked Bari. Giro was scary… and maybe it’s for the best that he’s gone. But Bari…”

Mei sighed. “Sorry, Gabu.”

He swallowed, rising. “I killed her brother.”

“…I think that may be what worries me. While it’s true you didn’t directly kill him… if it hadn’t been for you… and me…”

“He’d still be alive,” finished Gabu. “And she loved him. I know she did.”

“Do you really think she’s forgiven us?” asked Mei.

Gabu didn’t have an answer for that. His ears twitched and turned toward the exit. When he walked
out, Mei followed.

The wolf from the valley stood overlooking the Emerald Forest, doubt on his face. “I’ll ask her,” he decided. “I’ll come right out with it and ask her. If she’s come here to get revenge... I guess we’ll just have to fight.”

“Gabu. Please.” Mei hated the idea of him taking on anyone, let alone the she-wolf who’d always been there to shine over his failures. If he could never outperform her in the past, did he really think he could outfight her now?

“Well, what else can I do, Mei?” whined Gabu. “If she wants to fight me, am I supposed to run away?”

“She would track us down again,” Mei realized aloud. “She did it once.”

“Unless we go someplace so very far away that even she could never find us,” Gabu suggested mournfully.

Mei considered. It pained him, the idea of having to run further and leave what they had here behind. It surprised him to find he felt invested in the Emerald Forest.

“Or we could stand up to her together,” he countered. “If she wants a fight, she’ll have to fight both of us.”

“Mei! I won’t let her hurt you.”

Mei tossed his head. “These horns aren’t just for show. I couldn’t beat a wolf, true, but I could help in a tight spot. Together, we’d have a better chance against her than each of us alone.”

Gabu took a pained breath. “I don’t think she wants to fight. I just have to talk to her.” He started down the hill.

Mei squeezed his eyes shut tight. He wanted to call out and stop Gabu, but what could he say? “Please.”

Gabu looked back up the slope, his eyes inquisitive.

“...Be careful,” said Mei. “And if you need help, call. I’ll come running.”

Gabu’s smile seemed to carry a combination of warmth and amusement. “Thanks, Mei. That makes me feel better.”

With that, Mei’s companion walked off in search of trouble, and the day felt perilously empty. Mei was reluctant to visit Sneaky Bluff. He was afraid to move from this spot.

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**The 15th Day**

Long ago, Gabu had daydreamed of tracking Lala. He’d told himself it wouldn’t be hard—her scent was so distinctive it sometimes derailed his thoughts. It was different from the scent of all the
other wolves, but it was all wolf, without a doubt. And so as a youth, he’d known he could find her, but he’d never been brave enough to actually try tracking her. What would he have said if she’d caught him at it? She’d have asked him why, and he wouldn’t have known what to say.

But now, finally, he was doing what he’d so often dreamed about. Gabu was taking in Lala’s aroma and trying to find where she was. Unlike then, he now knew exactly why he wanted to find her.

Or at least, he thought he did.

Her trail was absurdly easy to find. She’d gone a fair distance from the hilltop, well into the forest proper, but her scent was everywhere. It was like a welcoming, sing-songy voice, striking fear in every other heart but welcoming Gabu in. Gabu loped along quickly as he followed the scent, but soon found himself running. Lala was an urgent problem. She was like a capsized tree set on fire by lightning, smoldering and threatening everything for miles around. She was a blessing too, if she didn’t intend to fight, but even blessings could be dangerous if they were too bountiful.

The brook Gabu sometimes drank from when he went through the forest appeared; the scent followed it to the right. Gabu swallowed a quick gulp and hurried after. He was deflected from the brook into an oxbow pond, mulchy and filled with angled low trees, some living, some fallen. The scent came to an intense climax here—it seemed to be where Lala had decided to make her home.

She wasn’t here, though. So Gabu sniffed around until he found a second, more recent trail. He heard monkeys crying to each other as he dashed through the forest, and wondered vaguely if any of them were among those who had thrown mangoes at him for sport. He burst from the trees into a sizable clearing. Lala’s scent was immediate. He stood there like a fool, looking this way and that, trying to figure out where she was.

_Hsssstt!_ The sound came from the nearby saplings. Gabu leapt to land facing it.

“Gabu, get out of sight! You’re scaring the prey!”

Gabu was stunned for a moment, then dashed from the clearing into the woods. He nearly brushed up against Lala where she lay in wait. She glared at him; awkwardly, he turned himself about and lay down in the greenery beside her. Her coat was marred with bits of muddy dredge and forest soil, yet she was still radiant silver—still somehow stunningly beautiful.

She watched the distance for a while. “Well, this stand may be spoiled,” she murmured. “It’s too bad. The wind was holding.”

Gabu followed her gaze to a trio of deer, two adults and a fawn. He salivated without thinking. The deer were peering into the foliage at them and looked wary of going back that way. “Sorry,” he murmured. This was strange—were they hunting like foxes? Gabu wasn’t used to lying in wait.

She watched them a while longer before turning her attention to Gabu. Her annoyed look changed easily into a smile. “You seemed pretty worked up. Were you just looking for me?”

Gabu nodded. He felt like a cub being reprimanded. “I wanted to talk to you.”

Lala stood. Dirt fell from her coat—somehow even that was beautiful. “Shall we talk and hunt?”

“Oh…” This was awkward. But Gabu reminded himself how much more awkward it could be. “Actually, I’ve fallen into a bit of a pattern. I only hunt every three days.”

Her light blue eyes widened in curiosity. “Really! And you weren’t hunting yesterday. So you hunt
tomorrow?"

Gabu nodded twice, feeling meek.

Lala’s ears tilted toward him patiently. “So why do you do it this way?”

Gabu cleared his throat nervously. It certainly didn’t seem like she wanted to hurt him. “Well, the idea is that I want to make the creatures around here comfortable around me. So I want to be… as predictable as I can!”

Lala’s smile grew lopsided. “Predictable? You want to hunt… predictably?”

He felt stupid, but the smile kept him from admitting it. “I guess it seems a little strange. But I really want to be able to make friends with some of the animals. I can’t help what I am. I have to hunt. But… I don’t have to hunt every single day. At least I have that much control over myself!” He finished by self-consciously rubbing the back of his neck.

His companion watched him with increasing fascination. “You want them to feel… comfortable around you,” she repeated.

How did she do it? How could she make everything he said sound stupid? “I can’t have just one friend for the rest of my life,” he said. Or rather, he could, and would accept that if he had to… but why not try for better?

“You’re really something. Do you know that, Gabu?” Lala’s eyes were adoring, if still patronizing. She moved her teeth toward his neck, and he flinched. She looked at him in surprise. “I was just going to give you a friendly nibble.”

“Oh. Of course.” Was she really? Was this the trick that would let her end his life without even the courtesy of a fight? Did he dare let her…?

But she didn’t try again. “You don’t need to live your life without any other friends, Gabu. We’re the only two wolves for forest-breatheds around. We’ve decided not to fight.” She sat down and let her smile settle into something gentle. “Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

She was saying… he knew what she was saying. But he couldn’t…

“Shouldn’t we be mates, Gabu?” Lala asked sweetly.

His joints felt rickety, his throat stiff. “But… your brother,” he said hoarsely.

Her eyes flared and she tilted down her head. Waiting for him to continue.

“I… let him die. If it weren’t for me…”

“It was self-defense,” she stated. “Wasn’t it?”

Gabu couldn’t nod quickly enough. “I was just trying to stay alive!”

There was a tiny, subtle tilt to the female’s head. “Then I have nothing to be angry about.”

Gabu swallowed. “Well, but still. He… he was your brother. The person you cared most about in all the world.”

“Are you trying to say I should be angry at you?”
He found he didn’t know what he was trying to say. Lala had made him forget his motivation, if not his train of thought. “Well… no… but…”

She reached forward and gave him a tiny nip on the throat. Then drew back. It was so quick Gabu didn’t have time to react. He realized, as he stood there blinking, that she’d given him a mercy. If she wanted to kill him, she would have struck then. He still couldn’t trust her completely. But at least… he knew now that she wanted him alive.

“I miss my brother. I’m sad for my brother. But I don’t blame you for his death.”

“You… you don’t?” *Stop being a fool,* he told himself. *She just said she doesn’t!*

“My brother died doing the work of a wolf. It was a noble death, if tragic.”

“Y-yes,” agreed Gabu, even though he wasn’t so sure. “It was a noble end.”

“Buried under an avalanche at the height of combat.”

Combat against him, Gabu didn’t say. “He was very brave. Brave to the end.”

“Fulfilling his mission.”

Was she going to *make* him say it? He swallowed nervously. “His mission to kill me.”

“His mission to hunt down and expunge a traitor,” she clarified.

Gabu sat down too. They were two wolves, under cover of foliage, no longer hunting but just sitting down together. “Do you really think I deserved to die, Lala?”

Her ears moved. She leaned forward and peered at him a new way. Her smile sat gently, like a snake coiled to strike. “You did betray the pack, Gabu. Even if you never shared our secrets with the goat… you did try your best to keep us from killing his family and friends.”

Gabu cringed. He wasn’t proud of his acts of sabotage. “I wish we hadn’t attacked Sawa Sawa Mountain. We had other places to hunt.”

“Places without a single creature like your friend Mei, I take it?”

Gabu didn’t know how to interpret that. “Like Mei? In what way?”

Lala nodded in the general direction of Flowery Hill. “Do you think that goat is the only one in all the world who would have struck up a friendship with you, given the chance?”

They’d discussed exactly that, in fact. “I don’t know. It’s the sort of thing that happens so rarely, there’s just no way to say.”

“So it’s quite possible that if a goat from some other herd—or a deer, maybe, or a sheep—had been in the barn with you that night, you might have become fast friends with them?”

Gabu shrugged helplessly. “It’s possible. I think most goats or sheep or deer would have run away as soon as they saw me in the open. But maybe I’m wrong.”

“Yet you were perfectly fine with us attacking those herds, with all those creatures who might have become your secret friends, if only things had gone differently?”

This was a new angle to Gabu. “I… I guess? I never thought of it that way.”
“You were being selfish,” said Lala. “You were making us all go a little more hungry, just so you could enjoy an extra friendship on the side.”

That seemed fair, if painful. “I… I guess I was. I’m sorry.”

Lala walked around Gabu—no easy task at the edge of the trees. “Are you really?”

There was a constant coyness to her tone that made Gabu want to lash out and demand to know what she thought. But he couldn’t. He turned himself around to face her as she moved. “I don’t know, Lala. I don’t regret being Mei’s friend. And I couldn’t have told anyone. They would have chased me out.”

“Or killed you,” she added.

“Or killed me,” Gabu admitted with a sigh. “And Mei, too.”

“So you were stuck. Give up something of value… or betray your family.”

“To tell the truth… I was just really excited to have such a great secret. I never even thought of it as betrayal.”

“But it was, wasn’t it? You had three choices—end your precious, one-of-a-kind friendship; tell someone about it and face death or exile; or keep meeting up secretly and protecting goats however you could in the meantime.”

“I didn’t want to hurt the pack,” Gabu protested. “I thought our friendship could work. I didn’t realize it would lead to so much trouble!”

“Yet now my brother is dead,” said Lala, still circling. “And Giro is dead. And so is the pack.”

Gabu hung his head. “I wish they hadn’t chased me. I wish they’d just let me and Mei go.”

“So do I,” said Lala.

Gabu looked up at her.

“You made a mistake, Gabu. There was one wolf you could have told about your secret.”

He stared. “…You?”

She nodded. “Me. Do you think I would have turned you in?”

“I… I just didn’t know, Lala. I mean… you were the beta’s sister… I couldn’t have burdened you with a secret like that.”

“Are you joking?” She stretched her shoulderblades tall, going wide-eyed. “I would have loved a secret like yours. I’m good at keeping secrets, Gabu. Back at Baku Baku, we never had enough.”

He stared and swallowed. “Really? You would have helped me?”

Slowly, she lowered herself to the earth, just within the trees, her tail’s tip lying in the clearing. “I think our pack is to blame for its own demise. I don’t blame you for Bari’s death. I blame Bari. I blame Giro. I blame all the wolves who came before them who decided treachery could be as small as a single secret, and could only be punished by death.”

Gabu stared, speechless.
“I don’t know if I would have helped you, Gabu. But I would have been honored to learn your secret. And I wouldn’t have betrayed you.”

“I guess… I should have been braver around you.”

“Yes, Gabu, you should have. Do you realize how many times I gave you an opening? How many times I wished you would say something as simple as, ‘Lala, I like you’?”

His heart betrayed him. It wouldn’t stop fluttering. Had she really been waiting, all this time, for him to make a move? “You… you did?”

“Our pack was big on muscle, in case you didn’t notice. It was big on speed, on reflexes, on agility and stealth. But there was one thing we weren’t really big on.”

Gabu was afraid to ask. “What’s that?”

She half-grinned. “Subtlety.”

That was not what he’d been expecting. “Well, Lala… I guess it seemed like you were subtle enough for all of us!”

She laughed. “Subtlety is wasted if it’s alone. Believe it or not, Gabu, I saw subtlety in you.”

“Really? I like to think of myself as a pretty straightforward guy.”

Lala considered. “Maybe it was situational. Maybe in a different pack, you wouldn’t have had to hide anything.”

“But Lala… before I met Mei, what was I hiding?”

She winked. “Niceness.”

He blinked, then pressed his paw against his chest. “You think I’m nice?”

“Altogether too nice for a pack hunter. Listen to me, Gabu.” She stepped up, and her face was suddenly huge. “Maybe another goat in that barn would have made friends with you, under the same circumstances. Maybe Mei is one in a million, or maybe any decent goat would have done the same. I won’t pretend to know. But I’ll tell you this—” And she flicked her own paw at Gabu’s chest, bumping him. “If that goat had met any other wolf from our pack, and I mean any of us…”

She grinned. “Well, let’s just say he got very lucky that stormy night.”

Gabu nodded solemnly. “Oh, I know. We both did.” Was it really true—was he the only Baku Baku wolf who wouldn’t have ripped their new friend to ribbons after finding out what he really was? Did friendship mean so little to the rest of them?

“Nice can be boring,” said Lala, now sitting inches from him. “But in a sea of snapping teeth and pounding paws and loud voices?” She tilted her head. “Nice can be the most interesting thing in the world.”

Gabu sat there breathing, taking in her smell. Was he really interesting? He never thought of himself as interesting. Certainly not compared to Lala.

She turned away and walked through the clearing, in the direction of the deer that had long since disappeared. “The offer stands,” she called back. “Let me know when you’ve thought it over.”

Gabu was suddenly lost. “The offer?” he called after.
“To be mates!” Her laughter rang briefly before the leaves muffled it.

He hurried after into the clearing, branches scratching at his pelt. “Lala!”

She turned back, a big, coy smile on her perfect face. “Yes?”

“Are you still hunting? I just… I was kind of hoping…”

She examined him quizzically, then settled herself with a thoughtful sigh. “Oh, I see,” she declared. “Well, then. We can hunt tomorrow, together. I won’t perish from one day’s hunger. I’ll try things your way for a while.”

Gabu exhaled in relief. “Thank you, Lala.”

“Every three days?”

“Every three days. That’s the idea.”

“Then it’s a date! See you around, Gabu.”

He watched her stride off and wondered if he’d even had a chance to discuss whatever he’d wanted to talk to her about. No matter how he turned his addled brain, he couldn’t seem to remember what it was.

{^_^}

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! This update is one day later than usual so that (A) the start of Part II can coincide with the start of a bright new 2019, and (B) because I always like to leave my New Year's Eves unplanned, and what with a trip to the DMV, I'd already done more planning than I liked and I didn't want to commit to posting an update.

The break between Parts I and II isn't terribly solid or jarring. It's a gradual flow in the nature of the story, rather. Until now, we've had the story of two friends living alone. Now, the world starts to encroach, once again, on their existence. But that isn't necessarily a bad thing.

And jeepers, I love writing Lala. :o)
Chapter Summary

* ...Left over hoofy?
* Would you like to take charge, or should I?
* Do you remember things from when you weren't yourself?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 16th Morning

Mei spent the night sleeping on his bed of moss. When he and Jenny had installed it, he’d hoped it would serve as a bed for himself and Gabu to share. Yet Gabu had never slept on it. Mei had asked if he wanted to, but the wolf had declined. Not wanting to press the issue, Mei could only conjecture Gabu had been upset at the changes he and Jenny had made without consulting him. Yet Gabu used the outdoor trench to bury his waste, and occasionally even sniffed the flowers Mei placed every few days in the nook. So why wouldn’t he join Mei on the moss? It bothered Mei sometimes when he woke up alone there—it made him feel like he’d done something wrong.

He yawned and stretched. Gabu’s tail flipped, suggesting he was awake, or nearly so. Mei went to him where he lay facing out the exit and joined him, his fine coat light against Gabu’s shaggy one. The great canine head turned toward Mei; an eye came visible. For a while, they looked at each other, and neither of them chose to speak.

This state of things ended when a great rumble sounded from the carnivore’s belly. Mei could actually feel himself shake. “Oh, bother,” he mumbled.

Gabu sighed. “My silly belly. It’s like a houseguest we never asked for.”

Mei recognized that this statement carried more meaning than it seemed. “Just like you never asked to be a wolf.”

It was Gabu’s turn to stand and stretch, slowly. “Well, if I’d been given a choice…” He yawned. “…I think I would have chosen something smaller!”

“Really? You don’t like being large?”

Now Gabu paced around in a circle, warming up. “It has its advantages,” he admitted. “But when push comes to shove…” He smiled with a certain wit Mei had grown to adore. “…being large means you take up a lot of space!”

“And need a lot of food,” Mei observed coolly.

The belly rumbled again, on cue. “That too,” agreed Gabu sadly.

“You’ll hunt today, right? Take care of that belly?”

Gabu nodded. “I’ll be with Lala.”
“Oh? She promised to hunt with you?”

“Yes… and the funny thing is, I don’t know whether that’s likely to make it easier, or harder!”

“Have you ever been hunting with her before?”

He scratched his flank with a hind foot. “Well… not just her and me. We’ve been on hunting parties together a lot. I think I know a little about how she likes to hunt. But… I have to admit I’m scared, Mei.”

That was surprising to hear from the big, bad wolf. “Scared? Of Lala?”

“Well… maybe not scared, exactly. Intimidated? I find her a little intimidating. She’s so suave, and self-assured…”

“Unlike me, you mean,” Mei said with a chuckle.

“Or me!” replied Gabu.

Mei imagined himself out hunting with her. “I think can see what you mean.”

He stood up and peered outward. “I wonder if she’ll give me orders. She probably will.”

“Does that bother you?”

Gabu shook his head. “I can take orders. It’s just… in the pack, she outranked me. Out here…” He shrugged. “It’s like we have to work everything out from scratch!”

“Well, good luck. I’ll be here to hear all about it when you get home.”

Gabu hesitated on the threshold. He turned about and gave Mei a slurp on the cheek before heading off to meet his doom.

It felt nice. Mei laughed quietly to himself. He went and carefully extracted one of the droopier flowers from his nook, and ate it.

He wondered what would happen if Gabu and Lala fell in love. Where would that leave him? Would it be a good development, or…?

Mei sat on the hillside, watching the land in its stillness, the clouds slowly flowing over the sky in layers. He envisioned himself staying on as pupsitter, helping raise a new generation of cute little monsters. It was so surreal a thought that he couldn’t even grapple with the morality of it. No, no, he imagined Gabu chiding. We don’t eat Uncle Mei.

Then, in a bittersweet continuation, he envisioned himself moving on, leaving the happy wolves behind, heading for the horizon.

He imagined himself making his way back home. Telling his herd—his former herd—he was done with wolves forever, but hadn’t it been it an amazing adventure? He imagined asking them to please take him back.

“Hoofy happy?”

Mei sighed and smiled. His eyes found little Bepo some distance away. He walked over. “I’m a little morose this morning. How are you?”
“Morose? What mean.”

“Gloomy. And grumpy.” But in truth, having a friend to chat with made him feel a lot better.

“Meanie feel?”

Mei settled with his front legs before him. “Well, not especially. Just a little worried.”

Bepo scampered closer through the grass, setting down a little bulbous root it was chewing. “Worry why?”

Mei sighed again. “Gabu’s gone hunting with a new wolf. Someone from his pack, back on the other side of the mountain. She came here just to find him.”

The vole stood up straight, blinking, one ear crumpled. “Afraid to lose?”

To lose Gabu? A tear or two threatened to well. “Well… maybe a bit. I don’t think she means him harm… but I can’t be sure. And if they become mates…”

“…Left over hoofy?”

Mei snorted in amusement. “Yes. What becomes of me then?”

Bepo resumed eating its root. “Not friends?”

“I think Gabu and I would still be friends. But I doubt we’d still live together. I might have to leave the lair to the wolves and find my own home grounds.”

“Not room?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I don’t know how things work for wolves. I know Gabu. He tells me what I need to know, and leaves out what I don’t. But as for how wolves live, as a species… I’m mostly clueless.”

“Then clue ask!”

Mei’s nose twitched. Did he even want to know more about wolves? Having a friend who happened to be one was one thing, but it was such a morbid topic. Still, he remembered some of the elders’ wisdom about wolves, and wondered how true it was. If they considered such knowledge valuable, perhaps he should, too.

“Maybe I will ask, Bepo.”

“Then you can shaggy too. All shaggy together.”

Mei shot his companion a look. “I am not a wolf.”

“Only pretend?”

“I’ll never be a wolf. There’s no point in pretending.”

Bepo was silent a moment. “Even if grow clever, strong?”

Mei didn’t understand. He bit off a small white flower within reach. “Gabu wishes he weren’t a shaggy. I wish that too. I wish there were some way to change what we are. For his sake.”
Bepo was silent. Eventually, it went back to nibbling its root.

Was Bepo thinking that it would rather be a wolf than what it was? Mei couldn’t rule out the possibility.

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**The 16th Day**

It was a partly cloudy day, the way Lala liked it. Not too much sky, not too much gray. A dynamic mix. The wind was from the south, allowing for plenty of stealthy approaches; it would have been trickier if the wind had been from the mountain. It was cool but not bone-chilling: a good day to hunt. She spent the first morning hour sizing up the land, getting a feel for which animals were headed where. She eavesdropped on the birds, naughtily hoping to hear rumors about herself, but wasn’t disappointed when their conversation was banal. Truly, it was better if the animals hadn’t caught wind of Gabu’s hunting pattern yet. If they got into the habit of hiding on hunting days, Lala would be hard-pressed to keep herself fed.

Then again, perhaps Gabu had a plan. He didn’t seem especially intelligent, which was a disappointment… but on the flipside of the leaf, he was capable of surprising her. That counted for a lot. Lala loved intelligence, but would take surprises over intelligence when the day was done.

The funny catch was, he wanted the animals to know his pattern. He wanted them to know there were two safe days out of every three for making his acquaintance, yet somehow to forget completely on the third day and wander about like fools for the taking. Did that plan make some sort of sense she was missing?

Lala liked it when she missed things. She relished the feeling of foolishness—of having been played, or outwitted. It was like a fresh breeze, but it happened so seldom.

She was favoring the rabbit colony at the edge of the tall grass meadow. They were unlike rabbits she’d known—slower and easier in their movements—and she hoped that was a lack of wariness bred from a lack of wolves. If she was unlucky, it would turn out to be caution. But even then she could just try something trickier, or pick a new quarry. There was no shortage around here.

Lala heard rushing through the woods and was ninety percent sure it was Gabu. A few quick sniffs as she started to run confirmed it. She angled off away from the rabbits, not wanting to alert them prematurely. “**Psssst!**” she whispered. “**Gabu! Not so loud!**”

He heard her. “**Lala!**” he whispered back, still a bit loud. She could see his face through the saplings at the forest’s edge.

She leapt in with him, taking care to jump with the grain of growth, and managed to avoid making a ruckus. “Well!” she said, keeping her voice low. “Good morning, Gabu.”

“Good morning,” he returned. There were branches between them yet. She was all right with that.

“It’s an exciting day, isn’t it? I haven’t had a packmate in so long, and unless you think of that grass-eater as a packmate, I imagine neither have you.”

Gabu hesitated at her epithet, but nodded. He was protective, then, but not protective enough to make a scene over a word. Good. “I’ve been hunting alone for so long… I’ve almost forgotten how to do it as a team.”
“That may be for the best,” Lala speculated. “We’ll have to unlearn what we were taught, anyway. We’ve only got the two of us, and this is a new country. The prey are so trusting! Some ideas won’t work here, but I’m convinced others will that would never have worked at home.”

Gabu nodded. “I’ve been having better luck than I usually did hunting solo. They’re not used to us.”

“Let’s hope we can keep it that way,” rejoined Lala, then hesitated. She’d forgotten his angle. “Oh—but then, you seemed to want them to grow used to us.”

Gabu’s nod was hesitant. “I’m not sure it will work. If they get good enough at hiding on my hunting days, I may need to try something else.”

He had no hidden strategy, then. Disappointing. “We’ll have to see how well we can match wits with the locals, then. So, how should we start? Would you like to take charge, or should I?”

This seemed to take the poor fellow aback. “Um… well…” She waited patiently for him. “I guess since I’ve been here a while already… maybe I should lead?”

Lala nodded, a serene little smile on her face. “That seems fair.”

“But… but you’re Bari’s sister! I don’t have the right to tell you what to do,” he sputtered.

“This is a new pack. In case you hadn’t noticed, Bari isn’t here.” That’s it—keep it gentle, but don’t let him forget his role in all this.

Gabu gulped. “All right. I’ll take the lead, even if I’m not used to it. I’m thinking… maybe we could start with rabbits?”

Lala smiled genuinely. “Exactly what I was thinking.”

This seemed to brighten her companion up. “They like eating at the edge of Tall Meadow… I figure one of us could prowl along the border and the other could circle around that way, through the grass… we could meet around that jag in the meadow.”

“And the prowler will pretend to be interested in something else, I take it?” Lala suggested sweetly.

“Oh—well, sure. Would you like to…?”

Lala bowed. “You’re the boss. I’ll walk the line and expect you at the jag. Is there a reason you want to come around from the south?”

Gabu looked at his proposed path, self-conscious. Bashfully, he hoisted his tail to test the wind. “Uh… Oh. I guess it would make more sense to circle around from leeward, wouldn’t it?”

Lala nodded, smiling. “It looks like the grass there is on higher ground, anyhow.”

“Yeah… all right. Um… ready to go?”

Lala sprang silently to where the division between grass met the woodline, and crouched. “Ready on your signal,” she announced. She aimed to wow him with professionalism.

Gabu hesitated, apparently unsure what the signal should be. He settled on “All right… go!” So Lala went. It was as good a signal as any, given that they were together under cover. But this male clearly hadn’t been completely faking his ineptitude at hunting. He was going to take a lot of work.
Then again, he didn’t seem completely hopeless, and that meant Lala would probably be having a lot of fun.

Gabu couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so nervous on a hunt. Well, yes, actually, he could. When Bari had taken the party to Crumbling Hills, the beta had nearly killed Mei. Only Gabu’s panicked interference had saved his life… and before that, the pack had targeted Mei’s herd more than once. But before he’d met Mei, had Gabu ever been this nervous?

Maybe when he was a youth, just starting out on the hunting party. His mother had still been alive, though, and that was a source of solace for Gabu. Losing her… had been really hard. His first hunt after his mother’s death… that was the only one he could think of that really compared to this. And even that was nothing like what he was doing now.

Gabu was actually ordering Lala around. Lala! The prettiest wolf he’d ever seen… and one of the smartest, too, he suspected. She never really showed her true colors, but Gabu was getting the sense she was a lot smarter than he’d ever realized… on top of everything else. At the very least, she was a better hunter than he was. And she was following his orders.

And they’d even caught three rabbits and a badger! It made him feel like he was on top of the world. He’d asked Lala if she’d ever hunted badger before, and she had to admit she hadn’t. Gabu had grinned such a tremendous grin—!

He had to keep himself in check now. It wouldn’t do to lose control. He certainly couldn’t start laughing for joy after leaping and pinning a deer to the ground. What would it think of him? Well no—more to the point, what would Lala think? Gabu wanted to impress her more than anything right now. He concentrated on the quarry and paced forward slowly, then lowered himself to a crouch in the undergrowth. Muscles tensed, he awaited Lala’s signal. And this was his plan.

The signal came, a high whistle. Gabu sprang and sprinted for the buck. It cried out and flailed randomly, then ran off to the side. Lala burst from the grass beside the jag and gave chase, but the stag got clear and it was obvious they wouldn’t take it. Gabu’s last pounce fell far short.

But still. But still!

Oh, how his heart was pounding!

Lala smiled ruefully. “I swear, he didn’t know I was there. He happened to flail in my direction. I couldn’t get a good first pounce in past those hooves.”

“It’s okay, Lala. We can’t win every time. But the plan worked, didn’t it?”

She nodded, her smile losing its ruefulness. “We were in perfect position. And you heard my signal and didn’t hesitate.”

“Just bad luck, then, I guess!” said Gabu, blushing, but not really embarrassed.

“Bad luck,” agreed Lala. “Are you up for one more try?”

Gabu looked around. No sign of any deer left here, and it was getting dark. “I think maybe we’d better call it quits for the day. Let’s divide up the meat that’s left.” He patted his belly and tried to imagine how well his share of the badger and rabbit carcasses would fill it. “Mm… it’ll be a little
thin, but I think we can make it three more days on what we got.”

“We’ll live,” said Lala coyly. She started trotting toward where they’d hidden their kills. “I had a good time today, Gabu.”

“Really? You did?”

Lala nodded. “You’re rather fun to work with.”

Gabu kept himself from blushing again by lowering his eyes. “You’re not so bad yourself! I have to admit… I’m excited from nose to tail!”

“You’re that excited to have a hunting partner?”

That wasn’t quite what he’d meant. She knew that wasn’t quite what he’d meant. “Um… sure! I’ve never worked with just one partner before.”

“It’s exhilarating, isn’t it? Knowing that your part is so important… that someone else is depending on you…”

Now Gabu did blush. “I think we’ll get better at it with practice.”

Lala looked at the darkening sky. “Have you considered night hunting, Gabu? Most packs favor it, you know.”

Gabu had always known the Baku Baku Valley pack was unusual that way. But… “I don’t know. I’m not used to hunting at night… and I wouldn’t want to leave Mei alone.”

“Ah, yes. You like to spend your nights together, don’t you?”

Gabu nodded a few times. “We agreed it would be best if we kept the same schedule.”

“Well, then. Forget I mentioned it!” With one last leap, Lala was at the cache. She pulled out the remains of the badger, which they’d both sampled. “So we really won’t go hunting again for three days?” she asked.

“I mean… that’s the idea,” said Gabu. Was she going to resist?

But she just nodded and pulled out one of the rabbits. “I’ll just take a few more bites. I’ll leave the rest for you.”

They hadn’t eaten all that much, since they’d wanted to stay lean while hunting. “But Lala… won’t you be hungry?”

She tilted her head whimsically and gazed toward the horizon, where the woods met the far meadow. “I think I may wander a bit. I could do some hunting of my own in the next forest. Far enough away I doubt it would spoil your experiment.”

Oh. “Huh. Um… I guess that would probably be okay.” Given the way rumors had traveled about himself and Mei, Gabu wasn’t at all sure about that… but he didn’t want Lala to go hungry. And the extra meat did smell really good.

“I’ll spend a night on the move. I promise—I won’t be anywhere near here when I do my hunting.” She dipped her nose into the carcass and pulled out a string of organs, then snapped them up—and somehow, she was prim and beautiful through it all. Even the blood on her chin was beautiful. How did she do that?
“Well then… I guess I’ll see you in three days?” said Gabu. He was disappointed—that felt like a long time to wait.

“I’ll make certain I’m back in time,” she promised. She nosed him—it was a surprise, and it made Gabu’s fur stand up. “I wouldn’t want you to be lonely without me.”

Gabu laughed nervously. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I have Mei!”

Her blue eyes were piercing, but Gabu adored them. “Yes, you do. I’m glad for that.”

He stared at her for a while. And she met his gaze. But eventually she looked down to the food and took another big bite. Gabu was hungry, but he couldn’t help himself—he watched her eat.

Lala finished taking her meager share and settled back. “I guess it’s about time to say good night,” she suggested.

“Yeah,” Gabu groused. He wished he could stay with her. “It was really…”

“It was good,” she agreed. “Enjoy your meal. Good night, Gabu. Wish me luck.”

Before he could reply, she sprang off and ran for the far woods. “Um—good luck!” he called after.

He thought he saw her ears twitch, but that was all.

He watched her run off, awestruck. Lala. Highest ranking female of the pack. Here, with him, and no other males around. And on top of that, she seemed to like him! It was just too much to believe.

Gabu would have to bring up the question of mates soon. He was afraid of what Mei would say. But far more than he felt hungry or afraid, Gabu was excited.

This wasn’t just ordinary excitement, either. This was something special.

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**The 16th Evening**

All that day, Mei had watched the sky. He’d turned abruptly at every sudden sound of birds’ wings, every distant crash of some animal through foliage or plaintive bleat for help. He wasn’t sure about most of the sounds—they were too distant to make out. But he wanted very much to know where Gabu and Lala were hunting. He told himself that if he paid keen enough attention to his surroundings, he’d be able to work out where they’d gone. Yet somehow he never became quite sure.

Mei made a point of staying close to home all day, just in case Gabu needed his help and called for him there. He hadn’t visited Sneaky Bluff the previous day, and he didn’t go today, either. This was a tense time, and Mei was willing to sacrifice his comfort for a while.

When he finally heard crashing through the nearby trees, he was embarrassed at how close it was before he heard it. Gabu was dragging a loose bundle of carcasses. Mei cringed—they stank. He could recognize rabbits and the black and white pelt of a badger.

“Mei! It’s good to see you!”

Mei forced himself to untuck his head from his shoulder. “It’s good to see you too, Gabu. I see you were successful in your hunt.”
Gabu stopped walking—thankfully, he seemed to have realized that the spoils were making Mei uncomfortable. “Oh. Sorry, Mei—I don’t have to bring them up. How about I go around behind the hill?”

Well, if half the hill had to be stunk up, behind was probably the better choice. The snowy winds from the mountaintop would take care of it soon enough, if the wind shifted again. “Good idea. I’ll meet you at the top.”

Gabu dragged his bloody foodstuffs out of sight. Mei could still smell them, could still hear him grunting. But he was happy for his friend. Gabu was back safe and sound, and it looked like he’d be well fed until the next hunt. Mei had been afraid today would be a disaster. Evidently it hadn’t been. He allowed himself to smile and breathe in a little of the triumphant, ugly waft of rabbit carcass—after all, it would suit well if he could teach himself to like it, a little.

He heard Gabu digging a hole. Good—it would smell less and attract less attention if the meat was buried. He waited outside the lair, trying not to fret. Eventually, Gabu patted down his hole and mounted the hill. He was still covered in the smell of leaves and blood and adrenaline, and more than a few little twigs and seed pods were enmeshed in his fur. Didn’t wolves clean each other?

“It was a good hunt!” he declared. “I was really scared about working with Lala, but as it turns out, we work well together.” He gave a pleased jerk of the head. “She even let me take charge!”

Of that, Mei was skeptical. He knew one way a female could get the better of a male was to let him think he was leading. “She did? That was nice of her.”

“I think it was more that she realized I’ve got a head start! I’ve been here for months, after all, even if I don’t remember most of it.”

Now that was a strange thought. “Do you think you subconsciously remember how to hunt, based on leftover memories from when you… weren’t yourself?”

Gabu lifted his knuckles thoughtfully to his chin, sitting back. “Do you know, I think I do. It wasn’t just once that I found myself getting a sense of what we should try, and where.”

Mei smiled tentatively, hoping that was a good thing. “I guess that means the time you spent without your memories wasn’t a complete waste.”

“Yeah! I guess so.” He smiled at Mei, then looked out over the landscape. “I guess none of the time we spend alive is completely wasted.”

*Even the time you spend killing,* Mei reflected. “You’re probably right,” he agreed.

Gabu continued more softly. “Lala left me with most of what we caught. She went off to do some hunting on her own… far away.”

“Hm.” Now that was a surprise. “But she’s coming back, isn’t she?”

“Oh, yes. She’s hoping to be back in a couple of days. I think she was worried about me.” He smiled ruefully. “I think she wanted to make sure I was well fed, and the catch we made wasn’t quite enough for the two of us, so.” He shrugged.

“So she really cares,” surmised Mei.

Gabu lowered his hind legs, then his forelegs, and stared outward. “I guess she really does.”
Mei stood next to him, thinking. What was Lala doing out there, on her own? And what was she trying to accomplish with Gabu? Regardless of the answer, even with her far away and Gabu at his side, he didn’t feel fully comfortable.

He pushed aside his worries. Gabu was here, and his pelt was cluttered with unwanted guests. Not as troublesome as his belly, but these they could do something about. “Gabu? Would you like it if I groomed you? You’re looking a bit untidy.”

Gabu laughed in sheer surprise. “You would do that, Mei?”

“Yes, of course! It would be my pleasure.”

So Gabu settled down, letting his muscles loosen, and Mei went about sorting out what belonged from what didn’t, to the meager extent he was able.

{Cc .^33}

Chapter End Notes

If you feel clueless, then clue ask!

As a goat, Mei may be a bit too tongue-oriented to be a good wolf groomer. But hopefully he’ll sink his teeth into the challenge.

This chapter was the longest one yet! I’ll generally try not to exceed 4000 words too often. But my stories tend to experience chapter inflation, so don’t be surprised if it should happen.

Illustration by DragonBlazerxxx.
The 17th Day

Chapter Summary

* -More- shaggies soon?
* Do goats groom each other?
* Part of something? What do you mean?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 17th Morning

“Hello, woofy!”

Gabu was startled. He lifted his paws—as if something had crawled underneath—before realizing he knew the voice. “Oh—Bepo!”

A chittering laugh, like a trio of grasshoppers, came from the little creature, a spot of black in the greenery behind Gabu. “Course Bepo! Who else hello woofy?”

Gabu set down his paws and turned around. “Good morning, Bepo,” he said politely. He wasn’t sure the vole liked him, and wanted to make a good impression.

The creature inclined its tail. “No killing today?”

Gabu shook his head emphatically. “No killing! But I wouldn’t kill you, in any case.”

A moment’s hesitation passed before it nodded. “Good. *Never* kill Bepo?” it checked, head tilted the same direction as its tail.

Gabu stood erect and plopped his paw over his heart. “I solemnly swear I will never kill Bepo.”

The vole tittered. “So funny!” It placed a paw on its own heart and stood straight and stiff. “Also swear,” Bepo declared.

“You’re not going to hunt me down and slaughter me?” asked Gabu, lowering his forelegs and wagging his tail.

“Almost never,” said Bepo.

Gabu brought himself up in surprise. “*Almost never?”*

Bepo laughed cheekily. “Never *ever.*”

Gabu laughed too. “That’s more like it! I guess we can feel safe around each other.”

Bepo nodded frenetically. Then it went to all fours again and became serious. “Two shaggies now.”

That was a topic Gabu had suspected the vole might bring up. “Yes… two shaggies. My friend
from home came looking for me here, and found me.”

“More shaggies soon?”

“Oh. No, I don’t think so. It took Lala a long time to get here. She came around the mountain.”

Bepo flipped back to look at the mountain for a second, then flipped its gaze back to Gabu. “Around mountain?!”

Gabu nodded in awe. “That’s right. She came a long, long way.”

“Look for shaggy?”

It was amazing to think of, wasn’t it? “Yes, just looking for me!”

“And find,” said Bepo.”

“Well, yes,” said Gabu. “She found me.”

“Very good friend?”

His ears sank. “Honestly? I’m not sure. We were never exactly close… but I guess she… saw something in me?” He decided not to mention that he’d kind of, sort of, killed her brother.

Bepo stared hard at Gabu now, as if trying to see the same thing in him. Eventually the vole shook its head. “Nope. Still not need woofy.”

Gabu chuckled, not as hurt as he might have been. “You don’t think the world has any need for wolves?”

Bepo shook its head. “No need. Can go anytime.”

He remembered the vole seeming to dismiss him before. “Would you like me to go?” asked Gabu, a little sad.

“All woofs go! Maybe you stay.”

Now that was a lot more reassuring. “So you do like me?”

The vole looked skeptical. Was it unable to believe a creature like Gabu could care what something like Bepo thought of him? “Too much killing.”

Gabu’s sadness spread. “I know,” he said. “But I can’t help it. I have to survive.”

“Otherwise? Bepo friend.”

Gabu smiled. “So I guess we’re almost friends, then?”

Two nods. “Almost friend.” The vole skittered off to the side and looked back with another thought. “Silver shaggy kill Bepo?”

That was a good point. “I’ll make sure she doesn’t,” said Gabu, as convincingly as he knew how.

Bepo nodded again. “No more shaggies?”

Gabu shook his head. “No more. Only Lala.”
“Lala!” The vole sang out the name like it was a joke. “Lalala!”

“That’s her name.”

“So silly. Maybe friend?”

“Your friend?” Gabu had actually thought about that last night, for a while. “Maybe so. We’ll see.”

Bepo nodded and sped away, but turned back one last time, having thought of something else. “Baby shaggies?”

Gabu felt a lump descend through his throat. “Um… I, uh… haven’t really thought about that.” Should he have?

Bepo shook its head. “Always think about. If baby shaggies, maybe teach nice?”

“Oh! Yes, if… Lala and I fall in love, and have pups…” It felt strange even to say it out loud. “…we’ll be sure to bring them up right.”

Bepo stared, as if challenging Gabu to keep this promise. “Good. Good baby shaggies.” The vole laughed, letting its tail fall to the side. “Okay! Good day, woofy! No killing!”

Gabu chuckled. “No killing today.”

“No killing. Good-bye!”

The rodent skittered off again and this time made it out of sight. Gabu flipped up a paw in farewell. “Nice to see you, Bepo!” he called after.

Gabu’s heart was warmed. He felt like he’d felt just after meeting Mei. It was good to make friends.

Mei had never used the term ‘almost friends’, though. Mei had learned what he was, had known full well what wolves were… but had gone on a picnic up the mountain with him anyway. Mei had taken a nap in front of Gabu, even after Gabu had lost his lunch. Was there anyone out there as innocent or as trusting as Mei?

If he could never stop hunting, would someone like Bepo ever call Gabu a true friend, without an ‘almost’ in front of it?

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The 17th Evening

Gabu settled down on the soft earth of the cave, savoring the familiar coolness it lent his belly. He exhaled happily.

Mei echoed the sound as he settled in on his bed of moss. Gabu was glad now that Mei had brought in the moss. It suited him. It probably reminded him of the green pastures where he used to sleep.

“So,” croaked Gabu. “Would you like to tell me about your day? Or should I go first?”

“Hmm,” said Mei. “I don’t know. What do you think?”
This was nice. This was silly. As if it really mattered who talked first about their day—but then, if they had the luxury of quibbling over such things, it meant life was good, didn’t it?

“I’ll go first,” Gabu decided. “If that’s all right with you, that is.”

Mei yawned. “It’s quite all right. Go ahead, Gabu.”

Gabu chuckled inwardly. “Well, to begin with, I went to take the wind at the bottom of the hill, and who do you think said hello to me?”

Mei chuckled out loud. “Bepo?”

“Exactly! And I’d thought maybe it didn’t like me. But it wished me good morning. And it asked about Lala, and I told it what I could, and we talked a while.”

“That’s nice. What did you talk about?”

“Oh…” It was a little hard to remember, actually. “You know how Bepo is. You can never quite tell what you’re talking about.” Maybe it was a little presumptuous for Gabu to say that after only having two conversations with the vole, but it seemed right, and Mei didn’t argue.

“But you got along?”

“It said we were almost friends. And I promised that I would never hurt it, and neither would Lala. Bepo thought her name was really funny!”

“Well, it is, isn’t it? Lala. It sounds like a stream flowing over stones.”

Gabu raised his head, imagining it. “That’s a nice way to see it. Anyway, since she’s away, I decided to spend my day in the forest with the monkeys.”

“Oh! How did that go?”

“To tell the truth, I actually had trouble finding them at first. They weren’t in their usual hangouts. But I wandered deeper and deeper, and eventually I heard them!”

Mei watched with one eye, but that one eye flickered with interest. “Did you catch up with them?”

“I did! And to my surprise, they weren’t in the trees!”

Mei stirred and lifted his head. “That’s odd. I thought they spent all their time in the trees.”

“I had the same thought! So I was surprised. But I decided to watch for a while, in case I scared them back into the branches.”

“They didn’t smell you there?”

“There’s an odd crossbreeze in the forest that makes it hard to smell things… and besides, I don’t think monkeys smell as well as we do.”

“So you just watched them? What were they doing?”

“Looking for food, I think. They were scraping off bark from the trees and picking off insects.”

“Oh? How about that. I didn’t know insects lived under tree bark.”
“Well, maybe when the trees start to rot! It could be a nice place for them.”

“A rotten tree could be a nice place?”

Wasn’t there a nice side to the act of rotting? “Well, at least it’s soft. Everyone has their own preferences, after all.”

Mei smiled broadly and curled one leg, acknowledging the point. “Did you ever show yourself?”

“Well, after a while, one of the monkeys spotted me, and they all scrambled away. But I got to see them grooming each other first! It was fascinating. They use their front toes as if they were teeth!”

Mei went wide-eyed. “Really?”

Gabu raised a paw and tried his best to separate his toes. They splayed with a little air visible between. He tried dragging them through the fur of his flank. “Like this,” he said. His claws caught, as expected, and he tugged feebly.

“Oh!” Mei laughed. “You know, I think they call those ‘fingers’.”

The word was vaguely familiar. Gabu set his paw back down. “I think you’re right! Do you know what, Mei? Some fingers would have come in handy that day on the mountain, after I dropped my lunch.”

Mei nodded, eyes glassy. “You wouldn’t have gone hungry on our picnic.” He seemed to have a thought. “You were hungrier than you let on, weren’t you?”

Gabu’s face winced in embarrassment. “I might have been. But Mei. Thank you for grooming me last night! It felt good.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” said Mei, willingly dropping the subject of the picnic.

“Do goats groom each other?” Gabu asked.

Mei smiled wistfully. “Mainly only mothers with kids. Once we’re grown, we groom ourselves.”

“Aw, that’s too bad. It’s nice to groom other wolves in your pack. It’s easier than doing it yourself and it brings us closer together.”

“We like to tell each other stories,” Mei explained. “Maybe that satisfies the same function.”

“I’d like to hear one of your stories sometime, Mei.”

“I’d love to tell you one! But first, did anything else happen with the monkeys?”

“Well, I stayed there for a while, but they all stuck to the trees until I went away. I told them I just wanted to talk, and I wasn’t going to hurt them, but one of the males said he didn’t believe me. He said he’d heard about how these days I only hunt every third day, but… how did he put it?” That skinny monkey had been so clever. “I think he said, ‘Nature makes patterns to teach us. People make patterns to fool other people.’”

“He thought you were pretending to have a schedule just so you could break it?”

“That’s what I gathered! But it didn’t make a lot of sense to me. Wouldn’t that be an awful lot of trouble just for one day’s haul? If I broke my own rule even once, no one would trust me again.”
“Did you explain that to the monkey?”

“I did! We had a bit of an argument. But in the end, I wasn’t able to convince any of the monkeys to give me a chance.” Gabu sighed. “Still, at least we’re talking now.” Gabu was starting to feel like the monkeys were a dead end, truth be told.

“That’s something,” Mei admitted.

“How about you? What was your day like?”

“Not much better, really. I had breakfast at Sneaky Bluff, as usual, and then went back to Tall Meadow to see if I could win over any of the rabbits there. I went slowly through the grass, so as not to scare them, but they kept bustling away. So I tried lying down for a while to see if I could calm them down, but the moment I got up again, they dashed off.” He frowned. “Then, some time after noon, one of them slowly crept over.”

Gabu tried to imagine it. “A rabbit, crept?”

Mei put out his forehooves and pulled himself ahead, edging his hind hooves up between them. “Like this,” he explained. “Step by step.” Gabu found himself staring at the spectacle—Mei looked so incredibly cute this way!

He tried desperately not to laugh. “And then what happened?”

Mei came forward, straightening out. “He stood up tall on all fours in front of me and talked as if he were very frightened.”

Gabu was very curious. “What did he say?”

“He said that the other rabbits had advised him not to come… but that he believed in the idea that it can do no harm to talk. So he wanted to ask me whether I had… brought the monster to these lands.”

Gabu’s heart dropped. “Oh, Mei.”

“I’m sorry, Gabu. Should I stop?”

Gabu shook his head. “I want to hear what happened. What did you say?”

“I said, yes, but that you aren’t really a monster. I explained that you’re a dear friend, and a very kind person. The rabbit shook his head and said that… are you sure you want to hear this, Gabu?”

He was starting to get impatient and anxious. “Yes, please! Tell me!”

Mei drew a breath. “He said that you murdered two members of his colony. I said, “I’m sorry to hear that, but he is really is a very nice person, and I can promise he’ll be no danger to you if you get to know him.”

Gabu winced. It sounded stupid even to him, even with the tale sanitized by Mei. “And then…?”

“I’m sorry to say he wasn’t convinced. But at least he didn’t just run away. He asked how he could possibly trust me, given that I was a friend to a monster.”

Gabu hated this. He hated the fact that he was befouling Mei just by existing. “And then?”

“Well, the other rabbits were watching him talk to me by then. I think they were getting the sense
that I was safe, even if I was friends with a… a wolf. I told him that I would be glad to spend time with them if they wanted me to. That way, they could get to know me without ever having to be in danger from you.” He looked plaintively at Gabu. “I’m sorry, Gabu. I think it might be easier if we start slow.”

This was actually a relief. “Oh, that’s quite all right,” he said, nervously smiling. “If you can make friends with them, they’ll be more willing to meet me.”

Mei’s tail rose. “That was my thought. And the buck I was speaking to said that he’d have to get back to me. I think he was still afraid I was going to fool him somehow.”

“I don’t see how,” said Gabu. “Did they think you were going to lead them to me? I could have been hiding in the grass the whole time, regardless.”

“I don’t know what he was thinking, but I suppose I can’t blame him for being overly cautious. In any case, I had no choice but to let him go. I wished him a nice day, for what that’s worth.”

Gabu smiled tentatively. “Well, it ought to be worth something!”

Mei shrugged. “The rabbits have to confer, it seems. Maybe they’ll come up with some way I can prove I’m trustworthy.”

“Or, maybe they just won’t care to take a chance. That’s what I’m afraid of,” Gabu admitted.

Mei was silent a while. “If I hadn’t taken a chance…” he mumbled.

“A big one,” Gabu agreed instantly.

They looked at each other. That face, those eyes. Gabu could almost see himself.

“I think they don’t realize how rewarding taking a chance can be,” said Mei.

“I guess they see it this way—a new friend or two on one side…” He sat up and used his forepaws to demonstrate. “…and their lives on the other.” He gulped. It was obvious which of those bundles was bigger.

“I suppose,” said Mei.

Gabu exhaled and slumped down, chin flat against the floor.

“But we aren’t just a couple of friends for someone to make,” Mei said suddenly.

Gabu perked his ears. “Oh?”

Mei breathed thoughtfully. “I’m not saying that we’re especially wonderful people. And I’m not saying we would be better friends to anyone than the next goat… or the next wolf.” He gave Gabu a tight-lipped look. “But to be friends with us…”

Gabu had a glimmer of what Mei was saying, but couldn’t quite see where he was going with it. “Yes?”

“…It would make anyone part of something,” he concluded.

Part of something? “What do you mean?”

Mei reflected for a while. But in the end he shook his head. “I’m not sure, Gabu. I think I’d better
get to sleep."

Gabu yawned reflexively. "Oh. Me too."

Mei stretched out on his bed of moss. "Sleep well, Gabu."

"You too, Mei."

Mei fell asleep soon enough. But Gabu lay there awake. He couldn’t shake the thought. What would someone who chose to befriend them be part of… and could it possibly be important enough to be worth risking their life?

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Chapter End Notes

Bepo has a sense of humor!

While these two friends have revealed a lot to each other, I imagine the secret of Gabu almost eating Mei’s ear will go to the grave. It’s… a little sensitive! (ba-dum chinnng)
The 18th Day

Chapter Summary

* Don't you think I look up to you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 18th Day

“Oh! I think I see one, Mei!”

Mei followed the wolf’s gaze and saw what he meant—a bowing, half-toppled cypress, roots loosened by the stream’s moisture. There were branches in profusion, but not too dense on its upper edge to prevent progress. “You’re right,” he agreed appreciatively. “It’s perfect.”

It was a temperate late morning with lazy winds. The two animals picked up their pace and reached the tree with gusto to spare. Gabu sprang onto the lower trunk, but sprang off again, looking to his friend. “Would you like to go first, or should I?”

It was unfortunate timing. “You go ahead. I still have cud to chew.”

Gabu tilted his head, pointy ears spreading out. “Cud? To chew?”

Oh my. Did he really not know about cud? Mei’s waves of surprise at the company he’d chosen to keep were fewer and further between these days, but they still caught him off guard from time to time. “It’s… just food I ate earlier this morning. The first part of my stomach is done with it, so now it’s come back for me to chew it a bit more.”

Gabu’s whites were comically wide. “You mean… you get to eat your food more than once?”

Mei snickered at the carnivore’s reaction. “It’s not exactly a privilege! It’s more of a chore, really. It’s what we have to do to fill our bellies.”

Gabu’s brows lowered a bit. “Oh. I’m sorry then, Mei. Is it unpleasant?”

“No especially! It’s just that it’s best not to exert myself while I’m doing it.”

“That’s too bad. I didn’t know!”

“Well, after all, we’ve been spending most of our days apart,” Mei pointed out. This was only the third midday they’d spent together since crossing the mountain—they’d agreed to do it every six days, it had been so much fun the first time. “I guess we still have a fair bit to learn about each other.”

“I guess so.” Gabu’s eyebrows rose again as he returned to the slanted tree. “Would you like to see me climb the tree, then?”

“Yes, please! I’ll probably be ready to give it a try myself in half an hour or so.”
Gabu stretched his body, took a moment to peer up at his objective, and bounded into action. He ran up several yards of trunk, claws catching briefly on the bark, then bounded the last distance to a thick branch about halfway up the slanted tree. Pausing for a moment, he looked down to his companion. Mei found himself beaming at the sight. His friend’s body was an amazing thing. It was funny—now that he’d moved past the fear of wolves his herd had instilled in him, Mei was coming to appreciate how beautiful the form of a wolf was. “That was very nice,” he called up. “Watching you, a person would never know that wolves don’t climb trees! I love how you use your legs.”

“Do you really?”

“Absolutely! I could never leap like that. The shape of your trunk is nice to watch in action, too. I like the way it bends.”

Gabu responded to this praise by clambering up two more branches, then extending himself cautiously up toward another. The tree’s slope was only a bit worse than a steep hill at this point, but there wasn’t a lot for Gabu to support himself on. He placed one hind paw on a likely-looking limb, then weighed his options, reluctant to spring entirely onto it.

“Be careful, Gabu! I don’t know if you can go much higher!”

He barked a laugh in response. With a careful push of the other hind leg and a muscular tensing of the lower body, he managed to stick the landing and grab the slender trunk with his claws, fore and hind. “Did you see that, Mei? I climbed the tree!”

“I saw! You’re amazing, Gabu!”

“Remember when your friend Mii got sick and needed that flower for her medicine? Compared to that climb, this was nothing!” The upper branches rocked softly up and down under the wolf’s weight.

“I’m so sorry about that, Gabu. I didn’t know how dangerous it was. But please… will you come down?”

Gabu peered down mournfully, clearly still excited. He looked down, apparently unsure whether to go head-first or back down the way he’d come.

“What do you need me to guide you?” Mei asked, shoving his cud to one side of his mouth.

Squirrels and chipmunks watched from the surrounding trees and bushes; birds watched from branches and an otter peered from the river. The animals in the half-fallen tree’s immediate vicinity had cleared out as soon as the interlopers came running up, but few of them had vacated the area. These two were just too great a mystery to dismiss, or at least too juicy a source of gossip to pass up. Mei could feel dozens of eyes on him as he talked Gabu carefully down from his perch.

“Left hind foot a little to the right!” he called. “So long as you ease it down, I think the branch can hold you!”

Gabu obeyed the instruction, then slowly began lowering his other hind leg, front claws dug in tight. “I love you, Mei!”

What a thing to say at a time like this. And yet—”I love you, Gabu. Don’t fall. You can adjust your claws down a little, I think.”

Soon Gabu was safe on the ground, having dashed the last few yards. He stood and shook himself
as if he’d been in the river. Bits of bark and clods of dirt flew loose. “Whoo! That was something.”

“It looked exhilarating, if a bit frightening,” agreed Mei.

“That’s the word for it! Wow. Mei, that was so fun! Do you want to try?”

Mei assessed his condition. “I think I’d better wait a while longer. Seeing you so high up seems to have upset my stomach a bit.”

“Aww. You were worried for me?”

Mei nodded. “I’d hate it if you got hurt.”

Gabu sagged visibly. “I guess we both know what could happen if I did.”

Was he talking about the avalanche? “Are you worried you could lose your memories again?”

Gabu keened softly as he looked into the distance. “I’d hate for that to happen! I must have been so miserable. And you must have thought I was dead!”

“I didn’t know what to think. Gabu, I was so utterly happy to see you alive again… it’s amazing how important you became to me, so quickly.”

“Yeah.” Gabu swallowed. “Do you think it’s a sign that something was missing from our lives?”

Mei had wondered along those lines before. “I think something was missing, Gabu. And we filled it for each other.”

“I wonder what it was.”

“Satisfaction, maybe? Except I don’t think that’s right. If you’d asked me, I wouldn’t have said I was especially unsatisfied.” Unless the failure to walk along that invisible path, the path to forever, counted. But in truth, he couldn’t even say what that meant.

“I’d say I was a bit unsatisfied,” said Gabu. “I wasn’t the lowest-ranking wolf in my pack, exactly… but I didn’t really command much respect. And my friends… Zack and Beach… they weren’t friends in the same way you are, Mei.”

“Did you ever have a true friend, Gabu?”

This got the pack-wolf thinking. He sat down next to the tree. The more he thought, the more troubled he seemed, and by the time he came out of his reverie, his eyes were glassy. “I don’t know, Mei. When you’re in a pack, you’re supposed to feel like you have all you need. You’re loyal to them, and you know they’ll be loyal to you. But I don’t think I did ever have a friend who cared about me, except as a packmate. Except…”

Mei was sad for Gabu, but wanted to hear more. “Yes?”

“There was a boy-cub, Boro… and he looked up to me. I know it’s strange…” Gabu chuffed in embarrassment and shook his ears. “But I think he admired me. I taught him to track, and I taught him to jump…”

Mei rubbed his cheek against his friend’s shoulder. “Oh, Gabu! It isn’t strange at all for someone to look up to you. Don’t you think I do?”

Gabu fixed Mei with a surprised stare. “You? Look up to me?”
Quite literally, Mei thought, but of course he didn’t mention the height difference—that wasn’t what mattered. “Wasn’t I looking up to you when you climbed that tree just now? Didn’t I call you amazing?”

“But…” This seemed to catch Gabu off guard. “But you’re amazing, Mei! You made friends with Bepo, and now it’s my friend too… and you have so many great stories and dreams… and coming here to climb trees was your idea in the first place!”

Mei didn’t feel like arguing the point. “Should we just agree that we both look up to each other and leave it at that?”

Gabu smiled. “Shouldn’t we look across from each other? As equals?”

Mei chuckled. “We can do that most of the time. But occasionally…” He shrugged. “I like looking up to you, Gabu.”

Gabu struck the ground with a heavy paw. “It’s agreed! We can each look up to the other some of the time. Speaking of which… do you think you’re ready to try climbing the tree yet? I’ll help all I can, just like you did for me.”

Mei stopped chewing and tried to work up to swallowing what he had. “I’m just about there.” He smiled shyly. “We goats don’t usually pressure each other when we’re chewing.”

“Oh! I’m sorry.” Gabu went erect and put his forepaws behind his back, in an apparent abundance of caution.

“It’s all right. My grandmother used to say… having to chew our food twice or thrice is the price we pay for being able to bend over anywhere we like and get a free lunch!”

Gabu salivated visibly. Oh dear. “When you put it like that, it seems like a small price to pay!”

“Do you wish you could eat grass, Gabu? Now that you know how much work it is?”

“Do I!” He dropped down in front of Mei, earnestness in his face. “Every day, Mei. I wish for that every day. I don’t care if I’d have to chew my food ten times!” A tear came to his eye. “I actually do eat grass sometimes, but I can’t handle much of it. I wish I could live on grass like you.”

Mei was moved—he hadn’t realized Gabu’s feelings were so strong. “I’m sorry, Gabu. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“No, no, Mei. It’s all right. It’s just… we wolves have a saying that ‘there’s no such thing as a free lunch.’ And I guess…” He gulped. “I never really realized before just how true that is.”

Mei managed to swallow a portion of his cud. He chewed a bit longer and managed to put the rest down. “No such thing as a free lunch? That’s so sad!”

Gabu nodded emphatically. “Tell me about it.” His stomach burbled, and Mei sighed for the poor thing, always trying to get a word in. Gabu down looked at it, embarrassed.

“Are you doing all right?” Mei asked.

Gabu rubbed his tummy. “I’m fine ‘til tomorrow. Are you ready to give the tree a try?”

Mei nodded, stretching his shoulders. “Let’s do this. I’ll be an arbor goat—the envy of all the squirrels.”
“I’ll believe it when I see it!”

Mei walked to the foot of the tree, but glanced back. “Hey! Are you going to encourage, or make fun?”

“Oh, I’m encouraging you all the way. Like I said, I’ll believe it when I see it! Which I’m sure I will in just a few minutes.”

Mei laughed and placed a front hoof on the bark of the half-toppled cypress. “Oh, I see. I knew you believed in me.”

“Oh of course I do, Mei. I’ll always believe in you.”

Mei gave a push of his back legs and sprang several steps up the tree. He scrambled for his footing, found it, and for a brief moment, felt like the luckiest goat in the world.

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Chapter End Notes

This chapter is rather short, so have a cute YouTube link!

Wolves and dogs do occasionally eat grass. But not a ton of it! It might be for the nutrients or maybe it’s to purge their intestines of worms. Fun!

And yes, Gabu and Mei (May) actually do go tree-climbing at one point in the TV series.
The 19th Day

Chapter Summary

* Are you afraid of me?
* May I come over in the morning?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 19th Morning

There were birds on the wing today. Mei craned his neck toward them, flying overhead. A new kind, he thought. Coming in with the spring. Judging by their direction, they were flying in from the distant southwest. But as to what lay in that direction, over the forests, Mei had no idea.

Come to think of it, this gave him an idea. If the birds were migrating in from that way, did that mean there was a hotter climate to the southwest? Would it get too hot for them in the—

“Good morning!” rang a cheerful voice.

Mei’s back tingled; he jumped and his hair stood up. The voice came from behind the hill, not from the cave itself. He was accustomed to being wished good morning by a wolf, even though he would never have believed it a year ago. But it was one wolf’s greeting in particular he was used to, and this wasn’t it.

“Good morning, Lala,” he managed to say.

She was behind him. The wind was in his face and Mei hadn’t checked his vulnerabilities. He was getting reckless. Then again, was there anything here to fear, aside from loneliness?

The silver-furred wolf paced up the hill, a picture of health. She’d obviously eaten well over the last three days, and there wasn’t a trace of morning grogginess in her movements. Moreover, there was a big sly smile on her face, unlike the sweet one she’d worn when they’d met before. As Mei watched, it cracked into laughter, and he cringed, wondering what she intended.

She stopped approaching. Her laughter was slower to stop. “Pardon me! It’s just that… it still cracks me up. I cannot believe you’re still alive.”

And just after Mei had wondered whether he had anything to fear. “Why shouldn’t I be? There aren’t any predators here big enough to target me… unless you expected Gabu to kill me while you were away.” He didn’t have enough fortitude to keep the bitterness from his voice.

“Oh, no, no!” She shook her head, her fur flowing with each shake. “I know he wouldn’t do that. I meant the fact that you made it over the mountain… through the snowstorm… with half the pack chasing you. I had a lot of time to think about things while I was circling the mountain, but I honestly never really considered the idea you’d be here with Gabu, living happily.”

Why not? Mei wanted to demand. “I hope it wasn’t an unpleasant surprise.”
Lala drew back in thought. “Why, no,” she said. “It was a very interesting one.”

*Interesting.* “Are you planning to win Gabu away from me?”

She shook her head again and resumed walking over the hilltop, toward Mei. “I don’t think it’s a contest, is it?” Then she stopped sharply again. “The two of you aren’t mates, are you?”

Mei wrinkled his nose. “How could we be mates? He’s a wolf and I’m a goat.”

Lala shrugged. “Stranger things happen in tales. Has he mentioned that I told him I’d be willing to be his mate?”

Mei nodded. “It’s his choice.” And it was.

Lala’s grin returned. “Well, there you go. There’s nothing to win. Just a well-considered decision by an adult male.” She snickered, dropping her gaze as she walked.

“Have you come here to see Gabu?” Mei asked.

“I’m here to visit you both! Later on, we’ll hunt. But if Gabu’s still sleeping, I’d like to get to know you, if I may.”

Mei felt like he was in a trap. He knew he couldn’t hide his distrust of Lala. “What would you like to know?”

She took a breath and sat down. “I barely know anything about you. I’m not even sure what to ask a goat. You were from the Sawa Sawa herd, yes?”

Mei’s breath felt steamy as it left his nostrils. “That’s right.”

Lala flipped her tail, as if declaring her unsureness how to proceed. “Did you have any special status in your herd? Were you the child of the leader, or… anything like that? I don’t know how a goat herd is organized.”

“You don’t say.” Mei was silent for a few moments before he decided that he ought to answer. “No. I was no one special. My mother was killed by wolves. I’m almost convinced they were from your pack.”

“Was she?” The she-wolf blinked and drew her head back. “Were you there to witness it?”

No ‘I’m sorry’? Somehow that didn’t surprise Mei. “I was very young. She told me to run, and I did.”

“In that case, I imagine the event stuck with you.”

Mei snorted. “Forgive me, but I think incidents in which your only parent is brutally mauled to death tend to do that.”

This silenced Lala, as Mei had thought it might.

He thought of going in to wake Gabu. But he didn’t want to do it while angry. He imagined himself telling Gabu his girlfriend was here, but knew it would come out surly. Mei couldn’t do that to his friend. So he waited.

“You’re very defensive,” said Lala.
“That’s what these horns are for,” Mei retorted.

“I wish…” Lala began. Then she sighed. “Is there any way I can convince you I don’t mean either you or Gabu any harm? I don’t want to be your enemy.”

Mei considered. Was there any chance she was being truthful? She seemed so obviously up to something. And yet…

“Perhaps I’m not being fair,” Mei admitted, looking down. “It’s just… what we had here was stable. Strange, but stable. And now you’re here… and I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Lala’s smile vanished. She padded forward, a look of concern on her face, and lowered herself silently to the grass. Mei was impressed how silent she was, compared to the rustle Gabu would make doing the same.

“You and your friend destroyed everything stable in my life,” she said. Her tone was as close to deadpan as Mei had yet heard it, but there was still an undercurrent of coyness. Didn’t that ever go away? “My whole social structure is gone, thanks to you. All the plans I’d laid. All my friends… my leader… my beloved brother. Gone. But I’m not unhappy. I’m here. With you—the destroyers of my life.” She shrugged, and her wistful smile returned. “Stability is overrated.”

She was right, in a way. Yet this failed to make Mei feel better. “And I’m supposed to believe you’ve forgiven us, and you don’t want anything in return?”

“I haven’t forgiven you, because you haven’t done anything to forgive! You preserved your own lives, against all the odds. But I do want something from you. I want your friendship.”

“That’s kind of a lot for a wolf to ask a goat.”

She shrugged—slower this time, more expressive. “Are you afraid of me?”

Mei’s jaw quivered as he forced himself to answer. “Yes.”

“Don’t be. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Isn’t that what someone who wanted to hurt me would say?”

Lala’s grin went crooked. “If I were a fox and you were a rabbit? Maybe. But if you know wolves… you’ll know that when we want to hurt someone, we do it. We don’t beat around the bush.”

Something was stirring in Mei. He wondered if it was trust. He wondered if Lala’s words were working. “Well, you’ll forgive me, I hope, if I don’t find myself fully reassured.”

Slowly, she stretched out and lay down in the grass, her belly crushing several of the smaller flowers. “Your mother. Was she killed on Sawa Sawa Mountain?”

Mei eyed her suspiciously. But he couldn’t help but answer. “Nearby. On the meadow.”

“If it’s worth anything, it wasn’t me who killed her. I haven’t been hunting that range long enough. I’d lay a wager it wasn’t Gabu, either.”

Mei shook his head sullenly. “My grandmother told me my mother ripped the ear off the wolf who killed her. So I knew it wasn’t you.”

Lala’s maw broke into an amazed gape. “Oh!” She laughed, and Mei cringed. Why did she have to
laugh and smile so much, especially when the subject was death? “That would have to be our fearless leader, Giro. So you’re the offspring of that one!”

Mei stood there, inclined away from the wolf, and kept breathing with effort.

“Your mother scarred his left eye, too, if this is the same incident we’re discussing. He kept his sight, but could never open it quite as far as the other.”

That was consistent with what Grandmother had told him. Mei felt a faint surge of pride—his mother had mutilated the leader of the wolves in the course of giving up her life. But he didn’t let it show. “Did he survive the break-up of the pack?”

“He didn’t survive the avalanche,” said Lala cheerfully. “Down came the snow, and it was goodbye, leadership. Our top five ranking males all died that day. Only three wolves came through that collapse—a couple of desperate, twitchy males who managed to make it back and report what happened, and our dear Gabu. I’d love to know how he managed it.”

“It’s too bad he can’t remember. He didn’t come through unscathed.”

Lala nodded. “But he’s better now, isn’t he? He achieved his goal.”

*She means me.* Mei disliked the way the female was looking at him. “Maybe he was just lucky,” he suggested.

“Maybe. Or maybe he was *driven.*”

That was just about enough of this, Mei decided. “If we’re going to be talking about him, we may as well let him be here for it,” he insisted. He walked into the cave and lifted a hoof to Gabu’s upper back. “Gabu. Would you like to wake up? Lala is here.”

He rumbled deeply, like contented thunder. “Lala,” he murmured, eyes still closed.

Mei didn’t like that at all. “Wake up, please.” He rubbed Gabu’s back in a circle. “Are you ready to get up?”

With a surprised grunt, the sleeping giant’s eyes popped open. He looked first to each side, then saw Mei. A smile appeared. “Mei! Hello. Did you wake me up?”

Mei nodded and spoke softly. “Lala is back.”

“Oh!” His ears perked; he sniffed the air, then rambled from the cave. Mei followed hastily.

“Good morning, Gabu!”

“Lala! You’re back!”

Her tail swung about. “Didn’t I say I would be?”

Gabu was so obviously, instantly happy to be in her presence. “Well, yes. But it’s hard to know for sure.”

Lala grinned. “You won’t be rid of me that easily. I was all the way past the grass forest—” She pointed with a jerk of her head. “—and there was so much to explore! It was a good trip.”

“You’ve been exploring?”
“I’ve been exploring ever since the pack dissolved. Another day’s trip is nothing special. Except, of course, that it is, because you’ll want to hear all about it.”

Gabu nodded thrice. “It looks like you’ve eaten well.”

She gave a wag of her tail. “I have! And I look forward to hunting again today.”

Gabu patted his belly. “I’m ready for that, too—I finished all the meat you left me. I buried some of it, but buried meat just isn’t as good as fresh meat.”

“Nothing really is!” Lala licked her lips. “Do you know what, Gabu? It turns out Mei’s mother, so far as we can gather, is the goat who scarred Giro.”

Gabu gaped and turned to Mei. “Really?”

Mei wasn’t really eager to discuss it. “So it seems. According to what my grandmother told me.”

Gabu’s gape slowly became a look of remorse. “But that means… it was Giro who killed your mother.”

Mei shrugged. “And he’s dead now, according to Lala. I guess that feels good.” Really, it didn’t. Mei had never been vengeful against the wolves. Just fearful.

Lala grinned toothily. “Well, congratulations! Honestly, I used to admire Giro, a long time ago. He was capable in so many ways, and had an air of mystery.” Lala flpped down one ear and closed the eye on that side for a moment. “The missing ear and scarred eye only helped. And the other girls still swooned over him to the end.”

“Not you, though?” asked Gabu.

She flicked her head. “After a while, I got to know him about as well as anyone did. And his mystery didn’t turn out to be that hard to solve.”

“Really?”

Lala regarded Gabu flippantly. “Giro was drawn into himself. He didn’t let himself love. That was basically it. He’d lost his mother and father in bloody conflicts and it hurt him, and after that he didn’t let himself love. Oh, he mated with plenty of the girls, but he never opened up to them. Somehow, that made them adore him all the more.”

“But not you?” asked Mei.

Lala turned her coy smile back to him. “I was the beta’s sister. I had certain privileges. I chose my own mates.”

Gabu seemed nervous to ask—presumably he knew which males had mated with Lala, and had opinions. “And… how did you make your decisions?”

“Well, for one thing, all the males I picked were brave enough to ask!” She grinned fiercely at Gabu. “More to the point, I like dog-wolves who are willing to share their feelings. If not quite all the way.”

Gabu swallowed. “I wish I’d asked,” he mumbled.

Lala took two swift steps toward him, eyes fierce as her smile, front feet neatly together. “You still can. Miracle of miracles, the sun hasn’t set on that opportunity.”
Gabu glanced at Mei and trembled. “I… I just don’t know.”

Lala snickered. “The goat complicates things. Beautiful.” She glanced at Mei and saw him staring back thorns. “Oh. I’m sorry. That must have sounded ingenuine. It wasn’t. I meant it. This situation is beautiful.”

“You have an unusual sense of beauty,” said Mei coldly.

“I know,” said Lala.

The three were suddenly silent. Mei took a deep breath, hoping to acclimate himself to the morning. The others did the same, as if yearning to start over.

“Should we go hunting?” asked Gabu, with only the briefest glance at Mei.

“Let’s go,” replied Lala. “Would you like to take charge again?”

“Oh—sure! To start out with, anyway. I’m not going to pretend you’re not the better hunter.”

Lala smiled slyly. “But you know the ground. Besides—it’s always nice to have practice, isn’t it?” She paced down the hill. “So, where to, hunt leader?”

“I’m thinking we should try again for deer today!” Gabu announced. He raced after her, but looked back up at Mei from the foot of the hill.

Mei could only imagine Gabu saw sadness on his face. But sadness wasn’t complex enough to describe what he was feeling. He’d never expected to feel emotions like this in such a simple paradise as the Emerald Forest.

“See you tonight, Mei!” called Gabu.

“Until tonight,” Mei replied.

The 19th Evening

It was a rich twilight. The red clouds at the edge of vision felt like something real—distant rocky landscapes that could be walked to and trod upon. The way the land was bathed in successive levels of light made Mei feel like he was being suckled, or surrounded by layers of herdmates for extra safety. It made him feel like a sheep. It made him feel like his mother was still alive.

He’d stayed near the hill all day again. Maybe someday, he would feel comfortable wandering on Gabu’s hunting days. For now, far too much was up in the air. He needed this comforting feeling. He needed the succor of home and high ground. Familiar turf. On a day like this, too much could happen to someone who chose to go out wandering… even if it was him.

He’d spoken with Bepo earlier. The vole had told him that its acquaintances had all gone to earth today, as none of them wanted to ‘risk fight shaggy.’ The word was finally spreading that there was such a thing as hunting day. If it wasn’t hunting day, you could roam freely, and the monsters—for there were now two monsters—would never harm you. But every third day, watch out—the hunters were on the prowl.
Mei had shared his apprehensions with the black vole. How he was afraid Lala had evil designs, whether on himself or Gabu. How Gabu was putting himself forward so easily… so far forward. How anything could happen on a hunt—he knew that well from his friend Tapper, who’d had a slew of stories of goats fighting back and leaving their hunters injured. And he knew it because his mother had maimed the wolf who’d killed her—and he’d been an alpha wolf.

Mei was afraid that some desperate deer or angry badger would hurt Gabu on the hunt. He knew it could happen. His heart twinged with the strangeness of worrying about a wolf getting hurt while hunting. His perspective had been inverted. He was worrying about the welfare of wolves now. It made Mei a little dizzy as he looked over the world from his hill.

*How did I get here?* his heart kept asking itself. And he had to take a deep breath and keep reminding himself how it had happened, and that it was for the best.

The smell of blood cut the air. Mei wanted to bolt, but again, he remembered that his allegiances had changed. Horrible as it seemed, blood wasn’t always a bad thing now. The question was whether it belonged to Gabu or Lala, or to their prey.

“Mei! We’re back!” crowed Gabu’s voice in triumph. Mei turned and saw them circle into sight around the foot of the next hill.

“We got a deer!” cheered Lala, trotting beside him.

The two of them were splotched with dark red blood. Mei wanted to bolt away. He wanted to throw up. Instead, he pranced in celebration. “Well done!” he heard himself say.

Lala and Gabu wanted to keep celebrating their victory. They wanted to while away the night together. Mei forbade them from coming into the lair before they’d washed—he didn’t think he could sleep with the smell of blood everywhere. So they rolled in the flowers and dashed up and down the hill and recreated the hunt for Mei’s benefit and for each other. Gabu had apparently been very inventive. He’d devised signals for ‘veer right’, ‘veer left’ and ‘hold fast’, and put them into practice. Lala had made fun of him, inventing in turn new barks and howls for such concepts as ‘roll over’, ‘snuffle your nose in the dirt’, and ‘make friends with the prey and live together in a cave’. But Gabu’s signals had worked in the end! On their fourth try going for a deer, he’d barked for ‘veer right’ when the deer had broken left. Lala had obeyed and the deer hadn’t been able to scramble fast enough to safety. Down it had gone! They’d laughed about it all the way home, and were still laughing even while they told the story.

Mei had to admit he was moved by their great hunting triumph, and that Lala’s ‘signaling system’ was a bit funny. He watched their reenactment with genuine interest and frolicked gaily over the hill with them. But when it came time to settle down for the night, he vetoed the idea of Lala sleeping over. Even if the wolves were willing to wash themselves clean in the stream, he wasn’t comfortable with that yet. One wolf was an odd bedfellow. Two were an odd bed.

“Fine,” acquiesced Lala. “May I come over in the morning?”

Gabu looked plaintive. “Mei? Is it okay if Lala visits in the morning?”

Mei sighed, smiling. Was this where things stood? Was he telling wolves when and where they could or couldn’t go? What would his mother think of that? “All right,” he allowed. “We’ll see you in the morning, Lala.”

She grinned, as if asking a goat for permission was funny for her, too. “In the morning,” she agreed. Her eyes met Mei’s for a moment, and it was as if they’d shared a secret thought.
The two went off to wash, and Mei was left to wonder: Had he been unfair to Lala? Had he misjudged her?

But then, as he wandered back into the lair, an even stranger thought occurred to him: Was it possible that in some ways, he was more like Lala than like Gabu?

He felt his stomach churn. What an unsettling comparison!

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Chapter End Notes

A ‘dog wolf’ is just the technical term for a male. I’ve avoided it until now, since it doesn’t feel appropriate to call Lala a ‘bitch’—so I’ve used ‘she-wolf’ instead. But ‘he-wolf’ doesn’t seem right either, so. *shrug*

I found the scene between Lala and Mei that opens this chapter especially entertaining. And I’m amused by Lala’s later declaration of beauty.

~Hey readers! This story is getting ART! Thanks to generous reader DragonBlazerxxx, I've inserted three in-line illustrations into previous chapters (4, 12 and 16), and there'll be more to come.~
Chapter Summary

* Hoofy headspace too cavey?
* What exactly were you hoping would happen?
* Do you need an actual voice from the heavens?

Chapter Notes

You get a double chapter today, readers! I expect double comments from you all. ;) I almost posted the two parts of this day as two separate chapters, since I think they each stand alone well. But I decided to leave them together because if I do, I’m on track for this novel to comprise three parts, each of 14 chapters, for a total of 42. My MLP and Undertale fanfic novels were 24 and 42 chapters long, respectively, and the Undertale one had two parts of 21 chapters each. So this structure is too neat to resist. :-)

The 20th Morning

Mei had unsettling dreams that night. No—they were already unsettled. They were a shaken mass of dreamstuff, like fallen autumn leaves in a tenuous pile. Mei’s sleep had been more or less sound ever since Gabu had made an effort and taken him in his grasp to calm him through his nightmares. But these weren’t nightmares. These were little snippets of fanciful story—some bleak, some joyous, some frantic, but all rooted to a shaky foundation. Wolves. Mei had dreamed of being a wolf, or of being among wolves, or of pretending to be one and trying to get real wolves to accept… that he believed it was true. He wanted to shake it all out of his head, now that he was awake, but he also felt an obligation to himself to lie there and think it through. Dreams have a purpose, he believed. I am troubled. Wolves trouble me. I need to come to terms with this.

So he lay there until he couldn’t lie anymore, and then he pushed himself up and left the cave where Gabu was sleeping soundly. It was just past dawn.

He’d dreamed he was the only goat in a pack of wolves. More than a pack—a whole community. Multiple packs that visited and exchanged members and sent their children to learn together, like the three herds of goat with their annual joint field trip. He was accepted as such—the goat among us, the one who helped start it all, the one who must not be touched. Some young wolves resented his status and asked why he should be allowed to live among them if he didn’t hunt, didn’t provide sustenance for the pack. Their huge faces and big noses targeted him hungrily. “It’s tradition,” they were told. “He helped us a long time ago. Our packs here wouldn’t exist if not for him. We don’t eat Mei.” And the hungry wolves, with light cream fur or mottled black and brown, would shake their necks and chuff and walk away. And Mei’s thread of hope, the slim happiness fueling him, slipped ever so slickly away when he came to realize that Gabu wasn’t there; that he had left the wolves, or passed away, years ago. Yet Mei remained among them, unloved but revered. And he kept hearing an undercurrent of gossip that he knew must be about him: What has he done for us?
lately? Yes, he brought us to this pristine place, but has he done anything for us lately? And Mei wished he had.

The feel of early morning was anodyne for dreams like this. Mei smelled the clean air, watched the grass blowing gently on the hillside and below, observed the little signs of spring’s progress. He stood breathing, surrounded by that which was real and good, and slowly healed from the tumult of unwelcome dreams. He focused on nature and tried not to think about his life.

“Hoofy happy?”

This voice, it occurred to him, was both a part of nature and of his life. It was with an exasperated smile and a certain weight that he turned to face the dark meadow vole. “Good morning,” he wished earnestly.

“Good morning. Hoofy happy?”

Why did Bepo choose to lead so often with that question? “I’ve had some bad dreams. Just need to clear my head.”

The vole shook its little head violently. “Not room in mine. Hoofy headspace too cavey?”

Indeed, perhaps it was. “I guess I have a lot to think about. What do you spend your days thinking about, Bepo?”

“Mostly happy,” answered the vole. “Springtime warm! So many foods. Winter was danger.”

Mei had asked about thoughts and gotten emotions as a reply. He smiled sadly. “Was it a hard winter to get through, Bepo?”

The vole nodded. “ Mostly dig.”

“You spent all your time underground, digging tunnels?”

“Mostly dig,” repeated the vole. “Not fresh. Not fun.”

“If it means anything to you, I also had a hard winter,” Mei confided. Not that he remembered most of it.

“Over now!” said Bepo exuberantly. “Done remember.”

Mei chuckled. “Was it a harder winter than usual?”

The vole gave Mei a funny look. “Usual?”

Was the creature serious about not remembering past winters? “Harder than other winters, I mean.”

Bepo shook its head spasmodically. “Other winters?”

Mei bit his cheek. Was Bepo so young as that? “Have you only lived through one winter, Bepo?”

A cautious nod. “One plenty. Never again.” It shook its head.

Mei grinned. “I don’t think you’ll have much of a choice in the matter.”

The vole looked hard at him, serious. “More winter?”
Mei nodded. “After spring comes summer, and after summer, fall… and after fall…”

Bepo laughed. “If still alive? Sooo lucky!” It turned a somersault right there in the grass, as if chasing itself vertically.

Mei blinked. “Still alive? But why wouldn’t you still be alive?”

The rodent stilled itself and blinked back. “So large hoofy. So forever. So old. Little Bepo vole. One winter, maybe two.”

Mei was horrorstricken. “Do… do voles die so young?”

The creature placed a paw against itself. “Not much me. How can live long?”

Mei was simultaneously sorrowful for the unexpected news that he was going to lose his only friend from this land, so soon—before Mei could even revisit his home—and grateful for the things, like time and years, that he took for granted. “Oh, Bepo!”

“Oh hoofy! So much sad in you. So much long live.” The meadow vole darted over to hug his leg, then darted back away.

Mei’s eyes watered. “I wish you could live for a long time, like me.” He had never thought of the life of a goat as something long… not until now. But they did have elders, after all. Mei’s grandmother was still alive. Mei swam with the idea of being as old as her someday, or older. There were so many potential years ahead of him!

If Gabu didn’t choose to eat him, that was. Mei had promised not to talk about it again, but he wholeheartedly meant the promise he’d made Gabu—Gabu had Mei’s permission to eat him at any time. He didn’t think it would ever happen, but circumstances could change quickly, and while friendship was one of the most powerful forces Mei knew of, it wasn’t eternal…

Mei couldn’t count on living to a ripe old age. He made it a point to live with someone who could devour him whenever he liked. It was for the best—life was fragile. It shouldn’t be counted on for too much.

Music rose from around the hill’s corner. What a strange thing to hear! It wasn’t the birds; it was Lala, pacing around the hill into sight, announcing her presence through a pleasant, high-pitched wordless tune. Just like a good wolf ought to do, Mei reflected for a silly moment.

“Other shaggy!” exclaimed Bepo, zipping away through the grass. “Good bye.”

“Wait,” Mei called, wondering at the wisdom of what he was about to say.

The black streak waited, looking back in a tense pose.

“Maybe you’d like to meet her, Bepo. I can make her promise not to eat you, just like Gabu.”

Lala was in earshot now and broke off her song for a delightedly airy question: “Promise not to eat who?”

It jarred Mei, the idea of someone he knew even having to ask that question. “Good morning, Lala,” he forced himself to say. “My friend Bepo the black vole is here—I thought you might like to make its acquaintance.”

Lala’s left forepaw remained lifted, undecided for a full two seconds. Then she laughed. “I’d be
honored! Shall I come up the hill?”

Bepo made a sudden screeching sound that reflexively pinned Mei’s ears. “Wait! No killing?”

“Will you promise not to hurt it, Lala?” Mei asked.

Lala nodded smoothly. “I promise.” The smile didn’t leave her face, or her voice.

“No never killing?!” Bepo clarified, standing erect and staring at the terrifying beast.

“I will never kill you,” said Lala simply.

Bepo blinked. “Okay. Meet shaggy.”

Mei was touched at the fact such terror could be overcome by a simple promise. Had Bepo never heard of the concept of lies? But he wasn’t going to bring it up, of course. “All right, Lala. You can come up the hill.”

She did, loping and leaping a bit, and arrived surprisingly soon, her paws settling quietly in the flower-studded grass. “Hello! I’m Lala, daughter of Sora and sister of Bari, alpha female of the erstwhile Baku Baku Valley wolf pack, north of Muri Muri mountain.” She bowed her head.

“Am Bepo,” said Bepo. It dipped its head awkwardly for an instant. Mei tried not to laugh at the contrast.

“Pleasure to meet you, Bepo! Have you lived in these parts all your life?”

Two quick nods followed. “Large tunnels. Only once fled.”

Lala looked quirkily at Mei. “Does the poor thing always talk like this?”

Mei nodded back. “Do you mean you had to flee your tunnels once, Bepo?”

