Cruel Intentions: Lacrimosa

by Lunarblue21

Summary

Prequel to IA1 and my upcoming story Cruel Intentions. In a harsh world filled with danger and excitement, three young lives will collide... follow Manny, Diego, and Sid as they grow up from age seven into teenagers and into the course of the first film as adults. T for violence, language & implications of a sexual nature. Deliberate AU as of IA4's release. Canon-compliant.

Cross-post from fanfiction.net.

Notes

This fanfic novel is a crosspost from ff.net (I kept telling myself that I would never crosspost it, but now that the ff.net Ice Age's archive is dying a slow death, maybe this is for the best).

I will gradually be posting it to ao3 over the course of this year, and I hope you all will enjoy it as much as the friends and readers I had at ff.net enjoyed it!
Origins Pt 1

The framing device of this story being told around the campfire is credited to FABCHICKXO for inventing it, and the name "Elder Titan" is © to goldenpoun, from her story Ice Age III My Version. Also, Manny's mother is named "Millie" as nod to Funkywatermelon for originating the name for Manny's first mate, but I called his mother that instead to shake things up a little. :P

Oooh, and the title comes from this piece by Immediate Music, have a listen: It's called "Lacrimosa Dominae" and it's a really epic instrumental.

The sun was fading behind the mountains of the valley, leaving soft hues of mauve, blue and purple mingling into the smoky aura as the dusk pervaded into the deeps of the river basin. As the last slender thread of the sun's rays disappeared, the smoky wisps of clouds lingered in the sky momentarily before drifting off. Shadows of night sought rest amongst the darkening grayness in the hillocks and meadows of the river valley below, one light glimmering brightly out of the present darkness, shining like a beacon out of the cavern, flitting its glow defiantly against the ravages of the twilight.

Within the cavern, Sid the sloth added a log of kindling to the fire he had fostered gently; his face red from the heat; but even that could not hide the intelligence gleaming in his eyes that his stupidity-ridden exterior belied. He glanced up at the others settling in beside the fire, turning his eyes downward as Shelley, the lady sloth that they'd befriended that day, smiled at him.

Beside her lay (though some distance away) the chestnut-furred sabre cub - who he knew to be called Axel –laying his head atop his paws, imitating Diego, who lay on the other side of the fire. Manny sat beside the sabre, Ellie snuggled next to him, her trunk interlocked with his. Only their daughter Peaches was conspicuously absent.

Sid half-smiled as he glanced over at the new tiger in their midst, remembering that Peaches wasn't here with the herd that night because she had been sent to bed as grounding for her brashness towards the cub earlier. He sat down beside the flames just as Diego rose to his feet, loping past the others settling in beside the fire.

I wonder what Diego 'th doing.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Stopping short at the entrance, Diego raised his head to the stars as the tendril of a memory played havoc with his mind. He gazed up at the stars, noticing in them outlines of those he remembered with joy mingled with pain. Letting out a sigh, he glanced back into the cave, watching the cub Axel bat at Shelly playfully to tease her, causing the female to scoot away from him as if she was afraid. Melting back into the shadows, Diego swiveled his gaze around the perimeter of their camp rapidly, scanning for any intruders.

Footsteps sounded behind him, but the tiger was so absorbed in his guard duties that he didn't hear them until the last moment.
"Hey, buddy, what's up?" Manny's voice said. The tiger pivoted, every hair on his body standing straight up with surprise.

"Manny," Diego replied, avoiding his friend's intent stare, "don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry," Manny rumbled. "I was just wondering what you were thinking."

The tiger attempted to repress a sigh, but then gave in and let it out. He directed his gaze back over at the cub once more, his eyebrows creased in thought.

"Well?" the mammoth prompted.

"If Elder Titan finds out we took in another sabre, he'll tell the Council, revoke your nomination and have my hide," Diego confessed in a rush, hurrying over the words.

Manny scowled at the mention of the Regent Elder, and then glanced down at his friend. Once again, he was struck by how vulnerable the tiger was as he recalled their appearance before the mammoth council.

*Once I become Regent Elder, I swear I'll change that.*

Attempting to cheer Diego up, he punched him lightly on the shoulder, saying,

"Don't worry, Diego! Titan will never have to find out what we've done – and I know you want to take care of Axel ... and to be honest, I think the little guy needs you."