The vole nodded. “Badger dug.”

“Well!” Lala flicked her tail. “If any badgers give you trouble, you will let me know, won’t you? I’ve found they’re tastier than they look.” She licked her lips sumptuously.

Mei was a little disturbed, but Bepo seemed rapt at the notion. “Fight for Bepo?”

Lala shrugged. “Why not?”

“Is strange meet. So much power!”

Lala flexed her great torso, rolling a shoulder. “It’s good to be strong.”

“What strong do? Why strong?”

Lala grinned. Her grin was full of points; she couldn’t help it, could she? “Well, if I figure that out, I’ll be ready, won’t I?”

Bepo chittered, and it took a moment for Mei to realize it was laughter. Was it laughter? “Is strong meet. Meet shaggy so scare! Like eat hot seed.”

“Hot seed?” asked Lala, lowering her head and peering curiously.

“First body shake. Then stop. Then safe!” said the vole.
“Ah. I see. Like a leap into cold water!” she agreed.

“Cold water hot,” said Bepo.

Mei was reluctant to admit he had no idea what they were talking about. “I’m glad you seem to be getting along.”

Lala regarded him. “Every day is a surprise around here. I should have gone wandering years ago.” She stillled herself abruptly. “Would have broken Bari’s heart, though,” she murmured.

“Bari heart?”

Lala smiled cruelly. “He was my brother.”

“Big woof?”


Bepo gasped. “Strongest shaggy??”

Her claws raked through the grass, tousled the little white flowers. “He had such a mind. And he had it all in place, too! Every whim under control. Every idea in service of the whole. My brother was amazing.”

Bepo tilted its head. “Dead?”

Lala spat air. After a tense moment, she uttered a curse word that made Bepo flinch. Mei realized it had made him flinch, too.

“Not strongest?” asked Bepo softly. Mei understood the implication: If this creature had really been the strongest of his kind, he surely wouldn’t have perished.

Lala’s expression was cruel, angry, discombobulated. Mei saw her sides heave—up, down. “Not stronger than an avalanche,” she muttered.

Bepo lowered itself, staring.

That was when Gabu chose to emerge from the cave, yawning, padding lightly. He glanced down the hill and saw Mei there, looking back at him. His eyes instantly went wide. “Lala! And Bepo too? Have you been having a chat?”


Bepo looked between the wolves. “Shaggy kill Bari?”

This had taken a bitter turn. Mei decided to interject. “But you don’t blame him… right, Lala?”

Lala went tight-lipped as she looked at Gabu. “Of course not. He was just protecting himself, after all. And his precious friend.” She lingered on Mei for a moment, her voice cold. “Who wouldn’t have done the same?”

Gabu trotted hurriedly down the hill. “Lala… if you’re mad at me, you can… I don’t know. Slap me on the snout! I didn’t want Bari and the others to die. You know I didn’t.”

“Is that true, Gabu? You leapt at them, ready to make your last stand… but you didn’t want them
to die? What exactly were you hoping would happen?"

Gabu sat back as if he had, in fact, been slapped. Bepo peered from one face to the other. “Maybe Bepo go. Good meet. Very hot seed.”

“It was very nice to meet you,” said Lala politely. Slowly. Turning to look back at Gabu. The vole raced off, and Mei wondered whether it would ever come back while the wolves were around.

“Slash me across the face,” said Gabu pitifully. “I don’t mind. If it makes you feel better.”

“Slash you across the face? Why should I do that, Gabu? Are you saying you deserve it?”

Mei could tell this would only go downhill. Gabu was willing to accept physical pain, but Lala clearly preferred emotional weaponry. “He doesn’t deserve it,” Mei insisted, stepping forward. “Lala… we’re both sorry about your brother. But you admitted there was nothing else we could have done. We didn’t want to hurt anyone. We just wanted to get away.”

Her tail swished and hips stiffened, but Lala’s face was frighteningly blank. Mei found he wanted to flee, even more than when he’d first seen her. But he couldn’t do that here and now. He and Gabu had no choice but to talk her through this.

A harsh smile returned to her lips. “I just want to know,” she said to Gabu.

“What?”

“How did you—you!—survive the avalanche? I don’t blame you for causing it. I certainly don’t blame you for coming over the mountain with…” She nodded to Mei. “Your special treasure. But how is it possible that Bari, Giro, all our best hunters managed to perish in that snow, and yet somehow you…!”

“What can I say, Lala? I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for surviving!” she snapped. “And don’t offer to let me hurt you. Are we a pack, or are we not?”

Gabu whimpered. “I just don’t know what you want from me.”

Lala sighed and spoke softly. “I’m sorry, Gabu. I’m not being reasonable. I’m asking you to do what the world itself could never manage to do.”

Gabu sat up, quizzical. “What’s that?”

“Make sense.” Lala chuffed, gave a harsh slash of her tail, and stalked away.

Mei waited until she was out of sight, then beckoned to Gabu, who was clearly upset.

“Yes, Mei? What is it?”

Mei gestured for Gabu to open his ear. He did so, and brought it obediently to Mei’s muzzle.

“I’ll always like you, Gabu. Whether you make any sense or not.”

Gabu instantly tittered with laughter. He grabbed Mei around the belly and hugged him to his own, swinging lightly to and fro. “Do you know what, Mei? I feel exactly the same way!”
The 20th Evening

It was a quiet evening—the kind that sometimes runs out of words. That had frightened Mei, the first time it had happened. He remembered a lush meadow the nannies sometimes spoke of, one that had grown near the cliffs back home. It had been home to the most luscious clover, but unlike the grassy stretches around it, the clover hadn’t grown back each year after the herd ate it. It had just been less and less after each winter, until finally the goats were hunting for clovers amid crabgrass—finding one now and then, but otherwise just passing the time by idly scanning the meadow that had once been so rich. Was life going to be like that now? Had they run out of all the best things to talk about? Was conversation going to be a struggle now—an effort to find the occasional snippets they had left to discuss, in between stretches of awkward silence?

But it wasn’t. It hadn’t been that. The next morning, Mei had woken up with thoughts on his tongue and Gabu had apparently felt the same. It turned out that conversation wasn’t a reservoir—it was a privilege. Something they were lucky enough to be able to enjoy. But silence was a necessary nutrient, and conversation an indulgence—a healthy dessert they could enjoy for as long as they both liked.

Or not at all. It was still pleasant being with Gabu, even when they didn’t talk. The little smiles and tail flicks they gave each other when their eyes happened to meet made that perfectly clear.

“Hello,” called Lala from outside the cave. “I apologize for how I acted this morning. May I come in?”

To Mei, her tone of voice didn’t sound entirely sincere. But he wasn’t sure what ‘sincere’ sounded like for Lala. For all he knew, this was as sincere as she got. “I’m all right with it,” he murmured to Gabu, whose ears were pitched.

“All right,” called Gabu. “Come on in.”

It was Mei’s first time sharing the cave with her. The space was crowded—it was almost impossible for their bodies not to brush each other at least a little. Mei retreated to the deepest
recess of his moss bed, while Gabu carefully turned around to allow Lala beside him. The two wolves lay facing Mei, their haunches rising just visibly behind their heads—like twin mountains, imposing in the distance. Mei shivered with another one of his ‘can this be real’ moments. They were blocking the exit. If the two of them decided to tear him to shreds, there was absolutely no escape. He realized this and tried to keep his breathing steady. That wouldn’t happen. He knew it wouldn’t happen.

“Thanks for having me,” said Lala once they were all settled.

“It’s always a pleasure!” said Gabu. “How was your day?”

“Reflective,” she admitted. “You would think I had more than enough time to reflect while I was coming around the mountain.”

“But you didn’t?”

Her ears swiveled to focus on Gabu. “I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to do with my days! I’m not allowed to hunt… I have no pack to watch over, no territory to defend… or at any rate, no one to defend it against. I have no intrigue to manage, unless the three of us count as an intrigue.” She smiled, as an aside, to Mei. “I went to the stream and drank. I washed my face, had some berries. I told myself I would spend the day roaming the perimeter of this land, learning the contour of the woods. But, while I did walk the edge of the woods, I’m not certain I learned it. I think my mind may have been too… preoccupied.”

“Really? With what?” asked Gabu.

She sniffed and took a deep breath. “With thoughts of death. I’d rather not discuss it. May I ask you a question, instead? Both of you?”

Mei nodded. “Go ahead.”

She paused a few moments, gathering her breath. It smelled like wolves in here. How had Mei reached this point—backed into a cave filled with wolves, yet somehow not afraid for his life? If he told Mii, she wouldn’t believe it.

“You said you met in a barn,” Lala began.

“That’s right!” said Gabu. “It was a stormy night. Thunder and lightning were crashing everywhere!”

Lala smiled slyly. “I’d like to hear the whole story, if I may.”

Well, this was comfortable ground. Mei smiled and began to tell his part, while Gabu, for his part, told his. The two of them jumped in frequently, taking over from one another, and even while doing it Mei could see how funny it was. Lala seemed more and more amused by the rapport they shared.

“‘All that delicious grass!’ I said. But I suppose Gabu didn’t hear the word ‘grass’, since at that exact moment, a crash of thunder struck.”

“And lightning!” added Gabu. “And no, I didn’t hear you, because I was crying the word ‘meat’!”

Lala’s jaw hung slack. “Unbelievable. But no, don’t let me interrupt. Go on. What next?”

They continued the tale right up to the moment when they stood, in plain daylight, facing each
other, each with a four-leaf clover brought for the other. “I could hear the birds go quiet,” said Gabu. “Even they knew something queer was happening.”

“I don’t really know how to describe what I felt,” said Mei. “I should have been afraid. I think perhaps on some level I was. But I was more… amazed. I couldn’t believe that I was facing someone so much like myself on the inside, and yet on the outside so different!”

“That’s more or less how I felt, too,” said Gabu. “It was like I was taking in a miracle.”

They fell silent then, and Lala looked from one companion to the other with growing disbelief on her features. “You idiots! It was a miracle!”

Mei stared. “I… I beg your pardon?”

She pushed her forebody up. “Do you need an actual voice from the heavens? This. Was. A miracle. I am not kidding. Your meeting was a literal miracle.”

Mei wasn’t even sure what she was saying. He’d always understood the word *miracle* to mean an incredibly lucky event, the sort of thing that happens once in a lifetime. “I don’t disagree. But why is it such a big deal?”

She swung her gaze to him. “Why is it such a big deal? Because Leto wanted this to happen! Or it could have been the goat god, for all I know. Do goats have a god?”

Had she lost her mind? “I don’t even know what that is,” Mei admitted.

“Well, that’s true…” said Lala dryly. “Fine. Let’s count. Number one—Gabu, you had to get separated from the pack. You were out scouting?”

“Right. So, number one, you were given outstalker duty, and number two, you got separated when the storm came in.” She turned to Mei. “And you were also caught by the storm?”

“It did come in awfully quickly,” he recalled. “I was afraid to leave the shelter of the copse, and my friends left me behind. Then I got practically hit by lightning and slid down a hill!”

Lala stared, then blinked. “So. The storm comes in so fast you get left behind—that’s three. You wind up sliding down a hill due to some lightning strike—four. Number five—Gabu, you tried to outrun the weather and wound up spraining your leg.”

“Well, that’s true… but was that really vital to my meeting Mei?”

“You heard what he said: Your walking stick sounded like a hoof, so he assumed you were another goat. If you’d just padded in, he would have been alarmed. Right, Mei?”
It really was starting to seem unlikely. “I suppose so…”

“Numbers six and seven—you both took refuge in the same barn. Numbers eight and nine—you both had headcolds so you couldn’t smell each other. If either of you had gotten even a whiff of the other…”

“We wouldn’t be friends now,” Gabu concluded.

“I’ll give you the darkness—it was nighttime under a roof. But numbers ten and eleven—whenever lightning struck, you both shut your eyes.”

“I’ve always been scared of lightning,” Gabu admitted sheepishly.

“Number twelve—your mother and his grandmother both gave you the same advice when you were little. Number thirteen—and I don’t even know how unlikely this is—you somehow managed to navigate an entire conversation without either of you saying anything that would identify your species! And the moment you were about to—the very syllable you were finally about to give the game away—number fourteen, BANG!” Mei winced and jerked up at Lala’s shout. “Down came the thunder!”

“You know, you do have a point,” allowed Gabu.

“Number fifteen—you decided, for some playful reason, not to exchange names—that too would have given it away.” She was right—‘Mei’ wasn’t the kind of name a wolf would have, and Mei had never heard of a goat called ‘Gabu’. “Number sixteen—Mei’s leg fell asleep, so he had to wait to come out—otherwise you would at least have seen each other in silhouette. And number seventeen…the next day, you both decided to give each other four-leaf clovers. Do you think that made a difference in your decision?”

Gабu swallowed. “When I realized I’d been talking to a goat, I was tempted to call it off—to say we couldn’t go on our picnic after all. But when I saw he’d brought the exact same gift as me…”

“…I couldn’t bring myself to run,” Mei concluded.

“So there you go,” concluded Lala. “If it weren’t for your leg getting sprained and yours falling asleep, your headcolds, your common history, your lucky choices in language, your similar taste in gifts, your similar reaction to lightning, and most of all, the storm behaving in exactly the way it did at exactly the right moments… this unlikeliest of friendships would never have been.”

It was true. The odds had been astronomically against their friendship taking root. They’d unwittingly skirted pitfall after pitfall. Mei had never laid it out like that in his mind before. “I guess I should be thankful.”

“You sure should,” growled Lala. “Because this was not a coincidence. That many lucky breaks don’t happen all in a row by chance. Maybe four or five. Just possibly ten, on a very good day. But not seventeen. This was a bona fide miracle.”

“I don’t understand,” Mei said. “If it didn’t happen by chance… how did it happen?”

Lala looked pointedly at him. “Did you ever ask yourself where wolves came from?”

What? “I… what does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m curious too, Mei,” interjected Gabu. “Your grandmother told you that there had to be wolves in the world so that goats could stay quick and sharp-minded. But did she say how we actually
“Um… no. She didn’t.” He’d assumed that if there had to be something in the world, it would simply be there. That was the nature of things, wasn’t it?

“Leto,” said Lala. “The maker of wolves. The being who watches over us and guides our actions.”

Mei was perplexed. How had no one told him any of this? “A being who watches over you?”

Lala smiled wryly. “That’s the story we’re told! Leto was the first wolf. She came from one of the other species, and funnily enough, no one knows which. There’s a story for how Leto came to be a wolf after being born or hatched as every kind of animal you can think of—a skylark, a gopher, a fox, a fish. Some say she was one of those creatures that build things like the barn you met in—or that she was an ant, or a sheep, or even a goat.” Her eyes got brighter for a moment, and to Mei she looked like a creature ready to pounce. “However she began life, Leto was given the power to choose her own shape. So she invented a shape for herself and called it ‘wolf’. She then went around the world, changing her shape to match the animals she met. Whenever she tricked someone into sharing a meal with her… that animal became a wolf. In this way, she populated all corners of the world with wolves…and then she brought them together and formed the first packs. That’s why we wolves like to share our meals, by the way—we’re all descended from creatures who chose to, long ago.”

Mei listened to the tale, fascinated and horrified. “And she watches over the wolves of the world?”

Lala nodded slowly. “She does. That’s what they say. She directs the packs this way or that…growing one, splitting another. Removing leaders from power and installing those she deems worthy. She can’t watch every pack in the world at once, of course…but when there are times of turmoil or great change, when a wolf pack migrates or changes leadership or has a bout of especially good fortune…you hear whispers that Leto is watching.”

“Gabu? Is what she’s saying true?”

His voice was plaintive. “I don’t know, Mei. But that’s the story we’re all told.”

Lala smiled to him. “Skeptical? I don’t blame you. I used to be. But if this union of yours,” and she moved her muzzle between the two of them, “wasn’t Leto’s doing, then it was some other great force. Some other species’ god. And I’m nearly convinced it was Leto.”

This was so strange. “You think your goddess wanted me and Gabu to be friends? But why?”

She shrugged. “Who knows? To unite the tribes? Small chance of that ev—oh.” Lala clapped her jaws suddenly shut and faced Gabu. “I just realized. If it’s because of Leto you had your magical stormy night, it’s also because of her you survived that avalanche.” She heaved, her eyes clouding. “So there’s my answer. Deep down, I must have suspected. Leto saved you from that ava—no.” She shut her eyes, pained. “Leto caused the avalanche.”

“You really think so?” asked Gabu.

“It makes sense. It feels true.” Lala lay still for a while, breathing audibly, and then: “Our goddess killed my brother.”

“Oh, Lala!”

She opened her eyes. “You doubt it?”
“Gabu shrank away from her, though the cave’s small size kept their pelts together. “But he was a good hunt leader. Why would she—?”

“Stronger wolves have died for more mysterious reasons,” Lala replied. “Leto loves her people. No, that’s not right. She… values her people. She wants us to thrive. But… that doesn’t mean she never cuts short the lives of great wolves. They say she has her reasons."

“I don’t know, Lala…"

“Gabu.” Now the she-wolf’s blue eyes were smoldering, intense. “Looks like you’re off the hook. You didn’t kill Bari after all. You were just a cosmic tool.”

Gabu swallowed. “So… does that mean you’re mad at Leto now?”

Lala laughed. “Can I be mad at my own goddess? She wanted our pack to die. For whatever reason. Maybe… maybe it was so they couldn’t follow you here. Maybe all of that death… all of that chaos and the breakdown of a centuries-old pack…” She was silent for a long time, but slowly indicated the two of them in turn. “… was just so that the two of you could live in harmony, on this hill.”

Mei’s mind raced. Was this another step on the path to forever? Was… was it even his path? “All of it, for us? The snowstorm… the avalanche…”

“But why?” moaned Gabu. “Why would Leto want Mei and me to be together so badly?”

Lala was silent. “I really don’t know,” she said at last, standing up. “But I’ll be dashed if I’m not going to stick around and find out.”

“You really think that’s…” said Mei.

“Good night, packmates.” She winked ruefully as she turned around. “Dream well.”

Lala left the cave. Mei and Gabu were left gaping at each other.

“It’s so strange having her around,” Mei said.

“Yeah,” agreed Gabu, staring into the distance through the cave wall.

“Do you really think all that is true?”

Gabu took a quavering breath. “Well, Mei… if I’m being honest… I can’t say for sure she’s wrong.”

Mei sighed, lay flat and let his eyelids slump. He didn’t know if he liked the idea of being a god’s tool. But, disturbing as the thought was… it did seem to explain a few things.

Not the least of which was why he’d always felt like he was on his way to something important. Maybe, just maybe… he really was.
Leto is a figure in Greek mythology, a female titan and bride of Zeus. Goddess of motherhood, she gave birth to Apollo and Artemis. Worshiped historically in Lycia (related to the word ‘lycanthrope’), she is associated with wolves, either having been guided by them or taking the form of one while on Earth. My godmother used to have a large dog called Leto. It seemed like a good name for the wolf goddess, especially since it fits in well with the short Japanese names.

The mutual gift of the four-leaf clover referred to here is from the TV series.
The 21st Day

Chapter Summary

* If Leto is trying to bring our species together… is that a bad thing?

* What scruples are these, foul miscreant? What scruples are these?!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 21st Morning

Mei lay still now, after so much time. One foreleg was tucked underneath; he could feel it; the other stretched out before him. He came from where he’d been into a place that was oppressively quiet, tragically empty, and gradually the cave’s dark wall tethered him to reality. His eyes fluttered; soft breaths brought back his focus as he… became himself again.

“Mei?”

The voice was asking a question, and he knew it was one he had to answer, but it was several seconds before he could fathom what the right answer was. “Oh. Yes, it’s me.”

“Were you dreaming?”

…That was the name for it. “Yes. I was. Oh, Gabu!” Now Mei remembered who he was with. He remembered what his life was. Could the rest of it really all be false?

“Will you tell me your dreams? You always have such interesting dreams.”

Again, Mei found himself stumped for an answer. How could he begin? It was like asking someone to describe their whole self. “I was a god,” he murmured.

Gabu hesitated. Then he asked cautiously: “What do you mean, Mei? Did you dream of being a god?”

Was that what had happened? “Yes… it was…” Mei stared at the earth floor, not wanting to glimpse the flowers or the exit, not wanting to forget. He struggled to put the dream, still so vivid, into words. “It was… about ants.”

“Ants?” asked Gabu curiously, lifting his head.

“Well, not really. Ants were the end goal… I was… I think I was the god of the ants. Except that I wasn’t an ant. I was… trying to make ants great? I was connecting them up with other kinds of animals. That was what was at the heart of it… making connections.” But there had been so much more, and it pained Mei to be losing it all.

“That’s amazing. What kind of connections?”

“Well… I connected ants to dragonflies, for the sheer force of them in flight. And locusts. They
were my army. They were powerful enough to… get the attention of other creatures. Toads, and small frogs. I spent a long time connecting up the frogs to the locusts… that was the hardest part, I think. It was…” He remembered a lingering twilight spent on a lilypad, watching the swarming gnats in the distance, hearing crickets chirp music meant to bring the frog and the chosen locust closer together. “…intense.”

“I don’t understand. How were they connected? What kind of connections?”

Mei looked indirectly at Gabu and tensed his shoulders. “I don’t know if I can describe it. It was… like we’re connected, you and me. Friendships, or… getting over conflicts between species. It was like I was trying to overcome natural barriers.”

“All so that the ants could be great?” asked the puzzled wolf.

“Yes, that was my angle. I used water spiders to go in another direction… I remember convincing a clam to care—it was hard, at first, and then surprisingly easy. I roped in creatures in the water whose names I didn’t even know… and now and then, I heard secrets in the air, that I don’t think I was meant to know…”

“Secrets!”

“Yes… but there was someone else out there, working against me,” Mei continued. “I was just starting to find out who it was…”

“Someone working against you? Another god?”

“It might have been. It probably was.”

“Do you remember anything about them?” asked Gabu.

“…Bees,” Mei remembered. “They were working with bees. I think bees were the insect I had to be especially sure to avoid.”

“Wow.” Gabu shook his head hard, ears flipping. “It sounds like an amazing dream.”

Mei nodded sadly. It was a real loss, having it be over.

“Do you think it’s because of what Lala told us last night?” Gabu asked.

Mei made eye contact at last. “Oh yes, definitely. I’d never heard of this thing called a ‘god’. I don’t know if we goats even have anything like that.”

“To tell the truth, I’m not at all sure that Leto is real,” said Gabu. “Like Lala said… there are too many stories about where she came from. They can’t all be true! And if most of them aren’t true… well, who’s to say if any of them are?”
Mei nodded hesitantly. “I guess that makes sense. But if my meeting you wasn’t being directed by some greater power… it certainly was unlikely.”

“That’s true,” Gabu admitted. He peered unsurely out at the world.

Mei found it difficult to let go of being a god. He wanted to be able to put into words what it meant to expand his empire of creatures, to make connections. He imagined Leto, watching over all the wolves of the world, one pack or land at a time. If Leto had arranged for him and Gabu to become friends, was she watching even now? Had Leto brought Lala to them? Did she have further plans?

Mei didn’t feel like he was being controlled. But then again, he didn’t feel exactly in control of his life, either.

He walked outside after Gabu, who was listening to the birds, head tilted. “Gabu?”

“Yes, Mei?” Uncertain, but the tenderness in his voice was still strong.

“If Leto brought us together… do you suppose she’s trying to take control of goats, as well as wolves?”

Gabu frowned deeply. “Well. That would be quite a trick, wouldn’t it, Mei? So then, she’d be using you and me as a bridge to get to the other goats?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. But I’m not sure how it would work, or even whether it’s something to be avoided.”

Gabu thought for a while. “I see what you mean.” But a little later he added, “Does that mean you’re not sure whether you want to visit your herd again?”

Mei hadn’t even considered that. “Oh! I don’t know.”

“If Leto is influencing you… she could use you to influence them.”

“Yes. I don’t know, Gabu. I’m not sure how much influence she could really command, even if she is real.”

Gabu was silent—he apparently didn’t know either. But after a minute of watching through the cave entrance, he spoke again.

“Mei? If Leto is trying to bring our species together… is that a bad thing?”

Mei swallowed. “It’s quite an odd idea, isn’t it? I mean… it’s one thing for me to be your friend. I’m only one goat. It probably isn’t that hard to resist eating me. But if you were living in a whole valley full of goat herds… and your whole pack were living in that same valley… do you really think everyone would be able to resist?”

Gabu’s ears stood taut, sagging just at the tips. “Maybe if we were raised from cubhood not to eat any goats. Maybe if we were taught from the very beginning that goats are our friends, not our food.”

Mei smiled, naturally liking the sound of this. “Then our kinds could exist happily together?”

“Well…” Gabu scratched his head. “I suppose so! But then… we’d just have to eat something else instead. If we couldn’t eat goats, we’d have to… well, for example, we might have to eat all the more deer to make up for it.”
Mei didn’t like contemplating the death of deer, but he didn’t know why Gabu was frowning. “Does that bother you?”

“Well… it’s just that, if we ate that many deer… it would be that much harder to make friends with them someday, wouldn’t it?” Gabu’s frown became a big, sheepish smile.

Mei laughed. “Gabu! Are you dreaming about wolves making friends with the entire world?”

He looked embarrassed. “Well… it’s something to think about, isn’t it?”

Mei stared at his companion, amazed all over again. “But how could that be possible? After all, you’d have to eat someone, or you wouldn’t survive.”

“Well.” Gabu thrust out his neck straight ahead, thinking. “Maybe we shouldn’t survive. Maybe the world would be better off without wolves in it.”

It was such an obvious idea, and one that had crossed Mei’s mind many times, yet he never thought he’d hear it from his friend’s mouth. “Oh, Gabu!”

He smiled at Mei, nervously. “Maybe Bepo is right. Maybe we really aren’t needed. Maybe we just exist because…” He waved his tail. “Because we want to.”

“I don’t know what the world would be like without wolves. I could easily imagine some other predator might come along to take advantage of your absence. The foxes might get bigger and stronger until they were just as dangerous.”

“Oh, Mei! Do you really think they could?”

“I don’t know.” He walked to Gabu’s side and looked over the view with him. “I just feel like… a world without dangers is too good to be true.”

Gabu set his head on Mei’s back and didn’t answer.

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**The 21st Day**

Gabu paced the lands on patrol. He didn’t like thinking of it as a patrol, really—that implied that the lands belonged to him, and that wasn’t how he wanted to see things. But he didn’t know a better word for his methodical, unthinking tour of the land surrounding the northern end of the Emerald Forest. He was used to being put on patrol duty, since everyone back home had known how bad a hunter he was, and today it seemed like the thing to do. He missed the old things… but he realized then that he’d thought again of Baku Baku Valley as ‘back home’. It wasn’t back home. It would never again be his home. He had to really get it into his skull that this was his home now.

The tall grass of Tall Meadow brushed his hips and belly. It was nice coming this way. It felt as if the grass was paying attention to him. Some of the stalks released seeds into his fur, which annoyed Gabu a little, but at the same time he found it funny. The grass was trusting him to spread its offspring far and wide. Didn’t it know he was a wolf? He didn’t care for grass. But he was a kindhearted wolf, so he would do it anyway. Rather than pick the seeds out, he’d let them stay in his pelt until they fell out naturally, or at least until he’d covered some ground. After all, if he could spread the tall grass, the creatures that ate the tall grass would follow… and that might just
bring pleasure to a wolf like Gabu. He had to wonder just how much the tall grass knew.

His smiling passage was interrupted by a shrill scream. Instantly he spun around—which was supposed to be a patrol, wasn’t it? He was ready to fend off an attack from a badger, wondering whether such a creature could really think it could defeat him and half afraid that a greater threat, one that could actually prey on wolves, had finally shown up. His heart beat rapidly as he scanned the grass for danger. But the streak that appeared was small and low, a dark gray spot sitting up and staring thorns at him through the vegetation. Was it really a rabbit?

“You!!” the creature screamed. Yes… definitely a rabbit. “So you’re back! You show your ugly dangling hide again, and you’re not even trying to hide, are you? You dunderjawed, cone-toothed, bespawling wretch! What are you doing here with those ugly, dewbeating paws and those milky kit’s eyes, barren of thought as winter is of clover? Well?! Speak!”

Gabu was so astonished he couldn’t bring himself to interrupt. But the lanky, dark gray rabbit was right at his feet, yelling at him. It was a storm of anger in one tiny spot. “What? What did I…?”

“What did you do? Excuse me?! You damned niddy-noddy lubberwort, do you take life as easily as breath? As a nibble? As a footstep? You killed my mate! You sank your accursed teeth through her back and sat there, like a nimrod trying to count—like your teeth were pathetic paws sinking in muddy ground. And you don’t remember, do you? You clodpated cumberworld!! Do you notice anything you do?”

It was so much, so fast. Gabu wasn’t even sure if it was a threat. “I… I guess I did hunt here a few days ago,” he recollected. He’d been giving Lala orders by then, proud as anything, and they’d taken three rabbits.

“Guessing is for children’s games, you two-assed loon. So you don’t even remember taking her life! It was like a snuffle or a sneeze to you!”

Gabu stared. He’d never heard of a rabbit, or any prey animal, speaking like this to a wolf. But then, these creatures didn’t know wolves, did they? “I guess I did kill her, then. I’m sorry.” Was he really sorry? He wasn’t sure, but the word simply came out of his mouth.

“Sorry?! Sorry is for bumping someone when you speed past, sorry is for a misplaced word. Do you think ‘sorry’ covers murder?” The rabbit leapt in place, not a jaw’s lunge from Gabu’s face. “You tremendous oaf, what use is your sorry little ‘sorry’? My mate is dead!”

Gabu shook his head helplessly. “I don’t know what to say.”

“She was carrying our kittens!”

Now that hurt. Gabu’s jaw tightened at this revelation, his ears flapping wide. “Oh! I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t know. You’re a lummox with flower farts for thoughts. You don’t know anything about the people you murder, do you? Do you even give two hoots which lives you end? Does it trip you up one bit?”

“I’m really sorry about your mate,” said Gabu, trying and failing to keep up with all the insults. “I don’t really have a choice. I have to eat meat.”

“What do I care about choices?” yelled the rabbit, now standing firm and staring, ears not quite erect. “You ended my life. You swept away hope and succor and took all that mattered.”
Gabu’s eyes glazed. This was starting to hurt. Even Bari had never torn into him like this. And it wasn’t like he had no fault in this. Gabu was trying not to hunt pregnant mothers. He already felt terrible about how little nourishment he got from the entirety of a creature’s life; it seemed especially obscene to be consuming unborn babies so small he didn’t even notice them going down. Normally, when a quarry was carrying babies, you’d see them when you tore open the stomach. That had never sat right with Gabu. But apparently he’d hunted a pregnant doe without realizing it and had eaten so fast he hadn’t even noticed.

“I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known,” Gabu said. “I’m sorry. But I don’t know what more I can say.”

“Again, the childish clatter! Sorry! Like beating down a willow with a stick. Oh, your imbecilic sorries! Do you have no notion of dignity? No mercy? No respect for self, if not for nature’s creations?”

Gabu just wanted this to be over. “Please… I don’t know what you want from me.”

“EAT ME TOO!” screamed the rabbit. He slammed himself down into the grass, face first, and trembled. “She was everything I lived for—how can you let me live one more breath? Crush me with your horrid teeth, mishandle me with your cloddish tongue, suck me down into your rancid gullet. Kill me. Have a morsel of mercy and let me follow into her pointless doom.”

This was new. This was terrifyingly, bizarrely new. No creature had ever asked Gabu to eat it before—he couldn’t remember this ever having happened to any wolf. He could only imagine the creatures were different here—in a place without wolves, they never learned to fear them. But this rabbit knew Gabu was fearsome, and wanted to be eaten. It was so strange. “I… I can’t eat you,” he realized. “It’s not one of my hunting days.”

“Your hunting days?” repeated the unbelieving rabbit. He sat up. “You keep a calendar of destruction? A timetable of torment? End me! Eat me now—I don’t require a hunt; I sit before you, devoided of pleasure. Bite my neck! Crush my pain into flecks of nothing!”

Gabu considered quickly. What did it mean for it to be a hunting day? Was the rule that he could only hunt then, or only kill then? Until now, it had always come to the same thing. But now he had to decide. What exactly was his rule?

He shook his head. “I can’t. Not today. Tomorrow I can eat you… if you still feel this way. I only hunt every three days.”

“Every three days?!” repeated the dark gray rabbit, eyes shining black. “Does your heart only feed your brain every three days? What stupid law of nature are you claiming? You’re being given a gift—a fine beast of the meadow, bereft of joy, ready for oblivion, insulting your every tuft and bulge, and you can’t eat it?! What thickheadedness is this??”

But Gabu was resolute. “I’m sorry, but that’s just the way it is. I’ve made up my mind, and you can’t sway me.”

“But why?? What possible logical zephyr could bear a conclusion like that without buckling and crashing? Aren’t you hungry, slaverer?”

Gabu nodded meekly. “I’m getting hungry, yes. I had plenty of venison two days ago, but I’m starting to get a little peckish again.”

“But then dine! Feast on this cruel, unrelenting thing that bespeaks your vices unceasing before you.”
The rabbit struck his own chest. “Are words insufficient to provoke your dullard’s spine into action? Do I need to yank your tail?” The creature zipped around Gabu and leapt upon his tail—Gabu was so astonished he didn’t think to dash away until it was too late. He hugged the wolf’s tail and clung fiercely.

“Please let go,” he asked.

“I’ll lose my grip when your teeth lose my soul’s grip upon my corpus! Do it, raggabrash! Find your disgraceful footing and do your abominable duty!”

Gabu shook his tail; it barely moved under the hefty rabbit’s weight. He shook his entire rear, but the assailant dug his teeth into his hair. He felt helpless—not unlike when Mei had yelled at him, but without the dread. This was just… wrong.

“Crash. Bite! Maim. Destroy! Do what you did so grotesquely well these five days past and send me dashing after! Send me to my love, miserable ninny! End my torment!”

Gabu slowly lifted a hind leg. He suddenly became aware of the eyes on him—rustles in the grass, eartips, odd silences. He was being watched. He could see some animals watching him, and knew others were watching from out of sight—he had an uncanny feeling the rabbit’s commotion had attracted the eyes of the whole meadow. He felt naked, like an underperforming whelp brought before his alpha for judgment.

Slowly he paced, dragging his tail and the large rabbit clutching it through the grass, which he flattened as he went. He worked his jaw, swallowing. Was this Gabu’s punishment for being what he was? Was this fair?

A bird flapped overhead—small, peering, out of reach. “Why not eat the babbit?” it chirped.

Gabu looked up, but the bird had already fluttered upward in a loop, and he couldn’t tell which of the several dark shapes there it was.

“…Eat the babbity?” called another. “Why not eat?” asked a third.

Gabu was being brought to judgment by the sky itself. “I only hunt every third day!” he pled.

“Not today?” came a voice through a flurry. “Use your teeth?” “Three days?”

“That’s right,” he explained, still treading slowly. “I hunted two days ago. It’s not time yet.”


There was silence for a while as the birds circled. Then they chirped rapidly to one another in a cloud of noise. Some flew off; others remained, or joined them. Many kinds of birds cycled and swirled over Gabu’s head. A brown rabbit became visible through the grass, standing erect, not trying to hide.

Gabu looked at it sadly and said nothing.

“You really aren’t killing him,” the rabbit said. By now the gray bundle on his tail was bunched and silent.

“I can’t,” whined Gabu. “It’s the rule!”
The rabbit watched carefully as he plodded. Then it added: “Who gave you that rule?”

Gabu was used to following rules laid down by Giro, or Bari, or his mother. “I gave to myself,” he croaked.

“Then can’t you… lift it?”

Gabu looked carefully at the rabbit, and in that moment it tensed, ready to run. But he let his neck sag. “No. I need this rule. If anyone is ever going to trust me… they need to know when I’m safe.”

A bird overhead said something in a more stringent voice that those of the smaller songbirds. “I’d heard about this, but I’d thought…”

Gabu kept walking through the tall grass, but it seemed to go on forever, and more and more creatures came to watch him trudge. He’d finally had enough; he sat in the uncomfortable grass and howled unfettered into the air.

The birds winged away for a moment, then came back to their erratic orbit.

Lala’s howl sounded away northeast. Gabu smiled. She’d heard him. He needed her now.

The rabbit on his tail uncurled, still grasping tight. “Oh, have you found your seat of misery?” he mocked. "Have you found your soul’s anguish, beast? Is it so terrible to have your tail weighed down for a mere span of day? Are my words sharp like shaped enamel? Are you barbed by my incisors? Dolt! You great quisby, eat me! Can you do nothing but trudge and keen?!”

“I can’t eat you!” cried Gabu. Yes, he could tear the rabbit off his tail—he didn’t doubt that. But he wasn’t sure he could do it without causing the creature pain, and he couldn’t bring himself to do that. This rabbit’s pain was real, and it was Gabu’s fault. Those tiny babies… those had been people like him, or could have been, and he’d devoured them without even realizing. He felt as filthy as the rabbit seemed to think he was.

Gabu started to walk again. Rustles at the edge of his vision haunted him; still he was watched. It wasn’t until he reached the edge of the meadow, at last, that Lala’s smell arrived, followed by the sight of her leaping from the woods toward him. She crossed the moor and landed with a jump before Gabu, and her eyes were on his tail: she hadn’t missed what was happening.

“Gabu? Are you giving out free rides?”

“Oh, Lala. This rabbit showed up and accused me of eating his mate, and all her unborn babies. Which I guess I did. When I told him I was sorry, he yelled at me and told me to eat him too!”

Lala’s eyes were instantly wide. “And… you didn’t?”

“I can’t! I have my rule! I don’t eat, or at least I don’t kill, until tomorrow.”

Lala opened her jaws wide and let them jerk gradually together, as if yawning in reverse. Or savoring the oddness of the situation. “Is that true?” she asked the rabbit.

“It’s true,” the animal spat. “And you’re just as guilty, I don’t doubt. The both of you—creatures formed of pure error, with nothing well meant about you!”


“Harsh as your obscene, gurgling bellies? I doubt I could ever summon that level of cruelty. You’re
both terrors—despicable clods of graceless flesh and mangy trails.”

“Has he been… like this the whole time?”

“He took a break for a while,” said Gabu helplessly. “But now he’s back at it.”

“This is amazing.” Lala walked around Gabu to view the gray lump close up. “You know, Gabu and I have been hunting together. If he killed your mate, I was probably part of it too.”

“Then you’re a devil in his mold,” moaned the rabbit. “Ugly, unscrupulous lunks, both of you. Do what this weak oaf can’t do, she-devil, and devour me!”

“She-devil! Wow.” Lala placed a paw beside the rabbit. “Sorry, but I’m playing by this fellow’s rules. I can’t eat you until tomorrow either.”

“Do you jest? Does fate play nibblies with my tender neck? You’re both predatory grotesqueries—why can’t you do the job nature made you for and slaughter me? Place me in your tummy-beds beside my mate and children, I beg you!”

“Rules are rules,” shrugged Lala, her head lowered, eyes up near the rabbit’s. “Did you call us unscrupulous a minute ago? Do you understand what that means? Don’t you realize that the very reason you’re upset with us is because of Gabu’s scruples?” She flicked her tail toward Gabu to indicate him.

“You maim. You kill. You deform and disembowel. You end lives but you won’t end mine. What scruples are these, foul miscreant? What scruples are these?!”

Lala sighed. Gabu sighed too. “He’s got a point,” he told her.

“Nonsense. Your scruples are well-chosen and interesting. What you’re doing is an experiment, Gabu, that it’s quite possible no one has ever done. Don’t be ashamed of that. Don’t run from it because of one angry rabbit. Who ever ran from a rabbit?”

“Cur,” swore the rabbit, huddled against Gabu’s tail.

“For what it’s worth,” said Lala loudly, “I’d love to eat you. You look fat and delicious. And I’d say you richly deserve punishment for your foolishness. Even if I do like your way with words.”

“You feckless bumlicking sumph,” muttered the rabbit.

“Mm,” said Lala. “Let’s go back home.”

Reluctantly, Gabu agreed. There was no point continuing his patrol now. And there was no point trying to get the rabbit off his tail. If this was a painful burden, let him bear it. Gabu was lucky enough not to be a rabbit, not to have to fear being eaten by predators. But he was also weak. He was too weak to find a way to live without murder, too weak to let himself die should he fail. He had resisted temptation—barely—in the snowy peaks, and again in the tense light of the goat-horned moon, but he knew he didn’t have it in him to starve himself to death. He could come right to the edge, but that was when his base portion took over. That was probably why he’d lost his memories after the avalanche. He’d been too desperate and hungry to stay himself anymore.

Gabu walked slowly, step by heavy step, toward the field of flowers, toward the grassy hill. Lala kept pace beside him all the way, tail swishing. She exchanged words with the stubborn rabbit now and then, but never seemed to take him too seriously. The cloud of birds followed high above, now spread out wider than before. Little rodents climbed from their holes to watch the march of the
wolves. Rabbits stood at the meadow’s edge, staring; squirrels crept out on branches at the edge of
the meadow, staring; field mice stood in tufts of crabgrass or on mounds of earth, staring.

Rumors flew at the edge of Gabu’s hearing. “…every three days…” “…never would have
believed…” “…must be true, or he would have…” Chirps and birdsong were like a perpetual
rainbow raincloud overhead. The sun crept slowly toward the horizon. Gabu’s stomach dared to
growl.

“Ooh, listen to that,” said Lala. “You still have some of that deer buried, don’t you?”

“A little,” Gabu nodded. He didn’t look at anything too distinctly.

“You could have that. Or…” She flicked her tail at the rabbit on his tail, striking him. “You could
wait.”

“Don’t tease me, terrible monstrous louts. Would you eat stored meat while a wretch such as me
begs for deliverance? Make me your next meal or starve yourselves to oblivion.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” said Lala. “We’ll chomp you right up, as soon as it’s midnight. Or do we have
to wait ‘til morning, Gabu?”

“I don’t think I want to stay up ‘til midnight, said Gabu. “I guess I can eat him in the morning.”

“There you go,” said Lala. “At dawn, our hunting day begins. At dawn, you die.” She grinned a
little, and Gabu thought he saw her lick her lips.

They were halfway up the hill when Mei arrived. He dashed around the hilltop, tired from running.
“Gabu? Lala?”

“Hello, Mei,” moaned Gabu.

“What’s happening? All the animals are talking about you!”

Oh, no. Gabu felt terrible. He’d drawn so much attention to himself, and now Mei’s day was
spoiled too. “I’m sorry, Mei.”

“Did you break your word and hunt too soon—? Oh!”

Mei caught sight of the dark gray burden on Gabu’s tail. The rabbit’s head was down, teeth buried
in Gabu’s fur—it was like a stone set there to weigh him down. “Why are you carrying that
rabbit?”

“He wants Gabu here to eat him,” said Lala. “Or me, I suppose. He isn’t fussy.”

Mei stared. “But that’s horrible!”

Lala shrugged. “Such is love.”

“Love?”

“My mate, my one and only,” croaked the rabbit, lifting his head. “She was the flower of life’s
escarpment, and she was ravaged, groin to sternum, by this senseless beast whose tail I clutch.”

“Um. Gabu ate your mate?”

“He used her for a purpose bitter and base as his dumbchunk stomach—brainless food, dead meat,
and down she plunged into his ravening jaws, and all our incubating babes along with her. Gutless nincompoop! Thumping lummox!"

Mei stepped to the side and spoke to the rabbit as the wolves passed by. “I actually thought rabbits took mates come-as-catch-can, and left them to raise their children alone.”

“Tsubaki was something special. She was a once-crafted sensation, a marvel among does. I could have stayed my whole life in her demesne, and thirty times thirteen lives more. But these horrors ended that. They ended her thread, they cut her joyous dance in the first act, the sweetest measure. They did it without a thought or a care but flesh, flesh, flesh! They are the cruel indifference of nature, and they must be my undoing. Yet now they refuse to be indifferent, and in such stupid reckoning are rendered doubly cruel!”

“I’m sorry about your mate,” said Mei. He watched the rabbit get dragged past—Gabu didn’t look back to see, but he suspected Mei might have given him a nuzzle.

“Sorry, sorry,” lamented the rabbit. “Watch me die. Bear witness to my death! That’s what sorry feels like. Be my gatekeeper and my dispatcher. Hear my scream. Tsubaki!! Oh, how I loved you, Tsubaki!”

“I hope you aren’t planning to go on like this all night,” remarked Lala.

“Or what? Or what will you do to me, you gassy gadabout? Kill me? Will loud laments speed my departure? Will shrill screams lead you to merciful violence? Then let the shrouds fall upon my senses!” He screamed, and screamed loudly, painfully. Gabu’s ears pinned down, but he did nothing but walk up the hill. Mei’s ears closed; Lala winced.

“This has come too far,” said Lala. Gabu could barely hear her.

“No,” he said. “Let him scream. It’s no more than I deserve.”

Lala stood in place, dumbfounded, as Gabu passed her by.

They entered the cave. Lala sat outside, facing in; Mei curled up at Gabu’s haunch and tried to comfort the rabbit. But still he screeched, and the cave was anything but pleasant.

“Gabu… are we going to be able to sleep tonight, with him going on like this?” asked Mei.

“No.” Gabu didn’t raise his head all the way. “It’s going to be impossible.”

“Then… should we pull him off your tail? I could use my horns.”

“No,” said Gabu. “I’m sorry, Mei. But we have to put up with this. Just for tonight. You can sleep outside if you like. But this is what I deserve. I’m a killer.”

“Gabu!” Mei nuzzled his flank, hard. “You only do what you have to do in order to live!”

“Even so,” Gabu told him. He understand that he wasn’t at fault… not in his actions, not this time. Aside from overlooking the babies.

“Then you don’t deserve to have a sleepless night! You haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Even so,” repeated Gabu. “Some things have to be made right. I’m only now coming to realize… how much pain I caused during my life up until now. I need to know about the pain, Mei. Tonight… will help me learn about the pain.”
Mei stood tense, but said nothing more. He nuzzled Gabu once more, warmly, and sat down beside the screaming rabbit.

“Learning about pain,” repeated Lala. “You haven’t stopped amazing me yet, Gabu.”

“I’ll be fine tomorrow. I’ll meet you in the usual place.”

“You’re sending me home?”

Didn’t she want to go? “You can stay if you want… but I don’t want you to have to go without sleep, too.”

Lala shrugged. “We’ve got some venison left. We’re not desperate. We can afford this.”

Gabu met her eyes. “You’re staying?”

“Why not? I’ll stay the night with you. Maybe if he keeps his screams on one note for a while, we can even harmonize!”

Gabu smiled but didn’t laugh. He laid down his head and waited for the sun to set.

Soon, he could hear Mei talking quietly with the rabbit. The rabbit kept screeching, altering his tone and timbre now and then. But then, suddenly, he stopped. Now the two herbivores murmured quietly. Gabu could hardly hear a word. He shut his eyes. He took in the mingled smells of flowers… a pretty female, a rabbit and a goat.

In the darkness, he heard Lala’s voice: “Well good night, screamer. Kill you in the morning.”

But the murmuring continued for hours after that, punctuated with silence. Gabu made out snippets of the rabbit’s speech… “recalcitrant life-ender…” “…make a clean breast of it…” “could never return to anything like…” And he heard bits of Mei’s side of things. “…she would have wanted…” “…the most unlikely places…” “…the hope that each new day…”

He could smell Lala lying there in front of him, saying nothing. Probably asleep. Gabu’s eyes were closed. He let his ears relax. He let the weight on his tail drag him down. He slept.

He felt himself asleep. He couldn’t make out what his dreams were. Even as Gabu slept, he found himself envying Mei’s amazing dreams. He could only dream of what had happened that day, but it was tangled, shadowy, lethargic and recurrent. There was no resolution. There was no progress. There was just a shifting of priorities, a heaving of slow breath, and an increasingly sleepless sleep.

But when Gabu awakened, he was relaxed. Mei was asleep behind him. Lala was asleep before him. The sun was just starting to rise on the horizon. An odd half moon was hanging in the middle of the sky.

And the dark gray rabbit was nowhere to be seen.

~~((-_-))~~

Chapter End Notes
Yes, rabbits really can scream.

This is one of the longest chapters in the story so far! And it required a fair amount of research... reading long webpages of old-fashioned insults. o.o

If you think Mei’s dreams are exciting, you should see the ones of my own I type out sleepily for my best friend on Telegram.

Congratulations - you've reached the halfway point of the novel! Expect 42 chapters in all - it's the magic number from The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, you know. And my last fanfic novel (Alphys and the Queen) also had 42 chapters.

To celebrate, I'm adding quotations for each part! You can look back at Chapters 1 and 15 for them. Maybe at some point I'll also revise the early chapters to bring them up to snuff.

Keep leaving comments, folks, I love them! Hope to keep y'all around until the end.

Illustrations by DragonBlazerxxx.
Chapter Summary

* Are you saying you're... in that special time of year?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 22nd Morning

Lala woke with a sense of unfinished business. There was distant birdsong; a trace of mist; a steady southward breeze. Some of the mountain’s chill was washing over the land today. Lala liked it when the wind blew from the north, but the foreign smells might spook the herds and make hunting a challenge. She licked her lips regardless—there was meat to had. She knew this before she remembered the rabbit, specifically. Her head lifted from the dewy grass. She’d fallen asleep on the hilltop. She was wetter than she liked, but had to admit this was a beautiful place to be on a morning like this.

And… oh. Yes. There was definitely something her body was telling her this morning other than hunger. Other than a stomach’s hunger, anyway. *Mid-spring*, her body was reminding her. *Last chance.* Her trip around the mountain had delayed her natural cycle, but there was only so much a need could bend before it broke.

Gabu was still in the den, talking quietly with the goat. Lala watched them with narrowing eyes. Where was the rabbit? Had it fled?

“Good morning, Lala,” said Gabu. “The rabbit left in the night.”

Lala chuffed. Recalibrating her expectations; stifling her three-days hunger. “Did you see him go?”

“No.” Gabu looked to the goat. “But Mei talked him into leaving. He helped him to see that… there was more to live for, even without the one he loved.”

Mei looked up at Lala cautiously. There was no apology in the goat’s face—just weariness, and wariness.

“Mm,” said Lala. “How do you feel about that, Gabu?”

“Oh? Well… I feel glad. I didn’t really want to kill the rabbit.”

Lala processed this. Then nodded. “In that case, I’m glad too. Excited to go out today?”

She noticed subtle relief in the goat’s countenance as he sagged. Had he expected her to snarl at him—or worse—for nothing more than a lost meal? Did he really think Lala was as simple as that? Food was important, but not in itself. Food was a celebration, or a bargaining chip, or a way of telling the successful from the feeble. Aside from that, food only mattered if you were in danger of letting life slip away. And Lala was having the time of her life here in the Emerald Forest; she was *not* going to starve.
Well, if that was what the goat thought of her, let him stay afraid for now. It would serve him right.

“I’m not sure if ‘excited’ is the word I’d use,” said Gabu, “but I’ll be ready to hunt in half an hour.”

“Fine,” replied Lala, turning her back. “We’ll have to see if we can’t get you excited before the day is out.” And she traipsed down the hill, waving her tail.

A little misplaced compassion was no problem. If he still had a sense of smell, the dog-wolf would be getting excited soon enough. Nature would see to that.

The 22nd Day

The meadow was empty when they got there. Peaceful. Painfully peaceful. As if it had been scoured clean by a flood, and even the water had gone. Not even birds, Lala noted. There had been birdsong at the lair, but here, not even birds were chirping.

“This is what I was afraid of,” moaned Gabu.

“That they’d learn,” surmised Lala.

He hung his head. “They learned.”

“And yet…” She took two steps forward into the crunching grass—clearly no literal rain had fallen here. “Isn’t that exactly what you wanted?”

Gabu stood like a sloping promontory, his head an extension of his back, peering into the lower heavens. “We’re going to starve,” he whimpered at last.

Oh, really. “Come on. Starve? Are you a wolf or are you a… a plant? Have you forgotten that we have spare venison, buried in the hillside?”

“Well… that’ll last a day or so…” he allowed.

Lala raised a paw. “And that you have legs for moving around on? If there’s nothing to hunt here, we can always move on. A cub’s lesson, Gabu.”

He sighed and looked askance.

“Gabu!” she chided.

He looked at her like a guilty pup, longing for… she didn’t know what. Well, this was a pretty doldrum he’d scratched out for himself.

She would just have to lead him back to the true path. “Hunting, Gabu.” Lala sniffed the air and found it fecund enough—by no means devoid of information. “Hunting is the ability to take in clues about your situation, integrate them into a picture, and figure out how to outwit your quarry. Hunting is an art. You know that.”

“I know that,” he acknowledged.

“Then remember it! Sometimes the clues add up to ‘nobody’s around’. A lot of hunts begin that way. Don’t lose heart!”
“But Lala…” He swung his head around to regard her at last. “It’s only going to get harder from here. They’re learning to avoid me.”

“Then learn to find them! Gabu, I can smell at least three species on the wind right now! The smaller ones may have gone to ground, but the deer—the deer have nowhere to hide that we can’t flush! And even creatures in burrows can be dug out if we’re clever.”

He still looked dismal. “Back in the valley, we used to track the herds for days,” he pointed out. “We didn’t do all our hunting in a day, and we had dozens of hunters to corner the prey. Here, it’s just the two of us, and we’ve only got one day to work, and there’s no snow for the deer to crash through and catch their hooves in…”

“Oh, you want snow?” replied Lala. She was determined to raise the fighting spirit in her companion whether he liked it or not. He could mope if he liked, but she had to eat! And besides, there was more she wanted from him. “Let’s seek out the next best thing, then. How about following the brook to see if there’s any mud?”

Gabu’s shoulders trembled. He looked over and shrugged. “I suppose that’s a fair enough plan,” he acknowledged. Good. Finally. He was starting to return to his normal self.

They strode briskly to the brook, down past the thicket toward the lower treeline. Lala didn’t know if they’d find mud—she hadn’t run across any recently—but she could hope for soft earth, and at minimum they were on the move now. They’d never feed themselves standing and moping in an empty meadow.

“I can smell deer,” Gabu acknowledged. There were medium-sized trees all around them now, and water at their feet.

“And monkeys,” added Lala.

“Oh! Well.” One of Gabu’s ears went lop—she took note of what that seemed to mean. “I think I’d rather hunt the deer, if that’s all right with you.”

“No complaints! Why argue with success? You’re still in charge of the hunt, if you want to be.”

This seemed to make the male uncomfortable. “Why don’t you lead today, Lala? I think I’m not exactly at my best right now.”

She wasn’t entirely sure about that, actually. True, he wasn’t in top hunting form, but Gabu was rarely a top hunter. What Lala wondered was whether, after that ill-fated day with the rabbit, Gabu might just be in his top philosophical form. It wasn’t easy to tell—he wasn’t as astute as reasoning things out as the goat seemed to be, a notion that made Lala smile. But Gabu seemed to philosophize through intuition, and that was something she admired. She was no slouch as a thinker herself, but her own intuitions tended to be about real people and things before her. This strange fellow was something else. Lala was thoroughly glad she’d risked everything to hunt him down.

“Anything you say!” she consented. She took two steps forward toward the brook to investigate, and also to symbolize taking over. She was here to learn from this near-omega. He was her tutor, like it or not. If he wanted her to take charge, she’d cheerfully take charge.

“What do you think?” asked Gabu after a while.

Lala smiled, spying a track in the soft earth of the bank. “Have you ever had muskrat?”
Gabu shook his head. “Are there muskrats here?”

She pointed to a footprint. “See for yourself. Ready to try something new?”

The male followed along promptly, albeit anxiously, as she told him about muskrat burrows. If Lala could show Gabu something new today, she’d be proud. She expected he’d be inadvertently showing her something else new before too long.

The burrow was even more prominent than she’d expected. A big pile-up of shredded bark and reeds, it was really something to look at. Gabu spotted it without being told. Just like that, his cheerful demeanor was back in full; he was eager to hunt again. Ironically, this was the part of hunting Lala liked the least: she hated rooting creatures out from house and home, destroying house and home in the process. She had no compunction about devouring people’s bodies—their owners had no real part in making those, and nature could easily reproduce them—but individual structures like these… it made Lala uneasy to destroy that which another had created.

“I feel like a fox,” complained Gabu as he approached the burrow, built on the edge of a bulge in the brook.

“It’s true—our kind are more eager to chase than to dig things up,” allowed Lala. “But when packs fall, methods must change!”

Gabu heaved a breath and shrugged before creeping around to his place on the brook’s far side. Lala carefully analyzed the breeze. The family was home—she was almost sure of it. She waited for the perfect moment before giving the signal.

*Crunch.* The burrow fell. The muskrats scattered, and since Gabu wasn’t familiar with their behavior, he didn’t adapt fast enough. The prey got away—all but a chunky adolescent who was too slow to find her feet. Lala grabbed and shook her by the neck until she died; the others squealed as they ran.

Gabu watched them with fearful eyes. Lala always watched his eyes. She always wanted to know how he felt—it was almost as delectable as meat itself.

They split the meat and went pursuing a family of deer along the brook. The deer got away—the water gave such creatures too much advantage, as opposed to the soft earth of the banks, which favored wolves’ wide paws over piercing cloven hooves. This observation gave the two a topic of conversation, and it kept things pleasant even when the muskrat youth was the only meat in their bellies. Lala caught Gabu sniffing the air more and more often, and she smiled. Had he finally caught a scent worth catching? It was about time.

“Onto something?”

Gabu gave a satisfying double take. “Unless I’m mistaken, I think I only smell you!”
Ah, yes. Did he, now? Lala laughed lightly and looked at the sky, saying nothing.

“I like the way you smell,” Gabu shared eventually.

“Imagine that,” replied Lala. “A male likes the way a female smells in spring.”

This provoked him to shake his head in apparent surprise. “In spring? But… Lala! Are you saying you’re…”

_Finally._ She looked sweetly at him. “Yeees?”

“Um.” He swallowed. “In that… special time of year?”

“In estrus?” she asked innocently.

He nodded, and she could taste his fear. Oh, this was lovely.

“I may be running a bit late this year,” she confessed.

She saw how his jaws slackened, how his tail wagged wildly for a second. He looked at her like he’d never seen a female before. “But does… does that mean…”

_Out with it._ She grinned, teeth everywhere. “Yeees?”

They’d stopped walking. She watched Gabu gather his strength. He certainly seemed to be taking a long time about it, but somehow that just made him more adorable.

“But there aren’t any other males around,” he said meekly, as if wondering at his fortune.

“That seems to be the case,” replied Lala in her measured, teasing tone.

“Then…” Gabu sat down. “Are we…” He was silent for far too long. “…Do you want to be my mate, Lala?”

Her lips relaxed as she let her grin became great, to match the momentous feeling in her heart. “Gabu. Gabu, Gabu, Gabu. Do you know how many _years_ I’ve been waiting to hear those words?”

Not that her answer would have been yes, back when he’d been the coward of the pack—but she’d still wanted to _hear_ them.

He stared, unable to talk. Yet she smelled the hunger in him. She could quite literally smell it—his own aroma was coming to greet her; it was wiser than he was.

So Lala leaned in and stared Gabu brightly right in the eyes. “I almost thought you’d never ask.”

She expected a sense of joy and relief to wash over him, but somehow all that came was a gleam in his eye. Was he about to show her something new again? “Uh… Lala… I’d really love to be your mate… I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have… but…”

She tilted her head carefully. “But?”

“But if we’re mates,” he went on, “we might wind up having cubs… and while I’m sure our cubs would be amazing, especially with you for a mother…”

Lala could feel her adrenaline rising. She curved back, legs stock straight. “…Yes?”

 “…I think I’d really have to ask Mei before I can have any children. It’s such a big decision, after
all!” He grinned sheepishly.

*The wolf asks the goat for permission to make more wolves,* said Lala’s hindbrain in amazement.

There it was. That was what Lala lived for. She was shocked speechless.
This chapter was originally going to be just the 22nd Day. I added the morning section in response to a couple of reviews wondering about the fallout from the rabbit's departure. I was tempted to have Lala confront Mei: “Oh? Have you cost us a meal? But... do you have another meal you can give us in exchange? Or do we have to take one?” Followed by a quaking goat, and then: “I’m just joking, Mei. You were well within your rights to convince him to leave. The choice was his, after all.” But I decided she’d realize that even this much would upset Gabu, and Lala very much wants Gabu to like her right now.

Gray wolf mating season can occur anytime between January and April. Females experience an estrus window of five to seven days.

Illustration by Catboo, a.k.a. Titeufii on DeviantArt, with sincere thanks. :)

Chapter End Notes
The 23rd Day

Chapter Summary

* How would you feel about the idea of...?
* Why do you kill? Have you any other way to live?
* What if Lala was right? What if your goddess is using us?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 23rd Morning

Warmth. It was all around. The moss under his breast… the heat picked up by the cave’s walls themselves as spring inexorably developed. Gabu’s presence—his big, squishable body, radiating heat. Mei didn’t find himself lying against his friend’s body today, but it was just as well—he was so warm. Even the flowers in the wall niche added to his sense of warmth.

“Good morning, Mei.” The lupine eyes opened and the smiling muzzle was turned, ever so slightly, his way.

Mei yawned. “Good morning, Gabu,” he mumbled. “Did you sleep well?”

Gabu had to think about it. “Not terribly well,” he admitted. “I would have slept better if yesterday’s hunt had gone better. But I’m feeling all right.” He paused for a moment of self-assessment before daring to go on: “Did you dream, Mei? I always love hearing your dreams.”

Mei smiled from the sheer sweetness of the sentiment. His dreams were foggy, though. “Um… I’m not sure what I dreamed about. I’m sorry, Gabu. I think it was something from my kidhood.”

Gabu tilted his head wistfully. “No more dreams about being a god?”

Mei chuckled. “I’m afraid not. Maybe we should have Lala over for storytelling again.”

Gabu smiled genuinely, and Mei wondered why. Was the mere mention of Lala’s name enough to make him happy, or was it the implication that Mei might be starting to enjoy her company?

“Yes, Gabu?”

“We… sort of have a question for you. Well, I guess it’s really me who has a question. But in a way, it’s from both of us.”

Well, that sounded ominous, if interesting. Mei stood and stepped off the moss. “I’ll do my best to answer.”

But Gabu just lay there looking nervous. Then he stirred himself and stood up. “It’s not really an easy question,” he admitted, an overwrought grin on his face.
Mei was getting less comfortable. Then again, he had to admit the sight of a huge, shut-eyed grin on a wolf still made him happy. “Well, I’m waiting patiently. Just let me know when you’re ready to ask!”

Gabu chuckled. “Well… this is it, then. How would you feel about the idea of me, and Lala… being mates?”

That was along the lines Mei had feared. “Well, Gabu… in fact, I’ve already thought about it a bit. I’ve even discussed the possibility. With Bepo.”

Gabu’s ears turned straight up in their funny way. “Oh, really? Well…” He scratched nervously behind his neck. “What conclusions did you reach?

Mei walked out of the cave. He wanted to be in the open right now. Gabu followed him out, waiting for his answer like a child waits for a parent. How had it ever come to this?

“I don’t mind you being mates with a she-wolf you like,” Mei said at last, before he was ready. “And I don’t mind it being Lala. It’s true, I didn’t trust her at first. And I still wouldn’t trust her with my life. But I’m coming to like her… and I can understand how you might.” He threw in a smile because he felt it was right to.

“Well, I’m glad you feel that way,” said Gabu. Mei could tell he knew there was a but coming, and there was.

“But Gabu…” Mei sat down—he didn’t feel strong enough to keep standing for what he was about to ask. At least he was sitting in grass and flowers.

“Yes, Mei?”

“…Are you planning to have children?”

Gabu swallowed. “It’s… sort of a consequence of being mates. It isn’t really… something you choose.”

Mei forced himself to look his friend firmly in the eyes. “But do you choose it, don’t you? You can choose to copulate… or not.”

Gabu nodded meekly. “I think I’d like to have children. I think I’d be a good father.”

“I’m sure you’d be a great father. You’re responsible and you’re kind. I might even believe that Lala could be a good mother. But… but Gabu.” Mei felt like he wanted to cry.

“What is it, Mei?” asked Gabu, clearly concerned.

Mei remembered his dream of being lost in a sea of wolves he didn’t know. “It was bad enough that I brought a wolf to this land… and then it was worse when it turned out another one had followed us. But… now you want to start a new pack… to spread the…” He couldn’t say the blight of wolfkind, could he?

“I know, Mei. I was worried you’d feel that way.”

Mei felt his ears stick out. “Is the Emerald Forest going to be covered in wolves thirty years from now? Is that what you want?”

Gabu frowned so deeply that Mei was instantly sorry. “…I don’t know, Mei.”
Mei hurried over and nuzzled his friend under the chin. “It’s not my decision, you know. I’m just your friend. If having children is what you want, I have no way to stop you.”

“But you can, Mei,” said Gabu. “If you tell me not to, I won’t do it.”

Mei stood there. So things were just that stark? “You won’t?”

Gabu shook his head. A tear streaked down.

Mei took a deep breath. The dawn was striking in the east, as usual. The butterflies were beautiful to watch in the valley between hills, as usual. Mei had never really thought about having children, himself. Only now did it really, for the first time, strike him how odd that was.

“How important are cubs to you, Gabu?” he asked.

“I think… I think I’d like to have some. Just once. I just feel like… if everything we’re doing here, with the creatures, is going to amount to anything…” He gulped. “I’d like to have someone to pass it down to. That’s all.”

Mei looked into the wolf’s eyes. He saw eyes that could have belonged to Mii. Or to his mother. Eyes he could understand. Eyes that weren’t monstrous or alien at all.

He sighed. He imagined asking his mother to forgive him, and he thought he could almost hear her voice, though he didn’t know what it was saying.

“One litter, Gabu. Have one litter of pups. Teach them well. Teach them how to be kind, and how to care about other creatures. Teach them about me, and have them call me Uncle. And… teach them how to be wolves.” He looked away.

Gabu sniffled. He rubbed his snout on Mei’s face, all over. He slurped his cheek, his nose, his eyes. “Mei. Thank you. Thank you.”

Mei felt ashamed for being as selfish as he’d been. He felt ashamed for giving as much as he had. He’d rarely, if ever, felt so pulled from both ends at once. “I’m sorry I can’t give you permission for any more. I just… the idea of bringing wolves into the world terrifies me. Will one litter be enough?”

“One litter will be plenty, Mei. Thank you. You’re the best friend a wolf could possibly ask for.” He laughed and nudged Mei’s shoulder with his own, then nuzzled anew. “I’m so excited!”

Mei loved the touch of his friend, the love he so readily shared. He loved Gabu’s excitement. But his heart felt like a stone, and he wondered whether there would ever again be a time when the words ceased to race over and over through his mind: What have I done? What have I done? What have I done?

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The 23rd Day

Lala had gone away again. Their hunt yesterday hadn’t gone very well, and so, as before, she’d had a few bites and left the rest to Gabu. Lala would travel a day’s journey, hunt for herself, and return.

So now, the punishment for a poor hunt had shifted again. Early in Gabu’s life, it had meant grumpy adults and meager scraps, a disappointed mother. Later, it had meant hunger and shame,
the promise of a persistent low rank. For a brief, strange time, it had meant these things, but also safety, the security of a friend. Then, after coming to the Emerald Forest, a poor hunt had come to mean hunger and nothing more. That was simple, a welcome and understandable consequence of failure.

Now, the consequence for a poor hunt was none of those things. It was loneliness. It meant that today, while Mei lunched at Sneaky Bluff, Gabu was left to roam the land alone and relive his mistakes.

Today, it was images and sounds more than mistakes that haunted Gabu. The scattering of half a dozen terrified muskrats as their house was torn apart. The fading of a deer’s scent on the wind. The tug of unwanted weight on his tail; the natter of impassioned insults he couldn’t understand. From further back, the howling laughter of monkeys as they swung away, leaving him in the drafty forest. And from before that, Bari’s voice, reprimanding him for wasting time, for missing a trail, or a cue, or the prey. Gabu missed Bari, despite it all. But to Bari, Gabu had missed everything… including the point of life entirely.

Is it true? he wondered. Have I missed the point? I’m alone… and when you find yourself alone, chances are it means you’ve gone astray. That was a lesson Gabu had learned, but never really taken to heart—otherwise, why would he have spent so many middays working out alone, practicing his jumping alone? Why had he never really put any effort into making friends who did more than laugh at him? Why had he never learned to take pride in his ability to hunt?

Because Gabu had never learned on a gut, instinctive level not to be alone, he’d wound up alone. Somehow. Somehow he was more alone than he’d ever been, except for a winter he didn’t remember. The perspective of years seized him as he walked toward the meadow; it was like he was watching himself from a huge distance, watching himself from behind a cloud, drappled by sun. A lone wolf pacing over bare earth. What had happened to this poor social creature? Wolves were animals of packs—where had this unfortunate soul gone wrong?

A sound broke the daydream, cut apart his fantasy. A rabbit rising in the grass. Instinctively, Gabu turned and prepared to give chase—then remembered. Hunting day had been yesterday. Still, he wondered about this rabbit, watching him. It wasn’t the one from before. It flinched when Gabu turned toward it, but drew up again when he relaxed.

Gabu made out round brown eyes over the closely held forepaws, the twitching nose. Should he say something? What was this?

He heard whispers in the grass. Oh stars, oh Leto—it was happening again! The animals were whispering about him, even when he wasn’t a spectacle, even when was just walking! Were the birds going to be whirling overhead soon? Was it going to be like this every day from now on? What could he do?

He stepped into Tall Meadow, crunching the slightly dry grass. Then he changed his mind. He ran the other way, heading across the open moor to the heath beyond. Eventually he came to rest, opening his ears wide in hopes the whispering was gone. And it was gone, wasn’t it?


Gabu swallowed. “What… what is it?”

The vole ducked away. There was silence, until two more skittered past behind. A long-legged rabbit with a splotchy coat danced into the heath and hopped, in a pattern of careful zigzags, around
Gabu. It sat there at a fair distance and watched him. He could see more than its nose twitching; the lips were moving. Slowly, the rabbit bent down to eat a forb, working it gradually into its mouth. But it didn’t stop watching Gabu all the while.

“What?” he snapped. “What do you want?”

The rabbit’s attention was instantly on him, the plant dangling from its mouth. Slowly, then, it slurped the bite up. Gabu waited tensely. Once the rabbit’s mouth was clear, it repositioned itself carefully to face him. “You won’t hurt me,” said its distant, fuzzy voice.

What? “No… no, I won’t hurt you. I just want to know what’s happening. Why is everyone watching me?” Even as he asked, sure enough, the first bird came wheeling above, circling the heath.

“You really can’t hurt me, can you?” asked the particolor rabbit.

“What?” asked Gabu. “What do you mean?”

But the creature hopped away, zigzagging carefully to the edge of the heath, then zipping directly away from there. Gabu was left frightened.

He looked up. Two birds now. Moreover, something had gone wrong with the wind. It was too quiet. Even though Gabu could hear it, it was too quiet.

No… as he ran, he realized what it actually was. The wind was too quiet for the volume of scent on it. Gabu could smell a great many animals of a great many kinds. This was the opposite of yesterday. The world was transformed overnight. Gabu was running now—not to find food, but from something ineffable. He didn’t understand what was happening. He was frightened!

So he turned and loped toward Sneaky Bluff. He wanted to find Mei. Mei was his rock; strangeness would have no strength against a bond like theirs. Mei would understand, or else help him look for an answer. If Mei didn’t know what to do, at least he would have a nuzzle to offer. If the world should happen to collapse on Gabu in a bundle of murmurs, scrambled wind and flailing animals… he would want Mei to be with him at the center of it. So long as they were together, the world could do its worst.

But Sneaky Bluff was through a stretch of woods, and Gabu hadn’t gone straight there from here before. He was unsure of the way, and his general confusion didn’t help. A chipmunk stood at the edge of the woods, staring at him for a second, then dashed away, cheeping. Squirrels clambered onto branches overhead, chirruping to each other. A herd of wrens took sudden flight, coalesced in mid-air, and landed on nearby trees. Gabu felt the pecking of a hundred eyes. He dashed around trees, not knowing when the stony cliffs would show up, unsure whether he’d even find Mei before whatever seemed destined to happen befell him.

Gabu came upon a thick stand of trees rustling with life. Life was all around him, but it wasn’t behaving like life should. He plopped flat on his rear in the wet woods and howled, an act of desperation. And just as if his cry had summoned his packmates, as it had sometimes done in an age long before, three sturdy deer stepped out from the elms and faced him. Two stags and a doe. The one in front had striking coloration on his back, ochre warring to keep down the white of his flanks, a sharp-looking six pointed rack, and eyes that seemed even more piercing than antlers. The other stag was fuzzy and seemed older, more barreled, while the doe was full of softness, her coat full of wispy waves—but Gabu was brought to terror by the sight of the determined young stag in
the middle. He felt a puddle soaking his bottom; his eyes were wide and his jaws were loose; he realized the deer could gore him right now and he wouldn’t know how to react.

“So there you are,” said the stag. His voice was commanding, but young, as if he was mature beyond his years.

Gabu struggled to rise, but stayed seated. “Me??”

“Flesh eater. Alien. Render of hide. I have to say, you don’t look so much. At this moment, you don’t look so much at all.”

Gabu wondered if he was so much. “I…”

“You killed Hilam. Together with your mate.”

“Uh—” Gabu hung his head, ready for another reckoning, but remembered to raise it, just in case those antlers came for him. “I guess I must have.”

The stag stood strong while the others watched. “Yet you don’t kill now. Do you?”

Gabu took a deep breath. “No… no, it’s not a hunting day.”

“A hunting day,” repeated the deer. He turned his head just slightly, as if trying to find a way, through Gabu’s eyes, to stare directly into his brain.

“That’s right,” said Gabu, his voice hoarse. “I only hunt every three days.”

The doe whispered something to the fuzzy stag. “Such a strange custom,” said the spokesdeer. “Is it your nature?”

“Erm… no. It’s something I’ve decided to do.”

The deer lowered his antlers an inch. “And when you dragged that howling rabbit across the land, clinging to your tail… you had not the ability to dislodge it?”

“I guess I could have,” admitted Gabu. “But it wouldn’t have been right. He was mad about his mate. I’d killed and eaten her. I ate their unborn babies.”

“Why do you kill?” asked the deer.

“To live,” replied Gabu.

“For only that?”

Gabu squirmed back, feeling his tail get wetter. “Yes… only that.”

“Have you any other way to live?”

Gabu shook his head. “I don’t. I really don’t. When I lived in a pack, I could let them do the killing for me, sometimes. But someone had to do it.”

The fuzzy stag whispered back to the doe. The head stag flicked his ears back, then straightened them.

“Decisions are weak,” he said. “If you forebear from destruction only by an act of will, how do you know you won’t forsake your will if things are difficult?”
I don’t, Gabu wanted to admit, but something burbled up as he remembered the desperate rabbit. “How could it be more difficult than it was the other day??” he pled. “The rabbit wanted me to eat him! He *begged* for me to eat him! I could have done it, and fed myself too. But I couldn’t. It wasn’t the right day. I made a promise!” Gabu prostrated himself before the trio of deer, banishing his fears of being gored or trampled. “I promised I’d limit my killing… so that I could try to make friends on the other two days… so the animals don’t have to be afraid all the time, but just some of the time… because some fear is better than only fear, isn’t it?”

The lead stag nodded. “It is.”

“I made a promise,” Gabu repeated weakly.

Now the fuzzy, older stag spoke. “And if you were ever going to break it, you would have broken it two days ago.” His voice seemed meant as much for the younger stag as for Gabu.

“I suppose so,” Gabu agreed.

The younger stag took a breath. “It is a tragedy that you have come here, eater of flesh. It is an unforgettable dark day for our forest.”

Gabu swallowed and nodded, saying nothing. He couldn’t disagree.

“I very much wish you had not come, bringing gore and death to our woods.”

Gabu nodded again, several times. He was almost ready to cry.

“But since you are here,” said the stag, “we may as well get to know each other. My name is Coryn, of the heavy mantle.”

“I’m Wilhelm,” said the fuzzy stag.

“Bedelia,” said the doe.

Gabu stared at the three of them, frozen in confusion. “I’m Gabu,” he heard himself say.

The stag in the middle bowed. “So then. Gabu.”

The others bowed their heads as well.

What was happening? “You’re… I don’t understand. Are we making introductions?”

“If that is your will,” said the young stag.

“You did say you wanted to make friends,” added the doe.

Gabu opened his jaws and half a dry laugh came out. He fought his way back to his feet and shook his rear end, drying it. “Really? You’re not afraid of me?”

“You appear to be a creature of your word,” said the powerful young stag. “Are we in any danger from you today, or tomorrow?”

“No… no, you’re not. I swear it. Not from my mate, either… she’s following the schedule too.” Gabu knew it was presumptuous to call Lala his mate, but he knew she’d agree when he formally asked her, and besides, he was too excited to worry—were these deer actually offering to be… his acquaintances? His friends?
“Then what need is there for fear? Come, Gabu. Walk with us. Tell us your story.”

“Ah… all right. But so that you know… I was headed this way trying to find my friend, Mei. He’s, uhh… he’s a goat.”

“The grazer? We know of him.”

“Oh! I guess you would… he’s probably over this way somewhere, near the bluff by the clearing.”

“Then we’ll walk that way,” put in the older buck. “Come on—day’s a moving.”

Gabu found his gait and had trouble keeping himself from trotting. “You really want to hear my story?”

“Would I have asked if not?” said the imperious young stag.

“Well… I guess not. I suppose it… it all started one stormy night…

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**The 23rd Evening**

Clouds hove near that day, but wound up passing near, not overhead. They made the bluffs seem taller than usual, a lopsided steppe extending into the darkening sky. Mei watched them go as he wandered home, wondering what it would feel like to jump from the highest cliff onto one of the lowest clouds. Wondering whether it would bear him if he dared to do so, and where it might take him. But of course, he had a life here, and he was scared of storms.

The air felt like rain, even though the rain hadn’t come. The plants’ scent were stronger than usual. But these scents were slowly overtaken by the realization that he heard Gabu’s voice in the distance.

“Mei! Mei!”

Mei snapped to attention and realized the shout was a happy one. He ran to meet his friend in the flowery field, heads rubbing against soft jowls in greeting. “What is it, Gabu?”

“Mei, you’ll never believe it! I’ve made friends! Or at least, acquaintances. Three deer in the woods!”

So quickly. Things could change so quickly. “Really?”

“Yes! It was strange at first. I was scared, since all the eyes in the world seemed to be watching me… but then the deer showed up, and asked me if I meant any harm, and I said no…”

Mei listened as Gabu described an unsettling morning, followed by a too-good-to-be-true afternoon in which he told his story to these three deer. They’d looked for Mei at Sneaky Bluff and hadn’t found him there, but Gabu had promised he’d pass along everything. These deer said they’d be willing to be friendly with Mei, too. And they didn’t just speak for themselves—they’d been in communication with rabbits and squirrels and had agreed to confront Gabu as their representative. A heady grin settled on Mei’s face as he listened, but it didn’t quite reveal his true feelings. It must have looked like he was overjoyed, but what he felt was more like awe.

“So that’s the opening we needed,” Mei summed up. “We wanted to make friends, and now it
seems like a real possibility!"

Gabu spun back with joy. “I can’t believe they’re finally giving us the chance!”

“We just have to make the most of our opportunity,” said Mei, and now his grin felt genuine.

Mei explained that he’d been at Sneaky Bluff, but had been drawn away when he saw a commotion in the adjoining wetland. He’d gone down to listen and had heard an argument between a group of tree squirrels and a family of muskrats. He’d definitely heard the word “wolf”, which had piqued his curiosity. But before he could get close enough to hear any more clearly, one of the muskrats caught sight of him and dashed away… and when one dashed away, so did all of them. He followed them into the wetland but wasn’t able to catch up. So he’d wandered back by way of the brook… but for what it was worth, he told Gabu, he too had had the impression he was being watched.

“We must have thrown them into so much confusion, coming here,” Gabu observed.

Mei nodded. “Who knows how many conversations the animals have had about us? And now they’re just starting to let us in.”

“Well, it isn’t all of them,” said Gabu. “But we’ll see who’s willing to talk to us tomorrow.”

“Did they ask us to meet them?”

“They said they weren’t prepared to make arrangements, just in case.” Gabu looked shifty. “I don’t think they trust Lala as much as me. Coryn said they’ll find us.”

They weren’t the only ones to feel that way. Then again, there weren’t many creatures Mei could imagine trusting more than Gabu. “All right. Tomorrow, we’ll stick together.”

Gabu grinned. “We would have done that anyway! It’s our together-day.”

He was right, Mei realized. They’d been making a point of spending every sixth day together… and if the other animals had recognized Gabu’s hunting schedule, maybe they’d realized that, too. “We’ll have to be sure and have a good time.”

“No matter how things work out!” agreed Gabu, dropping his forequarters and wagging his tail.

The two friends wandered homeward. Mei felt the coolness of stems against his fetlocks. He contemplated his life changing yet again. He imagined having a herd again. But this was a true test of his imagination: what did a herd not made of goats even look like? Could a herd be made of various kinds of animals? Was that even the right comparison, or was this something more delicate and complex?

His dream of being a god recurred to him. As Mei ascended the flowery hill, he remembered his somnolent quest to link various types of creatures to each other through… something like friendship? Interdependence, in any case. In the dream, all of them had been subservient to him, whether they knew it or not. Could the same really be happening to him and Gabu? Were they really in the throes of Leto, the wolf goddess? If they connected with the likes of deer and rabbits, were they just bringing more animals under Leto’s control?

Viewed that way, it was possible that Mei’s actions were the most hapless—the most deleterious—ever undertaken by someone from his herd. It was possible that he was leading all goatkind on a slow path to destruction. The thought hit him like a rock to the shin, and he stumbled on the hill.
“Mei? What’s wrong?”

“It’s just… what if Lala was right? What if your goddess is using us to get to the other animals?”

Gabu thought for a moment, his eyes registering various thoughts on the other side of his face. Then he resolved into a comfortable grin. “But Mei, is that really so bad? What are you worried she might do?”

Recruit deer and other large browsers into a comprehensive army? Mei had to admit the idea was ridiculous. “Well… I guess I’m not sure how Leto could really use the rest of us, even if we do become friends with wolves…”

“But Mei, is that really so bad? What are you worried she might do?”

Recruit deer and other large browsers into a comprehensive army? Mei had to admit the idea was ridiculous. “Well… I guess I’m not sure how Leto could really use the rest of us, even if we do become friends with wolves…”

“Maybe she’s doing it just because it’s the right thing,” Gabu suggested.

Mei marched on. “Or maybe we’re all here on our own, and no one is watching,” he countered cheerfully. “Whether our meeting was a miracle or not… there’s no way of knowing whether whoever brought us together is still watching.”

“I suppose we could just be one drop of rain,” Gabu mused.

“Rain?” asked Mei.

“In a storm! If you were a god, and you wanted grass to grow, you might make it rain! Am I wrong?”

“You’re certainly not wrong, Gabu.”

“And yet… once you’d made it rain, you wouldn’t have to pay attention to every single drop of water, would you?”

Mei understood. “I guess you’re right! We could be just one drop in someone’s plans.”

“But Mei,” Gabu went on slyly. “I think we may just be the drop of water that hits the seed.”

Mei laughed gaily. “Are we that special, Gabu?”

Gabu reached the hill’s crest and walked for the burrow. “Can you even ask?”

Mei lingered outside for a while, watching the shelves of clouds. He imagined himself up there, somewhere, watching the creatures below. This is promising, he fancied himself thinking. This looks like it’s going well.

Then, his spirits thoroughly lifted, he went inside to enjoy what might well be the last evening of an era.

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Chapter End Notes

At last. It’s happening.
My two best friends are into Sid Meyer's Civilization. If Leto really exists, and if she's really up to what Lala thinks she is, being her probably feels like playing that.

Illustration by FlyingMambo, formerly known as dragonblazerxxx--check them out on DeviantArt!
The 24th Day

Chapter Summary

* You expect us to be your friends, even while you pick us off day by day, one by one?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 24th Day

It wasn’t really a patrol. It was more of a tour of beloved places, as if for an imaginary audience. Mei and Gabu had agreed that if they didn’t know where to find the deer, they would make themselves visible in as many places as possible. But that didn’t mean they wouldn’t have fun for their fun day. Gabu had taught Mei some of a traditional wolf’s song, and now Mei was struggling to remember his part while they strode through the low meadow.

There was no clover here. That was a little sad. Mei remembered when his herd had entertained the visiting Prince Kuro of the black goats, and Tap had marched along boasting about every rock and stream, just to show off that he knew things worth knowing. But in the end, Kuro had chosen to spend his time with Mei in the clover field, presumably because he found it more appealing to do actually do something than to hear about things. Mei and Kuro had found a four-leaf clover, sure enough, and Gabu had adored it.

A pang of longing pulled at Mei’s lower stomach as he realized he wished he could see Kuro again. But he swallowed his pain and let it out in the song:

“Here I lie in my den of shade
A-nursing the pups that I have made
Tell me of that with which you were born
And of all your plans, come tomorrow morn.”
He tried, in a mild way, to make his voice sound like that of a mother wolf. Gabu replied with a
similar tune, his voice somewhat uneven:

“Mother, O Mother, it gives me joy
To drink your milk and share this den
Gladly I’ll tell of that which I am
And of my plans come tomorrow morn.”

The two walked through the flowery field at the base of the hills, singing verses in alternation from
the traditional lupine song.

MEI: What are these paws that sit under your shank
And why do their toes spread so broadly-oh?
O tell me, O tell me, my child so fine
That I may come to understand you.

GABU: Mother, O mother, as you well know
My toes spread wide to cover the snow
So I might tread far, and never to fail
That you may follow my frag-a-rant trail.
MEI: Then what is this coat of thickset fur
And why does it cover your body-oh?
O tell me, O tell me, my child so fine
That I may come to understand you.

GABU: Mother, O mother, I’m sure you’ve been told
It keeps me warm from the ice and cold
For a mother’s warmth must be left in time
But in this thick coat, you’ll be always mine.

MEI: Well, what is this tail that extends from your rump
And tickles the air so freely-oh?
O tell me, O tell me, my child so fine
That I may come to understand you.

GABU: Mother, O mother, if you must know now
It tells other wolves that I stand proud
I carry it high to show my worth
And leave my mark on the trees and the earth.

MEI: Hark, what is this nose at the end of your snout
By whiskers all surrounded-oh?
O tell me, O tell me, my child so fine
That I may come to understand you.

GABU: Mother, O mother, as surely you’ve found,
It tells me the shape of the world around.
If any should pass, I’ll be sure to know
For my nose knows prey from friend from foe.

MEI: And what are these eyes that peer so blue
Out at the world and the sky-i-oh?
O tell me, O tell me, my child so fine
That I may come to understand you.

GABU: Mother, O Mother, I cannot lie:
These eyes are blue like the midday sky
In time they’ll fade to a rich, grown gold
But now they keep me from being old.

MEI: Here I lie in my den of shade
A-nursing the pups that I have made
Tell me of that with which you were born
And of all your plans, come tomorrow morn.

Mei finished with a great force to his voice, unlike that with which he normally sang. He was getting into the role! By that time they were at the edge of the wetlands, the brook before them.

He smiled at Gabu. “Did I remember all the words right?”

“Oh, mostly, mostly! You’re a very quick learner, Mei! But it’s ‘what is this brush,’ not ‘what is this tail’. In the old songs, our tails are called brushes!” He swiveled it happily left and right, brushing the backs of his legs.
“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. Gabu, it puzzles me how your songs can add such strange sounds to their words! ‘Sky-i-oh’ and ‘frag-a-rant’…”

Gabu dipped his muzzle into the brook for a quick drink. “Well, I guess not all the words fit exactly right into the space it takes to sing them. But as I see it, that just makes it more fun.”

Mei walked up to take his own drink. “It was fun to be a mother wolf for a little while. Did you say there were more verses?”