Diego's eyes were a glassy yellow, a sign that he was deep in thought. Finally, he spoke up.

"Yeah, he does. We should probably head back to the others now, Manny."

The two returned to the campfire, once again taking their places beside the warmth offered to them. Shelley, the tan-coloured she-sloth, glanced up at them from her work of plying some grasses into a workable item for carrying things in.

When Sid had asked her out of curiosity what it was, she replied that it was something she had seen the human females doing and that she wanted to try making one herself, something that greatly surprised the others. Now she glanced up at the mammoth and the sabre, sitting near to each other beside the fire's light, a question lingering in her eyes as her gaze traveled up and down Manny, admiration gleaming in her eyes.

"Manny, thir," she began humbly, "my ... friend Axel and I here both have heard taleth of your herd'th exploitth, but we – well, I, anyway, am greatly curiouth about learning your paththth before that. Can you tell uth?"

The mammoth bull smiled in response,

"Meaning mine and Diego's?"

When she nodded in response, Manny glanced over at the tiger to see his reaction.

Diego shrugged,

"Fine by me." He replied laconically. He nodded his head at his friend deferentially. "You can start, Manny."

"Thanks, Diego," Manny grinned at the tiger. "Anyway, my story begins with my herd's migration
and entrance into this very valley..."

It was spring in the valley, and the snows had melted away, revealing a land of austere beauty hidden beneath the ice. The forests budded again as the deciduous trees such as oaks, maples, poplars gradually began the transformation from a skeleton to a fully fledged tree filled with leaves alongside the evergreen trees such as firs, cedars, and pines reached higher into the sky.

They flourished under the welcoming heat of the formerly reclusive sun, as wild flowers popped up in scores, carpeting the steppes with dots of bright light amidst the dark green of the grass fronds parting rich loamy earth and the gloriously blue sky.

Although the last vestiges of ice had vanished, there were several regions within the landscape of the dale that the snow and ice insisted on refusing to secede – and one such area was the massive river valley of the long, immense glacier that sliced its way down the mountains that opened the basin to all incoming and outgoing in the habit of migration, and all the creatures of that specific valley referred to it as "Brede Pass."

Everywhere in the valley, a peaceful serenity reigned – a peacefulness that was abruptly dispelled by the commotion stirred up by the entrance of a large mammoth herd into the vale.

Ah, the patriarch of the herd thought to himself, his gaze sweeping over the verdant, rolling grasses of the dell. What a beautiful place for us to settle in, perhaps.

He stopped short at a rise that lead into the valley, his mammoths halting behind him. Over his shoulder, he heard gasps of pleasure and excitement as the cows and other males in his herd eyed the lowland with keen fervour. He felt rather than saw his mate stroll up next to him, her light brown coat brushing against his own. Turning his head, he linked his trunk with hers protectively, casting a concerned glance downwards at her swollen belly as he exulted,

"Would you look at this place, Millie! I know we're here only to see the Regent Elder of all the dioceses be installed in place, but this place is so magnificent I think we should consider ahem, settling here."

"It certainly is lovely," Millie agreed, smiling at him as he guided her down deeper into the hollow, the others in their group trailing after slowly at first; but once they saw their leaders set foot in the glade, the cows and their calves went wild with excitement. "Though it isn't the usual place for a Regent's installation, since I've seen that happen at Seven Oaks, not here in the Three Fjords. I guess my godfather wanted a change of pace from the way things have been done!"

One calf broke loose of his dam, trumpeting happily as he darted away through the grasses, as his mother snorted, beginning to follow after him despite her distended abdomen. Clovis glanced up; noticing her distress and seeing that her mate was the rearguard, marshaling the stragglers into order as the pandemonium erupted as the mammoth herd emerged into the Bredelands had caused a definite response from those already in the valley. He cast a loving look at his mate, withdrawing his trunk from hers with regret as he whispered,

"Wait here, my darling, as I go wrangle up Heloise' young rapscallion – she needs the help with that one." He finished with a playful wink at Millie, who smiled at him and then drew back, unconsciously placing her trunk on her side as if it gave her pain.

Clovis lumbered in the direction of the unruly calf, scooping him up with his trunk as several beasts – a beaver, a tapir, and a sloth – peered out from the bushes. The sloth parted the tall, thin
grasses that concealed them, murmuring to his friends in a tone filled with animation,

"Look, guyth, the mammothth are here; let'th go tell the otherth!"