Gabu looked embarrassed with his squinty smile. “Oh, the old wolfsongs all have too many verses. Nursing songs especially. The poor moms have nothing else to do while they suckle but sing songs!”

Mei smiled at the thought. “Goat mothers seem content just to love their children.”

Gabu bit his lip. “Well, I guess goats aren’t such natural singers. We wolves like to howl!”

“And according to Lala, you even harmonize when you do!”

His pointed ears perked up. “That’s true! That way you can hear every voice. And every voice deserves to be heard… am I right, Mei?”

That kind of question was easy, but he liked getting easy questions from Gabu now and then. “That’s what I think, anyway.”

They shared a happy glance. The white clouds were fluffy overhead, but a shadow hove across the corner of Mei’s vision. He turned to glance up the brook and there…

Oh. There came the neighbors. So this was really happening.

Three deer, led by the hale one Gabu had described, strode down the bank. Two squirrels sat on the doe’s back. A rabbit, particolored and lanky, hopped quietly beside. A pair of leaf warblers, grass green and cautious, fluttered nearby.

The end of a song always felt like it carried a certain weight—like the remnants of music had yet to settle down into oneself, and an ineffable sense of presence lingered until the last were gone. That was the feeling Mei had now. A feeling of something coming home, coming inside. A settling of snow, or leaves, or a long anticipated mist.

Or a rare clearing on the path to forever.

He stood rapt, Gabu at his side. Their tails were limp. The head stag lifted his neck and peered at Mei with deceptive softness. The animals came to a halt.

Mei bowed, as his mother had taught him to do. He folded his forelegs and bowed to the ground. He heard Gabu, with a start, do the same.

He rose.

“Mei the white goat, I presume.”


“Hello,” said one of the squirrels.

“Greetings,” chirped one of the warblers. “Salutations,” echoed the other.
The doe spoke. “Your companion told you of us, did he not?” Her voice was gentle, but distinguished far past any goat Mei had ever met—even the prince of the black goats, when he’d come to visit.

“Yes,” said Mei.

“Then we are well met,” said the powerful stag. Mei remembered his name—it was Coryn. The stag didn’t bow.

“Hello again,” managed Gabu, his voice meek. Mei watched him nod to the creatures, in turn. “Hello—to all of you. I’m Gabu… from Baku Baku Valley.”

“Hi there, Mr. Murderer.” The female squirrel, from atop the doe, cut through the descending tension with a clear, chipper voice. “I’m Taffet.”

Mei thought he could barely hear a whine leak from Gabu’s lips. But he saw the wolf bow again. “Very pleased to meet you.”

“Don’t call him that,” murmured the male squirrel to his companion, after which he turned to Gabu and spoke with a flourish, paw at his breast. “Kiput. I’m her mate.”

“My name’s Ringa,” put in the rabbit inconspicuously.

“Haburo,” said one of the leaf warblers.

“Hatsu,” said the other, exchanging positions loosely with the first.

“Well,” said Gabu, looking at them all. Mei stole a glimpse of his face and was surprised to see tears there.

“Well,” said Coryn. “You strangers have unsettled our wood. The greater part of those who dwell here remain fearful of your presence.”

“Always makes sense to fear what you don’t know well,” put in the older stag.

“Yet no newborn foal is known at all,” spoke the doe, looking up toward him confrontationally.

“I’m sorry if we’ve made anyone afraid of us,” said Mei, feeling he was better positioned to use the word ‘sorry’ than Gabu was. “We only came here looking for a place to be safe.”

The stags exchanged a look. “Well pardon me, Mr. Murderer,” said the clear-voiced squirrel, hopping forward until she stood on the doe’s head, “but does you being safe mean no one else gets to?”

“Um,” said Gabu.

Mei cut in. “We’d like everyone to feel as safe as they can, of course. And that’s why Gabu here has decided to make a… a habit of only hunting on every third day, and at no other time. But I’m afraid he does need to eat meat to live.”

The male squirrel joined his mate on the head of the doe, who bowed a little under the weight. “And ‘meat’ means… people?”

Mei lowered his head. “I’m very sorry, but I’m afraid it does.”

The warblers tittered to each other. The old stag sighed patiently.
“So,” said the rabbit, emerging from Coryn’s shadow. “You expect us to be your friends, even while you pick us off day by day, one by one?”

Gabu gulped. “I… I understand that’s a lot to ask. B-but…”

“I’m proud to say I know it can be done,” said Mei, standing forward. “Where I’m from, no one had ever heard of the idea of a goat befriendng a wolf.”

“Yet Mei and I are the closest of bosom buddies!”

“And… do you hunt him every three days?” asked the large-voiced female squirrel.

Mei exchanged a surprised look with Gabu. Suddenly he felt a frightening surge of adrenalin, though he didn’t know why. “Ah… no…”

Gabu rose to his hind legs and let his forepaw cross his breast in astonishment. “I would never do that!”

Suddenly the animals were murmuring to each other. “Not quite fair,” said one of the warblers. “Not terribly!” replied the other.

“Just to be clear then,” said Wilhelm, the older stag.

“Y-yes?” said Gabu.

“If the lot of us make a promise to be your friend, or at least to give it a good, honest try… does that mean we’re also safe come huntday?”

“Oh,” said Gabu. “W-well, I mean…”

Mei wanted to interject, but they hadn’t discussed this, and ultimately it was Gabu’s stomach that would suffer. It was his call.

“I… I suppose that only makes sense?” he decided, returning to all fours. “I mean, I can’t exactly expect you to… after all, you must be the bravest animals in the Forest, and I can’t…”

It was lucky his stomach didn’t rumble right then and there. “I think we’ll have to think it over,” said Mei. “But for now, you can all consider yourselves safe.”

The birds chirped in what sounded like triumph. The rabbit sagged in relief. But the deer seemed somehow troubled as they watched each other.

“Fujiko’s going to want in on this,” murmured the male squirrel, just loud enough to hear.

Suddenly, Mei realized a piece of the danger.

“We may need to keep this under wraps,” rumbled the old stag to the others. “Least for the time being.” More adrenalin surged, and another piece of the danger snapped into place.

“I suppose I’d better… get to know all of you right here and now,” said Gabu, “just to make sure I don’t… accidentally wind up hurting you tomorrow.” And this time his tummy did rumble.

“Not to be a fur-drench,” said Taffet, “but what about the other one? You’ve got a counterpart, haven’t you?”

“Oh,” said Gabu. “Well, yes. Lala. She’s away right now, but I suppose she’ll have to meet all of
you, too.”

Mei found himself trembling. There was too much in this they hadn’t thought through!

“Lala,” repeated some of the animals. Private conversations abounded.

“Just curious,” said Ringa the rabbit. “But do you think you’ll recognize me, in the heat of the hunt? I saw you yesterday in the heath.”

“Well, you’ve got a distinctive coloration,” said Gabu. “I think I’ll manage.”

“Wreathes!” exclaimed Haburo the warbler. “Wreathes for the protected!”

“We can weave them,” said Hatsu, bobbing merrily.

Now the full scope of the danger was rapidly sliding into place. It reminded Mei of that stormy night, when he’d slid down a slick hill in fear of the lightning, before he’d found shelter. “It’s very nice to have met you all…” he said.

“When do we get to meet Mrs. Murderer?” asked Taffet.

“Should we all have some kind of regular get-together?” suggested Kiput. “A sort of mixer… so we know we really are friends?”

“Ooh! I like that!” chimed one of the warblers.

“Who can I invite?” asked Taffet. “Can I invite my friend Fujiko?”

Mei felt his eyes get wide. “We really should be going!” he bleated.

Everyone’s attention was suddenly on him.

Coryn regained the floor by stamping the earth. “We’ve only just come together. Is this not what you wanted?”

Gabu was looking at Mei in surprise. “Mei?”

“I just… it’s all so much. We’ve been alone for so long… just the two of us… mostly…”

“Is it overwhelming?” asked the doe, Bedelia, sympathetically.

“I think we need time to think it over,” Mei announced. His voice was too loud—he was having trouble tempering it.

“Think it over?” echoed Kiput the squirrel, his tail twirling.

“It’s true, we’d like to be your friends… all of you, I’m sure.” Mei gulped. “But it isn’t easy. We can’t pretend this is easy. We have to be careful.”

“Careful?” asked Gabu, his snout just inches away. “Careful of what, Mei?”

*Careful that it doesn’t all fall apart,* he wanted to say, *like a bundle that’s been stretched too thin.* “I’m worried,” was all he could manage.

Coryn chuffed a deep sound and scraped the ground. “Time is amenable. We will respect your wish, goat. Friendship is no instant thing.”
Mei nodded. “That’s true.”

“But then how long will it take?” murmured Ringa, barely audible.

“I suggest,” said Coryn, looking around, “that we exercise caution tomorrow. This meat-eater will, I think, try to spare us. But things are not yet settled. Stick to your trees and secret places, if you would see this through. And perhaps by the next hunt’s day, we shall know true safety.”

Bedelia nodded, prompting the squirrels to scamper back up her neck to avoid falling. “You can’t promise you won’t eat us?” protested Kiput weakly.

“I’ll do my best,” said Gabu. “Sorry, everyone. But Mei’s my best friend, and it sounds like he needs some alone time.”

“No trust,” said Hatsu from the sky.

“No peace,” said Haburo.

“All right, Mr. Murderer and Friend. We’ll be seeing you around.”

“Watch for it,” warned Wilhelm. “And I’m hoping to meet that gray lady of yours, too. Get her word for our safety.” He scuffed the ground as he turned away.

“See you around,” called Gabu haplessly as the crowd trod and flew back up the bank. “It was… really nice meeting you all!”

Mei watched stiffly until the whole assemblage disappeared into the woods. He felt his hooves sinking into the wet earth near the brook. It was like he was pressing the earth away without trying to.

“Mei?” asked Gabu at last. “What was it that you needed to think over?”

Mei took a deep breath. It didn’t fully calm him. “Let’s go back to the lair, Gabu. I don’t feel safe out in the open like this.”

Gabu swallowed, nodded, and obediently padded along behind. But Mei realized the irony in what he’d said. If this was all about safety, and friendship… then why was he, Gabu’s truest friend, the one who felt unsafe?

He had a lot of explaining to do, and he didn’t even know where to begin.

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The 24th Evening

Home. Home was where to begin. Home was the place where internal activity reigned. The world could churn up dangers and distractions all it liked, but at home… Mei was free to think and reason things out until he was ready to step outside again. And he was free to talk with Gabu for as long as it took…

…until he felt safe again.

“Back to basics,” he said, as soon as he planted a wobbly leg on the now patchy bed of moss.

“Back to basics?” asked Gabu helplessly. Mei looked back at him, stern.
“All right,” sighed the wolf, settling his haunches within the cave. “Back to basics. Mei… what’s wrong?”

Mei swallowed and sat there, looking at him. Neither of them spoke for a while. Something was building up that had to be built.

“I’m afraid we haven’t thought this through,” he finally said.

“We haven’t?”


“It’s all right, Mei. Take all the time you need.”

So Mei took a deep breath. He lay down and stretched out. He let his eyes roll, his neck relax. Then he swung up his gaze.

“It’s not like I imagined, Gabu. I imagined us meeting one special friend, maybe two, and… forming a fast little group. From there, we’d meet one more animal, and then another, and slowly…” He shook his head again. “It wasn’t like this.”

“But what’s wrong with having plenty of friends?” asked Gabu.

“It won’t work. Did you hear them, talking about wreathes to mark them as safe? It’s like a little club. A club like that is bound to grow, and grow…”

“Are you worried I’ll run out of…” Gabu swallowed. “Prey to hunt?”

“That’s part of it.” Mei closed his eyes and tried to put things in order. “I don’t know exactly what I’m afraid of. But this isn’t what it should feel like. They’re using you, Gabu!”

“…Using me?”

“No, that’s not quite right. They’re… trying to make sure of themselves. To make sure they’re in the club, before it gets too hard… to get in. They want to be friends with you just to be safe.”

Gabu’s huge, naive eyes still weren’t buying it. “Mei, are you sure?”

Mei thought back. It was true—maybe the warblers didn’t have to worry. Maybe the deer had a nobler purpose. But… “No, I’m not sure. But even if these animals are in it for the right reasons, the next batch won’t be. What message does it send, Gabu, if you tell everyone, ‘Be my friend, and I won’t eat you’?”

“It sounds like a friendly enough message to me,” he replied.

“But think of the inverse, Gabu. Think of it the opposite way. ‘If you won’t be my friend…’”

“…I’ll eat you,” said Gabu, realizing. His jaw hung slack. “Oh. I see what you mean.”

Mei nodded soberly. He looked at the wall, between the light of the exit and the flowers. He only wanted to look at stone right now.

“I don’t think that means we should give up, Mei.”

Mei loved his friend’s optimism. He looked at Gabu and saw more brightness than the cloud-blocked sun could illuminate. “I think we should take it slow,” he warned.
“All right, Mei.”

That was all they seemed to need for right now. Mei struggled over and lay down next to his friend. He was surprised, but not really surprised, to feel sharp, gentle teeth in his coat. He was being groomed. Of course he was. Mei sobbed tearlessly, eyes closed, while Gabu’s sharp teeth slowly straightened his hair, removing the nits. Purifying him. Beautifying him.

There really was nothing to fear, was there?

Mei rolled onto his back. He let his four hooves dangle, amused by the sight of them at the bottom of his vision. “It’ll be fine, won’t it, Gabu?”

Gabu looked up sharply. “Do you think so?”

“If we need to, we can always just leave for another place.”

Gabu sniffled, lifting his back. “I guess that’s right.”

“Back to basics.”

“I’m always here, Mei.”

Mei squeezed his eyes in choked up laughter. He lay on his back and let tears run down. He let himself be a kid again. Believing family would always be there. Believing in the enduring, never-ending love of the herd.

“We’ll work it out,” reassured Gabu. By the sound of his voice, he really believed it.

Mei was happy enough. He knew they didn’t need to.

^{{c.C}}^
to revise and share it, because why not? It's about the classic Pac-Man arcade games. The first chapter goes up Friday, with others to follow on subsequent Fridays. :-) [EDITED TO ADD: The novelette is posted! Check it out!]

Illustration by Flying Mambo.
Chapter Summary

* Is that what you want more than anything in the world?
* Why don't we take a honeymoon?
* Do you love me?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 25th Morning

Mei’s dreams were heavily populated that night. There were endless, countless faces to process, scents to catalogue, and people to meet. Behind him were the days of being a forgotten relic in a wolf pack. Now Mei was part of a squirrel colony, a rabbit warren, a migrating flock of birds. He was jumbled from one community, one culture to another, so fast that he knew he was leaving obligations everywhere behind him, but kept getting whisked into new groups just the same. Tap was there. So was Bepo, briefly. The only other voice he recognized—and it came from the body of a mid-sized, fuzzy animal he didn’t even recognize—was the voice of the female squirrel, the one who kept saying “Mr. Murderer.” She seemed to be keeping an eye on him. Mei wanted to please everyone, so he kept making excuses—”I’m sorry, I don’t fly,” he said, shaking a foreleg to demonstrate how useless it was. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how to climb trees, but maybe I can leap—?” And all the while, he kept explaining that this was all because of the wolf goddess, Leto—if she would only leave him alone for a moment, he might have time to catch his breath—

He was awakened in a tumble by a strikingly clarion wolf howl, frighteningly close. “Hooww-ooosss!!” His belly flipped over and his legs tangled in their rush to start running. Where was the…

…the herd…?

Gabu rose too, but he seemed distinctly pleased rather than concerned. He hurried from the cave before Mei could… even remember why he was in one. “Lala’s back!” he cried.

Oh. Right! Of course. That brought it back in a jiffy.

Mei hurried after his friend before he could worry too much about how he felt. Early mornings were dangerous that way—he remembered too much, then too little. The carnival of lifestyles faded rapidly against the blue hillside and the silver wolf sitting happily at its foot, head lifted.

She’d gone to feed herself, and it looked like she’d returned in triumph. Well… Mei supposed that was better than the alternative.

“Lala!” cried Gabu, pelting down the hill.

“Good morning, Gabu!” She leapt, just once, to land neatly before him. Her tail waved like a sapling’s tuffet.
Gabu fought against his own momentum and clambered to a halt just in time. He sat before her; she remained standing and looked him over, as if seeing him in this place for the first time.

Amazingly, Mei could see the same wonder, a certain longing, in Gabu’s own bearing. Had the two formed a connection so quickly? But then he remembered, with a pang of jealousy, that they’d known each other for longer than Gabu had known him. He was the billy-come-lately here.

“How have you been?” asked Lala politely.

“I’ve been very well,” said Gabu. But it sounded to Mei like he was really saying how glad he was to see her.

“I’m glad to hear that,” replied Lala. Her voice seemed so sweet, but at the same time, a single streak of russet ran from the edge of her jaw down one shoulder—oh, ick! Mei screwed up his face, trying not to look at it. At least it was dry.

“You look well fed,” said Gabu.

“Thank you,” said Lala.

“I know some wolves might disagree,” Gabu ventured. “But I personally think you look nicer this way.”

Oh, for goodness sake—wasn’t he even going to mention what had happened? “We have good news,” interrupted Mei, stepping forward.

Lala’s ears perked instantly. Somehow, Mei found himself resenting her greed for information. Even if it was offered freely. “Ohh?”

“Oh, right!” said Gabu. His face melted into bashfulness. “We have some new friends. Or at least, some would-be friends. Some of the animals approached us and said they’d be willing to give it a try!”

Lala gaped for a moment. “Really! You’ve… won their trust?”

“Well…” Gabu’s facial fur puffed out a bit.

“After a fashion,” said Mei. “But in truth, I’m not sure they trust us so much as… they want to be safe themselves.”

Gabu glanced back at him, troubled. Then he turned back to Lala. “We just don’t know. I’d like to think at least some of them really are… curious about me.”

“Curious? About you?” asked Lala, advancing her head.

Gabu grinned bashfully, eyes shut. “I’d like to think I’m something of an interesting person!”

Lala chuckled slowly, her tail slashing back and forth with force. Mei wanted her to stop, but didn’t dare interrupt. “Gabu.”

“Yes, Lala?”

She winked at him. “When will I get to meet these new… friends?”

“I’m not sure! We can’t do it today… it’s a hunting day.”
“It certainly is!”

“And to tell the truth,” he lamented, “I’m worried. I met three deer, and a couple of squirrels, and a rabbit, and two birds… but what if today, when we’re hunting, we accidentally kill one of them?”

One of Lala’s ears dipped. “Would that spoil everything?”

“I… I think it might. And even if we don’t run into them… we might end up hunting one of their friends, or relations, without even knowing it!”

“I suppose that makes things tricky,” she acknowledged.

He nodded. “So, I’m wondering whether it even makes sense to go hunting at all today. I know it would mean going hungry for a while… but sometimes you have to make sacrifices for the greater good…”

Lala nodded. “A sacrifice,” she repeated.

“But if we get through it, it’s worth it in the end, isn’t it? I mean… getting to be friends with all kinds of animals… even if it’s only a few of each…”

“Is that what you want more than anything in the world, Gabu?”

He seemed to be caught off guard by this question. Gabu blinked a couple times, presumably reflecting, then jerked to attention, ears rising. “Oh! I just remembered—that’s not the only good news I have!”

Lala seemed to take Gabu’s response warily, one forepaw out in front of the other. Cautiously, though, she lowered herself to the ground and tilted her head. “It’s not?”

Gabu glanced back at Mei, nervous for a moment. “No, it’s not. Lala… M-Mei said that… we, uh… we talked it over, and he told me that…”

A hint of Lala’s dark tongue showed. “Yes…?”

This was clearly hard for Gabu. He took a breath and spit it out. “He said it was all right if we have a litter of pups!”

Lala inhaled sharply. Then she chuckled. She looked curiously at Mei, who wished he could look away. “Is that so?”

Mei nodded, feeling the weight of his horns. “One litter. No more. I can’t tell you how conflicted I feel about even that.”

The she-wolf’s eyes went bright. “I see! Well.” She looked at Gabu. “Does this mean…”

He swallowed. “Yes, Lala?”

She stood gracefully and shook herself, her fur falling into shimmering ridges. “Does this mean…”

“Um… does it mean what, Lala?”

“Are we going to formally be mates?”

Gabu couldn’t even muster any words in response. He just tightened his snout, then nodded several
“Well then!” Lala smacked the ground with her tail. She looked around, taking the wind. Then, after a few moments’ contemplation, she turned back to Gabu. “In that case, I have an idea!”

“What’s that, Lala?”

A fiendish smile cut her muzzle. “Since we’re about to be mates, why don’t we… take a honeymoon?”

Gabu gaped. “…A honeymoon?”

Lala jerked her head toward the forest. “A honeymoon! Isn’t it traditional for lone wolves to travel when they hook up?”

“But… but Lala, where would we go?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Deep. Through this forest, into the next one. I’ll show you where I’ve been going on these trips alone. We’ll hunt in the next forest, where we’re sure not to run into any of your new friends.” Her smile grew. “And then we’ll have some time alone.”

Gabu swallowed. Mei saw his tail twitch. “Alone?”

“Just you and me,” said Lala.

“…Y-you and me?”

She stepped closer. “At night.”

Gabu laughed nervously. “Mei… is it all right if I don’t come back until late tonight?”

Mei supposed it was. “Yes, Gabu. Take all the time you like. I may be asleep when you return… but if you lie down next to me, I’m sure it will warm my heart.”

Lala scrutinized him. “Are you sure you two aren’t already mates?”

Mei trembled. “We’re best friends, and that’s all.”

“Well, Gabu? You have permission. What do you say?”

Gabu lifted his head toward the rising sun and held it there, smiling. “I think it’s going to be a good day!”

Lala nodded, her expression knowing. “We’d better get a move on, if we want to be back tonight.”

Gabu nodded, a little nervous. “Well, Mei… I guess I’ll see you in the morning!”

Mei nodded. And perhaps you’ll be a father, he didn’t say. “I hope you have a good trip.”

It seemed like Gabu had a little trouble pulling his eyes away. But he managed it in the end. “All right, Lala… lead the way!”

She sprang into action wordlessly, trotting with graceful, lifted knees, her tail waving out straight. Gabu hesitated a moment, then darted after, not wanting to be left behind. “Goodbye, Mei!” he called back.
“Goodbye, Gabu!” Mei tried to keep his voice uplifting. “Good luck!”

He watched until they disappeared into the forest. Only then did he realize how fast his heart was beating.

Well, he had the whole day to get it under control. He might as well see if he could put down a few bites.

*We don’t eat Uncle Mei*, his subconscious mind whispered.

*No*, he replied to it as he started off toward Sneaky Bluff. *No, we most certainly do not.*

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**The 25th Day**

If the forest had winds, Lala was one of them. Gabu didn’t even have time to feel buffeted by the odd cross-breezes of the Emerald Forest; he had to chase after Lala, who was slipping past groves and trees like the wind itself. Sometimes she got far enough ahead that all he could see of her was a lick of silver, winding—but he never felt lost. Her smell was too intense. He could never have lost that tantalizing smell!

Gabu was tempted to sing the wind song as he went. He even tried at one point: “Hyululu hyululuuuuu!” But his throat caught on the last note of breath, and his lungs demanded he stop. Lala didn’t stop. She didn’t look back once, not even when he fell behind. She looked up at the monkeys once, when they clamored loudly at her presence; Gabu saw her sit and crane her neck toward them, wondering what was on her face. Defiance? Curiosity? Pride? But before he could get close enough to tell, she was off again. The monkeys yelled things Gabu could almost make out, things about haste and warnings and foolishness and hope. Proverbs and taunts and things he couldn’t recognize. Then they were past the monkeys, and Lala didn’t slow. The breeze grew, and they came to a wide aisle surrounding a dead streambed, and Gabu felt his coat being ruffled and attacked by the cold wind. Lala leapt the clay sand, her paws dodging the stones that had once graced the stream’s bottom, and Gabu raced after, and then the wind was gone. It was gone! They were in blue-green forest, running over brown soil, and it felt good and safe. There was a gentle birdsong in the air.

“Are we in the next forest, Lala?” he managed to yell.

“No even close,” she called back. Not breaking stride.

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Gabu had gone off running, once, in his adolescence. The pack hadn’t known he was going, and the truth was, until his legs had carried him further and further from home and he’d realized he had no inclination to turn back, neither did he. He ran with the joy of finding new things, but it wasn’t sheer curiosity—this was soon after his mother’s death, and he’d been rebuked for taking a potential war with a rival pack too casually. Gabu was troubled and angry, and he ran from anger. He felt cooped up in the valley, and had run for a taste of how much world there was. Eventually, he’d gotten scared at the apparent answer—no matter how much world he might crave, there was always more of it. This fear had been what had eventually driven him back home. Now, he felt the...
same feeling. He was running after his mate, but he was also running to explore. To get away from troubles. To get a sense of the size of the world. It was unsettling, and he feared getting lost, and he feared the new plants and smells and sounds he encountered. But these were small fears next to the wonder that loomed in his chest. He no longer feared the endlessness of nature itself. If nature could manage to be endless, he would exult in that! He loved knowing that he could run and run apparently forever, if he had to. If he got tired, he would rest, but he could go on. If he met a mountain, he could traverse it—he’d done it once! If he met a craggy gorge, he could leap his way across. Treelines, ridges, brambles—nothing meant the end. Nothing could keep him from advancing, if advancing was what he really meant to do.

Gabu had heard of an end to it all. Just as there were legends of Leto and of other wolf heroes and packs, there were legends of faraway places with features unknown to Baku Baku Valley. One of these was of an end to it all—an end made of water. Old wolves had reportedly come back from such an end, reporting it to other wolves who then grew old. Woods that gave way to rock, rock to sand, sand to water, and water that appeared to have no limits. A blue line between water and sky—a horizon that couldn’t be starker. Gabu didn’t know whether he believed this legend, but if an endless water cropped up before him, he would at least try to find a way over it. That was the spirit with which he ran. And he was just following Lala—he could only imagine the kind of exhilaration Lala was feeling.

Shrubs appeared and filled the understory, something like they did back home. Gabu smelled mulberries. Hydrangea blossoms brushed his coat, leaving petals that shook off miles later. Lindens gave way to huge oaks. Sweet gum trees appeared, with their budding red balls that would turn brown and spiny in the fall and cling to the paws. The birdsong seemed to come from further away and higher up, and more of it was echoed. Still Lala ran. The sun was glimpsed only rarely, and only for moments, too briefly for Gabu to gauge its height. He had no sense of day passing. For all he knew on a run like this, time might be as endless as the world itself.

Finally the trees broke away and they were met with the sight of a bright lake below a bluff. The sun was blinding off that lake! Gabu skidded to a stop in time to keep from skidding on down to the water. Lala stood on the dusty edge, framed by the forest, glowing in the sun, coat dappled with petals and pollen. She smiled, amused, as Gabu caught his balance. He looked at her. He didn’t honestly know whether anything more beautiful anywhere had ever existed.

“This is where the Emerald Forest ends,” she said at last.

Gabu looked back at it. “It doesn’t seem so emerald from this side,” he observed. The leaves were yellow and brown as much as green, the trees less perfectly shaped.

“Things change,” said Lala. She leapt into action and slithered directly down the bluff, keeping both head and body close to the ground. Gabu admired how she kept her balance and wondered if he could ever do the same. But she wasn’t stopping, and he couldn’t lose her, so he tried the incline—and found himself careening far too fast, losing his balance, forepaws behind hindpaws, gallop into tumble, until he managed to zag sideways and slow himself long enough to get a gait underneath him again. He shot way out to the left and kept pattering his legs for lack of a way to stop, descending the slope toward the lake even as he saw Lala running along its border below. He met up with her shoulder to shoulder in a massive bump that nearly toppled her; they teetered for a full second on the brink of the lake, fate uncertain, before coming back down together on the path. Hips, flanks, shoulders—none were spared contact. Lala’s fur was so smooth. Her falls were more graceful than Gabu’s walks.

She laughed like sweet honey and licked his neck. “Someone decided to take a shortcut,” she teased.
“It’s a steep bluff!” Gabu exclaimed. He felt like the sun was in his eyes.

“Were you trying to tumble me into the lake?”

“No!” Gabu protested. “I would never…”

“Good,” said Lala. And she leapt in.

Gabu stood gaping in the wake of her nimble splashes, her elegant paddling toward the opposite bank. Then he wondered whether he should join her.

She looked back, smiling darkly. “It’s good! Come on in!”

Gabu laughed and ran in, rather than jumping, so that his legs felt the splashing inch by inch and his front knew the water before his rear. It was cold, but he was warm, and he could stave off cold. He’d once dragged a freezing goat into a cave he’d dug himself in a snowbank! He could handle a chilly lake! He swam, and Lala waited for him, then swam off again. She was a faster swimmer. Gabu wondered whether she’d ever had the chance to practice. He’d never been in a lake before—only in rivers and streams. This was gentler! He wasn’t fighting a current, or fighting to stay safe; he was fighting not to be left behind. And he was fighting the cold. He reached out for Lala’s tail, but it slipped through his paws. He got a mouthful of pure water. Panicking, he paddled wildly with all four paws, and suddenly he’d arrived at the bank. Lala climbed out and extended a leg to help him.

He climbed out and stood next to her. Unsure if he should shake. Should he shake? Grinning slyly, Lala shook and the water flew free. It hung in the air long enough to shimmer. Gabu barked in laughter and shook himself. Some of his spray caught Lala; she shook again, laughing. And so did he.

The next forest was taller. The giant oaks were joined by ash and tuliptree. There was less ground cover and more bare soil, though the trees weren’t immune to creepers aspiring to their heights. Nests were built where the branches from one tree knotted with the next. Progress was easier, but Lala seemed to finally be tiring a bit and didn’t run as much. The two wolves rounded trunks at a brisk walk, though Gabu tended to alternate more between walking and zipping, as if he was a suitor trying to earn his paramour’s attention. Lala’s pace was mostly stable. She grinned back at him now and then, unlike before, then sped off again, always teasing. The sun’s place was clearly visible now, marking it as mid-afternoon. Gabu wondered when they were going to stop and hunt.

Eventually, Lala slowed her pace and stopped to smell more, and listen. Gabu did the same, reverent. He trusted her judgment. He smelled something new, an animal that he’d never smelled before. Looking at Lala’s face, he could tell she smelled it too. It was heady, and made him want to chuckle to himself. He kept looking after the scent as he paced, trying to find its source. Lala did the same. She smiled at him and their eyes locked, and Gabu trembled.

Lala walked up to him, forepaws neat, nose just a head’s breadth from his own. “Are you ready to eat?” she asked.

He nodded twice, feeling his hunger suddenly. “But what is it, Lala?”

Her grin was broad. “Wild boar. It’s worthy of us. And it’s delicious.” Her tail slashed the pregnant air.

Gabu inhaled deeply. He’d heard of boar! It was something he’d hoped to taste one day. “Round-snouted things?”
She nodded. “That’s right. They like to fight back when they’re attacked. Watch out for the tusks.” Slowly, she showed one lower canine, then the other. “Much bigger than fangs.”

Gabu was starting to shiver. “Are they big?”

“Big, yes. But the ones around here? Not so big. I’ve heard legends of boars four times the size of a wolf. The best packs might bring one down… or they might lose a fighter. In these woods?” She inclined her head. “They’re about our size. Maybe a little bigger.”

Gabu gulped. “Bigger than us?”

“But there are two of us,” Lala reassured him. “And they go alone.”

“Even so,” said Gabu. “With tusks that huge…”

Lala advanced on him, smiling. “Are you afraid?”

Gabu reared back, dangling one paw before himself. “N-no!” His first impulse. “Well… as a matter of fact, yes. What if one of them tramples one of us, or puts a tusk through us?”

“Would it help if I told you that I took one yesterday?”

Gabu stared. “Really? All by yourself?”

Lala nodded peacefully. “It was a pig,” she added. “A child. This is their whelping time. And this is a good time for us in another way.”

“Another way?” echoed Gabu. He felt helpless sometimes around Lala… like he couldn’t possibly do any better than to repeat her words.

She smiled more brightly. “This is a forest that hasn’t learned to fear! The Emerald Forest is just learning to fear. This place? Hasn’t known wolves before.” She paced around a tree, taking some creature’s scent. “It’s still young that way.”

“Does that mean the boar will be easier to catch?” asked Gabu.

“Mmhm!”

Well. That didn’t sound so bad. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of going for a pig, though. “Do we have to hunt one of the children?”

“Why, Gabu! Feeling ambitious?” One of Lala’s ears rose higher than the other.

“N… not really. I just don’t want… I wouldn’t want anyone’s life to be too short.”

Her expression went through a couple of swift changes. “Feeling pity for our quarry, Gabu?”

Gabu took a deep breath. “I guess.”

“We can hunt an adult. If that’s what you want. It’s our honeymoon, after all. For this one evening… we can do anything.”

Gabu’s trembling intensified, but in that moment it transformed from weakness into power. He was alive with power! He knew Lala wasn’t wrong—for these few hours, he could bring down the beast at the heart of the world itself! He really could do anything… and he was afraid of wasting it.
Lala strolled near. Her chin tilted up toward his nose. “Gabu.”

“Lala?”

“Do you love me?”

He was struck by the question as by a gust of heavy wind. He couldn’t even think of how to start ferreting out an answer. “I don’t know!”

“That’s right. You don’t.”

Gabu trembled through a breath. “I don’t?”

“We’ve known each other a long time, haven’t we, Gabu? But in another way… we barely know each other at all. Isn’t that so?”

For most of his life, Lala had been an unattainable idol. Like a kami living among mortals, or a wolf with divine blood. Only after he’d met Mei had Gabu worked up the bravery to think of her as just one among the pack… but now… now she was something else entirely. “Yes… that’s definitely so.”

“Don’t ask me if I love you,” said Lala. “It’s too soon to say.”

He nodded a little too rapidly.

“But Gabu, know this.” Her teeth opened, came in, then closed gently on his snout… and raked away, pressing just hard enough to comb his fur. They clicked together, leaving her smiling lightly at him. “I want to love you.”

Gabu’s heart pounded like never before. “So do I, Lala! I want to love you too!”

Her shoulders and thighs rose and tensed. “Perfect. Hold that strength for now, Gabu.” She turned away and slipped around a tree, nose primed.

“Where are you going, Lala?” he pled helplessly.

“I smell a boar. Are you with me?”

Gabu padded forward. “Yes! Of course!”

“Then keep your voice under control, and get ready to ram that boar after we flush her. Remember —you want to love me.”

“I do. I really do!”

Her blue eyes held his captive. “For now, let’s kill a boar. Love me after.”

Gabu stood captive on the spot, waiting for orders. He would do anything to obey those words.

“STRIKE!” barked Lala.
Gabu struck. It was his third ram; he’d rattled his head on the first two attempts, and two boars had escaped, but he was getting used to how these creatures fought. This one was a mother protecting her brood. It occurred to Gabu that killing a nursing mother might be worse than killing a baby, but he didn’t know if the young might survive, and besides, he was already here in the thick of the age-old fight. The boar smelled delicious, and Lala smelled better, and he was coiled with strength—just for today, just for this hunt. He saw the boar’s snout and decided to claim it, and he extended himself to close his jaws around what he wanted. Gabu bit the upper edge of the sow’s snout, and Lala clamped her neck, and the struggle was fierce and energetic and long-lasting. It felt like he was already making love. His thoughts were on Lala; he hardly even noticed when the sow died.

Gabu’s belly was full. His throat was pricked, bleeding sparsely from where the sow’s tusk had grazed him. Dimly he wondered how close to death he’d been. The bleeding didn’t bother him, though—it was already nearly healed, and was nothing compared to the messy strings of viscera he’d enjoyed. His throat, his muzzle, his forepaws—all were wet and glorious. He snuffled down flesh. He howled once, abortively, in joy—Lala looked suddenly at him and he forgot the need to howl. He looked back at her. Beneath their feet was a mound of meat.

“It gets harder,” said Lala, looking into the sky through the thin part of the trees. The sun was setting. Owls were starting to come out, filling the upper woods with their various calls.

“It does?” asked Gabu.

“The prey learn. They learn the sounds of a hunting wolf, or a pair. Or a pack. They learn how to fight, or how not to fight. They learn what kills a wolf, or makes it run in fear. They learn to avoid our scent.”

“Oh,” said Gabu, understanding. “It gets harder.”

“But that’s life.” Lala turned from the vivid sunset to face Gabu. “Life gets harder. That’s how it should be. And we get smarter, and we keep along.”

“We keep along,” Gabu echoed. He could barely feel the pain at his throat anymore.

“But now and then,” waxed Lala. “It gets easier. Have you noticed that? Sometimes, out of the blue, life gets easier. Against all reason. Like a bone breaking, all of a sudden. And it’s not fair… and it’s not sensible… but it happens.”

“It happens,” agreed Gabu, and he knew it was true. He remembered the feeling of a life’s memories flooding back after a season of living without them. He’d never felt anything like it, before or since.

“I think that’s beautiful,” said Lala. “I don’t understand it when it happens, but I’m glad to take it. If fate decides someone else’s extra luck should belong to me… I’ll take it gladly. It helps me feel… for just a while… like good is the basic state of the world.”

Gabu thought about this, in his sparkling, unnerved, worked-up way. “…Are you sure it isn’t?”
Lala smiled and stared at the sun as it disappeared. “No,” she said. And she looked at him.

Gabu stared at her. “Would you like to have some babies?”

She grinned, baring all her teeth. They glinted in the young blue night lit by a waxing, gibbous moon. “Fuck me,” she said.

Gabu had never heard that word before. But he knew what it meant. And for half a glorious hour, he did.

^("o.o)^

Chapter End Notes

Here, have a video of wolf sex gone wrong: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAkfazw0aAo

This chapter was the single most intense one for me to write so far. It also required a fair bit of web research on plants and such. I'm happy with how it came out.

Gabu compares Lala to a kami, which I almost had him do back in Chapter 14. Kami are the divine beings of Shinto - narrowly, you could call them Japanese nature spirits.

Unused line: “Let’s make some little hunters! The goat has decreed it!”
Chapter Summary

* Are we packmates, or are we not?
* And, ah... aren't we a social structure, Miss Lala?
* You killed my sister. And you destroyed our home. Do you remember?
* What if just looking at you causes us pain?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 26th Morning

Mei felt soft. He felt like he was lying on flowers in bloom—an irresponsible, childish thing to do, but luxuriant, and he couldn’t say he’d never done it. Had his morals slipped, now that he was so far away from everyone? Perhaps where there was no shortage of flowers, there was no need to be considerate of others. Perhaps being nearly alone was a good thing.

He opened his eyes, gained awareness. Oh! In addition to the moss bed he’d gone to sleep on, he was wrapped all around by the soft body of a sleeping wolf. That explained it!

Mei chuckled. He hadn’t even registered Gabu’s scent as especially strong. This really was his new normal. He wouldn’t say so to Gabu, who’d once taken a similar comment the wrong way… but it was nice to actually enjoy the scent of the creature he shared his home with.

Mei admired the contortion Gabu had resorted to in order to curl himself all the way around Mei, his tail filling the last gap. The wolf’s throat was exposed with one paw drawn up against it, toes dangling. Mei’s haunches pressed against Gabu’s abdomen, yielding and lightly furred. It occurred to Mei that Gabu had been hunting last night—that his abdomen was probably full of gnawed-up animal flesh, passing slowly through his intestines…

He remained still. He didn’t move. The thought didn’t bother him nearly as much as it once would have. Mei lay there in a pit of wolf-flesh, admiring every piece of his cavemate. He drew a deep breath and exhaled. He let himself rest in luxurious comfort a while longer.

Gabu certainly looked happy. Mei wondered what that meant.

It would be a nice thing to simply stay until Gabu woke up on his own. On another morning, Mei might have done just that. But he knew the wolf had been out late into the night. Mei was used to meeting his friend at dusk and retiring together, talking over the day’s vicissitudes. But last night, he’d gone to bed alone. It had been lonely—Mei acknowledged that. He’d talked with Bepo a little before dark, but the vole’s experience seeking out mates had been so alien from what Mei knew that he couldn’t say the conversation had been of much value. Darkness had been an unpleasant visitor, for once. Mei had recalled snippets of his aimless, miserable winter. The world had looked a little like that as the sun went down. He’d gone to bed remembering the winter’s smells.

Now, here was his cushion again. His wolfpillow. His true and faithful friend. Mei was happy to
soak in the presence of him, and his obvious love, for a while. But if Gabu hadn’t returned until midnight, or even later, there was no telling how late he might sleep.

Carefully, ever so tenderly, Mei extricated himself from the ring of affection. He stepped as though he were walking the side of a cliff; then, having escaped Gabu’s soporific embrace without waking him, Mei left the cave and had some grass and clover. He granted himself a small luxury and had a few flowers, too.

Turning east, he saw the sun coming up. As he occasionally had in the past, Mei fancied that he could actually see it moving, ever so slowly. It was shrouded by clouds. He imagined his mother’s face in the sun’s ring, and to his mild embarrassment, Mei found himself murmuring to her, imagining her responses. He let his embarrassment fall away as he had a full conversation with the memory of his mother. He told her what he’d learned about the wolf who’d killed her, and about the others from the same pack he’d befriended. He told her that he’d given them his blessing for a single litter of pups. Just one. Don’t hate me, Mother. I couldn’t condemn my best friend to live and die childless. He wants children, Mother, I know he does. I had to let him or I couldn’t have lived with myself.

Me? Well, as it happens, Mother… I don’t care about children one way or another. I know it’s good to leave something behind. But I feel like… I feel like I’m doing just that.

“Mei?”

He jumped, startled. The voice was a comfort, even if it had caught him off guard. It was good to be with people, not just memories. But it was Lala’s voice, not his mother’s, and not Gabu’s. How strange that he’d found it comforting.

“Good morning, Lala.”

She smiled—an artificial smile, but he couldn’t claim it wasn’t well crafted. “Good morning!”

“I woke up to find Gabu…” Mei gestured with his chin. “All around me.”

“He cares for you.”

Obviously. “He seems happy.”

Lala’s whole face lit up, ears perched higher than Mei would have guessed they could go. “Does he?”

Well, this was fairly clear. “So you’ve done it, then. You’ve mated with him.”

Lala turned, stepping at an angle, layers of cheek fur flowing down her neck. “Does it show?” she asked smugly.

Mei didn’t deign to answer that. “Do you think you’re pregnant?”

At this Lala laughed lightly. “Do you think that’s an appropriate question to ask a lady?”

Mei stared. He honestly didn’t know what was or wasn’t appropriate to ask a wolf. But he asked quietly: “Are we packmates, or are we not?”

Lala’s ears fell and she regarded him seriously. “It’s hard to say. I’ve had a good sense for it in the past. I feel good about this coupling, but I was just on the edge of my cycle.”
Lala paced forward, passing Mei as she reached him. “It means… if this litter is born, it will be a late litter. Well into summer. There won’t be much time to rear them before winter strikes.”

Somehow, this hadn’t occurred to Mei. He blinked as the silver wolf’s tail brushed his face, then turned to follow. “Will they be healthy? Do they need to go off on their own before winter?”

Lala looked back and smiled broadly, and this time it seemed genuine. “Normally? Yes, they would! But here, in this mad, wild place?” She laughed deeply, and it carried. “Who knows!” She turned toward the cave.

Mei stayed outside while Lala went in. Had he made a terrible mistake? Had Gabu? Had the wolves squandered their one chance at offspring on a mating too late in the year? Would most of the pups die? Would Mei feel forced to give them permission for… a second chance?

How long would this go on?

From around the hill came rough, rasping sounds and a friendly growl. Mei looked up to see the wolves sniffing, nuzzling each other. Mei approached, and Gabu looked up. “Mei! Good morning! It’s good to see you.”

Mei forced down his fears and walked over. “I liked how you were curled around me when I woke.”

Gabu looked sheepish. “I wanted to make up for missing you last night. You were asleep when I got back… and you looked so lonely…”

Mei grinned, hiding his doubts. “Maybe a little. But I kept in mind that my best friend was having a honeymoon. I take it things went well?”

Gabu nodded more than once. “We killed a boar! Do you know what boar are, Mei?”

Mei hadn’t thought there were any around here, but… “Yes, I’ve heard of them. Congratulations. So you’ve eaten well?”

“Very well, thanks!” He looked fondly at Lala. “And I think Lala and I have gotten very close.”

“We’re fully mates now,” she confirmed. “Thank you, Mei, for letting me have him. For the night.”

Mei nodded, rather than say ‘You’re welcome’. She wasn’t, really. Was she? “I guess you’ll be around until the next hunt, then?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it! I understand there are some… intrepid individuals to meet.”

Oh. Yes. “I have to say… I’m of two minds about this,” Mei admitted.

“About making friends with the locals?” asked Lala. “But wasn’t that your ambition?”

In Lala’s world, everyone needs an ambition. “Yes, but… I’m worried. It was a whole group that met us, and it’s going to grow… and they’re all expecting to be safe from hunts…”

Lala exchanged a glance with Gabu. “But we have options, don’t we?”

Gabu explained. “I think Mei is worried that if we promise safety to all our friends, it would be
“like… threatening doom to everyone else.”

“I see,” said Lala. “And then every creature in the forest would feel trapped into being our friend.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” put in Mei.

Lala smiled, and her smile was crafty. “Is that bad?”

“Well…” Gabu considered. “I’d say it hardly counts as friendship if they’re not being honest about it.”

“And if they are?”

Mei answered her. “If someone tells us nose-to-nose that they’re only being friendly with us to avoid being hunted? Then you definitely can’t call that a real friendship.” Did he need to explain further, or would the twisted she-wolf get it?

Lala stood in thought, but seemed to understand. At least she didn’t press the issue. “So, what can we do? Refuse to offer safety?”

Gabu looked stricken. “But… isn’t that the main reason they came to us in the first place?”

“Is it?”

Gabu didn’t answer, and Mei didn’t choose to. Instead, he started walking down toward the brook. He knew he must have a severe expression on his face. It was how he felt inside.

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**The 26th Day**

Lala didn’t mind leading, as she had all day yesterday. It was her chance to show off what she’d learned; what she’d wrought herself into. Leading was her chance to shine… or rather, since she endeavored always to shine, her chance to shine on something particular and illuminate it. But she also liked being led, when there was someone leading worth half their bones. She’d always enjoyed being directed by hunt leaders—by Giro and Bari especially. It was inspiring to know that there were wolves around with purpose. The world was nice enough on its face, but to imagine any given wolf in it with purpose—! …To imagine the prey, the birds on the wind, the wind itself, the trees, the clouds—all with their own individual purpose! That was to impregnate the world. That was to set imagination aflame.

That was what she was doing here. Being led. Standing ready to help when and if help was needed. Tracking down Gabu was looking like the best decision Lala had ever made… but she wasn’t yet sure. It could still all be an embarrassing failure. The key moment had yet to resolve… and that excited Lala. She was excited to be in a place that probably wasn’t, but just *might* be, the most important place under the sun right now.

Gabu’s project. This was Gabu’s project… and, if she was being fair, the goat’s project too. (And Leto’s, most likely, but that was viewing things on another level.) Lala was following for now. Whenever the topic of friendship with plant eaters came up, Lala deferred to her companions. She didn’t spend her energy thinking up ideas that might take things in the wrong direction. She was made for working *within* society to get the results she wanted—she wasn’t made for transforming what society *meant*. Lala wasn’t a transformational thinker… but she knew enough to respect one when she met one.
So she kept sweetly asking questions and nodding and going along with what her companions
dreamed up. For now, they were her beacon. They were shining. If she could help their efforts by
keeping Gabu fed, she would pour herself into that. If she could put things in context by pointing
out the goddess’s role in all this, it was her privilege to do that. And if she could help by just being
another wolf, another meat-eating body to scramble up into this crazy experiment, so that it wasn’t
all about Gabu… she would do that too.

She’d even go above the rise on it. If one more wolf in the project was good… a whole litter of
them must be even better! Lala would gladly bring new souls into the world for the third time in
her life if it meant bringing this project to its full fruition.

The sun was covered in clouds today, but she felt like it was in full force. As the trio paced swiftly
to the brook, Lala felt like the stories of the future were shining on her back, illuminating her pelt,
putting spring in her step. This, though. This was where helping from the back became perilous.
This was the first juncture at which she might actually screw things up.

Lala didn’t mind being nervous. But she didn’t relish it like she did being fooled, or surprised.
Rather, she looked forward to when it was over—when she could look back and smirk, or sulk,
over what had happened. She hadn’t handled her first conversation with Mei very well, and she
was worried that could happen again. Lala didn’t know how to talk to people who weren’t wolves.
Birds, she’d occasionally chatted with. They were out of her reach, she was too big for them to
hurt; they were outside each other’s purview. That made things less awkward. But Lala had never
tried talking with her prey since one ill-judged pursuit in her adolescence. She’d just distracted
herself by being witty, and the rabbit had slipped away mid-sentence, leaving her doubly
unsatisfied. Now she was about to go that route again. Fate and her own instincts had led her down
this road. She was going to have a chat with her food.

Smile, Lala. Just smile. Remember how silly and strange this is. The rest will—hopefully—come
on its own.

She couldn’t make herself believe it would come *naturally*, though. There was nothing natural
about this.

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No one was at the brook where it met the woods. The air wasn’t empty of scent, true, but…

Well, Lala didn’t need to say anything. She just looked back at her companions—nose high, tail
gently waving, as if to ask, *What do we do now?* Just keep smiling, Lala. Keep acting like this is no
problem… and it won’t be.

“I sort of thought they’d be here,” said Gabu.

“We can wait and see,” Mei suggested.

“Or we can track them,” suggested Lala. She was already starting to sort out *deer* from the other
aromas on the breeze. They’d said three deer had been in charge of it all.

Gabu sat abruptly and thought. Lala watched him. Let him percolate. His brain, slow though it
might be, was a better weapon for attacking this problem than her own. And she was no stranger to
waiting. Her belly was full, and the day was long.
“I’m not sure tracking them would be such a good idea,” decided Gabu. “What do you say we wander by the brook and let everyone see us? With any luck, they’ll come to us!”

Mei nodded with a content grunt. Lala did the same. This was nice. She liked being led, and it amused her that Gabu was her leader.

It wasn’t yet easy, talking with the goat present. But Lala started to learn, and for his part, the goat—Mei—seemed to be warming up to her. So talk sprouted slowly, but developed as the morning passed. They wandered by the brook; they drank, and washed, and chatted about what these two fast friends had been doing when the cotillion of animals approached them two days ago. This led to Gabu telling how he’d taught Mei the Song of the Mother Wolf, which of course Lala knew. She’d sung it to her own nursing children, once upon a time! So the males performed it together, and she sang along on the mother’s parts, which might soon be particularly appropriate. Would this summon the deer from their holt, she wondered?

In any case, she was pleased to find the goat was capable of holding a solid melody in the face of her harmonies. That showed character. She found that she was having a lovely time.

Lala sang the Song of Sly Love for her companions, and the old Hunt song, on which Gabu joined in merrily. She was halfway through the Song of the Moon, counting her own special verses, when leaves crunched nearby and the music quailed in her throat. Was—? Yes, those were deer shanks passing through the undergrowth! Lala turned to face them and her companions did the same.

Remember, Lala. Smile.

They appeared. The one in front seemed to have a definite purpose in the way he stared at her. It was palpable. Good—Lala loved purpose. She saw it reflected in the other hind and hart, and yes, there were squirrels riding along. Rabbits shuffling through shrubs. Was that a muskrat?

“Peace,” said the leading stag, in a deep voice with as much purpose as Lala could ask for. “We come in parley.”

The hind and hart behind him bowed; the other animals looked nervous. Lala counted quickly—a pair of leaf warblers overhead, as she’d been told, but three squirrels, not two. Two rabbits, not one. Yes, this group had grown.

“Hello again,” said Mei.

“It’s nice to see you,” said Gabu.

There was a tittering of introduction. “Well, here we are,” said the downier stag in a rougher voice. “And you must be Lala.”

Lala sat back and nodded carefully. “I’m Lala.” She chose not to give her full title this time; it would seem pompous. Her tail puffed up, but she forced its tip to remain down.

Each of the animals gave its name, and Lala kept careful track, committing them each to memory. Gabu and Mei hadn’t remembered all the names, which had irked her. The birds were Haburo and Hatsu. The squirrels were Taffet, Fujiko and Kiput. The head stag was Coryn of the heavy mantle, accompanied by acolyte Wilhelm and sister Bedelia, respectively. The muskrat was Itsuko. The rabbits were Ringa and Akiara. She kept herself from shaking her head, keeping it to an ear twitch instead. So many strange names. But Lala was skilled; she repeated them to herself and kept them straight.

“I would have imagined you as Coryn’s father,” she said kindly to Wilhelm, hoping it sounded
complimentary.

The older stag chuffed. “Our folks don’t keep our fathers. We rut; we leave.”

“But you have acolytes,” Lala surmised.

“Not often,” said Wilhelm. “Only when there’s someone worth following.” He nodded brusquely toward Coryn.

Lala wondered whether this stalwart creature was indeed worth following, and whither. “I might have taken you for his mate,” she said to Bedelia, bowing slightly. “Or is that another thing deer don’t keep?”

“I’m afraid so,” she replied. The three squirrels teemed on her back—why didn’t they ride one deer apiece, if they couldn’t use their own legs?

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you all!” said Lala. She let herself give a cute wiggle, as if letting the pleasure fall into its proper place. “I have to confess… I’ve only ever spoken with my own kind before.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Murderer,” declared Taffet in altogether too clarion a voice. “Or is it just Miss?”

Was that the part of her address the squirrel was unsure of? “You think of me as a murderer?” she asked. Coy, she reminded herself. Keep it coy—don’t show your teeth.

“Well aren’t you?” demanded the squirrel, creeping squarely up to the doe’s head.

Lala bowed subserviently. She knew this was a key moment. “It’s true that, as a wolf, I hunt for my sustenance. But I think the word murder only applies within a given social structure.”

The male squirrel spoke up from behind Taffet. “And, ah… aren’t we a social structure, Miss Lala?”

Lala smiled, allowing herself to show just a hint of tooth. “I suppose that’s what we’re here to determine!”

The older stag murmured to the doe; the brown rabbit whispered to the colorful one. “Social order,” said one of the birds. Damn it, Lala couldn’t tell them apart.

“As I see it,” said Mei, standing as tall as it seemed like he could, “whenever a new connection is formed between creatures, that’s a good thing. We may as well be friends.”

“Will being friends with the wolves get us out of being their lunch?” asked the rearmost squirrel—Fujiko. Ah, yes… charm the wolves by talking straight past them. Excellent idea.

“I’m not sure,” said Mei. “But it couldn’t hurt.”

The squirrel didn’t seem convinced. She whispered to her friend. Lala looked to Gabu to take over—that was getting away from them.

“Well, everyone,” said Gabu, “I can’t promise with complete certainty that I won’t try to make you my lunch when my hunting day rolls around. But wouldn’t you like to be friends anyway? Isn’t it worth being friendly while we can?”

Lala’s lips tightened. She wished he would commit, one way or the other. But he was the leader
“Are you telling us,” said the multicolored rabbit, “that we’ve no guarantee of safety?”

“Well… I wouldn’t use the word ‘guarantee’,” caviled Gabu.

“We have songs!” said Lala, trying to wrest back the conversation. “We have stories! Dozens of stories. Goat stories. Wolf stories. And thoughts! We’re not dull people.”

“And we’d be glad to share them,” said Mei, somewhat redundantly.

The muskrat now spoke for the first time. “I don’t think anyone thinks you’re dull people,” he said. He was meek—probably juvenile—and struggled to meet Lala’s eyes. “It’s that… well. You killed my sister. And you destroyed our home. Do you remember?”

The burrow on the brook. It came to Lala’s mind and she couldn’t help twitching a little. “Yes. Four days ago.” Just four days? The pace of life here really was rapid.

The rodent stared. “I’m just not sure how we can be friends, after you did that. My parents didn’t want me to come. They said you could… rot in loneliness.”

“Tsuko,” said Lala. “I’m sorry about your home. And… I’m sorry about your sister.” Lala wanted suddenly to clarify—she was sorry in the sympathetic sense, not in the sense of remorse. But she knew that wouldn’t go over well.

The muskrat looked up hopefully. All the animals looked at her, except the squirrels, who glanced at each other. She knew she had to say something else. Just being sorry wasn’t enough.

“I realize it would feel awkward to spend time with me, after I killed your loved one.” Lala looked around at all the faces, afraid she was about to say something stupid. “But… awkwardness is just a feeling, isn’t it? Life is full of difficult feelings. If we learn to get past them… or even enjoy them…” She lowered herself to her belly, even though the ground was moist. “…Life is more enjoyable.”

The warblers fluttered. The doe turned one eye to bear on her. It was the brown rabbit, Akiara, who spoke. “What if just looking at you causes us pain?” she asked earnestly.

This was a deep question. Lala took a breath. She looked at Gabu, hoping he could answer… and sure enough, he did.

“Well… pain is pain. And if we’re really your friends, we wouldn’t want you feel that way,” he offered. “So… I won’t be offended if any of you decide you want nothing to do with me.” He sat down beside Lala, tail down, ears drooping.

“But,” said Mei, stepping forward. “Their pack killed my mother. And they harrowed us, time and time again. My herd had to change our plans or run from them, over and over.” He looked at Gabu and rested his head against his furrier one for a moment. “But here I am, nonetheless.”

“Do you have any herd left?” asked the loud squirrel.

Mei shook his head, but hesitated. “Gabu and Lala are my herd,” he answered.

Heartwarming. Tender. Lala scanned the faces to see if any were touched. Interestingly, the big stoic stag seemed like he might be the most moved.
“But you’re safe, Mr. Grass-Eater,” said Taffet. “It’s easy for you to feel that way. What about the rest of us?”

The other squirrels nodded in timid agreement. The colorful rabbit slouched back.

“Safety,” said one of the warblers, bobbing.

“Security,” said the other.

Mei stepped back, chastened. A misstep, then. Lala sighed and tried to look docile. “Is there no one willing to give us a chance?”

The animals looked between themselves. “I will,” said the brown rabbit. Odd—she was the one who’d spoken of pain.

“With no guarantee of safety?” asked Kiput.

Gabu seemed unsure; he quavered his lower jaw before speaking. “I… I just don’t know if I can keep perfect track of everyone. And I do… I do want to be fair… but…”

Oh, for goddess’ sake. For better or worse, Lala interrupted. “Look. What he’s trying to say is, if we spare you just because you’re our friends, what does our friendship mean? Is there anything magical about it? Is it really friendship at all? Or are you just buying your safety? What if…” She rose to her paws and faced the squirrels. “What if someone came to you with a bundle full of seeds, or… acorns, or whatever you eat? What if they spread the contents out and said, ‘I’d like to buy your friendship. How many months will this get me? Three? Six?’ What would you say?”

Gabu and Mei were staring at her. Let them. They’d been too afraid to say it outright; if she could help by breaking down a wall, let her. There was a limit to coyness and understatement, to uncertainty. There came a time when terms had to be frankly discussed. Lala had reached that point in negotiations with Giro’s sister, Lolo, and had secured her own status as top-ranking female. She’d reached that point with all her previous mates, and obtained understandings. If she had to be the enemy here, she would accept that. Just let this pitiful circling of the issue end.

“Friendship is not a thing to be bought or sold,” said Coryn.

“Damn straight,” said Lala.

Then there was silence. Sometimes, sudden silence was a good thing.

Sometimes it wasn’t.

“All right, Mrs. Murderer. We can be friends, even if you might kill me in my sleep the day after tomorrow. But I still don’t think it’s fair the grass-eater gets a free pass.”

“I rather agree,” said Kiput. The old stag, Wilhelm, was nodding.

“Fair dispensation is a virtue,” said Coryn.

“Is there a reason Mei gets to remain safe, even on hunting days?” asked Bedelia. “Is it the fact he’s known you for so long?”

“Well, actually,” said Gabu. “I’ve only known him since last summer. And he’s known Lala less than a month.”

“Well, then,” the doe continued. “Is it possible we may enter your grace likewise, after a little

“Forget it,” said Ringa, the colorful rabbit. “If we can’t be safe and we can’t even know the rules, I’m out.”

“Me too,” said Fujiko. “These creatures scare me.”

“No peace,” sang one of the warblers.

“No bliss,” replied the other. Why were they even afraid? Lala couldn’t touch them if she wanted to—they could fly!

“I don’t know,” said the muskrat whelp. “My parents wouldn’t be happy…”

“This is a bitter deal, if you ask me,” said Wilhelm.

Well, Lala had tried. She had indeed fouled it up, it appeared. For the first time in… well, for the first time since the fall of the pack, Lala felt genuine remorse. She’d almost forgotten the feeling. Holding back tears, she looked toward Gabu, wondering if he was mad at her. She didn’t want him to be mad.

“I’m sorry,” said Gabu. “But there’s no way I could ever hunt Mei. He’s… he’s my dearest friend.”

The doe looked levelly at him, withholding her opinion.

“I am doubtful of this business,” said Coryn. And he turned to Lala. “You come to us, a walking tragedy visited upon our lands. Yet you ask for love.”

That was a bit much. Lala’s hocks flexed her up. “You see me… as a walking tragedy?”

Ringa nodded nervously. “We used to only have to fear badgers and hawks, plus the occasional fox. But you’re something else altogether.”

Coryn nodded. “You are great, clawed behemoths that even we deer must fear.”

“You have to understand how scared we are,” said Itsuko. “Most of the creatures wouldn’t even think of coming to talk to you.”

“We’re the brave ones,” agreed Taffet, looking around at her companions.

Nearby, Mei sighed. He walked into the midst of the welcoming committee, as Lala had come to think of it. Rather ironically, it seemed, as it was clear they weren’t welcome. The animals stepped and skittered back before him, as if he, a goat, might destroy them. “Will you at least spend time with me?” he asked.

For a moment, there was doubt all around. But then—“Sure,” said the brown rabbit.

“Why not?” said Taffet.

“I… I suppose,” said the muskrat.

“If we must,” said Kiput.

“Watch from above,” said one of the warblers.
“Live and learn,” said the other.

Lala stepped back several paces. “Should we wolves withdraw, then? Let Mei soften your hearts and keep our own company?”

“Perhaps it would be best,” said Coryn. Several of the others nodded.

“Stay,” said the brown rabbit. “I want to hear your stories.”

Lala hesitated. Now, this one. This one really was brave. “Maybe we’d better work up to that. We wouldn’t want to make your companions uncomfortable.”

The rabbit met her eyes. Those whiskers… they were compelling. They added force to the stare.

“We’ll see you around, Mr. and Mrs. Murderer,” said Taffet loudly. “For now, we’ll stick with Mr. Grass-Eater.”

Mei looked at Lala apologetically. She curtsied, brushing it off. This was nothing. Patience—that was all this would take. Lala had plenty of patience.

“I think that would be wise,” concurred Coryn.

“Well then…” Gabu sounded a little helpless. “I guess we’ll come back tomorrow? At mid-morning? To this spot?”

“To this place on the brook’s bank,” the stag agreed.

It was decided, then. So Lala withdrew, taking care to do so as gracefully as she knew how. Gabu turned unhappily beside her. As she left, Lala noticed the colorful rabbit slinking away, the timid female squirrel bounding down from the doe’s back to leave. Not everyone had the stomach even for a foreign goat, it seemed.

Yet as she walked with Gabu back to the flowery hill, she recalled Mei, on that very hill, telling her that friendship was a lot for a wolf to ask from a goat. Doubly so, to ask from creatures whose friends and loved ones they slaughtered on a regular basis. If these locals were reluctant to extend themselves in peace, Lala could comprehend that.

She said as much to Gabu. But it didn’t lift his disappointment.

“I hope Mei can convince them about us,” he said, loping along. “That we’re actually not such bad people.”

“Aren’t we, though?” asked Lala, letting just a little sweetness creep back in.

Gabu looked at her, wide-eyed. “Just because we’re hunters doesn’t mean—!”

“We’re not exactly good company for a lot like that,” Lala pointed out. “From our perspective? There’s nothing wrong with you, or with me. But from theirs?” She shrugged. “We’re monsters.”

Gabu moaned. “I don’t want to be a monster.”

Lala smiled. “Well, for what it’s worth… if you weren’t, you couldn’t be my mate.”

Gabu gulped. It seemed like she’d given him a little food for thought.

They went back to the lair on the hill and waited there for the third member of their pack—the one
with flat teeth and hooves, rather than fangs and paws—to come home and tell them how the terrain lay for tomorrow.

The 26th Evening

When Mei came back, he was exhausted. The sun was setting. Lala and Gabu had spent some time practicing their signals in the meadow, and playing on the hill, but they weren’t tired like Mei seemed to be. His ears were limp against his skull, his footsteps small. His breaths seemed to be mostly exhalations.

“Well?” said Gabu with his adorably hopeful face. “What are they like?”

The goat forced himself to smile. “They’re not bad. They all have their own ways… and their own tales, and their own ways of…” He yawned. “Looking at things. Oh, but Gabu. It’s been a long day. I’m so tired, and…” For once, it was Mei’s stomach that burbled.

“Mei!”

Mei laughed. “And hungry!” he admitted. “I haven’t eaten all day. I’m not used to that, like the two of you.” His eyes, too, were smiling. “I hope you’ll forgive me if I can’t tell all the stories at once. I’ll… need some time to rest.”

Lala was indeed hungry for these stories. But, she reminded herself. Patience. She nodded graciously.

“Of course!” said Gabu. “Would you like me to gather up some flowers for you?”

Mei beamed, but shook his head. “I’ll stick with shoots and clover for now. You’re very sweet—do you know that, Gabu?”

“If he doesn’t know it,” said Lala, “I do.”

Mei smiled at her, then set about hunting for edibles. She watched as his sides started heaving a bit less.

Lala imagined biting into those sides. She imagined tearing the strips of muscle from his flanks, enjoying them one by one. Her stomach still approved, but her deeper self recoiled. Good. Regularly fantasizing about eating her packmate was an exercise. If Lala found herself gradually more repulsed by the idea, that was for the best. It was one thing to resist temptation; it was another to vanquish it.

“Is it all right if I stay a while?” she asked. “I know you don’t want me sleeping in your den, but I was hoping to hear a story or two before I have to—”

“Stay,” said Mei. His cheeks were full of clover; his expression was a little desperate, a little pained. He chewed and swallowed. “You don’t have to go.”

“You don’t mean… are you giving me permission to sleep inside? With you and Gabu, tonight?”

Mei nodded and slitted his eyes. “Please. Stay. You’re one of us now.”

Lala gaped for a moment as she took this in. Then she nodded contentedly. “Thank you, Mei. That
means a lot to me.” She checked her emotions quickly and found that it was true. Well. How about
that.

Gabu set his head against her shoulder. Lala relaxed and laid her cheek against his nose. They sat
like that for a while as they watched the land and the coat of the grazing white goat grow dark.

So Lala had a home again, now.

It felt good.

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Chapter End Notes

I see Mei as being homosexual, but not especially libidinous. As his herd lacks a
culture of homosexuality, he’s effectively asexual for the most part. This is related to
his lack of desire for children.

Just to be clear—we humans and some great apes are the only critters that really smile,
at least to indicate happiness. But it makes our cartoon characters so much more
relatable!

EDITED TO ADD: Okay, maybe dogs smile too. Some people seem to think they
even learn it from us!
The 27th Day

Chapter Summary

* What price?
* What price friend?
* Mei, what are you saying?
* We're not saying no to this, are we?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 27th Morning

Mei’s dreams were a tangle of things he’d done during the day. There was a fatalism to the melange of scenes: his previous dream, about being tossed from one animal culture to another, had come almost true. The previous day, he’d been introduced to the rudiments of cervine, sciurine, and lapine lore; walked with deer through the darker parts of the wood; browsed the thicket and learned the sacred blossoms; peered into a warren’s tunnels and memorized its exits; helped warblers scour wet mounds of leaves, searching for caterpillars; tried and failed to scale a tree; told of his herd’s habits and history, and discussed too many topics to remember. None of it had stuck especially well, since he’d been hurried hither and thither too quickly. Mei should have been excited to be exposed to such a fascinating new selection of acquaintances, but he was afraid. He was afraid they wouldn’t accept his friends, and he wasn’t eager to develop this acquaintance alone.

“Mei,” implored Gabu, his wet nose prying the goat up from the earthen floor. Apparently he’d slipped from his moss bed. “Aren’t you going to get up?”

“Mmm,” uttered Mei.

“…Well, if you’re not ready to get up, that’s no problem. I’ll just go practice my signals with Lala for a while. We’ll stay close to the hill.”

“Mmmm,” Mei acknowledged. He knew he should have more words, but he was just too tired for them.

“It’s all right. You had an exhausting day yesterday.” The wolf’s long furry snout pressed against Mei’s face. “You can be the one who sleeps late for once.”

“Gabu,” said Mei. But the wolf was silhouetted by the cave’s entrance, already heading out.

Dreams. Had Coryn really told him two dozen generations of his ancestors’ names? Mei was muddling what he’d really done with what he’d dreamed.

If he were alone, this would be like a new beginning. Like a second childhood… more interesting and less comfortable than the first one. It would be an adventure. But Mei wasn’t acutely aware that he wasn’t alone.
He was a representative of wolves. He was their gentle face. He was a reflection of the gentle parts of their hearts.

Gabu’s heart was nearly wholly gentle, Mei realized. Lala’s… he didn’t know how big the gentle part of her heart was, or how genuine. But it existed.

He rolled over and found himself half off his bed of moss, half on.

He lay there. Could it be that he hadn’t yet gotten up? How could he still be in the cave? Weren’t goats supposed to wake quickly, in case of danger? Mei couldn’t remember a morning it had been so difficult to get moving.

But he dreamed again. This time it was a horrendous dream. Vivid and cruel and brief. Still, unlike the beautiful dreams from before, it brought him comfort. Not fear. Because now he knew. He understood what had to be done. And he cried. He let the old, dry moss soak up his tears, and he rolled over once more, and finally he stood.

The cave entrance was bright. It was morning. Mei walked out and found the sunlight alien… hard to get used to.

“…Hoofy okay?”

Mei looked down—comforted, if just for a moment. The wolves were nowhere to be seen, but he could hear them running, barking distantly to each other. They were behind the hill, but the black vole was right here. “I guess you can tell I don’t look happy this morning,” he observed.

“Saggy face. Where pep? Is sun day.”

Bepo had a cluster of grass seeds in its forepaws. As Mei watched, it nibbled, taking quick bites and looking up again. “I’m worried, Bepo.”

Bepo paused for two strange seconds and looked in the direction of the distant brook before asking: “Why worry?”

“Well.” Mei sat down, unsure if he could say the words aloud. If he couldn’t say them to Bepo, he realized, he couldn’t very well say them to Gabu. Yet it was hard. “I met the other animals yesterday. They showed me their homes… and told me some of their customs.”

“New friends! Bepo heard. Day of rustling.”

“Did we rustle the grass around here, Bepo?”

“All rustle! Creature all everywhere. Very excite.”

Mei nodded sadly. “Yes. It was exciting. With any luck, I’ll have a good number of exciting days ahead of me. Learning things… telling stories…”

“Make friends.” Bepo’s black eyes were earnest and seemed to bore into him.

“Yes. Making a lot of new friends. More than I could have… ever of dreamed of.”

The vole looked at him with intense scrutiny. “Then why not hoofy happy?!’ Well. Five words. That was the longest sentence Mei had ever heard Bepo speak.

“Because it comes at a price,” said Mei grimly. It felt cathartic, a little, to admit even that.
“What price?”

Mei looked at the fuzzy little creature, so honest and small... the creature who would be dead within a year, even if everything went perfectly. He didn’t want to cast a shadow over so short, so sweet a remaining life.

“What price friend?” repeated Bepo, cocking its head. And then, there, despite Mei’s wishes, was the shadow. A literal one, with a shape.

Mei looked up and found Gabu there, looking concerned. Lala was close behind.

“Oh—you’re up, Mei.” Gabu strode forward, rumpled from happy exercise, and sat down. “Oh! And good morning, Bepo!”

“Good morning, Bepo,” echoed Lala. “Good morning, Mei.” Her tail settled down after the rest of her.

“Good morning,” Bepo said impatiently.

“Did you sleep well?” asked Gabu.

Mei didn’t know how to answer that. His sleep had left him restless, yes, and he’d woken and drifted off again more than once. It had been one of the worst sleeps of his life. And yet...

“I’m doing well enough, Gabu. I think I’m rested up. My head is clear, anyway.”

Gabu tilted his head, looking not unlike Bepo. “Oh? Well, I’m glad to hear it.”

Mei took a breath and stood up. He ignored Bepo and ignored Lala, looking only at his closest friend. “I realized something last night.”

“Oh?”

Mei could keenly feel the shadow of the wolves, standing in the sun’s way. “You’re not going to like it.”

Gabu frowned. “What do you mean, Mei?”

Mei pointed his nose toward the brook, and the appointed meeting spot. “They don’t trust you. They don’t fully trust me either, even though they showed me a lot of things yesterday. I think they’re willing to be my friend. But not yours.”

Gabu sighed deeply. “I was afraid of that.” He was silent, and so was Lala, sitting behind him. “Well...” And he scratched his shoulder with a hind paw. “If only one of us can have other friends in our lives... I’m glad it’s you, Mei.” He glanced at Lala. “I’ve got a mate now, after all.”

Mei fixed Gabu’s eyes tightly. “You can have friends. I believe it. I’m convinced of it. We can make them trust us. If we gleam like the sun—” Which was hidden right now behind Gabu’s head. “—we can force them to see you can be trusted. And you do gleam. Both of you! In different ways, yes, but you both gleam so bright... and I can’t believe they won’t see that eventually. But—”

“But what, Mei?”

Mei took another difficult breath. “But we have to be fair. If we’re going to make them trust us—to amaze them with honesty, with brightness... we have to be fair. We have to be as fair as... as fair can possibly be. Nothing less will convince them.”
Gabu was afraid—Mei could see it in his eyes. Damn it, why did he have to be afraid? “Well, I agree, Mei. I’ll do anything I can to win the animals over. I’ll be as fair as fair can possibly be.”

Such unquestioning loyalty. Such inner brightness. Mei hated to break a devotion like that. “Are you sure, Gabu? Do you mean that, one hundred percent?”

Gabu rose to his haunches, bringing a paw to his chest. “I promise, Mei!”

“You’ll do anything you have to do?”

Gabu swallowed. “I’ll do absolutely anything, if it means we can have new friends together.”

“Then you have to hunt me,” said Mei.

The silence was the worst part. Gabu’s jaw hung slack. “…Hunt you? I don’t understand. Mei, what are you saying?”

“They complained that you weren’t being fair. They were right. Gabu, how can we ask any creature to accept the idea of being your friend two days out of every three, and your mortal quarry on the third? It’s preposterous. It’s never been done, and it boggles the mind just to think of it. The only way… the only way we can convince anyone such a thing can be done… is if I set the example. I see it so clearly now, Gabu. I need to be the first. You have to hunt me on hunting days, just like anyone else.”

Gabu’s eyes. His jowls. His whole self. He was a wolf in disbelief. “Mei…”

Lala’s eyes, on the other hand, were wild. They were terrifying. Now these were the eyes of a predator… but not just a predator of meat. A predator of ideas. “And… what if we should happen to catch you?” she asked in a soft tone that defied the look in her eyes.

“They complained that you weren’t being fair. They were right. Gabu, how can we ask any creature to accept the idea of being your friend two days out of every three, and your mortal quarry on the third? It’s preposterous. It’s never been done, and it boggles the mind just to think of it. The only way… the only way we can convince anyone such a thing can be done… is if I set the example. I see it so clearly now, Gabu. I need to be the first. You have to hunt me on hunting days, just like anyone else.”

“Then you eat me,” said Mei, resolute. “But don’t worry—I’ll stay far away. I’ll leave on hunting nights after the sun goes down and find someplace you’ll never find me, and wait it out. Or I’ll walk and walk all night long, if I ha—”

He broke off. Lala was laughing. She’d turned away, like someone politely turning their head to sneeze, and was laughing at the sky.

“Mei,” moaned Gabu. “Eat you?? You’d want me… to eat you?”

“Only if you catch me,” said Mei, redoubling his effort to stay strong. “Which you won’t.”

“But Mei—!”

“This is. The only way.” And it was. It was clear to him—his grogginess was gone now, and his fear too. “The animals will not be friends with their hunters… unless they know their hunters are incorruptibly fair. That they don’t play favorites. That you can’t buy their favor. You have. To hunt me. Every three days.”

“And… and kill you if I catch you?” Gabu swallowed the biggest gulp. “I… I don’t know if I could!”

“You have to promise me you will. Gabu.” He shifted his gaze. “Lala. Promise me. You’ll treat me like any other prey animal. Today, I’m your packmate. Tomorrow, I’m your food. Promise me.”

“So strange,” said Bepo. Mei had completely forgotten the vole was there.
“It is so strange,” said Lala, who’d finally managed to subdue her laughter. “I could swear. Never in the history of the world.”

Mei stayed resolute, staring into Gabu’s eyes. “This is what it will take, Gabu, if you want to share new friends with me in the long run. In the short term, we could make a few more friends like Bepo. That’s true. We could make them exceptions, and hunt the rest. We could make friends with everyone in this forest, maybe, and you could always go to the next forest to hunt. But eventually, all the animals would move from there to here… or everyone would start asking what’s so special about this forest that makes it better than all the others… and they would see that you aren’t entirely fair. And that’s the thing, Gabu. If you aren’t entirely fair… it doesn’t work. To be friends with the creature who’ll try to kill you tomorrow… that’s practically impossible. The only thing that will make it work in the long run is if they see that you’re bound by your word, and that you’re utterly fair. No exceptions. So it’s up to you. Do you want friends… or am I enough?”

Gabu cried. It didn’t come all at once, but it came. He spattered the earth with tears, one clump from each eye, and Bepo had to dodge or be spattered. “All right, Mei. I know you want to do this… and I know you’ll be careful…”

“I’ll be more than careful,” Mei promised. “I know it’s not just my life that’s at stake. It’s everyone’s happiness. Believe me, you won’t smell hide nor hair of me on hunting days.”

“I’ll do it, Mei.” Gabu hung his head like a wrecked thing. “I’ll hunt you, along with everyone else. I promise.”

“Never. In all the history of the world,” said Lala, shaking her head slowly. Mei stared at her. “Oh. I promise, too. I have no qualms putting you in my belly, goat, if that’s what I have to do.” She chuckled again, looking at the sun.

“Then it’s settled,” said Mei, hardly believing it himself. “We’ll tell the animals together.”

“Soooo strange,” said Bepo. “Big creature think.”

“That’s true,” Mei said to the vole. “We big creatures are a bit strange from time to time, aren’t we?” He smiled, with an effort. “But that’s just our nature.”

Gabu stood up strong on all fours, shoulders ready for action. “Mei… I don’t want to do this. You’ve got to be careful and not let either of us catch you. Do you understand? You’ve got to. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

You would have a family, Mei thought to himself. You would have a mate, and children, and abiding friends who would trust you implicitly. Who would doubt the word of a wolf who had the choice between breaking his word and killing his best friend, and chose the latter? But he didn’t say it. He tried to look strong, in turn, to reassure his friend. “I won’t let you catch me,” he repeated. “I promise.”

Gabu sniffled and nuzzled Mei on the cheek, nearly unbalancing him. “I would miss you so much!” he declared. “You understand that, don’t you?”

Mei nodded. He understood. He really did. But at the same time, he knew how necessary this step was. As Mei set out with his companions to meet the committee of animals, he realized that he had taken not a step, but a flying leap on the path to forever. He was running along the path.

He just hoped it wasn’t the last run he’d ever make. But if it was… then this was where the path had been meant to lead him all along.
If this was where his path ended, Mei knew, it was still worth it.

He would not regret following his path.

The 27th Day

“And so,” said Mei, trying to keep a smile on his face, “we agreed that I would no longer be safe. Gabu and Lala will hunt for me when they go hunting, just like anyone else. Because we know this won’t work unless it’s fair.”

There was a terrible pain in the silence that followed. The staring. The thought that even to go this far could still be fruitless, that the entire plan was hopeless to the root. The fear. But it was ended when the brown rabbit, Akiara, said, “Wow.”

Mei and many of the others looked at her.

She raised her head at an odd angle, one hindfoot forward and flat on the ground. “You really mean that? You’re not joshing us?”

Mei shook his head and felt his ears flap a little. “We’re not. We didn’t come easily to this decision.”

“It’s true,” moaned Gabu. Beside them, Lala nodded.

“That’s… effing amazing,” said the rabbit. “You’re gonna risk your life? Just for this?” She gestured, flicking her ears, to the small group at the brook’s edge. Mei noticed that the other rabbit, Ringa, hadn’t returned after leaving yesterday. Neither had the squirrel Fujiko. “Just to be friends with us?”

Mei gulped and nodded. “Well… not just with you, hopefully. We’re hoping to meet others, if we can.”

“And for that, you risk being torn to shreds by your best friend? Holy moley. That is devotion. That is bravery. Damn. We aren’t saying no to this, are we?” She looked about. “We’re saying yes, right?”

“Assuming it’s the truth…” said Wilhelm, the old stag.

“I must say,” muttered the male squirrel, Kiput. But he trailed off.

“Impressive,” said Bedelia, the doe.

“…That’s terribly sporting of you,” continued Kiput. “I… so, no safety? For anyone, ever?”

The wolves looked at each other. “I guess not,” said Gabu.

“But we would still cherish your friendship,” said Lala.

Another brief pause. “I, for one,” said Coryn, the mighty young stag, “am surprised. I did not think…”

“That they could win you over?” asked his sister.
He looked to her, and back. “Well, it remains to be seen. If the goat truly does fend for himself tomorrow, along with the rest of us… it will test your friendship. I have my doubts that it will not break.”

“It won’t break,” said Mei without hesitation.

“It won’t break,” repeated Gabu. “Not unless…”

“Not unless he catches me,” finished Mei. “And then I’ll be dead.”

“And in a way, it won’t break even then,” added Gabu pitifully.

The leaf warblers fluttered, at last, to Coryn’s back, removing themselves from the air for the first time. “Justice,” said Hatsu.

“Harmony,” said Haburo.

“But,” said Wilhelm, clearing his great throat. “Does it really make sense? Why should we trust you any more just ‘cause you’re willing to shed the blood of a friend?”

“Because,” said Mei, trying not to shudder. “It shows that they can adhere strictly to rules. Without making exceptions based on sentiment.”

“Does following one rule mean you’ll follow ‘em all?” countered the stag, shaking his antlers.

“I think we have to,” said Gabu.

“It feels better this way to me,” said Bedelia. “Though I don’t know why.”

“Mmm,” said Coryn. Mei saw Lala’s shoulders stiffen; she was watching him. They all watched him as he thought.

Eventually he gave a sharp nod. “I think I glimpse the shape of this,” he said. “Think of more than our woods and our realm.”

“Well? I’m thinking of it,” said Wilhelm.

“Imagine if other wolves, and yea, other meat-renders were to make the same offer. Be safe now; be hunted then. What if they had a favored few among those who ate no meat? ‘These few,’ they would say, ‘are safe; the rest of you must obey our timetable if you would have our friendship.’ Would this way of things be sound?”

They all contemplated. Mei admitted he hadn’t been thinking of it all on such a scale. This proposal just felt deeply right.

“There would be purchases of favor,” murmured the doe.

“And you can bet if there’s a reason some creatures got special treatment, others’d try and get in too,” said Wilhelm.

“And there would be lies,” continued Coryn, “and false professions of loyalty and affection. But this way…”
“We’re all in the same ditch,” said Kiput.

There was silence. Mei glimpsed Lala in his rear vision; she was smiling, her forebody thrust up tall. Saying nothing.

“I don’t know about the rest of my family,” said the muskrat, whose name Mei didn’t recall. “But I’m willing to give it a try.”

“Oh gosh,” said the loud squirrel, Taffet. “We’ll have so much fun, Mr. and Mrs. Murderer! You can lie down and I’ll scamper on your bellies, and we’ll see how fast you can dig a hole, and we’ll play Hide-and-Go-Seek…”

“One can’t just invite oneself to scamper on another person,” murmured Kiput to her.

“Oh, I’m up for being scampered on,” offered Lala.

“I think we have a deal,” said Bedelia. “Assuming, of course, that you keep to your word.”

“Well, for my part, I won’t be in the lair tomorrow,” said Mei, and the words triggered a fear in him he hadn’t fully internalized yet. “And I won’t be on the hill, or at Sneaky Bluff.”

“Oh, Mei!” Gabu realized. “We won’t get to spend all of tonight or tomorrow night together! We’ll only… we’ll only get to spend the whole night together once every three days.”

That brought pain to Mei’s heart. It was no small sacrifice he was making. “We’ll have to make it count,” he said, still trying to evince a smile.

Wilhelm nodded. “Tomorrow. Get through tomorrow, and keep your word, and then the next day… Well.”

“The next day, we will be comrades,” said Coryn. “All of us.”

“Or at least, we’ll try,” said Akiara.

Now Mei let himself cry. He found that once he let the tears out, the smile, too, came naturally. He didn’t have to work to keep it on his face.

Mei spent the day at Sneaky Bluff. Gabu followed him, not wanting to be anywhere but with Mei. Lala, saying very little, followed as well.

Mei had trouble keeping his food down. He was glad Gabu was there, but couldn’t think of anything to say to him. It’s just because one era is ending and another is beginning, he told himself. You’ll have plenty to talk about in the seasons to come. Nothing is really changing. Not really.

“Have you thought about where you’ll go?” asked Gabu eventually.

“Ah-ah!” said Lala. “Don’t tell us!”

Mei sighed. He hated the idea that there were things he couldn’t talk about with Gabu. “I’ve thought about it a bit. I think I’ll be all right.”
“You aren’t too predictable, are you?” Lala asked. “I know the two of you have a sort of bond. Tomorrow, it may work against you.”

And there was another idea Mei hated. “I’ll try not to be predictable.”

“I’ll try to…” said Gabu. But he trailed off. Presumably there was no promise he could make. If he didn’t try his honest best to hunt Mei—at least as diligently as he hunted for other animals to eat—then he wouldn’t be keeping his word.

“We’ll get through this, Gabu.” Mei walked over to his friend, but didn’t touch his pelt. He was awash in the strong scent of predator—he’d just been starting to enjoy it, to feel safe and happy around that smell, and now he was going to have to start fearing it again. “We will. It’s all right.”

“I don’t know, Mei. I’m scared.” The great, fuzzy tail dropped suddenly. “I’m just not sure this is worth it.”

“If you want to give it up after tomorrow, we can stop,” Mei found himself promising. “If this threatens to break our friendship, forget about it. We’ll go back to basics.”

“Back to basics,” Gabu echoed softly.

“But we have to try. This is for us, Gabu. It’s so that we can be part of a society together. A real pack, or herd, or something greater. I know you want that. I know you miss that.”

“I do, Mei. I do!”

“Well, this is the price. The price for being what you are. For being who you are.”

“For being who I am,” echoed Lala, holding her head high.

The two males looked at her. “Lala,” said Mei.

“Yes?”

“You’re a bit strange. You know that, don’t you?”

She produced a broad expression, neither a smile nor a frown. “I know.”

“And a bit scary,” Mei went on.

“Oh, I know.” Lala stretched her body, looking formidable.

“But you don’t want to catch me, do you? You don’t want to eat me?”

The she-wolf frowned, ears drooping. “Absolutely not. I will, if it comes to that, but…”

“I know.”

“I’d miss you.”

Mei nodded, closing his eyes.

He finished his grass in silence. The wolves watched him, either lying still or pacing softly. So far as Mei could tell, they had nothing better to do.
High overhead, birds watched the bluff, soaring, soaring.

The 27th Evening

Sunset was dark that night. Sunset was cruel.

“You won’t come back here tomorrow, right?” pressed Gabu. “Not for the whole day?”

“I won’t,” said Mei, shaking his head. Looking down the hill, not at the wolves.