Hearing the whisper, the mammoth swiveled his head around, Heloise' calf still dangling from his trunk, making the young one laugh out loud as the air flew past him as Clovis did so, eager to pinpoint the voice. A giggle sounded from behind the bushes, and the half-grown beaver and its friends emerged, gazing up shyly at Clovis. The sloth had his claws clasped behind his back diffidently, his eyes shining with admiration.

Having seen their fill of the leader – known to the tribe of mammoths as Elders – they darted off, eager to spread the word that more mammoths had appeared in their Bredelands locale. Clovis allowed himself a private grin as he marched over the milling crowd of his herd, noticing that his second-in-command Abelard, mate of Heloise, had moved to the forefront while he was gone.

Realising that his leader had returned with his son, Abelard left his duties of supervising the excited calves and cows waiting just inside the valley. The little ones stomped their feet on the ground, causing a loud rumble to echo throughout the forests.

Setting the calf down in front of his father, Clovis shared a smile with Abelard as the chocolate-furred bull caught up his child in his trunk. He then aligned himself beside Clovis to escort him back to where the herd was restlessly waiting, saying,

"Thank you, Clovis, my friend, for bringing back Richard for us. He is a trunkful, that's for sure."

"Yes, he is," Clovis agreed quietly, his eyes seeking out his mate amongst the other females in the herd, and then he glanced up, meeting her large, soft green eyes as time seemed to slow for them. In that moment, Clovis and Millie were the only two mammoths in the Valley.

Abelard let out a shout, sending the cows forward into the lush grassland of the basin, their calves tagging along at their sides as Clovis sauntered over to his mate. Reaching the tussock of grass she was resting on, her eyes sweeping through every contour, nuance, and aspect of the valley they had come to. Clovis chuckled appreciatively as he stepped up beside her, throwing a playful wink in her direction. Millie laughed in response, hitting him on his side with her trunk mischievously.

-x-x-x-x-x-

Millie glanced up at her mate, her gaze sweeping up and down his tight physique, admiring the rich reddish-brown colour of his fur, one of the things that had first attracted her to him in the first place, and then met his eyes, large and deep and brown. For several minutes they just gazed into each other's eyes again.

Wouldn't it be something if our baby had Clovis' eyes? she mused to herself as Clovis arranged himself beside her on their place on the tussock. He swiveled his head forward, making a cursory inspection of his mammoths that were by now dispersing further inwards into the meadow. Making one last final circuit around the perimeters, Millie saw him lift his head and turn to her, gently coming alongside so that their coats mingled. Millie let out a sigh as she enjoyed the sensations of his auburn fur against her own, relishing its softness.

x-x-x-x-x-

His scrutiny of his herd's safety complete, Clovis raised his head, seeking out the forest green eyes of his mate as she glanced around the Bredelands once more, letting out another sigh – this time one of utter contentment.
"Oh, Clovis," she mussitated, laying her head against his shoulders trustingly as the mammoth bull delighted in providing the strength that he lent her, "you are right. This is such a beautiful area... It might just be the perfect place for us to stay and raise our calf."

"It is indeed," Clovis concurred, taking her trunk in his own as he helped her down from the tussock, descending a hill that lead into the deeper recesses of the lowland that would supply the mammoth herds gathering there for the installation of the Regent Elder into his office enough food and water and sanctuary from predators for as long as they needed before the migration hearkened in their bones again.

"And, you must know, Millie, my darling that we are here for a most important reason. It isn't every day that a Regent Elder is elected to that supreme office. And who knows," he continued with a wink at her, "I might one day be nominated."

His mate chuckled, a glint of stubbornness in her eyes as she conceded,

"It is a great honour." She paused as if in thought, and then went on. "And one that shouldn't become a burden to any who take it up. An Eldership is a great responsibility, Clovis, dear."

"Are you thinking of being nominated yourself?" Clovis teased, fully aware that not only the males were elected to that high office, but the female mammoths of high repute could be honoured as well with such a nomination and potential ascension.

Millie let out a rich, throaty laugh at Clovis' remark.

"No, of course not," she replied, looping her trunk into Clovis. "I merely wanted to remind you that any Eldership is a great responsibility, darling."