“Not even once, Mei. Promise?”

Mei forced a smile onto his face and looked back. “Well, if I didn’t ever come back during your hunting days, you’d never have any reason to look back here... so maybe I could come back, for a little while.”

Lala started to pace closer, overhearing. “No!” said Gabu. “Mei, if we finish hunting for the day, or if we just want to take a break, we’ll come back here! You can’t risk it, even for a moment!”

Mei had realized that, deep down. “I know, Gabu. I was just joking.”

Gabu looked at him with big white eyes. His countenance changed rapidly; then he pushed his furry snout against Mei’s face and hugged him. “Meeii...”

Mei rose to his hind legs and let his front ones drape over Gabu’s. He sniffled, but said no words.

The sun went down. They went into the lair.

“I’ll stay with you a while,” Mei said. “But don’t worry. I’ll leave before midnight.”

“You should get a head start,” said Lala. “You don’t know everything we’re capable of. Remember, your scent is the first scent we’ll have.”

“We’ll have to track you,” said Gabu miserably. “You’ll have to find some way to hide your scent. Go to the brook or roll in something... and even then...”

“Even then, we’ll try to find where you come out,” said Lala. “Nothing personal—it’s just what we do. Take measures.”

Mei nodded. He’d been thinking of measures all day.

“Fool us,” said Lala. “Fool us hard.”

“Make sure not to leave hoofprints if you can help it,” said Gabu.

“Make us forget you ever existed,” said Lala.

Mei nodded. He lay on his bed of moss. It was starting to stink, he realized. It would add to his scent. Sighing, Mei dragged the moss, clump by clump, out of the cave.

Gabu stared. “Oh, Mei! Your bed!”
“It needs replacing anyway. But I can’t risk the odor.”

Lala hesitated outside. “Would you… like me to stay away from the cave, while you’re here? I can wait outside, if you’d prefer.”

Mei swallowed. “No. Let’s be here together. Inside, together, just for now.”

Lala smiled. “You can rest your head on me if you like.”

Without the moss he was used to, Mei found that tempting. “It’s… it’s not a trick, is it? It won’t make me easier to hunt?”

Lala grinned ruefully. “Not at all! Remember, Mei, until midnight, I’m one hundred percent on your side. I want you to live.”

Mei nodded, tears in his eyes.

“It’s not until the instant of midnight that I’ll start trying to trick you.”

He guffawed despite himself, through his sobs. Lala walked into the cave and lay down next to Gabu, and Mei turned around in place and slumped against both their huge, soft bodies.

They chatted softly for an hour or two about nothing in particular. Speculations about the animals they’d met. Observations of the weather. Little anecdotes of hunts gone by. Eventually, Gabu drifted off to sleep. Lala looked at his softly respirating mouth. She looked knowingly over his body at Mei.

Mei looked knowingly back at her. He could see her teeth. He knew how well they would rip his flesh, given a chance. He knew the appetite for goat still lived in Lala.

“Mei,” she whispered.

He forced himself not to look away. “Yes?”

She stared. “Don’t underestimate me.”

He swallowed, not knowing what to say. Was that a threat?

“Please,” she added.

His fear softened. It wasn’t a threat. She just didn’t want to lose him. He nodded somberly and didn’t dare let himself doze.

Lala smiled and relaxed against Gabu. She blinked twice, watched Mei for ten seconds more, then closed her eyes.

Five minutes later, she was asleep. Mei lingered for a while. One minute, another. Another. Just one more.

Then he got up and quietly left the cave.

The moon was almost full. Mei looked at it, thoughtfully, longingly. He looked back at the
beautiful creatures filling his home with their sleek, furry bulk.

He walked down the flowery hill and went away.

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Chapter End Notes

I’ve been waiting to reach this point for a long time.

Cervine, sciurine and lapine: Aren’t animal adjectives lovely? 'Timetable' is admittedly a stretch, but it seems more eternal than 'schedule', the alternative, and better in Coryn's mouth. Just assume the 'table' part has no independent meaning.

Lala is prone to fits of maniacal laughter at things other people don’t find funny. You’ll have to excuse her. It’s just one of her little oddities. It does make it difficult (albeit amusing) to visit an art museum with her.

EDITED ON 6/7/19 TO ADD:
In response to criticism, I’ve added a new chunk to the conversation on The 27th Day. It discusses in more detail the concept of Mei's proposal and whether it actually makes friendship with the wolves more appealing. It's kind of a deep philosophical quandary, really. Bedelia seems enlightened, but her position is basically that of Aesop's dog in the manger, guarding oxen from eating the wheat he himself can't enjoy. "If I can't have special safety, why should any friend of the wolves get it?" Coryn's deeper analysis may justify his sister's intuitive resistance.
Chapter Summary

* Since when, exactly, are we supposed to be fair to our quarry?
* Will you be able to live with yourself if you give up now?
* Do you think the rest of our months will be as interesting as this one?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**The 27th Night**

Gabu woke with a start. He was recoiling from something, but he didn’t know what. Something sharp and vicious and unexpected… but he didn’t know what it was. As usual, he could never remember his dreams.

“Psst. Gabu.”

Lala was on her feet, pacing back and forth. She’d just nosed him awake, he realized. With an effort, he opened his eyes fully. “Lala?”

“It’s past midnight, Gabu. And I was thinking… we’ve been hunting during the day so often. Wouldn’t it be a nice trick to go hunting at night? The animals wouldn’t expect it.”

Gabu blinked. That was an idea, but… well, he wondered what Mei would think. Mei always had valuable opinions on this sort of…

Where was Mei?

…Oh. Oh, right.

Gabu jerked up, shaking his head. “Lala! We can’t! He won’t be expecting—”

She glared sharply at him. “Gabu. Tshhh.”

She… didn’t even want to let him mention Mei? “I just think… it wouldn’t be fair. We always hunt in the daytime.”

“Fair? Since when, exactly, are we supposed to be fair to our quarry? They learn, Gabu. We have to adapt, don’t we?”

“But… we’re trying to win their trust…”

“Midnight to midnight. That’s what we agreed. Within that span, if any of them make the mistake of thinking they know when we’re afoot, they’ll pay for their confidence.”

But his mind couldn’t leave Mei. When had he left? How much of a head start had he taken? Gabu sniffed the den frantically, trying to gauge the weight of his scent.
Lala looked him in the eye. “We *owe* it to our quarry to try our best. Don’t we? Otherwise, aren’t we running the risk of playing favorites?”

Gabu sighed and sagged his shoulders. He hated it, but she was right. “Okay, Lala. We can go hunting now, if you want.”

She nodded. “We’ll take a nap at midday and get in another good long hunt before the day’s out.”

Gabu sighed. He had to follow her lead. If he were in charge, he’d never be able to keep things fair. “All right, Lala. I think you’d better lead the hunt today. I don’t think I can be trusted.”

Lala nodded slowly, taking this in. She walked to the entrance. Gabu followed her and peered, blinking, into the bright, mild night.

“Are you ready?” she asked. Her bearing was so poised… the motion of her neck and shoulders so perfectly smooth.

“I guess so,” he admitted.

“In that case, Gabu… I think I smell a goat. That’s as good a place to start as any, yes?”

Gabu swallowed a tremendous lump. She wouldn’t even acknowledge—! “…You’re in charge, Lala.”

“Then let’s go.” Just like that, she leapt into motion and sped down the hill.

Gabu did his best to keep a steady pace behind her. He, too, had the scent. As he followed it through meadow and heath, he repeated silently under his breath a steady prayer to the trail itself: *Please run out. Please run out. Please run out.*

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Some distance up the slope of Muri Muri Mountain, it ran out. The freshness of the chilly mountain breeze blew the scent away and mingled it with a dozen others from the far north or beyond. Gabu sniffed over and over, making sure he wasn’t just imagining it. Then—

“Lala! I… I’ve lost the scent!”

“Have you? Blast. Me, too. I think I can detect a rodent, though. Woodchuck? No, at this height, probably marmot.”

Gabu wagged his tail. The huge weight on his back was sloughing away like caked up snow in the spring. “Marmot, huh? Let’s follow!”

“Are you sure you want to give up?” asked Lala. “A goat is so much bigger than a marmot… it could feed us both until next hunt’s day.”

Gabu struggled not to beg. “…Yes, Lala. I think we’ve lost the scent, and… w-we may as well take what we can get.”

“Very well.” She turned to a new path, leading downward, and followed it, switching her tail. “It’s a pity. I haven’t had goat meat in so long! I could really go for some.”
“...Lala, please!”

She looked back for a sharp instant. Nodding, she fell silent and padded downward. She didn’t need words to lead the hunt.

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**The 28th Morning**

They’d been up and down the low paths abutting the mountain, sniffing and rooting for hours. They’d snagged the first marmot they’d found, then located a tunnel system and gone about collapsing it strategically. Gabu hadn’t liked it, but anything that kept them off Mei’s scent was fine with him. The marmots had just retreated further down their tunnels, and for all their tries, they’d only managed to catch one more—an elderly male who had trouble wiggling into a newly formed hole after a collapse. Then they’d gone down to the meadows to stalk rabbits. Two marmots and a rabbit made a decent haul, so they called it a night just as dawn broke.

Lala hadn’t said Mei’s name all night. She was pretending they didn’t know him, that their friendship didn’t exist. As if it was all a big game. And as Gabu reflected, he realized her approach might actually be for the best.

“Not bad,” remarked Lala as they dug a hole in the hillside to stash their haul. “It’s no deer, but it’s a start.”

“Do you want to go searching for deer after we sleep?” asked Gabu.

Lala sniffed the air. “Still got the scent of that goat in my sinuses. Want to give that trail another try?”

“No!” cried Gabu a little too abruptly.

Lala gave him a queer look. “Deer it is, then. We can stalk them at dusk, then switch back to rabbits after dark.”

Gabu nodded. He shoved the meager kills into the hole and started nosing the dirt back over. Was he being dishonest if he refused to hunt Mei? He didn’t want to deceive the animals, but the thought of following Mei’s trail again made his stomach turn. It was bad enough there was the chance of running across him at any time! Surely… surely it was okay if, this first day at least, they chose to follow some other prey. They’d already tracked him once.

Gabu wondered what was going through Lala’s head. Was she as scared as Gabu? He could tell she wasn’t. If they ran into Mei and were forced to eat him, would she even care? She almost seemed excited about the possibility.

They patted down the hole and retired to the lair. Sleeping during the day seemed strange to Gabu, even though he knew it was natural. Leaving home had upset all his routines, but in a good way. Now… he was even more stressed about hunting than he’d ever been. At Baku Baku, to hunt poorly had meant the disapproval of his packmates. Now, to hunt too well meant the death of the person he cared most about in all the world. Gabu had real flesh in the game now. There were hazards on both sides, and he had to walk the middle line. Would he ever get used to this?

Lala lay beside him and smiled. There was depth in her smile. She was having real thoughts, deep
in her guts—he could tell. Gabu realized that Lala was scared of Mei dying, but was also excited about it. She was excited about her own fears. Gabu loved that his mate could play host to such a strange bouquet of emotions—he could never feel the same way. He loved her, but… she made him afraid. Life would never really be simple while Lala was around.

“Good night, Gabu. Or rather, good day.”

Gabu yawned, trying to let out his remaining willies. “Good day, Lala. Sleep well.”

She eyed him as they drifted off. Who but Lala herself could guess what she was thinking about him?

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**The 28th Evening**

The deer were wary. Somehow, Lala wasn’t surprised. They were expecting company tonight. That was what happened when you let your quarry know you were going to be hunting them in advance. *How do you do, pleased to meet you, I’ll be trying to pull out your jugular tomorrow night. Looking forward to it.* Strange to think anyone would stick around with that kind of forewarning, really.

Lala had done her best by shaking up the schedule. If they were going to introduce themselves to the leaders of the deer—Lala assumed Coryn and his followers were their leaders, based on their manner and by implication—at least they could go after them by night rather than day for a change. The strategy had worked, a little, in the foothills, but here in the woods, the deer were on the lookout. Lala presumed they’d had word that the wolves had spent the pre-dawn hunting and the day asleep, and were ready for them now. Rats. Well, that was one interesting implication of a culture in which everyone was connected. When danger came, one way or another the word would spread, and no one need be taken off guard.

That was ominous. Starvation was a threat. But there was still a long road ahead, and Lala wasn’t panicking yet. She was still far more interested in the ramifications of the system she was in than she was worried about being on the losing side of that system. Lala knew herself well; she could survive for a long time on insights and ideas.

The doe they were tracking suddenly came to life, thrashing down branches and bursting through a tree wall. Gabu glanced over, troubled. Lala sprinted ahead, hoping to catch the prey without a plan. Gabu followed, but by the time they’d found her breakthrough point and pushed through, she was nowhere in sight. The scent was fading; the quarry was lost.

The texture of these woods was just too forgiving. Too many paths, *just* enough trees to prevent direct pursuit. It was like pulling thorns, trying to trap deer in forest like this. But no. Lala knew better than to blame the terrain. It was the warning that was doing it. The deer knew they were coming, and it was just about that simple.

Lala braked to a halt, letting her heart rest a bit. Gabu scrambled to stop and clumsily plummeted forward a few too many paces. Well. His mind was elsewhere. That was the other factor at play here, of course.

“I think the deer are prepared for us,” Lala remarked.
“Yeah…” Gabu acknowledged sadly.

“Shall we switch to rabbits?” She tried to keep her voice pert.

“I guess,” he agreed.

They sneaked toward Tall Meadow. Lala pointed out three twigs with brisk flicks of her tail, and Gabu got the idea to avoid them. The rabbits weren’t in their usual places, though. This was frustrating, Lala had to admit. They could all be underground, but she wasn’t nearly as confident flushing burrows on open ground as in the foothills, where there were fewer options for where to dig. They could try exhuming ground at random, but that didn’t seem likely to bear fruit. Lala stood in the tall grass, inhaling the westerly breeze, and contemplated the problem.

“I think we should give in, Lala,” said Gabu. “I’m ready to stop hunting.”

Spite surged through Lala: reflexive whenever a hunting partner demonstrated cowardice. But she caught herself in time to show her lower gum only for an instant. Gabu might be a coward in some ways, yes. But he had integrity: she hadn’t forgotten how he’d kept that screaming rabbit on his tail for hours and hours. And these were special circumstances. Of course Gabu would be cowardly on a night like tonight. That was Lala’s purpose here—her job was to edge him back on track.

“Nonsense. Are you satisfied with nothing? We’ve had nothing tonight, not even a squirrel. Have some pride.”

“I just… we already have some meat from this morning, and I don’t think…”

“This is a new hunt, Gabu. We haven’t gone home empty-mouthed on any hunt so far, and I don’t intend to start tonight. It’s a damned full moon, for pride’s sake. Put your nose up.”

He did, but his heart clearly wasn’t in it. At least he didn’t argue. Lala led him to the meadow’s edge, then to the heath, where her instincts were taking her. Gabu noticed a recently browsed shrub and pointed it out. Good—he was being a good sport. Lala noticed every twitch, every shudder or shake he gave, and knew exactly what was in his mind. She wondered how many more twitches he was keeping hidden. Lala realized she wasn’t even equipped to judge his level of cowardice—this situation was just too unique.

“Mouse,” he whispered, creeping forward.

Was that really what they’d come to? Were they hunting mice? Normally, Lala would veto the idea of wasting energy on such a piddly chance. She’d rarely resorted to hunting mice even on her trek around the mountain, when she’d been adapting to solitary life. But if Gabu could catch this mouse… Lala could use that as an excuse to stop. It would be something. The mouse had symbolic value, in addition to the tiny morsel of nourishment it would provide.

So she prowled alongside, ready to strike. But Gabu’s trail ran dry. He looked around sadly and seemed utterly lost.

“Any more ideas?” asked Lala.

Gabu looked at the moonlit ground. He looked at the mountain in the distance; he looked at Lala. “I really don’t want to keep hunting,” he said. “Please, Lala… can we go home?”

She was the acolyte here. Lala was leading tonight’s hunt, but Gabu was the real leader in all this; Lala was just playing his game. She had to remember that. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?” she asked. “Will you be able to live with yourself if you give up now?”
Gabu’s sigh was heartbreaking. “Yes. I will.”

She smiled faintly. “Do you think you’ve put in a fair effort?”

He sank to his haunches. “I admit I wasn’t at my best tonight. But we got unlucky, and it’s okay to fail sometimes. Can we go home? I’m just… I’m really ready to go home.” He kept glancing toward the mountain.

“All right, Gabu. We’ll call it a night.” Lala flipped her tail and strode for the flowery hills. “So much for our perfect record!”

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” He followed behind at an irregular pace. Lala could hear by his footsteps how tired he was.

They reached the hill and loped around to their buried haul from that morning. In silence, they dug up one of the marmots. Lala dug in and grabbed the best goods in a single bite. She tossed organs and caught them in her mouth, then slurped them down with a certain satisfaction. Gabu watched helplessly.

“That’s my cut! The rest is yours. I’ll see you in three days, lover-mine.”

“Lala! You’re going?”

He hadn’t realized? “That’s what I do when the hunt goes badly. This way we can both eat.”

“But Lala… the animals… they’ll be waiting to meet you. We’ve… we’ve finally earned it.”

She considered things. He did have a point. “Do you think it’s best if I stick around?”

He looked at her without resolve. “Well… I was hoping you would. I don’t mind going a bit hungry.”

“And you’d like me to go hungry with you?”

He seemed afraid to speak, tail curled back and head low. “Well… if that’s not too much to ask…”

Lala could hardly let him outdo her in the starvation department, could she? She shrugged. “You’re the boss!” She turned about to slink down the hill. “I’ll find someplace to sleep and see you in the morning.”

His eyes jerked open. “You…” He gestured his head toward the lair. “You aren’t staying here?”

Lala winked. “Not tonight. Tonight, I thought you might like to be alone.”

Gabu stared, then exhaled heavily. “That’s thoughtful of you. All right, Lala. Good night.”

“Good night, Gabu.” She went toward the woods, but looked back. “I guess tomorrow, a new age begins?”

“Well, I suppose you’re right! Tomorrow, it’s a whole new age.”

Lala chuckled as she paced off, swishing her tail. An age of friendship between wolves and plant-eaters! If this actually worked, and she was part of bringing it about… well, to say the least, she’d be able to face old age with pride. This was the sort of thing Lala had always dreamed of. Just not this specific dream.
The 28th Night

Gabu watched Lala walk away toward the woods. He ate a few bites of the marmot, stopping when there wasn’t much left. He dropped the rest back into the hole with a vague sense of shame, covered it, and walked slowly up to the lair.

He didn’t stop at the entrance, though. Without even thinking about it, Gabu paced around and walked to the very peak of the hill. Why had he done that? He rarely did, but for some reason it felt right tonight. Oh, of course. Tonight was a full moon. Just like the night when he’d regained his memories. Just like the night he’d been reunited with Mei.

This was a sacred place, wasn’t it? The top of the flowery hill… it was for this special time alone. A place for watching the full moon rise. But it was already high in the sky… and when it reached the exact zenith of the sky, he knew, it would be midnight.

Did he dare howl? Would that profane this special place? Or would it just show it proper respect?

Gabu howled without deciding to. It wasn’t a sad howl, or a mournful one, or a happy one. But it was deeply emotional, just the same. Gabu just didn’t know what emotion it was.

He lay down on the soft grass and let the wind billow his fur. It was sometimes chilly and sometimes gentle tonight, always from the west. He let his mind drift. He’d spent the day sleeping; he’d be awake a while longer. Maybe for once, he’d be awake when he started dreaming. Maybe this way, for once, he could remember his dreams.

Gabu looked up. The moon was past its zenith. He settled down again, his chin against the ground. Grass rustled. Hoofsteps crept close. Softness nestled against his body. Gabu didn’t look up, but he started to cry.

“It’s nice to see you, Gabu.”

Gabu closed his eyes, so he wouldn’t see anything. “It’s nice to see you too, Mei,” he said through his tears.

There was silence. Gabu could feel the heartbeat of the creature who’d walked up to lie beside him.

“Were you worried for me?” asked Mei.

“Mei, I was so worried for you! I couldn’t concentrate… I kept wondering… what if we come across his trail? What if we turn a corner, and there he is, heading home?”

Mei started to groom Gabu’s coat. “I wouldn’t do that to you, Gabu. I care about you too much to let you kill me.”

Gabu sniffled uncontrollably. That was too much. It was just too much.

“I suppose you came up here to watch the full moon, didn’t you?”
Gabu looked at Mei. He was just like he’d been when he left, just a little dirtier, a little rumpled. But with the same pleasant smile. Not changed—not really. “I did! Just think of it, Mei—it’s been a full month since we started living here together.”

“Twenty-eight days,” said Mei.

“And twenty-eight nights,” added Gabu.

“It feels like so much more than a month,” observed Mei, looking at the moon. “When you’re with a herd, most months just fly by.”

“Do you know what? You’re exactly right. That’s just how I feel.”

“I think this has been one of the busiest months of my life.”

Gabu’s ears went up in excitement. “You can say that again! Who knew that living alone in paradise…”

“…would be so exciting?” finished Mei. “Certainly not me. But I guess this is what they mean by ‘happily ever after’.”

“What do you mean, Mei?”

“Oh, sometimes when you hear a story about goats, or other creatures who lived long ago… if the story has a happy ending, they end it by saying, ‘And they lived happily ever after.’”

Gabu chuckled. “Oh. I see! And you think that’s what we’re doing?”

“It just seems a lot more complicated than three simple words.”

That was definitely true. “I guess life is never as simple as that. What are you doing, Mei?”

Mei was rubbing the top of his head into Gabu’s side, somehow managing not to pierce him with his horns. But he stopped. “Oh, nothing really. Just showing how I feel about you.”

Gabu laughed out loud. “Do you think the rest of our months together will be as interesting as this one, Mei?”

“Well, that’s hard to say. You could find me and kill me on your next hunt, and I guess for me at least, that would be that. But I certainly expect great things ahead.”

Gabu dipped his head and tried rubbing it against Mei’s flank. But the gesture went silly fast, mussing his fur and making Mei exclaim in surprise. Still, they both laughed about it.

“I don’t know if I could ever really eat you, Mei,” Gabu confessed. “Even if you wanted me to. Even if all the animals in the world wanted me to, and it was the only thing I could do to… I don’t know, to bring back the sun and keep everyone from freezing to death. I still don’t know if I could do it.”

Mei grew serious. “Gabu. If all the animals in the world depended on you eating me, I wouldn’t want you to hesitate. You know it’s important that this arrangement be fair. Maybe you should… start bringing yourself around to the idea.”

“Oh, Mei!”

“Well, all right, Gabu. We won’t discuss that for now. It’s good to be with you.”
“It’s the best thing in the world. That’s what I think.”

Mei laughed. “And the full moon shining down.”

Gabu stared at the moon. Some said the moon was where Leto lived, and that it was the seat from which she watched the world. Others said it was a she-wolf in its own right, trapped there thousands of thousands of years ago, waiting for her chance to return to the world. For his part, Gabu suspected the moon was something more complex and mysterious than anyone knew… but if it really was a wolf, he wondered what she thought when she looked down and saw a wolf and a goat sitting together on the hilltop, watching her, as fast as friends could be.

“Mei?” said Gabu. “We’ll always be together, right?”

There was a short pause, and Gabu imagined that Mei was thinking of all the contingencies and what-ifs and possibilities, not least of which was the chance of Gabu eating him on a hunt one of these days, now that he was fair game. But in the end, Mei set it all aside as unimportant.

“Yes, Gabu. We’ll always be together.”

END OF PART II

Chapter End Notes

Of course I've been keeping track of the moon's phase. I've been referring to it occasionally for the whole story, in fact. That's a big part of why each part of the novel has fourteen chapters. I originally planned to have the three parts each be nine or ten days, and end the novel at the end of one month... but then I realized there was more story to tell after that tumultuous month was complete.

An actual lunar month (synodic, not sidereal) is about 29.5 days, not 28... but this way it works out better in that each quarter gets seven days, and the novel gets to be 42 chapters long. Consider that it's hard to tell when the moon is exactly full, and call it artistic license.

The final book in the original children's book series is called (in English translation) "One Full Moon Night." I'd like to read it, but I haven't found a copy! I snagged a cheap copy of "One Sunny Day," the second book in the series, and it was... surprisingly sloppy-looking in terms of art. The background colors are highly variable. The goat and wolf aren't named (yet), the wolf drops his 'g's from words ending in 'ing', both characters scold themselves by hitting themselves in the face, and there's a silly little fakeout near the end. Did the wolf eat the goat as they took shelter together from a shower? No... the goat just slipped and hurt himself, and the wolf carries him back down the hill. Of course.
Thanks to everyone who's reviewed so far, and especial thanks to the providers of fan art, and to Jamango Jackal. I hope you all stay tuned for the third and final part!
The 29th Day

Chapter Summary

* Hoofy life complex. Why so complex?
* What could wolves teach us? What could we possibly learn from wolves?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART III: The Impossible Society

“When a goat likes a book, the whole book is gone, and the meaning has to go find an author again.”

— William Stafford
The Trouble With Reading

The 29th Dawn

Definitely something. Something rushing. Or roaring.

She could swear she heard something. Even as she lay flat, her ears swiveled carefully around. Her belly, her chest were flush with the earth, and it seemed almost like others, somewhere in the warren, were already on the move. But the sun wasn’t up yet. And when she finally forced herself to stand, Akiara couldn’t hear anything but field crickets in the distance.

Was her belly telling her things her ears couldn’t pick up on? Or was the act of lying down, her prostrate form, telling her something she couldn’t keep with her when she stood up? Was anyone really up already, or was she just sensing the promise, the immense potential of the day?

She already had the sense she could feel things that others couldn’t. Things like when it was time to dig more escape routes. Like when it was time to move en masse, and when it would be futile. Her instincts turned out to be wrong half the time, true, but she couldn’t let them go. She had to act on what she felt. One area where she did better than average was knowing when the rain would be brief and when it would persist for hours; when the winds would change; when the clouds would fill the sky. Akiara was no future-teller. Her ears and nose weren’t any better than the next rabbit’s. She just had different ways of putting her perceptions together, of knowing what they meant. And occasionally she turned out to be right; occasionally she was able to say I told you so.
These strangers, this oddball trio who’d opened their lives to the people of the Forest and to the rabbits of Tall Meadow. Akiara knew something about them. They were no passing shower. They were a rain that would endure and endure. She could feel it. But what she wondered especially, as she climbed to the surface and skipped along the pre-dawn grassland, was whether that rain would be the kind that nourishes or the kind that destroys.

She wasn’t sure she’d be going back home for breakfast. If she was the first one up in the morning, no one could keep her from going down to the brook. And she’d have plenty of time to plan for what might come.

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The 29th Morning

This was different. Two mornings ago, Mei had flopped and turned, unable to fully wake up; today, he felt as though he’d slept like a stone settling in a river. When he rose, he rose with no weights upon him. Slumber was something he still felt all around, as if the world were sleeping… but none of it seemed to have stuck to him. Mei had slept on the smooth earth, with no moss bed to comfort him, yet he couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept so well.

Gabu snoozed audibly. Mei didn’t wake him. He went outside, munched the first flower he saw, and wondered whether Bepo was around.

Apparently not. On impulse, though, Mei went to the general area where he’d most often encountered the rodent and looked around. “Bepo?” he called. “Are you there?”

No response. Shrugging, he started in on another flower. Mei didn’t like stripping the hill of too many flowers, but after yesterday, he felt like he’d earned this.

The grass rustled and suddenly his friend stood there before him. Its little dark eyes were aimed straight up, head stock still as though it could anchor a tree. “Hoofy.”

Mei took a breath and gave a tiny nod. “Bepo. Hello.”

“Hello hoofy. All right? All pieces? No hurt?”

“All pieces,” Mei reassured. “And not hurt. Though I can't claim not to have been afraid yesterday.”

Bepo’s stillness suddenly gave way to a mad circular dash, but this was over in an instant. “Shaggy chase!! Shaggy still friend?”

Mei nodded, surprised by the pressure he suddenly felt behind his eyes. “We're still very much friends.”

“But chase?!”

“You were there when we agreed to it. We decided it's for the best this way.”

“But really hunt!” squealed Bepo.

“He doesn't want to kill me. And I won't give him the chance.”

“Hoofy life complex. Why so complex?”
Mei had to think about that. Was his life complex? In some ways, it was simple—he went to the same places every day, talked with the same people, slept in the same cave. But compared to life with the herd... it was true, his current life was devilishly complex. In the herd, he'd been surrounded by gossip and chitchat; it had given him the impression of being surrounded by activity. Now, he was the source of most of his own activity. He was no longer wading through a lake of life; now he was the lake.

“I guess it's because I'm trying something that, so far as I know, has never been done.”

“All creature friend?”

Mei nodded deeply. “Wouldn't it be nice if we could all be friends with each other?”

Bepo blinked. “Friend with bugs? Friend with worms?”

This made Mei laugh. “I don't know about that. But I will say this—if they asked me to be friends, I would certainly consider it!”

Bepo stood amid tall blades of grass, in thought. “If all friends... then not all creatures.”

“Come again?”


Mei frowned. “I'm not sure I follow. Are you saying it’s because we have enemies that we have differences in form?”

“If not enemy friend? Enemy something.” Bepo nipped off a blade of grass in its teeth. “If all together? All same.”

Mei tried to grasp what the vole was getting at. But pawsteps through the grass drew his attention, and he looked up at the approaching shadow.

“Good morning, packmate!”

Lala was smiling. Her head was held high, as was her whole body—she seemed to have a lot of pep today. Mei wondered if it was for him.

“Lala.”

“Congratulations on avoiding those scary wolves yesterday. Up in the mountains, huh?”

Mei had indeed spent the best part of yesterday in the mountains, some of it uncomfortably high. He wasn't pleased to hear Lala call him out on it. “I take it you followed my trail.”

“So you didn't smell us? I guess we never got close,” she replied. “Ah-ah—don't tell me your secrets, if you have any! That is to say, don't tell me anything I could use against you. If there's anything you did yesterday that it wouldn't help me to learn... well, I'd love to hear it.” She settled down into the grass. “Oh—hello, Bepo!”

“Hello other shaggy.”

Mei considered what to say. It was hard to know what tidbits someone like Lala might be able to twist into useful information. “Well... I asked myself where I could go that it would be downright folly for you to follow me. I didn't want to just play a guessing game. I wanted to play a game I
could be sure I would win.”

Lala nodded. “Well reasoned. And you thought of Muri Muri.”

“It’s just that goats are more sure-footed than wolves in the mountains. But don’t expect me to go there every time.” In fact, Mei was planning to go to Muri Muri every hunting day, at least until he had a better idea. But he intended to change the paths he took, and possibly to cover them with snowdrifts. He’d considered doing that last night, but decided it would be safer just to leap from one rock to another until he’d made enough distance to have foiled any pursuers. Causing miniature avalanches could potentially reveal his path more blatantly than any hoofprints he might leave.

“Of course not.” Lala winked. “You have plans, I expect.”

Mei nodded. *And I may break them,* he thought of saying, but chose to settle into the grass instead. Lala would understand there were words unsaid.

“In any case. It’s good to see you again, packmate.”

Mei nodded again. He couldn’t bring himself to say ‘You too.’

“Silver woof,” said Bepo sternly.

Lala looked down, ears pulling back in amusement. “Yes?”

“Will *really* eat hoofy? Not is friend?”

Lala stood in silence for a moment. “I’d like to think he’s my friend.” She glanced briefly at Mei. “But… I would eat him, if it came to that. It’s my responsibility.”

“Responsiblitrity?”

“It’s difficult to explain, Bepo,” said Mei.

“But maybe not taste good?” protested the rodent.

Lala’s palate showed as she contemplated, a drop of saliva falling. “Oh, believe me. He would taste good. I know.”

Such a far cry from Gabu, who would have had Mei believe he’d never eaten a goat in his life. Yet Mei was getting used to being thought of as edible, under certain circumstances. Still, he decided to change the subject. “Are you looking forward to seeing the woodland creatures again?”

Lala’s paws flexed, claws digging into the earth. “Oh, absolutely!”

“Gabu mentioned your hunt didn’t go well. Will you… be all right?”

Lala drew a deep breath. “I’ll be tested, these next few days. But I intend to pass the test.”

“You could go off on your own again, you know. You don’t have to stay for the meet-up.”

She sat back abruptly. “But Mei! Isn’t this our moment of triumph?”

It was true. “Yes, but if you’re worried about getting hungry…”

Lala smirked. “I appreciate your concern! But I can live on pride for a while.”
“Pride eat?” asked Bepo. “Are sure?”

Lala beamed, shoulders raised. “I’m sure. I’ve done it before!”

Mei breakfasted quietly on stiltgrass and watched her dubiously. He supposed he would have to be satisfied with that.

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**The 29th Day**

Staying out of the way and sequestered all morning… hadn’t felt right. She’d almost talked herself into it, but then Akiara had imagined descending on the meeting from a strange place of loneliness, and she’d realized she had to go back. But she didn’t go all the way back to the warren. She lingered at the edge of the meadow, waiting to see who would come. Not her parents, she hoped, and not Pryce, the father of her first litter, or Hisao, the busybody always trying to keep everyone corralled. Not that Akiara didn’t give unwanted advice—she just agreed with her own, and found his repugnant more often than not. Plus, Hisao had authority, thanks to being respected. Akiara was young—only thrice a mother—and had very little authority, thanks in large part to her advice turning out bad so often. For her part, she had faith that rightness would come with time—she just had to learn how her instincts fit together—which to heed and which to downplay. She had incipient wisdom in her and fully expected to become a venerated, wise old doe someday… if only she could live that long.

Sure enough, they came. Her first visitor was her sister’s friend, Jakka. It started out with good morning and howdee do, does it look like rain, do you think? There was a bit of a drought on, with only three or four meager rainfalls the whole spring, but it was bound to break soon, didn’t she think? The meadowgrass was getting brittle, but was still certainly edible, as were the dandelions starting to come up. Jakka liked dandelions before they started to flower, didn’t Akiara? It was a full three minutes into their chatter before she asked whether Akiara was really going to do it—was she really going to spend the day with long-jawed, neck-snapping, potentially life-ending wolves?

“You bet I am,” said Akiara. “And I’m going to hear their stories.”

“Well, don’t blame me if you come back dead,” said Jakka. Half-joking. She showed no interest in the stories at stake, and not much in the result of the experiment it all represented. “You know I’m going to let the others know. I won’t seek them out, mind, but if they ask me, I’ll tell them where you are, and you know they’ll ask.”

Akiara knew. Her colony had no shortage of meddlers. She should know—she was one herself. “Fine. But if my parents try to come and bring me back, please stop them, okay? I won’t go back. It’ll just be a useless fracas.”

Jakka sighed. “I can’t stop another rabbit from doing what they want to do. I’ll tell them you said so, though. We’ll see.”

She only had to make it to midmorning. She could slip away soon. “Sure, Jakka. Take care.”

Jakka went back under, and sure enough, two of Akiara’s siblings appeared not twenty minutes later and bounded over. They launched into an argument that was more passion than reason, more self-directed moaning than any concern for their sister’s sake. They were amazed that anyone could seek out predators, for any reason, ever. They were just a fount of melodrama today.
“Don’t you see?” she demanded, knowing very well they didn’t. “We could learn so much! We could gain so much!”

“I don’t know what you’re hoping to gain,” said her sister softly, fearfully. “What could wolves teach us? What could we possibly learn from wolves?”

“Anything they tell you, check it twice before you obey,” said her brother. “It’s like as not a trick. They will trick you—you know that, don’t you?”

She dismissed them and told them she’d report everything when she came back—but not just to them. Her true friends would hear first. Pity those weren’t the folks coming to see her now. The next visitor on the horizon was—oh, lordy, him? Matsuo’s bulky charcoal form cast about, staring one way and another before spotting her and leaping with surprising rapidness her way. She saw his skin refold with each bound, and could practically hear the recriminations already. She wanted to leave, but just as badly wanted her leaving to be on a good note. So she stuck around to tell this guy off.

“Akiara! You half-tunneled betrayer, is it true? Are you headed down to another profane tryst by the water?”

Already she wanted to kick him in the face. “Do you think it’s any of your business?”

“My business?? My business? Remind me, wanton kit—which of us lost a tender mate to those despicable maws? Have you ever known sorrow? True sorrow? You have no right to traffic with wolves!!”

“I haven’t known your sorrow, no. But that doesn’t give you the right to tell me where to spend my days.” Was she really going to go for the punch, here? Well, did she want to end on a good note or not? “Just because you chickened out on your stupid suicide-by-wolf doesn’t mean you own the blasted things.”

He gaped. Good. “Have you no shame? No dignity? How dare you?” demanded Matsuo, face tensing, scuffing the earth at the meadow’s edge.

“It’s thanks to you I’m doing this,” she told him quietly. “If those wolves had gobbled you up, I wouldn’t go. But they held back. They held back because it was their rule, and in my way of thinking that entitles them to a chance. So if you want to blame anyone for my going, blame your own fickle liver!”

His ears sank; he crouched as if to spring. “They slew Tsubaki!” he yelled.

“Is there a soul in the warren who doesn’t know? Get over yourself, you great oaf, or kill yourself properly, but do it on your own time. Today is special.”

With that, she left him. She didn’t want an actual skirmish, and it looked like he might be ready to give her one. And she had to admit that little spar had left her satisfied. Akiara knew she couldn’t beat Matsuo in a knock-down fight, whether physical or verbal. Getting in a little jab, like she’d done, was the best she could hope for. Now she was ready for the brook. Now she was seething with excitement.

They were gathering in the woods by the uneven spot in the banks, as promised. More birds were swooping overhead than before—well, good. More the merrier. She came to a halt before Coryn and bowed her obeisance, as was proper.

“Akiara,” said the great stag.
“Coryn. Good day to you, and yours.” She nodded in turn to Wilhelm, Bedelia, and the squirrels on her back. Ringa wasn’t there, of course. The coward had just been interested in safety, nothing more. She’d have words for him if this went well. Aside from the birds, no one new today—not even Bedelia’s faun she’d mentioned might have an interest. Oh, well. Either things were going bust, or this little club was bound to grow.

“Good day, Akiara,” said Kiput. “Are you well?”

“Fueled by anger, that’s about as well as I ever am,” she replied. She jerked her head upward. “Do the birds have names?”

“Aside from the leaf warblers? They haven’t introduced themselves.”

“I’m sure they will in time,” said Bedelia.

Other animals were used to ignoring birds. Akiara didn’t like doing that. She’d been friendly with birds since her kithood. Birds were interesting in ways her own kind wasn’t. They were more emotional—lighthearted or fiery. They traveled farther, and easier, than rabbits ever would. But most of all, they had heroes. Rabbits didn’t have heroes, to speak of. They had competent, legendary figures, the ones who oversaw mass relocations or sent messages to establish relations from one warren to another. But that was about it. For rabbits, either you were prudent or you were a fool. Akiara liked heroes, and she’d always liked birds.

“Hey,” she called upward. “I’m Akiara, from Tall Meadow. What’re your names?”

“Tsume,” said the brown-headed thrush.

“Aiko,” called the chestnut-cheeked starling.

Well, what the heck. “What’re you here to see?” Akiara called.

“Something wondrous,” replied the thrush.

“Something horrible,” responded the starling.

Huh. “I guess one of you’ll get your wish,” she replied, front paws on a rotting log.

“Suspense,” put in Haburo.

“Uncertainty,” added Hatsu, wheeling symmetrically with her mate.

Sure. That was good enough.

Itsuko, the muskrat kid, was the last to arrive. Once he showed up, the group started walking downbrook toward where the woods let up. The warblers flew ahead to scout for trouble, and the rest went at a modest pace. Itsuko was clearly scared and couldn’t keep moving steadily, so Akiara dropped back to comfort him. “Hey. You’re the best member of your family if anyone asks me. Tail up. Come on, don’t dawdle. Fun’s a-waiting.”

The warblers came back and reported that, as arranged, the outsiders were waiting. All right, then. Time to do this. If this turned out to be the last day of Akiara’s life, let it be remembered that it was a grand one. They emerged from the woods.

The brown wolf was in front, peering into the brook; his mate was whispering something to him. They all looked up. Akiara felt a pride she’d rarely felt before.
“Well met, wolfkin,” said Coryn. That was a nice touch. Wolfkin. She’d never heard that word before, but it seemed to fit. She saw the goat blink and wondered if being called ‘wolfkin’ was a new one on him, too.

“Hello, everyone!” said the male wolf. “It’s good to see you.”

The deer bowed. Akiara decided to get a shot in early: “Great to see you too.”

The squirrels on Bedelia’s back murmured. The warblers chirped. The visitors looked up and saw the extra birds, too.

“You’ve noticed we have extra company,” said Bedelia sweetly.

“Hello,” called the goat into the lower sky. The thrush and starling settled to roost on Wilhelm’s back; the silly warblers kept flying. Did they ever rest?

“You have a lot of friends,” observed the female wolf.

“We strive for unity in this land,” said Coryn. “But they are not friends—they merely share our curiosity.”

“You have a lot of friends,” put in Bedelia. “They can send us word of goings on far away.” She flared her ears. “Including a certain pursuit on a certain mountainside.”

Well, that got a reaction from the newcomers. The wolves looked at each other; the goat stared wide-eyed. “You saw us on the mountain?”

Bedelia bowed. “The birds reported that you spoke truly.” She raised her head in pleasure. “You, Mei, really did subject yourself to the hunt. And you, Gabu and Lala, really did seek him. It was my pleasure to learn that no harm befell you.”

Mei—that was the goat’s name—grinned and walked forward. “It wasn’t an easy night, or day.” Yeah, Akiara bet! Rock on, goat—had he really put himself in mortal danger just so that his wolf friends could have friends of their own? Was he really going to do it over, and over, and over? This group had balls.

“Yet it has brought you here,” replied Coryn.

“Just to be clear,” said Kiput. “You are still friends? All of you? Despite hunting for each other last night?”

The goat nodded firmly; the male wolf nodded more frenetically. “Absolutely,” said the female.

The birds and squirrels murmured. “We have discussed the matter,” said Coryn, “and we are prepared to believe your words—that you, Mei, will join us as our equal on each third day hence.”

“Join you?” asked Mei.

“You don’t have to actually come where we are,” said Wilhelm. “But join us in spirit, yes. As prey.”

“A kindred spirit, fleeing the destruction of those we would otherwise call friend,” explained Bedelia.

The brown wolf was smiling; the silver one was holding back. “I guess that’s true,” said Mei. “Does that mean you’re willing to spend time with Gabu and Lala now?”
There was a sudden silence. Coryn finally uttered, “It is what we promised,” but he left the statement unfinished, and there was clear doubt in his voice. Oh come on.

The starling and thrush looked at each other. So did Wilhelm and Bedelia, Taffet and Kiput. No one said anything.

“…But?” asked the female wolf.

Oh, for goodness sake! Akiara bounded forth. “But nothing. Come on, let’s sit together. All of us,” she called back, chiding her companions. “I intend to hear some of your stories. I was promised stories.”

With painful slowness, the wolves walked forward and sat down next to Akiara. They peered at her—the male with anticipation, the female coolly—and slowly, painfully slowly, the other animals followed. They all sat down in a ragged circle, the squirrels reluctantly springing down from Bedelia’s back.

“We are creatures of our word,” said Coryn into the stillness. “Wolves of the north—we extend to you our friendship.” And, for the first time Akiara could remember, the great stag bowed. About effing time.

The wolves looked delighted. The birds all chirped. Taffet started chirruping in that weird way squirrels had. Akiara thumped on the ground, adding her note to the applause.

“That’s wonderful,” said the brown wolf, stepping forward. “Uh… is there any more ceremony to do, or should we start talking? I don’t know about you, but I’m so excited!”

“You and me both,” said Akiara.

“I’ll tell you what I’d like,” said Taffet, loudly as always. “I’d like to hear Mr. and Mrs. Murderer tell the stories of how they got here.”

“Er… yes,” said Kiput, beside her. “We had the general tale from Mei the other day… but if we could hear it from the wolves’ own lips, so to speak…”

“We’d be only too glad,” said the silver wolf, sitting up brightly.

“Sure,” said her companion. “It’s kind of a long story…”

“A long story may be exactly the cure for a deep-felt unease,” said Coryn. “Let us drink first, and then let stories be told.”

Now that was more like it. So they all drank, and they gathered again, far enough from the brook for the ground to be dry, and they listened to the outsiders tell their stories. Akiara sat proudly near the middle of the circle and hung on every word. She didn’t intend to let this trio feel unwelcome for a moment.

The 29th Evening

“But then again,” said Akiara, flipping her attention from one side to the other, “what do you expect the ruler of the wolves, the alpha, told Gabu, when he finally came to visit him in his pit?”
The adolescents were lined up against the ridge, as if it could protect them from a wild and changing world. “They told him the same thing, didn’t they?” guessed Shizu. “That he could be free if he went to meet the goat and steal all his information?”

Akiara pounded the ground with a well placed hind paw. “Precisely! In his case, the punishment for refusing was death. But symmetry of symmetries, the wolves had decided just as the goat elders had for Mei—go to your friend and pretend. Squeeze him for everything you can. Steal his secrets and bring them back—and then we’ll live happily. And what do you think Gabu said?”

“Sounds like he didn’t have a choice,” said Jakka.

“Not much choice indeed,” Akiara agreed, spinning back the other way. She loved how the ground was lit with different shades in each direction, casting the audience in moonlight and shadow. The moon was full and the air was warm tonight—perfect for storytelling. They tried to coop her up in the Big Burrow but she’d insisted a story like this had to be told topside. “It was agree to betray his friend, or die. But mind—in case you’re thinking Gabu should just run away with Mei.” She contorted one side of her face darkly, evoking a scarred eye. “The alpha promised that if he tried, they would chase him to the end of the earth, and find him, and kill him. ‘A traitor to the pack must die.’” She flashed her teeth at the adults, then the adolescents and kits. “So was the rule they lived by. And so they told Gabu.”

“He should have spat in the alpha’s unholy face,” moaned Matsuo, raising his huge body over the audience. Ringa turned around and told him, rather gracelessly, to shut up.

“He was at the bottom of a pit!” retorted Akiara, whirling. “His spittle wouldn’t have grazed the surface! And he’d have died for nothing. So! Imagine the day—a warm but stormy day last fall, so overcast the sky was like ash. The two friends met at the edge of the forest and agreed to walk by the river—but all the while, eyes were watching them. Eyes of wolves from one direction, eyes of goats from another, and the eyes of the forest creatures all around. And the two of them were keenly aware…”

Akiara’s parents were there at the corner of the group, huddling against each other as they listened. They were terrified for Akiara and she knew it. But she didn’t intend to change her life one whit for them. Not anymore. She spun the story out and on, until goat and wolf were likewise huddled in a little snow cave in the mountains… and she realized that she’d seldom if ever felt so alive. This was her best storytime yet—because it was true, so far as she knew—every word of it! Or, no. It wasn’t the truth of the tale that made it powerful. It was the fact it was near. It was that it was still unfolding.

The air was warm that night. But as she described the wolf’s desperate struggle to keep the goat alive through an interminable blizzard, it seemed like every flank and haunch in the field was shivering with chill.

Good. This was just how Akiara liked it.

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Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the third and final part of this novel! I'm excited. Are you excited? Just to keep things fresh, let's start out with a brand new point-of-view character! Back at the
end of Part I, I really thought I would only ever have three POV characters, but plans change, and characters worm their way into authors' brains. Long ago, I admit I had my mind a bit blown when, near the very end of Watership Down, Richard Adams suddenly abandoned the point of view he'd been writing for like 23 chapters in order to justify a deus ex machina. I put that in my toolbox! Except that here, of course, I'm suddenly jumping into a rabbit's head rather than out of it.

And how about that Bepo? It said yet another five word sentence, and one that’s seven words, if you allow the ellipsis! The vole’s becoming downright loquacious. Then again, its take on evolutionary pressures is woefully incomplete…
The 30th Day

Chapter Summary

* Wolf juice!?
* Would you like to stick your head inside?
* We had a wonderful day, didn't we?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 30th Morning

Gabu’s mind was filled to the brim with happy feelings. They were like bits of grass, or colorful autumn leaves in a rushing stream. They swirled and gushed over and swirled some more, and he could even swear at some point they’d formed themselves into dreams. Gabu wished he could remember his dreams. He was sure the ones he’d had last night were nice ones!

He yawned with satisfaction, stretched his body, sat back and stretched a different way. He left the cave and saw Mei standing happily in the early morning light, peering down and speaking quietly. He must be talking with Bepo! Gabu therefore walked over gently, so as not to scare his little neighbor.

“Mei,” he greeted. “Good morning!”

Mei chuckled. It wasn’t a joke, but he chuckled anyway. It looked like Mei was as chipper as Gabu today! “Good morning, Gabu. Did you sleep well?”

“I think you can guess I did! Good morning, Bepo.” Sure enough, the little vole was standing there watching them, its black eyes as unreadable as ever.

“Too happy woofy! Good morning.”

Mei gave Gabu a tender little lick. Gabu lit up—his friend never used to do that! Not as an ordinary greeting, anyhow. Gabu gathered his wits, then leaned down to lick Mei back. And he made it a big one, from neck to cheek!

Bepo was staring. “Now eating hoofy? Lick by lick?”

Its tone didn’t seem to match the joke. “Oh, don’t worry,” said Mei. “I’m quite unharmed.” He grinned at Gabu. “You’re very cheery today.”

“I ought to be! We’ve got friends now, Mei! A whole club of them!”

Mei chuckled again. “I agree—it’s quite exciting! For a while, Gabu, I’d almost given up on the notion.”

“All friends now?” asked Bepo skeptically.
“Does that bother you, Bepo?” Gabu walked closer. He was tempted to give the vole a friendly lick to melt its tiny heart.

“And special is good, right?” Gabu persisted, widening his stance. His tail started wagging.

“Special best good.”

Gabu laughed. “May I give you a slurp, Bepo?”

“The vole shied back, jerking with a jump. “Shaggy slurp??”

“Oh, my tongue isn’t shaggy. It’s just the rest of me that is.”

“I think you might get Bepo a bit wet,” Mei pointed out.

Oh, right. “That’s okay. I won’t slurp you if you don’t want to get wet.”

“Wet fine,” said Bepo. “Wolf juice scary.”

Gabu sat up and scratched his head, the other forepaw dangling. “Is it?”


Gabu laughed. “My teeth may be dangerous, but I can promise my tongue is quite safe.” He nodded, satisfying himself it was true. “But that’s all right. Mei, what do you think we’ll do today?” It was their regular day for staying together—for play! Gabu could barely contain his excitement.

“I suppose we’ll get to know our new friends a little better. We told them our story yesterday… perhaps today they’ll share theirs with us?”

“Is good share,” said Bepo.

“I think I’d be very happy with that,” said Gabu.

“Do you have a story, Bepo?” Mei asked. “Did you always live on this hill?”

Bepo shook its head hard. “Not always. Born down in field! Flat curves. At nights? Zip up hill, run down. Before chase off! When owner die? Zip up, stay up! Hard night, long day.” It brandished its tall incisors. “Big fight! Bepo win!”

“That must have been very exciting for you,” said Mei.

“In Bepo life? Some big day, some small.” It took a deep breath in the space of two seconds. “Fight for here? Biggest day ever.”

Gabu found himself thrilled by the miniature tale. Mei listened sympathetically, then asked, “Bepo? Does it bother you that we’re here in your territory?”

The rodent tittered in amusement. “Not my territory you! My territory other vole!”

“Oh, I see. Then are you glad to have us as neighbors?”

Gabu beamed, sitting bowlegged on the hillside. “Awww.”

The vole looked at him. “Big woofy? Thank you for make Bepo life strong.”

Gabu grinned. When a vole uses such a long sentence for such a heartfelt thank you, it just can’t go unanswered. He stepped forward and planted a brief little slurp on Bepo’s entire body.

“YEEEK!” shouted the vole, skittering away. It skittered up again and stared. “Wolf juice!?”

“I think you’ll be okay,” said Mei. “It just means he’s fond of you.”

Bepo ran around in squiggles for a while. Then it paused and looked up from all fours. “Not so bad,” it decided. “Good juice.”

Gabu laughed, his heart warmed just about to bubbling.

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The 30th Day

“Can I see your paw?” asked the impudent rabbit, Akiara. She patted the ground. “Put your paw here. I want to see how big it is.”

Lala sighed. It wasn’t an internal sigh, the kind that vented actual frustration. When Lala sighed audibly, it meant she was either feigning frustration or sharing the sublime mystery of contentment. She wasn’t sure which applied here. Quietly, she outstretched her right foreleg and placed her paw on exhibit for the perusal of the hoi polloi.

The deceptively plain-looking rabbit first sniffed it, then lay down and put her own paw beside it. Lala had to admit the difference was striking. She loved her paws, just as she loved everything about her body and most things about herself.

The rabbit didn’t get up. Rather than admire how much larger, how much shapelier her own paw was, Lala watched the rabbit’s face. This one had something in her that made her mind go by leaps and bounds. There was something to this brown-furred plant-eater that Lala admired.

“What are you looking at?” asked Itsuko, the shy muskrat youth.

“What do you mean?”

“What is it like… living your life striding on things like these?”
The rabbit hadn’t addressed her question to Lala, oddly, but Lala was the one in the position to answer. But what could she say? She’d never had any other set of feet. She’d never had another body. Yet somehow this didn’t stop her from intuiting answers; she was talented at understanding things intuitively from others’ points of view—at least those of other wolves. She knew that just because a person only led one life didn’t mean they couldn’t understand the nuances of many.

“There’s potential,” she said. She rose and posed midstride, one foreleg extended and bearing weight, the other barely bent against the earth. “Say I’m confronting someone—my alpha’s sister, for example. In this pose, I can withdraw casually…” She let her bent leg straighten, taking the weight while she pulled back. “…Or come to attention…” She drew forth her rear hindleg and let the motion straighten her out neatly as she lifted her head, bright-eyed. “…Or, if things should come to it…” She resumed the pose, then let her whole body release into a forward dash, her bent ankle using its tension to thrust without straightening. “…I can spring!” She grinned back at the watchers, and found that now all the animals were looking at her, their other conversations halted. For a moment she was self-conscious, but then remembered there was nothing to fear so long as she didn’t offend them. The only thing anyone had over her here was their friendship, which they could withdraw. That was the whole sum of their power.
“It must be so different, being a wolf,” observed Itsuko into the silence.

Mei spoke up from where he’d been chatting with the deer. “In some ways, that’s undoubtedly true! Yet in other ways, I think you’ll find there’s hardly any difference between us at all.”

Lala flashed a hot grin his way. Mei pulled back, surprised. Well, maybe that was naughty of her. But she actually liked the idea that she had things in common with this goat. They were meeting the inhabitants of a new land together. Testing the waters together. And she found she liked his mind. “He’s not wrong, you know,” she told the muskrat. “We’re after many of the same things.”

“Fun, you mean,” said Akiara. “And insight.”

“Camaraderie,” added Coryn.

“Peace,” said one of the cursed leaf warblers, overhead as always.

“Joy,” said the other.

“A safe place to live,” suggested Bedelia, “and good food to eat.”

“I was going to say,” put in Gabu: “Don’t forget about food!”

“Warmth when it’s cold,” added Mei.

“Family… right?” said Itsuko.


It was a beautiful peace that fell over them in that moment. Lala walked back to the lagomorph and the rodent and lay down again. “Did you want to examine my forepaw a bit longer? Or would you like to look at one of my hindpaws?”

“Kinda tempting,” said Akiara. “But I’d actually like to get a look at your teeth. Could you open your mouth up?”

Could you open your mouth up, please? Lala mused. “Certainly! Would you like to stick your head inside?”

Akiara’s ears twitched. “Nah. I’m not there yet.”

“Oh, but you’ll have such a better view!” Lala teased.

“Maybe in a month or so. I don’t trust you that much yet.”

“Fair enough,” said Lala, and opened her jaws up wide.

Off to the side, her swiveled ears caught the sound of Mei murmuring to Gabu: “I would put my head in your mouth, if you wanted.”

“Oh, but Mei!” replied Gabu, his voice just as low. “What would I ever do with it in there?”

Lala smiled… but with her teeth and palate on full display for the curious animals, she suspected it didn’t show.
They asked her about her teeth, so she described the sensation of tearing through meat. And when they realized wolves had a name for every tooth, they made her list them all. Itsuko, in a whisper so shy Lala had to make him repeat himself, asked if he could feel one of her imposing canines. So of course, she obliged. He sniffed her tooth, then ran a delicate clawed toe down its full inch of length. The muskrat hopped back a few paces, poised there on his hind feet as if he’d just had a transcendent experience. And for all Lala knew, he had.

She showed every part of herself to the animals. Well, every part of her body, anyway. The stretch of her legs, the twist of her ears, the teats with which she’d nursed two litters of young, even the hidden glands behind her ears and tail. She showed them how far she could turn her neck. They wanted to see how fast she could run, so she showed them a walk, a lope, a trot, a sprint. The doe even put her muzzle in Lala’s tail for a moment, to feel its softness, after Lala made the offer. All the while, Lala contended with a nagging voice telling her she was giving away secrets to her prey—that they’d be all the harder to catch tomorrow if she showed them everything she could do. But Lala knew a wolf’s real secrets weren’t found in her body, magnificent though it might be. They were in her attitude. They were in her approach. They were on the inside, and she wasn’t sure they were something she could share, even if she wanted to.

“Well, you’ve showed us a ton about yourself,” said Akiara, one ear raised, the other lop. “Is there anything you want to know about my body?”

Lala grinned, letting a space of her canines show. “Oh, believe me. I’m quite familiar with rabbit anatomy.”

This brought the brown bunny up short. “Oh!” She blinked. “Yeah, I guess you would be.”

Lala walked past. “I’ve had plenty of chances to play. Thanks for the offer, though.”

“But never with a live rabbit, right?”

Lala shrugged. “I’ve seen live rabbits run. Is there anything else I ought to see?”

Akiara considered. “Have you seen rabbits dig?”

She had a point. “I’ve interrupted rabbits while digging,” Lala mused aloud. “But they never stick with it once they notice me.”

Akiara smacked the ground. “I’ll show you. See how great it is to have friends outside your species? Now you’ll get to see a rabbit digging who doesn’t run away.”

Lala sat politely, now oddly conscious of every part of her body, and watched with interest. She truly was starting to understand the value of having friends among prey species. It had seemed like a funny curiosity at first, a goal of Gabu’s whose purpose might come clear in time… but now, she was starting to wonder whether she’d stumbled into something tremendous. The world was large, Lala knew. So large that nobody, not even the birds, knew how large it was. But she wondered whether in all the world, with its unthinkable breadth, there existed any other wolves with the freedom to ask a rabbit questions, and to actually expect answers.

Lala nearly teared up as she realized it was quite plausible, even probable, that she and Gabu were the only ones.
They lay side by side in the den, chins on the ground, which was the only thing that kept them from frowning. Outside, it was dark. They’d seen the light leeched from the sky and hadn’t been able to stop it. Gabu felt Mei’s coat against his belly and his shoulder. Now and then, one of them looked at the other, or switched his tail, or said something. Now and then, Gabu’s belly growled, rattling them both. His last hunt had been a bust, and now he was really feeling his hunger.

“That was a big one,” Mei murmured.

“Yeah,” Gabu moaned.

He hated this. He hated that this was necessary. In just an hour or so, Mei was going to get up, leave the cave, and wander for a day alone. Rather than have Gabu’s company and help, he was going to have to pit wits against him. Gabu would rise at some point after midnight and join Lala, who was set to meet him at the foot of the hill. The two of them would form a plan, and Lala would undoubtedly announce that she’d smelled “a goat” and suggest they follow the scent. And Gabu would be honor-bound to do it. He’d be fighting his own instincts all the way, but he’d be stuck tracking Mei, while pretending their friendship didn’t exist… and he was stuck going through this torture every three nights until who-knew-when… or until…

No. He closed his eyes. Success wasn’t something he would think about.

This wasn’t right. Gabu knew his friend would be terrified and alone. He wanted to be there for him. He wanted to help Mei through his time of trouble. But he couldn’t. The time of trouble was him.

“I’m so sorry, Mei,” he mumbled.

“No. Don’t be. It’s not your fault,” replied the goat.

One lone cloud crossed the mouth of the cave. Gabu mentally clung to it. He wanted it to stay, but it blew steadily away and was out of sight all too soon.

His belly shook again.

Gabu covered his eyes. “I don’t know if I can sleep tonight, Mei!”

“Shhh. It’s okay, Gabu. It’ll be all right.”

They were quiet for a while. “You’ll stay safe?”

“I’ll stay safe.” More silence. Then—“Would you like me to sing you a lullaby?”

A lullaby? Gabu hadn’t had a lullaby since his mother died. He shook with gratitude, with memory, with emotion. “Mei?”

“If it will help you sleep. Relax, Gabu. We had a wonderful day, didn’t we?”

It had been. Gabu had chatted with the squirrels and the deer, and he’d asked to see the skeptical starling’s wings, and the starling had opened them up wide! And Lala had shown off for everyone, and the rabbit had demonstrated how to start a burrow or a warren, including how to keep the
entrance clear… it had been a day like no other he’d ever known. But now Gabu was hungry, and he was going to have to hunt those very same friends he’d just been enjoying the day with. And their relatives. And their relatives’ friends. And chances were good that Gabu and Lala would either kill at least one of those friends or relatives before the next day was out… or go hungry again. Gabu didn’t know how much longer he could go without food. But he was terrified of wrecking what they’d built. Mei would be so disappointed. So disappointed…

But Mei sang in a tender, wavery voice, held cautiously in tune. “Oh, ain tain tethera, methera and mimp. Fall back home, my loving little sheep. Ayta and slayta, laura dora dik. Lay down your heads on the grass so thick.”

Gabu sighed out his fears in the sweetest sigh he could remember ever taking. His belly rumbled, and though he knew it was hungry, he imagined he was rumbling with pleasure. He shut his eyes.

“Ain-a-dik, tain-a-dik, tether-dik mether-dik, mit,” sang Mei. “Ease on o’er so your brothers will fit. Ain-a-mit, tain-a-mit, tether-mit gether-mit, ghet. Cast off the weight from your bon’ wee head.”

Mei hummed the tune through, and Gabu felt his ears flutter. Then Mei sang the verses again, and the tension melted from his back and neck. Gabu’s legs lay like heavy logs, free of care. His worries were banished to a tiny flicker in a corner of his mind.

Mei brought the lullaby to an end, and without opening his eyes, Gabu mumbled: “But Mei, I thought goats didn’t have any songs.”

“We don’t,” said Mei softly. “We borrowed that one from the sheep. It’s based on a chant they use to count themselves in the evenings, when they come home.”

“Ohh,” Gabu said. He could hear his breathing more than anything. He imagined a series of sheep passing up a dusty trail onto a grassy hill as sunset fell all around. Mei began in on the first verse again, and Gabu idly counted each sheep as it rose. He was asleep before he knew it.

He never felt Mei rise from his side and walk away.

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Chapter End Notes

Ease on oe’r so your brother’s bum’ll fit. (In some systems, bumfit is fifteen.)

Mei’s lullaby is one of over a dozen regional variants of a sheep-counting chant in Scotland, England and Wales. The shephard counts groups of twenty and then starts over. I think this is why ‘counting sheep’ is considered a way to fall asleep.

It seems like I’ve been seeing wolves in popular culture everywhere these days! Most recently in an article about repopulating the wolves on an island in my home state, and in a comedian’s routine when he randomly added ‘wolftoss’ as a skill on his resume.

I like wolves! I’m glad other people do too.

Illustration by Flying Mambo.
The 31st and 32nd Days

Chapter Summary

* What would go through Gabu's heart if Mei didn't come back?
* What's the story? Someone die last night?
* Do… do birds ever fly back and forth, over the mountain?
* Would you like to know a secret?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 31st Day

Mei stood in a slushy floe, staring up the path he’d taken two seasons ago. The snowbanks were like walls here, guiding his footsteps where they wanted him to go; they were melting, however, as if to underscore that their desires were just a suggestion, just a guide. Go back home, they suggested. Your friends don’t need to know. Stay a few days away; come back when the weather’s as nice as this again, or nicer. You’ll be hunted, yes, but you’ll be hunted here, and who’s to say the remnants of the pack that nearly killed you before will even care if you return? You know your friends are searching for you. Go away for a while. Visit your home. They’ll take you back when you return, even if it’s a year from now. That’s what true friends do. True friends will understand.

All this was like a song of the water, a melody of the slush around his hooves. So Mei trod northward and let the sense of awe and distance grow around him. It was true—he might not even be in much danger, should he cross Muri Muri and head for Sawa Sawa. His herd might still be there; they might welcome him back; it would be a great burden off his back to tell them goodbye and to explain what had become of him. He wouldn’t stay there, of course. He’d always go back. But if he could only see them one more time, they’d know—then they’d know.

His horns felt twisted, his face heavy. He winced out nascent tears and stopped in his tracks. This wasn’t wise. It wasn’t a path he wanted to go down, physically or mentally. Gabu expected him back tomorrow, sleeping there beside him when he woke up. He might even wait up for Mei after midnight, like last time. What would go through Gabu’s heart if Mei didn’t come back? No, he couldn’t go home without warning his friends. Moreover, it was a terribly risky idea—the weather could turn and all this slush could turn to ice, making his trek a torment—the snow could return, freezing him solid; the Bari Bari wolves could have coalesced into an effective pack, and even if not, any lone hunters might pick him off. And his family might reject him… or worse, they might beg him to stay. Mii might beg him to stay. If she did, could Mei force himself to plod back over the cold, forbidding mountain in order to live with wolves?

Plus… they’d just broken through. They’d just won over the hearts of the locals, at last. He couldn’t abandon them now. He would go back. Yet it was awfully tempting to walk this path, staring at the rise he’d crossed in the fall, and wallow in temptation.

Maybe he’d press on to the top of the pass. Just so that he could see down at whence he’d come.
Just to get a glimpse of what he’d left behind.

Would it really be a year before they went back? With the pace of life like it was, could Mei even imagine such a span of time? It felt like another age—the promise of another summer, another winter, another spring like this one. He was faced with the richness of a dozen lives, the lives of creatures not even goats, all around him… was learning the sacred blossoms of a herd of deer and hearing their ancestors named really so different from the idea of next year? Was learning how squirrels organized their society really any more exotic than the notion of going back home?

At the rate things were going, he and Gabu would never go back. And that thought squeezed tears from Mei. He started imagining he was wading through a slushy river of his own making, the waters of his pilgrim’s sadness. Whatever coldness he felt on his pasterns, he’d brought upon himself. It seemed most fitting that way—and yet, he didn’t turn back.

Mii. What did she think of him? Did she still long for him to return someday, or, failing that, to be alive out here somewhere? With the blue sky so clear and the snow so stark and the path before him open, Mei’s thoughts of Mii were starker than ever. He remembered her intensely. Dear little Mina—not really his sister, but like a younger sister to him. Mei’s mother had never been prolific, and he’d wanted a sister. They’d laughed over the same things, found the same joy in straying just so in the mornings—this far from the herd and no farther. Her name was Mina, but they’d given her a nickname to sound like Mei’s, and sung songs together, and won over the love of Mei’s mother and grandmother. Mii had been Mei’s friend in a way that, even now, somehow Gabu wasn’t. Gabu had plenty to offer than Mii didn’t… but he didn’t replace her. He could never replace her.

Had she forgotten him? No, surely not. But he had a snowflake of a feeling that she’d given up hope for him. That she’d let go already, as goats do. It was a hard feeling to bear, but like a snowflake, it threatened to melt into nothingness.

Don’t forget me, Mii! he wanted to shout. He would make trails in the slush or eat paths through the snow, if it could signal her at a distance. He wished he could tell the very birds to…

Oh gosh. That idea actually wasn’t impossible, was it? Mei was making friends with birds, or would be soon. He actually literally could tell the birds to send her a message, couldn’t he?

The sudden jolt from reverie to practicality made the whole day feel realer—less bright, more cold, yet more vivid in an immediate way. He clambered from the path onto a rock, getting his feet out of the slush.

Well. He’d come far enough. He would turn back now. If he’d been a wolf, he would have considered this hunt successful. He had an idea, a real idea, to bring back and mull through.

Thank goodness for that, he reflected as he began the long trudge home. If he hadn’t had something to turn him back, he might have just trudged onward, unable to stop, like a newborn kid on a pond of ice.

The 32nd Morning

There were murmurs coming through the wall, so Akiara got up. She wiggled the willies from her
whiskers and slipped into the main dormitory corridor. Just as well she preferred to sleep alone in
spring and summer—sharing her quarters with five other rabbits would just be a hassle when it
came to mornings like today, when catching the gossip was key. No ‘good mornings’ and jostled
ribs to hold her up.

She coiled around to the parlor she thought the murmuring had been from, and sure enough found
Jim and Hisae dishing, huddled with cautious upward looks as if they thought the outside world

“G’morning. What’s the story? Someone die last night?”

Hisae twitched her nose at Akiara. “Yeh. Paolo. ‘Member him? Used to be Rosie’s mate?”

Oh sheesh. Paolo, yeah. She remembered him. Rosie’d been filled with the sun’s pride that year—
she hadn’t even thought about getting anyone else. He’d been attentive—that was her recollection.
It hadn’t lasted between them, of course, but Rosie—yeah, Rosie wasn’t gonna be happy. “Where’d
they get him?” Akiara asked. She knew her ears were twitching and she didn’t care.

“East edge of the heath,” said Jim. “No one saw it, but Greta heard him squeal. Seems like he was
just out foraging.”

Akiara nodded. This was the new normal. Asking ‘so who died’ every three days and actually
going to get a serious answer half the time. “Paolo. Got it. No one else?”

“No one we know,” said Hisae. There was a hostile vibe coming from her—maybe just stunned,
though. Maybe ironic. Maybe just closed. Hisae hadn’t seemed to like Akiara’s storytime much the
other night… she might be a tough nut for a while.

“Okay,” said Akiara. “Thanks. Any idea where Rosie is? I should probably give her some love.”
Rosie was one of Akiara’s least unfavorable siblings—she was shallow, but had never deliberately
caused Akiara grief.

Jim indicated the way. “Saw her heading for the elm stands. Think she might want to be alone,
though.”

“She’ll want me there. Thanks.” Akiara zipped out. Truth told, Rosie probably wouldn’t want a lot
of company, even from her sister. But she’d want Akiara there just the same, if only for a minute, if
only at a distance. It was her duty; it was where she belonged right now. Akiara was relieved, if she
was being honest. She’d never been close to Paolo. It could have been a lot worse.

For now, she belonged in the elm stands with her sister. In a few hours, though, she belonged
where the brook met Low Meadow. She had a pair of wolves to inform as to whom exactly they’d
just killed.

Because that was part of her job now, wasn’t it?

The 32nd Day

“I have to admit,” said Gabu— “there’s something I’d like to see.”

“Mm?” rumbled Coryn, turning his massive neck to regard the wolf. Mei, too, wondered what was
on Gabu’s mind.
“Well,” said Gabu, his brightness shining through. “I’d love to see a group of deer running. Without me having to chase them, I mean. Ever since I was a cub, I’ve been impressed at how beautiful a running deer is. But I never get to see you run up close… unless I’m running after.”

Wilhelm chuffed and Bedelia laughed. They’d come a long way fast, hadn’t they? “You would have us run for your pleasure?” asked the doe.

“Well, yes,” said Gabu. “If that’s not too much to ask, I mean.”

“Probably wouldn’t do much harm,” allowed Wilhelm, scuffing the ground. “No hunting tomorrow—plenty of time to get our breath back.”

“There is that,” said Coryn.

“That’s why I waited to ask,” said Gabu. “I’m not trying to tire you out—honest. I’d just like to watch you run.”

Bedelia nodded deeply. “All right,” said Wilhelm. “We’ll make as though something’s spooked us. Form up?”

“Form up,” agreed Coryn.

And the deer ran! Mei watched with fascination. It was beautiful to watch their perfect forms in motion, yes. But it was at least as beautiful that they were willing to obey the whims of a predator to begin with.

As the deer circled back over the scrubland and slowed, Gabu howooed in approval, rising from a crouch in a way Mei thought was quite cute. But the deer seemed immune to flattery.

“That satisfy you, dewclaw?” That was Wilhelm’s nickname for Gabu, and it seemed harmless enough.

“It absolutely did! It was wonderful. Thank you!” Gabu’s tail wouldn’t stop wagging.

Mei turned his attention to Lala, who’d taken a moment to watch the deer run, but who was now back to interrogating the brown-headed thrush about his flight habits. “But you don’t fly as part of forage?” Mei heard her ask.

“Forage? Oh, no. Forage is easier on the ground. I could see an earthworm from the air, but… it’s just not efficient.” He shook himself, brown feathers rustling.

“But you mentioned eating on the wing,” replied Lala, confused.

“Well, I eat the occasional gnat or mosquito while I fly, yes,” the bird replied. “But it’s more essential that I fly in order to reach the insects in the trees! They’ve got a whole nother type of nutrients, you know.”

“Do they! I had no idea.” Mei snickered at the sight of Lala’s huge, bushy tail recurling around her as she sat up, and wondered how much of it was for show.

Rather than interrupt a pleasant conversation, Mei looked for the leaf warblers, Haburo and Hatsu. He discovered them at rest (for once) in a patch of grass not far from the brook. Mei found these two difficult to talk with, but… well, if he’d learned anything from his conversations with Bepo, it was that short sentences didn’t necessarily connote a lack of intelligence.
“Pardon me,” he said, trotting over.

Haburo raised his wings and faced Mei. Her wings? Mei thought he was the male and Hatsu was the female, but he’d forgotten and was embarrassed to ask again. Neither of them was especially lighter than the other, but their colored streaks were in different places. “Good day!”

“Fine times,” said Hatsu, flaring her tail.

“Good day! I was just wondering… you know that I’m from over the mountain to the north, right?”

Haburo flapped his wings excitedly, nearly rising, while Hatsu stretched her body. Somehow Mei got an affirmative sense from all this.

“Well, while I was away yesterday, I started wondering… what if I could send a message back home, to the herd I used to belong to? Do… do birds ever fly back and forth, over the mountain?”

They exchanged a tiny pair of chirps. “Birds fly,” said Hatsu.

“Mountains don’t,” said Haburo.

Mei blinked. “Um, right. So… would it be, er, possible for either or… or both of you to fly back to the foothills of another mountain, called Sawa Sawa, where a white goat herd lives? And if you did… could you send them a message from me?”

They were silent, but bobbed their heads to each other in a patternless sequence Mei couldn’t decipher. “A long way,” Haburo said at last.

“But we can,” said Hatsu.

Mei felt himself blushing with excitement. “You’d really do that, just for me? I know there isn’t much I can give a pair of songbirds in return…”

“Your stories,” said Hatsu.

“Your joy,” said Haburo.

So they had been listening. Mei hadn’t been sure. “I’ll be glad to tell you more stories if you can deliver my message safely, and bring back whatever message they have for me.”

“Happy crowd,” said Haburo.

“Happy wood,” said Hatsu. And she stretched her head high and chirped, as if to say she was ready.

Were they saying that Mei deserved the credit if things were happy? He didn’t know what to think of that. He was still all too aware of the fact that he’d brought a large predator to a land that had none. He’d made the creatures here unhappy, if anything. Still—“I’m grateful. Let me think.”

This idea was still new, and Mei hadn’t actually put much thought into what he would say if he could send a message, or whom exactly it should be for. Would these warblers be able to recognize a specific goat by description? Perhaps he should send a message to the whole herd. Then again, would they even be able to remember and recite an entire message? They rarely said more than two words at a time.

A sudden loud voice jerked Mei from his contemplation: “Guess what, Mr. Grass Eater!” The leaf warblers fluttered back into flight.
Mei clenched his jaws hard. He spotted Taffet on a dangling tree branch and faced her boldly. “Yes?”

“I’ve been telling everyone I know about our little club, and today I got someone to follow me!”

Oh! Another new friend? “That’s great, Taffet. The more, the merrier.”

“That’s right. Ready for company?”

Mei composed himself and nodded, preparing to make a good first impression. “Who have you brought with you?”

Taffet clung to her branch with all four paws—it sank and bobbed under her weight. “Come on out!” she yelled back.

Mei looked to the branches, but it was from the forest floor that a rustling came. Slowly, warily, a little figure emerged. More slowly than a squirrel ought to travel. But it was a squirrel. She raised her head and looked straight into Mei’s eyes.

Mei suddenly felt weak. “…Jenny!”

“Hello. Hello, Mei.”

His first friend here. The friend he’d met, and accidentally betrayed. The friend who’d abandoned him. Mei wasn’t ready for this. Should he walk up, or… retreat? Instead, he sank to his knees and folded his legs beneath. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

The little tree squirrel gave a quick shake of her head. “Me neither. But if these people are giving you a chance…” She leapt twice, landing nearer. “…I can give you a second one.”

Mei found himself a bit moved. “I’m so glad to hear that, Jenny! And I’m terribly sorry about your friend, the chipmunk.”

“Shaniku.”

“Yes, Shaniku. Back at the time, I’d told Gabu not to eat any squirrels, but I hadn’t thought…” He shook his head, feeling his ears flap. “Well, so much has changed since then. Jenny… I’d like to introduce you to my best friend, Gabu the wolf. He’s just over there, talking with the deer. Are you up to meeting him?”

Jenny hesitated for a split second, but undulated her tail in a nod. She looked over. Mei bleated to get his attention. Everyone looked at him, but he tried to ignore them.

“Er—Gabu? I’m sorry to interrupt, but… I—I’d like to introduce you to my friend, Jenny the tree squirrel.” He gestured toward her. “You remember me telling you about her, right?”

Gabu gaped for a moment, then grew a huge grin. “Of course I do, Mei!” He took a few steps toward her, paws high in a playful gait, nothing hidden, and stopped at a respectful distance. “Hello, there. I’m Gabu—I’ve heard about you!”

Jenny’s eyes weren’t black—they had an auburn quality, but were hard to read. Her stance, though, was defensive. “You killed my friend.”

Gabu sighed and let his own stance fall. “I was sad when I heard about that,” he told her. “I really wish I didn’t have to eat meat in order to survive. But I do… and she just happened to be the only
prey I was able to catch that day. These days, though, I usually hunt larger creatures.”

Jenny’s tail thrashed to one side. “Never again? Will you promise never to kill my friends again?”

Gabu looked sad. Mei took the burden of answering: “I’m sorry, Jenny, but he can’t make that promise. Everyone here has agreed to share the risk of being caught and eaten when Gabu and his mate, Lala, go hunting. And that includes even me. We’ve decided that it’s better that way.”

“This way,” put in Wilhelm, “the wolves aren’t overrun by suck-ups.”

Jenny looked uncomfortable. “I told you so,” rang Taffet from above.

“But it’s only every third day,” Mei hastened to add. “We’re perfectly safe all today and tomorrow, and on the hunting days… well, perhaps you and I could spend a little time together, now and then.”


“Only a fool likes danger,” declaimed Coryn, turning his head toward her. “But danger is with us. We must learn to accept its ways.”

“Honestly,” said Akiara from nearby, “these guys are a lot of fun.”

“Doom,” said the chestnut-cheeked starling, perched on top of a nearby shrub.

“Beg your pardon?” said Akiara.

“They’re all doomed,” said the songbird. “It’s all to fall to heck.”

“Pff,” snorted the rabbit. “Who put a bee in your bonnet?”

The starling spread her brown and white wings. “Doom,” she repeated.

“But Aiko,” said Gabu sadly. “I thought you believed in our friendship.”

“I can be your friend ‘cause you can’t fly. Can’t catch me. See my wings all you want.” She turned about on her twig, exposing her wings to every direction, mantle and underside. “But all this? Going to doom. I want to see it happen.”

“Hmmp,” said Mei. “Not very neighborly.”

The starling rasped loudly, startling everyone. Apparently it was a form of laughter, or celebration. Jenny crept even further back and crouched low.

“Don’t let her put you off,” said Tsume, the brown-headed thrush. “Come on, join us. We’re good folks.”

“It really has been rather nice,” put in Kiput.

But Jenny seemed cowed by the group of animals in the clearing. “Can I just visit the lair?” she asked.

Mei reflected. Jenny had always been on the shy side. If she would only return to his life by visiting him at home, so be it. “That’s all right. Why don’t you drop by this evening around sunset? I’ll be finishing my supper.”
She looked from Gabu to Lala. “Will the wolves be there?”

“Yes, but they won’t hurt you. Believe me, it’ll be fine.”

Jenny crawled closer and spoke raspily to Mei: “I just want to be your friend. Not theirs.”

Mei grimaced haplessly. “I’m sorry. But we’re a package deal.”

Jenny stared. Then she nodded quickly, once. “Sunset. I’ll be there.”

“All right, Jenny. It was nice to see you again!”

She nodded again and quickly, too quickly, slunk out. Taffet gave Mei a moment’s glance, then leapt down to chase after. Kiput looked to Mei apologetically.

It was funny, Mei reflected. Jenny had been his first new friend in this land, and as such, he’d been so excited by their friendship. Now, he had an assortment of creatures to socialize with, and every expectation of meeting more… and in this light, Jenny seemed thorny and lackluster. Still—she’d been willing to give him a chance before anyone else was, save Bepo. He owed her a certain amount of accommodation. Yes, it had crushed him when she left… but he found he did still want her in his life.

The 32nd Evening

Conversation was sporadic but gay on the hill that evening. Lala had apparently grilled all four birds on the experience of flying—to wit, what it was to be a bird. She waxed at length on the subject, gracefully springing from one place to another, staring into the distance and no doubt imagining herself with wings. This was not Lala as Mei knew her… except insofar as it seemed to express an impossible ambition, Mei supposed. He supposed, furthermore, that the ability to fly was not the absolute total of ‘what it was to be a bird’, and that if he were a bird, he might be offended at the presumption that it was. But for now he was glad to ask Lala simple questions, and smile at Gabu, and watch Gabu haplessly plunging onward through the flowers after Lala as she traipsed this way and that over the hill, trying to keep up.

When the narrow line of grass cut its way up the hilltop, interrupted by little lumps of russet showing through the green, Mei had actually forgotten he was expecting company. At first he wondered whether their sanctuary was being attacked. But then he remembered—Jenny. “Psst! Gabu!” he called. “We have company!”

Gabu double-took and trotted over. “Oh! Is it Jenny?”

Mei pointed out her approach through the grass. “You may want to hold back a bit… she’s rather shy.”

Gabu poinked straight up, making himself all the more obtrusive. But then, in a frenzy of hospitality, he scrambled into the lair and flopped to the floor, tail flat, legs dangling limply behind. “No problem! I’ll be practically invisible! I’ll be like a carpet of moss.”

Mei hurried after, eyes wide. “I… don’t think you need to go quite—”
The loud cluck of a tongue got Mei’s attention, followed by the word “Hey.” He spun about to find Jenny ten feet from the entrance.

“Oh, Jenny! I’m glad you came.”

Her expression was harsh. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mei was confused. “Why didn’t I tell you what?”

“Your friend. That he eats meat.”

Oh. Right. “I’m sorry, Jenny. I should have told you. I was just… waiting for the right time.”

“I guess the right time was when I heard from my aunt that Shaniku’d been chomped by something a thousand times her size.”

Mei winced. Jenny was being so hostile, but he couldn’t blame her. “I should have been upfront. After you left, I decided I’d been going about things wrong.”

She stared. Then she skittered forward and peered into the lair.

“Hi!” said Gabu, raising his head. “Glad you came to visit!”

“Don’t get up,” said Jenny. Gabu’s head flopped limp, his chin flat against the earth.

“You know, he felt terrible about it,” Mei told the squirrel.

Jenny took this in. “I can smell him. Doesn’t the smell bother you?”

“It used to,” Mei admitted. “But now… well, I actually think it’s nice.”

“He smells like… danger.”

“It took me half a month or so living with him to get used to it. I suspect we could get used to anyone’s smell, over time.”

Jenny crept inside, past Gabu, who followed her with his ears but remained otherwise perfectly flat. She sniffed the flowers in the nook. “Kinda withered. But you’ve been keeping them fresh, huh?”

Mei nodded. “Yes, although with all the excitement, I haven’t been changing them as often as I ought to.”

“What happened to the moss?”

“It wore out after a while. And it had such an odor I was worried it would help them track me.”

Jenny’s tail twitched. “Want a fresh batch? We could make it up again.”

Now that was what Mei had been hoping to hear. “I think I’d actually love that, Jenny. Would you be willing to help?”

She was. Thankfully, Jenny was willing to set aside her distaste for Mei’s companions and discuss the problem of comfort instead. Mei told her about removing the moss bed and how comfortable it had been in the meantime, and they discussed where to find the best replacement moss. But when Lala came over while they were near the cave mouth, Jenny was immediately on the defensive.
Lala sat down. “Why, hello!”
“You’re a monster too.”
“…I suppose you could say I’m a monstrously good person.”
“You eat flesh.”

While Lala was mulling how to respond to this, Gabu called to her in a low voice. “Pssst! Lala! Come over and be a carpet with me!”

She looked with bafflement between squirrel and carpet-wolf. Lips tight, she seemed to decide becoming a carpet wolf was a safer idea, and walked gingerly over to join Gabu on the lair’s floor.

She lowered herself carefully and extended her legs. “Like this?”

“Shh,” cautioned Gabu. “Carpet wolves don’t talk.”

“Ahh.” Lala set down her chin and went silent.

Jenny seemed annoyed by the display. “Why are they doing that?”

“I think they don’t want to get in your way,” said Mei. “Shall we go gather that moss?”

“Sure,” said Jenny. “Follow me?”

Mei was glad to get away from the awkwardness of the encounter. He just hoped the wolves weren’t still lying there when they got back. “Lead the way!” he told his companion.

When they got back, the wolves were still lying there. Mei blinked at the sight. Had they been prostrate like that the whole time? He and Jenny were hauling leaf bundles of spongy moss from the woods, his large and hers small, and they set them down outside the burrow. Jenny stared at the wolves in disbelief. “You’re still doing that?”

“It’s rather relaxing,” said Lala. “I became used to lying in wait on my way around the mountain.”

“Like an alligator,” remarked Gabu.

“Something like an alligator, yes!”

Mei had heard of alligators, but never seen one. “I guess you’ve been taking the chance to talk.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gabu. “Lala’s quite the conversationalist! For a carpet wolf.”

“Why, Gabu… don’t undersell yourself!”

Jenny stared some more, then turned to Mei. “They’re silly.”

Mei smiled. “That’s true. But it’s better than several alternatives.”

She chirped, appreciating this truth. Then she grabbed a mouthful of moss and ran in past the wolves. “Come on. Let’s build you a new bed.”
“Don’t mind us,” whispered Gabu. “We’re just made of moss.”

“You’re made of nasty teeth,” retorted Jenny as she cleared an area of twigs with her claws.

“Am I?” asked Lala, grinning brightly.

“Yep. Too many.”

“I’m sorry about all my teeth,” said Gabu. “But the sad fact is, I need them, or I wouldn’t survive.”

“I think that Jenny and I rather need our teeth too,” Mei suggested, hoping she’d agree.

“You two say a lot for carpets,” was all she said.

Mei laid down the moss after Jenny cleared the ground with her nimble fingers. He patted it down with his hooves and she filled in the cracks. “I think that feels rather nice,” he suggested.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll come and sleep over.”

Oh! “That would be a delight! You wouldn’t mind sharing the lair with… my friends?”

She huffed. “Maybe if they’re out sometime.”

Unfortunately, this place was coming to belong more to the wolves than to him. “I’m not sure when that will happen. It would be nice to have you over sometime to try out the bed, though. Do you remember your dreams? Maybe we could share them in the morning.”

“I have rather interesting dreams,” remarked Lala.

“About eating people?” challenged Jenny.

“Not most of them, no.”

“Then what?”

Lala let her head down softly. “You’ll have to sleep over sometime if you want to find out.”