"Hmm. Yes," Clovis admitted, using his trunk to bring her in closer to him as he nuzzled against her. "And with great power comes that... responsibility, I mean," he continued, winking at her again playfully. This caused his mate to lightheartedly whack him with her trunk before nestling in close to him.

Once again, he caught her trunk, intertwining them close together as he looked deeply into her forest-green eyes that sparkled only for him, nuzzling her affectionately as she reciprocated by rubbing her head alongside his, her eyes closed as she inhaled his scent. Enjoying his mate's indulgences, Clovis relaxed, his body slackening in exhaustion over the exertions of the day. Abruptly, his peace was broken as Millie let out a grunt of pain.

"Millie, what's wrong?"

"The calf!" Millie gasped, breathing heavily as contractions pounded her. "The calf... Clovis, it's coming."

Supporting his mate with his own body, Clovis shepherded Millie through the milling horde of his mammoths, who had all congregated to the middle of the steppe in a confused sort of melee. Abelard noticed his Elder's mate in distress, bellowing for the cows to part ranks to allow Clovis and Millie access into the forest. Over his shoulder, Clovis shouted to Abelard,

"My thanks, brother!"

In response, his second-in-command dipped his head respectfully as a small gray bird darted overhead, trailing after the Elder and his mate, its eyes bright with interest.
Clovis led Millie into a canopy of thickly grown firs, where, to his relief, he noticed a small clearing. Millie sank to the leaf-carpeted ground with a moan, squeezing her eyes shut in anguish as birth pains lashed into her stomach.

Clovis stood protectively at her side, his trunk on hers during the more intense moments of labour as she pushed and groaned and cried out against the agony seething through her. His mate laboured all that day and into the fringes of twilight before giving birth just as the sun rose that morning, spreading fingers of light into the recesses of the wood, and one fell upon the dark brown calf lying amongst the leaves of the thicket.

The mammoth bull gazed down at the calf, inwardly trembling with joy as he watched the calf stumble to its feet, blearily opening its eyes as he directed his gaze in its direction.

Beside him, he indistinctly heard Millie murmur, "Clovis, it's a boy."

She rose to her feet, intertwining her trunk with her baby's as he leaned against her. "It's a boy, and oh, Clovis, he has your eyes."

The Elder allowed himself a private grin as he looked at his mate and child, noticing with pleasure that his Millie was right; the baby did indeed have his large chocolate eyes. Again Millie's voice sounded next to his ear,

"Clovis, he looks just like you." A smile was evident in her voice, and he raised his head from inspecting the calf to gaze deeply into his mate's face as he stepped closer to her, placing his trunk protectively over her head as Millie used her trunk to scoop the baby into a warm cushion to sleep in.

Clovis laid his head onto the nape of his mate's, his trunk gently teasing her light tan crest of hair as he replied,

"Let's hope he takes after his mother as much as me – I need your compassionate, caring nature to balance my brash, stubborn attitude and to keep me in check, my dear."

Millie chuckled,

"True... but he also could use a measure of fortitude and masculinity, and those are your attributes as well; and worthy ones. We'll just have to wait and see as he grows."

x-x-x-x-x-

Overhead, the small gray bird had overseen everything. Its dark eyes brightening, it spread its wings and flew off, knowing that Clovis would appreciate if all the other animals in the nearby area heard the news that his son had come, and how this news would thrill the community of the creatures living in the valley under the governance of the mammoths. The bird's eyes flashed as it smiled to itself, thinking,

After all, it isn't everyday a "hope of the herd" is born in one of the mammoth herds.

It continued its flight throughout the valley, calling out as it passed. All creatures, from sloths, glyptodons, armadillos, and the Przewalski horse-herds looked up, listening intently to the news. Excited, all the many species found their vantage points, in trees or high hills, to watch the mammoth herd assemble.

"I have good tidings! Clovis son of Alfred's mate has had a son, another "hope for the herd"! You must all go see him!"
A mahogany brown Imperial mammoth raised his head in response to the call, his face beaming with appreciation at the message.

"My thanks, Sonia!" he exclaimed, raising his trunk into the air to trumpet the news to his herd. "We shall make our way to see him now."

Sonia grinned happily, knowing that she had just spoken to the newly installed Regent Elder of the mammoths, Augustine, and that it was a great honour. As she winged towards the farthest east corner of the Valley spreading the news, the animals who had received her message began to gravitate towards the thicket, heading that way in groups of twos and threes, the mammoths at the forefront.

Reaching the thicket, the larger ones craned their heads inside to catch a glimpse of the calf, a few even lifting their young ones past the firs so that they could see Millie's baby, while the smaller creatures crept under the large feet of the mammoths, standing diffidently at the edge of the thicket, their eyes wide with interest.

The small dark brown calf glanced around the array of faces before him – sloth, mammoth, bird, and horse – his eyes big with excitement and bewilderment as he crawled up next to his mother, trying to conceal himself from the inquisitive gazes of the other creatures as she chuckled appreciatively, enjoying the attention that the other species were bestowing on her son, since a "Hope of the Herd" was special.

One young beaver stepped forward, inspecting the baby from all angles. The beaver smiled as the little mammoth yawned, snuggling up against his mother. The kit looked up at Millie and Clovis, a question in its eyes.

"What 'cha gonna call 'im?"

Millie smiled expansively at the little one.

"Manfred," she replied simply, and a murmur of pleasure went around the circle gathered around the thicket.

"Manfred," repeated the kit with a grin, speaking for everyone. "I like it."

Hearing his name called sharply, the tiny beaver scurried off, his broad tail thumping the ground. Clovis and Millie glanced again into each other's eyes, smiling at one another as they found their trunks linking in an expression of love as they gazed down at diminutive snoozing Manfred.

The fire crackled abruptly amidst the silence wrapped around the listeners as Manny finished his beginning of his tale, and then Ellie spoke up.

"Aw, Manny," she grinned. "You must have been so cute as a calf."

Shelley's dark eyes glinted in the fiery-red glow reflected by the flames as she murmured,

"It's tho wonderful how you had such wonderful parenth such as Clovith and Millie, thir."

The mammoth bull stared into the fire, glimpsing for a moment the shades of his past before he briskly averted his gaze, raising his head so he could oversee everyone.

"Well, if you athk me, your parenth were too lovey-dovey, Manny ol pal," Sid protested as he
removed the tan-coloured she-sloth's hand from her work, causing her to look into his blue eyes.

Having caught her attention, Sid bent close to her so that their faces were almost touching but the moment was shattered by Diego's statement.

"Congratulations, Sid. You now earn points in the "lovey-dovey" department you just accused Manny's parents of."

Embarrassed, Sid withdrew to his side of the campfire, casting wistful glances at Shelly as she returned them shyly.

From his place beside the fire the sabre noticed out of the corner of his eye that the cub Axel had placed his head on top of his crossed forelegs, his face hidden from view. He glanced up, his gaze meeting Diego's.

"I never had parents like that," he mouthed before disappearing under his forelegs again, leaving Diego feeling slightly baffled.

Shelley smiled at him after making more eyes at Sid, which simultaneously caused the mammoth and the sabre to share a glance of genuine astonishment at Sid's good fortune at meeting up with this she-sloth.

Crash and Eddie, bored with sitting around doing nothing but listening to Manny tell his story, slid up behind the tuft of their sister's hair, grabbing their pea-shooters. Peering out of either side of Ellie's large forehead, they sighted their targets: Sid and Shelley. Crash winked at Eddie and they blew into their pea-shooters, at once causing Shelley to drop her work, Sid to accidentally step up beside the fire, singing his tail (again) and Axel to raise his head, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he watched the pandemonium erupt into the silent cave.

"Quiet!" Manny hissed, grabbing hold of the possums in his trunk. He gave Crash to Ellie to hold while he himself took Eddie. "Peaches is asleep, and I won't have you ruffians waking her up."

"Right," Shelley agreed, picking up her scattered grass threads. "And bethideth, it'th Diego'th turn to tell hith thory."

"Oh, all right," Diego conceded. "Here goes. But let me warn you, my story is intense and well, it might be hard for you herbivores to hear."

"Just tell it, Diego," Manny encouraged, smiling at him affectionately. "Don't worry; we won't let it bother us."

"Thanks, Manny," Diego replied. "Anyway, my story begins… with my father's raid on a nearby pack…"

x-x-x-x-x-

The amber-coloured sabre crept along the ground, glancing behind him to make sure his trusted group of lieutenants was treading along in his pawsteps. He stopped short, inhaling the pungent smells of a largely female-dominant pride only two miles away. A thrill scurried down his spine as he contemplated the judiciousness of this raid: there were only two ancient leaders of the pack, and of their offspring, barring two males, the majority was female.