Mei was of two minds whether he wanted to find out. He kept patting moss from his bundle into place. “Lala really is an interesting person. I was afraid of her at first, too. But often, I find there’s value inside a daunting exterior.”

“Like what?”

Mei was conscious of both wolves carefully attending to his words. “Well… from what I’ve heard of wolf culture, it’s much more… involved than my own. I’m constantly being amazed by Gabu’s kindness, and Lala… well, I have to admit she has interesting ideas.”

Lala’s smile suddenly turned to a wide-eyed gape, and Mei wondered whether he’d said the wrong thing. But her attention seemed inwardly turned, if anything.

“I don’t know if I want to hear them,” said Jenny, still scornful.

“Oh? Are you so content with the workings of your own mind?” teased Lala.

“Don’t need thoughts about schemes and coups,” said the squirrel. “My folks get along decent.”

“Are you sure?” asked Lala. “I’ve got…” She chuckled. “…a lot in me.”
Gabu looked oddly at her. “Lala?”

She smiled at him, turning her head but remaining otherwise flat. “I think lying here like this has jostled me about a bit.”

“Oh! Are you all right? Would you like to stand up?”

Lala raised her nose and closed her eyes, as if gazing inward. “I do feel a little disoriented. But it’s all for the best. I’ve just realized something. Gabu? Would you like to know a secret?”

Jenny was ignoring them now, back to cleaning the floor.

“A secret? What’s that, Lala?”

Lala grinned her brightest grin at the wolf beside her. “I’m pregnant.”

*Oh gosh.* Gabu leapt straight up, bonking his head on the roof. “Lala!!” he cried. His tail was wagging even before he landed, and just like that, Jenny was off like a shot, running reflexively.

“Oh, no. Jenny!” called Mei.

“Oh! Really?!” said Gabu.

Lala took her time standing up. “Would I joke about something like that? I just felt it myself.”

“Jenny!” yelled Mei, leaving the cave. But it was too late—the squirrel had been spooked and was dashing down the hill. “Please come back.”

“Yes, please come back!” echoed Lala, striding from the cave. “I only wanted to share my good news. The more the merrier, isn’t it?”

Gabu hurried after her, yelling to Jenny: “Wait! I’m sorry! I just learned I’m going to be a father!”

But she didn’t turn back. Mei sighed and watched his rodent friend go. Then he walked back to Gabu and nuzzled him firmly and fiercely on the face. “Congratulations.”

“Aww. Thanks, Mei. Lala, I can’t believe it! We’re going to be parents!”

Lala flicked her tail and sat gracefully. “No nuzzle for me?”

Well, that was asking a lot. But, Mei reasoned, this moment was only going to happen once. And once was how many times a person lived.

He went to Lala’s silver cheek and, tension filling his face, gave her the sweetest nuzzle he could manage. “Congratulations, Lala.”

Her body shook with gentle laughter. “Thank you, Mei. What should you think—should we name one after you?”

Oh! Now that was a thought that made Mei weak in the knees. He sank onto the soft flowers and found he didn’t know what to say or think.

~~~(\_/o)"
Birds fly! Mountains don't. Therefore, birds can fly over mountains and you can jump higher than a house.

“Who put a bee in your bonnet?” and “We’re a package deal” are borderline expressions for the setting. But Mei and Gabu’s lunch bundles could be called packages, and if Mei can rock a scarf, they may well have bonnets! Huh, now I wish I’d referred to Mei’s scarf at some point up to now.

In this chapter, Mei thinks of Jenny as the first friend he made in the Emerald Forest (and environs). For the record, Mei did meet Bepo first, but he didn’t instantly consider Bepo a friend… just an acquaintance. So it's technically true. Turns out she's kind of unpleasant, though!

The gestation period for gray wolves is around 63 days. Lala has been pregnant for seven days. She isn't feeling pups jostling inside; she's probably just feeling an atypical sort of nausea. But Lala is very self-attuned; I think it's reasonable for her to intuit her pregnancy a ninth of the way through.

I produced the newsletter for a convention this weekend and came home very tired and a little lazy—that's why this chapter is going up so late in the day! But it's still Monday in my time zone, and that's what counts. Right?
The Late Spring

Chapter Summary

* Will you | Would you
  Welcome him? | Be happy?

* Can I spit on you, too?

* Is there a right time and a wrong time to eat a goat?

* What are we going to play for Play Day?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 33rd Day

A message! | A message!
From Mei! | From Mei.
Your herdmate | Your grandson
Thinker | Traveler
Not dead | Not forgotten

Over valley | Over mountain
Muri Muri | Impossibility
A lair | A cave
A hilltop | Of grasses
Hilly fields | Sweet flowers

The wolf? | Still present.
Ever present | Ever faithful
Always kind | Never cruel
Your suspicions? | Your condemnation?
Were wrong. | All wrong.

No herd | No goats
But friends | New friends!
A muskrat | A rabbit
Two squirrels | Four birds
Three deer | Soon more!

His wolf? | Still hunts.
For him? | A mate!
Two moons | New cubs!
A pack | A herd
Of three. | Of many.

If soon | If soon
Mei’s chin trembled. It was like music, even without the sustained pitches of birdsong. “I think you have it,” he told the two leaf warblers. “It’s very beautiful.”

“Your message,” said Haburo, fluttering down to the wet grass.

“Your life,” echoed Hatsu, settling beside him.

It had rained that morning. There was a sense of relief—the Emerald Forest had been having an exceptionally dry spring, and some of the animals, they reported, were even whispering about whether it was somehow due to the strange outsiders; whether the gods above had decided to parch their land in order to extinguish these dangerous strangers. The morning’s rain had therefore given Mei a doubled sense of safety. The brook club wasn’t meeting that day, but he’d gone wandering anyway and been spotted by Hatsu and Haburo. That, he reasoned, was a prime opportunity to teach them his message. They’d been more than generous—agreeing to deliver the message for nothing, and even volunteering an hour of their time to refine it into their own fragmentary speech.

“You’re very kind,” said Mei. “And you understand the instructions? How to find the valley?”

“Understanding,” said Hatsu.

“Orientation,” said Haburo.

That was a yes, Mei believed. “I’ll be very grateful if you manage to find my herd. If you want me to do anything in return… please just ask.”

The two flapped their wings, rising only inches into the air and switching places. Mei got the sense it was their way of acknowledging his gratitude.

“More rain,” said Haburo, looking at the sky.

“Thunderstorm,” said Hatsu.

Was there really going to be a thunderstorm? The dark clouds coloring the northeast made it seem certainly possible. “Do you know,” said Mei, “I don’t think there’s been a real thunderstorm here since I came over the mountain.”

“Drought’s end,” said Hatsu.

“Water’s gift,” echoed Haburo.

If there was a thunderstorm, it wouldn’t do to be caught on Sneaky Bluff, would it? Mei would have to make his way home and graze there. “It’s odd… I’m afraid of storms. At least, that’s what I know about myself. I’ve always been afraid of thunder and lightning. And yet…”

The two birds flapped up and circled each other for a moment before landing. Mei couldn’t even guess the point of it. “…and yet,” he continued, “I find that I’m actually looking forward to this. I’ll get to be snug at home, with my best friend…” And then he realized. “Oh, of course! It was during a storm that I met him! Well, that’s remarkable. I… I think I may actually like
The birds peered at Mei in silence. For the next few seconds, they seemed to be maneuvering to be the one who peered more closely at him, as if it were a competition. Then they stood still.

“Well. If you deliver the message, I’ll be very grateful,” he told them.

“Our pleasure,” said Hatsu courteously.

“Our duty,” said Haburo.

Mei was touched. “But it can certainly wait until after the storm,” he told them.

“After,” agreed Haburo.

“After,” concurred Hatsu. With that, the two fluttered nearly straight up, circled tightly, and zipped away to the southwest.

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**The 35th Day**

Trembling could be a sign of danger, or of anger, or it could be a very good thing indeed. Today, Lala reflected, her trembling was a sign of satisfaction. She and Gabu had done well last night. It was a good thing—they’d been getting by on scant portions ever since the honeymoon, and Lala was eating for several now. She felt like she’d hardly been even eating for one! It had tempted her stomach and her sense of prudence to go off into the far-flung forests and dine there, leaving Gabu to tend to his friendship quests on his own for a while. But her sense of adventure, paradoxically, tempted her to stay behind, at home. Home was where the real adventure was taking place, these days.

Somehow, Lala’s trembling ceased when she reached the brook, where the locals were. She was at ease, even though she was out of her element and didn’t know what to expect. There was no need to impress anyone, though she surely wanted to. She was even tempted to stretch, to yawn, to show off her big belly filled with rabbit meat, to flash her lovely sharp teeth. Instead, she seated herself demurely on the soft earth, just far enough from the waterline to be dry. Her back feet were tucked neatly, nearly out of sight, and her tail was curled amply around, making it look like she carried her own bed with her. She lifted her head and relaxed her ears, projecting a sense that she was ready for business, as it were: a wolf ready to be approached. The question entertained her: Who would dare be the first?

Akiara, bless her soul, had an entourage with her. The storyteller leapt ahead, glancing back at the shy trio of rabbits levering themselves ever so cautiously from the woods, shying at the unmistakable wolf smell. Lala saw Mei get up and walk to greet them, but she chose to remain seated, peering their way with a friendly, only slightly toothy smile.

“Oh!” cried Gabu in his usual, guileless way. “Akiara—you’ve brought friends!”

The rabbit’s nose twitched affirmatively. “Hi. So. You two were busy last night, huh?”

They had been. They’d found a passage in the tallgrass meadow dug too close to the surface, and collapsed it. A whole chamber had been exposed, the rabbits within scattered. Lala and Gabu had each grabbed one on the instant, and another had fallen later in the confused aftermath. They’d also snagged a rabbit and two squirrels from the heath during their midday hunt. Lala’s belly was full and there a buried rabbit to spare; still, she knew she couldn’t expect this kind of windfall with any
regularity. The rabbits would learn to dig deeper tunnels; lean times would come again. Still, Lala broadened her smile. “We’re feeling comfortable today.”

“Right. Sure.” The brown lapine glanced back to make sure her companions weren’t scattering. “Remember how last time I told you about my sister’s ex, that you killed?”

Lala noticed Gabu frown and let her own smile fade. “I do.”

“Well, she’s here. I talked her into coming. I think she needs the therapy. Brought a couple others, too. Boscone and Frieda—no close relations to me, but you killed their father in that cave-in, and the doe you killed was Boscone’s cousin. Want to know their names?”

Gabu made a guttural noise, unmistakably sad. “Well, if you want to tell me…”

“I’d be honored,” said Lala.

Akiara looked neutrally at her, but the black and white doe at the edge of the trees glared at her. “Killer,” she snapped.

“Ease yourself,” said Coryn. He was standing off to the side, watching over things, as was his wont.

“Yeah,” said Akiara. She looked at Gabu. “Lots of us knew the folks you killed, but these three are taking it hard. I suggested they could maybe come and yell at you. If that’s okay.”

Gabu’s ears flitted in surprise. “Oh, I see. Well.” He lay down more fully, putting his eyes on level with the visitors. “That’s certainly reasonable. I guess they can spit in my face, too, if they like.”

Lala gaped, but caught herself. Did he mean that literally? Oh, Gabu. Of course he did. Was that what he deemed a fitting remedy for the gash their natural enmity had wrought? Spittle in the face as a healing agent?


Gabu shrugged. “If it would make them feel better. I hate the fact that I’ve brought your companions grief.” But in his tone, even through the remorse, Lala detected a certain satisfaction. A kind of relief that came just from the offering.

“You know, you don’t deserve that kind of treatment,” said Mei, pacing back.

“It’s all right. Hello everyone—I’m Gabu.” He addressed the quavering rabbits behind Akiara. “I’m glad you came to see me. If you’d like to say anything to me… or spit on me… well, that’s perfectly fine. I guess you may as well line up.”

So they did. It was quite the spectacle—first came Rosie, the bereaved lover who looked a lot like Akiara, but with curvier hips, and an unmistakably meeker comportment. She told Gabu quietly about the day she’d met Paolo… and the way he’d courted her. Lala walked over and reseated herself next to Gabu so she could better hear. “And he was attractive?” she asked.

“He was. He wasn’t my first, but he was… he redefined what it meant to be in love. For me.” The quiet brown rabbit sat back, assessing things. “You took him from our colony. Both of you. You should be ashamed.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Gabu.
“It is what it is,” said Lala.

Rosie trembled with anger, too dry to ignite. She worked to harness her trembling, and Lala reflected on what a great many emotions such a thing could bespeak. Then Rosie spat on Gabu. A rabbit’s spit was a small thing, but the symbolism of being disrespected in such a way… well, the social climber in Lala recoiled at the sight. Gabu just sniffled and took it. He didn’t even wipe his cheek.

“Can I spit on you too?” whispered the doe to Lala, now scared anew.

Lala looked cynically to Gabu. “Do I have to?”

“You don’t have to, Lala,” he replied. “But I think it would be the kind thing to do.”

Lala sighed. Let this be a test of her constitution. “Spit away,” she commanded.

Ungh. She could feel it. She couldn’t forget where it had landed.

Having spat on both the wolves, Rosie moved on. The other doe, Frieda, stepped up and did the same—telling the wolves about her beloved father, berating them for destroying him, spitting on their noses and mouths. The buck was quieter, but even angrier; he’d lost two loved ones. He turned around and sprayed Gabu in the face, as if marking him as his own, without even asking. Gabu whimpered but didn’t draw back. No—that was where Lala drew the line. “I’ll pass on that, thanks,” she told the sandy rabbit.

He gave her a hateful look, but no more words, before hopping slowly away.

“Gabu,” Lala whispered. “You have urine dripping from your face. Are you going to wipe it?”

He shrugged and did so, reluctantly, saying nothing. Lala felt a pang of shame—did the fact she’d refused to get sprayed mean she was a coward? Lala didn’t like being a coward. But she tucked the thought away for later.

“Well,” said Akiara to her group. “Hope that helped. You guys want to stick around, or…?”

“Not sure,” said the quiet Rosie. “What’s going to happen?”

The animals looked between each other. Then little Itsuko, the muskrat, spoke up. “Well, I, uh… I was hoping to ask…” He turned around awkwardly, facing the wolves. “…um… what it feels like to eat someone.”

Ooh—Lala liked this one. But Wilhelm snorted in disgust.

“Are you sure that’s appropriate?” asked Bedelia.

Itsuko quailed back. “I was just curious.”

“I’d be glad to describe it,” said Lala obligingly, drawing herself up. “In great detail. Of course, there’s tearing apart, and then there’s mastication and digestion. Were you interested in any particular part of the process?”

“All right,” said Rosie, turning around. “I’m outta here.”

“Fair call,” said Akiara. “All right, folks—I’ll be back in half an hour. Gonna escort these grievers home.”
The squirrels were lurking in the cattails nearby. “Do we really have to hear about the process of disassembling a living person?” asked Kiput.

“Well, I intend to stay and hear,” said Taffet. “You can go close your ears and hum if you want.”

Kiput sighed and slumped against her.

And Lala took that as her cue to begin. She sat a little higher. “To begin with, Itsuko, do you know what a ‘sinew’ is?”

It was going to be a good day.

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**The 36th Morning**

Gabu laughed through his leaps! He had no breath to spare for vocal laughter, but that didn’t matter—it was just as easy to express the same emotion in the way he landed—all four legs straight, then bending a moment later, instead of falling directly into a crouch. To lower the hindlegs with the back bowed; to lower the forelegs with the hindlegs straight; to pounce with each pair of legs separately instead of as a group—these were cub’s tricks, but weren’t they still just as fun as ever? Gabu laughed his way in funny, unpredictable leaps all around Flowery Hill. Lala watched him and countered with her own games, leaping too far and gathering herself before leaping on. Landing overextended, jumping jerkily, eying him as he eyed her back. It was like they’d forgotten that walking was even an option. It was wonderful to have enough energy to spare for play! Gabu missed play. Playing with another wolf was so much fun!

The sun was bright and there were birds singing. There was a breeze, too, but it was hard to keep track of where it was blowing from with all this circular leaping. Gabu was thinking of breaking suddenly into a straight-up sprint around the hill, and wondered whether he’d catch Lala off guard if he did. But then Mei, who was watching peacefully from the hill’s base, cleared his throat. Gabu, who was crouched uphill at an angle, turned his attention to the goat and lost his balance. He wheeled his forelegs, spun around, and caught himself in an even more awkward downward slant. “Whoa!”

That was when Gabu saw the birds. The two green warblers were circling Mei, who was smiling brightly at him.

“Gabu—guess what? I have news!”

Gabu scampered down the hill and leapt, landing at Mei’s hooves. “The birds are back!” He peered at each of them; they flew just a little further back in response.

Mei chuckled. “They are indeed. And Gabu—it’s good news!”

“Really?” Gabu felt his tail wagging.

“Well.” Mei sat down; the birds landed on the ground to either side of him. “According to Haburo and Hatsu, my herd was amazed to hear I was still alive. They were even more amazed to hear that I’m living with you—according to the birds, they were certain by now you would have gobbled me up!” The goat’s eyes closed for a moment and a huge grin took over his face.

“Well,” said Gabu. “Maybe I just haven’t gotten around to it yet. You have to give some things time, after all.”
Mei opened his eyes, looking quizzical. “Is there a right time and a wrong time to eat a goat?”

Gabi decided Mei would know he wasn’t serious. “Maybe I have to let all of your experiences simmer and mix inside of you! A goat who eats healthy grass and clover tastes better than one who eats the straggly kind. Maybe a goat who’s filled with joy and friendship is the best-tasting kind!”

Mei cocked an ear, blue eyes wondering, but then he smiled again. “Ahh. So by being my best friend, you’re really just fattening me up!”

“That’s right!” said Gabi. “And the more years I enjoy your friendship, the tastier you’ll finally be when it’s time to eat you!”

“Well. I guess so long as my life is happy and fulfilling beyond all my expectations in the meantime, I can’t really complain!” said Mei.

“Is that the angle I’ve been missing?” said Lala, finally arriving around the hill’s side.

“Well,” said Gabi. Somehow, the idea of joking about making a meal out of Mei didn’t seem so appealing when it came to her. “Does this mean you’ll want to go back and visit them?”

“I think so,” said Mei. “The best part is, the warblers said the remaining wolves aren’t all that dangerous. They haven’t reformed into a pack yet, and when the warblers asked the wolves about me, they didn’t seem to care. I... think that means it would be safe to go back... for a little while.”

Gabi sat and thought. “All by yourself, Mei? You know I can’t go with you. Your herd would run away the moment I came near!”

“That’s true, sadly. I wish it weren’t that way. But I think it’s possible Hatsu and Haburo might be willing to accompany me. Is that what you were offering?”

“Unity,” said Hatsu, fluttering a few inches up.

“Family,” said Haburo, doing the same.

“Is that a yes?” asked Lala.

“I think that’s a yes. I asked if there was anything I could do in return... but it seems like they’re willing to help me out of the sheer goodness of their hearts.”

Gabi sat there, feeling his own heart thumping. He was still exhilarated from the leaping... and he found that the sight of the little green-brown birds filled him with happiness now. “Do you know what, Mei? I think that may be the best reason to do anything.”

Lala chuckled dryly. “I’m not sure it’s really a reason. More like a reservoir.”

“So,” said Mei. “I was thinking.”

Gabi tried to keep himself balanced as he sat on the hill’s slope. “Yes, Mei?”

“Well...” The goat shook out his tension, his ears flapping for a moment. “The other night, you and Lala were talking about how hard it would be to provide for yourselves when Lala is closer to delivering... not to mention when she has to nurse her litter. You said you were scared that you wouldn’t be able to provide for the whole family, handicapped as you are.”

That was the term Lala had used—'handicapped'. It was a concept that came from cub’s play—one cub would fight another while keeping its head low to the ground, for example. By limiting what
they were allowed to do, cubs learned how to deal with difficult situations later in life. And they certainly had a lot of fun doing it. Similarly, by hunting only every three days, and by promising the prey that they would never break that schedule, Lala and Gabu were handicapping themselves. They were also handicapped by the lack of a pack, and soon the birth of their pups would handicap them further. Gabu didn’t think he could cope with so many handicaps. He gulped. “That’s true—I am more than a little worried about it.”

“Well…” Mei spoke cautiously. “Perhaps, when Lala is closer to having her pups…the two of you should go someplace further away. Two or three forests from here, perhaps. You could leave the Emerald Forest and our friends, just long enough to have your children and raise them to the point they can start to fend for themselves. It would give the local creatures a respite from being hunted, but they would know you’re planning to come back. And meanwhile… I could go back to my herd. I miss them quite a bit, you know.”

Gabu was flooded with mixed emotions. It seemed to make sense, but… “Mei… I don’t know if I want to spend that long away from you. I’d miss you so much.”

One goat’s ear went lop. “Well, and I’d miss you too, Gabu. But maybe after a month, or even just a few days, with my herd, I could come back and find you, wherever you’d relocated to. You could lead me there to begin with, to make sure I knew where to go… or we could even use the warblers as go-betweens.”

“You know?” said Lala. “I like this plan.”

“Do you?” asked Gabu.

She slunk around him, between him and Mei, and sat down. “I like the idea of taking a break. Giving the folks here a chance to live without us. Will they be happy we’re gone, or will some of them… actually come to miss us? I’m curious. And raising our children in the normal way will be so much easier without this schedule.”

Gabu still wasn’t sure. “But what about after Mei joins us, wherever we end up? What then?”

“Well,” chuckled Mei, “you certainly won’t have to hunt me every three days anymore. I think we can all admit that would be a relief. And I’d be glad to watch the pups for you so that you could both go out hunting, or patrolling, or whatever you’d care to do. I’m sure I could handle a bunch of wolf pups.”

The idea seemed utterly precious to Gabu. “Oh, Mei! You’d babysit for us?”

“I’d be delighted! And that way, hopefully the pups would learn not to eat goats, without us even having to teach them.”

“Assuming that’s a lesson we want them to learn,” interjected Lala.

“Well, and isn’t it? I mean… I suppose…” And Mei went silent, frowning. “I suppose if we ever invite other goats into our little society, we’ll have to… well, you’ll have to hunt us all together. But if that happens… I think I’d rather have pups that have to be taught to hunt for goats, rather than pups who have to be taught not to hurt them when it isn’t time for hunting.”

“Hm,” said Lala.

“Well, Mei, I think that makes sense.” Gabu wagged his tail again. “And… I think we ought to do it. It sounds like an adventure.”
“Life,” said Haburo, raising his wings.

“Adventure,” chirped Hatsu, doing the same.

Gabu’s heart kept pounding, more softly now. He was a creature of habit—he liked it when good things stayed the same. The idea of uprooting everything, if only for a few months, troubled him. But it all seemed to make sense, and everyone thought it was a good idea… so Gabu would square his shoulders and embrace the adventure. After all, if he was only going to be a father once, he might as well make sure it was a memorable experience!

Mei rubbed his face against Gabu’s. “I’m sure it will all work out perfectly,” he said, smiling intensely.

“And if not perfect,” added Lala, “it should at least be interesting!”

Gabu forced himself to chuckle and nuzzle back. He felt his tail wagging still, and felt powerless to stop it.

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**The Late Spring**

Time passed.

Rain came. Mei did indeed find that he liked the sound of thunder now, and while he still jumped at each sizzling bolt of lightning, this reaction didn’t bother him—he came to actually enjoy the excitement of it! So long as he had Gabu (and sometimes Lala) to wait out the storm with him, he was content… and if he didn’t, he could make it bearable just by imagining that he did. And with the drought’s end, the grasses became greener, and the forbs fuller, and the flowers brighter. And the lands Mei knew as the Emerald Forest became as worthy of the name as the greenest depths of the forest itself.

The brook club, as it was known, began to grow. One of Itsuko’s sisters, curious about this group of grown-ups he spent so much time gabbing about, joined them and came back day after day. Later, the rest of his family even dared to join the group from time to time; Gabu befriended their father, Jakomi, who gave him advice on what to expect from fatherhood. Fujiko returned sporadically, as did a few other squirrels, while Jenny made a habit of visiting Mei at home every so often to discuss improvements. A pair of chipmunks joined the club, and a blue and white flycatcher, and a reed bunting. More deer joined the three in charge from time to time, watching timidly from cover of the woods.

Akiara continued to let the wolves know exactly which rabbits from her warren, or that had once been associated with it, they had killed, and she continued to bring their bereaved loved ones along to tell the wolves off, or to cry before them, twitching, or to ask them why, or simply to talk about those they’d known. And indeed, a good number of them chose to spit in the wolves’ faces, and the wolves took it and never complained. (Except for once when Lala got spit in her mouth when she’d been trying to talk—on that occasion she complained. But otherwise, never.)

The club also moved beyond the place where the brook met the edge of the woods. They still tended to gather there, but their little society began to take field trips. They walked slowly through the forest, letting themselves be seen and heard. They visited the edge of the largest community of squirrels in the wood, and on another day they visited the periphery of the chipmunk colony. Mei and Gabu showed the club their hilltop lair, and everyone took turns going inside to breathe the
wolf-laden air. They had game days in the broadest meadows, with races and relays and tail wars, Mother May and Catch-as-Catch-Can and freeze tag and Leto’s Word. Mei and Gabu told everyone about their tradition of spending every one day out of every six together just to play, and this became the group’s tradition. Itsuko and his sister took to chanting in practiced unison, “What are we going to play for Play Day?”

Taffet, the loud squirrel, shared with everyone her intention to inculcate a monkey into the club. Whenever they walked through the jungle anywhere near the monkeys’ territory, she would call up to them: “Heeeey Monkey Monkey! Come and talk! What makes you so special that you won’t talk?” Or other taunts of that kind. She reported having gotten into quite a few debates as a result of this behavior, but in every case the monkeys refused to join them. “They called us an abomination,” she said. “And I said, ‘But apart from that, what’s wrong with us?’ There could be good abominations, couldn’t there?”

The rotation of days lent itself to tradition and ritual. Play Day always fell before a hunting day, which led some animals to worry about being tired out… but so long as the wolves ran hard and played hard, the prevailing wisdom came to be that they would be tired out, too. So Lala and Gabu were always invited to join in every game, and they accepted most invitations. They took to sleeping heavily into their hunting days, then going out once in the day and once in the evening or night… though Lala insisted on switching it up now and then to keep the locals on their toes.

It was Wilhelm who came up with the nomenclature ‘Firsthunt’ and ‘Secondhunt’, in which Play Day came before Secondhunt… as Gabu reported that it had back when he’d begun his schedule. The days after hunting tended to be somber ones, in which, as Coryn put it, “hearts must be allowed to still, and holes in our lives be contemplated.” These, he said, were “days of talking,” and of grieving, and of “gossip that leaps from one grove to the next.” Naturally enough, the animals started to call these Talkdays, or Talking, as in: “We’ll get together Talking next,” or “See you on Talking if we’re both quick enough!” This left one day unnamed out of each six, and the gap was filled easily enough by Akiara’s suggestion: Before Firsthunt comes Storyday, or Story for short. This was when the animals told each other stories of their lives, or of their ancestors’ lives, or the lives of others they’d known, or the stories of their culture, or failing all of that, stories they made up themselves.

It was on a Storyday that Bedelia told them all the legend of Chirin the Ram, whose mother had been slain by a wolf in his youth and who had sworn vengeance, only to take his mother’s killer as his mentor for lack of anyone else to teach him to fight. Gabu and Lala had sat stunned during this tale, blinking rarely. It was on another Storyday that Taffet (with occasional corrections and asides from Kiput) told the exciting tales of Ratatoskr, the messenger squirrel who supposedly skitters up and down the tree at the heart of the world, carrying messages between the eagle who watches all things and the serpent who gnaws at the world tree’s root. On another Storyday, Lala countered with the story of Fenrir, the once playful wolf who grew gigantic so fast that he became distrusted, and in his downfall swore to swallow the moon and sun. On another occasion, Itsuko’s mother, Umenoki, tittered to get the group’s attention and then delivered the story of the Three Little Pigs, a trio of brothers who thought they could build homes strong enough to withstand wolf attacks. (The wolf in this story came to a bad end, at which Gabu and Lala exchanged a wide-eyed glance.) And on yet another Storyday, Mei related the story of the three Billy Goats Gruff, which the chipmunks and muskrats liked so much they later adapted it into a play, with Mei himself tapped to play the starring role.

One day, a little mouse who lived in the scrub beside the brook came upon a meeting of the club and asked, in its simple way, about their customs. It was given patient and thorough answers, just as was anyone who asked. Akiara mentioned their regular pattern of activities, and the mouse asked “Why? Why do this?” To which Coryn responded simply, in order not to confuse the wee creature,
“It is the way of things with us.”

The mouse, Ciru, did indeed join the club. In the private tongue of mice, as it turned out, there was a word for ‘the way of things’ or ‘the way that things change’. Ciru shared this word with the club: ‘week’. It seemed a funny word at first, but Taffet liked it, and so did the warblers, and gradually the animals started to refer to their six-day week:

- Firsthunt
- First Talking
- Playday
- Secondhunt
- Second Talking
- Storyday

And this, dear reader, is how the week came to be.

Remarkably—and some speculated Leto herself might have had a paw in it—it was not for quite some time that the first member of the brook club was killed by the wolves in hunting. Arguably, it was the rabbit Tia, who became sick from a parasite and unable to react quickly when the wolves came… but she had only attended occasionally and tended to stay out of activities, so by the reckoning of most, it was Jakomi, Itsuko’s father, who was first among them to die. On the hunt, Gabu and Lala had been delighted to discover the rebuilt muskrat burrow, whose location the muskrats, despite their general friendliness, had never been willing to divulge. Gabu leapt into the structure with instinctive abandon, his mind racing with excitement. But when the meaty male smashed under his paw turned out to be Jakomi... the very person whose advice about fatherhood had been rattling around Gabu’s mind… well, he wasn’t so happy. He cried tears over the body by the stream, in the midst of the ravaged burrow. And Lala stood by his side and licked him, and groomed him. She agreed to eat all the meat, for Gabu didn’t want it.

The next day was a grim one for the brook club. None of the muskrats were there, but somehow half the club had heard, and the rest soon found out. When Mei and the wolves arrived, there were a lot of glares their way—baleful or sad. Gabu sighed a deep, high-pitched sigh and lay down, and Lala sat quietly in the back of things. Slowly, into the silence, the animals started to talk about Jakomi and their memories of him, even if these were brief and few. Eventually, Gabu dared to add a memory of his own—and this, Mei later reflected, might have been the pivotal moment for this strange, impossible society. Was the murderer allowed to mourn the murdered? Or would he be shouted down?

Into the silence entered only birdsong. The brown-headed thrush, Tsume, sang a song that began as disconnected trills, but became a full-fledged melody of remembrance. The warblers joined in, followed by the flycatcher and the bunting. Then one of the younger does, who kept to the edge of things, chimed in, agreeing with Gabu, and saying such a sad thing it was that the muskrat children would have only one parent going forward… but at least they had what seemed, to her, to be a loving community to support them. And there was a chorus of voices and sentiments that followed, all in agreement.

It was at that moment that Aiko, the chestnut-cheeked starling who had been watching the club from the early days, hoping to see it collapse in doom and failure, flew away. She was never seen again.

~n=n> `|*|` >$< `|*|` <n=n~
Now you know how the week was invented! Bet you didn't realize this was a Just So Story. Now if you'll allow us to just speed ahead fifty days, O Best Beloved…

Up to this point in the story, the number of chapters has kept even pace with the number of days. This is where that correspondence starts to break down. Readers of my pony novel The Pony Who Lived Upstairs may recall a similar thing happening at a similar place in the overall story.

The last section of this chapter, which covers so much time, was originally its own chapter. I combined the two in order to make room for another chapter before the story’s end, while still limiting myself to the promised 42 chapters. Ah, the problems of the conscientious writer with semi-arbitrary self-constraints!

Self-handicapping is also a thing among playing wolf cubs! Yay for woofies and doggies. They're so fun!

Imagine that the warblers deliver each line in the opening section with a small amount of overlap, and pause to gauge reactions between each stanza.

Can rabbits actually spit? I don't know. I don't think there's much call for them to in the wild, and it seems like a strange thing to try to train them to do. But I suspect if they were sufficiently intelligent and sufficiently moved, they could manage.

What is a 'tail war'? Probably something like a thumb war. And 'Leto's Word' is likely a variant of Simon Says.

The story of Chirin the Ram is from the 1978 animated feature Chirin no Suzu (Ringing Bell), which has been compared to Arashi no Yoru Ni. Ratatoskr and Fenrir are from Norse mythology; the Three Little Pigs are from an English fairy tale and the Billy Goats Gruff from a Norwegian one.

When I originally posted this chapter, I had also just finished posting my retro Pac-Man fanfic "The Direction of Your Eyes"! Check it out on this site.
The 83rd Day

Chapter Summary

* Is that really a requirement? Being like the one you fall in love with?
* Perhaps we should consider our options?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 83rd Morning

“If I may,” said Kiput, crawling over to a medium-sized tree all ascramble with branches, “I’d like to show you something. A treat for the senses. Or so I hope—I realize there’s a bit of space between your senses and mine.” The tree’s limbs were exploding with green pinnate leaves, bundles of green nuts hung in between.

Mei looked anxiously into the woods, where Jenny was off finding something. She wouldn’t be back for a while, it seemed. He looked curiously back to his other squirrel companion, who’d decided to tag along today. Mei was growing closer to Kiput and his mate Taffet, and was glad for the chance to say goodbye before his great adventure.

Kiput paused at the tree’s base as if to take stock before leaping up—a quirk of his Mei had noticed—and scaled the tree swiftly. He went to one of the nut bundles and carefully reached out. “I don’t suppose you’ve ever given these much notice?”

Mei investigated the double row of green fuzzy treasures. “I’m afraid not. I don’t go in much for nuts, personally.” But he was open to learning more, and it came through in his tone.

“No, no… I thought as much. Opposed incisors… that’s the key to it.” Kiput flashed his teeth, though from his modest height Mei could only barely make out the two sharp pairs. “You’ve only got them on the bottom, yes?”

“That’s true,” Mei admitted. “We goats have a dental pad on top. It’s not so good for chewing nuts.”

“Well.” Looking almost like he was about to fall, Kiput managed to reach a nut and carefully plucked it, letting it thump to the ground. “It’s a good thing you’ve got friends to tell you what you’re missing. Of course, you’ll tell me the same thing about greens, no doubt.” He skittered down the tree again and stood cordially before Mei.

“Well…” Mei chuckled. “Some plants are especially tender. But others are just… something to fill your stomach with. You never eat greens at all?”

“Doesn’t agree with the digestion,” said Kiput, knocking a nimble fist against his stomach. “Tree buds, yes. But those have substance to them. Can’t abide anything flat. Blossoms, grass, leaves… no good for me. But!” He leapt to the fallen nut and held it up. “Premium stuff, this. Work hard for your meals, that’s what I say, because that’s when they taste the best.”
“I don’t think Jenny feels that way,” said Mei, smiling.

“Indeed, well. Our Jennifer is… no gourmand, to say the least. She is a builder, I give her that. But some of us prefer… the aesthetic qualities of food.” He turned the nut over and over in his hands, cleaning the fuzz off. “Here, feel it.”

Mei took it in his mouth. It was smooth, but where the fuzz came off, it felt wooden and slightly angular. “It feels rather tough to crack,” he suggested.

“Ah yes, precisely.” Kiput took the nut back and held it up. “This is a heartnut. Type of walnut, technically. It is quite difficult to shell… but worth it, in my opinion, unless you’re stark out of energy. Notice the shape? The indent?” He tapped a concave spot on the nut’s top.

“It did feel a bit irregular.”

“It’s what they call a heart shape. Shape of the heart, they say, though I imagine squirrel hearts and goat hearts sit a bit differently in their respective cages. Symbol of passion, we call it.”

“Passion,” Mei repeated. “Well, I suppose it’s at the most passionate moments that our blood really flows.”

“Quite, quite.” Kiput gnawed the nut’s crown, trying to get purchase next to the indentation he’d pointed out. His tail flicked sharply. “There’s a bit of a trick to it… finding the weaknesses, as it were.”

Mei watched with curiosity. “Does it take long?”

“Sometimes a heartnut can be a dastardly thing,” admitted the squirrel. But then came a crack, and he stood gripping it proudly, a hole visible. “But once you get purchase, the rest comes off like a breeze,” he said with pride. “One moment.”

Mei watched him gnaw the shell loose, bit by bit, for a few sustained moments. It wasn’t long before the nut’s meat sat bare in the rodent’s paws. It was brown, and even now reminded Mei of tree wood.

“Care for a taste?”

“Maybe just a sliver?” Mei suggested.

“Certainly. Allow me.” Kiput gnawed the nut until it broke naturally in half, then broke off a chunk from the outer meat—it was visibly hollow within. “Try this,” he said, offering it up.

Mei did. He appreciated the taste, though it wasn’t what he was used to. He crunched it between his molars. “Much softer than the shell was.”

“Indeed. Indeed! And there you have the secret.” He held up the halved nut, its inside looking even more heartlike than the outside. “The secret of the heart, in short—it’s, er. It’s always softer on the inside.”

Mei sighed. “I’m going to miss you.”

Kiput set down the nut and faced his friend. “I suppose that’s what I was driving at too. Heartnut. Gets to the pith of the matter, you know.”

Now Jenny emerged from the woods with a batch of little pink-tipped sprigs in her mouth. She saw
the nut and its shell and looked between the two. “You were showing him a heartnut.”

Kiput tipped the other half toward her with a hind foot. “Quite—care for a nibble? I think it’s not quite to our friend’s taste.”

Jenny put down her burden and picked up the treat. The two squirrels nibbled, looking at Mei. “It’s gonna be weird with you gone,” said Jenny.

Mei couldn’t help but chuckle. “So soon? We’ve only known each other since the start of the season.”

“Yeah but. You’re a fixture. Everyone talks about you. We’ll have to go back to talking about… whatever Taffet thinks is interesting.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” said Kiput, still nibbling.

“She’s a loudmouth,” said Jenny.

“She has an exceptionally vibrant spirit,” Kiput retorted. “And she happens to have won my heart.”

Jenny faced Mei. “No one knows why those two are together. They’re not much alike.”

“Is that really a requirement?” asked Mei. “Being like the one you fall in love with?”

“Well,” said Jenny. “Guess not.”

“We are alike, in spirit,” said Kiput. “I’m not sure I can explain it to you.”

“That’s fine,” said Jenny. “I’ll take your word for it.”

Mei sighed happily as he watched the squirrels eat. “These pink sprigs… are they for me?”

Jenny nodded. “I was gonna braid ’em up. Something to go in your hair.”

“Hm!” uttered Kiput appreciatively. “Around a horn, perhaps? If you’re feeling ambitious?”

“I was thinking behind an ear,” she replied.

“Ah.” He examined Mei’s face thoughtfully. “Yes, I can see that. Not unreasonable. Are you really done already? Gracious, Jennifer, you eat fast.”

“You eat slow,” she answered. “Here, Mei. Lemme show you how they fit together.”

By the time Kiput was done with his meal, Mei had a tiny but noticeable little splash of pink blossom just behind his right ear. He couldn’t see how it looked, but Jenny assured him it was pretty. “If those wolves don’t notice, you’ll have to tell them to look harder.”

“I will, Jenny. Thank you,” said Mei.

It was about time to meet up with the group at the brook. It wasn’t going to be an easy goodbye, but this little gathering had made it easier.
The 83rd Day

Gabu felt itchy. All through the day, he’d been sporadically overcome by itchiness, racing to rub himself against something—the cave wall, a tree, a rock, anything that would serve. Of course, he knew why he had to scratch—it was the start of summer and he had to shed his thick undercoat. This happened every year, and Lala was doing the same. But somehow, Lala made it look graceful, even beautiful, shedding her tufts of excess fur. Gabu wanted to whine. He rubbed vigorously until there was no more fur to shed, leaving him sore…but then a few minutes later, he’d itch in a different spot. It had never felt quite like this before.

On a deeper level, though—an undercoat level, really—he knew why. He was anxious. He didn’t want to leave this new home, with his new friends. He was worried about everything to come—finding a new territory, building a new burrow, becoming a father. Becoming a father! He didn’t know how to raise pups—he didn’t yet feel like he was a full, complete adult wolf himself. He was getting there, yes, but…was he ready for this? Not to mention that once Lala was close to term, all the responsibility for getting food would fall on him.

There was hope in his heart for the months to come, but plenty of fear, too. The one piece of relief was that he was going to get to stop hunting his best friend. He’d gotten used to it, true. On yesterday’s hunt through the thicket, he’d barely felt any of the nervous undercurrent that had thrown off his performance in the past. Mei knew what to do—he was good at evading the wolves on Huntdays. They had his scent at the start of every hunt, but after losing his trail, they’d only found it again a couple of times, and they’d never once laid eyes on him during a hunt. But then again, Gabu wasn’t sure he could tell his jitters about Mei from his jitters about the journey they were about to begin.

Mei would be coming with them, which was a huge blessing. It made him feel lifted whenever he remembered it. But at some point soon, Mei would depart to go and visit his herd, back in Sawa Sawa Valley. The pups would probably be born when he wasn’t there. Then at some point he’d return, and start babysitting, and Lala would be able to spend some of her time hunting again, although of course she’d still have to nurse them. It was all so uncertain, and Gabu didn’t even know what kind of home to envision.

Mei rubbed against Gabu to reassure him as they walked down to the brook. That felt good. “Mmmn,” he moaned. “A little bit to the right. Hey Mei? I know you’re always careful to avoid scratching me with your horns…but you can use your horns just this once. I’m really itchy under there. Mmmmm, oh yeah! That really hits the spot. Thanks, Mei.”

Lala chuckled. “Shedding hard, are we?”

Gabu shrugged and started walking again. “What can I say, Lala? There’s just so much to shed.”

The figures of the deer were the first to come into view, as usual. Gabu found himself wanting to sob. He and Lala had been focusing on deer recently. They’d discovered where some of the young, inexperienced fawns had been hiding, and had taken one by surprise a few weeks earlier. Since then, they’d been trying to sniff out their new hiding places—noticeing bent and broken branches and such—and had killed two more deer, one young and one old. The deer were getting skittish—yet the normal group was still there to greet them.
Bedelia bowed evenly at the shoulders. “Our friends,” she said as they approached the usual spot. There were rabbits there, and chipmunks and squirrels and birds and muskrats. The whole atmosphere felt somber.

“Good morning, everyone,” Mei greeted, walking ahead. Gabu noticed a spot of something pink behind his ear. A goodbye gift from someone, probably.

There was a muted chorus of “Good mornings” and such. The leaf warblers, who were planning to follow at a distance before joining Mei on his journey, fluttered up, then down again in turn without a word.

And there were whispers from one animal to the next. One of the muskrat whelps was asking her mother something; the chipmunks were chirping quietly; in the back, Akiara was addressing her companions as she often did. Coryn stepped forward into the heart of the group, drawing attention.

“It is hard to know what to say, at a time like this,” he said.

Gabu decided to take it by the neck. “Well,” he said, looking over the assembled animals, “I’m going to miss you. I’m going to miss you a lot. And I know you don’t necessarily feel the same way… since after all, you’ll be a lot safer while we’re gone… but… even so…” He didn’t know quite how to finish.

“It even so,” Lala continued, “I hope there’s a little part of you, a little perverse part, that misses us too.”

Yeah. That was basically what he was trying to say.

“You’re gonna go and have babies?” asked one of the youngest muskrats, from the next litter after Itsuko. Gabu’s heart was warmed by the fact they’d started coming back, even after he… took their father away.

Lala jiggled her belly. “They’re getting antsy,” she explained. “They won’t wait too much longer.”

“I’m glad you’re going to go terrorize a new place and give us a break,” announced Taffet. She was on the ground now, having braved to come down from Bedelia’s neck some weeks before.

“I’ll second that,” added Wilhelm. “Though I can’t say I wish you ill.”

“I’ll just go ahead and say it straight up,” said Akiara, hopping forward. “I’m gonna miss you. I’m glad you’re coming back. Full stop. And I’m glad we’re gonna keep meeting while you’re away, even if there’s not as much point in it.”

One of the rabbits in the back chuffed at this. But aside from that, no one seemed upset at Akiara for expressing herself. They knew how she felt by now. They were used to it.

“I wish I could be as unmitigated in my feelings,” said Bedelia. “I agree with my brother—it’s hard to know what to say, or to wish for. But I will recognize this day as an important one.”

“You could just say ‘Farewell,’” said Itsuko.

Bedelia was silent at that, but Wilhelm spoke: “Suppose they don’t fare well, though. Suppose only one of the wolves comes back, or neither. We’re better off, aren’t we?”

“Indeed,” said Coryn. “But I apologize for such tension. You deserve true tidings of health and fortune on this journey, and I only regret we are not prepared to give them.”
“I’ll miss the stories,” said Octavia, one of the young rabbits who’d been coming regularly.

“I’ll miss the strange company,” said Jim, another rabbit.

“There’s plenty to miss,” said Kiput.

“That’s true,” said Bedelia. “We should focus on that.”

Gabu was warmed by this effort to make him feel better, even if he did wish there was more than one creature willing to give him a simple farewell. He ambled forward and lay down in the middle of things, ears swiveling this way and that as the creatures told him what they’d miss.

“Oh… Akiara?” he asked. “Did you want to introduce some new rabbits to me?” It was a Talkday, after all, and that meant hearing grievances.

“Yeah,” she said. “That buck you ate yesterday morning was one of our senior patrollers. He was pretty well liked. I told ‘em all no spitting or peeing on you today, though. You should be clean when you go off.”

Well. Gabu didn’t know how he felt about that. He was willing to take a little abuse if it meant another creature’s peace of mind. But maybe Akiara was right, and he needed all the pride he could get on a day like today.

“That’s appreciated,” said Lala as she settled down next to him. “We’d be glad to meet your mourners now, and learn about this renowned patroller.”

He had seemed pretty fast, Gabu recalled. It’d been a lucky fluke of a jump that had caught him. Well. Here came the first angry face, and here came the guilt. But that was nothing new. Gabu felt an itchy spot flare up to one side of his spine, but held back from scratching it.

Things were starting to wind down. Normally, that meant going home. Today, that meant taking their first steps on a frightening new adventure. Gabu was trying to work himself up to it.

“There is the matter of your lair,” said Coryn.

Oh, right. At their last meeting, they’d talked about whether anyone should be allowed to use the hilltop cave while they were away, but none of the ideas had made a lot of sense, given that they were planning to come back. “Did you decide on anything?” Gabu asked.

“It seems likely that in your absence, someone will try to occupy the lair. Quite possibly a badger, or a family of them.” Despite a few efforts, the group had yet to succeed in reaching out to any badgers enough to foster trust.

“I’d be okay with that, so long as we can take it back when we get back. But would that be cruel?”

Coryn looked uncomfortably to his sister, having no answer.

“It’s hard to say,” she replied. “Is it better to have, and to lose, or to be without? If you return in winter, they may have a harder time relocating.”

“For that reason,” said Coryn, “we will keep a watchful eye on your home. We will not claim
ownership, but we will inform anyone who should choose to move in that there are wolves who lived there, and who intend to live there in future, and that they will take back their home by force if they must. This way, with luck, no badger will dig tunnels too deeply in your floor, and no one will be too disappointed when forced out.”

That sounded reasonable. “I guess that's the best solution. You'll keep telling the new children about us, right? So no one's too surprised when we come back?”

“Oh, don't worry,” said Wilhelm. “We'll spread the word about you.”

Lala rose from her place. “I feel the wind rising.”

Tsume fluttered overhead. “Good day for travel.” And the warblers, too, rose.

“I think that may be our cue to go, everyone,” said Mei. “I have to admit... I'm somewhat apprehensive.”

Bedelia walked to him and pressed her head against his own. “Good travels, goat of the north.” She said it like a friendly nickname, with affection.

“What you guys 'round,” said Akiara. “Don't screw up.”

“Goodbye!” cried a chipmunk Gabu didn't know.

“So long, Mr. and Mrs. Murderer!” announced Taffet. “Good luck with the baby monsters!”

“But not too much luck,” added Wilhelm. “The more wolf pups they manage to raise, the worse off we are.” There was a murmur of agreement among the rabbits.

“Good point,” said Taffet. “Good luck, but not too much of it! I hope one or two of your pups turn out healthy.”

“That's as much as we can ask,” said Lala. “But less than we can hope. Goodbye, everybody! Best wishes!”

She started to move toward the woods, and Gabu hopped to his feet. Tears suddenly moistened his eyes. “Goodbye everyone! It's been so much fun!”

It really had. Gabu's pack had had traditional celebrations and songs. Now and then, Gabu had even found them fun. But now that he'd known real friends, and now that he wasn't focused on filling his belly every day of his life... all those times felt so empty. That fun had been built on pain. The fun he knew now... well, it was interspersed with pain, true. But it was real. It was powerful. He understood now that he'd never really had friends before. He'd never really cherished his own life before.

Now he did. And he had this amazing, impossible community to thank. Their forms and faces disappeared quickly from the edges of his vision. He heard Mei bleating his own goodbyes. At the edge of the woods, he turned around one more time to look at them all, to take in their aroma.

So many eyes watching. So many ears, listening. So many warm, special friends who weren't quite able to admit they wished Gabu happiness.

That was all right. He knew that if he weren't planning to come back, they would wish him all the happiness in the world.
He lingered on that last gaze, until finally, somehow, he was able to turn away and follow Lala into the forest.

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**The 83rd Evening**

This was the longest trek of Mei's life. He was out of breath. He was heaving. His legs were burning. The forest was beautiful, but he was in too much pain to appreciate it.

From nowhere, a comparison arose—a memory, stirred from its deep bed by upheaval and turmoil. This was like when he ran from the wolf that killed his mother. This was like that storm-wracked day when he'd run without end, no distance great enough, no time long enough to know he was safe. He wasn't nearly as frightened here, with the wolves present and the warblers overhead, but his exhaustion reminded him of that day. Now, as then, the path seemed to never end and the sky was barely visible.


“Mei! Are you all right?”

“I'm so sorry... Gabu. I'm just... just... dead tired.”

Furry legs suddenly planted fast around him like a grove of winnowy trees. There were eight of them, Mei reflected, amused by the thought. He was too tired to count, but wolf leg groves like this always came in stands of eight. The leaf warblers came down from the canopy and settled gently on either side, watching. “We'll rest,” said Gabu's voice. “We'll rest as long as you want.”

“We can rest,” said Lala. “But if it's going to keep going like this, perhaps we should consider our options?”

Mei didn't like the sound of options. He was too tired to talk, though, so he listened as Gabu asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well,” said Lala, scratching fur loose from her shank against a tree stump. “We could carry him.”

“I thought we decided that would be too tough.”

“It may be. But it may be worth a try. Or... one of us could hunt while the other escorts him.”

Mei didn't like this. He didn't like being a burden, literal or figurative. He didn't like being a problem for his friends to solve. And he'd tried his best to keep up... but his friends had longer legs than his, and were better built for long, steady travel. Mei had run his reserves dry all too soon. He wished he'd insisted on more breaks sooner, so that he wouldn't have found himself so exhausted now.

“I guess... that might make sense,” said Gabu.

“After all, if we're going to go slowly, we might as well take advantage of the fresh forest we're in. Or alternatively...”

“Yes?”
“We could plan to bed down here. Let the trip last four or five days, rather than two or three.”

“Well... if you're okay with it. I guess there's plenty around here for Mei to eat. …Right, Mei?”

Oh—now he was being spoken to directly. Mei tried to look at the foliage around him, struggled to think. There was no grass in this forest—it was as if the trees leeched all the nutrients from the ground and gave nothing back. But he could eat buds and leaves, if he had to. “Yes... I'll be all right. I just need to rest.”

“Rest up,” chirped Hatsu, near his left ear.

“Bed down,” echoed Haburo, near his left.

“All right,” said Gabu. “It looks like that’s the best plan…”

The wolves and birds kept talking, but Mei let himself drift off. He was under watchful eyes, in good care. He slept; he dreamed. It was only once he was asleep that he had, once more, one of those familiar, bewildered, behumored shocks:

Don’t worry, Mei. You're lying in the forest with wolves standing over you. You're perfectly safe.

His dreams were funny, if bitter.

~ (v) ~

Chapter End Notes

It was Jerry Seinfeld who, in a stand-up act, asked what you say when you're taking leave of someone you don’t like. Take care? Farewell? Goodbye? They all have positive connotations. Of course, the situation here is even muddier, as most of these animals like the wolves on a personal level. That doesn’t mean they want them around.

In this chapter, Kiput finally gets to shine. From his first appearance, I imagined him as something of a less than perfectly arrayed English old bean type… that just hasn’t been clear until now.

Regarding Mei’s situation, most goats actually prefer buds and leaves and shoots over grass… but I get the sense that Mei’s species of goat is more grazer than forager.
The 90th Day

Chapter Summary

* How could you leave without saying goodbye?
* Happiness is over the mountain? Is that what you’re saying? If I were ever to follow, I wouldn’t miss it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 90th Morning

Here he stood at last. Just one grassy ridge now separated Mei from Sawa Sawa Valley, the home he’d known all his life… until the most recent part of it. The scent of fragrant olive trees and modest boxwood shrubs brought him powerfully home. He’d been walking for days with the sporadic companionship of Haburo and Hatsu, and now he was afraid to crest the last ridge. But that was silly—at this point, there was really no turning back.

The warblers were fluttering now near Mei’s own level, but behind him as he ascended. They were watching his progress—if he stalled any longer, they would know it. And they were so very generous with their time…

So Mei stiffened his neck stalwartly and strode forward over the last few yards of hill. The view was before him… and yes. There it was. A puff of white—like a piece of sheep’s fleece discarded on the meadow. But made of moving pieces.

Mei’s people. Those he had left behind. Those who were still so familiar to him.

“I’m scared,” he told the wind.

“Fear carries,” remarked Hatsu from behind him.

“Meaning bears,” said Haburo from ahead. The two of them rode the air currents like leaves.

It did, didn’t it? Mei didn’t even know what that meant, but it felt right. He took a breath and started to descend the hill. Being unnoticed was too much to hope for—almost immediately, he started to hear cries and bleats. The herd reoriented itself toward him. Mei supposed they would guess it was him—who else would they expect to find arriving?

A sudden shock of white broke free from the group and dashed up toward him like a moth for the moon—it was Mii. Mei smiled and choked on his own breath. Instead of descending further, he waited for her to reach him. He expected Mii to leap at him, nuzzling him in greeting. She didn’t. She stopped short, and there was anguish in her face.

It was like in his dreams: he didn’t know what to say.

“How could you leave without saying goodbye?” she demanded.
Just like that. The first question, and it was difficult. “Ah… hello, Mii.”

She canted forward, staring. Her hooves seemed to grip the hillside. She wanted an answer.

“Um… well, Mii, I didn’t know I was leaving until… until it happened. I couldn’t go back and say goodbye… we wouldn’t have gotten that chance again.”

“The chance to leap into a roaring river and die??” she demanded.

Mei swallowed. Would it help to point out that he wasn’t dead? She’d probably been able to figure that out by now. Instead, he nodded seriously.

“Mei!! You were my closest friend! You were like my brother! How could you leave! For a wolf!?”

Mei had imagined this conversation so many times, and Mii was acting just like he’d suspected she would. Yet somehow, the answer didn’t leap to his lips, no matter how many times he’d envisioned it. “I think maybe I’d better tell everyone at once. You’re probably not the only one who wants to know that.” He tried cracking a smile. It cracked a little too hard.

But Mii stepped forward and pried her nose upward into Mei’s shoulder. “How could you?!”

“Mii?”

“I was so lonely after you left. So lonely. I’m still lonely.”

All Mei’s answers had leapt into a lake. He stood in astonishment, only grunting out an “Uhh…” He wanted to tell Mii he was sorry, to comfort her… but he also wanted to know how in the world she could be lonely when she had Tap, and Moro, and everyone in the herd but him.

But the rest of the herd was on the move, and they were also headed his way. The cloud of white was a hazard now, a setting sun against which Mei’s thoughts had to race. And Mii leapt forward and bopped her nose against his own.

“Whaa?” he replied.

“Mei! You have to stay this time. You understand that, don’t you? You can’t leave me again.”

There was chatter at different levels from the approaching group as it mounted the foot of the hill—bleating and whispering and calling. Mei heard his name spoken over and over. “I don’t know if they’d even want me to stay,” he reasoned. “After all… they gave me an ultimatum if I wanted to remain part of the herd. I said I’d do it, but then I went ahead and did the opposite.”

Mii’s eyes were wide and soft, despite her anger. “You mean you betrayed us to the wolves?”

“Well… no, I didn’t. I guess I didn’t do the opposite, then… but…”

But they were here. “Mei!” cried his grandmother, whose voice cut sharply through the clamor. The crowd opened to let her emerge in front. “We didn’t think you’d ever…” Her voice caught as she stumbled up the hill. “…ever come back.”

Was she happy he was here, or stunned by his audacity? “Hello, Grandmother.”

The rest of the goats stopped behind her out of respect. “Mei,” she bleated. “You… It’s so good to see you.” Tears came to her eyes, and that made Mei wonder if he, too, would cry. “You chose to leave us… and I’m ashamed to say I didn’t realize how much you meant to me until you were
gone.”

Again, Mei had no notion of what to say. He vaguely remembered having prepared responses, but they were gone. “Grandmother…”

“Are you just going to let him back? You’re not going to just let him back into the herd, are you?” This commanding, contrary voice belonged to Tapper, forcing his way forward.

“That remains to be seen,” said the elder goat, his voice nearly lost under the hubbub of a dozen voices.

“Tap—you don’t want me here?” asked Mei. It was an uncalculated question born from sheer curiosity.

“Mei!” Tap’s greeting was a wall, hostile and hurt. “What could you possibly have to say for yourself? You betrayed the herd.”

In fact, Mei had reflected on this. Gabu had betrayed his pack, yes, and had come to be proud of that choice. But Mei…

“I never really betrayed the herd,” he objected. “I just abdicated from it.”

Instantly Tap’s face was angry and large, while Mii’s was angry and afraid. “You promised us you would extract information from the wolf!” yelled Tap. “And did you? No! You betrayed us and leapt into the river!”

Mei found a tiny sliver of humor and clung to it. “I did actually extract information from the wolf, as it happens.”

This precipitated a gasp from most of the goats present, Tapper and Mina included. Mei’s grandmother frowned, but it was the elder who spoke:

“Oh? And what, then, precisely, have you learned?”

Mei tried his best to smile innocently. “Well… I learned what hours wolves tend to keep, and how it feels to lie curled up next to one, and how one’s teeth feel when they groom your coat. I learned that wolf packs are rather harsh places where deep friendship is rare, and leadership is both a valuable commodity and a threat. I learned how wolves smell after they roll in dew, or after they gambol through flowers, or after they’ve had a meal. I learned a little about how wolves show their love for others… and how long it takes them to have children, and how they feel about it. I learned that wolves are very different from each other… just like we goats are.” He grinned, happy that they hadn’t interrupted him. “I’ve learned that and so much more.”

“Is this a joke?” retorted one of the middle-aged nannies.


“I’ll say he has,” said Tapper.

“I guess I have,” admitted Mei.

“All of these things you named,” said the elder. “These are hallmarks of living with a wolf, yes? You have been living your life with this… outcast wolf you met, have you not?”

Mei nodded. “That’s right. Only he wasn’t an outcast at first. He chose to leave his people, just like
I did."

"To leave," agreed Grandmother. "But why did you leave?"

"How could you?" repeated Mii.

"It’s ungoatlike," said Tapper.

Well, this was as good a time as any. Somehow, Mei had imagined getting to the bottom of the hill before being forced to explain himself. But there was no point making any more of a production out of it. "I left because Gabu was my friend. We were secret friends, it’s true… but only because we had to be. I would have preferred to be his friend and still to be part of the herd.” He took a decisive breath. "But none of you would have accepted that. You didn’t accept it, when you found out. And so…” He twitched his head to one side, one ear flopping. "I had to leave."

"That makes no sense," argued Mii.

"Did you forget all the reasons we have to fear wolves?" demanded Tap.

Mei found himself… not tired, but somehow weary of these questions. He’d heard them in his dreams too many times. He had the high ground on the hill, and likewise it somehow felt like he stood aloof, apart from this herd, above their questions. It was a strain to answer, but he did. "No. I didn’t forget those reasons at all, Tap. But when I met Gabu, I realized that none of them applied to him. I can’t say for certain, but I suspect that if some of you had met him, you would have felt the same.”

"Impossible,” said a billy.

"Wolves are our enemies!” cried Tapper, as if that point had somehow escaped Mei. Had Tapper ever really been his friend? He had, hadn’t he? Mei had just been that different.

Mei shook his head. "Gabu is my friend. That’s… that's my basic truth, now. It’s honestly the most fundamental truth in my life. You can accept it or not, but if you don’t, then… well, I won’t be staying in any case. The Emerald Forest is my home now.”

"The Emerald Forest?” asked the elder goat.

"It’s over the huge mountain to the south. We’ve made a home there, and friends… you must have heard the message. Hatsu and Haburo said you’d heard.” Mei glanced upward toward the warblers; he glimpsed them soaring high, too high above, and behind. As if they were trying to stay apart from this.

"Yes, the birds came to us,” said Grandmother. “Have you really given us up? So easily as that?”

It hadn’t really been easy, had it? Mei remembered the fear of exposure, the shame of being found out, the pain of hearing the story of his mother’s death. He remembered the soul-wringing day on which he’d planned to milk Gabu for information; the realization he couldn’t and the leap into the river; the banging, painful swim and the ensuing pursuit; the leap across the gorge and the endless baying of wolves; the terrible snowstorm and the decision to let go of life. Yet all of that had come apart from his decision. It had meant a great deal of suffering, but it had come as a result of the decision, not as part of the decision itself. “It really was easy,” said Mei, discovering it quietly.

"Don’t you love us?” demanded Mii.

had to go. I didn’t understand it at first. But then it came to me. Gabu accepted you as part of my life. But you didn’t accept him. And I understood in my gut… that meant I had to go with him.”

Some of the goats seemed to try to process that. Mii ran down after Mei, eyes wet. “You didn’t even try and talk me into accepting it!” she yelled. “Maybe I would have! You should have tried.”

Now a lump rose suddenly in Mei’s throat. Was she right? Had he been unfair to his closest friend? He’d assumed none of the goats could be brought around… and Mii was as fearful of wolves as anyone. But maybe he’d owed her an explanation. “I… I’m sorry, Mii. I guess I didn’t think of it.”

“Oh, Mei!” She headbutted him again, but softly this time. Her horns were so tiny, and she bent her head so shallowly that only the smallest curve of them hit him; they seemed to lift his head to a place of understanding. “Why couldn’t you have tried?”

Mei hurried down to flat ground, along with her. “Would it have meant that much to you, just to understand?”

She snorted. “Maybe. Or maybe I would have come with you!”

This widened Mei’s eyes. “Are you… are you saying you would have wanted to?”

“No!” she cried. “Well, how could I know? I never heard you try to convince me. Maybe you wouldn’t have. Maybe you would have. But it hurts that you didn’t try.”

Mei took a deep breath, but he was panicking inside. Should he offer to let Mii come back with him? Would she be able to handle the mountain? What if wolves attacked before they could get there? “You’re right,” he admitted. “I’m sorry. Is it too late?”

The herd was following, but Mii hurried ahead of them, and Mei hurried after. “Too late to convince me? I don’t know why it would be. I don’t want to leave my home. But if there’s something magical and special about this wolf… maybe I’ll just have to.”

“Well… he’s not magical. But he certainly is special. I… I wouldn’t want to pull you away from home. I’m not saying you should come and join us, Mii.” Somehow, amid all the distance here, he’d never even thought of it. “But if I knew that you were here at home, and that you accepted my choice… that would mean a lot to me. A great deal.” Mei spoke before he could fully process what he was saying.

“Well, stay a few days. Try to convince me,” said Mii. “And we’ll see whether I can accept your decision or not.”

Mei found the idea of trying to accept a notion for a friend’s sake amusing. And painful, since it reminded him of Gabu’s decision to hunt Mei, which he’d accepted just because Mei had wanted him to. “Do you want to accept it?” he asked, half joking.

“What do you think?” cried Mii. “Yes! Of course I want to. I want to see things the way you do, Mei. I always did! You’re my brother, you know. You’re my brother in everything but blood.”

Mei shivered. He was sorry, and hopeful, and overwhelmed all at once. And he’d been in his home ground for all of ten minutes.
The 90th Day

It was home, but it was like viewing it through the branches of a camphor tree, or through the lens of dreams. It was like seeing the ice of a thawing lake and mistaking it for pure water. Mei was allowed to roam the pastures of his prior life, but was never left alone to enjoy them. Over the course of days, the elder debriefed him. And the herd followed along so none of them would be the last to hear.

Mei had never been anywhere near this famous, this hung upon. You really can’t go home, he kept thinking to himself, and he wondered how much was really left of home, under this cavalcade of attention. Nothing had been lost to the goats who lived here, but what was lost to him? If they did let Mei come back and live with them, and if Mei wanted to… would this ever really be his home again, even then?

It just seemed like it was missing something. Like whatever had tethered it to his soul and made it feel like home had popped like a bubble in the stream and floated away.

“But then one day, suddenly,” he told the group, “Gabu came home with a guest. Because it turned out that another wolf had found us, left over from the old pack. She’d gone the long way around the mountain, traveling alone all winter, just hoping to find Gabu…”

As it turned out, it wasn’t true that they’d lost nothing here. Mei asked Mii where Moro was, hoping to say hi. He hadn’t heard his familiar muffled voice, hadn’t seen him trudging up the hill. Really, that was enough answer in itself, but still Mei asked. Mii stared and melted back, as if she was the snow of winter and horror was the sun. She didn’t say it. Mei did.

“He’s gone, isn’t he?”

Mii nodded. “He’s not the only one.” The nannies named others then, four goats in all, missing from the herd. Killed by wolves since Mii had left. They’d been hopeful at first, when they learned the Baku Baku Valley pack was broken, that they wouldn’t have to fear being picked off anymore. But to their surprise, things had actually gotten worse! There were scattered little family groups and pairs and coalitions around now, and while one wouldn’t expect these to be as efficient as a large, expertly led wolfpack, they were somehow hitting this particular herd worse than the big pack had for a while.

It dawned on Mei that for several months before he left, Gabu had been protecting Sawa Sawa Valley. He’d been deflecting the hunts to other herds, other animals, other targets. He’d been deliberately bungling hunts there, or howling too soon in order to give warning, or even telling Mei directly that a hunt was planned and that they should be somewhere else. And when Mei realized this, he told Mii, told the elder, told everyone. They didn’t believe him. They said he was credulous, that a wolf would never stand up for goats. But then they started to think back, put the pieces together and remember when things had gone easy for a while. They eventually realized that Mei was right. That wolf really had spared them for over a season. Now, for whatever reason, the remaining wolves were acting as if they were trying to make up for lost time.

“…She listed every single coincidence that had had to happen in order for me and Gabu to come out of that barn as friends in the making,” Mei continued. “I think there were seventeen of them. And when she laid it out like that, I realized that… she had a point. It didn’t seem natural. It was hard to believe there hadn’t been something behind our encounter, more than just chance. Lala blamed it on something called a ‘goddess’—a wolf goddess called Leto. I don’t suppose any of you have heard of her?”

Mei was going to miss Moro. Moro had been a glutton—obsessed with food above everything, and
with laziness above everything but food. He’d been a shallow member of the herd, but Mei had liked him, and he’d liked Mei. Somehow, Moro’s presence had made Mei feel… safe. Well, that was obvious enough in retrospect, wasn’t it? Moro was slow and fat and fairly simple. If someone like him could survive, the herd was obviously free from peril. No one had to worry while Moro was around. Mei had never realized it before, but in this way he’d actually provided the herd a valuable function. And his death had been a bellwether.

“At first it seemed like, even after all that trouble, none of them were going to speak up. But then the rabbit with the plain brown fur, Akiara, hopped forward and told everyone else, ‘But nothing—I was promised stories and I intend to hear stories.’ So the rest of them were convinced to follow her lead… and that’s how, after a month in the Emerald Forest, we finally made our first batch of friends. And we started meeting most days that weren’t hunting days…”

The wolves here were hunting at night. For generations, Baku Baku had been that unusual thing, a diurnal wolf pack. Thanks to that, Gabu was happy to sleep at night just like Mei did, if for a bit longer. And thanks to that, the herd had taught itself not to be too fearful at night. Now they had to keep watch more carefully, a sentry in each direction. Now, most nights, the herd had to wake and move at least once. They didn’t sleep as well. And when danger did come, they didn’t always know which way it was coming from.

The break-up of the big local pack had made things more complicated. There were many threats now, not just one. It seemed like the adolescent wolves were excessively vicious, hunting more often and more vehemently than they needed just to survive. It was like they were trying to make up for the loss of the social structure they’d grown up in. The way they charged and struck at the herd would almost be sad, if it hadn’t been occasionally injurious or deadly.

“It was a deep, dark jungle where they finally stopped and decided to build their den,” said Mei. “I’m almost afraid to go back—it’s not much like this at all. But I’m going back there—I promised. The warblers over there will lead me back, if I lose my way. I’m sure I’ll get used to the jungle. I’ve gotten used to so much already.”

“And you’re going to help a pair of wolves raise their young,” said a skeptical, thick-coated nanny, one Mei had always been rather fond of.

“That’s what I’m going to do,” said Mei.

Grandmother spoke up: “Have you thought at all about what your mother would say?”

“I have, actually. Sometimes when the sun is covered by clouds, and it’s safe to look at it, I think of Mom as if she’s somewhere in the sun, watching me.”

Most of them were silent then, thankfully. But some herdmates asked Mei what his mother would say, speaking to him from the sun. And he sighed.

“I like to think she keeps an open mind. Now that… she’s free from everything.”

He didn’t like putting death that way. He didn’t think freedom really encompassed the concept of death—it was something more, and something tragically less. But he felt like his mother would be happy for him. If she were watching. And maybe she was. If no one else would be happy for him, his mother would. And Mei said so.

“You’ve really gone and done it this time,” said Tap.

“And are you happy?” asked Grandmother.
Mei drew a deep breath. “Very. I feel like my life matters. I never even realized before that I didn’t feel that way… until one day, suddenly, I did.”

There was murmuring.

Mina pranced close and stayed with Mei. Wherever he went during that day in Sawa Sawa, Tap kept his distance and cast looks over at him as if to underscore Mei’s status as an outcast—that there was no coming back. But Mii followed him, almost helplessly, almost eagerly. Everywhere he went. It felt like she wanted to soak him in.

“Happiness is over the mountain,” she said seriously to him. “Is that what you’re saying? Just on the far side? If I were ever to follow, I wouldn’t miss it?”

Mei laughed bittersweetly and told her about the green hilltop with a cave. It was, indeed, hard to miss. “But do you really think you’d want to leave everything behind?”

She shook her head. “I don’t. But in case I do someday, I want to know where to go.”

Mei was touched. He rubbed faces with Mii. He tapped horns with her and took in her scent and stared into her eyes. She sometimes seemed like a younger version of himself. Right now, Mei was struck by how much that was true.

“I wouldn’t turn you away,” said Mei. “If you showed up one day… we’d fold you into our lives. I know Gabu would, if I asked him to. After all, Lala showed up, and at first I didn’t want to fold her into my life, but I did. I did! And it wasn’t so bad, really… and now, if I never saw her again, I’d miss her.”

“I know you wouldn’t let me be sad,” said Mii. “You’d find a way to keep me happy.”

Mei found himself weighted by the possibility of the promise. “I’d do my best. But I wouldn’t want you to come unless you felt a need for it. I left because my best friend couldn’t stay here, and so I had to go with him. Everyone else acts like I chose to leave, but to me, it didn’t feel like a choice. You shouldn’t choose to leave everyone, Mii.”

“I should only come if it’s not a choice. That’s what you’re saying?”

It sounded strange, and Mei laughed at it. “I guess that’s what I’m saying.”

Mii leapt and nuzzled him. “Mei! Those are choices too! The choices that don’t feel like choices are the most important choices of all!”

Mei couldn’t argue with that. He looked at her eager, smaller face, and he felt a tear or two invade his sight. He couldn’t argue.

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Chapter End Notes
Mii doesn't appear in the children's book the movie is based on, though Tap does. She isn't given many lines in the movie, so for this depiction of Mei's former best friend, I went with the personality she's given in the kids' series. Smaller and younger than Mei, she's a bit of a fiery, headstrong doe who, while kind, doesn't hesitate to challenge things that she doesn't understand.

Mei knows everyone in the herd, of course, probably by name. But I decided not to make up names for the unfamiliar characters because it would clutter things up. I already have so many new names in this novel! We can assume that no one is as important to him as Mii, Tap, and his grandmother.
The 93rd, 94th and 95th Days

Chapter Summary

* Is Gabu still alive?!
* Have the two of you had any children yet?
* Did you love her?
* Do you ever feel like anything is… missing?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 93rd Day

Herd life was simpler than Mei remembered it. It was no quieter, but it was simpler. He remembered the clumping of his community into little groups that had made things seem so rich. A person could pass from one clump to another and hear different conversations, feel different levels of urgency. They would find games, and gossip, and tension. Someone was generally on lookout duty, and that hadn’t changed. The herd still clumped, and though Moro was gone and Mei had left, Tap and Mii still generally spent their time together. There were still contests of climbing the mountain’s foot when fears were low, and there were still races, and there were still places for quiet reflection. Mei heard a pair of adolescents debating whether digging little traps, or ‘pitfalls’, was a practice more dangerous to themselves or to the wolves who chased them. He passed by middle-aged herd members chewing placidly, standing or lying in the sun. He walked to the fringe of the herd; he walked to its center.

His objective was to stay until he was no longer the center of attention. Mei wanted to just be one goat in the herd again—no longer seen as the big news of the day, to be interrogated and watched and whispered about. He’d spent three nights here so far, and already he was starting to feel like his goal had been achieved. There were still heads that turned when Mei walked by, and he still heard snippets of gossip about himself, but the other goats’ interest in his return seemed to have faded fast. He wondered how many of them were thinking about him but didn’t want to say it. He wondered whether any of them were plotting to drive him out, if he didn’t leave on his own.

The herd was much like it had been in every way, but it was so small. Somehow, the complexities that had formed the basis for Mei’s life before he met Gabu no longer seemed complex enough to be worth worrying about. He could walk from one end of the herd to the other in a minute, and nothing about it seemed to reach out to him or tie him down. Everything was still here, but it was so tiny a life. He stood on the edge, staring at his herd, and wondered how this little life could ever have contained him.

True, Mei had always been prone to wandering more than most. And Mii was the same. His wandering had been connected to his vague concept of a ‘path to forever’, and possibly to his mother’s memory. But Mii? Well, she was a restless soul, and she wanted more from her existence than it seemed willing to give her. But more to the point, she admired Mei… and if he strayed from the herd, she did too. She was prepared to do whatever he did. But would she really want to leave?
Mei remembered when the four of them—himself and Mii, Tap and Moro—had walked the long, treacherous road through Maga Maga Forest in order to see the baby black goat recently born to Para Para Field. The baby had been adorable, yes, but had the trip been worth it? They’d gotten lost when one of Tap’s landmarks had been missing, and a gang of wolves had apparently caught wind of them. Luckily, Gabu had been there to protect them and guide them in the right direction, all without showing himself. Mei reflected once again on how much Gabu had done, and how very lucky he was to have met him.

That had been the last time Mei had seen Prince Kuro. They hadn’t had any time alone… but there had been a sort of peace to the place… a quiet, underlying beauty, like the earth under gnarled grass. It was funny, but it felt as if Kuro and his grandfather were the source of it. The Sawa Sawa herd was sometimes quiet, yes, but how often was it really peaceful? Mei stood on the fringe of things, looking in, and felt dizzy, as if he were watching things from afar, and he’d forgotten what peace really was. Had he ever really known?

Mei wanted to go and visit the black goats. But would it be safe? The state of local wolves right now was uncertain, but any group that left these parts would not have Gabu’s help. Ideally, Mei would go alone, but he’d been only twice, and by a different route each time—his grandmother had led him there via the mountain paths, while Tap’s path had never risen above the foothills. He had to admit he didn’t really know the way. Then again, he had an advantage—the warblers. They would look out for danger and let him know what lay ahead. As for the way, Mei could simply ask Tap…

He was standing only a tree’s height away, in fact. Mei looked at him. And as if clairvoyant, Tap looked deliberately back at Mei. Eyes hard. Horns at the ready. It pricked Mei’s heart to see his onetime friend so hostile.

No, he didn’t want to ask Tap for directions. He was mortified by the idea.

Still, Mei didn’t look away. Tap gave one final stare and stalked onward. If it was meant to leave Mei off balance, it succeeded.

The alarm was oddly familiar to Mei, but somehow not what he remembered. It was dusk. The lookout, a tall but lean billy, cried wolf, and it cut swiftly through the herd like a sudden shower. Hooves started to beat the earth; the herd cantered the opposite way. Details followed, relayed in shouts from one fringe to the other: five wolves, adolescent, three males and two female. Prowling, then striding closer. Now running! added the alarm with a bleat of panic. Everyone ran toward the rising slope of the mountain. No one fell far behind, Mei noticed: the slowest and oldest of the herd were already gone. His grandmother was one of those lagging the most, and Mei stayed near her to call out encouragement. He saw the wolves pounding closer. The guards set their heads and formed a daunting mobile wall of horns. The wolves slowed; one of their females darted around. In response, the herd scrambled into motion again, the defenders backing up, and everything was a muddle of motion.

Mei and his grandmother bustled through the middle of it, having caught up. That was a relief, but things were still dangerous. Eventually everyone reached the slope and the herd took a firm position against the hunters. Their ground here was high and it wouldn’t be easy for the wolves to slip up into the rocks and attack from above. Those with the longest horns were on the perimeter, ready to block a leaping attack. Everyone caught their breath and stopped moving. It was only five
attackers against the herd, and all adolescents. They’d be fine, most likely. They were safe now. Probably.

There wasn’t much talking now, just murmuring and watching. “Has this been happening often?” murmured Mei to his grandmother.

“Only too often,” she replied, eyes taking the wolves in. “It’s like they don’t know the strength they need.”

“We’ve been practicing our formations,” said Tapper from the second line, not looking back.

The predators paced to and fro, calling to each other. Their voices were raspy and disguised, their words cut between by sharp yelps. Mei could only make out snippets, but no actual commands. It made his stomach sink, hearing how different these wolves were from Gabu.

“Are they from Baku Baku Valley?” he asked.

“Who knows?” retorted Tapper, as if he couldn’t care less.

“I think so,” said Grandmother. “They seem confused, don’t they?”

Mei watched them stroll to and fro along the line of readied bucks, daunted as they looked up at the herd. “It’s true,” he agreed. Their calls did seem broken and confused.

“They’ve had their easy prey from us, and from the spotted and black goats too, so we’ve heard. But I don’t think they know how to take any more of us. I think they may be in trouble.”

“They’re kids,” added a nearby nanny. “Without a pack, they’re lost.”

Mei looked out as a hush fell over the herd. Suddenly, out of nowhere, one of the male wolves planted his forepaws strongly and addressed them all. “Is there someone new with you? One of you is new, right? I heard someone… went away and came back.”

Mei was astonished, but admittedly not as astonished as he would have been a year ago. He wondered whether he should reveal himself, and whether, if he stayed silent, the herd would betray him. He looked around. A lot of faces were looking at him, then innocently jerking away. “We won’t tell,” declared Mii aloud.

It didn’t matter. The wolves weren’t fools. The one who’d asked looked at Mei, coming closer. “It’s you, isn’t it? You’re the one they went chasing after. You’re the one who went off with…” The youth’s voice choked.

Mei nodded hesitantly, knowing he was protected by bodies all around him, even if some of them were less than sympathetic. “That’s right.”

“You’re the one they died for,” said the affronted male. “They died trying to track you down.” Two of the other adolescents jogged over to him and murmured; one flicked him under the chin as if to scold him. But his attention remained firmly on Mei.

“That’s true,” said Mei. He didn’t care trying to rehash the details.

The wolf sat down. The bucks in front edged forward, sensing weakness, but the other wolves growled and drove them back. Mei sensed nervousness all around. “Is… you have to tell me…” said the young male. “Is…”
Mei’s ears went up. This wolf had a question?

“Is?” prompted the elder goat.

“Is Gabu still alive?!”

Mei’s mouth opened. He had to fight to close it—to answer. “Gabu… yes, he’s still alive. He’s happy. He’s… he’s going to be a father soon.” He didn’t know how much he should tell this troubled youth, but holding the information back didn’t seem in his nature.

The speaker squeezed his eyes shut. His ears went down for a moment; then ears and eyes opened again. “He met a she-wolf?”

Mei nodded gravely. “Her name is Lala.”

Now the young wolf jerked in surprise—several of them did, in fact. This blue-tinged youth suddenly wasn’t the only one staring in disbelief. “Gabu… wound up with Lala?!”

Mei’s throat caught. “Yes. The two of them are making a home for their children in a distant forest.” He wanted to add that he planned to go back to them, but didn’t want to encourage an ambush.

The youth seemed to be overwhelmed with emotion. “He got Lala,” he told one of his companions, before turning back to Mei. “She was the girl of his dreams. But I thought she was too… special for him. I can’t believe it.”

Was he upset? Happy? Amazed? Mei couldn’t tell. He couldn’t resist, however, sharing some of the success they’d had with these young hunters. “Gabu has made friends with many animals in the south. Not just me. He’s friendly with several deer, a number of birds, a family of muskrats…”

“That’s insane!” interjected one of the female wolves, leaping up.

“You can’t do that,” said another.

“He’s friends with all those?” asked the wondering male, ignoring them.

“Mmm-hm. And we’re becoming closer all the time.”

The whine from one of his companions barely seemed to register with the curious youth. “Are you… going to see him again?”

Mei nodded gravely. Now it was his fellow goats who let out plaintive cries.

The curious youth advanced abruptly, driving back the front rank of defenders; if he came any deeper, they would surely strike at him. “Then… tell him that Boro misses him!” cried the wolf. “Tell him I wish we’d never gone hunting for him… that I’m sorry. Tell him that for the pack, I’m sorry!”

Mei couldn’t make out much sense from the hubbub of reactions around him. But he nodded. So this was Boro, Gabu’s little protege. “I’ll tell him,” he promised. “And just so you know… he misses you too.”

The little wolf’s face lit up. The sturdy fighters near him jerked their heads, ready to charge. “He misses me?” called Boro.

“She’s talked about you. He wishes he’d been able to say goodbye,” said Mei.
But the other wolves were barking and calling the blue-tinged one back, and one or two were striking back at the pressing wall of horns. The goats were murmuring and the herd was advancing down the hill. The wolves had to retreat. “Gabu!” called Boro, as if Mei himself were channeling him. “I don’t think you’re a traitor!” As the wolves turned tail and the row of bucks butted at them, Mei got the sense that what he was saying was: I don’t understand what happened. But I wish I did.

Mei watched the five adolescent wolves run off. He wished he could speak privately with the one called Boro—that he could tell him Gabu’s adventures at length. But they simply didn’t have the opportunity.

The 94th Evening

Mist suffused the air, rendering the sunlight hazy and the green leaves all around into indistinction. Mei felt moist and swimmy. Even while hazy greenness met his eye high and low, what he could only think of as green music filled his ears. The warblers were watching over him from the canopy, occasionally rising above to check the lay of the land, but while they were within tree cover, they sang. Their music was half melodic, formed from curves of pitch that darted with momentary bursts into high peaks. They took turns flying ahead, and likewise, they took turns with the highest curves of their song. The song itself wound lower and higher over time; it was pleasant but enigmatic. The overall experience of walking this way through Maga Maga Forest was, above all, hypnotic.

Mei arrived suddenly at the cave where he’d spent a night with his grandmother on his second trip this way. It startled him at first glimpse, but after that it was like the comfort of an unexpected friend. He took a few steps toward it. It was a sizable cave, but hidden by trees and below a dip in the ground. He wouldn’t have noticed it if his grandmother hadn’t shown it to him, and his grandmother would never have known about it either if it hadn’t been for the black goat elder showing it to her long ago. Grandma had told him the story during their trip—a black goat had kept her safe through the night after she’d been separated from her group. She hadn’t known his origin until morning, when she saw him walking away… but she suspected that he’d recognized her for what she was—a white goat—even in the darkness. That had been the start of thawing relations between the two herds. Mei trembled as he realized that he was in a similar position, but on a much grander scale. Conceivably, he could be the goat to bring the world the amazing gift of good relations between his kind and wolves… or even between predators and their prey in general. Had his grandmother left him a peacemaker’s legacy?

Mei called up to the birds: “Down here—it’s the cave I mentioned!” They fluttered down, taking a few moments to shed their arboreal heights.

“Craggy,” said Hatsu.

“Dark,” said Haburo.

“Safe,” said Mei. “And dear in my memories. And those of my grandmother.” He explained the place’s significance to his companions, and they consented to stop there for the night. The warblers refused to sleep in the cave itself, though—they would watch over Mei from the trees closest to the entrance.

Mei foraged a bit before giving up on daylight. There were only a few stray beams that penetrated this forest, but it was enough for him to feed himself. He lay then in the cave, chewing his cud and remembering his previous journeys—both here and elsewhere. For some reason, the cold rush of
the river came to him, the one he’d leapt into with Gabu, not knowing where it would take them or whether they’d survive. The banks of that river had felt somehow like these curved stone walls did now.

“Good night!” he called to his companions. “See you in the morning!”

“Good night,” chirped back Haburo.

“Sweet dreams,” added Hatsu. He heard the birds settling on branches for the night, finding what shelter they could without a nest. Then it was silent, and dark, and Mei was left with his own thoughts.

He wished he’d remembered his grandmother’s role in things in time to mention it. Saying goodbye had been hard. Truly hard. Grandmother was so sad, even though seeing Mei again for a few days had clearly brought her happiness. It was no surprise she felt that way. She was among the oldest in her herd, but in a quirk of fate, Mei was her only surviving descendant. And he’d left her for what had seemed like the most spurious of reasons. Looking into her eyes that morning, he’d known that she loved him, dearly. But was she proud of him? Mei didn’t know. Maybe if he’d suggested that his relationship with Gabu might bring about a sort of peace of the same kind Grandmother’s relationship with the black goat elder had done… maybe then, she would have been proud of him.

He shut his eyes and lay on the stone floor. He sniffled. It hadn’t felt as sad as he’d expected, leaving the herd that morning… walking into the woods and letting them recede into soft white dots in the distance. Now the sadness was catching up with him. Mei lay and let it subsume him. It felt like his sadness was higher than he was. But it couldn’t fill the cave.

He’d woken up that morning filled with boldness and necessity. Asking Tap for the directions had been easy. Mei’s embarrassment didn’t matter—it had almost been like he was watching himself ask from a distance.

“The way to Para Para?” Tap had asked. “Why should I tell you?”

“Would you really want me to get lost and die?” Mei had retorted.

Tap had stared and mulled this over. “No,” he finally admitted. “I don’t want any goat to die. But you’re a traitor to the herd. And a traitor to me! I don’t want to help you.”

“I’ll be getting out of your hair. If you hate me so much, won’t you be happy to see me go?”

Tap had snorted and told him the directions. “I wish you hadn’t come back,” he added.

Mei hadn’t known what to say to that.

“Just go,” said Tapper. “Try not to get killed.” And he’d turned away.

Mei hadn’t wanted those to be the last words between them. So he’d called after, “Goodbye, Tap. I’ll miss you.” But he’d gotten only a hurt stare in response.

So that was it between him and Tapper. A lifelong friendship, and that was where it ended.

Mei wanted to be asleep. He could hear voices from the cave mouth. Owls, he thought. But was that last one a distant wolf’s howl? He could drive himself crazy wondering whether every owl’s hoot was really a wolf’s call.

But lying there on stone, with nothing around him, there wasn’t much else to wonder about.
Saying goodbye to Mii, strangely, had been so much easier. He understood why that was now. It was because their goodbye had a sense of continuation to it. Neither of them had said it, but it hadn’t felt like goodbye forever. It had felt like a stretched tendon, like the second-to-last note of a song’s chorus, straining for resolution. It was ‘until we meet again in the next age of things’. Not goodbye forever. Not to Mii. Never forever with Mii.

The pink tinge of sunset in Mei’s imagination became the pink tinge of sunrise, and somewhere in between had lain dreams. Mei realized that he’d slept, and was now awake. He walked to the cave’s mouth and took in the mist of morning. The forest was still dark, but it was dark with colors and the crawling of caterpillars, the rustling of leaves by ten thousand little creatures. He stood at the cave’s mouth and appreciated the world that was.

After a while, he began to wonder whether the warblers were awake. He cleared his throat cautiously. “Good morning,” he called.

A light flapping came down from above and some distance away. “Good morning!” called each bird in turn.

“Were you feeding yourselves?” asked Mei.

“Light food,” said Hatsu.

“Always ready,” said Haburo.

Mei was struck by how amazingly selfless these birds were. He decided to finally say so. “I really appreciate all your help. I wouldn’t feel safe crossing Maga Maga without you.” Once, while scouting on the previous afternoon, they’d seen wolves coming and directed Mei to hide. He didn’t know what would have happened without their help.

“No problem,” said Haburo softly, folding and unfolding his wings.

“Our pleasure,” said Hatsu just as softly.

Mei felt his throat constrict a bit. “Which way to Meso Meso?”

The birds darted in a single direction, then flew back repeatedly and darted again. It was roughly the direction Mei would have guessed. “This way,” they echoed.

Mei set off and the warblers followed overhead. The creepers dangling from the branches didn’t seem nearly as daunting in the morning light, tenebrous though it was.

There were no more wolf scares, just a few corrections in course. It was a relief when the forest finally gave way and the foothills of Meso Meso Mountain appeared. It wasn’t the same slope where Grandmother had taken Mei to pick wood sorrel for the black goats, but that memory still impinged strongly. Mei rested there for a while, now that he was mostly safe from danger, and remembered. The birds settled down and waited patiently.

Mei was tempted to go and pick some, but resisted the temptation. This was no ordinary visit, and besides, he didn’t want to risk having to sleep another night in the wild. Each day he roved on his own was another day that Gabu and Lala had to do without his help. There was a good chance their
pups were born by now. He valued this time alone—he really did. But he wasn’t really a creature without ties. The green-brown birds sitting nearby were proof of that, if nothing else was. It was for their sake as well that Mei decided to keep walking without scaling the slopes to the fecund plateau.

Soon he was in Peri Peri, a sparse white bark woodland. It wasn’t impossible for wolves to hunt here, but there would be ample time to sense their approach and ample room to run. Mei therefore felt safe making conversation on this last leg of his journey. “So,” he called upwardly, a bit self-conscious. “Have the two of you had any children yet?”

It was the first question that came to Mei’s mind. But this innocent question led to a rather heavy conversation. It was a slow thing, hearing a story from birds who spoke only two words at once, but Mei felt as though the mist was as heavy as ever, even though they’d left Maga Maga Forest behind.

Hatsu could not have children. Her eggs were never fertile. She’d tried with Haburo, she’d tried with others. She was barren.

Yet Haburo loved her. She had expected him to forsake her when her clutch was tiny—just three eggs, none of them living. It was the confirmation she’d feared. Yet he’d promised never to leave her, and never to be untrue. This was a rarity for their species, whose males would often sneak off for extra dalliances even during the breeding season. Hatsu had promised fidelity in kind, and the two had spent half a year building the most beautiful nest they could imagine, but had finally despaired for lack of young to raise. They’d asked each other what they could do.

They could help others, they decided. The purpose of having children was to pass themselves on. But they could pass themselves on through the benefit of others as well. So the pair of leaf warblers had dedicated themselves to those in need of help—those that they could help—and had never flagged in their dedication. They’d helped another pair of their own kind raise a family, to begin with. Then they’d met Coryn and had carried messages far and wide for the deer. When Coryn had told them about the wolf in their land, and about his surprising willingness to make peace with the animals, Hatsu and Haburo hadn’t hesitated to come and learn the truth about these new strangers.

They hadn’t been at every meeting of the brook club just because of curiosity. They’d been there the whole time to help.

Mei was moved. He was now the main benefactor of these kind birds’ lives. It was almost as if he were their child, in addition to everything else he felt he was. He stopped walking and looked up long enough to thank them, and to thank them thoroughly. His eyes watered and his throat was tight. They fluttered down to the bare earth and bowed before him, accepting his thanks in their accustomed way.

“Our pleasure,” said Hatsu.

“Our joy,” said Haburo.

Para Para Field. A place covered in uniform green grass, but interrupted here and there by a rock or beige bare patch. On this side, it sloped sharply. The sight of it brought a feeling of contentment to
Mei’s stomach. *Now, at last, I can rest,* it said to him. Mei hadn’t even realized he’d been waiting so hard, and so long, to be able to rest. What did *rest* even mean?

As he walked uphill from the woods, a tiny kid, black as ash, saw him and pranced in instant excitement. A shrill bleat of wonder erupted from her lungs, and she turned and ran, crying, “Daddy! Daddy!”

Well, so much for quietly contemplating the topography. Mei glanced up at the birds and picked up his pace. The child looked so young—it couldn’t be the same baby they’d come to see before, could it? He smiled to think of the black goats doing well, and braced himself to be greeted by some puzzled father. Did this child have the same parents as the other baby? What were their names… Isamu and Daku? Would Daku remember Mei from the year before?

Dark gray spots came down the slope, quickly recognizable as goats. There was no hubbub of excitement, no gossip in the making—just goats coming to see what had excited the youngest member of their herd. But in front of them all—

He was as graceful as ever, and just as stately on the sloping grass. It was Kuro—grandson of the elder and friend to Mei. A smile came quickly, and Mei couldn’t help letting it grow. He wanted to call out, but somehow this occasion seemed too serious for yelling.

Then, to Mei’s surprise, the tiny kid ran straight to Kuro… was he her father?!

At the same moment that Mei could feel his eyes widening, Kuro’s own eyes shot wide along with his mouth—in recognition.

“Mei-san!” he exclaimed.

That was Kuro. Polite, even in amazement.

Mei pranced closer, leaving decorum behind. “Kuro-san!” he cried. Only the black goats and certain chipmunks used the ‘san’ honorific, so far as Mei knew, but he was glad to oblige.

The prince, as the younger cohort in Mei’s herd had come to think of him, nuzzled the little child, then strode eagerly downward toward Mei. Other black goats were descending the grade, but none were running, and if the situation was urgent, it was only because of who stood before him.

“Forgive me,” said Kuro, having caught his breath. “I had come to terms with the idea that you were dead.”

Mei stood still in surprise. Well, that made sense. Of course the story of his betrayal would have made its way here. “I hope it’s not too unpleasant a surprise.”

Kuro smiled. It was so evident how happy he was that Mei didn’t need his answer: “On the contrary. I could hardly think of a nicer one. Okimi—have you met my friend Mei-san?” He spoke kindly to the babe at his feet.

“Is this your daughter, Kuro-san?”

Kuro bowed in pride and tucked a foreleg around her, giving the little one a place to hide from the white-haired stranger. “She is. You met her mother, I think—Sunako.”

Mei thought back and remembered a doe by that name. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” said Kuro. “And congratulations to you, too. For coming back safely after your many
adventures.”

Mei tilted his head. “How do you know I’ve been on many adventures?”

Kuro indicated the birds overhead with a horn. “How could you not have been? The last I heard, you had given up your herd for the company of a kindly wolf. You agreed to betray him, but then jumped in a river and washed away… so the story goes.” He lowered his tail and head momentarily in deference to the idea the story might be false. “And now, three seasons later, you return with an aerial escort.”

Mei glanced up at the warblers. “May I introduce my lookouts and friends… Haburo and Hatsu of the Emerald Forest?” By now the rest of the herd was assembling at a polite distance, with the elder striding forward, so the introduction was meant just as much for him.

“Mei-kun, the white goat,” said the elder, amazement in his tone. “I never thought we would breathe your scent again.”

Mei bowed. “It’s good to be here. I hope it won’t be an inconvenience if I stay the night.”

Kuro grinned. “Stay a thousand nights. You are always welcome. Even if you’ve risen from the dead.”

There was a polite, nervous chuckling among the watching goats. Mei decided it was time to explain himself. “I’ve been living over the mountain, to the south. I spend my nights and mornings—some of them, at least—with the wolf I went away with, and his mate. By day, I have a bluff where I like to graze, and we’ve built a little society of animals who like to get together and talk, and tell stories, and play.”

Kuro stared in growing astonishment. Behind him, his grandfather did just the same. “I hope you will stay long enough to explain your fascinating statement further,” said the latter.

Mei laughed. “I had to come here. I couldn’t bear the thought of never coming back here. And I don’t know when I’ll have the chance to get away for a visit again.”

Kuro forward and nuzzled him. “You can put your fears to rest. I’m so glad you decided to come, Mei.”

The arc of smiling, nervous faces behind him made Mei just as glad. He felt rested already. None of these goats meant him any harm. And to think he’d almost gone straight back to the wolves!

At his hooves, the little girl kid rubbed her head against Mei’s pastern. He looked down, amazed that she could be so brave so soon. But when he thought about where she lived, it wasn’t really amazing at all.

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The 94th Evening

Mei told his story again, this time to a smaller and more respectful audience. The black goats numbered just thirteen, much fewer than Mei’s own herd. There were interruptions, but not many—for the most part, the herd stood or sat on the sloping ground and listened patiently as Mei gave his account. As a result, and perhaps because he’d gained practice by now, Mei told the story more
fully than he had for the white goats. He was met by a host of questions, not the least daunting of which was whether he could trust someone like Lala.

Mei was glad this group could swallow the idea of trusting Gabu, at least. That was further than his own herd had gotten. And ultimately, it was a good question, but he admitted that he had come to trust her. He couldn’t explain why, but he genuinely believed that Lala had his best interests at heart.

“How can you be hunted by those who claim that you’re their friend?” asked a juvenile doe.

“Because it was the only choice that would bring everyone together,” said Mei. “At least, it was the only choice I could find. But that’s over, at least for a while.”

Mei noticed that two faces he remembered from his past visits were missing, and he asked about them. The group was instantly somber, and that told Mei the answer.

The elder shook his head. “Gone,” he said.

“Wolves,” asked Mei.

“Wolves,” he confirmed. “Not the ordinary ones, either. The clan from Baku Baku broke up, and it… disrupted the politics of the Peri Peri pack.”

“Oh! I had no idea.”

“Where we once had one large threat, we now have three smaller threats,” said a tall billy.

Mei swallowed. “Is that worse?”

“As with so many of life’s turns, it’s hard to say,” said the elder. “Don’t worry—we don’t blame you.”

Was he to blame? That avalanche in the mountains had changed so much. “I’m sorry for those you’ve lost, in any case,” he offered.

“So it goes,” said Kuro. “There are so many things that we can’t control.” He looked toward the horizon at the setting sun. “Anyway. I think we’ve been on the grade long enough. It’s a good place for stories… not as much for sleeping.” He smiled.

Mei looked down the slope. It was true—just sitting here had a certain tension built in, but he was tired. “Are you going up to flatter ground?”

“Exactly!” said Kuro, and led the way. “If our guest would be so kind as to join us?”

The herd moved up, and Mei was glad to fall in with them. A spot of snow among ashes.

The field at the top of the grade was indeed flat, like Mei remembered it. A trace of mist was moving in from the mountain. There was more mist than they got on Sawa Sawa, and Mei couldn’t pretend to have any inkling why. He relished it, though—it made his visits here more magical. He imagined that growing up amid such transient mists must have an effect on the spirit.
“She’s gone now, too,” remarked Kuro. “I don’t know if you noticed.”

Mei set his mind to a gallop, trying to figure out who he meant. “She?”

“Sunako. Okimi’s mother.” He came to a halt; the two of them were alone. The herd was watching little Okimi.

Mei flushed, embarrassed that he hadn’t asked. Only then did he feel sadness, and it was faint. “Oh. Kuro, I’m sorry.”

Kuro smiled bittersweetly and shook his head a little. He started to walk again.

What to say now? Mei didn’t want to let this revelation die in silence. But he didn’t know… “Were you—did it…”

Kuro’s ears swiveled, and then he looked back, his face nostalgic. He waited for Mei to finish.

“Did you love her?” Mei asked quietly.

A heartbeat passed. “Not especially,” Kuro replied. “But please, don’t tell anyone else that. She was the mother of my child. I was supposed to love her.”

Mei stood feeling disheveled, his stance wider than it had to be. “How did it happen?” he asked lamely.

“Wolves,” said Kuro casually. Of course, it had been wolves. “Or did you mean, how did I come to be with her? I am the only living son of the elder’s oldest son… it was expected that I would have children.”

“I see. And… you had only one?”

“Two,” he said. “The other was taken along with her.” Now, again, the black prince stopped. He looked up at the low sky, thick with amorphous clouds. He was remembering them, Mei knew.

“Was she old enough to eat grass? Or did you… have another nursing mother?”

He shook his head. “Isumu was dry by then. But Okimi took to knotweed soon enough, and when the buds started to come in, she was delighted. She’s just started eating grass.”

“I’m happy for you. That you have a daughter.” Not for the death of your other child, or of your mate, Mei thought. But of course Kuro knew that.

“I hope she grows up to make me proud. The whole herd takes a part in raising her, you know. We tend to all our children that way.”

That was more or less normal, but Mei had the sense this herd took it even more to heart than his own. “If it had been up to you… would you have sired her?”

Kuro sighed, not unhappily. “Who can say? If I were someone else’s son, I might well want different things. How about you, Mei? You’ve never had children, have you?”

Mei shook in the negative almost guiltily, his head lowered. “I don’t think it’s something I’m interested in.”

“Well, that’s all right. You’re certainly interesting enough regardless.”
Mei raised his chin. Kuro was looking softly at him.

The sun was down already, and the sky was darkening. “Will they be expecting us back soon?”

“Soon. Would you like to go back?”

Mei sighed. He’d been walking for days, mostly alone. Yet he somehow felt like wandering further, with Kuro by his side. “Not quite yet.”

The black prince nodded, and the two of them paced onward.

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The 95th Morning

Sleep was good that night. When Mei awoke, the mist was everywhere. Maga Maga was shrouded almost from sight. He stood up and heard someone else yawning. There were little “Good mornings” and such here and there. Mei told a few goats “Good morning” himself. He was asked by the oldest nannies about his health; he answered encouragingly.

They all took their breakfast together. The pouncing kid who’d been just a baby last time pounced up to Mei. Mei reared and pronked a little with the child, and said hello to his parents, Daku and Isamu. Little Okimi came over then, wanting to play, and there was play involving several of the herd, and there was quiet laughter.

“Why is there a pink flower behind your ear?” asked the older child.

“Because a squirrel didn’t want me to forget her,” Mei replied.

The child found this insufferably funny—he leapt and laughed and laughed. “I noticed that yesterday,” said Kuro. “It’s a fine thing to be cared for. Shall we walk?”

Mei nodded as if he’d been waiting to be asked. The two wandered away from the mountain, away from the steepest grade.

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring any woodsorrel,” he said at last, breaking the silence.

Kuro’s white teeth flashed. “It’s quite all right. Just to know that you’re alive and well… it’s truly a greater gift than I could have hoped for.”

Mei was curious. “How did the herd react when they heard about… what happened to me?”

“Oh, there was quite a lot of talking! You were the toast of Para Para for many days. Everyone had their own ideas.”

“But most of you figured that I was dead?”

“I’m afraid so. Thank you very much, Mei, for proving us wrong.”

Mei blushed. “I feel like I ought to make myself useful somehow.” Just being alive wasn’t enough to be deserving of thanks.
Kuro stopped in place and slowly knelt, enjoying the morning. “Does a friend need to be useful? I just like being around you.”

Mei felt the same way, but to just say it would be sappy. He went forward and knelt next to his companion. They looked at each other.

“Woodsorrel is your grandmother’s gift, anyway,” said Kuro, continuing from before. “Every visitor deserves to set their own mood.”

That idea intrigued Mei. “Do I have a mood about me?”

“I think so. It’s complex, though. I don’t think it can be summed up in a single word.”

Mei chewed his cud peacefully for a while. They were no longer walking, but the moving mist and the rising sun, combined with the only vaguely familiar landscape, made it feel as if they were still in motion.

“We call you Prince Kuro, you know,” he suddenly decided to say. “At home. It’s what some of the does call you, anyway.”

Kuro turned his head abruptly. “Prince?”

Mei nodded. “I think it suits you. You have a regal way of acting.”

The black buck’s nose wrinkled; he might have been blushing, but it wouldn’t show. “I just act the way I was brought up! I wouldn’t know any other way to act.”

“Well, there you are,” teased Mei.

Kuro chuckled, turning away. “I wish…”

“Hmm?”

“I wish I were free to go with you. If only for a while. Or failing that, I wish that you could stay.”

Mei blinked. Did he really care that much? He rose and stepped forward, hoping to regain eye contact. “You wish I could stay here, with your herd?”

Instead of answering, Kuro sighed. He looked into the distance. “Tell me, Mei. You’ve come to accept the presence of wolves in your life. But… do you ever feel like anything is… missing?”

Mei swallowed. Yes. He did. “Missing? Like what?”

Kuro shut his eyes. Then opened them, and looked into Mei’s. “I wish we could be mates, Mei, you and I. I wish I could ask you… will you be mine? And can I be yours?” He paused. “But sadly, neither of us is a doe. So that can never be.”

Mei blinked. “You… you wish I were a doe?”

“Oh I!” Kuro laughed. “It wouldn’t matter to me. I just wish…” He shrugged. “But there’s not much point in wishing such things, is there? I just feel like you’d be a better mate for me than Sunako was. It’s a funny feeling. That’s all.”

Mei exhaled, feeling the heat of his breath. He felt the backs of his ears rise. Kuro saw it too; he eyed Mei’s excited state and chuckled.
“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far. But I… I’m very fond of you too, Kuro. And of this place… your home makes me feel very tranquil inside.”

“Yes… it’s an excellent home, isn’t it?”

Or was it Kuro himself, and not his herd or homeland, that made Mei feel this way? “It’s strange. You’ve… got me excited. And yet… I still feel at peace!”

Kuro chuckled, lifting his face—his little beard dangled. “Then that is what I can give you.”

“I can’t say I’ve ever wanted a mate,” Mei confessed. “But if I did…”

“Say no more,” comforted Kuro.

Mei let himself relax. His companion did the same. They laughed, and then they looked back together at the herd, in the middle distance.

“That clover,” said Kuro. “That I helped you find. It wasn’t for a girl at all, was it?”

It felt good to release a secret, even if Mei had forgotten he was holding it. “It was for Gabu.”

“So I suspected,” chuckled the black goat.

They were silent again. Mei wasn’t sure what to say, or if he had to say anything. He knew he should probably be leaving soon, though.

“This Gabu… he’s the most important thing in your life, isn’t he?”

Mei nodded.

“Then let me ask… are you the most important thing in his?”

Mei nodded again. “I am. I know I am.”

“Even though he has a mate? And probably children, by now?”

Mei had to admit he wasn’t sure how becoming a father would affect Gabu. “I guess I’m not sure. But I’m fairly sure he’d still tell me our friendship is more important.”

Kuro lowered his voice. “And is that how it should be?”

That question cast a chill over Mei. He didn’t answer for a long time.
Looks like it's a new longest chapter. Oops! My serialized works always seem to suffer from chapter inflation, and this is no exception. But given that I have so much story to tell and only six chapters left to tell it in, we can't expect the brief 2000-word chapters from Part I. 6000 words may be the norm from here out, and I won't be surprised if I write even more.

Speaking of which… for the first time since I began _Beyond the Storm,_ I have no buffer! I've been neglecting writing for several weeks and I haven't written anything in advance. So I'll have to get busy soon if I want to update by next Monday! I'm optimistic, though.

There's a lot from the 3D show (_Arashi no Yoru Ni: Himitsu no Tomodachi_) in this chapter. Boro is a young wolf who comes to admire Gabu and learn from him, even while the rest of his pack looks at him as a goofball or weakling. He never gets to say goodbye. The several-stage trek to Para Para Field is depicted in the show, as is the cave shared on a different trip by Mei and his grandmother (though it's girl-May in the show, of course). Kuro and his grandfather are from the show too.

If you grow up learning that location names are all repetitions of four letters each, it must not seem unusual!

In accordance with reasonably common usage, I'm using the terms 'buck' and 'doe' for young adult male and female goats, and 'billy' and 'nanny' for their older counterparts.
The Early Summer

Chapter Summary

* Does Leto watch over every dam in labor?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Early Summer

Pawsteps sounded one after another. They were a sweet sound, a reassurance of Gabu’s own body, of his health. Pawsteps said many things—including “I can walk,” “There is a forest floor for me to walk upon,” and “I can choose my own path.” But at the same time, it was mildly disturbing for Gabu to hear his own steps. This forest was alive at night, but remarkably silent during the day. Now, at midafternoon, it was dark and almost eerie. The trees were very dense, enough so that the ground was covered with needles and leaves even in early summer. Some forests only had two or three kinds of trees, which gave them a special feel. This one had almost too many kinds! There was a huge variety of plantlife; the trees alone included towering pines and hemlocks, impressive oaks and maples, and even the occasional birch or cherry. There were shrubs—some of them flowering—and low regions filled with an algae-green soup that was up to a wolf’s height deep. Gabu was learning the ins and outs of the place. He didn’t want to make wolf soup. And he didn’t especially want his footsteps to be heard… but the forest was silent, and there was really no way to avoid it.

It made more sense to hunt at night. There wasn’t much daylight here at the best of times, and oddly, there was actually more wildlife here at night than during the day. With all the bats and insects and tanuki that made the nights come alive, Gabu’s pawsteps would be better muffled. Still, he wanted to get to know the land a bit better before trusting himself to algal glow, moonlight and memories.

To his amazement, now that he wasn’t bound to a schedule anymore, Gabu was actually turning out to be a pretty good hunter! He’d always thought of himself as unskilled—fit for a support position and not even completely worthy of that. But he’d managed to scrape by on his own for almost half a year, and had somehow even survived a winter alone (though he still couldn’t remember it.) And then, even before he’d regained his hunting partner, Gabu had handicapped himself. He’d made the decision to hunt only one day out of three, and what’s more, he’d let the quarry know. Making things even trickier, the best prey back home—he found he wholeheartedly thought of the Emerald Forest as home, now that he’d left it—were smallish things: rabbits and marmots. It was tough keeping himself fed without g—without bigger prey he could take consistently! But being in charge of his own life—that was something that was undeniably thrilling. And now, he was learning that it had all paid off.

Something was in the swamp—he could hear it. A muskrat? Maybe even a fisher? He couldn’t smell much over the reek of this unfamiliar swamp. Gabu slowly advanced to try to cut off the creature’s escape, in case it intended to come out this way. But his hopes weren’t high. He wondered whether he’d get used to the ambient scent of this swamp and eventually be able to make out little differences. If he couldn’t, he’d need to stick to the relatively dry undergrowth.
But if he had to, he could do that. Gabu had already killed several squirrels, a beaver and excitingly a jungle chicken since arriving here. He was only going to get sharper once he learned the land and shifted to nighttime hunting. After spending so long burdened by limitations, he was now finding it surprisingly easy to stay alive.

That was good, because he’d be feeding a whole brood any day now. Things were bound to get tough again. But Gabu was ready for that. He knew he’d only get this chance once in his lifetime. He would rise to the occasion… because he had to.

Over time, life got lower. That was the direction and the drift of pregnancy. This had always been true, but was more noticeable here, in this soft earth den dug beneath a wide white oak, without the murmur of voices and pack life just around the corner. For her past two pregnancies, Lala had settled comfortably into the role of wise hermit—she to whom those in need could come for advice, in exchange for gossip. She had rested in crags on a bed of dry grass, tended by Giro, Lolo and her respective mates and suitors, and had been a sort of carpet wolf, to use a recent metaphor.

Here, Lala was practically alone. She lounged below ground level, peering out at a jumbled view of leaves and low branches. The caterpillars had been nice to glimpse, but they were gone now. This den wasn’t especially deep, but it felt like another world entirely from the stony crags of Baku Baku, with its moist, soft ground and roots all around. Lala had stopped digging when she’d hit the mighty oak’s tap root; now it defined the corner of her dwelling. She spoke to it sometimes, when she felt starved of company. She and the tap root had things in common. They were both venerable things, confined to one place but much busier than they appeared. Fueling something. Enabling the greatness of life to be possible. Lala inhaled the tap root and let its scent relax her as she waddled around to take yet another nap.

She was so full. Any time now. She’d counted three at least, probably four young lives that would depend upon her. I am your sustenance, she told them. Soon, you will draw on me the way the white oak draws upon its roots. And I will welcome this—I will provide. I will mother you, children. I will mother you harder than I’ve ever mothered any children before. For that is my mission, now. That is what I’m here for. No longer am I the belle of the crags, no longer a leader of grown-ups, whether prize or idol, ingenue or striker. None of that. Right now, I am here for you.

She imagined they could feel her emotions, even if they couldn’t fathom her words. Her nipples were swollen, her belly broad and laden. She was like a fat tree, taking root in the earth. These children would be her masterworks. They would be the conduit leading from Gabu’s grand plan into the future. They would be the tools by which she would do his bidding, so long as it was the greatest project under the sun. Gabu would be proud, but it wouldn’t come close to Lala’s own pride. My masterworks. I can’t wait to see you, to smell you each separately. To know a small piece of what you’ll be capable of.

A sense of shame refluxed through her. Lala was not creating these pups, not truly. It was some unknown force, the Paw of Nature, that built pups and swelled bellies. Not for the first time, Lala wondered whether Leto had some part in it. But that was unlikely. She might have tweakled and nipped the process, but babies had been born long before wolves walked the earth. Who had invented them? What incredible refinement of mind had enabled someone, perhaps an elder god, to invent such a phenomenon? To change oneself—that was difficult sport, but not unfathomable, and in a sense unavoidable. But to build living things anew, full of surprises from father and mother and
beyond, to actually nourish them in the womb and draw them out—to figure out how such a ponderous thing might be done… Lala envied such an intellect. She wished she had the intelligence and wisdom to invent a way to make life from life. Perhaps, if she observed the process from just the right angle, she would catch a gleam of that ancient wisdom. Perhaps, if she amassed enough hints of the mystery, they would add up to a picture…

But then, this was to be her last birthing, was it not? Gabu had promised the goat he would never again be a father. If he kept that promise, and if Lala stuck by his side, then this would be all she was ever going to get. After this, there would be no more clues as to the nature of that incredible contrivance, childbirth. If this was to be her last taste from that deep spring, she had better savor it!

She arched her back. Something popped. She sank and splashed—splashed down against the cave floor. Ahh. Was this it? Had the time come?

She felt a grave shifting just above her pelvis. Her weight was falling back. Well, if they know it, she reasoned, I know it. Lala lifted her head toward the entrance and crooned as loud as she could manage: “Ga-buuuuuuuu!”

It was time. She seated herself as stably as she could, set herself to steady breathing, and peaked her inner senses for a possible glimpse, however fleeting, of infinite wisdom.

Evening came. So did Lala’s water, thin and vaguely sweet. Like kindness, sometimes. Aches came, and sharp pains, and Gabu came too, just when it seemed right for him to come. He said her name over and over; he licked her and groomed her and kept saying her name. And he asked questions in his thin, hopeful voice. Did they feel healthy? Yes, she said. Did she think there were four? Yes, that’s right. Did she need anything? Just the knowledge that you’re here, she told him, and Leto’s love.

Lala wasn’t actually sure that Leto loved her, or even knew she existed. But she believed it was likely. Leto’s eye had watched over Gabu and his caprine companion, so it appeared; Lala was now a big part of that picture. If Leto had done more than forge an impossible friendship and walk away, she must know Lala. So if she was paying any attention at all, she would be aware of this childbirth. For all Lala knew, Leto watched over every wolf dam in labor. There was a weight to this event that was more than the century-old tree above them, more than the strain of her muscles, more than the millennia-old forest with a thickness verging on jungle.

It might be other gods, Lala admitted. She didn’t know the courts the gods walked in. She only knew the smallest fraction of their gossip. In a place like that, Lala would be a green naif. But maybe on her death, she reflected. Maybe that was where she was ultimately bound.

Night came. So did heavy breathing, a labor for air, an agony of the ribs. So did relief, and so did four children, wet and disheveled, deaf and unseeing, yet already distinct. The largest was already crawling over the others, exploring the squashy carpet wolves that were his world. Three boys, one girl.

“The white one,” whispered Gabu. “We should name it Mei.”

Lala stretched her neck to lick the pretty thing. “It’s silver-white, like me,” she whispered back. “And it’s the girl.”
Gabu’s eyes were so soft as he looked them over. “Then what do you think we should call her?” he asked.

Lala met Gabu’s eyes mischievously. “We’ll call her Meiko,” she decided. “And this one—the dark brown one. Bari.” They’d already discussed it, in fact—their strongest son would be named for Lala’s brother. It might have taken a careful eye to determine the strongest, but as it happened, with one pup slowly trampling all the others from the start, there was no contest.

Lala began to nurse her children for the first time. She repeated all her messages, as if the milk could carry her praise, her encouragement, her admiration. Feed, she said, and grow strong. Gabu nuzzled each pup ever so gently, and nuzzled Lala, and brought her water in a tremendous leaf, tilting up one corner carefully in his teeth. She drank the water, ate the placentas and cleaned away the afterbirth. And the night was as day; they didn’t mind the darkness.

The others were called Himari and Nogusa. Himari, pale brown with fur like feathers, delicate when he began to walk, every step to the side as well as forward. Sun ball. Sunflower. Nogusa, flecked with a plethora of grays, light and dark. Pronounced ears that rose at the slightest thing, even before he could really hear. Field grass. Wild growth.

Gabu cuddled Lala with a fervency she had to admire. She’d been loved before, of course, and administered assiduously. But never had she gotten such a sense of urgency from one of her lovers. Gabu darted to the den, dropping whatever food he’d managed at the entrance, and nuzzled Lala on the top of her head, and kissed her, and nibbled her neck as if he couldn’t love her hard or fast enough. He would touch each pup, turning it over, licking, snuffling its ears. And then, likely as not, he would leave again, knowing more meat was needed.

Lala couldn’t blame him. She was hungry. She wished she could leave her den for more than a few minutes to get water and a breath of fresh air, but these pups were more important than any she’d ever had. They were Gabu’s pups, but they belonged also to his project… to his ambition. They were Lala’s children, yes, but they were also the pups of the future. She knew to take great care with them.

Bari was the first to sniff her teats before suckling, and the first to push another pup away. Lala smiled, and simply moved little Nogusa to another teat. She had plenty. Meiko, though, was the first to wag her tail. Once she started, it was like a path had opened, and she wagged it frequently. She wagged while nursing; she wagged while cuddling. She even gave feeble wags while she lay asleep. Lala watched her children with squinted eye and wondered what they dreamed of.

It was always a joy when Gabu came home from his night’s roving and nestled himself up beside her. He was the last thing she needed to stay awake for. His presence was like her final blanket; with him in place, the world was right, and she could sleep.

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**The 99th Day**

When Mei returned to the Deep Forest, he was forced to tread cautiously. It was night, and there was a superabundance of sound—crickets sawing, katydids chirping, frogs croaking, and even the
occasional owl’s screech—or was that a tanuki? Amid this soft clamor, Mei couldn’t tell whether there might be something dangerous lurking. So he strode carefully, one leg at a time, keeping a watch out, ears wide open. His eyes were attuned to the darkness, but he had to admit being able to see nearly every direction in his peripheral vision wasn’t terribly reassuring when so much of the periphery was obscured by darkness, and every direction was obscured by trees in nearly full leaf. There was no moon in the sky, either. So Mei struggled to unpack one sound from another, one scent from the next. He focused on trying to figure out what danger looked like, or sounded like in a place like this. When a screech or a rustle of branches came from too close, he dove into cover and waited for the normal clamor to resume.

Eventually, after enough of this, the reassuring scent of wolves came as a sheer joy. No, wait—wolfscent was the most dangerous! Mei had forgotten that not every wolf was his friend. Was that Gabu’s scent? Or was it just a wolf’s generic must? He hid in the undergrowth, nose lifted, and tried to puzzle it out.

Ohh. Yes. Of course. It was Gabu’s scent, plus Lala’s, plus those of the children. They might be fresh from Lala’s womb. Their den must be a ripe place indeed.

Mei stepped out into the open and called: “Gabu!” Then he leapt back under cover, just in case.

A rampaging through the brush followed soon after, followed by the reassuring lupine cry: “Mei!” Soon, the two were at each other’s faces, Mei prancing upward and Gabu canting down, licking and nosing and laughing.

“I was worried I wouldn’t ever see you again,” confessed Gabu.

“You were? But I told you I was coming back.”

“I know, but… but this place is so different, and so far from everything…”

Mei nodded. “That’s true. It’s frightening at night. I probably should have waited for the warblers to wake up, but I’d been away so long I told them I’d just forge on…” He glanced around at the loud forest, lit only by dim starlight and the occasional lightning bug, but that was laughable now—with Gabu here, there was nothing to be afraid of. Except… “Gabu. Your children.”

He didn’t want to ask outright, just in case. But Gabu’s smile didn’t falter. “There’s four of them! Oh, Mei, I want you to meet them! Come on—I’ll take you to the den!”

Mei had left the wolves just before they’d selected a site for their den. He asked about their time alone here, and Gabu went on excitedly. He was almost babbling, he seemed so happy to have Mei to talk to. Lala had chosen the den’s site and had done most of the digging, he explained. She had a strange affection for the big oak tree it was dug under. And Gabu had been focused on hunting—learning where the paths were, how the animals here tended to hide or flee, how to detect trees in near darkness. He’d been getting better! In fact, he’d been hunting just now when he caught a whiff of goat, and had wondered—was it Mei? “It’s been so long since I smelled another goat, I wasn’t honestly sure.”

Mei laughed. “I had the same thought about you! Until I realized I was probably smelling your children.”

“Well, if it had been another goat, don’t worry.” The wolf sat upright and crossed a foreleg over his breast. “I wouldn’t have set paw on it. But I still would have liked to know it was there.”

Mei thought back on Mii, and how she’d followed him on his tryst one day when Gabu was still a
secret, and gotten lost in the process. He wondered if she would ever try coming to find him. “I’m full of excitement, Gabu! I’ve got so much to tell!”

Gabu chuckled, dropping into a rapid lope as he cracked a huge grin. “Me too, Mei!”

They’d been a long time apart, but getting together again was so much fun.

Mei peeped into the cave, but there really wasn’t a speck of light to be had. He could make out distinct wolf scents now, at least. Lala’s gentle breaths were like a source of wind, here in the recesses of the grand oak.

“Maybe if we’re really quiet,” Gabu whispered, “you can smell the cubs. I just don’t want to wake them, or Lala.”

Mei nodded and crept silently in. He would once have been afraid of incurring Lala’s wrath, but she could hardly do anything do him now, could she? Wasn’t she suffused with a mother’s love?

Gabu sniffed at a pup, then turned to Mei and guided his head gently with a paw. “This way, Mei. It’s right in front of you.”

Mei smelled the whelp. It smelled like blood and… well, it registered like a wolf, but more so. It was stewing in its fresh wolf juices. “It smells healthy,” he whispered.

Mei could feel Gabu’s tail wagging.

Mei spent the night in the corner. At daybreak, he peered at the pups, taking in their colors. Then he walked back through the forest, bleating in the peculiar way he’d devised until he heard the sound of the warblers approaching. They wished him good morning, and he told them the news. They reacted with civil pleasure, but seemed largely indifferent to the birth of the wolf pups. “Life provides,” said Hatsu.


Mei returned to find Lala awake. She yawned even while she was staring, taking him in. Then she smacked her lips and regained her breath. “Well, well!” she said. “The wandering ungulate returns.”

“Hello, Lala. Congratulations.”

A big, genuine-looking smile met him. “Thank you! I think this is my best litter yet.”

Mei didn’t remark on the notion it would also be her last. “Are you feeling well?”

“I’ve been feeling… close to the ground,” she replied. “Bearing young makes you feel heavy, you know. The heaviness hasn’t left me entirely.”
“And all the pups are well?”

Lala shifted a hind paw and touched the mottled gray one. “Nogusa, here, is a bit of a weakling. Not a runt, not yet, but he may become one.”

“Sorry to hear it,” said Mei.

“It’s not a problem,” said Lala. “Life is inequality. We learn that from one side as well as the other.”

Mei felt a nearly imperceptible shudder go down his spine. He was getting accustomed to Lala’s… voracious approach to life. She still felt a mother’s love, he expected.

“Lala’s still making sure he gets plenty of milk,” Gabu reassured.

“I have milk to spare,” she singsonged. “He’ll have plenty of chances to show his weakness in other areas of life.”

Mei’s shudder was a little bigger this time. “Nogusa, you said? What are the others’ names?”

Lala ran her nose down the nape of the silver-white one. “You’ll be pleased to hear we named this one for you!”

“This is little Meiko,” said Gabu. “Sorry about her being a girl… but she was the only white one!”

Mei’s heart melted. *Meiko. Sprout, or bud.* He watched her start wagging her tail as her mother stroked her, and he smiled the biggest smile. “That’s all right, Gabu.” They really had named a wolf pup after him! That was amazing. And it was fitting in a way: Kuro had wished that either Mei or himself could have been female, and now Mei was witnessing that in a way. This was himself as a she-pup. Or so he could indulge himself in thinking.

“The other two rhyme!” announced Gabu. “This is Bari, and this is Himari.” Dark and light brown, respectively.

“After your brother,” Mei surmised, indicating the dark one.

Lala nodded. “May he live again.”

“He was my hunt leader, too!” added Gabu, playfully nosing the active pup. “I was a little afraid of the first Bari, but…” He shrugged. “He was good at his job. And I’m bigger than this one!”

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Lala teased.

“I’m so glad for you,” said Mei. He looked over the youths as they squirmed around blindly. He tried not to think of what they would become someday, but the thought wouldn’t leave him. Future destroyers. Future renders of flesh. They were in a little pile, a cute little pile of destruction. Mei thought of all the creatures whose lives they would end someday. He imagined himself showing a long line of creatures, great and small, to the entrance of the cave, and showing them the tiny pile of fur and flesh that would one day end them. And he imagined a stag stepping forward with a sizable hoof, and a remark—“They don’t seem so mighty”—and squashing them into a little mixed up pool of slurry. Then that’s all they would be, and the animals would stare, then laugh… and the little pile of multicolored goo would just sit there, oozing, and never do anything else. It would be so easy right now for someone to curtail forever the destruction these four cubs would someday cause.
Yet Mei didn’t want that to happen. He meant what he’d said: he was glad for Gabu and Lala. And he was even glad for himself, because even if he never meant to have children of his own, he would have the privilege of watching these children grow and develop. He meant to be part of their lives—to invest himself in them.

It was a strange feeling, even after all this time. Mei felt like a traitor to his kind. But even as he realized this, and realized simultaneously that, at bottom, it didn’t bother him, he felt himself taking another step on the path to forever. He stood there experiencing love for these four little treasures. He didn’t want them to be squashed underhoof. He wanted them to lead happy, productive, fruitful lives.

“You made it possible,” Lala reminded him fulsomely, as if reading his emotions. “We never would have had them if you hadn’t given us permission.” It sounded like she still found the idea exquisitely funny.

But it was true. These were the little monsters that Mei had opened the gate for and let into the world. They were his responsibility, after a fashion. And they would cause such pain.

Yet Mei watched them squirming, the little white one’s tail wagging, and he loved them. He adored them already.

Did that make him a monster?

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Chapter End Notes

Wolves really do come in a wide variety of colors… but not usually with this much variety in a single litter. That's cartoonist's license.

For an even more uncomfortably loving canine mate and father, read _The Book of Sorrows_, sequel to _The Dun Cow_, by Walter Wangerin, Jr. And don't say I didn't warn you.

More than usual, I was aware while revising the introduction to this chapter of the differences in Mei and Gabu's idiolects. A lot of phrases and words I originally used (like 'plenitude') would have been fine for Mei’s thoughtstream, but I had to change and simplify them for Gabu's.

Too bad Gabu doesn't have a scarf anymore! It would be good for transporting water, but I imagine the wolves don't produce a lot of those things. I'm really honestly not sure how they make them. Maybe they just find them in barns.

It was tempting to set a section during the 100th Day. Day 100 is a significant one in Pinkie Pie's Travelogue, my other work with numbered days. But somehow 99 feels more suitable here. The birth of these cubs is not a completion in itself; it's a thing on the brim.
"I think this'll be my best child yet!" That's what real mothers say, right?
**Chapter Summary**

* If it’s not a race, what is it?

* Nature’s way? Is the week part of nature’s way?

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes

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**The 151st Day**

It was when she was most of the way to the Big Tree, just as it came into view around the smaller, crooked trees in its way, that Meiko had a realization. Paths got smaller! There were more of them as life went on, but they got shorter—day by day and run by run. Smaller. Easier! And easy didn’t mean more lovable, and it didn’t mean less. It was just faster. The more she ran the path to the Big Tree, the faster it went, and the more time it left for other things. Other fun things, she hoped.

She was learning the way on her own. And she was also running faster than before. When she ran, it wasn’t like when Mommy and Daddy ran, or even like Uncle Mei. For her and her brothers, running was a jerky thing, full of bumps, stumbles and trips. Running was like the water drops fell off the cupped leaves—it wasn’t all at once, and it was full of funny bursts of speed where she didn’t fall down at all! She loved running and she loved getting better. Daddy told her that someday, she’d run like him. And Mommy told her she had yet to discover so many things more wonderful than running…

She put on a burst of speed when she saw Uncle Mei. He was at the Big Tree, talking with something in the branches—probably Aunt Hatsu or Uncle Haburo, but maybe a squirrel! Predictably, she bumbled and tumbled over when her paw hit a root. She was convinced she hadn’t had to hit the root—it hadn’t been wrong to speed up, she just hadn’t done it right. She rocked until she fell still and let out an ‘Oof’. Then she smiled and wagged her tail. Mei and Daddy were coming over to her, and she knew they’d lick her face and get her standing again. This was an okay way to say hi.

“Are you all right?” asked Daddy, while Uncle Mei said, “Hello, Meiko.” He turned to her brothers, who were plodding on behind, and greeted them too, but Meiko felt like she got the warmest greeting. Was it because she was the fastest? Or maybe it was because she was named for him? They’d told her that because she was white she’d gotten to have Uncle Mei’s name—not only that, but an extra -ko, too. Remembering that made her grin, and so did Daddy’s licks and slurps, and his nose, which flipped her back up to her feet. Meiko knew how to stand up after tumbling over. But she liked being flipped over better.

“Hi, Uncle Mei,” she murred. She jerked her head back toward her brothers, feeling her ears quiver. “I beat ‘em all here again!”

Uncle Mei chuckled. He looked to see them arriving—Bari was first, of course, and then Himari, with his funny slanty steps, like he could never remember the right way to walk. Meiko suspected he probably could have gotten there faster, but he was nice and he waited behind to keep Nogusa
company.

“I got here almost as fast,” Bari was bragging in his sloppy, scratchy voice, “and I didn’t fall over even once! Meiko falls a lot, so I think really I win.”

“Nuh-uh!!” Meiko insisted. She had to defend the rules of the race—if Bari got away with saying it didn’t count if you fell once, he would make that a rule for every time. And then Meiko would never win again.

“You know, it isn’t a race!” said Uncle Mei, grinning.

“Huh?” said Meiko.

“If it’s not a race, what is it?” challenged Bari.

“It’s an outing,” said Uncle Mei. “Your mother decided to take you out to see me today, and to enjoy the Big Tree area. Does it really matter whether you get here quickly or slowly?”

“Yeah it matters,” protested Bari, standing up as tall as he could. “The one who gets here best wins.”

“The fastest one wins,” retorted Meiko. Was he just making up rules?

Mei gave Bari a side-to-side nose kiss. “Well, I suppose you can make it a race if you want to. But everyone has to agree.”

Himari and Nogusa were just arriving. Immediately, Himari tripped up to Daddy and gave him a nuzzle. Then he planted his agile forepaws at the bottom of the Tree. “Can I dig at the Tree, Daddy?”

“Well, I guess!” replied Daddy, swishing his tail. He used to say it wasn’t nice to dig at the roots of trees, but since then, he’d admitted this one was so big it probably didn’t mind. Himari leapt excitedly and started searching for his old tunnels, in case any were still around. If he couldn’t find them, Meiko knew, he’d just happily start in on a new one.

“He’s such a sunny child,” said Uncle Mei to Daddy.

Daddy just chuckled and looked around at all of them. Meiko knew what he was thinking—they were all sunny! He loved them all so much! It made her feel really lucky.

“Feeling cheery today?” asked Daddy. He crouched down so his face was the same height as Meiko’s and he wagged his tail high along with hers. She laughed hard, like she always did.

“Yeah!” she replied. She’d already seen a bug at the bottom of the Big Tree and she wanted to follow it.

Nogusa stumbled up, confused about where to put his paws. “I made it!”

Meiko caught Mommy’s scent and knew she’d been strolling behind the whole time. “You did make it,” said Mommy. “All on your own! I think that’s your third day running.”

“Well, I didn’t really run,” admitted Nogusa. That was true—he couldn’t even try to run yet. He was clumsy and not very strong and he only had two modes: walking slow and walking funny.

“It’s an expression,” said Mommy. “When you do something several times, one after another, we say it’s a ‘running’ pattern. ‘Three times running’ means you walked all the way from home to the
Big Tree three days right after one another! And do you know what that means?"

Meiko didn’t even know what that meant. “What?” she asked.

“What?” asked Nogusa.

Mommy perked up, her ears and chin high. “It means…” she said loud enough for the other grown-ups to hear, “that our time in this forest may finally be near its end!”

Oh no. Did that mean change? Meiko didn’t want things to change. But then again, if Mommy was excited about it… maybe it was good?

But Daddy seemed sad, or at least worried. “Lala… do you really think they’re ready?”

She nodded one of her deep nods, that used most of her body. “I’m prepared to carry Nogusa most of the way. They can make it. It won’t be quick, but it can happen.”

What did this mean? “Are we going somewhere else?” Meiko asked.

“Do you remember us talking about this?” asked Uncle Mei, walking over. “We came from a place with more than just forest. It had wide open spaces to run in, and bluffs to climb, and a beautiful lair on top of a hill to live in.”

Himari stopped digging in the soft root soil and loped over. “We’re going back there? Now?! ”

“Not just now. But maybe in a day or two, we could set out. How would you feel about that?”

Meiko didn’t know how to feel. How could she know? There was so much out there, and the grown-ups knew all about it, but she didn’t. She felt her tail stop wagging. “It’s kind of scary,” she admitted.

Uncle Mei nodded in his serious way. “Yes, it is scary. But the Emerald Forest is our home. We came here knowing that we would go back there as soon as you pups were ready.”

Nogusa was smiling, his ears cupped. “Is it nicer there?”

“In many ways,” said Uncle Mei.

“There’s more room to roam,” said Mommy in her clever voice. “But the real sparkle of the Emerald Forest is the creatures! Do you remember us telling you about all our friends there?”

“I can’t remember all those names,” said Bari, who was smiling, his tongue showing.

“I can remember a lot of them,” said Himari, happy to be able to show off. “Bedelia and Itsuko and Taffet and Kaput and Umenoki and… and Wilhelm and Rosie—”

“It’s Kiput,” Meiko interrupted, “not Kaput. I don’t know how there can be so many animals with so many names.”

“I’d like to meet them,” said Nogusa.

“Me too!” chimed Himari. His tail was wagging, so Meiko started in again. She couldn’t help it—it was contagious.

Daddy scuffed all their heads, one by one—Meiko tried to run away, but he got her and gave her head a loving scuff. “I guess that’s decided, then! Should we go tomorrow?”
“I think we may as well,” agreed Uncle Mei.

“What an adventure we’ll have, won’t we, children?” said Mommy. She brushed her tail over Himari’s head.

Meiko had a thought. “Are Aunt Hatsu and Uncle Haburo coming?” She knew they weren’t always around, and that made her afraid they’d stay behind.

Uncle Mei spoke up. “I expect they’ll want to fly ahead and give warning.”

“Fair enough,” said Mommy.

“So they will be there with us?” asked Himari.

The two warblers, one after the other, emerged from the Big Tree’s foliage, swooping down. “Of course!” said one.

“Our home,” explained the other.

Meiko smiled. “If you weren’t there, I’d miss ya!”

“You’ll be able to learn so much,” said Mommy sweetly. “And who knows? You may make a whole bevy of new friends!” Meiko didn’t know what a bevy was, but she assumed it was a lot.

“Okay,” said Nogusa. “I guess we can go.” He didn’t seem too sure.

Daddy sighed happily. Then he gulped and looked uncomfortable. “I guess you’ll have to say goodbye to everything that’s here. I don’t think we’ll ever come back.”

Oh, wow. That made Meiko feel sad. There were a lot of things to say goodbye to. She wanted to say goodbye to all the squirrels and birds, even if they always ran and flew away. “Okay,” she said, and the sadness was starting to fall over her like leftover rain. “Should I get started now?”

“I suppose you’d better,” said Uncle Mei.

Meiko went over to the base of the Big Tree. It had been there her whole life, she realized, as a place to go and gather, and now she wasn’t ever going to smell it again. “Goodbye, Big Tree,” she said, putting a front paw up on it.

Bari came over and put his paw next to hers. “G’bye, Big Tree,” he said.

Her other brothers came over too, slowly. They all put their paws up against it together. Meiko thought Bari was the one who started howling. But she wasn’t sure. It could have been her.

She knew Mommy and Daddy and the others were watching them. But Meiko didn’t care. She stood as tall as she could against the Big Tree and she howled her little sad howls for as long as she felt she had any howls in her. And she felt and heard all her brothers howling with her.

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**The 153rd Day**

The shadows wavered in and out with the noonday breeze—now the earth was webbed with black wherever the ragweed grew, now it wasn’t. Thumping carried through the dirt, enough that Akiara could feel it in her paws. She heard feet leaping nearby and hurried over the heath, searching for...
the source of mayhem. She was drawn by squeals in the distance. and found old Tibias trembling against the ground near one of those ragweed stands, watching as a messenger pounded off.

“What,” asked Akiara, landing nimbly over him.

“Mmn?” he asked, ears twitching.

“What is it? What’s happening?”

“Mmnh,” he responded. “She was looking for Nousagi. Some kind of message from the air.”

“From the air?” demanded Akiara.

“Birds,” said Tibias. “For the leaders’ ears only.”

“Screw that,” said Akiara, racing after the messenger. “Aren’t I a storyteller on the rise?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. If these birds were Haburo and Hatsu—and she very much suspected they were—then they were here with a story, even if it was in the form of news. And that made it her business.

Especially if the news was that the wolves were coming back.

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The 154th Day

Everything was all different, but the toads were the best part. They were like the chunks of meat in the scenery—everything else was just milk. Whenever he heard a toad in the crunchy grass, Bari pounced over and looked for it. And whenever he saw a toad, he pounced for it! They always got away, but his paw had hit one once. It had felt funny and it had jumped away funny and he wanted to hit one again. He wanted to catch one. It would make this whole trip worthwhile.

Dad made a weird noise, though. Like a growl or a groan. He padded over and looked down at Bari. “Son… you like chasing the toads, huh?”

“Yeah?” Bari didn’t like being defensive, but Dad’s tone called for it. He kneaded the earth with his big toes.

“Well, that’s fine,” said Dad. “I guess soon you might even catch one. I guess you’re all going to start hunting soon.”

It felt strange for Dad to switch from talking to Bari to talking to everyone. Bari didn’t like it. “Nogusa’s too slow to hunt,” he pointed out.

“Oh believe me,” said Mom, “he’ll try.”

“I just need to get bigger,” said Nogusa, trying to be bright about things as usual. He wasn’t even very good at that, though. Himari was brighter even if he didn’t say much.

Dad went on talking to everyone, even as they all walked along. “But just so you know, there are some rules we have to follow. Well… one rule, really.”
“What’s the rule?” asked Bari, hoping it was a fun one.

But Dad didn’t seem comfortable going on. He looked to Uncle Mei and to Mom, and Mom cleared her throat and took over.

“You all remember when I told you about the week, don’t you? Six days, one after another?”

“I remember!” chimed Meiko, wagging her tail. Bari tried not to smile—he didn’t want anyone to know how much he liked it when she wagged.

“I don’t remember what the days were,” said Nogusa.

“Simple enough! I’ll sing them again for you.” Mom rolled her shoulders and sang: “First hunt, full of vim! Then First Talking, cold and grim. Playday, full of fun! Second hunt is time to run. Second Talking, loud! Storyday draws up a crowd.”

“So Mom sang the song through again, and all the pups sang along as they marched. Bari noticed that Uncle Mei didn’t look too happy. He kept wincing and walking askew, and didn’t sing along. Then again, Uncle Mei was different from the rest of them—Bari had known that a long time. Uncle Mei didn’t have claws or pointy teeth, or even any teeth at all on top. He never chased toads or squirrels, and he never fed them meat coughed up from his belly like Mom and Dad. He just ate shoots and grass and green plants, and Bari thought that was embarrassing. So maybe it made sense that he wouldn’t like it when they talked about hunting. Uncle Mei knew how bad he was at hunting, even though he was a grown-up, and that made him embarrassed for himself.

“Very nice!” said Dad. “You kids certainly have excellent ears!”

“I have an excellent mouth,” said Meiko.

“I can’t disagree,” said Mom.

“Well,” Dad went on, “hunting is only for the Hunting Days. On First hunt and Second hunt, we can hunt the animals. But on all the other days, the animals are our friends instead.”

Something about that sat weird with Bari. His ear curled.

“Okay!” said Meiko. It looked like she was fine with it.

Bari decided to speak up. “I’m gonna eat all the animals on the Hunt days. There won’t be any left to be friends with,” he joked, and he licked his lips just for fun.

Mom frowned. “Is that so.”

Dad said, “Well, I don’t think you’ll be able to catch them all. There are a lot of animals.” He didn’t look happy either. Oh well. Bari wasn’t the best at telling jokes, but he was going to keep trying.

“Really?” asked Himari. He’d been really quiet for a while, but now he spoke up. “You mean we hunt after the same animals we’re friends with?”

“It’s how we do it,” said Mom, looking at the clouds with a funny smile.

“But…” Himari seemed most upset of all. “But how? Won’t we run out? Who’ll want to be our friend if we’re out hunting them on the other days?”
Now Uncle Mei finally turned back and spoke. “They understand that it’s nature’s way.”

“Nature’s way? Is the week part of nature’s way?”

“Well, no,” said Mei. “We invented that.”

“I don’t want to eat anyone that I’m friends with,” said Himari. Bari watched him—his walking got more crooked than usual and his eyes got wide. It seemed like the more Himari thought about things, the more upset he got.

“Well, if you’re lucky, you won’t run into any of your friends,” said Dad. “Once you start hunting, you’ll realize that the easiest animals to catch are the ones who are old, or crippled, or weak.”

“What if some of my friends are old and weak?” cried Himari. He was probably thinking of Nogusa, who was definitely weak, even if he wasn’t old.

“Well, I think the animals to come to the brook to meet us are usually healthy and young,” said Dad. But he sounded bothered too.

“I don’t want to eat any of them,” said Himari.

“That’s okay,” said Bari, sensing another opportunity for a joke. “I’ll have yours! I’ll get big and wide and huge, and you’ll get little and skinny and tiny.” He laughed despite himself, even though he knew it was better to tell a joke without laughing at it yourself.

Himari just looked sad and scared, though. And Uncle Mei looked angry, and Meiko looked confused, and Mom and Dad looked at each other and frowned. Only Nogusa laughed at all, and it was only a tiny laugh.

Bari shrugged. He was still bad at telling jokes, it looked like. But that was okay. He was just a pup. He had plenty of time to get better.
Chapter End Notes

It's yet another two POVs! And here I thought I'd only have three for the whole story. Does Meiko’s realization in the first paragraph reflect my feelings as a writer on the speeding up of this work?

I almost made Nogusa female.

I like the surprise of hearing a toad leap through the grass near where I'm walking. It's rare enough that I find it kind of exciting, especially if I can spot the toad. They're not hard to catch compared to other animals, though I don't feel much like bothering them these days.

NOTE: I’ve added a piece of conversation to the pivotal confrontation back in Chapter 27. It may alleviate some discomfort about the way the animals received Mei’s dramatic proposal to be hunted along with everyone else.
The 155th and 156th Days

Chapter Summary

* You held on to life, just for me?
* Do you want me to get big and fight you?
* You do realize you mustn’t come back, don’t you?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 155th Day

The long march came at last to an end. Eight paws had left the lair on the green hilltop at the end of spring; twenty-four paws strode or leapt inside near the end of summer. There were gleeful and curious noises at the sight of the cave, followed by exclamations at the strong scent of badger, followed by a rapid rushing for the exit as the three badgers settled happily inside went running from the lupine invasion. Mei watched them speed down the hill, screeching all the way. Then the pups, only barely shaken by this drama, piled inside the lair and explored, snuffling their snouts in the soft earth, spreading belly-wide and remarking on its coolness. Gabu and Lala went in after them.

Mei stayed outside. He watched the displaced badgers until they were out of sight, wondering whether they would return. He’d seen that his moss bed was once again gone to ruin, and that his flower nook was still there but empty; he decided to wait before replenishing it. The lair was a place of wolves now, and while Mei would continue to sleep there, the joy of privacy he had once enjoyed with Gabu was gone. That was all right. Caves were not for goats—not in the long term. Open spaces were the herd animal’s friend. So Mei wandered a ring around the lair, re-acquainting himself to home. Home was this hill now; there was simply a family living at its peak.

Was it his family? Mei kept teetering back and forth on that. Of course he was a part of that family. Of course he was. And just as surely, of course it was not his family. His family couldn’t be a pack of wolves. His family was far away, on Sawa Sawa Mountain, that was all. And just possibly… in Para Para Field?

He lay down and shut his eyes. Well, there was someone there who had used the word *mate* to describe himself and Mei… even if it was in the context of something that couldn’t be. That was something like family, wasn’t it? A trace of family? An undertone?

He sighed. Really, Gabu was Mei’s family, just like ever. But Gabu was very distracted these days, and with good reason. Maybe, after the pups had grown and moved on to their own territory, Lala would get bored, knowing Gabu would never consent to another litter. Maybe she would leave eventually, and things could once again be how they were.

Some noise brought Mei’s eyes open, putting him on alert. He’d half been expecting a soft little pounce; to find a wiggling wolf cub crawling on him playfully, asking for Uncle Mei. But this was a shriller noise, from down the hill: “Hoofyy! Hoofy come!”
Mei scrambled down the hill, seeking the source of the voice. “Bepo?”

“Hoofy! Are back! Soo forever long!”

The vole stood raggedly upright, paws hanging, nose slightly limp. Its black fur was lightened from when Mei had last seen it, especially on the belly, chest and chin. “Oh, Bepo! It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Maybe not come back. Maybe not live. Thought maybe special done. But not done!”

Mei hated to admit he already wasn’t comprehending his friend. “No,” he said. “Not done.”

Bepo looked around at the wolves cavorting slowly on the hilltop. “Sooo many woofies! What happens? Now woofies everywhere!”

Mei smiled unsurely. “Well, that is the way of it. I’m told four is a rather average litter.”

“Litter on hillside. How many months Bepo? Tall wolf? Head far from ground. Small woof? One chomp gone!” Somehow, despite its fears, Bepo didn’t seem to be very upset.

“I’ll tell them all to leave you alone,” promised Mei. It occurred to him that this was a violation of his own rules, but surely, it couldn’t make a difference—how could one little black vole who never went anywhere make a difference?

Bepo nodded several times. “Safety for Bepo. So funny. So funny, hoofy.” It stood awkwardly and arched its back, head high, but couldn’t seem to arch very far. “No good stand.” It dropped its back and lay like a lump on the earth. “No good breathe. How many months?”

Chill took Mei’s spine. The vole was talking about its own death. “Are you… are you feeling old, Bepo? I’m so sorry.”


Mei smiled bittersweetly and lay down, chest against the grass. “I just meant I’m sad to see how much you’ve changed.” Only on the outside, though, he reflected. You don’t seem changed on the inside at all.

Bepo shook its head. “Your fault! Is your fault Bepo old.”

Mei shook his own head, ears flapping. “It can’t be! I don’t know how to make someone old.”

“Old, not dead! Your fault. If never hoofy? Probably give in. Probably not try. Why so low, Bepo?” The vole gestured with nose and tail to the lower part of the hill, where they were. “Why not high?”

“I was thinking this was lower on the hill than I normally see you,” acknowledged Mei.


Mei sniffled. “You held on to life, just for me?”
“You and allll woofy. Made Bepo special. If special? How can not say goodbye?”

Now Mei took in a stiff breath. “Are you dying, Bepo?”


Mei reflected, but decided he didn’t want to think about that right now. “I’m very glad you were here to meet me. I hope you’ll be well for many months to come.”


Bepo nodded. “Now Bepo black and white!” It groomed a patch of brittle gray fur on its chest. “White for toughen up!”

Mei closed his eyes for a moment and sniffed with pain and laughter. “In that case, Bepo, I’m all the more glad I decided to go and visit my old home sooner than I’d planned. Because now I’ll get to tell you all about it.”

Bepo curled down swiftly on the ground. “Tell Bepo homeland?”

Mei chuckled. He turned to watch the brood of little hunters roaming over the hill—Lala chasing Meiko at a self-imposed three-legged limp while Gabu playfought with Bari, trying to tumble him using only his nose. Nogusa and Himari were grooming each other. Gabu glanced at Mei for a moment, and Mei grinned. Gabu grinned back.

“I think I have time to tell a little of it,” said Mei. “But if you want to hear the rest, you’ll just have to live until tomorrow.”

Bepo sat up straight, tail straight back, as if offended. “Hard bargain,” it said. “Is deal.”

“Well, then,” said Mei. “I suppose we’ll have to start with our trip southeastward to the deep, dark forest…”

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**The 156th Day**

Well, there they were. Lingering at the brook just outside of the woods, like always. Gabu was scared, but he kept pride in his stride, just like his mother had always taught him. This wasn’t as scary as meeting the animals for the first time had been. It definitely wasn’t as scary as being caged in a pit to await his fate as a traitor. (After that, Gabu had doubted whether anything would be truly scary again… but now he was a father.) So he walked into the gathering like he belonged there (which he did, really), pride on his face and a train of stumbling little pups behind him.

He looked around and saw a lot of different reactions. Which was what he’d expected, really. Wilhelm was tense and alert, nostrils tight. Coryn looked over sternly, but only his eyes really changed. Bedelia drew back, but stood in front of the younger does, who mostly cowered. The muskrats were chittering quietly to each other, lying low. A chipmunk ran in a circle to stop behind a patch of grass. Tsume, sitting on a rock, beat his wings twice. The squirrels crept forward
curiously, though, and Akiara, accompanied by a few rabbits from her warren, dashed ahead of the crowd to greet them. She was the one it was impossible to ignore.

“I’ll be dashed. You brought them back. You popped them out and brought them back, just like you said you would.”

Gabu nodded. Mei was coming up beside him; Lala was guiding the children from the rear. “Hello, everyone! As you can see… we’re back! I know you’re not all glad to see us… but I’m glad to see you, and I’d like to introduce you to my new children… Meiko, Himari, Bari and Nogusa.” Gabu indicated each one in turn. Apart from his natural pride, he really was glad, on a deep level, to see all the animals again. It just went to show—this was home now, and no two ways about it. And it meant what he had with Mei wasn’t as impossible as it seemed. Making friends had been an incredible fluke, but once he’d had one…

“Oh my gosh!” shouted Taffet. “A whole little murdery brood!”

“They are fine children,” said Bedelia, nodding.

“They’re cute,” said Itsuko.

“They certainly are,” said his mother, Umenoki. “And they’ll gobble you down quick as the river if you aren’t wary. Learn that scent! You smell it, you slap your tail in alarm, understand?”

“Yes, mum,” said the muskrat children.

“You’re all really neat and pretty,” said Meiko, wandering up to one creature, then another. Some of them shied away, sometimes with a squeal; some of them sniffed her. Coryn stood at a slight angle, watching warily, and said nothing as his stout leg was examined. The other pups followed, and soon everyone was introducing themselves in a big beautiful chaos. He and Mei had dreamed once about their peoples socializing happily—now it was happening before their eyes.

Haburo and Hatsu soared overhead like friendly caretakers, watching the proceedings.

“So, now,” said Coryn. “Our land that once knew no trace of the wolf, and which recently knew a single hunting pair, is now home to half a dozen.”

“They’re not ready to start hunting yet,” said Lala. Gabu could tell from her voice how much she loved them. “They’re mostly weaned, though.”

Kiput cleared his throat. “So, until they learn to hunt, they’ll be eating…?”

Lala smiled broadly at him. “Chewed up flesh that we regurgitate.”

He winced. “Sorry indeed I asked.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty disgusting,” said Akiara. “But hey, congrats on spawning the next generation! I don’t know which one’s cutest.”

“That’s Meiko,” said Himari with a smile.

“You’re just saying that since she’s the girl,” retorted Nogusa.

“Nah, it’s ‘cause she’s always wagging her tail. And she does it up high!” Himari wagged his own golden tan brush to demonstrate.

“There’s nothing wrong with being cute,” said Meiko, and sure enough, she started wagging on
“Who wants me to eat them first?” announced Bari loudly, looking at the crowd.

This silenced most of the murmuring. “You’ll have to grow wings if you want to catch me,” said Tsume, who went on to demonstrate his gift of flight. Gabu was glad for the graceful escape—Bari and his jokes about eating creatures were awkward at the best of times. Especially since all too soon, they wouldn’t be jokes anymore.

Coryn stamped his hoof once to regain attention. “This is no small reunion,” he said. “For a season, we have enjoyed and known our old peace. Now our respite ends, and we must consider.”

“Consider?” asked a young buck at the edge of the assembled deer.

“What to do,” he replied. “In particular, whether these parts may no longer be our safest home.”

Gabu suddenly felt like he had a bur stuck in his throat. “You’re leaving? Just because we had children?”

Coryn swung his head to stare. “It bears consideration. That is all.”

Gabu hoped no one actually wanted to leave. Somehow, he’d never really thought about it as a possibility. Animals lived where they did—if they migrated, it was to find new territory or mates, not to escape predation. But… he couldn’t really blame them if they did leave. They’d lived in a place with no wolves, and now…

Well, if the cubs all grew up healthy and stayed here, they’d be killing off creatures three times as fast. Could he really ask them to shrug that off? He gulped.

“Tall Meadow’s not moving,” said Akiara, “so we’re not moving. We’ll learn to dig deeper and sounder, that’s all.”

“I don’t want anyone to go,” said Meiko, her tail falling even as it kept faintly swaying. “I want to make friends with you all.”

“And I don’t want to eat anyone,” added Himari.

“Then don’t,” chirped one of the chipmunks.

There was an awkward moment. Mei glanced at Gabu, and Gabu felt his snout sag—he didn’t know what to say. But fortunately, Lala spoke into the silence.

“Well! We’ve been gone a long time, and I’m sure we’ll be glad to tell you all about it. But if I’ve reckoned the days correctly, I believe today should be Play Day… yes?”

“That’s right,” said one of the muskrat does.

“Are we going to have a game?” exclaimed Taffet.

There was a clamoring, especially among the youth. Gabu noticed that there were a few marmots in the group now, including a litter of little ones. Two smaller squirrels, probably born that spring, frolicked between the six or so grownups. And most amazingly… in the back of everything, there was a badger! Was Gabu seeing it right? He couldn’t make out its scent with so many different animals here, but yes, it was definitely a badger. He’d have to ask who that was and when they’d joined the group. Despite their best efforts, they’d never attracted any predators before but Gabu
and Lala themselves. Right that moment Gabu couldn’t really fathom the consequences, but he knew that was a big development!

“I can’t run really good yet,” said Nogusa.

“Lemme see you try,” said one of the last litter of muskrats. They were about the pups’ size, Gabu noted.

“Okay!” chimed Nogusa, and started clampering clumsily in a circle. The other young muskrats joined in, circling them both.

Lala walked up, flanking Gabu. “Children know how to play, it would seem.”

Gabu nodded deeply. “They just somehow jump right in!”

Itsuko, the muskrats’ older brother, walked up alongside Lala. Gabu knew they’d had something of a bond, and hoped they could rekindle it after being apart so long. “I’m glad they’re getting along,” he said.

“Indeed,” said Lala. “Would you like to play, too?”

“I guess I could. But I’m a little scared. What if he learns all about how they run and how they smell and he tries to eat them when he’s big enough to hunt?”

Lala shrugged. “What if? We’ve already taken your sister, and your father. Yet life goes on, doesn’t it?”

Gabu was amazed how nonplussed the kit was; he just glanced at Lala with a twitch of his whiskers. “Yeah. I guess.”

Lala looked meaningfully at the rodent. “Is there something more you want, Itsuko? Something beyond what you have?”

The way he looked at her was like… he admired her. Or, no… it was like she was his teacher. Gabu didn’t know what to make of it. “I don’t know,” said Itsuko. “What kind of thing could I want?”

Lala shrugged one shoulder. “Revenge, perhaps? You could swear to become the most powerful muskrat in history, and to defeat us in combat once you’re full grown.”

Itsuko giggled nervously. “Like that ram in that story you told?”

Lala nodded serenely. “Just a thought.”

Itsuko balled a forepaw and bapped it gently against Lala’s leg. “I don’t think I could do that. I don’t even have any horns.”

“But you have those lovely rodent teeth,” Lala pointed out.

“Maybe I could gnaw through you if you lay still for a couple hours,” he joshed. “But if not, I don’t think I stand a chance. I’m just never gonna get that big.”

Lala looked away, toward a cloud. “Then I guess revenge is a hopeless dream! We wolves will just continue to eat your family until we’ve gobbled you all up!”

“Do you want me to get big and fight you?”
Lala chuckled. “Only if that’s what you want. You could focus on… oh, swimming instead. That’s something muskrats love, isn’t it?”

Itsuko shook in confusion. “Do I have to focus on something?”

“Of course not.” Lala brought her nose right over to his face. “All I ask is that, one way or another, you continue to be interesting.”

The youth took this in. “I’ll think about that,” he promised.

It was amazing, the relationships that could form. Gabu listened, but made sure not to get in the way.

The children played in two main groups, and the adults took inspiration from them and started their own game. It was original and spontaneous and involved a lot of tight circling. As if everyone was trying to catch someone else’s tail. But things quieted down after a while. They met the badger. She was a shy creature with folds of skin visible over her ribcage when she turned—Gabu gathered she’d used to be bigger. She’d heard about the brook club months ago but only gathered the courage to show up there last month, afraid of scaring the smaller creatures away. Well, it turned out she had scared them away, but the deer had heard her out, and she’d told them she wanted to keep to the sacred schedule they called the ‘week’ and befriend the other animals in the meantime.

Coryn had asked, “But what of the rest of your clan? Will they not miss your presence?”

She’d shrugged and said she lived alone. She’d never been much for the dominance trials in her original family, and had gone off on her own after about half a year. None of the clans she’d met after that had wanted to take her in, but maybe the brook club might?

Her name was Kyrie. She’d been coming regularly to the meetings and had become the token predator in the wolves’ absence. At first the attention had made her uncomfortable, but she’d grown to love it. Mei asked her questions while Gabu listened, keeping an ear and an eye on his children.

There were a lot of new faces, in fact, even if many of them didn’t want to meet him. The club had swollen while they were away, which seemed strange to Gabu—wasn’t the whole point of it to allow him and Lala to be with other animals when they weren’t hunting? But he realized that now it was something special in its own right—it was a way that animals could get to know other animals who were different.

“It’s really something,” agreed Mei. “I wonder how common this sort of society is.”

“It can’t be that uncommon,” Gabu speculated. “After all, it’s always nice to meet someone new. Why not someone from a different species?”

Mei grinned. “I think most animals prefer to stick to their own kind. We’re just more comfortable that way.”

“But what about you, Mei? You could have stayed behind in Sawa Sawa Valley. Or with your black goat friends in Para Para. Yet here you are!” Gabu had worried that the goats would imprison Mei, or that he’d otherwise be injured along the way… but he’d never really doubted that Mei
Mei considered. “I suppose I’m not most animals,” he decided. “If I had decided to abandon you… well, I think I’d have never been comfortable again.”

Gabu couldn’t help it; he seized Mei against himself and gave him a tight, tight hug, balanced on his hind legs. “Mei!” He didn’t care who was watching… which was good, because that was everyone.

Mei laughed helplessly. “Gabu!” he replied. But naturally he hugged back.

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**The 156th Evening**

There was an excited tension spread throughout the group tonight as they ascended the grassy hill. The pups were bickering and jostling each other, tired from their big day and daunted by the slope of the hill they had ascended so easily the day before. But there was also the wonder of their guest, Kyrie the badger, as she took in the familial procession, along with her wonder at being a guest—at the fact that Mei and Gabu had chosen to invite her to their home after knowing her for just one afternoon. And then there was the reason they’d invited her—the possibility the badgers from yesterday would have returned in their absence. They’d awakened that morning to the sounds of furtive snorting, and Mei had caught a badger marking the hillside; it had squealed and run off. Mei couldn’t blame them—it wasn’t easy to give up a home just like that.

Kyrie wasn’t even halfway up the hill when she quailed, sniffing aggressively. “Ohh dear. Yes, I’m afraid you’ve got a problem. They’re back again.”

“The badgers are up there? Now?” asked Gabu.

“Yes.” She nodded her conelike muzzle. “I’m sorry to say.”

Mei sighed. “Is it possible you could… pop up there and clear things up? I’d rather they didn’t run straight away. Maybe if it were you, they’d stick around and listen.”

Kyrie drew a long breath. “I’ll do what I can,” she promised. “Hold on.” And she scuttled with surprising rapidity up the remainder of the hill.

“Ahoy!” they heard her call, just before she peeked into the lair and was met by a barrage of hissing. She backed out but didn’t run. “Oy! Folks. Folks, listen!” Then Mei could no longer make out her words as she lowered her voice. He could see her stance lower defensively; he watched her scuttle back, then forth. He made out one more snippet of her raised voice: “…won’t take no for an answer, believe me!” Then things went quiet again.

The pups gathered, ready for conquest if it turned out to be needed. Gabu and Lala were nervous—they’d told the pups not to join in the fighting, since a spiteful badger could easily carry one of them off. But Mei could tell they loved this situation. They weren’t just going home tonight. They had to earn their home.

But tawny Himari had a different perspective. “Maybe we could dig out a new burrow,” he suggested excitedly, tail wagging. “We could let them have this one.”

He was promptly shouted down by the others. “No!” “It’s our home, we’re not gonna let them have it!” And he backed down, lowering his tail between his legs, and watched with the rest of them.
After a while, Lala called up: “Would you like me to come up there?”

Kyrie exchanged a few more words with the squatters. “Might be a good idea,” she called down. So Lala traipsed up the hill, and Mei, wanting to keep things bloodless, went along behind her. Gabu stayed with the pups down below.

There were three of them, wide-eyed, teeth showing, flanking the entrance. When Mei and Lala appeared, one badger fell back in surprise and the others raised their gazes. “What’s this about, then?” demanded a male.

“I’m terribly sorry,” said Mei, “but this was our home before we left for the summer, and we need it back. We have pups to raise, you see.”

Their fuzzy rumps rose. “Pups? Between you two?” cried another.

“Not between us,” said Lala. “Between me and another wolf, who’s waiting down the hill. But if Mei and I had given birth to pups, somehow… don’t you think the little half-goat, half-wolf darlings would need a secure home?”

“I think you’re confusing them,” said Kyrie. “Look—you can see these guys mean business. They’re being nice, coming to evict you in the evening, with all night to find a new place. But you have to leave, now.”

“Finder’s Keepers!” objected the third badger, eyes wild.

“Indeed,” said Lala, raising one paw and brandishing the claws. “And we intend to keep what we found.”

A female squatter thrust forward and hissed at her. Lala snapped her jaws forward and hissed back. The attacker retreated and the three drew together defensively.

Mei stepped to one side, leaving a way out for them. “I’m afraid you have to go,” he told the trio. “The wolves here have killed badgers before. They will do it again.”

“Wait—they have?” asked Kyrie, looking suddenly back. Oops. Mei regretted saying anything—that hadn’t been terribly politic, had it?

“On the count of three, I’m coming in,” called Lala.

The squatters, formed into a triangle, just hissed and bared their teeth.

“And I’m counting by threes,” Lala continued. “THREE!”

With that, she barreled into the cave and snapped at the lead badger. They fell back, tumbling; they squealed and scattered. With Lala snapping at their shanks, they ran rapidly from the cave, piling past Mei.

“I am sorry,” he called after. “But you do realize you mustn’t come back, don’t you?”

One of the badgers yelled back a word Mei didn’t even understand. Then they wound around the back side of the hill and swarmed away. Mei hurried around to watch them go.

“That wasn’t a very nice thing he said, was it?” asked Lala.

“It was a cuss word,” agreed Kyrie. “But I think you drove the point home—I doubt they’ll be
back.” She gave the she-wolf an apprehensive look. “Er… should I go, too?”

“Nonsense,” said Lala. “You were very helpful! I’d say you’ve earned a night here, if you want it.”

Mei sighed. A random near-stranger in their home, on their second night back? But he couldn’t begrudge the favor.

Kyrie considered. “Well, I wouldn’t want to get in the way.” She tilted her head up. “The goat said you’d killed badgers before?”

“Well, when times are lean!” replied Lala. Gabu was leading the pups up toward them now. “But of course, you’re perfectly safe ‘til Huntday.”

“I was… actually hoping it wouldn’t apply to me. That we could maybe… go hunting together?”

“Oh! Now there’s an interesting thought.” She advanced toward Gabu. “Gabu-sweet, this lovely badger has offered to try joining us on our next hunt!”

“Huh?” said Gabu. “Well… that’s interesting. ‘Do you think it would work? We probably have pretty different hunting styles.”

“Possibly,” said Kyrie. “But we could compliment each other. You’d specialize in the open ground—I’d go after those that duck underground. It could work out.”

Lala smiled warmly to Gabu. No, not warmly. Hotly. Mei knew this expression of hers—she was excited. “Shall we go inside and talk it over?”

Gabu let his tail sway. “I don’t see why not! Children, Kyrie here is going to stay the night as our special guest.”

“Welcome!” cried Meiko.

“That’s so funny,” said Himari.

“Okay!” said Bari. “But I call the spot in the back.”

“You got that spot last night. We have to trade!”

As the horde piled into the lair, filling it to the brim, Mei had to wonder whether Kyrie had any notion what she’d gotten herself into.

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Chapter End Notes

Badger badger badger badger badger wate no

According to the literature, real wolves handicap themselves when playfighting like Lala and Gabu do here, and take turns attacking and defending. A recent study,
however, finds that when adults playfight with pups, the pups are more likely to be the ones that handicap themselves.

The muskrat tail-thumping alarm signal is real. The dreams Gabu recalls himself and Mei having were from the TV show.
The 157th, 178th, 194th and 202nd Days

Chapter Summary

* Is that what you want most? Fame?
* Do you care about the deaths of others at all?
* But why? Why does he need to break the rules so badly?
* How long would it be before Gabu and Lala were alone again?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 157th Day

There was no denying it—life was just more amusing when you had friends of all kinds. Mei’s horns, for example, weren’t made for digging. He couldn’t even get an angle on the dirt with them if he tried—when he was up on the surface, that was. But down here, in the Tall Meadow storage room Akiara had enlarged for him with the help of some friends, his horns grazed the ceiling. He was actually able to help pack shut the widened entrance he’d squeezed through, making Akiara’s job easier. She climbed on his back to pack the last gap shut with wadded reeds, just loose enough to let some air in. They couldn’t see what they were doing by the end of it, but Akiara promised to dart out and back through another tunnel, just to make sure it wasn’t obvious from ‘topside’.

Mei lay contentedly on the freshly dug earth. It was… dirtier than in the cave at home. It soiled his coat, but he didn’t mind. He smiled, noting the differences in texture, temperature and air quality, until the rabbit came back and reported happily that things were tip-top. “We’ve got the whole day to ourselves,” she said.

Not that it was ideal, having to spend an entire day underground. But Mei had a supply of grass and shoots, and more to the point, he had a brimming supply of stories to tell. And he knew Akiara was hungry for them. She was a young storyteller among her people, but leading the effort to befriend Mei and the wolves had catapulted her from obscurity into the top ranks. She’d been starting to languish again without them, as Mei understood it, which made her one of the very few animals actually glad to see the wolves return to the Emerald Forest.

“Mind, I would’ve been glad even if I hadn’t been telling stories,” she confided. “I’d been trying to make a name for myself as a young crone, ‘cause I get feelings, you know? Problem was, my advice was wrong a lot of the time. And there’s not that many ways for a rabbit to get famous.”

“Is that what you want most?” asked Mei. “Fame?”

She thought for a second, thumping a foot. “Not most, no.” Another few seconds. “What I want most is to live a good life. You know? I wish rabbits had heroes, ‘cause I’d want to be one. Not just to get praise and look like a hero, but to actually be one. To do the right thing. And that’s why I’m glad to see you back regardless of how many stories I can get. I like you. I like the wolves. They’re cool people. They spice things up. I honestly think it’s worth the small risk of death every three days.”
“But no one else seems to agree with you.”

Mei felt one of her ears wave, stirring the air. “They’ve got their own rhythms. I mean, I respect that. Sometimes I’m worried that I’m not a good person. If I were good, I’d get more broken up over the dead. My sister’s ex dies? One of our best patrollers, cut short? My heart goes aflutter, but for the wrong reasons.”

Mei was silent. Had he made a dangerous friend? “Do you care about the deaths of others at all?”

“Yeah…” said Akiara. She was silent a while in the perfect darkness. “I do, I mean, I feel it. Maybe not enough. Maybe there’s something wrong with me. But I feel so much more. I felt a thrill when you guys came to town, and another thrill when you turned out to want to make friends, and turn things upside-down, and change the very way we think of time. I mean… sometimes I wonder if there’s something wrong with everyone else. That they can’t feel it.”

Mei thought of everyone out there, in the open or hiding for the day like himself and Akiara. It felt strange to go back to hiding from his best friend, after more than two months of freedom. He’d even considered asking the animals for exemption—whether their feelings would be terribly hurt if Gabu and Lala declared him safe and off-limits. He suspected it wouldn’t destroy the brook club at this point. But he’d thought about new members who might be reluctant to join, and knew his example was still the strongest way to convince them. He thought of broader principles, and of those who would try to get an exemption for themselves if one were granted for him. And he’d decided not to do it.

But he couldn’t go back to the mountains—not after going home. The mountains meant longing for him. They meant the desire to be home again, in Sawa Sawa. (Again, the word ‘home’ was tragically split for him—what did it really mean?) He knew now that place was lost to him, except as a transient. The wolves would probably expect him to venture up in the mountains again, where he considered himself safest. Paradoxically, then, he was probably safer here, in the rabbit warren. They would never expect him to be here. But more than that, being here made the return to hiding bearable. He could tell himself he wasn’t hiding. He was just enjoying a long, luxurious, pitch black day with his good friend Akiara. He was taking the time to pass on his stories properly. This wasn’t a day lost, a day of sadness. This was just another project.

“I’m grateful that the world has so many different kinds,” he told Akiara. “People like you and people like them. Goats like me and wolves like Gabu. I really mean it. I’m grateful.”

“Yeah?” Again, a gust of wind from wavering ears. “Me too.”

“Well then,” said Mei, making himself comfortable. “How about I tell you all about my trip back to my homeland… the grassy foothills of the mountain they call Sawa Sawa?”

“I’m all ears,” said Akiara.

This was exciting. If two was company, three was a party… and Lala hadn’t led a hunting party in… far longer than bore thinking about. It wasn’t as exciting as reuniting with Gabu had been, but it was in the same general forest. She controlled her fluttering ears, fought to shrink her telltale grin. “So,” she said, turning to her companions. “How are we going to organize this?”
The badger looked up. Her body was like a teetering log—if her head was up, so were her chest and belly. “Oh! Well, I was thinking we could each hunt more or less our own way, but together… and each help the other out when we need it.”

Lala considered, but Gabu spoke. “That sounds good. How do you normally hunt?”

“Oh, I go to likely spots for grubs and earthworms, but if I happen to notice something bigger nearby, I follow after. If it’s something that hides underground, well.” She bobbed proudly. “I dig after. I’m pretty talented at digging things up.”

“Do they ever go so deep you can’t dig them out?” asked Lala.

“Sometimes. I like to persist, though. More often, they get away through the back way.”

“Ah!” said Gabu. “Then it seems to me, that’s where we should be waiting.”

Kyrie beamed. “Seems like a plan!”

“Should we try to communicate?” suggested Lala.

“I suppose if it wouldn’t scare the prey! What do you have in mind?”

So Lala told Kyrie the signals she’d worked out with Gabu, as well as a few more from Baku Baku, and they decided what to try. They then picked the barest part of the heath as the best place to start. If rodents were going to start emerging from tunnels, Lala wanted to see them coming out. The less cover, the better.

It was half an hour before they got wind of a ground squirrel. Until then, Kyrie had snuffled around in moist places, testing Lala’s patience by rooting for creepies and crawlies. At one point she’d slurped up an earthworm. But when the squirrel dashed for home, Kyrie followed where Lala and Gabu would have been unable. They could dig, certainly, and had been trying to catch animals that way. But all too often, their digging was too coarse to find the tunnels themselves, and the prey’s path was lost. Kyrie was a precision digger. The squirrel was forced back, and back, and eventually popped up from another hole, and Lala was there. She hadn’t spotted the hole fast enough, and the squirrel ran, dodging her jaws, and dropped into another hole. So Kyrie followed again…

Well, in short, they lost that squirrel, but wound up catching two others, plus a chipmunk and a vole. Then they went to Tall Meadow and nearly got a rabbit. The rabbits were getting wise to the wolves’ capabilities; Kyrie might be just what they needed to reinvigorate their attack. From that first moment with the ground squirrel, it had been abundantly clear to all three that they worked well together. Could it be that they needed no better form of hunting than this? Why hadn’t Lala considered working with the badgers sooner?

This was Gabu’s genius, of course. He was a fool in some ways, of course, but a brilliant fool. His priorities had made this possible. Lala imagined if she’d made this discovery at Baku Baku. While she was waiting for the second rabbit to emerge, she speculated on how she would have revealed it to the pack. Would she have called a big meeting and made a grand announcement? Swept away a pile of leaves to reveal her badger friend after an exuberant buildup? Perhaps she would have assembled a private hunting party and told only them, and watched as the secret drove a wedge between factions. If only Lala had been born with a ladder to climb! She would have climbed it so well!

But in any case, the introduction of badger-assisted hunting would have been a revelation to Baku Baku Valley. It would have dramatically improved their performance, assuming they could be
talked into hunting small prey rather than goats and deer. It would have transformed their social structure… and who knew? Maybe if they’d been forced to get along with badgers, it would have led the way to getting along with… other creatures?

Lala’s musing was cut short when a rabbit madly squeezed past Kyrie and the badger wasn’t able to grab him in time. Gabu moved fast and Lala rushed after. They might yet catch this one before he found another hole. She admonished herself for falling so far into fantasy: this was serious. Today’s success would gird the way toward an enduring partnership. She wanted to catch that rabbit.

She almost didn’t notice the scent of goat on the wind. Well, that’s odd, her hindbrain told her. She decided not to mention it for now—they had far more important business right in front of them.

Besides, it would be a pity to kill Mei on a day like today.

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**The 178th Day**

“Bari!” yelled Himari. “You’ll get in trouble.” Trouble with Mom and Dad, sure. But trouble itself was bigger than that—trouble was trouble!

But Bari wouldn’t stop lumbering down the hill. “I’m not gonna go too far. Just wanna see if there’s anything to catch.”

“You know the rules,” Himari implored. “When Mom and Dad are out hunting, we stay in the den!” Somehow, Himari didn’t think reminding Bari of the rules would convince him of anything, but it had to be said.

“We got to go out last week,” Nogusa pointed out.

“That’s cause Aunt Hatsu and Uncle Haburo were watching out for us. Bari, what if something’s out there that tries to hurt you? What if a deer tries to kick you?”

Bari turned back and grinned. “I’ll bite its leg!”

Nogusa started tripping down the hill. “Oh, come on, you know you couldn’t do that,” he argued.

“Wait and see,” said Bari, hurrying on.

Himari hated breaking the rules, but he couldn’t stop his brother getting in trouble without following. “Drat,” he swore. “Drat drat! Come back! I’m telling.”

“Tattletale!” called Bari. He was already getting out of ear’s reach.

Meiko came down more slowly. She didn’t seem worried. “He’ll be fine,” she told Himari. “He just wants to surprise Mom and Dad. He wants to catch something before they tell us it’s okay.”

“But why? Why does he need to break the rules so badly?”

Meiko made a face and leaned on one front paw. “They’re just rules! It’s not like they’re real things.”
Weren’t they real? Just because they weren’t things you could touch didn’t mean they weren’t real. Right? “They’re what Mom and Dad want us to do.”

“Yeah but.” Meiko nosed Himari in his side. “You gotta break them sometime. We’re not gonna live here with Mom and Dad and Uncle Mei forever. We’re going to go off on our own, and then none of us’ll do what they say. You don’t have to do everything Mom and Dad say!”

That hit Himari like the sun coming out from behind clouds. But it was a dizzying sun. Did he really get to decide his own rules? Should he really be planning for when he was on his own? Did he really get to do what he wanted?

Himari felt weak. He turned around and ran up the hill. He was going to stay in the den today. But he was doing it because he wanted to.

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**The 194th Day**

Mei followed Itsuko down the wet slope at a brisk walk, taking care to place each hoof stably. There were leaves beginning to fall near the brook in the woods, and he didn’t want to lose his footing and trouble the young muskrat any more than he already was. Notes of orange and yellow were rising like mist through the green of the leaves.

“Oh sludge,” said the youth. “I can smell her.” He doubled his pace and ran down the hill to the brook’s side. He swam across rapidly, leaving Mei to wonder how to cross. He peered in, trying to gauge the water’s depth here. The mound was visible on the other side. And yes, there was a strong, bloody musk on the air.

“Hurry!” shouted Itsuko.

Mei leapt in and swam across. He wasn’t much of a swimmer, but it was a narrow brook, and he made it well enough. He shook himself awkwardly to dry off and hurried to the mound. There was a narrow crack in one side.

“Mom,” said Itsuko.

“Ohhh,” moaned Umenoki. “The first one’s come! Help me.”

Mei could see her convulsing on her side. A small kit, vaguely dusted with dark fur, was lying limp at her waist. “I’m here too, Umenoki,” he said.

“Ohh,” she repeated. “Mei. Itusko, you brought the goat?”

“He’s the only helper I could find,” said her son. He dove into the water and swam up from below; it was barely even an interruption in conversation. “Well, Gabu offered to come and help. But I thought that wouldn’t be a good idea. He’d find out where we live.”

She rolled and straightened while her son started to groom her. “Good thinking. Mei… it was kind of you to come. I know the crack’s not big enough for you… you’ll just have to pry your way in. Don’t worry about the walls… we can rebuild.” She moaned again, then, and Mei hesitated, watching son tend to mother, before he started to nose the structure, testing its integrity. He didn’t want to do it more damage than necessary.
“I have to go,” said Itsuko. “Lipta needs me.” Lipta was Itsuko’s mate, whom Mei understood had been bitten by a tick and was quite sick at home with their own children. It was strange for Mei to conceive that his friend Itsuko, who’d been a child when they met, was now a father in his own right. Different creatures really lived so differently… yet there was so much it was easy to understand about each other.

“One more kiss,” said Umenoki. “Then go.”

Itsuko kissed her. He dove down and came up outside. “Thanks so much, Mei. I’ll hope for the best.”

“I’ll try to help somehow,” said Mei. “Good luck.”

Itsuko left, and Mei carefully pulled away chunks of the wooden structure until he could wriggle his head and forelegs through. His experience pushing into rabbit tunnels was paying off now, as it happened. Mei had been visiting Akiara and other rabbits semi-regularly on hunting days, and the wolves were none the wiser. By contrast, poking himself into a muskrat burrow in the daylight was barely uncomfortable. “How can I help?”

“Oh,” moaned Umenoki again, softer now. “You can’t really groom my fur, can you?”

“Maybe if I use my tongue,” Mei offered. He didn’t relish what it would be touching, but this was no time to be squeamish.

“Just be here with me,” said the mother. “Once the second one’s come, see what you can do to get me tidy.”

Mei nodded. “I’m sure it will be okay. You’ve been through this so many times.” Umenoki had actually talked as if she were done having babies for good, after losing Jakomi. But a naughty, spirited buck had caught sight of her one day up the brook, and had chased her through the water, and she’d relented—the tale had made for an exciting diversion one Talking Day.

“That’s just it,” she cried. “It’s an autumn litter, and I’m an old mother. There’s pain, that’s all. It’s just pain, Mei, and it’s been a hard carriage. I’ll just be glad to get them out.”

Mei chuckled despite himself. He scooted forward and touched his friend with a careful hoof. She was breathing fast, but it seemed to slow.

“Thank you, Mei. So Gabu wanted to come too, eh?”

Mei smiled, flicking an ear. “He was very concerned. I think he was already feeling worried about Lipta.”

“It’s for the best he doesn’t know about this place… but his willingness to help touches me. Imagine…”

She trailed off and closed her eyes, but Mei knew what she meant. Imagine young lives entering the world under the loving, watchful eye of the beast who took their half sister, who took their mother’s first mate from the world. It amazed Mei in a way that Umenoki was still willing to be around Gabu. Yet he frequently watched the young muskrats as they played during club meetings, and their mother seemed to trust him utterly with their safety. Gabu was a fine babysitter, it turned out. And now the wolf cubs were starting to play with the other children. Even the younger deer had brought an occasional fawn to join in.

Mei knew it was about his willingness to divide himself. To become almost another person on
hunting days. Everyone knew that the Gabu who showed up to club meetings was as gentle and friendly as anything… and Mei chose to believe it was the truer side of him. Yet he wondered whether it took a toll on a person… to divide himself in that way.

“Yes, that’s true,” replied Mei, beaming. “He really cares about you and your family. Lala does too.”

“Don’t know if it’s better,” moaned Umenoki. “To have a predator who cares.” She went through a contraction. “Ohh! Second one’s coming!”

Mei raised himself as much as the opening allowed and watched with vigilance. “It’s all right,” he reassured. “You’ve done this before. It will be over soon… and you’ll feel so happy.”

“I almost fancy it is better,” groaned the muskrat. “It’s good to… be cared about. Even if it’s by the instrument of one’s own death.” She squirmed and stretched, and the baby started to move. “If I could… know the care of the rocks and trees, and the air…”

But she didn’t finish. Her baby was born, and Umenoki gathered it in with a webbed paw and nosed it caringly. Mei, in turn, licked his tongue over her back, over and over, and smoothed her spiky fur.

Neither of them remembered to return to the thought. There were four more kits born that day.

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The 202nd Day

Gabu kept obediently in his place in the underbrush, staying focused in the direction he’d been instructed to watch. Yet his attention kept straying to his little black and white whelp. The word poor kept coming to mind. Poor thing. Poor son. Even as Gabu watched, Nogusa’s own attention strayed. He looked up at a higher branch whose leaves were rustling, disturbed by squirrels or birds. Was the pup’s attention really that flighty, or was it actually too great an effort to keep his focus on the trees he was supposed to be watching? Nogusa seemed to try, he really did, but even dragonflies could distract him. Gabu wondered what would become of his son if he couldn’t learn basic hunter’s discipline.

“Psst,” he signaled.

Nogusa jerked in surprise and, after a moment’s confusion, returned his attention to the gap between the trees. Abashed. And Gabu returned his own attention to where Lala, as hunt leader, had told him to put it.

To his other side, Meiko was ready to pounce. Her intent didn’t waver for a moment; she was crouched and ready, peering unforgivingly at the enemy that hadn’t yet arrived. Her tail was still for once, but poised high in waiting nonetheless. Meiko was a fierce hunter; Gabu could see that. She would be just fine on her own.

Gabu wondered whether she might be willing to help her weaker brother. Maybe the two would go off together. Maybe they’d find a pack somewhere far away and join it together, and always have each other. But he knew that if Meiko had other plans, that would be asking a lot.

There was distant scuffling. A small yip of joy—that was Bari, no doubt. Lala had taken two boys
to help her stir up a ruckus among the chipmunks and squirrels, and instructed the rest of her family to wait here, at a strategic point along their likely escape route, to leap out and surprise them. Gabu was excited—it was what he considered their first serious hunt, all together as a family. They’d taken the pups hunting before, but the adults had done all the work. This time, the pups might actually catch something!

Yet he was sad somehow, too, and he didn’t know why. Was he thinking ahead to when they were able to survive on their own? How much longer would they stick around at that point? How long would it be before Gabu and Lala were alone again, with no hopes of ever having more children?

Lala would probably try to get Mei to change his mind about that, he expected. But he didn’t think Mei would relent… and honestly, Gabu didn’t want him to. He felt the same way, truth be told. Bringing wolves into the world… it had filled him with pure joy in the distant thick forest, but now that he was home, it worried him. Gabu wasn’t happy to be a wolf. If he could have had some other kind of children, he gladly would have, but nature had spoken—you could only ever sire children of your own kind. The fact that he’d added four more wolves to the world troubled Gabu on some level, just like it troubled Mei. He loved them dearly, and that was the feeling he tried to keep foremost, most of the time…

Lala’s perfect, melodious howl came sailing through the woods. Gabu hissed to get his children’s attention and crouched. Their pawsteps were coming close. The sound of skittering little things followed—squirrels gathering nuts for winter, blocked on three sides. The important thing was to keep them from getting up a tree. If a squirrel got up a tree, it was gone. You had to get between them and the trees, or pounce high enough to block them if they tried to climb one. Here they came…!

Nogusa sprang first, a little too early. Gabu leapt at the approaching squirrels and saw one turn tail in fear and scamper the opposite direction. Meiko leapt and dashed for another. The party converged in the woods and all the squirrels went dashing for trees. Gabu assaulted an elm tree and found himself claws deep, his quarry having escaped into the treetops. There was loud chirruping all around, a rain of hatred! He heard Lala swear in consternation. (Not around the children, he wanted to say!) Nogusa was digging through the brush, probably having seen one run off that way. Himari darted into the open and looked this way and that, trying to find where they’d all gone. Then came the howl of triumph. From a distance behind Lala, little Bari was howling his heart out. And this was no howl of pain or loneliness or brotherhood. This was the victory call of a young life who knew, for the first time, that he was capable of earning a living for himself. This was the joyous howl of a child getting his first taste of adulthood.

“Bari!” called Gabu. He pulled loose from the tree and trotted after. Brown and big-pawed and bulky for his age, Bari trotted out from behind a bush, a squirrel dead in his jaws. He had the happiest expression in the world.

“You did it!” praised Lala. “Oh, Bari, I’m so proud of you.”

“Way to go!” shouted Meiko, tail wagging.

Himari was staring at his brother. “Put it down,” he commanded.

“Mmh?” asked Bari.

“Put down the squirrel!” said Himari, louder. “Let me see it.”

There was a strangely familiar scent reaching Gabu’s nostrils. Bari tossed the squirrel in front of
him as if presenting a gift to the family, a gesture of pride. It landed with a little plop.

Nogusa hurried up and sniffed the corpse. He looked straight toward Gabu. “That’s Taffet.”

Gabu’s eyes went wide. Oh, stars above!

Meiko nudged the squirrel. “Yep. Definitely Taffet. I know her smell.”

Bari blinked, looking suddenly helpless with all his bulk. “I killed Taffet?”

Lala looked down at the squirrel, then up at Gabu sharply, as if looking to him for guidance. But Gabu didn’t know how to respond. The pups had played with Taffet. They knew her. Meiko in particular had said she liked her voice.

With a suddenly heavy heart, Gabu realized that he would never again be called Mr. Murderer. He’d had no idea how that would affect him.

But both Lala and Gabu jerked suddenly from the wide-eyed pups to a noise at the foot of a nearby tree. Himari was throwing up.

Gabu hurried to him. “Himari!”

His son vomited again. Gabu nosed him, combed his teeth over the fur of his back in order to soothe him.

At last Himari caught his breath, though it was still shaky. “I don’t think… I don’t think I’ll eat anything anymore,” he said.

“You’ll get hungry,” cautioned Lala.

Himari sighed and sat down, breathing. Nobody said anything.

Eventually, the chirruping squirrels in the trees stopped their calls and scampered off. There was still distant birdsong.

Chapter End Notes

I was surprised to learn that real badgers actually do hunt with canine companions! Specifically, coyotes. One woman even gave an account of a coyote going to a badger holt and chirping, as if to say “Come out and hunt with me!” And the badger did. Such pairs may not quite rise to the level of friends, but they could certainly be called business partners.

I feel it’s late September when Umenoki gives birth, which is late in the year for muskrats. I don’t know whether that’s difficult on their bodies in any way, but I wouldn’t be surprised.
It’s odd how the gyrations of stories gang aft agley. I tend to write long works like this without a strict plan, but with benchmarks in the distance. About 80% of the time, I actually reach those benchmarks, but this chapter is an example of the remaining 20%. Originally, I planned to devote an entire chapter to a worried mother in need of a babysitter desperately settling on Gabu, and the children fussing over whether they could feel safe with the hunter who killed their sister and father watching them for the day. This is why I introduced the muskrats in the first place. It might have been a beautiful scene, but somehow the plot never wound in such a way that it would make sense. By the time our heroes were back from distant lands with their new pups, the muskrats children had all grown up. So the scene between Mei and Umenoki in this chapter and its brief reference to Gabu babysitting at the brook club is the closest thing you get.

Forty chapters—that’s quite a lot of events! And the chapters have definitely been getting longer, and the plot is moving faster. Even so, it’s looking like two more chapters won’t be enough to contain everything I want to cram into this story before it wraps up. So it’s possible that I’ll be combining two earlier chapters in the final part into one, or three into two, in which case you’ll get an additional chapter. I may just run them up to 43 for now.

Additionally… I think it’s quite possible there will be an epilogue. I’ve never written an epilogue, but that seems about like what this novel may call for. Something like an epilogue, anyway. We’ll see. So there will probably be updates for three weeks to come, possibly four.
The 206th and 211th Days

Chapter Summary

* Are you going to leave us, Himari? Is this it?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 206th Day

There were remnants of yesterday’s rain, yet—dewy moisture against the fetlocks, scintillations of droplets from every shaken lupine or foxglove like little harvests of shining fruit. Occasionally there was a loud drappling from the leaves of the nearby woods, buckling under their collected loads. Mei grazed quietly, selectively. He chewed slowly, as he often did when the grass was wet. The wolves were noplace to be seen; Gabu had told him they were going to the edges of their territory today, so the cubs could learn what a territory looked like.

Mei would probably visit the bluff at some point. For now, he ambled around between the woods and the hills, for no reason he could put his tongue on. It felt low here, with the trees to one side and the hills off to another. He bent deeply and occasionally rested, despite the wetness. It felt right to be low, just now.

A collapse of water nearby lasted a little too long, and Mei looked up to see a squirrel descending a red oak, its leaves resiliently green amid the other trees and their autumn clothes. He waited patiently while Kiput came to join him in the shadow of the tall flowers with their shining rainy burdens.

The squirrel looked at him, then to the ground, where he found a flower seed. He picked it up and turned it around before cracking it. For half a minute, the rodent fussed over his seed and ate it, then picked up another. Mei finished chewing his bite of grass and swallowed, and waited.

“You know,” said Kiput, looking off somewhere. “There’s a turn to the pain, after a while.”

Mei looked at him, ears limp, and said nothing. He didn’t even bother trying to find the right words—he knew that at this moment, there was nothing to say.


Mei didn’t really. He didn’t remember his mother’s death. “I think the closest I’ve ever come… was when I found Gabu again, after coming all the way through the winter storm, and he didn’t remember me. He’d lost his memories…” That was the worst pain Mei could remember. But he knew it wasn’t the same flavor as Kiput’s pain.

The squirrel nodded, businesslike, several times. “Yes, well. I’m rather the flipside of that. Still got my memories of Taffet.” He knocked a paw once against his skull. “Lost the real thing.”

Mei sat down, feeling his seat grow damp. “I wish it hadn’t happened. I very much wish that.”
“Yes… yes indeed, hadn’t happened. Would have been better. True, true.” Kiput nodded as if this were some kind of insightful statement. Then he went on: “Better if the wolves had eaten me? Quite possibly. Can’t say for sure. Taffet would be grieved, no question… but I think my grief…” He choked up, then set down the seed and cleared his throat. “Not to flout my own feathers, but I dare say my grief is a trifle deeper.”

Mei closed his eyes and sniffed. “I’m sorry, Kiput. I’m going to miss her.”

“Yes,” said the squirrel. He sat there, long body straight, staring and blinking into the humid distance, for quite some time.

“Everyone will,” added Mei.

“To say nothing of the children,” said the squirrel.

“I’d forgotten you had children,” said Mei.

“Oh, they’re blown to the wind,” replied Kiput, undulating his tail, “but word gets around, you know. I still see them from time to time. No more kits, I suppose. All done with that now.”

Mei thought about how Umenoki had also sworn off children after losing her mate. He wondered whether Kiput, in this moment, knew his will better than she had. “But you still have plenty of loved ones. I hope you’re able to remember that.”

Kiput gave him a sharp look. Squinting. For a moment, Mei thought he was offended, but the squirrel just lowered himself to the grass. “Quite,” he said. He sat and rested.

Mei didn’t want to cause any eddies. He stood up and ate for a while, keeping his friend in eyeshot. The clouds moved; the grass started to dry.

It was Kiput who eventually spoke again: “That gold-furred pup. Himari?”

Mei’s stomach dropped, but he didn’t frown. “That’s him.”

“How is he doing? Stopped eating, I heard.”

Now Mei did frown. “He hasn’t taken anything since then. A few berries, I think. He’s out today, but I don’t know how much longer…”

“Mm?”

Mei shrugged. “I hope he agrees to eat soon. I know everyone’s worried.”

“Not quite sure how to feel myself. Hope that isn’t too vexing.” Kiput picked up another flower seed and ate it nervously.

“It’s not surprising at all. I won’t blame you if you hate the wolves.”

“I, well.” Kiput shrugged and gnawed at the little seed. Mei had seen him decimate acorns in similar amounts of time. “Chances are I won’t be about at the club for a while. Hope they understand. But… well, but after all, they have to put something into their bellies. Why not…” He grew distant again, trailing off. “Why not my mate? Good as anything, really…”

Mei winced. “I’m so sorry, Kiput.”

The tree squirrel shook his head as if to banish worries. But he still stood staring at the distant
Mei decided to quietly finish his meal and head elsewhere. “I’ll see you around, Kiput,” he said.

“Yes… yes, quite,” said the squirrel, barely moving his head.

The 211th Day

Nogusa shivered. He’d been lying next to Himari for over a day now, taking breaks only to pee and drink. He could feel his brother’s hunger. It had taken a while, but he could feel it now, just as sharply as he could feel changes in the wind or pebbles in the dirt. He was hungry himself, that was true. But Himari’s hunger was deeper, and Nogusa could feel the difference. And he could feel his brother’s ribs, of course. That wasn’t good. He was young, but he understood ribs were supposed to stay wrapped up with flesh and love. You weren’t really supposed to know they were there.

“…Well, someone has to go hunting!” Mommy was saying in the background. They’d been talking for a while. These days worried voices were more normal than calm ones. It was like a change in the weather. Nogusa weathered it. He knew there was a reason for such things, and he didn’t like thinking about what it was. He preferred to just stay snuggled next to his brother and share his love. It was better not to think about it. That way his love was more pure.

“Kids,” Daddy asked, “would you rather go hunting with your mommy, or with me?” Daddy was just outside the cave. Nogusa could hear him clearly, but knew the question wasn’t directed at him. No one wanted to go hunting with him. They knew this was his place.

“Nggh,” moaned Himari, his ears fluttering. He could hear what they were talking about. The fuss all day, and most of the fuss for the last few days, had been about him, and Nogusa knew Himari knew that.

“You don’t have to worry,” Nogusa said. Then he immediately felt guilty for saying it. “But are you worried?”

Himari closed his eyes. “I’m so scared. I’m so sorry.”

It hadn’t been the first time he’d said those words. He’d been saying them, now and then, for days.

“What are you scared of?” asked Nogusa, trying not to think at all in the slightest of what the answer might be.

“I’m scared there’s no way out.”

Nogusa felt that pass through him and shuddered again. He dug his chin deeper into Himari’s shoulder.

Meiko burst in, pouncing with almost every step. “Nogusa! We’re going out hunting with Mommy! Himari, I know you don’t want to come, but you should come.”

Nogusa stayed silent. He had to let Himari answer first.

Himari shook his head sadly. “I can’t.” He’d been up for a trip several days ago, to patrol the
family territory, but now he was just huddled. He was too weak to go out, and Meiko should have known that.

“You have to!” she protested. “What are you going to do? Just stay here until you die??” Her tail wasn’t still, but it wasn’t wagging now: when Meiko was upset, her brushy tail thumped repeatedly against the earth as if she were using it to make a point.

Himari looked down. Nogusa could feel his heart beating faster.

He got up and faced his sister angrily. “Don’t talk that way! You’re making him scared!!”

She grimaced back at him. “Do you just want him to fade away? Are you gonna lie next to him ‘til he’s gone?”

Nogusa’s jaw trembled. Was that what he was doing? “I want him to be able to figure things out,” he protested.

Meiko’s lip curled. She stepped over and cuffed Himari on the head. On the head! “Helloo!” she yelled. “Doing any thinking in there? Figuring anything out?”

Nogusa leapt and snapped at Meiko. Oh gosh… He caught her on the throat. She pulled away, yelping, and shook her head. She stared at Nogusa. “What the… MOOOM! DAAAD!” she wailed. He watched a drop of blood form on her neck.

Wow. What had… what had Nogusa just done? He’d never done anything like that before. He’d tried to pounce on squirrels, but this was… this was like real fighting. And he’d never hit anything before, especially not his own family. This was the most violent thing Nogusa had ever done. He was horrified… but he couldn’t deny that he was also, somehow, just a little proud.

Daddy and Mommy came in, Bari tagging shyly behind. “What’s happening?” asked Daddy.

“Nogusa jumped at me and bit me!” exclaimed Meiko.

Nogusa couldn’t let her get away with that. “She hit Himari and she yelled at him!” he protested.

All the while, Himari was just lying hunched on the ground, his head down, ears pinned, shuddering.

Daddy and Mommy worked it out, like they always did. Nogusa admired their ability to do that—he hoped someday he’d be able to do the same. If he lived that long. That was the other part of the question he didn’t like thinking about.

Mommy was licking Meiko’s throat to make it heal up. Daddy lay down next to Himari. He peered at him. Nogusa walked around to see. He saw Himari open his eye, then close it again when he saw Daddy right there.

Daddy’s face looked really sad, like he was tired from walking a long way. “Are you going to leave us, Himari? Is this it? I only…” His voice choked. “I only get to know you for a few months, and then you… you go??”

Himari whispered. “It’s not okay to kill people. You can’t do that.” Tears streamed down and sounded in his voice: “You can’t do that!!”

Nogusa nuzzled his brother on his head; he started licking, putting the disheveled golden fur back into place. Himari had been so strong, just a few days ago. It scared Nogusa to see him now.
Daddy sniffled and watched. He set a big paw on Himari’s back. “I’m not saying it’s easy,” he said softly. Nogusa looked over to see if Mommy was listening as she tended to Meiko. Her ears were swiveled back; she was listening but pretending not to.

“It’s not okay,” repeated Himari.

“How do you really think… do you really think we’re born, just to let ourselves starve and die?” whimpered Daddy. Now this was another dimension of fear—Daddy whimpering. Daddy terrified.

Himari shook his head weakly.

“We’re not supposed to do that,” Daddy went on. “We’re made to hunt. We’re made to eat meat! I don’t like it either, but we don’t get to choose how we’re made.”

Himari took a few seconds to answer. “But we can choose… to do it or not to do it.”

Daddy stood up, tears leaking. “Please, son. Eat something. Just a swallow!”

“No,” said Himari.

“Please,” added Nogusa.

But Himari closed his ears again. He slowly eased his raised rump down to the earth and lay flat. Slowly, he went limp, and Nogusa knew he was trying to sleep.

Eventually, Mommy and Meiko went off with Bari to hunt. Kyrie, the badger, was waiting for them at the bottom of the hill. Nogusa stayed behind. He had to stay behind. It wasn’t much of a decision. Daddy lay with Himari on one side and Nogusa lay on the other. They could both feel his breathing and his heartbeats. Nogusa thought he could maybe even feel Daddy’s heartbeat, through the body of his emaciated brother.

Eventually Daddy stood up and declared he was going to go get water. Nogusa nodded. Then he was gone, and it felt like the two of them were very alone.

Nogusa heard the sound of his own breathing. He felt guilty when it wasn’t synched up with his brother’s. He tried to slow it down, make it so the two of them were breathing together.

After a while, Nogusa felt both relaxed and very sad. Slowly, he stood up. He didn’t think Himari would react. But Himari looked up at him, opening his eyes and ears like it was a question.

“If one of us has to die, it shouldn’t be you,” said Nogusa, fighting past the urge to cry.

Himari stared, wondering. His curious blue eyes got wider.

“I’m the weak one. I’m the runt. I should be the one who dies. If someone has to.” He didn’t know why he had to say this, or what logic he was working by, but he knew he had to say it.

“I don’t want anyone to die,” whispered Himari. His throat was dry—Nogusa could see why Daddy had to go and get water. “It’s just nature. Nature is making it happen.”

Nogusa trembled in anger. He didn’t know if he was angry at Himari, or at nature, or even at himself. But he yelled: “You were good at stuff! You were good at hunting and running and now it’s gone! You were strong and now you’re weaker than me! How can you be weaker than me?! How can you do that?” He didn’t even know what sense his question made.

But Himari seemed to. Shaking, he rose to his feet. He gave Nogusa a big, difficult, dry lick on the
Nogusa was hopeful. Was Himari going to go and eat some of their buried meat? Would he accept meat if Daddy spit it up for him? But Himari just walked into the grass near a group of tiny white flowers and lay down. He took in a deep breath through his nose, which the flowers tickled. He let it out. He stretched out in the grass, in the sun.

Nogusa started to cry. He cried a long time, sobbing and sobbing. Then he went back and lay down next to Himari. His brother didn’t make him leave, or say anything, or even lift his ears. He just lay still with his eyes half open, watching the world. Nogusa got the idea he was watching the world for the last time.

A terrifying thought struck Nogusa: was he the one who was wrong? Should he be starving himself too?

But a gentle wind caught his mottled fur, and a sweet smell of flowers washed over him, and Nogusa just closed his eyes, knowing any decision that meant leaving this place was the wrong one. Somehow, he had to stay.

And then Daddy came back with water, and both of them drank, and Nogusa licked Himari from head to tail, making him beautiful even though it took an hour. Himari looked at him with love but didn’t have any words for him left.

Meiko and Bari and Mommy came home with a dead rabbit and Mommy gave the pups the best organs to eat. Nogusa ate slowly and licked his lips when no one was looking. Daddy chewed up a bunch of meat and then spit some of it up and offered it to Himari. Himari looked at him. He gave his head a tiny shake. Nogusa saw the sun shining on his light brown fur and thought of how the sun looks when it goes down. It gets oranger and dimmer at the bottom, he reflected. That was how Himari looked now. He was going out.

It was getting dark and most of them were done eating when Daddy told everyone he was going inside the cave with Himari. They were going to be alone in there, he said. Nogusa wanted to go in after, but he knew Daddy knew best about this sort of thing. Daddy and Mommy knew best about everything. They had so much knowledge and so much strength and so much understanding, even if they hadn’t given much of it to Nogusa. But they couldn’t do everything. Nogusa knew well that they couldn’t do everything.

Mommy gathered the pups around and she groomed them all, and sang them a mother’s song, and then sang them another song about animals far, far away, that Nogusa didn’t understand most of. They walked down the hill and around it and toward another hill, all listening to Mommy sing. And Mommy told them about how things were done in the pack she and Daddy had come from, and about the wolves they’d known, and about the wolves that had come before them, and about the stories they’d heard of the first wolves of Baku Baku, who had founded the pack tens and twenties of years ago. It got dark then. They walked around another hill, and wound around a third one, and finally, when Nogusa got so tired he couldn’t go on, she led them back up their own hill, and they went up to the very top of it, which they’d never done before, and rested there in the grass, and watched the shifting dark clouds over the dark blue sky, blocking and admitting stars, toying with the light of the narrow crescent moon, high over everything.

Nogusa heard them snoozing. He heard them all breathing in and out; he saw Bari’s big paws twitch in his sleep; he saw Meiko’s twitching tail. Mommy was curled up on her own front paws, fast asleep, Bari beside her snout, Meiko at her side. For a moment, Nogusa wondered whether he, too, was asleep. Slowly, sleepily, he decided he wasn’t.
He lay on the edge of the tall, green hill, just over the cave that was his home. He watched the distant forest with all its creatures. He watched the green hills and meadows between here and there, and he watched the distant heath to the one side and the wetlands to the other, and he felt the watching weight of the huge mountain behind his back.

He saw his father leave the cave with a little bright bundle in his mouth. He turned to watch his father lope down the back of the hill and into the foot of Muri Muri Mountain. He watched his father climb the cold slopes until Nogusa couldn’t see his shape anymore.

Nogusa waited for half an hour until his father came back. He watched as Daddy climbed the hill again, pausing at the top to stare at the sky, at the partly hidden blue moon.

Then Daddy came up to the top of the hill. Nogusa pretended to be asleep. His father curled up all around him, seeing him lying there alone. Nogusa let himself drift. He fell asleep in his father’s warmth.

Nogusa had only one brother now. That was just how it was. His eyes leaked, but he slept, and he slept long.

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Chapter End Notes

This was another one of those chapters that made me cry to write. I think if I run into those now and then, it means I’m doing something right.

We’ve now had a scene from the point of view of each of the four pups. Hooray for symmetry! This story is almost over, and I’m still not sure whether next chapter will be the last. If it’s not, I’ll be rearranging the chapters somehow so as to make 42 in the end.
Autumn, Winter and Spring

In the morning, Gabu met Mei at the base of the hill. He'd come from the woods and smelled of brackish water. Gabu knew it was meant to cover the scent of wherever Mei had been, so Gabu wouldn’t know. He wanted to dart forward and hug Mei to his chest. But he held back, and Mei looked at his face, and knew.

The goat’s head dropped. So did Gabu’s. The two of them nuzzled each other, then walked slowly back up the hill, toward the lair.

Lala was there, outside the cave mouth, staring at the sky. She turned to face her packmates.

“Himari,” said Mei.

“He was brave,” said Lala.

Mei sniffled. “Perhaps a bit too brave, I’d say.”

Lala’s jaw hardened and she looked away again, back to the low stretches of sky.

Gabu lay next to Mei. The goat’s coat, thinner than his own, felt slightly damp against his side. The two of them watched Lala and the cave mouth until the children came out.

All of them said a few words about Himari.

“He was a lot of fun,” said Bari.

“He was special. Super-special,” said Meiko. “I liked the way he walked.”

Nogusa said that he would always wonder whether his brother had been right to do what he did, and the rest of them wrong.

Gabu realized that the same question would haunt him, too. Perhaps for all his days.

That afternoon, Mei walked with Hatsu and Haburo. They shared a certain kinship of emotion just now, uncertain in its shallowness or depth. Mei felt almost as though he had lost a child of his own, but he knew his feelings were less profound than Gabu’s or Lala’s. Haburo and Hatsu had lost only the dream of children; they had never had any children to lose. But they had loved the dream.

“His face,” said Hatsu.
“His voice,” said Haburo.

“I remember both,” said Mei. “But over time, will I still remember? He didn’t live long. I wonder what he could have grown up into. What sort of adult wolf he would have made.”

“His own,” said Haburo.

“Or yours,” suggested Hatsu.

Did Mei have a kind of wolf? He reflected on his approach toward Gabu, and toward the caustic issue of… hunting. Sustenance. Had Mei’s sense of ethics in any way contributed to this death? On the one horn, ever since that heated night with Gabu after their argument, he’d never blamed the wolves for what they had to do, and did his best to show them love even when they stank of blood. But on the other horn, if it hadn’t been for Mei’s strong desire for friendship with the other animals, and his insistence that everyone be at risk, that the wolves not play favorites…

“Our dreams,” said Hatsu, swooping low.

“Your memories,” said Haburo, doing the same.

“I guess they dwell together now, don’t they?” said Mei.

Both birds circled higher, then spread wide. Eventually they began to sing. And Mei trudged on.

The brook club met the next day. The absence of one wolf pup was already enough to put all the animals on alert. They listened patiently as Gabu explained the news; his son, Himari, had chosen to stop eating meat. He had wasted away, and yesterday morning Gabu had buried him.

“And this… choice of his,” said Wilhelm, a little less gruff than usual. “It started the day you killed Taffet?”

“Yes,” said Gabu, avoiding his eyes.

Coryn struck the ground. “I am sensible of your loss,” he declared. “We will treat our wolven friends with gentle words, these few days hence.”

He bowed; so did Bedelia and Wilhelm; so did the rest of the deer. The rabbits and chipmunks and mice and muskrats followed. So did Kyrie, and Tsume, and the other birds.

Kiput, who sat on a low branch next to Taffet’s friend Fujiko, merely watched the proceedings, his gaze dark and tail drooped. Fujiko groomed him diligently.

On the 215th day, there was a heavy thunderstorm. Mei and Gabu invited Bepo to share their lair with them, as it had at times in the past. Bepo’s wheezy breathing gave it trouble climbing the hill; it joked about how that which is easy runs to hard, and high hills run to very high. Eventually it consented to let Mei carry it gently in his mouth, between his dental pad and lower lip. They spent the evening together with Lala and the pups, engaging in wordplay and telling jokes and stories. The pups had trouble understanding Bepo’s jokes, but that somehow made the overall experience all the funnier.

Eventually, near midnight, Kyrie arrived for the next day’s hunt. After pleasantries were
exchanged, Mei took Bepo gently in his mouth again and deposited it gently next to its hole near the base of the hill. It was still raining. Mei hurried off then toward the rabbit warren, looking forward to cover and comfort there.

On the 224th day, Mei realized that he hadn’t seen Bepo since the night of the thunderstorm, and mentioned it to Gabu.

On the 236th day, Mei resigned himself to the likelihood he would never see Bepo again. There were badgers around the hill, after all, and the vole had been old. He walked with Gabu to Sneaky Bluff and cried into his shoulder.

That night, while Gabu and the pups settled down in the lair, Mei walked with Lala among the hills. They talked about the nature of age, and of time, and memory. They speculated on whether there was a reason creatures tended to keep to their own kind, and whether it had anything to do with the fact that some lived long lives while others lived briefly. Who could have planned such a thing, and were they right to do so? Was there any way around it?

“Lala?” asked Mei. “Was there ever anyone besides your brother that you truly loved?” He studied her profile in the dark blueness. “Before you came here?”

Lala curved her neck. “I loved our mother,” she said. “She was mighty, and… like a great tree, she was always there.”

“Did she die?”

Lala nodded. “Great trees fall,” she said after a moment.

“No one else?”

Lala mused. “I had three mates before Gabu. Two of them gave me children. I… loved things about them. In each of them, I found things to love. But did I love them altogether?” She paced. “Not entirely, no. I loved myself, of course.”

Of course. “Do you think you could abide? Making friends and losing them, dozens of times over?”

“Well, in a way, that’s like having children, isn’t it? They don’t always stay with the pack, after all. You have pups… you love them intensely, in a way that seems almost given to you… and you lift them up, so that they can belong to themselves. Then they leave… or if they linger, they become just new young packmates… but either way, the love fades.”

This was strange to Mei. His mother’s love for him had never faded. Nor had his grandmother’s. “It doesn’t fade for us,” he said.

Lala looked queerly at him, taking his meaning. “Then life must be hard for you.”

Yet he wasn’t the one who’d lost a child, Mei reflected. “Is it your love for yourself that carries you through?”

Lala inhaled the cool autumn air. “Not exactly. I’d say it’s… the struggle. The light in the distance. The fact that… even when you don’t know what you want, you know there’s something there for
the wanting. Something far away, but within a lifetime’s travel. Something you know you’re capable of reaching.”

Mei almost told her then about his pathway to forever. Almost. He couldn’t quite bear to describe that secret to Lala, not yet. But if they kept taking walks like this, someday he would.

“It sounds like you have a lot of faith in yourself,” he said.

“I have faith that anything is possible,” replied Lala. And then, after a long silence, she added: “You know what? You’re right. I think it is my love for myself that carries me through.”

Mei found himself smiling. “I kind of thought so.”

On the 239th day, the muskrat families announced that they had decided to embark on an exciting and risky venture: they were going to build an exhibition burrow, right there on the brook. They would work in shifts, building their real homes in secret while building an extra one in plain sight, so that everyone could enjoy their craft. The smaller animals would be welcome to weather cold nights and snowstorms there, once winter came. Anyone capable of threading one branch betwixt others was welcome to try and build their own alongside. The muskrats would be handy to provide any wisdom they could.

This notion was excitedly embraced by many. Immediately, Ciru the mouse offered to offer its own exhibition—it would build a nest for itself in the hollow against a stone, rather than underground, just to show everyone how it looked and was done. The chipmunks squealed to each other, discussing what they could do along the same lines. Kyrie decided to try and build her own muskrat burrow, just for the challenge of it.

On the 241st day, they broke ground, and multiple mounds rose in the vicinity of the brook, attended by cheerful creatures—homes built not for protection or child rearing, but for play.

Bari dared them to try and build a mound so tough that he couldn’t butt his head through it. The muskrats laughed and exchanged smug looks. “Wait and see,” they told the boastful little Fenrir.

On the 247th day, it was frosty. The rodents were fat and the young wolves were starting to hunt on their own. Little Nogusa, after months of trying, finally made his first kill—a careless chipmunk skittering from brush cover toward its hole. There was a celebration for him the next morning in the hilltop lair; Aunt Hatsu and Uncle Haburo came to visit, and Mei and Jenny and Kyrie were there. They played tag and jostled Nogusa playfully and sang “For he’s a jolly good fellow.” Nogusa was delighted.

On the 251st day, Haburo and Hatsu volunteered to carry a message to the land to the north and back again, before the snows came. Gabu leapt at the chance to send word to Boro, if they could find him. He’d been shaken by Mei’s revelation that Boro had kept his faith in him and missed him badly, and wanted to let the youth know that he was safe and happy and remembered him often. The warblers went winging off.
Four days later, they returned. From Sawa Sawa, Mii sent word of having tried to make new friends among her people, but said that they were increasingly boring for her. She didn’t know how much longer she could go without doing something drastic, or so Mei gleaned from the warblers’ terse report. Mei’s grandmother and others sent fond wishes. So did Kuro and his grandfather—the birds had sought out the black goats without Mei even having asked. The wolves’ attacks had stabilized into a new pattern, they reported. Things were well and only one more of their number had been taken. They had three new kids and were making preparations for winter.

“Kuro sends | his love
His heart | with you,”
reported the warblers.

After four hours of searching and pestering three different wolf coalitions from the safety of the air, the warblers had managed to track down Boro’s companions. “Not Boro?” asked Gabu.

“Is gone,” said Hatsu.

“Run off,” said Haburo.

His former companions had reported that Boro had lost his nerve, as they put it, or perhaps his sanity entirely, and run off into the unknown. The familiar haunts he knew had worn him down, and he’d needed something new. Perhaps it was sheer wanderlust that had torn him from his little pack in search of new frontiers.

Gabu was horrorstricken. “Was he headed this way?”

“No,” said Haburo.

“Sorry,” said Hatsu.

“His way,” said Haburo.

“His own,” finished Hatsu.

Gabu hung his head and shook in sympathy for his one-time protege. He huddled with Mei that night, sobbing… and once Mei left, he huddled with Lala, who stroked his head and back gently with a forepaw.

On the 257th day, Tsume the brown-headed thrush said a warm goodbye to all his friends at the club. It was time for him to wing off southwest; he would be back when winter was over! Meiko asked him what the land to the southwest was like, and he told her about a place of strange trees with big bulbous fruits and swamps of green water, and in the far distance beyond that, vast rocky plains with hot springs. Meiko wouldn’t let this go, and it became the focus of that First Talking. Poor Tsume wasn’t able to escape for hours! It was quite a spirited goodbye, at any rate.

On the 262nd night, Mei decided not to roll in the brack of the wetlands to disguise his scent. Instead, he went to the mountains and wandered there for an hour before going back to the cave. Why should he make his Huntday haunts a mystery if he could deceive the wolves into thinking he’d been to specific places instead? From now on, he would spend his Huntdays in the rabbit
warren, and then spend an hour elsewhere in order to gather a different scent. He had heard their great paws pounding the ceilings too often, and wanted to dissuade them from any notion that it might be his favored refuge. He was cautious, of course—if he caught any whiff of wolves, he would retreat. But from the curious looks Lala gave him upon his return in the mornings, or in some cases the dark hours after midnight, he suspected he was succeeding in confusing her.

On the 264th day, the snow came. It fell during a meeting of the club, coating the exhibition mound with delicate crystalline flakes. The young muskrats laughed and the deer snorted and shook the snow off their backs. Meiko ran around with her tail wagging nonstop, leaping at individual snowflakes and plowing up snow where it accumulated. She was full of wonder. Meanwhile, Bari and Nogusa stood with their tongues out, smiling at each other, and catching flakes like they were delicate rabbit livers.

Mei stood near Gabu and tried not to shiver. He was all too acutely aware that he had walked last winter in a hopeless, miserable haze. That he had survived was a wonder. But now he had Gabu with him. Not to mention a multitude of other friends. He rubbed a horn against the wolf’s thick, shaggy haunch and then met his eye. They shared a delicate smile, not needing to say it out loud: They would get through this winter just fine, so long as they had each other.

On the 275th day, Lala took Meiko on a trip. She’d been begging her parents for days to follow Tsume to the southwest, and Lala had finally relented. Why not take a trip of discovery with her daughter while her daughter was still with her? Perhaps the land of bulbous fruits and green waters would be where Meiko would eventually make her home.

“But you’ll come back first, right?” asked Nogusa.

“Yeah of course I’ll come back. I’m gonna find where the birds go to be warm and I’ll come tell you all about it. And if you like what I tell you, we could go there together!”

Nogusa grinned, and for once wagged his modest tail. “That sounds good to me.”

Gabu ran his snout slowly against Lala’s. “You will be back, won’t you?” he asked. “Even if you meet another dog wolf who’s more handsome than I am?”

Lala chuckled deeply. “I’ll be back. There’s no one in the world quite like you, Gabu.”

Gabu sat down and grinned as he watched his mate and daughter canter away, though his ears were limp.

Bari turned to Mei. “Are you gonna be our new mom while Mom’s gone?” he joked.

Mei chuckled a little. “I’ll do my best,” he promised.

On the 278th day, Bari bonked his head against a cunningly crafted muskrat burrow, after announcing to one and all that he was going to bash through it. He cried for a while, and the chuckles on all sides died down into expressions of sympathy. Mei lay with him and licked him, fulfilling his promise from before. Nogusa cuddled him and Gabu groomed him, and after a while, Bari sighed and lay quiet. Then he started laughing. “It hurts,” he said, “but it only hurts ’cause I was so dumb.” A few of the creatures laughed with him; the muskrats tittered in their own way.
On the 280th day, Nogusa made a cave for himself in the snow. He then heard a mouse moving
and tried to dig for it. Kyrie stuck her head down into his tunnel and asked whether he wanted to
learn to burrow. He assented rather enthusiastically, and the badger gave him some tips.

She wasn’t adept at catching small animals in the snow, though, she told him. If he wanted to do
that, he’d have to learn from a fox. Kyrie was eating mainly nuts and berries for now, and would
start going to torpor soon in her own burrow.

“Will we see you at all during the winter?” asked Mei the next morning.

“Oh, I figure I’ll pop up from time to time,” Kyrie said cheerfully. She was much fatter than when
they’d met her; it looked like she would be comfortable sleeping for a while. So instead of
*goodbye*, the family just told her *good night*.

On the 285th day, Lala and Meiko returned triumphantly. Gabu was so relieved that he howled to
the sky with joy.

Lala grinned. “Did you think we wouldn’t be back?”

He pounced and nudged her in affection from every angle. “I just didn’t know what you might
find!”

Meiko, who seemed to have grown visibly, was all too glad to tell everyone about it, tail wagging
as wildly as ever. She talked about how the snow got thinner and thinner the further they walked,
and she remembered exactly where they were when it disappeared. The rock had been cool but dry
and she’d had fun leaping between it and the trailing bank of snow.

“But don’t you like snow?” Nogusa asked.

“Nope! I like it where it’s warm!” said Meiko.

“That’s funny,” said Gabu, scratching his head. “I always assumed you would like snowy places
because of your coat! You’re silvery white and can blend in.”

“Yep. I know. I dunno!” said Meiko. “I’d rather be warm and happy than blend in.” And she
proceeded to tell them about the thick, low trees with their huge, flowering fronds and silly-looking
fruits that fell when you shook the branches.

She spun her story into a performance that she repeated at the brook club the next Story Day. It
was well received and entertained the whole crowd. But that was the end of the notion that Nogusa
would go off with his sister someday to live with her support. They simply liked different climates,
and that was that. And that was all right. It was the way things turned out, sometimes.

On the 293rd day, the deer held their Winter Ceremony. It was a private affair, for only them, but
the sound of their intermittent baying cut through the trees and sounded in the surrounding lands. It
was haunting. The other animals met at the brook and listened. They spoke softly about their
speculations, or about what the deer had told them about the ceremony.

“It’s respect for winter,” said little Ciru, the mouse. “Winter is heavy. Needs respect.”
“It’s not winter itself they’re appeasing,” countered Akiara. “It’s their gods. Deer have the strangest gods. They have to be told how great they are whenever the days get dark, or they’ll strike! If the gods don’t get their appeasement, they take the food away and the herds don’t survive.”

“Not sure you’re quite right about that,” said Kiput. “The way Bedelia described it, it’s more of a communion. A coming together of sorts. I suppose our cervine friends just need to remind themselves now and then who they are… much like we all do.”

“I think they’re scaring off snow spirits,” said Itsuko with a grin, clearly just making it up.

“Maybe they’re telling the snow spirits to come and attack all of us,” joked Bari.

“I wish I could be there with them,” said Meiko.

“Patience, child,” said Lala lovingly. “We all have secrets. Someday, perhaps you’ll found your own pack… and when you do, you can teach them your own ceremonies.”

Meiko grinned. “If I do, they won’t be secret. Everyone’ll be allowed to join! Even if we hunt the animals all the rest of the year, that’s the day they can all come hang out with us and be safe.”

Nogusa nosed his sister. “You don’t think you’ll stick to the week system when you go off on your own?”

She shrugged. “Maybe! We’ll see. I get the idea it’s kind of hard to get it started.”

“Well, that’s true, it was hard,” admitted Gabu. “But it was absolutely worth it.”

Bari just chuckled. It seemed like he had his own plans.

That night, the deer began to sing. Their songs were prolonged and deep and harmonious and rose to the apex of the dark sky. There were tiny flakes on the air.

On the 294th day, the young muskrats swarmed the deer, asking what they’d been doing yesterday and what all their songs meant. Wilhelm tolerated the creatures on his back, but shook his head brusquely and kept his mouth tightly shut.

“Our ceremonies are our own,” said Coryn. “There are some things that cannot be wisely shared.”

“But,” said Bedelia. “I hear that you have guesses. Today is Play Day. Would you like to share your guesses with us?”

“That is a thought,” said her brother. “We would fain enjoy such entertainments, if you are content not to know how close they strike to the truth.”

So the muskrats and the chipmunks created little plays in which they pretended to be deer, lowing and singing and worshiping gods or prancing in a circle. Mei moved between the groups, helping them firm up their ideas and memorize their lines. And when they were ready, the animals all watched, and many of them laughed, and the eyes of the deer twinkled.

Then Akiara and Lala put on their own little show, in which the deer were paying back an ancient debt to the sky itself, which had built their antlers out of snowflakes long ago. There was an undercurrent, missed by the children, in which the nature of their braying songs was sexually pleasing to the sky, which supposedly explained the origin of all kinds of weather. The crowd
hooted, and Jenny heckled, and the deer struck the snowy earth with their hooves in applause.

On the 298th day, Nogusa caught a mouse by pouncing in the snow. He was so proud! He told his parents that he’d worked out a method by watching foxes on the heath, and he was going to get good at it and maybe feed himself this way. Lala told him that would be wonderful, as the question of whether he would ever be able to survive without help was a sensitive one in the family. She knew, of course, that as he grew further, mice wouldn’t be sufficient to satisfy his stomach. But this thought, Lala chose to keep to herself.

On the 303rd day, Mei fell sick. There was no clear cause, but he hadn’t been eating well, since everything was buried in snow. After comforting him for a while, Gabu took to dashing out and bringing back branches he’d bitten off near the ends, so that Mei could strip them of anything edible. Mei told him he needed tree cones, so the pups went out looking. Lala dug up dry grass buried under the snow and brought it back for Mei. Everyone made sure he was well fed while he rested in the cave, but his sickness lingered. And the next day was a Hunting Day.

“Well, Gabu?” said Lala out on the hillside. “If he’s still in our cave come midnight, what can we do? Will we devour him?”

Gabu whined. “We should go meet the animals and ask them for permission to let him stay there just one Hunting Day. Just because he’s sick. I know Mei won’t be happy, but I think the animals will understand. I hope they will, anyway.”

Lala nodded and smiled and accepted his wisdom, as she always did. It was part of her long, long game of patience. So they went to the frozen brook and explained things to the assembled animals. And they did understand. And they did assent to let Mei rest through Hunting day in his home, unassailed. Really, it was easier than they’d expected.

“Tell him he can take all the days he’d like to get better,” said Itsuko.

“Does this mean if I get sick on Hunting Day, I can hang out with you, too?” asked Akiara.

“Um.. I don’t know…” said Gabu.

“Nah, just kidding,” said the rabbit, her long ears twitching. “Mei’s special. We get that. He need anything from us?”

“You can always send your love,” said Lala.

Mei recovered three days later. He was very grateful to everyone, and went wandering in the mountains for some moss and some cool fresh air.

On the 308th day, the Emerald Forest was abuzz with gossip. Coryn, mightiest of the stags and de facto leader of the forest, had fractured his leg. He was limping, the younger deer said. He was with his sister and his acolyte somewhere, trying to heal. But how had it happened? Some said he’d stepped in a hole covered over with snow, and twisted his leg just wrong. Some said he’d tried to leap a gap too broad for him. Some said he’d undertaken a quest to meet someone far away and had run too hard and too long.
Others claimed that the wolves had caught his scent the previous day and had chased him to the point of raggedness.

The wolves were reluctantly silent on the matter. “Well, we have been chasing deer lately,” said Gabu, but Lala shushed him gently. Mei watched in wonder as Gabu shut his mouth. Did they have plans? He hoped Coryn would be all right, and that the three leaders would return soon.

On the 314th day, a Second Talking, Kiput cleared his throat. “If I may,” he told the group humbly, until they quieted down. “Nothing much, just wanted the floor a moment.” He paused. “Fujiko and I have something to announce.”

Mei chuckled and looked at the two squirrels together. Lala smiled broadly. Meiko’s tail started in wagging.

Fujiko stood tall. “We’re going to be mates,” she declared proudly.

The animals shouted cheers and congratulations. “Oh, it’s nothing,” said Kiput, flicking his tail. “Just worth mentioning, is all.”

“You naughty rascals,” said Jenny. “I knew it.”

Nogusa spoke up. “Shouldn’t we have a party? Or some kind of celebration?”

“Sounds legit,” said Akiara.

“When I was at Baku Baku,” said Gabu, “we knew how to celebrate weddings. I could share a few of our traditions.”

“I’ll tell the deer,” said one of the young does.

“Oh dear,” said Fujiko. “I think I’d be flattered.”

Kiput sighed and turned to the group, flailing his heavy tail. “Well. If it’s the will of the many, I suppose. A celebration it is.”

“Celebration!” exclaimed Meiko.

They celebrated the wedding of Kiput and Fujiko four days later, for Playday. Coryn returned for this, still limping, but claimed he could “no longer be errant.” His great twelve point antlers, everyone noticed, were gone. This was not unusual for deer in the winter, but it attracted attention just the same. He refused questions and simply preferred to watch the festivities.

There were dances and songs and promises exchanged, and at the height of things, Umenoki whispered in Kiput’s ear knowingly, and the squirrel wrinkled his face and whispered back.

“What are they whispering about?” asked Bari.

“I think I have an inkling,” said Mei. “Remember, they both lost someone they loved. And they both thought they’d never love again.”

“Oh,” said Bari. “Well… that’s good, then.” He smiled, and Mei wondered if a little spark of guilt for having killed Taffet all those months ago was lifted from the youth that day.
On the 319th night, the wolves all went hunting together. They flushed a group of deer from a stand of snow-flecked trees, and Lala was there to snap at their hocks, redirecting them. Most of the deer sped away, but one went slow, and one stayed to fight. Gabu recognized Wilhelm’s face, now angry and terrified, and felt a tremor of fear himself. Coryn was limping away, but he turned now to face down the predators, not willing to let his acolyte die for him.

“Go!” shouted Wilhelm. “Make yourself scarce!”

“Do you think you can beat us?” Lala challenged the woolly old stag.

Wilhelm snorted. “I’ll make you sorry you were born,” he threatened.

Coryn heaved a strong, warm breath that misted into the cold sky. “If you were younger, or if they were, or if you still had your rack, I would bid you fight fierce,” he said. “But you are advanced in age, Wilhelm. I would not have you die for me.”

“These old hooves can still kick,” roared the stag. Gabu wasn’t sure how damaging that would be, though. He was glad the stags had finally shed their antlers—that was a big part of why they were hunting them now. They couldn’t afford to keep antlers in the winter when there wasn’t as much food, but that made it harder for them to defend themselves.

“Ready, kids?” asked Lala, raring to pounce.

“Ready!” shouted Bari.

“Ready!” echoed Meiko and Nogusa.

“GO!” yelled Coryn, who turned tail to flee.

At the last moment, Wilhelm turned and ran. He overtook Coryn and pounded up a powder as he went. Lala leapt past Coryn and turned to corner him. Soon the five wolves had him surrounded.

Gabu remembered the day he’d been on his belly in the mud after running from the animals, and Coryn had addressed, rather than attacked him. That had been how he’d been able to open the way, to make friends with everyone. If it hadn’t been for Coryn… “I don’t know if I want to do this,” he confessed.

Coryn’s eyes were fierce. “Wolf! Are you doubtful of your nature!? Would you hesitate to kill a weakened deer, for love of his friendship?”

“I don’t… I really don’t…”

Coryn snarled. “Well, wolf. Now that I see your weakness, you had better kill me. Or believe me, I will make it known! And if you ever bare your teeth again, none will fear you!”

“We have to,” said Lala.

“Well, wolf? There is a decision to be made!” shouted Coryn. “Strike, or lose your respect!” The king of the forest crouched, ready to spring.

“But—” said Gabu.

HAVE AT ME, WOLF!” roared Coryn. Reflexively, not wanting to be hit by those tremendous hooves, Gabu leapt for his throat. Lala and the pups leapt at the same time. Gabu felt a hoof
pummeling him, but his teeth met flesh, and he tore. The struggle was not long.

The family ate well for a week. But Gabu didn’t let anyone groom him that night. He slept on the hilltop, alone.

On the 320th day, none of the deer showed up at the brook. The animals looked cautiously at Lala and the pups, who sat quietly and said little. Gabu, too, was absent; Mei knew he was washing and washing himself in the snow. There were sounds of keening and baying from the woods. The deer were howling like wolves.

“Well,” said Kiput.

“Well,” said Akiara.

On the 323rd day, some of the younger deer came back to the club. So did Gabu, clean and wet. “I’m sorry,” he told them.

“Don’t apologize,” said one of the healthy young bucks, his eyes steely. Would he be the new king of the forest? Mei wondered.

“Don’t worry,” replied Lala, lying nearby and grooming herself. “I won’t.”

The club went on meeting, even without a leader. Wilhelm never returned. Bedelia came sometimes, but stayed quiet, and spent much of her time whispering to the various children. Mei asked her once how she was doing, and she said “Well enough,” and nothing more.

It was quieter without Coryn around. Well, not quieter, necessarily—there was still plenty of cavorting on Playday, and there were spirited stories on Storyday. But there was less weight to it all. Coryn and Wilhelm had somehow… anchored the club to the ground. Without them, it felt more ephemeral. Yet the group’s amity survived.

Akiara’s friend Jim liked filling the awkward silences with an awkward, but well intentioned joke. Jenny liked being acerbic in response. Bari would wag his tail, then, and join in with youthful witticisms of his own. With the possible exception of Nogusa, everyone was quite tired of the winter.

On the 333rd day, there was a cruel, huge snowstorm. It blanketed everyplace thickly; even Haburo and Hatsu had trouble flying, and huddled at home. Mei stayed cooped in the lair with the wolves. They spent some of their time lying in a big pile together, experimenting with different configurations. They talked about which flowers they liked best, and would be gladdest to see again.

Late at night, Mei sighed and rose to go. Tomorrow was a Hunting Day. Gabu whined: “Oh, Mei, stay! It’s terrible out there!”

Mei shook his head. “I’m sorry. I have to go. You’re honorbound to kill me if I don’t.”

Gabu hung his head. Lala just watched as Mei leapt falteringly through the huge stacks of snow. Then she spoke up of her own accord: “I doubt we’ll be going out! So you don’t need to go far!”
“Thank you,” Mei called back as he continued. Soon, he was out of sight. But could he trust Lala to be telling the truth?

When Hunt Day was over, Mei staggered back weakly, his face chilled. Gabu was utterly relieved to see him, but horrified by his state. “Oh, Mei! Let me warm you up.”

He just nodded and lay down on the cave floor. All the pups came to lie by him and lick him and nuzzle him.

“How did you get by?” asked Gabu.

“I took a leaf from you,” he explained. “I made a snow cave. It wasn’t pleasant, but there were dried forbs, deep down.”

“I’m so sorry, Mei,” said Gabu.

“I think that’s the worst of winter,” said Lala. “Welcome back, packmate.”

Mei sighed and slept.

On the 339th day, the snow began to melt. Once it began to relent, it melted quickly, the sun beating down. Mei looked at the sun, exerting its authority, and realized it no longer made him think of his mother. It made him think of Himari.

Kyrie returned and announced that she was done with torpor for the season. Everyone spent time happily at the brook. The rabbits squashed crusts of ice with their feet, and the chipmunks skated on the frozen brook, daring each other to guess when it would melt through. The muskrats watched from inside their poke-ups in the brook itself, little spots of vegetation pushed through where they could rise to breathe. Everyone admired their ability to swim in the icy water. Animals started talking about showing off for each other again. Fujiko composed bad poetry about spring and spoke it to no one in particular.

Spring was in the air.

On the 343rd day, Kyrie started hunting with the wolves again. She was excited to see how much Nogusa had improved his digging technique. With the snow mostly gone, she was able to teach him to snuffle around for rodents. She got him to try worms, even though he found them icky. He admitted they weren’t bad, but decided they wouldn’t sustain him.

Bari and Meiko started talking about going off together to the southwest. Nogusa started talking about staying behind. Lala licked him lovingly and said he would make a fine companion for his mother and father, if he chose to stay.

On the 350th day, Tsume returned from migration. He was greeted warmly and asked for his
stories, which he told. Meiko and Lala told him happily about their winter trip to what they assumed was his homeland, and lamented the fact they hadn’t run into each other there. They spent an hour trying to identify common landmarks, and figuring out how close to each other they’d come.

Tsume said that if Meiko and Bari wanted to make a life in his winter home, he wouldn’t have any complaints—he could always fly high enough to avoid them, and all his friends there were other birds.

“There, that’s what you should do,” said Akiara. “Make friends with the birds, even if no one else will trust you. They’re worth it, you know. They’ve got more going on than it seems.”

Meiko wagged her tail. It seemed like she liked the idea.

On the 354th day, Gabu looked up at the full moon and realized it had been twelve full months since he and Mei had been reunited in the Emerald Forest. This was the closest full moon to marking their first year together—in the Emerald Forest, away from their homes. In paradise.

They went up to the hill’s peak together and watched the moon. After a while, Lala dared to join them. Mei sighed, but found he didn’t even mind.

On the 360th day, Hatsu and Haburo went again winging off to Sawa Sawa Mountain, to carry news both ways. Mei had quite a trove of tales to send with them this time. He told them to tell Mii she was welcome to join him anytime.

They returned four days later. Mei’s grandmother was still in good health, and expressed astonishment at the life he’d chosen to lead. Mii sent word that she wasn’t ready to strike off just yet, since she’d met a nice buck from the spotted herd, but she was thinking of going off with him, and there was just no telling what the future might hold.

Mei sighed and was happy for her.

On the 368th day, Kiput announced, rather dryly but with an undercurrent of pride, that Fujiko had just had babies. “I’ll be heading back shortly to help her tend,” he told the brook club. “But just to let you know. We’ll be raising them to be curious about all you lot, and with any luck? They’ll be part of this society in no time.”

“Best congratulations,” said Hatsu from aloft.

“Happy tidings,” said Haburo, matching her arc for arc.

There was general conviviality and good will from all.

On the 374th day, Lala cleared her throat and declared that she had an announcement. Once she had the attention of the club, she looked down to her children, Meiko and Bari.

Bari smiled shyly, goofily to everyone. Meiko wagged her tail and spoke. “We’re really sad to say, but we’re also really happy. We’re going off!”
“Really?” asked Jim, the rabbit. “Going off for good?”

Meiko nodded. “To the same place we went in the winter. Only Tsume knows a better part of it, and he gave us directions! So we’re gonna try and see if we can find the place he spends his winters.”

“And maybe if other wolves show up, we’ll try and start a pack,” added Bari.

“Or if they don’t—” said Meiko.

“If they don’t, we’ll try and go even further and see if we can find the place with the hot springs!” Bari interrupted.

“That sounds amazing,” said Akiara.

“Best of luck,” said Bedelia.

Just as the arrival of more wolves had elicited mixed joys the previous autumn, the happy departure of two wolf cubs prompted enthusiastic and genuine good wishes from the whole brook club, boosted just a bit by their natural relief at having two fewer wolves to hide from. Mei was happy to see it, even if he was saddened by the imminent departure of two creatures to whom he’d grown so close. Aside from those who’d lost a loved one to them, everyone loved Meiko and Bari. Even those who had were kindly. And so there was a merry day of farewells. Practically everyone at the club wished the pair well… and then there were tributes, and stories, and memories shared.

They all went back to the lair. The next morning, Mei and Kyrie and Gabu and Lala and Nogusa and Hatsu and Haburo were there to see them off. Bari and Meiko sat on the hill, facing their destination with hopeful sun on their shoulders, and a lot of tears were shed.

“I’ll probably never see you again,” said Nogusa.

“You’ll be in our hearts, though,” said Meiko as if it were a rock-hard fact.

“I know,” said Nogusa. He gave them one last lick.

Gabu hugged both his children to his breast and squeezed tight, trying to keep their scents forever. Lala lay with them and stared with wide blue eyes, as if taking in their measure one last time.

“Are you proud of us?” asked Meiko humbly.

“Proud of you?” asked Lala, as if the thought had never struck her mind. “Only more than words can say.”

Bari laughed. “Oh! Well that’s okay, then. I guess you don’t need to say any words.”

But Mei did. “Goodbye,” said Mei. “I’ll miss you very much.”

“Goodbye, Uncle Mei! Goodbye, Aunt Hatsu! Goodbye, Uncle Haburo!”

“Thanks for everything!

Mei watched them leave. He somehow didn’t think, even after all this, that the pair realized how very special their upbringing had been. How many wolf pups had a goat in their life as they were growing up?

He wondered, not without a little pride and a little apprehension of his own, how it must have
shaped them.

Chapter End Notes

What does it mean when time speeds up? Does it mean the world is more familiar?

I’ve combined Chapters 32 and 33 into one, in order to allow the whole story to be just 42 chapters. That means there will be one more after this, plus perhaps an epilogue.

I think of the deer as kind of pagan or druidic. But if male deer lose their antlers in the winter, does that mean Santa’s reindeer are all female?

I hope you liked Meiko and Bari. I came to know them better than I expected. But children come and children go.

There will be a new illustration soon in Chapter 23, thanks to FlyingMambo, formerly known as dragonblazer. And at least one more to come.
The Last Day

Chapter Summary

* Can you imagine if time didn't have a beginning?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**NOTE:** The bonus chapter won't be up on Monday as I intended! Family distractions. I'll have it up this week, though!

**Life Went On…**

When tempestuous weather passes, Mei reflected, it leaves ordinary haunts newly colored. Similarly, now that there was only one wolf pup remaining, and a meek one at that, life seemed much quieter. There were no more snowstorms to weather, no more gossipy young voices speculating on future travels. No more small voice asking ‘Hoofy happy?’ on the hilltop. The prospect of Mii coming to join them seemed lessened, now that she was caught in the spider’s cradle of love; and neither would Gabu’s protege, Boro, be joining them. Lala and Gabu made no noises about wanting a second litter; they remembered the hard bargain Gabu had struck with Mei. They had had their children. One had left the world in a chilling way that Mei knew for a fact still haunted Gabu’s heart. Two had left for warmer pastures, and one remained indefinitely, with no plans to depart.

At first, the death of Coryn had cast a great tension over everything. But that tension had largely dissipated when it became clear that no retribution was forthcoming. The deer did not replace Coryn—he was considered one of a kind. Nor did they attempt to sabotage the brook club. There was less weight and less leadership these days, less suspense and less hardship. It was almost like life had been before…

…before everything… had gotten complicated.

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They fell into a routine.

On those mornings that were not Huntdays, Mei would wake by Gabu’s side. (Sometimes after a Huntday he would return instead by morning’s light, but more often, missing his friend, he would slip into the lair shortly after midnight.) The two would nose each other and say good morning, and then they would share their dreams. Mei typically had plenty to tell, Gabu very little. (Lala typically waited outside for this, but if she stayed in the den it was usually because she’d had a fantastic dream of her own that she wished to share. Mei normally found these well worth hearing.)

The pair would wander from the den and enjoy the warming air together. They would share a few thoughts and perhaps make plans. Then, as in the old days, Mei and Gabu would go their separate
ways. Mei still liked to take breakfast at Sneaky Bluff, where he was sometimes joined by the leaf warblers. Gabu would frequently practice signals and maneuvers with Lala. Sometimes they were joined by Nogusa, who had his own den now, and sometimes by Kyrie, or both. Mei knew, though, that Nogusa and Kyrie sometimes practiced digging techniques on their own. (Kyrie was coming to think of Nogusa as her own stepson, which was heartwarming, if strange. Nogusa was no badger, even if he did enjoy digging and was possessed of remarkable hearing, and even if his coat was black and white, albeit mixed more thoroughly than Kyrie’s.)

If the club was meeting that day, they would go, typically finding that it had been bubbling for some time before their arrival. Mei and Gabu had agreed that it was best not to be among the first to arrive. It was good to give the animals a respite from wolves now and then. They would then go along with the flow of things…

...or if the club wasn’t meeting, they would enjoy extended periods on their own. The wolves liked to conduct an occasional border patrol, while Mei liked visiting Umenokō or finding a good place for cloudwatching. The exception was when it happened to be Play Day, in which case Mei and Gabu wandered together, saying anything that came into their minds and singing songs. They loved running down hills together and pretending to be the wind, but only did it when they thought they were unobserved.

When evening fell, they came home. That was when Mei and Lala would go walking the hills, or the heath, or even the jungle, discussing large ideas. They were both philosophers, it seemed, and after a year’s distrust had finally formed a bond. Lala had such a large scope of intellect that it boggled Mei. She was such a strange and broad thinker. Mei knew that she and Gabu liked to switch off being hunt leader, but Lala was usually in charge. In much the same way, either Mei or Lala would typically lead their evening conversations—making observations for the other to react to. When Lala led, the conversation was usually wider-ranging and more captivating, so Mei let her lead most of the time. He tried to keep her grounded; to clarify her questions and notions; to give her a gentler perspective. When Mei led, on the other horn, Lala liked to be cunning or coy; to challenge him with innocent queries, or to grin broadly and naughtily and ask, ‘What about this?’ ‘What about that?’

The colors of the setting sun were especially good for this kind of inspiration, Mei found.

They would walk back and ascend the hill, and if they’d reached any especially fulsome conclusions or odd topics, the two would relate them to Gabu and Nogusa. Lala would groom Nogusa’s coat and wish him well, and the child would go off home happily. Then the three would murmur in quiet and unhurried conversation until they went to sleep. If the next day was a hunting day, Mei would slip out quietly. He was good at waking up in time, but if he failed, Lala would nudge him and warn him it was time to go. On other days, it was Lala who would slip from the cave, out of a sort of courtesy. She knew Gabu and Mei liked to wake up together.

When hunting was poor, Lala would take a trip to the forest beyond the next and fend for herself between hunting days, as she had at the start. She seemed to come back a bit transformed from such excursions—a bit headier, a bit wilder, often smelling of blood. Nogusa didn’t like it, but he appreciated the extra share of meat she left behind. During those trips, Gabu and Mei had the cave to themselves. It felt roomy that way, but good.

Sometimes Jenny still came over to help Mei replace the moss bed or make other ‘improvements’ to the cave. She didn’t visit as often as she’d used to, though; there were only so many ideas a squirrel could have, and the novelty of being friends with a goat was long gone.

On hunting days, Mei would sometimes wander the mountain paths, and sometimes he would walk
the brook’s course through the woods until he found a tempting hiding place. But usually he went to the rabbit warren, where he had many friends. There were several holes big enough for him now, their widths obscured by secret clumps of grass, and he would choose one chamber or another to spend his day in, equipped with plenty of grass or blossoms or forbs to eat. He traded stories with the rabbits, chiefly Akiara, but had largely run out of stories to tell. So instead, he told them what he imagined might happen in the future, or might have happened if things had gone differently. What if Himari had relented and become a full-grown wolf? What if Tapper had forgiven Mei? What if Mei had stayed with Kuro and the black goats? Endless stories born from endless possibilities, none of which would ever play out under the sun. The rabbits eagerly offered their own thoughts, and Mei came to know more than their dreams: he came to understand the shapes of their loose ends.

And sometimes, when Lala had posed a particularly interesting question during their evening walks, or offered a particularly thought-provoking declaration, Mei would run it by Akiara and the other rabbits, and see what they made of it.

Rabbits and scheming silver wolves tended to think very differently, at it turned out. That was refreshing, but of course was really no surprise.

Then One Day…

On the 451st day, Mei lay in the Tall Meadow secondary storage chamber, trying not to disturb the collections of crocus, lily and pansy blossoms piled up around him. There were shoots here too, but the blossoms especially appealed to Mei. He nibbled them now and then, having gotten permission to eat modestly … but being several times the size of a rabbit, he was expected to lay in his own provisions for these long subterranean Huntdays. Right now, Mei was hardly hungry. He could feel his meal churning in his third stomach, which often underscored a restless unease in behavior, but fortunately he was able to channel this into conversation. Lala had asked a rather simple question the previous evening—“Why are we here?” And she’d expounded on what she meant, asking whether animals had a purpose and whither they had ultimately come.

“I think I agree with your late friend, Mei. Bepo believed firmly that goats don’t need wolves in any way to be happy. Do you know what? I think it was right.”

“You do? Well.” That perspective was coming to seem reasonable to Mei, regardless of what his grandmother might believe.

“It’s nonsense to think wolves were made for the sake of goats.” Lala licked her lips. “I’m not sure you’ll like the suggestion, but it would make more sense to suggest that goats were made for wolves!”

“As something to eat,” Mei suggested.

“And as sport,” said Lala, surging ahead abruptly, as if she had the scent of one. “As a way of testing our skills. As I said, it makes a certain sense. But do I think it’s true?”

“No?” asked Mei. He rather enjoyed listening to Lala thresh through theological issues.

“I do not,” she confirmed. “For one thing, most of the stories I’ve heard indicate that goats already existed when Leto created the first wolves. For another thing… I don’t know. Something about you and your ilk seems somehow more…primal than mine. As if you have more right to exist. I don’t
know.” She paced hard. “I’m not sure that makes sense.”

“We don’t take the lives of other creatures,” Mei pointed out. “In my view, that gives us… a bit more right to exist.” He didn’t want to upset his friend too much.

“Right. And all you need is plants. But we need you, or other animals like you. It makes sense that you were around first. But then.”

“But then?” asked Mei, looking up eagerly.

“Where did the first goats come from?” asked Lala.

Mei had pondered this, but never gotten very far. “Do we have to have come from anywhere? Isn’t it possible that we’ve always existed?”

Lala clenched her jaws and paced harder; Mei had to dash to keep up. “Do you think time had a beginning, Mei?”

How interesting—they were on to a new topic, though Mei could see how it related to the old. “I honestly don’t know. I wasn’t there. Nobody’s memory stretches back that far.”

“Can you imagine if time didn’t have a beginning?” asked the silver wolf, her ears pointed sharply backward.

Mei tried. It made him dizzy, imagining all those endless generations of goats, backward turnings of the seasons, individuals undying and being unborn. “No, I can’t,” he confessed. “But perhaps that’s just the nature of time. After a certain point, it becomes unimaginable.”

“Mmm,” acknowledged Lala, and curved around a hill’s base, giving the idea some thought.

Mei had related this conversation to Akiara, together with their subsequent speculation on whether there had ever been a ‘first goat’, and whether, like Leto, such an individual might have started out as something simpler. He related Lala’s speculation on what the first living thing might have been, and how it might have found its way into being. Mei had been unable to fully grasp Lala’s idea; it had involved a warping of time in the very early days, and the suggestion that when the world was new, perhaps cause and effect were souped up together. Such an environment, Lala had claimed, might permit a creature to invent itself from nothing. But it was all intense speculation, of course, and Mei wished to know what Akiara thought.

“Yeah, that’s interesting,” she said. He felt a little eddy in the air, which meant Akiara’s ear had twitched: she was struggling with a thought. “I wanna say that’s hogwash. But I can’t totally rule it out. Lala is crazy smart. She might actually have a hold on the big shape of things.”

Mei wasn’t sure he agreed; he was afraid of the idea of the world being as Lala imagined it. And he knew that Lala respected Akiara in turn—not for her intelligence, precisely, but for her ambition. But he had another notion: “Why do you suppose there are both goats and rabbits?” he asked.

“Why?” repeated Akiara.

He nodded. “After all, we eat mostly the same things. Why are we both needed?” He meant it as a funny little conundrum.

Akiara’s ear twitched again. “You think someone made a plan and said, ‘Okay, we need this, we need that’? Rabbits aren’t enough, we need goats too?”
Mei smiled—she seemed to think rabbits had come first. “I’m really not sure. I’m just wondering why certain animals, of certain sizes, exist, but there are gaps. If just anyone can exist, why are there gaps? And if it was all planned, why are there so many different kinds, but not more?”

He heard Akiara chewing on some kind of stem, probably a pansy. She seemed to think for a while. “It’s individual people,” she finally said. “It’s gotta be. Not plans. It’s all individuals.”

“What do you mean?”

“Like Leto. Now, I dunno if Leto exists, or ever did, but someone made wolves happen. Someone made rabbits, and likewise goats. It might not have been a plan, or it might have been a thousand different plans, but it wasn’t all one great plan. Somehow, there’s some way to make new creatures. And it’s a secret, I guess. Or else it’s just really hard and you’ve gotta be super smart, like Lala, to come up with it. Maybe someday she’ll start a new type of creature. I wouldn’t be totally surprised. But it wasn’t just one person who made all the kinds of animals—it’s thousands of people, over the ages, all doing stuff on their own. That’s gotta be it.”

Mei stared, despite the total darkness. “Are you sure? It just seems so impossible—the idea of creating an entirely new type of creature.”

“Heck, you might be onto the trail right now. You may be the only goat in the world with wolves for family. What if the secret is for two animals of different types to have children? I’m not saying you should try. I’m just saying.”

Mei choked on his laughter. He lay in silence a while. That was quite a notion. “Are you suggesting that new species are created when existing ones… interbreed?”

“Who knows?” said Akiara. “It’s just a thought. ‘We’ve gotta come from somewhere, and you’re right. The fact there’s not animals of every size and shape you can imagine must mean it takes something special to make us. I’m guessing it’s the great dreamers and heroes and geniuses of the past who figured out how to do it.”

“And you think Lala and Gabu and I… may be close to that?”

“All I’m saying is, I don’t know any other folks as weird as you.” Mei smiled uneasily: he knew Akiara meant it as a compliment.

They were in an active storage room, so rabbits would show up every now and then to get something, or stow something, and grunt greetings to Mei, whose presence there they accepted. Some were friends, and some even stayed a while to join in the conversation. They knew this was Akiara’s Huntday tradition, and some of them found her conversations with Mei entertaining in themselves, even before the storyteller had had a chance to trim them into shape.

“Hi there, Mei. Aki.”

“Hello, Jim!” said Mei. “Have you been outside today?”

“Just a while ago. Pretty mild. Clouds, light east wind. Birds went quiet over the low meadow, so I came back in just to be safe.”
“Would you like to stay a while?”

“Might as well. What’s on the breeze today?”

Akiara jumped in. “We were just trying to work out where all the different kinds of animals came from.”

“And the broader question,” added Mei: “Why are we here?”

“Hmm. Kind of a big one.”

“I know!” said Akiara. “Any thoughts?”

Rabbits came and rabbits went. Akiara’s sister Rosie… her other sister’s friend and inveterate gossip, Jakka… even the fat blowhard Matsuo, who’d made so much trouble for Gabu, poked in to bloviate for a while before leaving with a mouth full of crocuses. The duo got word of shifting winds from above and had, as always, a vague sense of the passage of day. They knew it was early evening now, though they didn’t have a spark of light to see by. This had been a frightening place once, with its strangers and tight fits and total darkness, but now it felt cozy to Mei. It was his home away from home. Almost without realizing he’d made a decision, now alone with Akiara, he started to talk…

“Akiara… you said something earlier that made me think. ‘You may be onto the trail now,’ you said.”

“The trail of creating new kinds of animals?”

“That’s right. It still seems impossible to me… but that reminded me of an idea I’ve had… that’s been with me for quite a while. It was something I kept to myself in the herd… just a funny, inspiring notion. I had the idea that I was on my way somewhere. Even if I wasn’t traveling… and then especially when I was… I imagined that I was on a broad, winding, up and down path, leading someplace important. I called it, ‘the path to forever’.”

“Wow,” said Akiara. Mei felt her ears wave.

“It’s not a path to a real place,” he went on. “At any rate, I don’t think it is. It’s a path that you move along by thinking of things, or by doing things. It may be a path toward some great idea. I felt like I was moving along the path when I spent time with Gabu, and when I left my herd, and when I decided I would look for friends here in the Emerald Forest, and that I would be honest with them about Gabu. The path to forever… is why I decided it was so important that everyone be treated fairly when it came to the wolves. And when the pups were born… I think that was part of the path to forever, too.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” said the rabbit. “You think anyone gave you this path? Did you come up with the idea on your own?”

“I think I did,” said Mei. “Unless, just possibly, it was something my mother told me. Or even my father. I don’t even remember him.”

“Most goats probably don’t go around thinking they’re on some cosmic path.”

“No,” Mei agreed, chuckling. “I’m sure they don’t.”

“And you decided to keep it a secret, all this time? Am I the first one you’re telling?”
“I’ve mentioned it to Gabu a couple of times,” Mei admitted. “But as it’s so undefined a notion, we never discussed it for long.”

“I think it’s really cool,” said Akiara. “I’m really honored you told me. I want to try to figure out what this path’s all about. Maybe I’m on one too. Maybe everyone is, and they just don’t know it.”

Mei laughed. “I’m not sure that even means anything. But if you’d like to try to puzzle it out with me, I’d be delighted.” He treated himself to a lily—this was a special occasion, after all.

“So is it an endless path?” Akiara asked. “Like, literally endless? Or does it just go on for a long, long way and then actually… reach someplace?”

“I’ve wondered that myself,” Mei admitted, a little humble. “But the truth is, I don’t—”

The earth rumbled. The ceiling rumbled. There were shouts from the main passage, muffled shouts from above. It all happened so fast. There was a loud scraping, and clods of earth landed on Mei’s muzzle.

“Fuck!” shouted Akiara. “Clear! Clear out!” She jumped over Mei—he felt her paws bounce off his rump—and dashed for the exit.

The passage collapsed on her. Then the ceiling fell in. Evening light was a sudden shock, with dirt everywhere, and also…

The scent of wolves. The beautiful, familiar scent of wolves.

He struggled and crawled up through the dirt—as if swimming across the brook, as if scaling a scree-covered mountain. His horns broke free, then his face. “Cut them off!” he heard, and it was Lala’s voice. Lala the hunter. Lala, whose voice he had only ever heard once or twice on a Hunting Day.

Akiara burst from a pile of loose dirt beside him. “Fuck,” she repeated. “What’s the buzz?”

Mei leapt from the dirt, but felt a weight land on his back, suddenly, slamming him down. No, no, no! He bucked and freed one back hoof for a kick, and his kick sent the weight flying, and he heard little Nogusa cry “Whoof!” Mei sprinted in a random direction.

“Damn it,” swore Akiara, and he saw her dash off the opposite way. Flashing, fur-covered shapes passed each other nearby, switching all too quickly, as if they couldn’t decide which way to run. One was silver, one brown. Mei ran for the forest, but the trees were too distant. He could hear rabbits braying and screaming in the distance; he could hear the thumping of heavy paws on the earth. He could hear little Nogusa’s voice far behind him.

He knew he was being chased. He didn’t know who was chasing him.

Then came Lala’s voice, strident and violent. “Do it, Gabu, do it!! Remember what it’s for!” And in the last moment her voice went muffled, and Mei knew she was turning away.

“What’s the buzz!” yelled Lala. Drat—why couldn’t she have thought of a better wording? Abstractions were so hard to come up with in blood’s heat. “Remember what it’s for!” she added,
unable at the moment even to remember that herself. Gabu had told her to keep him on track, to lash him when he quailed. He was weak inside; she was strong. He knew that, and he knew she knew it. He needed her to enforce his will, his beautiful weak will, which in this case was really Mei’s will. Why had they switched off at the last moment? Lala should be chasing Mei. She would actually have the fortitude to catch Mei, to kill him if she could. She couldn’t count on Gabu to do it. Certainly, there was a place in Lala, a broad stripe of her heart, that ached from the idea of losing Mei, from the possibility this would be the last day she would ever see her small white packmate, her fellow philosopher, her friend. But it was Mei who wanted it this way. She remembered that deeply, frequently, intuitively. It was Mei who wanted it this way. Mei wanted to be hunted like any other animal. He had his reasons, and he’d had several chances to change the arrangement, to back down. He never had. Lala respected that. She respected Mei too much not to kill him.

But for some reason, she and Gabu had impulsively paused in their tracks, exchanged a brief glance and switched courses, and now Gabu was chasing Mei while Lala was chasing the rabbit. Damn. If Gabu caught Mei and didn’t kill him…

Well, she didn’t know what to hope for, if she was being honest. Really, she should put her whole attention into this chase. A plain brown rabbit, downwind. Drat. Plain and brown. Nothing special. Please, thought Lala. The rabbit dove for a hole, but Lala swiped at the entrance and the creature leapt instinctively. Lala blocked the hole and the rabbit bounded away. The chase was back on.

Female. The plain brown rabbit was female, she could tell. Damn it, don’t be Akiara, she thought. Please don’t. Damn you, Akiara, for not having any identifying features to distinguish you from any other plebeian brown rabbit! You have a special soul, confound it—you should look beautiful! At the very least, you should have been born with a white spot on your forehead, or on the tip of your tail—something to identify you as the future crone you are, as the brilliant storyteller, as the brave soul willing to open a friendship with wolves when no one else was. Why do you have to look exactly like so many others, and terrify me whenever I’m chasing a plain brown rabbit who happens to be downwind? A little terror in one’s life is healthy… but I really wish…

The rabbit doe cut left suddenly and dashed for another tunnel entrance. But she telegraphed her move. Lala was wise, and her reflexes were wiser. She leapt a moment before. Her front paw slammed the rabbit out of midair. She flailed on the ground, and as Lala leapt in and her teeth went for the throat, she got a whiff of that scent and knew, and wanted to swear in anger, and her fur stood on end and her shoulders went tight and it was only through force of a tempered will, a rock-hard lifetime of discipline, that she crushed her jaws shut on the rabbit, which was already flipping over to escape, and shook it, hard, and twisted her jaws, and crushed the life out of it.

There were screams in the background. Thumping. Running. The sky was dark. There were clouds overhead.

Lala dropped the remnants of Akiara and sat back, stunned.

She had never been here before. Through all of Lala’s machinations and intrigue and plotting, she had never before killed a friend. Once, long ago, she had told herself she could do it if she had to.

Now, she knew. But pride was a long way down, buried under at least half a dozen other emotions.

Swearing silently to the stars, Lala tore skin from the lapine body, tore flesh, buried her nose in viscera. She pulled out organs, suppressing her sobs, nourishing her anger, her sorrow. She chewed with rage, feeling her throat bob. She swallowed. The blood, the juices—they were wonderful. It was terrible how wonderful they were.

Damn it. She would savor this meal. This was the most…
This was the most expensive meal Lala had ever eaten, and probably the most expensive she would ever eat.

She let herself cry, stopping just short of howling to the sky. No need to alarm Nogusa. She looked around. No one was near. Lala was alone near the edge of Tall Meadow. Alone with what was left of a very special friend.

_Gabu_, she said to herself. _This is on you. If I need consoling tonight, it’s on you. I did this because of your ideals._

Her jaws trembling, Lala took her time, tearing loose chunk after chunk of delicious rabbit.

She enjoyed her meal.

---

Mei leapt a furrow where Tall Meadow met the heath. He stumbled on his landing; now he needed a moment to gather his hooves and sprint on. But a great, mighty weight struck his side and he went flying. Flailing, his legs landed in every direction. _This is it_, a voice in his head said, and nothing more. Mei didn’t even try to regather himself. He just lay there and lifted his head, to see…

A great brown shaggy leg framed his vision on either side. Gabu stood over him, so much emotion on his face Mei couldn’t tangle it out. No one else was near, so far as he could tell. They’d run from the meadow away from the warren, out of sight. Nogusa had gone chasing other rabbits, but no one else had come this way. There were open strips cutting through the sheet of blue, shifting clouds, far overhead.

“Well,” whimpered Mei.

“Mei,” whimpered Gabu.

Mei lay sprawled, afraid even to move his legs to right himself, to try and escape. Any movement could do it. Any movement could snap the twig in Gabu’s brain, make him decide to strike. Mei had told him, over a year ago, to work himself around to the idea he might kill Mei, one of these days. He knew it was a possibility. He’d thought an underground chamber at the warren would be safe, but he knew the wolves had been honing their digging skills with help from Kyrie. This wasn’t a complete shock.

They looked at each other for a long time.

The length of Gabu’s snout was really quite remarkable. It lent soulfulness to his expression. Mei didn’t quite comprehend why having a long snout would add to the profundity of one’s soul, but lying here, at this funny angle, it was suddenly oddly clear that it did. Wolves were deep creatures, Mei understood. And this one in particular… this one was his friend. His truest friend. His best friend.

“Mei,” said Gabu. “I’m not going to eat you.”

Mei lay still. He let his muscles relax, but his mind was still racing. Did he dare say any of the things he wanted to say?
“I know you wanted me to eat you if I ever caught you, on the hunt,” said Gabu. “And I… I promised I would. But… here we are. And I’m not going to. I’m breaking my promise. So.” He sniffled. “You can be mad at me if you want.”

Should Mei be mad? Was he mad?

Did he want to live?

Somehow, no question in the world seemed to have a clear answer right now.

It seemed like half an hour had passed, but the clouds overhead had barely moved.

Mei straightened his legs. He cleared his throat. Slowly, he got to his hooves.

“Gabu,” he said.

“Mm?” said the wolf, tilting his head slightly.

“I forgive you. For breaking your promise.”

The wolf’s ears sagged in what might have been relief. “Oh,” he said.

They stayed silent, motionless, for another half an eternity.

“We can’t go back,” said Mei.

“Back…?”

Mei nodded toward the distant green hills. “To the lair.” He nodded toward the distant end of the woods, where the brook ran out. “To the club. It was all… it was all founded on a promise. And now…”

“And now I’ve broken the promise,” said Gabu.

“But I forgive you,” repeated Mei.

The two animals turned slowly toward the darkening meadow. A few rabbits were vaguely visible in the distance, ears raised high. There was no sign of Nogusa, or Akiara, or Lala.

“We could go back anyway,” said Gabu. “And apologize.”

Mei nodded, thinking this over. “Or I could slip away. I could go and hide somewhere. We could tell everyone that I got away at the last moment.”

Gabu nodded twice.

Mei thought for a long time. He tried to envision his pathway to forever. Did it still exist? Had it been crumbled to dust at the very moment the wolf had knocked him down onto the soft furrow between meadow and heath?

“I want to say goodbye to Lala,” said Gabu. His voice was sad, deeply sad. Mei understood that Gabu understood.

“You can find her secretly, when no one is watching,” he said. “You can ask her if she wants to come with us, if you want to.”
Gabu gulped and nodded.

They found a place under the heath where Mei could stay for now. He lay there quietly, feeling the cooling earth under his belly, feeling the prickle of the plants. Gabu nosed him once, as if tucking him in, and strode off, looking for his mate and child.

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**Goodbye**

Gabu felt each pawstep, fore and hind, as a distraction. He kept asking himself, in the sort of panic that keeps a real answer from forming, *What do I want?* Do I want a family? Do I want my best friend? Do I want an honest life? Do I want a land full of animal friends, even if the most important one is gone?

He hadn’t known whether he could eat Mei until he’d been tested. It had been like in the mountains, during the snowstorm. He’d made himself believe he could do it. He’d told Mei he would do it, on principle. But when the horrible moment finally came, it hadn’t even been close.

Gabu would never eat Mei. He knew that much about himself. He just didn’t seem to know anything else.

He howled to the sky. Plaintively. Long. He sat on the green grass between the woods and the hills, and he howled, and Lala came to him.

She was stinking of blood—covered in it—and her expression was tight and grim, her eyes fi—oh no. Oh, no. Gabu could smell something beyond the delicious tang of rabbit innards. He could smell the familiar scent of…

…Of Akiara. His stomach clenched. Another friend dead.

Little Nogusa trailed behind. He looked up at Gabu mournfully, somehow sensing the sadness of the moment.

Gabu moved to stand up, then abruptly sat again, as if caving in. As if giving in to Lala in some dominance struggle. She stared at him sharply.

“I don’t smell blood,” she observed. On him, she meant. There was still blood caked in her own fur. “Did he get away?”

Gabu sat still for a while. Then he shook his head.

Lala drew a slow breath. “Is Mei alive?”

Gabu swallowed. “I let him go.”

There was a pause. “I see,” said Lala carefully.

“We’re going to leave,” said Gabu, surprised at how easily the words came.

“Leave,” said Lala.

“Because we broke our promise to the animals. Because *I* did. Because I wasn’t strong enough.”
Lala stood tall, powerful, silver. “I see!”

“You can come, if you like.” He looked to Nogusa. “You, too, I think. I don’t think Mei would mind.”

Lala sat back, staring. She seemed… amazingly, she seemed afraid. Of all the reactions Gabu had expected, he hadn’t foreseen that. What was she afraid of? Making a mistake?

“Well, Gabu. So you’ve decided that because of this one failing… this one mistake… you’re going to abandon everything we’ve built here?”

Nogusa looked terrified, but said nothing.

Gabu nodded slowly. “I have to. We have to pretend I killed Mei, and left in shame. Or… well, in any case, he can’t be around here any more. It wouldn’t be honest. And I think the rabbits might know, anyway. And they might tell everyone. And even if they didn’t, I know Mei would.”

He is essentially eaten,” said Lala slowly, comprehending piece by piece. “And so, he must go.”

“And if he leaves, I have to leave too,” said Gabu. He heard an apology in his voice, and didn’t regret it.

“I see,” said Lala.

“Please don’t go,” said Nogusa.

Gabu looked at his son, his one remaining child, and closed his eyes. He sniffled. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“And I?” asked Lala, slowly and carefully. “What would you like me to do?”

“It’s up to you. Stay if you want. Come with us if you want. I don’t… I don’t have the right to control your life.”

Lala swallowed, for once, in trepidation. She stared off into the distance, thinking.

Gabu sat there and let her think. The setting sun lit up the clouds in the west. It felt almost like the sun was rising, not setting. Somehow it felt like both at once.

Lala took a deep breath and sat forward, ears and eyes on Gabu, on her mate. “Maybe we’ll meet again someday,” she suggested.

A thorn pierced Gabu’s heart, and he sniffed. “Maybe,” he managed.

Nogusa leapt onto him and he rose, swinging his son with a father’s rhythm and finally sloughing him in order to give him a strong, heartfelt hug. Gabu rose to his hind legs and clutched his child like nothing else. It was one of the longest, most needful moments, but it ended, and Gabu let his grasp slip away, and Nogusa plopped to the ground. So did Gabu, feeling bare.

“Goodbye, Daddy.”

“Goodbye, son. I’m sorry.”

Lala stepped forward and nudged his snout with her own. “Don’t apologize,” she said. She closed her eyes and rubbed his jaw with her own. Gabu stepped forward into it. They kissed, and nuzzled, and sat back and regarded each other.
“It’s okay if you failed,” said Lala. “So long as you keep working hard… tomorrow, and the day after that…”

Gabu wailed. She was echoing her advice to him from long ago… advice that he’d never really been sure she meant.

She smiled, looking straight at him. “You’re an incredible wolf, Gabu. Of all the wolves from Baku Baku, I’d think I’d rate you…” She closed her eyes for a moment to think, then opened them. “…number one in bravery.”

Gabu’s eyes went wide. Braver even than Bari? Braver than Giro?

“I know you may not feel brave,” she went on. “You weren’t brave enough to jump that gap, back when we were cubs, and you weren’t brave enough to kill your best friend just now. But Gabu. Just being brave enough to leave!” She touched her nose to him once more. “Other wolves live lives that never even approach yours.” She licked his jawline and cheek. “Your failures are braver than their greatest triumphs.” She laughed and shook her head. “I love that about you.”

“I love you, Lala,” Gabu said.

“Yes,” she agreed. And she watched him.

Gabu got up. “Somewhere off in warmer lands, our son and daughter are changing the world,” he reminded her.

“And you changed the world right here,” she reminded him back. “You made something impossible happen here, Gabu. I intend to stay… and foster it.” She smiled, tilting her gaze back. “I’ll be the most important wolf in the world. You’ve opened my eyes to how rewarding cross-species friendships can be. It’s an entire trove of possibilities I never imagined. That’s how great a wolf you are, Gabu. I’m proud I picked you out early.”

“You should be proud, Lala.”

“I am. Of you. Now go. Tell Mei I’ll miss him very much.”

“Tell him bye from me,” said Nogusa sadly.

“I will. Goodbye!”

Lala turned around and walked off, her tail waving in the diminishing light. Nogusa lingered a little longer, but finally tore his gaze away from his father and hurried off after her. Gabu watched them go until they were both out of sight.

Then he turned and walked away from the Emerald Forest.

And then…

The sun was rising. Mei felt refreshed from sleep, and Gabu’s lively steps beside him indicated that he felt the same. They were walking toward the sunrise, into the east, and maybe just a little bit
Neither of them had ever been this way before. After they cleared the first forest, neither of them knew what to expect.

“Well,” said Mei, breaking a long silence.

“Well!” said Gabu, clearly excited.

“That was something,” said Mei. He wasn’t sure if Gabu would realize that by ‘that’, he didn’t just mean the previous day’s events. He meant the events of the last five seasons—their entire time in the Emerald Forest.

“It was certainly something,” Gabu agreed. Of course he understood. Mei could tell from his tone of voice.

“We made a lot of friends,” said Mei.

“We did!” said Gabu. “Even though it wasn’t easy. And I had children!”

“You did!” agreed Mei. “And they were adorable.”

Gabu paced more wistfully for a while, his wagging tail falling still. “They were, weren’t they?”

Mei nodded. “We went through a lot together. And a few things apart.”

“That’s true,” said the wolf.

They walked on, through broad prairies, toward a daunting ridge of rocks in the far distance, toward the unknown.

“What do you suppose we’ll do next?” asked Mei.

“I guess the next place we go, we’ll have to try something else!” said Gabu.

Mei laughed merrily. “That’s a perfect idea, Gabu. We’ll try something else.”

The wolf laughed too, his ears perked. “I was rather proud of it, myself!”

The goat smiled to his friend. The sun rose. The earth was alive with bustling creatures, all interconnected in ways subtle and chaotic and grand.

We may never know what the monkeys were up to.

**END OF PART III**

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Here ends my exploration of the world of Arashi no Yoru Ni, which I began almost a
year ago. As ever, it feels something like the closing of a chapter of my life. But only something like it.

Are the creative urges satisfied that motivated me to begin this story last summer, and to extend it into a novella, and then a novel? I don’t honestly know. I feel like the characters in this story, both adopted and original, have more life left in them. It would be wonderful to spend time with them, if they were real. But is there really more story worth telling?

This isn’t quite the end: I’ll create either an epilogue or a bonus chapter for next Monday. I have some ideas but I’m not sure what I’ll go with yet. So there will be one last visit to this setting, which is good.

Poor Akiara! It doesn’t escape me that Gabu detected her death from Lala’s scent, but that neither he nor Lala spoke about it. (I do think he’ll tell Mei, though.) Akiara wanted to be a crone to her people someday, but half expected not to make it to the proper age. It turns out she was exactly right to doubt.

Though I didn’t plan it, Akiara turned out to be in the vein of another character of mine, Peach Spark—the titular character of my My Little Pony fan novel The Pony Who Lived Upstairs. If you liked Akiara, you’ll probably like Peach. I suspect some of my readers would enjoy that novel, which is set in New Jersey and New York, even if they aren’t familiar with the pony fandom.

The experience of writing this has taught me a bit as each project should. I started out with chapters even shorter than my previous works, and as always, they got longer as time went on. But it made a bit more sense for them to do so here, as the setting and cast got larger and grander. And then, at the end… it all closed up like a paper fan with a sunset on it. Mei and Gabu are back, more or less, where they started.

It was a different experience writing for a small fandom of a work that’s far from fresh. I didn’t get a lot of readers. But I had many very devoted readers who were kind enough to leave lots of comments, and two or three of these may lead to lasting friendships. We’ll see. Another surprising development was that most of my comments came from non-American readers, though ff.net’s traffic stats show the majority of my views coming from America. I can’t claim to know why that is, but it’s interesting.

I’m aware that (except for the most recent one), the illustrations have vanished--that’s because I made the mistake of hotlinking from Facebook Albums, which turns out to be unreliable over time. I’ll go about fixing that soon; the illustrations will be restored, and there may be one or two more coming. I’ll list them in the final Author’s Note.

I began Beyond the Storm after eating copious sushi (with chopsticks, though I’m no great shakes with chopsticks) at an East Asian buffet and feeling a bit transported. Watching the movie and then the series made me feel… special, somehow. Like the message or the story were strikingly pure. I may have sullied that purity, but I just felt like there were ideas to explore in the tale of natural enemies united in true friendship.

I hope you liked it. Even if you haven’t left any comments thus far, please leave a comment now and tell me what you thought. What made you read to the end? Did you have a favorite part? How do you think you might have steered the story?

Thanks very much for reading.
—Ringcaat
Five Years Later

Mei was at the Chasm when he finally saw it.

He hadn’t come to gawk at the Chasm, of course. No one had expected the new creatures to be there so soon, in spite of the wild and rampant rumors from Tobiko, pieced together from numerous birds winging eastward as fast as their wings would take them. Something strange and fearsome was clearly developing… but still, the Chasm was the Chasm, and huge gray creatures surely couldn’t cross it in less than a day at the very least. So Mei hadn’t gone to witness whatever was happening—he’d just visited the wolves to be sociable, as he often did. And to visit Gabu, of course. That was the one constant in both their lives that neither would give up—they had to spend time regularly together, or they wouldn’t be happy.

He’d approached the Citadel gaily with a daisy in his tail and his scarf’s knot turned up at an angle to signal that he was expecting safe passage. Of course, everyone knew who he was, but formalities were formalities! Gabu had to arrange Mei’s visits in advance to make sure he wouldn’t be attacked, but once he was there, they were free to roam Sukima Wolf territory as much as they liked. True, it was riskier than Gabu coming to visit, since the worst that could come from that was a few frightened goats… and if they recognized his friendly yellow scarf—one of many they’d made from cloth salvaged from the Citadel—they’d know he wasn’t there to hunt. Still, it was worth it. For one thing, Mei enjoyed the company of the some of the other wolves, who smiled brightly to see him. For another thing, both animals relished their freedom, and didn’t relish the idea that only one of their homes was open to the other.

Life was good, by and large. The goats of Sougen Keep were more spirited than those Mei had grown up with, leaping from rock to rock at the edge of the scraggly woods and sometimes even laying rock courses for sport. They were of his own kind and had a healthy fear of wolves, but it
hadn’t been all that monumentally difficult to convince them that individual wolves could be creatures of honor—to be trusted for a day, if not forever. Gabu’s winning charm had certainly helped! It had been harder for Gabu to convince his own new people, the Sukima wolves, to let Mei walk among them peacefully now and then. But that had laid the groundwork for letting other goats visit and friendships form. It had been difficult, of course, because the wolves preyed on the goats… but Mei and Gabu had experience attacking that barrier now. They’d spent a year softening up their respective clans, strewing metaphorical flowers across the way, followed by another year firming up the rules and fomenting good feelings. And now?

Well, it wasn’t exactly a land at peace, but the two groups now enjoyed relations about as good as one could hope for natural enemies. And last year, a young trio of two goats and a wolf had struck out on their own together, unwilling to live with the tension of never knowing when the goats might meet their fate at the wolves’ claws. Mei chose to view that as a victory. He wondered where the trio would end up, and whether their story might be anything like his and Gabu’s own.

Tsume no longer came out this way, but his children, Toshi and Tobiko, were invaluable for passing news along. Hatsu and Haburo’s passion for delivering news and being helpful had been the prime inspiration for Tsume’s children, in fact…and when Toshi and Tobiko had declared their intention to keep the various groups of larger animals in touch, it had warmed the warblers’ hearts to an extent Mei suspected they hadn’t been ever since Hatsu had learned she was barren. In this way, the duo were able to pass on their values after all.

Mei and Gabu had wandered past the Chasm’s lip just for the weight of it, as Mei liked to put it. He liked glimpsing gravity’s pull in action; fathoming the depths to which it would topple him if he were reckless enough. For his part, Gabu said he just liked the view… which was another way of putting it, really.

But they hadn’t been planning to stroll by the Chasm for their whole day together. For them, it was just one step on a merry journey, meant to give them a sense of distance and height and place…and of course, both animals were curious about these strange rumors the birds had brought. Mei wondered whether maybe, if he squinted just right, he might be able to see what they’d been talking about on the other side. Gabu stood with him on the lip, and the two of them peered together.

Sure enough, he saw a herd of strange, gleaming beasts… and oh! As Mei watched, fire leapt from the far brink of the chasm! Stalks of it, one, two, three—and then the shining behemoths rose, stripes gleaming white against dull gray in the midday sun, and Mei’s stomach caught in his throat. He stood, staring, then stumbled back, afraid of whatever he was seeing. “Gabuu…” he moaned.

“I see it, Mei,” his friend’s troubled voice replied. “Maybe we’d better get out of here!”

But curiosity kept Mei from fleeing altogether. He backed away from the lip, but kept watching as, impossibly, those silver creatures, bigger than the largest beasts Mei had ever heard of, actually flew! They made sounds as they bridged the chasm, buzzing like tremendous, single-minded cicadas. Gabu turned to bolt, but he looked back at Mei, unable to leave him behind.

Mei rose to his hind legs, lifted his forelegs and stared at these bizarre things as if they were the sun—as if they held the sun’s secrets. Path to forever, his mind chanted, over and over. You could die! countered another voice.

“Oh, Mei,” urged Gabu. “What do you think they are?” His eyes were as white and round as goose eggs.

“Do you remember the barn where we met?” Mei whispered. The huge thing was now nearly overhead.
“Mei! How could I forget?”

“Someone had to build that barn, long ago. I think these are the same creatures who built it. They’ve come back.”

Gabu gasped. “After all this time?”

Mei backed up further. He could hear titmice shouting in the sky, together with various other birds’ alarm calls. There was a wolf howl from back at the Citadel, then another. Then it was a distant chorus, commingled with shouting. The unworldly beast was directly above him now, and Mei wondered whether he had anything to fear.

The creature stopped. Mei could hear its searing, distant cry, and almost convinced himself he could smell flame coming from its innards. It started to come down toward them. Turn and run, he told himself. But all he did was pace back a few more steps and watch, his neck craned.

“What is it, Mei? Has it spotted us?”

“I think it’s spotted us, Gabu,” Mei murmured.

An orifice started to open in the thing’s belly—or whatever part was downmost—as it descended, and now Mei could see the white and blue flames, dancing in the sunlight. “Gabu?”

Gabu was some distance behind him now, unwilling to leave him. “Mei?”

Mei spoke fervently, his eyes not leaving the tremendous gleaming creature. “In case this is the end, Gabu… I have no regrets for a life spent in your—”

A long, sharp, impossibly quick object shot from the opening and pierced straight into Gabu. The wolf cried pitifully, rose to his hind feet, wobbled, and fell over.

“GABU!”

Now Mei ran, but his instincts had been remade from years of happiness with Gabu, and instead of fleeing for his life, he ran to his friend. Tears were already forming as he nudged the soft flesh, already going lax under his muzzle’s touch, losing definition. Since he knew they both might die at any moment, Mei pushed himself onto Gabu’s body and thrust the bridge of his face into him and embraced him; he buried himself in wolf-flesh. He then thought of pulling out the giant quill, in case it wasn’t too late… but almost in the same moment, he knew he lacked the power to fight this creature. What it wanted to impale them with, it would impale them with. There was nothing Mei could do but savor what he had before it was pulled away.

“Gab-u-uu-uu!” he wept, hugging as hard as he could. There was still a heartbeat, but it was fading. Mei sobbed once more and, with an effort, pulled himself away from the mange and fur that defined his most precious relationship. The sun was diminished; Mei stood in a profound shadow. He looked up at the great flying creature that descended toward him. It had no wings, oddly, but it blasted fire from its lower skirt, as if to direct itself through air. Savage, terrible appendages whipped noisily around from its head, if it even had a head; there were four, and they must have been the source of the insectlike sound. And in its belly… bizarrely… an orifice had opened. It must have been the source of the quill, Mei realized. And then something doubly bizarre occurred.

A figure appeared from within the beast’s belly. It was no half-eaten corpse, nor was it a whelp. It was a healthy being, strangely colored and unlike anything Mei knew. He couldn’t see it clearly, with the mother beast rocking and the wind whipping and tears streaming from his eyes, but he could hear its voice—precisely crafted and just a bit higher in pitch than his own. It wasn’t a
tremendous surprise to Mei that he couldn’t understand a single word it said.

The great thing whipped its way further down, and Mei could smell the guiding flames at its foot. It was no longer descending directly toward him, but just to the side. The creature within was black on top, lighter below, taupe and dark blue beneath that. It clutched a branch or rib of some kind within, keeping it from falling through the hole. The image made little sense even as it came clear.

Mei couldn’t help himself. With his haunch still brushing Gabu’s shank, he shouted to the terrible thing-within-a-thing. “If you’re going to kill me, kill me now!”

But amazingly, the voice came clear, and Mei understood it. “The wolf is alive,” it shouted through the wind. “Your companion will be fine—we just shot it with a tranquilizer. We’re not going to hurt you.”

Mei couldn’t make sense of it all. How did this half-eaten creature have the nerve to address him like this? Wasn’t it afraid for its own safety? “What did you do to Gabu?!” he demanded.

“We only wanted to make sure you were safe,” the voice returned. “We were afraid the wolf was going to attack you. It will wake up in a few hours, and be just fine. I’m sorry that we scared you. I realize this must be terrifying.”

It was. But reassurance that one wasn’t alone in one’s feelings went a long way. Mei pressed his leg against Gabu’s leg and could vaguely feel the warmth of his blood, still circulating. He dared to hope it was true. “What do you want from me? What are you?”

Strangely, the creature answered in the plural. “We’re human beings. We’re surveyors and rescue workers, but our primary mission is outreach. Will you stay and talk? I’ll come down.”

Mei trembled but held fast. This was beyond his imagination, but there was only one answer. “Yes, I’ll stay. I want to understand.”

And with that, the orifice in the great creature’s belly swung shut, and the entire massive abomination settled gently to the earth, crushing only a few shrubs. Dust settled; the fires died and the whirring appendages became still. Mei huddled with Gabu, unwilling to cease contact with him. As long as he could feel Gabu’s pulse, there was hope.

Another opening appeared in the silver creature’s side, and suddenly Mei wondered—was it a creature at all? Could it be… a building? A flying building, like the abandoned barns and ruins scattered erratically over certain parts of the landscape?

Could this be what buildings were meant to look like?

The small creature came out, and Mei was surprised to find it was actually larger than he was. Not by all that much; he guessed that Gabu probably outweighed it. The black dome on its head was apparently hair, raining down on all sides to an equal length. The creature was covered in what looked like multiple hides deformed with strange growths, but seemed healthy and mostly comfortable, if not at ease.

Mei refused to listen to his instincts, which told him to run. He stayed in place. The creature spoke to him again, this time in a quieter tone.

“Again, we’re terribly sorry for making you uncomfortable. This wolf is your friend—is that correct?”

Mei didn’t know what to think. “Yes! He’s the most precious thing in the world to me.”
The creature frowned. “I’m so sorry. Again—he’ll be fine. He’s just drugged. Just sleeping for
now. Most goats aren’t friendly with wolves, as far as we know. We were afraid he would eat you,
and you were so close to… well.” The strange creature, which stood on its hind limbs, put a
forelimb behind itself, and Mei recognized humility. He also recognized from its voice that the
creature was female. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Seiryu Fujimori. I’m a
Communications Specialist, Rank 3, with the Anapocalyptic Subcontinent Animal Reclamation
Initiative.”

So many concepts that Mei had no way to make sense of. But this creature held his life in her
grasp. “My name is Mei. This is Gabu.”

The alien thing nodded. “You can call me Seiryu. Mei… I know you must be confused, and
frightened. But I hope I can convince you that it’s good that we found you. My people… we have a
lot to offer. We can improve your lives, if you’ll let us.”

How amazing. Could this claim be believed? “What do you mean?”

“How would you like to stop aging?” asked the stranger. “We can make it so that you never grow old.
At least, there’s a good chance we can.” She smiled unsurely. “If you were a mountain goat, I
could promise—we don’t have the technique finalized for meadow goats yet. But I expect we’ll
have it soon. We can cure your diseases, if you have any. We can offer you security. Food. Water.
Shelter. Health. We don’t ask anything for those basic essentials. And if you’re able to find work
with us, we can give you more. So much more.”

Mei could feel his tail shaking wildly. “I’m afraid you’ve caught me off guard. I’m terribly baffled
—I don’t know what to say.” It almost felt like he was talking outside of his own volition.

“Your friend can come with us too, of course. We do have the aging problem solved for gray
wolves. And anyone else you know is welcome, too. We want to give everyone the chance to come
with us, back to… to what we call civilization. We would have come sooner, but… we didn’t know
the animals in this part of the world were sapient. Until four years ago, we had no idea.”

“What does that mean—sapient?”

“It means that you’re like us.” The creature put one of her forepaws over her chest. “You can
communicate with us on our own level. You’re fit to be part of what we’ve built. And of course, it
means that you’re precious. You’re persons. Every person offers tremendous value to society. The
fact that so many of you have been living and dying out here in the wilderness, with no idea of
what’s available… well, it’s very sad.”

“You said you can keep us healthy? Stop us from getting older?”

“We can do that and more, though we’re still learning the biology of the population out here,
species by species. We can conduct surgery to remove harmful tumors, or to change some things
about you. We can improve your eyesight and sleeping patterns. We can improve your fertility. If
you don’t like being covered in hair, we can remove it. Or we can make it grow thicker.”

“You know how to do so much. How? How do you know so much?” asked Mei, boggled.

“Time and systemics,” said the alien. “We’ve had time to learn, time to pass on our knowledge and
build from it. And systemics for organizing knowledge, and telling good knowledge from bad. For
working out what has to be learned. We’ve put a lot of effort into learning as much as we can. And
now we’re trying to save everyone. All the animals out here willing to be saved.”
“Saved? Are we in danger?”

The alien shook her head. “Only from the ordinary dangers of life. But we can save you from those. You can live in so much more comfort, and happiness, than the life you know. It’s really only a gift, an offer to let you join us… but I can’t help but thinking of it as a rescue mission.”

Mei looked at Gabu, whose chest was rising and falling evenly. He was alive. He really was going to wake up, and the two of them could…

Mei raised his hindquarters and stood firm. “I’m not making any decisions until Gabu wakes up.”

The creature looked uncomfortable. “All right. Is it all right if we bring him on board?” She pointed to the huge flying thing, be it creature or building.

“Inside there? Is it safe?”

“Believe me, it’s safer than it is out here.”

“Is it alive?”

“The skycraft isn’t alive, no. It’s a contraption built for carrying large groups of people long distances. We won’t make it fly without your permission. I just want to look you both over. If you decide not to come with us, at least we can make sure you’re in good health.”

Mei sighed. “You promise you won’t take us anywhere without our consent?”

“Cross my heart. I promise. We’ll send out teams to canvas the area. The captain may expel you if there’s an emergency, but we won’t lift off without warning.”

Mei nodded. “All right. I’ll go with you. But I won’t leave Gabu.”

“Understood.” The alien pulled something down along her forelimb and, after a moment, spoke into it. Mei’s head swam—how many layers down did these creatures go? But after a moment, he realized that she was using some power to speak to one of her fellows who was still inside the silver behemoth. He didn’t understand the words. But after a few exchanges, more creatures like the one before them hurried out from the base of the large flying thing, carrying a long, stiff bed. They went to Gabu as Mei skittered back, watching them prod him, feel him, place things against the wolf. Then they lifted him onto the bed and carried him back toward the silver building.

“He’s in good hands,” said the creature called Seiryu. “Come this way, Mei.”

Mei had no choice. He followed.

“Name?” asked the human being sitting on the low stool, artificial stick in his hand, artificial flat object in his lap. This creature was brown-haired, with slightly lighter skin than Seiryu’s. Mei had figured out that the heads and forepaws, called ‘hands’, of these creatures were where their real skin shone through; the rest were coverings to serve who knew what purpose.

“Mei,” said Mei.

“Is that your full name?”
“I’m afraid I have no idea what you mean. Is there some other secret name you’re after?”

“No, that’s all right,” said the brown-haired human. He scratched his stick on the surface of the… plank, or whatever it was in his lap. “You’ll need to choose a surname in order to enter society. It’s up to you, really. It could be based on occupation, or any special interests you may have, or on your place of origin. Or you could simply take a name based on your strain or species, such as Mei Whitegoat.”

That didn’t sound so bad. “I suppose I could be called Mei Whitegoat. But why do I need a second name?”

“There may be another Mei. It’s a short name, and probably common. You need a unique identifier. You may need a middle name as well.”

“Whitegoat is fine. Can I think about a middle name later?”

“Certainly. Place of birth?”

Mei took a breath. “Sawa Sawa Mountain.”

“I’ve heard that before… one moment.” The man scratched his object again, changed positions and did more scratching. Apparently there was a whole world inside that flat thing, or… or his mind worked very differently from Mei’s. It was all very disorienting, but Mei had agreed to travel with them for a while, at least. For Gabu’s sake. Gabu had woken up and reacted with amazement to the offers these creatures made. They’d told him they could feed him on artificial meat—he’d never have to kill another creature for the rest of his life. “Well, we have to go with them!” he’d told Mei, as if it were obvious.

Really, in a way, it was. Mei wasn’t sure whether this was a place along his path to forever, or whether it was an unexpected and sharp departure from the path… but he couldn’t deny Gabu the chance to escape his greatest burden. Even if it was only a small chance, and the likelihood was that these ‘humans’ were lying to them… it was still a chance worth taking. They couldn’t let them leave, and wonder forever what might have been…

“All right. Sawa Sawa… also known as Pleasant Mountain? Approximately seventy horizon-lengths west of northwest from here?”

That seemed reasonable, even if it shocked Mei to hear it. “I… yes, I think so. That’s right.”

“We’re headed that way soon. How long were you in residence at Sawa Sawa Mountain?”

Mei answered the human’s questions as well as he could. He was led to a small room with a dim light overhead, all made of the same shining material as the outside of the building, but darker. It was uniform in texture and color, with almost no cracks; it frightened him. The room had three soft objects in it that were flat and pleasant to lie on, but they certainly weren’t anything green or growing. There was nothing else. A human showed up with a portable pool of water and small servings of dried grass and dried clover. Mei ate and drank sparingly.

He could feel the great structure flying again as his footing on the floor shifted. Mei was still feeling queasy from his medical examination. They hadn’t put him to sleep like they had Gabu. But he half wished they had. It had been invasive and offputting to have his body scrutinized so thoroughly by strangers. They’d taken blood from him, and spittle. They’d tested and prodded him everywhere, and in the end they told him what he already knew—that he was in good health. But they would know more once they’d done their tests.
Mei lay in the dim, unchanging light and grumbled to himself. He started to wonder whether there was a point past which it was no longer worth saving Gabu from the curse of being a wolf. But then he jarred himself. *Of course it’s worth it. Even if this strange torment is forever, it’s worth it. This is what he wants the most.*

Mei forced himself into a peaceful state and awaited his next test.

“Hello, Gabu. My name is Mr. Kanematsu. We’ve already tested your physical health, but now we’d like to assess your mental and emotional health. I’d just like to ask you a few questions, if that’s all right.”

Gabu shifted on the floor, looking up at the mysterious creature, its body nearly all swaddled in some soft artificial hide. “That’s fine,” he agreed.

“To begin with… you are a predator. Is that correct?”

Gabu sighed inwardly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“And that means you regularly eat the meat of other creatures?”

“I have to. I’m not happy about it, but it’s what I have to do.”

The creature—the man, he’d called himself—nodded. “And that includes the meat of other warm-blooded endotherms—mammals and birds?”

Gabu let his head sag just a little. “Yes.” He hoped these people weren’t here to punish him for what he’d done. He wasn’t proud of his early life, but after meeting Mei, he’d really done the best he knew how.

“Have you personally taken part in killing some of these creatures?”

“Yes. I’m a hunter. I hunt. What can I do?”

There was a pause. The man moved his front paws over a mysterious object in subtle ways that Gabu could barely begin to understand. Gabu waited nervously.

“Gabu,” said the man. “I’d like to know: do you like yourself?”


“Take your time.”

It was such a simple question that Gabu didn’t know how to start with it. He certainly liked having himself be around… but what alternative did he have? He could think about whether he liked other people by whether it made him happy they were there. How could he apply that to himself? He was always there.

Well… he could ask himself whether others enjoyed having him there. And he thought of all the groups he’d known over the years—his packmates at the Citadel, who respected him but thought he was strange in a lot of ways… the animals at the Brook Club, who so often didn’t know how to
talk to him… the other dog wolves at Baku Baku Valley, who never seemed to have a kind word…the children he’d grown up with, who’d laughed at him. It didn’t paint a very pretty picture of who Gabu was.

But then he remembered Mei… his pure, curious, round eyes and his friendly, encouraging smile. Mei lit up when Gabu appeared. And Mei knew best. Gabu couldn’t expect the animals he’d hunted to love him, but they were still friendly, and he’d made a lot of friends… but Mei would know whether Gabu was a good person. How could there be a better judge of that than Mei?

And Mei liked having him there. That was plain as anything to see. “I guess I do like myself,” said Gabu, somewhat surprised to be saying it.

“It took you some time to answer,” said the man. “Is there any reason for that?”

So Gabu explained about how hard it was to co-exist with the animals that you live on… but ever since settling in the Emerald Forest with Mei, he’d known he had to try. He talked about everyone who’d looked down on him over the years, and all the reasons he’d had to doubt himself, including reasons he still carried with him to this day. Then the man asked questions about his childhood, and about how the other pups had treated him growing up, and once Gabu started to open up, he just kept gabbing. He could hardly feel the time passing by.

“All right, everyone. There will be an orientation this afternoon, a group lecture in the evening, and another tomorrow morning after breakfast. The lectures will cover the nature of civilization and things you’ll need to know, as well as some of the choices you’ll be able to make. We apologize for the confusing nature of things—for now, just enjoy mingling! Remember, you are absolutely not to harm each other. Dinner will be served after orientation. If you need anything, you can press one of the brown buttons or ask Ms. Yoshida for help. Good day!”

Mei peered around the common room. More animals had been found and ‘picked up’, lured by the same promises that had ensnared Mei. He knew some of these goats, and one of the rabbits actually looked familiar, though he wasn’t in the habit of—

Oh! “Gabu!” he cried, cantering over.

“Mei!” Gabu pranced to meet him and the two nuzzled warmly.

“Gabu. This is so unbelievable, isn’t it?”

“You said it, Mei. Do you know what? They gave me a little… flat thing, all covered in juicy little cutlets. They were some kind of meat I’ve never had! They said it came from an animal once a long time ago, but since then they’ve just been growing the cutlets out of other cutlets! They say they can make all the meat they want and nobody has to die!”

“Really? That’s amazing, Gabu! Does your stomach feel satisfied?”

Gabu sat up and knocked his stomach with a forepaw. It wobbled slightly, but he seemed happy. “No problems so far!”

“Well, Gabu. I certainly hope they aren’t putting one over on us.”
Gabu squeezed his forepaws together and looked around the room. “I really hope so too, Mei.”

There were three wolves sitting off to one side, huddled as if in fear of the goats, rodents and rabbits milling about the middle of the room. A few little birds fluttered overhead. The room was walled and floored in a material Mei gathered was called ‘metal’, but there were things sitting here and there to make it more… customizable, Mei decided. There were slightly recessed pits here and there, some of which were filled with gravel or wood chips. There were three tubes on one side of the room that somehow dispensed what looked like water; a rabbit was standing up to drink from one now. Things like fake trees made of something black were spread over two corners, with birds perching in their fake branches. And there were more of the soft flat things from Mei’s cell. Animals were resting on them, looking around in wonder, chatting quietly or loudly. One of the aliens—human beings—stood to one side, her hands clasped in what Mei took for politeness, watching everything. Sure enough, no one was harming anyone else, no matter how scared any of them might be.

“It’s so strange, Mei. I wonder if we should go introduce ourselves to everyone.”

Mei considered doing so. But a sense of tense calm rose from his lower stomach. “I think we’ll have time for that, Gabu. Either this is all a trick and we’re being taken away to be eaten, or exploited somehow… or we’ll have plenty of time to meet everyone.” His deep stiffness spoke to the fact he was coming to accept the former possibility… even while the latter came to seem more likely.

“Do you think so? What if it is a trick, Mei? What do you think they might want from us?”

“I have no idea. They asked us a lot of questions. Maybe they just want to learn about us.”

Gabu’s nape bristled as he sat down. “They interviewed you too, huh? I spoke to a human called Mr. Kanematsu. He asked me all sorts of things, and then he went away for a while, and when he came back, he told me I had signs of… of low self-esteem, and… and of general anxiety. He said something about trauma… post-trauma stress? He said once we get to ‘civilization’, it would be good for me to have, um, what did he call it? Psychodynamic therapy?”

“Oh, Gabu. Did you ask what that is?”

“It’s basically just a kind of talking. I’ll go to sessions, he said, and talk about my thoughts and feelings! I guess I don’t see the harm in that.”

“My questioners said something similar to me, although I guess it wasn’t such a concern. Something about…” He racked his brain to try to remember. “Mild psychological morbidity and suicidal ideation? Something like that. But they did say I was in good emotional health, overall.”

Gabu surprised Mei by hugging him and lifting him from the floor. “Well, I’m glad to hear that! I’ve always thought your emotions were some of the best ones, Mei.”

Mei laughed and pushed lightly at Gabu’s leg. “Well, thanks! Yours aren’t so bad yourself.”

Gabu nodded toward the wolves by the wall. “I know them. They’re Sukima, even though they don’t live in the Citadel. I should probably go say hi.”

Mei smiled. “Would you like me to come with?”

Gabu frowned, but seemed to change his mind. “Actually, Mei? I really would like that. It would probably help them get used to things here if they saw an example of a wolf and a goat getting along.”
“In that case,” said Mei, “I’m pleased to be of service!”

The lecture explained a great deal, but for every question it laid to rest, two or three more germinated, soon to sprout in Mei’s mind. Most humans could not speak with animals, the lecturer explained. About a third of the skycraft’s crew had studied the language they called ‘Transtantamic Animal’. Mei had trouble wrapping his mind around the idea of a ‘language’ in the first place, but recalled that mice had their own ‘private tongue’, and some birds had special ways of sending signals through song—this was just an extension of those ideas. The human civilization had been astonished to learn of this language’s existence, only learning about it when a Great Egret had shown up and started trying to get people’s attention. They now reasoned that there had been numerous contacts before this between themselves and the natives of the Anapocalyptic Subcontinent, but somehow, the main point had always been missed. It was so easy to miss the signs of intelligence if one wasn’t expecting to find them.

There had been a great disaster on the subcontinent, the lecturer explained. It had left things unstable and unsafe; holes in the web of life had formed, and for a while it had seemed like it might collapse. His ancestors had fled, leaving the whole, vast landscape behind to be reclaimed by nature. It was still considered dangerous, forbidden; to stake a claim on that place of destruction was to strike out at one’s fellows, to say ‘I value pelf and power more than our compact.’ So for over a millennium it had been settled only by outcasts and outlaws… until the egret had come.

“What was the disaster?” asked a rabbit.

“It’s complicated,” said the lecturer. “You’ll learn about it in time. You could call it a gross misuse of knowledge. We were trying to learn how to do something new, and made a terrible mistake.”

“Are there only humans where you come from?” asked another goat.

“There are animals like you, but they lack your intellectual capabilities. Like insects or worms, only the gap isn’t so great. Apart from my kind, the only members of our civilization are a few parrots, chimpanzees and dolphin pods, and their intelligence pales compared to yours or ours.”

The goat nodded and listened patiently.

They were shown pictures of incredible buildings, tall enough to rival small mountains. They saw moving pictures of person-carriers zipping along tracks at unthinkable speeds, and of beautiful gardens with impossible diversity of plantlife, and of tremendous places with structures Mei couldn’t even begin to recognize and thousands upon tens of thousands of humans. The lecturer played sounds for them as well. “I understand that some of you are olfactory learners, and I apologize—most of our presentations are still audiovisual, but I do have something for you.” And he presented three tubes, which he broke and released to the room: the smells of a ‘supermarket’ full of foods; a fine ‘restaurant’ also full of foods, but somehow better in a way Mei didn’t understand; and a city square, faintly tinged with smoke and things unrecognizable.

“There’s so much to learn!” chirped a nightingale on a perch.

“That’s true, but we’re confident you will learn it,” said the lecturer. “Are there any questions for now?”
He called on a marmot who’d risen, lifting her paw. “I just… not to squint at a blessing, but, I don’t really understand why you’re helping us all out. You’re promising us so much… what do you gain from us in return?”

“That’s a good question,” said the lecturer. But he paused and stood awhile without answering. “Essentially, it’s that we believe every person has great worth. We can manufacture most things, but there’s no way we’ve found to reproduce the effect of raising a sapient being from birth. A child develops unique connections as they grow and have experiences; they come to have a unique perspective on the world, and a perspective could be seen to…”

Mei found he didn’t need any further answer. He felt like he understood what the man had been trying to say.

Gabu came to Mei in his cell. He was barely able to fit in there with him; the room was smaller than their cave back in the Emerald Forest had been. But it was worth it. Gabu was excited, and afraid, and Mei’s presence calmed him, and the tight walls kept him from exploding.

“Oh, Mei. The medical technician asked me if I’m ready to get my anti-aging injection. They say you have to do it three times, but the first time makes most of the difference, and… oh, Mei, it’s an immortality treatment. If I do this, I won’t ever get old! I could live forever, if I’m lucky, and… and I don’t even know whether I believe it, and…”

“Gabu, what is it?” asked Mei, troubled.

“Only, Mei. And they don’t have one for me,” said Mei. “Not yet. But Gabu… they say they’re working on it. And they tell me they’re determined to find treatments for every kind of animal in time. It’s just that there are so many kinds.”

Mei was right, but there was so much they didn’t know. Gabu scratched his side and bumped the wall with his knee. “I know, but Mei… what if there’s a problem and they can’t figure out how to treat you? What if I leave you behind? Or… well, really, it would be you leaving me behind, wouldn’t it? I’m just so nervous. I don’t know if I want to live forever.”

“Well, it won’t be forever, in any case,” Mei said, smiling. “Accidents happen. Sooner or later, something’s bound to happen to both of us.”

Did Mei always have to talk about… that? Well, to be fair, it really was the subject of the conversation this time. “I guess so. But Mei… I’d rather think about the life we’re having, rather than how it might end.”

Mei smiled. “Well then, if I were you, I think I’d go ahead and get the injection! That way you can be healthier for longer. And I’ll get mine when it’s available.”

“But Mei…” Gabu knew he was right—somehow he already knew that, but he couldn’t face it yet; he had to fight. “What if you don’t get it until you’re on your last legs? And you can’t walk
anymore except by creaking and tottering? And I’m just… the way I am now?”

“Well, one of us ought to be healthy, anyway. Besides, I get the sense they have ways of helping with creaky old joints. I’m not afraid, Gabu.” Mei smiled, and his smile bore Gabu up as if he were riding a cloud. “You don’t need to be, either.”

Gabu felt more at peace. “But what if it’s a trick, Mei? What if they don’t intend to give us any of the things they’re promising?”

Mei’s expression softened. “I don’t know. Somehow, I’m not afraid of that, either. It’s certainly possible. But...” His ears lifted and relaxed. “I feel as if that’s outside our purview. There’s nothing much we can do about it at this point. We’ve leapt in with these newcomers, and now all we can do is see if they’ve been telling us the truth.”

This felt right to Gabu. Yet he had to argue, just in case Mei was missing the point. “We can still leave, Mei! They’re willing to let us leave, any time the skycraft sets down! No one will stop us—if they try, what will the other animals think?”

Mei frowned. “I guess we could leave, that’s true. But do you really want to do that, Gabu? Do you really want to let this… unbelievable opportunity just fly away?”

Gabu reached for Mei and snuggled up against him, not unlike a scared puppy. “I don’t want to do that, Mei.”

“Then we’ll stay?” Mei touched a horn’s edge gently to Gabu’s crown.

Gabu swallowed. “We’ll stay.”

“And you’ll get your injections?”

Gabu nodded. “I will.”

“And we’ll do our best to live happily ever after?”

Gabu laughed tearfully. “I’ll see what I can do!”

“Well, then. That’s more like it!”

Gabu deflated and lay on the floor of Mei’s tight cell. Then he worked himself slowly out, back end first. “I’m so glad you’re here, Mei.”

Mei beamed. “That’s what makes all the difference, isn’t it?”

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Two days later, they landed at a place they called a Holding Camp. It had a long official name that Gabu couldn’t remember, and some of the workers there called it a refugee camp some of the time. There were over two hundred animals on the skycraft now, and all of them were being disembarked now except for a couple of birds who’d volunteered as guides to help the pilots find communities they knew about. It was an exciting day, but the communications people kept reminding them that they would have to stay here for a long time. This skycraft and five others were out scouring the land for all the animals they could find, but the land was big and there were...
so many creatures out there. Even with several other holding camps and dozens of other skycraft like this one, as well as a few expeditions out there on foot, they expected this operation, called ASARI, to take a very long time before it was done.

The holding camp was a relief compared to the skycraft, because it was on solid earth. There were no more sudden lurches at the worst times, threatening to make you lose your lunch, and best of all, you got to go outside as much as you liked! Gabu went straight to the outer fence and watched the woods beyond. He asked the attendant whether he could leave, and the young human told him that yes, he could. But he didn’t recommend it unless Gabu had a good reason. There were dangers out there, and it was foolhardy to go back into the wilderness when everyone had food and comforts and water and health care in here, just given to them!

Gabu thanked the attendant, but explained that he really wanted to go out there and see what there was to see, just for a little while. The man frowned and made a few motions with his fingers on his tablet. “All right,” he said. “But if anything at all dangerous happens, please come back. Remember—life isn’t just a short while anymore. It’s forever. It doesn’t make sense to risk yourself if you can help it. And your life is valuable to all of us.”

“All right,” said Gabu, who hadn’t really thought about it like that before. The thought of his life being more valuable than it ever had been… not just two times or three times, but FOREVER times more valuable… struck him like an odoriferous faraway breeze. He let his ears sink. “I understand,” he told the man, even though he didn’t fully. “But I have to go out for just a little while. I’ll be back soon, I promise!”

“All right,” said the man. He used his machine and opened the gate for Gabu. “Just be careful with yourself, please.”

“I will,” said Gabu, and he strode out into the open. He looked back; the man was watching him. He went on into the woods, just far enough to be out of sight. And he sat down and looked at the sky through the leafy trees.

The wind was blowing. And Gabu really was free. He’d been afraid they wouldn’t let him leave. He’d been afraid he was a prisoner, and they just weren’t telling him.

He had to be sure. He took a sharp turn, keeping careful track of where he’d come from. And he ran for ten minutes through the trees.

At first, it was eerily silent. But eventually, there were sounds of native creatures. Crickets and owls and something that chirped from a shrubbery when he startled it. Frogs leapt now and then away from his paws. The sky got dark and none of the humans back at the camp, who knew how to do so much, could stop it from doing that.

At last, Gabu was satisfied. He turned around and walked back where he’d come from. He thought of calling out to everyone in earshot, letting them know there were creatures who could give them safety and immortality not at all far away. But he decided to play it safe and stay silent. The humans knew what they were doing. They could come and offer their gifts to these creatures eventually.

Gabu came back through the gate, and the human attendant seemed genuinely relieved. He walked back toward where he’d left Mei, through the giant field surrounded by fences on the edges and towers on each corner. There were thousands of animals there, of every kind… at least, every kind large and smart enough to understand what they were doing there. Gabu marveled at them all, milling and swirling around and chirping and bleating and braying and yelling and talking, but none of them trying to hurt each other, except maybe through words. It was an amazing sight. He stood
in the middle of a place covered in bare, compact earth, with just a few shoots of grass or clover here and there, and took it all in. He felt like he could stand there watching for days.

“Gabu? Oh, my fated stars, Gabu! It is you!”

Gabu had a huge grin even before he’d finished spinning around. Lala was standing there, coming down a slanted stone wall with her paws carefully spaced. She was striking to see, her fur vibrant and fluffed, her bearing full of health. “Lala! Ohh, I wasn’t even daring to hope! I thought I’d never see you again.”

She nuzzled him. Warmly. Thoroughly, all about the face. “I’m very glad this strange, wonderful force brought us together.”

“How long have you been here, Lala?”

“A few weeks. Not long enough to pick a new mate, in case you were worried.”

Gabu hadn’t even thought about it. “Are we… are we still mates, Lala? Even here?” So far away from home, speeding so quickly in some unknown direction.

“Oh, I think so,” she responded. She looked up at the rising moon, just under half there. The sky was colorful.

“You only think so?”

Lala shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure whether what we think of as ‘mates’ still exists here. All our footing is whisked out from under us here, Gabu! All our assumptions overturned. I’m still very much sorting through it all. Deciding which questions to ask. Reimagining the future. Did you know that if we want to have children again, we have to apply for it?”

“Apply?” Gabu’s right ear flopped; he didn’t even know what that meant.

Lala stood proud, head up. “We would need to acquire access to an application form, and then fill it out! Have you used the data access points that they make available for us yet?”

Gabu shook his head. That sounded vaguely familiar. “What are those?”

Lala grinned. “You’ve seen the humans moving their fingers on flat surfaces, yes? They have some of those for us. Apparently what they’re stirring around is raw information.” She winked. “That’s the level they’re playing on. But I’ve learned to do a few basic things, such as play a game!”

“A game? Made of raw information?”

Lala nodded. “It’s called Breakout, fittingly. You use your paw to move a paddle back and forth, aiming to prevent a ball from dropping away. All the while, it smashes rectangles in the sky until… well, you should see it yourself.” She swished her tail. “But these things are also how we set plans in motion, in the greater society. We find the particular form we need, and fill it out. Perhaps with help from an expert. They don’t let just anyone have children around here, you see. Think of it! Everyone is allowed to live forever—if we had children at will, it wouldn’t be long before the earth was bursting at the seams!”

This did make sense to Gabu, but the enormity of endless life crashed anew against his mind; he had to sit down, it seemed to ring so loud. “That’s true, I guess… but it’s so amazing, isn’t it?”

Lala nodded. “However! The human I spoke with said that the restrictions on children normally
only apply to their own kind! For the first few generations, he expects any animals who apply will get permission almost automatically! After all, the world isn’t flooded with us yet.”

“Oh!” said Gabu. His eyes were filled with the glory of Lala as she flounced and paced from one side to the other, speaking about this strange new world they now lived in. She seemed to be flourishing here beyond belief. He did want children with her. He wanted to ask Mei for permission straight away. And why shouldn’t he say yes? The pups could eat mass-produced meat cutlets! They didn’t have to kill anyone at all!

“Gabu,” said Lala suddenly. “Is Mei here?”

Oh! “Yes, he is! We’ve been together all these years and he’s here, too!” He laughed as he ran to show Lala the way. And sure enough, there was Mei, waiting just where Gabu expected him, at the edge of a tower near the smorgasbord and watering trough. (They had meals here five times a day, though most creatures slept through at least one or two of them, but they also had little snacks available constantly, which was much better than it had been on the skycraft.) Mei was ruminating and chatting with the tiny rabbits there, and looked up when he saw Gabu.

“Mei! Lala is here! Look, it’s La…”

But when he turned around, Lala wasn’t there.

“Gabu?” Mei walked forward. “Was Lala following you? Is she really here?”

Had he somehow imagined her? Was his head going mushy? “Um… I thought she was following me. I guess maybe I rushed off too fast. But she’s back, Mei, and she’s even more wonderful than ever, and… and I want to have children again, Mei! They won’t need to eat anyone, since they have manufactured meat here, and…”

Mei laughed out loud, and it lasted a while. “But you still feel like you need my permission, don’t you? Even though everything is different.”

Gabu gulped and nodded. “I mean… I made a promise. One litter and that’s all. But… Mei. May I have permission to bring even more wolves into the world?”

Mei nodded deeply. “Consider yourself released from that promise.”

Gabu grinned from cheek to cheek. He couldn’t help but remember another promise that he’d been forgiven for breaking, five years ago. And he was never gladder he’d broken it than he was now.

Then Mei was staring over his shoulder, and Gabu turned back. Oh—there was Lala! And… and…

There was an old doe standing there, and an old, frizzly-furred little muskrat. Gabu blinked. He sniffed the air. Oh. Yes!

“Wolf from the north,” spoke the doe, wonderingly.

“Bedelia! Oh, and Itsuko! It is you, isn’t it?”

“Gabu,” said the muskrat, rising slowly onto his hind feet, his voice throaty. “I was wondering if I’d run into you again.”

Mei laughed. “This is amazing! We’re back together, after so long!”

“I thought you might appreciate some familiar scents,” said Lala. “It’s been quite a time without
you two! What was the last message I sent?"

Gabu thought back. “You told everyone the truth about us,” he recalled. “About how Mei was really alive.” He remembered learning from the birds that Lala had lied to the animals, telling them that Gabu had killed Mei, then left forever in shame. He’d suggested it to her, but he didn’t know why she’d gone along with the idea. She must have had her reasons.

“Yes. Of course, I’d already let that slip to Bedelia, here. I needed to give her something, you see.” Lala jerked her with a snap of her jaws. “This deer was a tough nut to crack!”

“You had to crack her?” asked Mei.

“I tended to keep to myself, at the club,” Bedelia revealed. “Especially after. My brother.” She looked at Gabu with firm, green eyes. It felt like she was staring at his soul, daring it to move.

“But I was bored,” said Lala. “I needed someone intellectual to talk to! My two brainiest friends were Mei and Akiara, and I lost them both on the same day. So I set my sights on Bedelia. Getting her to open up.”

Bedelia looked at Lala with what Gabu might have imagined was hostility, if he wasn’t being told otherwise. “She is a persistent creature.”

“Is she?” asked Gabu.

The old doe flicked her tail. “The deer of the Emerald Forest have many secrets. Not as many now. This wolf is not one to let things rest.”

Lala sashayed around Bedelia. “No rest for the age-d!” she singsonged. “You were looking forward to joining your ancestors, weren’t you?” She chuckled. “Now you have to live and live and live.”

Bedelia snorted forcibly and chewed her lip.

Lala continued. “I hear after they finish finding immortality serums for everyone, they’ll start finding rejuvenation treatments. New, lush coats… more juice for your joints…”

“She’s teasing Bedelia,” said Itsuko, “but I could use some juice in my joints. I’m actually really excited.”

Lala’s tail brushed over his face as she turned her attention his way. “Silly little rodent. I’m sure it’ll all break down, and we’ll be munching on your bones soon enough, desperate for marrow.”

Itsuko chomped the fur of her tail in mock-anger, but dropped it easily enough. “I was Lala’s friend the whole time, but apparently she didn’t think I was smart enough.”

Mei gave Lala a look. But he didn’t seem angry.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Itsuko,” Gabu put in, wagging his tail. “Is there anyone else here from the old days?”

“The deer are split,” said Bedelia. “Some half of us came along this intriguing trail. The rest stayed behind, as a land with no wolves and less competition is a tempting thing.”

Gabu knew he wouldn’t be seeing the leaf warblers again. He’d heard from Toshi that when Hatsu finally succumbed to old age, Haburo didn’t last a week without her. “I heard Umenoki died.”
“That was me,” said Lala. “But Itsuko still has plenty of family around.”

Itsuko slapped the ground with his tail and grinned as if he were still young. “Now you’re not gonna kill any more of my relatives. Tell you what--I’ll tell them you’re here and round them up for a visit tomorrow! How about that?”

“I was fond of your sisters,” agreed Gabu. “How well did your children grow up?”

“Oh, you’ll see!” said the muskrat. “There’s plenty you haven’t met.”

“I remember you as a tiny little pup,” said Mei.

“Well, I’m a great-great-grandfather now,” said Itsuko proudly.

“Really!?” asked Gabu.

“At least!” Then Itsuko addressed Mei. “You never had any children, did you?”

“No,” said Mei. “I never did.”

“I guess it’s not too late!”

Mei looked to Gabu and gave his head a little exasperated shake. Gabu looked to Lala with anticipation. “Did you ever see Wilhelm again?”

“On hunting days? Occasionally. Aside from that, never.”

“He went into her belly in due course,” said Bedelia without rancor.

“Only when he couldn’t run any more,” said Lala. “I think you heard about Nogusa and Kyrie.”

“They’re still living together?” asked Mei.

“In the scrubland over west of the Forest. I visited them twice. For all I know, they may turn up here someday soon.”

“And Kiput?” asked Mei hopefully.

Lala was suddenly still. “I’m sorry, Mei.”

Mei sighed, letting his head drop.

“He gave up the ghost just a week… just a week too soon.” Lala looked around the camp, seeming grieved by it. “That wasn’t me. Some disease took him, and I think a fox got the body. Fujiko had left him, you see, and I don’t think he… took it well.”

“That’s too bad,” said Mei.

“Yeah,” agreed Gabu.

“I don’t think he would have liked immortality,” Lala reflected. But they were all silent a few moments.

Gabu and Mei both nuzzled Itsuko and exchanged bows with Bedelia, and then they went walking with Lala around the camp’s indoor hallways. These branched off into sleeping chambers, copulation chambers (for which contraceptives were mandatory), the dining complex, the medical
halls, and more rooms whose function Gabu didn’t even know. Gabu walked to one side of Lala; Mei walked on the other. She addressed them both in turn as they talked, avidly exchanging what stories they hadn’t been able to send through avian messengers. Mei told her about meeting the Sougen Keep herd; the wariness they’d expressed about him when he admitted he had a difficult secret; the slow process of revealing what it was; the covert nights he’d spent with Gabu. Gabu told her about joining the Citadel and all the challenging tests they’d put him through, the stress of adapting to a new hunting style, the skepticism he’d met when he suggested a protocol for approaching the goats in peace, and the long, emotional nights he’d spent with the Sanctum leadership telling stories of all his adventures with Mei. Lala seemed impressed by it all, which made Gabu glad. She should be. Sometimes it all impressed even him.

“And then the outsiders showed up, did they?”

Gabu shrugged helplessly. In a way, all his work had led to nothing… but it wasn’t for nothing, really. At worst, it had kept his friendship with Mei alive, and at best, he’d blazed a new trail that others could follow. “It was terrifying at first. The skycraft seemed like a giant godbird, and it pierced me and put me to sleep! Then the humans were poking and prodding me, and I didn’t know they were trying to make sure I was healthy. I thought they were getting ready to eat me!” It would have been fitting, after a life of eating others, but Gabu chose not to mention that. “Then they had to explain where I was… and there were hours of questioning and tests before they finally let me free and I could see Mei!”

Lala lifted her head and smiled cruelly as she strolled. “Only hours of questioning? Lucky you. They held me for three days! And they also tranquilized me.” She stopped with a paw raised. “What a fascinating term. Tranquilize. To make tranquil, through force. Almost oxymoronic.” She walked again silently, and Gabu didn’t interrupt. Then her expression went wry, if a little sullen. “I don’t really mind the tranquilization—after all, they had to show dominance over me one way or another. But they claimed they were afraid I’d eat my companions. Does that really make sense? Would I have been surrounded by birds and muskrats if they were in any danger from me? Did the humans think I was saving up entrees on all sides before indulging? …Still, I can’t blame them for being cautious, I suppose.”

“It seems fair to me,” said Gabu. “After all, lives might have been on the line.”

Lala nodded. “Oh! Did they give you a last name? Apparently two syllables isn’t enough—for them, being a person is much grander than that.”

Gabu nodded, feeling sheepish. “I’m Gabu Graywolf.”

Lala laughed merrily. “Gabu! We picked the same last name! I thought about a few alternatives, like Striker or Prowler, but decided not to leak my spoor, so to speak. Silverwolf was a possibility, but I get the sense it would be less professional. Did you spell it with an ‘a’ or an ‘e’?”

Gabu remembered the question, but didn’t even know what it meant. “I took an ‘a’, since they said it was more common.”

“I’m Lala Greywolf, with an ‘e’,” said Lala. “So our names aren’t quite the same after all. Isn’t that funny?”

“It is,” said Mei. “But why did they detain you for so long?”

“Oh, mainly the psychological profile. They also claimed to do such things as measure my blood and gauge my adrenal response, but I suppose their mind games were what gave them the most to worry about.”
“Did you say something that troubled them?” asked Mei.

“Oh, I’m sure I did. I was questioned about hypotheticals, then the tester went away to confer with her colleagues, and then came another test, and an interview about my childhood, and a series of statements to agree or disagree with, and on and on. I could hear them talking about me, sometimes, standing behind walls. They thought I couldn’t hear their muffled voices!”

“Did you hear what they were saying?” Gabu asked.

“Not most of it, no. But it turned out all right. At the end of three days, the woman with black, round fur on her head came striding out with her memory-holding board and said, ‘Good news, Lala! You’ve tested negative for psychopathy.’ And of course I asked her, ‘And what is psychopathy?’”

Mei knew that psyche referred to the mind. “Does it refer to the mental path one’s on?” Such as his path to forever? Could psychopathy be something he possessed?

“In a manner of speaking,” replied Lala. ‘‘Mind disease’. In particular, the tendency to be antisocial, the inability to empathize or love, yadda yadda. It seemed she was relieved. ‘You checked a lot of the boxes on the psychopath profile, Lala, but there were too many examples of remorse and other strong emotions to ignore, and you did demonstrate dedication to a moral code, albeit unorthodox—’ She went on that way for a while.”

“So… what was the diagnosis?” asked Mei.

Lala flicked an ear. “Narcissistic personality disorder.”

“Wow,” said Gabu. “What’s that?”

“Excessive concern with myself. Honestly, I don’t understand how these humans can know so much, yet comprehend so little. Have they had to live in reality? Don’t they realize that those creatures unconcerned with themselves don’t last in the wild?”

Gabu wasn’t so sure. “Well, they do seem to know what they’re doing. Maybe they had a point.”

Lala made a pff sound. “In any case, I had to take a course in what they call ‘anger management’.” She widened her stance slightly. “I ask you—am I an angry person? Am I poor at managing what anger I have? Honestly, it turned out I was better at managing my anger than my instructors were. By the end of the third session, even they agreed I was better at anger management than they were. Yet I still had to finish out the course.”


“On the other horn,” said Mei, “you do seem a bit angry right now.”

“Well, only because I was forced to take the course!” Lala retorted. “Their anger management course, as it turned out, only gave me more anger to manage. Don’t worry, though—it’s well within my capabilities.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that,” Gabu said.

“How can I be angry in the face of… all this?” asked Lala, walking again and gesturing to the building they were in. “I’m overawed by this entire civilization! I never thought I would feel this way, or be presented with so many possibilities all at once! For all this, a little humiliation is a small price to pay.”
“I have to confess,” said Mei. “I’m not quite sure what all the possibilities are.”

Lala strode forward to the next doorway. Gabu recognized it—it was the entertainment center. A family of boars were sitting around one of those flat things with pictures they called ‘screens’, even though they weren’t much like the prey screens Gabu was familiar with. He knew the humans showing up on the screen weren’t real, though he hadn’t known that when he’d first seen them. Lala led him past to an empty, black screen and pushed a button. Things appeared in green and white that Gabu couldn’t understand.

“Have you started learning to read yet?” asked Lala, pushing buttons and making the screen change.

“Um… no.” He had a general sense of what reading was for, and knew he’d probably have to learn it eventually, but… “I guess you have?”

“I know the letters and their sounds, more or less. We could help each other practice! But this, I know how to use only because I asked, and I watched how they did it.” She pushed a final button and a picture of a gigantic pointed building appeared against a blue sky.

Some writing appeared beneath it. Then a cheerful voice spoke, while images of what she was speaking about appeared on the screen. “So! You’re an animal from the Anapocalyptic Subcontinent getting ready to enter mainstream civilization. But what will you do? What will your role be? You may be worried or confused about the shape your life will take. Will you be able to continue living outdoors in the way you’re accustomed to? Hopefully, we can help. In this video, we’ll cover the following topics:

- What is a career? How does it differ from a job?
- What careers are available in modern society?
- How will your experience as a wild animal help or hinder your progress on a given career path?
- Which careers are best for your body type?
- What laws concerning public space govern individuals who want to simply keep living in the wild?

Remember—we in human civilization want to help your transition to be as pleasant and easy as possible. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, especially if you feel anxious or scared. These are exciting times, full of changes, and things may be challenging for a while, but rest assured—there will be a place in civilization for you.”

Mei was staring with a small frown on his face. Gabu blinked and blinked again as the image shifted to the interior of a building full of humans and the voice started talking about ‘careers’.

“Lala… have you seen all of this before?”

She nodded. “The whole thing! I watched it twice. It was exactly the same both times. It’s going to be so exciting, Gabu! The humans have so many…” She swirled her tail in uncertainty. “… concepts that we just have no notion of! There’s so much to learn. So many hills to climb! Except that they call it ‘climbing the ladder’. And I intend to climb it, rung by rung.”

Mei smiled a little. “Well, I’m happy that you’re happy, anyway.”

“I think I might enjoy a corporate setting,” said Lala. Gabu stared at her, trying to make sense of what she’d said. “You have no idea what that means, do you? Don’t worry—neither did I for the first couple of days. I’ve been making a pest of myself, asking questions. I’m trying not to ask the same humans too many things, though. It wouldn’t do to make enemies.” She turned around
sharply, front legs spread dramatically. “Gabu! Did you know because none of us have hands, we’re at a huge disadvantage?”

Despite himself, Gabu glanced down at his forepaws. “Um… I knew the humans were different from us that way. But… a huge disadvantage? Really?”

Lala nodded as if savoring it. “Their whole society is built around hands. Being able to…” She raised a paw and flexed it. “… grasp things. And pull them, or turn them… in too many ways to contemplate.” She lowered her foot to the floor. “It turns out that my four strong legs, of which I’ve been so proud all my life, are now a weakness! I’m going to have so much difficulty climbing the ladder without any hands!” She laughed deeply—to Gabu, she didn’t seem troubled at all. “Oh, Gabu. I’m looking forward to it so much! I hope you’re there for some of the key moments, when I surprise everyone.”

Mei chuckled. “Maybe you’ll be the first wolf in charge of a whole building.”

“Maybe! And perhaps then I’ll set my sights on an entire city.” She sat, grinning intensely.

Gabu couldn’t help but laugh as well. Lala was so strange, but so amazing… and Gabu loved her. He stepped forward and nuzzled her neck. “If you want me to be there, Lala, I’ll be there!”

“I’ll be there too, Lala,” Mei chimed in. “If you want me, that is.”

Lala grinned at him. “Oh, Mei. I would so miss you if you were gone forever.”

Almost three weeks later, the little bell that dangled by Gabu’s bed started swinging and ringing. Gabu stood up on the bed in surprise. The other beds were mainly filled by wolves, wild dogs and other predators, but Mei was in the next bed, and he stood up, too. “I guess they want me,” said Gabu.

But suddenly, Mei’s bell started tingling too; the two jangled together like a pair of dancing insects. They stopped together. They started together. Then they started swinging in alternation, and as the room full of predators started to stare, Mei and Gabu laughed and sprang from their beds and dashed out the door.

“What do you suppose it could be, Gabu?”

“Oh, Mei! I have a feeling!”

They arrived in the entrance hall and Gabu’s feeling proved true. He cheered a cheery howl before he was halfway across the room. Then his eyes opened even wider. Oh, gosh. This was even better than he thought.

It wasn’t just Meiko standing there, wagging her full grown tail like a bird’s wing, and her brother Bari with his happy, goofy tonguetip showing in his excitement. There was someone else beside them… and even though he was full-grown now and Gabu hadn’t seen him in so many years, he recognized his protege. It was little Boro.

“Oh my goodneesess!” he exclaimed. “Boro! Bari, and Meiko! Did… did you all just get here together?”
Meiko laughed her little laugh—it was still as sharp as ever, if a little less high-pitched. “We’ve been living together!”

“Gabu!” shouted Boro in excitement. His tail wagged too, and he ran forward, then blushed. “Um… I know Meiko is your daughter. But… she’s also my mate. And the mother of my children… I hope that’s okay?”

Gabu froze in his tracks and nearly melted. “You… but…” He looked between the three of them. “How could that be? I’m so flabbergasted. Bari. Meiko.” He stepped forward and hugged them, and neither of them hesitated. Their hugs were strong and pure and good.

“I couldn’t stay where I was,” said Boro. “I knew I had to strike off… like you did. The pack fell apart. Your goat friend came back, and he said you were still alive… oh wow, I guess that’s him there! You’re still together!”

“Yes, we’re still together,” said Gabu. “And I heard about you leaving, and I was so worried. You didn’t have anyone to hunt with!”

“Well neither did you,” pointed out Boro, no longer chubby as he’d once been. “It was hard! I had to eat mice and birds’ eggs and walk a long way, and then one day I wound up in a warm place with these big, spreading trees, and I could smell wolves, so I tracked them down…”

“We had an exciting day,” said Bari. “He found us and we found him at the same time! We were gonna fight, but then we decided to talk instead. And I told him my name, and he said he used to have a beta with the same name, and I said that’s probably the guy I was named for…”

“And when he found out you were our father, we were friends for life!” added Meiko. “Bap, snap, that’s it! Friends for life.”

Boro leaned against her. “And it wasn’t long after that we decided to have pups of our own.”

“Oh, kids. Boro! I…” Gabu tried to find a way to express his awe, his amazement, not just at their being there or having met up with each other, but at the whole, incredible adventure it suddenly seemed he was back and part of. Finally, he settled on “I’m… so proud of you all.” And it was good.

They all hugged. Even Mei gently nuzzled Boro, scalp to scalp.

“It’s good you’re here, Uncle Mei,” said Bari. “I missed you! I guess now I’m never ever gonna eat you, ‘cause we’ve got meat here that didn’t come from anyone!”

“Yes,” said Mei. “It’s a great relief. We’ve been here a while now, and we’re starting to grasp the nature of the beings who made this place. They see themselves as saving us from an existence full of danger and death… and it’s true. In a sense, that is what they’re doing—saving the whole great, vastness of us from what we always knew. Of course, it hurts to lose the lives we knew… but I’ve come to believe it’s for the best. And I’m very glad the three of you were saved.”

“You think we can trust these humans?” asked Meiko.

Mei stood with his legs neatly together and beamed. “I do. I really do.”

“Well then,” said Bari, “let’s get trusting! Want to show us around? Oh, hey! Is Nogusa here?”

“He and Kyrie showed up just last week,” said Gabu happily. “They’re mates now. Isn’t that odd? They aren’t even the same kind of animal, but apparently that’s how mates work now.”
“Oh wow,” said Meiko. “I want to see them! Are they gonna have mixed up badger-wolf babies?”

“I don’t think they can do that,” said Gabu. “Not yet, anyway. But they can take the seed from one animal and put it in another… and I think they’re planning to have a mixed litter… I don’t know what to say! There’s just so much to tell you, and I’m so happy.”

Bari stepped forward and gave Gabu a big slurp. “How’s that for a start?”

“Oh, Bari.” Gabu laughed and shook the slobber from his face. “You’re all grown up, but you haven’t really changed.”

Mei spoke up from behind. “Chances are we’ll be waiting in this camp for at least another month before they take us to civilization… so I may as well show you around! And you pups remember Bedelia, I think, and Itsuko?”

“Oh my gosh, Itsuko,” said Meiko. “We used to play tag together. He’s here too?”

Gabu felt his tail start wagging and he couldn’t bring himself to stop it. He couldn’t remember a time he’d been so happy. It felt like all the horrors of the world had been stripped away, and a whole life was waiting up ahead.

A week later, Mei and Gabu were summoned to the office of the Camp Ambassador, a short but sturdy woman with gray cut through her black hair. Mei didn’t know much about her except that she worked for the human capital. “Hello,” he said, in the human language that he’d finally managed to learn, more or less. “I hope we haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Absolutely not,” said the ambassador. “Mei Whitegoat, of Sawa Sawa Mountain? And Gabu Graywolf, of Baku Baku Valley?”

“I haven’t lived in Baku Baku for years,” said Gabu, “but yes, that’s us.”

The woman smiled warmly. “I’m sorry it took us so long to track you down. We didn’t know who you were, at first. But believe me, in the last few days, your names have been cropping up quite a lot.”

Gabu sat back nervously, his face taut. “Really? Someone’s been talking about us?”

“You’re celebrities. It was the two of you who established the mixed society in the Emerald Forest, correct?”

Oh. Mei felt emotions passing quickly through him. “Yes, that’s right,” he said.

“And it was the two of you who invented the subcontinental hunting week?”

“Yes,” said Gabu. “But I didn’t think anyone knew about it, except in the Emerald Forest.”

“As it happens, things spread. Especially when they’re of benefit to society.” The ambassador sat with her hands folded for a moment. “It’s not just the week, though. I understand from your fellows at The Citadel on Sakuya Chasm that you established protocols for predator-prey fraternization.”

“Er, yes,” said Gabu. “Mei and I wanted to keep seeing each other, even though we’d joined
different groups. So we had to come up with some way…”

“And you set into motion a system of messaging, delivered by songbirds, to connect the various animal living groups?”

“Well, some of them,” Mei admitted.

“Mei. Gabu. Believe me. Our ecologists have been finding incident after incident of natural enemies managing to coexist, in some way, without the constant fear of death. And in a surprisingly large number of cases, when we investigated, we traced this state of affairs back to the two of you.”

Mei exchanged a look with Gabu. He hadn’t realized.

“I don’t know whether you’ve saved lives, precisely, since the meat-eaters still need to eat,” the ambassador continued. “But you’ve acclimated thousands of sapient animals to the idea of coexisting with natural enemies, as equals. You’ve made things so much easier for them, and for us… and on top of that, you’ve greased the wheels back at the capital for those in favor of integration. When our opponents argue about brute, savage creatures like…” She nodded to Gabu. “…like wolves, for instance, with their great toothy jaws and killer instincts…” She waved her hand dismissively. “It’s been so useful to be able to point to the stories you set in motion, and to illustrate, with hard evidence, that herbivores and carnivores can get along. You can restrain yourselves. And now we have you! We have the actual duo who began it all. The meadow goat and the valley wolf who forged a friendship, despite the odds… you realize we’ll need to hear all about it, don’t you?”

Mei started to tingle. “Well… I’d be glad to tell my story.”

“I’m really not at all a brute,” said Gabu. “I’m much more of a nice guy, if you get to know me!”

“I’m sure,” said the ambassador. “Well, if the two of you have been worrying about your futures among humanity, you can worry no more. If you’re willing to make appearances and talk about your experiences, I think you’ll find yourselves very comfortable.”

“Do you mean we’d have plenty of money?” asked Gabu. They’d learned about money a few days ago.

“Absolutely,” said the ambassador. “No shortage of money. What do you think?”

Mei grinned to Gabu and let himself relax. “I don’t see any problem with telling everyone about ourselves… do you?”

Gabu grinned back. “I don’t see why there would be. We’ve got nothing to hide!”

“Well, then!” said the ambassador. “May I inform my superiors that you’ll be ready to fly to the capital on the next express jet?”

“The next express jet?” asked Gabu.

“It’s a very fast way of flying. Faster than the fastest birds.”

“When will it leave?” asked Mei.

“Tomorrow at dawn. I suggest you start saying your goodbyes!”
Gabu looked to Mei. “Do you think we should see if Lala can come along? After all, she was a big part of it.”

“That’s a good point,” said Mei. “Madame Ambassador, do you think—”

“I’m aware of Lala Greywolf,” said the ambassador. “Keen thinker. Intimidating, really. I know she played a role in your successes, but I’m only authorized to start payment to the two of you. You’re the pair the public really needs to see, in my opinion. But don’t worry—Miss Greywolf and the rest of your loved ones will be integrated into society before long, and I have no doubt they’ll catch up with you.” She winked.

“But… will they even be released into the same country?” asked Mei.

“That’s up to them! But for the most part, we have open borders, and transportation is plentiful. Moreover, newly introduced animals will receive stipends to ease their transition to civilized life. And believe me, they won’t have any trouble knowing where you are. We believe in keeping loved ones together, Mei. Gabu. You will live your lives with the people you care for. All we’re offering is a head start.”

It wasn’t a certain thing. But if he and Gabu really had made such a difference as all that, it probably meant they could make an even bigger difference out in the wider world. It wouldn’t be responsible to hold that back, even for a day. “I’m up for it,” he said. “How about you, Gabu?”

Gabu shrugged, smiling. “Better than jumping into a rushing river!”

“I’m afraid that’s just what it may feel like for the first few weeks,” said the ambassador, standing. “But I’m sure the two of you will get used to it. Report to the main gate an hour before dawn… and from me personally to you, thank you.”

Another rushing river. Well, it had been right the first time. And this time, they’d be jumping into a river made of people who cared. That could hardly be wrong, could it?

The 1st Decade

Time passed slowly for a while, as Mei and Gabu got their bearings. They were learning things every day, sometimes without even having to ask. They would say and pretend they understood whatever the humans were talking about, and by the time they had a moment to look back, it turned out they did. They stood on a parade float for two days running, smiling out at the people and waving. They gave interviews to important people and only learned who they’d been afterward in the brief moments between engagements. They learned what alcohol was and how much of it they could stomach. They encouraged young rabbits and songbirds and sheep that they could get along with anyone, if they tried, while photographers took pictures and people listened to conversations that felt like they should have been private. They wrote speeches in busy offices and penthouses with staffers walking back and forth, worrying about deadlines, and they relaxed together at night in ring-shaped cushion beds and watched the city through the windows on every side. They gave earnest, if schmaltzy, lectures about the power of friendship. They were briefed on new trends on how animals should behave—table manners, sartorial practices, how to meet strangers of another species. They gave their feedback and then presented these lessons to audiences, or on television. Mei wore a short shirt with bright red hems and a pink bow; Gabu modeled a line of wolves’
trousers, but admitted on a talk show, to laughs, that he preferred going bare. They played sketches of meeting each other, as if for the first time; they pretended to make friends with humans, with parrots, with boars and deer and frogs and squirrels and all kinds of animals, including some they’d never heard of. They sat proudly at state dinners while important humans from one part of the world tried to impress those from another. They got fan mail by the gigabyte. They answered some of it, tossing off answers casually to white-collared staffers while grinning to each other at things they’d seen through the window, three stories below.

They wrote a book together called “One Stormy Night.” It sold sixty million copies.

Mei was hailed as a hero for his bravery. He spoke to an audience of humans, mostly in business suits, about how he’d come to the decision to be hunted by his own friend, just to convince skeptical animals that friendships with predators were possible. He talked about the lonely, cold nights, and how hard it had been to stick with his decision. They asked him how he’d managed to do so for so many months, and he didn’t know what to tell them. But whatever he did tell them, they always seemed to hang on his words. They kept telling Mei he was an inspiration and a hero, and over time he almost started to believe it.

Eventually, things slowed down. Mei and Gabu begged for their privacy, day by day, until the ASARI Department’s leadership agreed to reassign their staff elsewhere. Gabu and Mei went to work now, like so many others, five days out of every seven. Some days, they weren’t needed for much, and were sent home early. Other days, they were whisked out of town on international trips and spent a night or two abroad, or on express jets. Every now and then, they were brought back to a Holding Camp to address the animals there and put them at ease. Mei didn’t mind. He liked having surprises in his life, and he liked being able to help, given that the world was going through so many changes. But he also relished his time off the clock, and he knew Gabu did too. The two of them liked to wander through the city together, eating at random cafes and splashing through public fountains. If they were occasionally recognized and asked for an autograph, that was fine. Mei and Gabu were both able to write clumsily by holding pens between their toes, but Mei preferred to keep an inkpad on his person. His hoof and Gabu’s paw made for a charming impression, stamped together.

There were so many options in the world they lived in now. Their medical technology was so advanced! On top of the anti-aging treatments he now received, Mei could change the color of his coat if he wanted, or make it thick or curly, or shed it entirely. He could have canine fangs implanted and take pills to let him eat artificial meat, if that was the life he wanted. He could have surgery to make himself look like a ram, or even like a little wolf! Or he could become a female goat and bear children. So many amazing choices… yet he chose to stay the same, and it wasn’t a difficult decision. He liked himself, and he had a simple soul. He didn’t see any reason to make himself appear to be anything other than what he was. And Gabu felt the same way.

Meiko, Boro, Bari and their children got an apartment in the same building as Mei and Gabu, on a lower floor. Nogusa and Kyrie moved into a Tiny House two blocks away, in the middle of an open square with a sandbox. Kyrie worked as a paralegal, while Nogusa was hired as caretaker for a local Zen Garden which Mei and Gabu grew to love. They all visited each other frequently.

Lala lived in another city, but she made time to visit at least twice a month. She, too, was famous for her part in the Emerald Forest society, but she chose to limit her public appearances. She’d taken a consulting job for a television news program reporting on the rapid changes happening as a result of ASARI, and within two years she’d obtained a high-powered position in the Strategic
Acquisitions department of a major international news/education conglomerate. They considered her invaluable, she reported, for her sharp mind and unique lupine perspective.

“If only I still had Akiara!” Lala lamented, as she walked with Gabu one evening under the huge beacons and broadcasting poles on the waterfront. “She would have made a perfect secretary. You know, Gabu, if I’d known what was coming, I never would have eaten her.”

“She probably would have liked civilization,” Gabu agreed sadly.

“She would have loved it. Damn.”

“Your job sounds exciting,” Gabu said, trying to bring the conversation to happier ground. “Is it what you like to do?”

Lala took a moment. “Well, I really enjoy Strategic Acquisitions. It’s excellent work for me. It uses my whole mind and body, believe it or not. But I’d be telling a lie if I thought I’d ever be content in one position forever.”

“Really?” asked Gabu. “You don’t think you’ll ever be content?”

“Contentment isn’t something I hunger for!” said Lala, looking ahead into the criss-crossy streets, just lighting up yellow with their looming phosphorescent LED lamps. “Remember, Gabu. There’s no limit built into life anymore. We may live for hundreds of years! Thousands, maybe, if we’re lucky. What good is contentment? All it would do is keep me bound in one place.”

“But Lala! If you were content… and I mean really content, you wouldn’t mind staying in one place.”

She turned around, her lush, silver tail billowing. “Well, Gabu… I suppose that’s what I’m afraid of!”

Lala later managed to get herself transferred to the capital and got an apartment down the hall from Gabu. They had more children then, after their applications were approved—three litters of happy, healthy pups, distinct and beautiful. The pups were children of civilization and grew up familiar with all its customs and amenities. Some found it difficult to be minorities in a human world, while others befriended humans, adapted easily to technology, and had no such difficulties, but all of them were proud to be second-generation civilized wolves.

Mei’s beautiful electronic bell sounded one day, indicating a visitor, and Prince Kuro was there on the doorstep, smiling shyly. Mei took a week off from work so the two could enjoy a vacation to a distant destination and exchange their tales and thoughts. After they returned, Mei went every now and then to Kuro’s place and spent a sweet night and a sweet morning with him. They would occasionally travel to places of which they’d only seen pictures and stroll quietly together, taking in the atmosphere. Kuro eventually showed up in the tabloids, but it didn’t bother him; he just answered reporters’ questions, polite and smiling, as always.

Mii showed up a year later, bleating with excitement at having finally found Mei. She was deferent and polite to Gabu, but couldn’t hide the fact she was excited to finally meet him, too. She eventually got a spot in an old fashioned outdoor goat commune in the next neighborhood. And one day Jenny showed up as a sales representative for a high-tech mattress company. Mei declined
to buy her products, but invited her to come by for salad and cola once a week, and she was glad to accept.

Gabu went often to visit Lala and their pups, making sure he was a major presence in their lives. But through it all, Mei and Gabu continued to share an apartment. Their one constant was each other. So long as they got to spend their days together, the world could change and twist and morph however it wanted, and none of it would seem like too much. On the contrary, when there was a rock-solid, powerful, immovable constant at the center of one’s life, change all around was a welcome thing. Change was beauty. Change was life.

It just wasn’t the core of life, that’s all. It could be everything else, but never the core.

The path to forever went unceasingly on, but in the end it always led back to basics.

Chapter End Notes

And then Mei suddenly woke up, and the reader realized that this entire chapter had all been an elaborate dream. OR WAS IT!!?!!??

This bonus chapter is a week late—sorry about that! But at fifteen thousand words, I hope you’ll agree it justified the wait. Is it canon, you ask? Well, it’s a major departure at the very end of an amateur fanfic novel set in the world of a movie and a TV series based on a series of children’s books about a story involving talking animals that never happened. So… yeah, it’s real. 8) If you want it to be.

This novel was my own take on a sequel or continuation of Arashi no You Ni, of course. But it was also a culmination of sorts for a short story I wrote many years ago, never published, called “Woodland Courtesy.” That story was about a wild mouse who gets caught by a barn owl. Rather than killing the mouse immediately, the owl has a whole protocol for how he treats his prey during their final hours, including a small chance to escape, an opportunity to speak final words to their family, and a chance to contribute to the owl’s sculpture collection, which he passes off as his own work. It’s maudlin and may or may not ever make a good short story, but some of the sentiment of predator-prey sympathy made its way into Beyond the Storm. I fully expect I’ll continue to explore those ideas in other works.

One reader asked to roleplay with Lala in private messages, and we’ve been doing that awhile! I admit my Lala is a compelling character, the sort I might enjoy doing philosophy with. I’m planning to use some of the cast of this novel as contestants in the next imaginary unscripted elimination gameshow I run in my head. ;) But aside from that, I guess it’s finally time to say goodbye to these fine creatures.

I don’t know what the nature of the apocalypse was that left the subcontinent inhospitable to human beings for so long. I figure that later on, outlaws and hermits established small settlements before moving on or being extradited, which is where
the barn came from, as well as Mei and Gabu's colorful scarves. (Because that’s the biggest loose end, of course. “One Sunny Day” claims that Gabu’s lunch is wrapped in a magnolia leaf, but the illustrations clearly show a spotted scarf. We need answers!)

Thanks to fanartfulfurryboy for occasionally bringing up the idea of a future in which carnivores can live on artificial meat! This bonus chapter would have been less likely without that. This civilization is using cell cultured meat, but I read an article about Impossible Foods, and those guys are really taking the task of replacing meat with plant proteins seriously. I haven’t had an Impossible Burger yet, but I’m planning to!

EDITED 8/3/19 TO ADD: I’ve just gone through the story and fixed various typos and errors that were pointed out, as well as revising and adding a few things to this final chapter. The illustrations had stopped showing up because they were hotlinked from Facebook; it turns out that doesn't work for extended periods, so I've restored them and added a couple more works in progress from the artist. Below is an index of illustrations throughout the novel.

INDEX OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Chibi Mei doodle - Chapter 2
Mei crying - Chapter 4
Lala views Muri Muri - Chapter 12
Hoofy happy? - Chapter 16
In a cave with wolves - Chapter 20
Mei as chess god - Chapter 21
Angry rabbit - Chapter 21
Wolf and she-wolf - Chapter 22
Gabu Fleeing - Chapter 23
Song of the Mother Wolf - Chapter 24
Akiara and Lala compare paws - Chapter 30

"Wolf and she-wolf” by Catboo; all other pictures by FlyingMambo.

What a time it's been! I didn't have a ton of readers, but the ones I had were (and continue to be) great. I've got a serious series of fantasy novels I should really be working on, but I keep getting distracted by the immediacy of fan fiction. Next up for me fanficwise will probably be to finish and post one of the three unfinished Undertale ideas I've been putting with. Part of me is done with Undertale, but there's another that part doesn't want ideas to go unexplored, and it must occasionally be heeded. The release of Deltarune made all of me quite happy, so that's probably the next logical thing to work on.

Oh... and once I'm back from my trip to North Carolina, I'll probably watch some more anime. That's something I've been meaning to do for a while.

8-)

Works inspired by this one:
Arashi no Kanata: Beyond the Storm Fic Art by IcanFURAII

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!