"Which is just what we need at the moment," Cortez mused to himself as a thickly built elder drew up alongside him. Cortez' eyes narrowed with anger as he stared at the elder, who responded by shooting him a glare. The alpha snarled; Brutus had spoken against the raid originally, and yet it
seemed he deemed it appropriate to be included despite that.

"Steady now," the elder whispered as he trailed the alpha into the long tan grasses, making Cortez roll his eyes briefly with disdain. They shrank back as they heard pawsteps coming closer, no doubt one of the brothers of the females in the pack on patrol.

Cortez' eyes gleamed with fiendish delight as he advanced carefully, every muscle tensed in preparation to pounce on the male on guard. He stepped closer, moving his paw around a stick lying nearby silently as Brutus took up his position at the rear, murmuring instructions to the others. The alpha turned his gaze forward, noting that the male sabre on watch had halted, his neck raised as if he was sniffing the air for signs of invaders.

Cortez smirked,

"Now!" he shouted, bursting out of his cover of the grasses, loping straight towards the guard. Raising his right paw into the air, he slashed it down the side of the sabre on watch, causing him to bite back his teeth against the pain as the rest of his pack streamed past him, letting out joyous roars as they joined their leader in disabling the barrier.

"We have come," Cortez announced in a loud roar to the pack, knowing full well that they were concealed in a small hollow nearby as he removed himself gracefully from the limp, sodden body of their guard. He let out a warning growl to his own pack as they hurried deeper into the depression, "and I'll have you remember that the prettiest of all the ladies belongs to me!"

Review?
Origins Pt 2

Chapter Summary

Diego gets a chance to begin his story... and it's a bit more than anyone was expecting....

"Okay, wow," Sid muttered, clasping his hands together with a gesture that resembled fear. "That'th intenthe."

Shelley shrugged. "Doethn't matter to me, it'th a good thtory! I have alwayth theen tigerth as mindlethth killing machineth though – come on, Diego, friend of Thid, imprethth me."

Manny frowned at the sloths.

"Diego did warn us it would be like that though, you two. I suggest that you'd apologise for interrupting him."

Sid and Shelley exchanged a glance before murmuring, "Thlorry, Diego."

"Don't mention it."

"What happens next?" Axel piped up, his green eyes aflame.

"Well," Diego continued. "After the successful raid on my mother's pack, my father decided to journey deeper into the valley, since his pack had been living on the outskirts, mainly sustaining themselves on Steppe mammoths for so long that their teeth were raw."

He let out a sigh, the memories of his cubhood floating back to him.

"It had not been a good year for my pack, but my father was pleased for one reason: he had abducted my mother, Lucita, from her own pack, and she was very pregnant by the time they reached the innermost valley of the Bredelands on its northern borders, where sabres had free rein to prowl..."

x-x-x-x-x-

The adult male sabre loped silently up onto a rise, his alert bright green eyes darting back and forth as he cast his gaze in a quick circuit over the area, inhaling deeply as he relaxed, scanning his new lands, and then scanning them again out of glee. Everywhere he cast his gaze, he saw signs of life; forests, plains, rivers, streams...

Food won't be a problem anymore, he noted, grinning at the thought. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, savouring the fresh and scent laden smell of the air. As he breathed out, he felt much of the pressures and stresses that had haunted him for countless months depart him. His grin grew wider, he enjoyed the sensation of worry-free existence that such scents offered him.
Tearing himself out of his reverie, he glanced back at the other sabres in his pack who were slowly making their way over to him, at least twenty in all, accompanied by one yellow-furred tigress, who was trailing along after them, her belly dragging across the ground slightly, as she was expectant with cubs and due to give birth any day now. She raised her head, meeting the sabre's gaze before dipping it away in sorrow, avoiding his glance.

*Well, she'll get over it – soon enough,* Cortez thought. *Once she has our cubs.* His thoughts turned to the day when he had captured her away from her own pack, along with a contingent of trusted lieutenants...

"Come on!" Cortez snarled, strategically placing his paws amidst the crackly, dry leaves that dotted the grasses at odd angles as he stopped short, nodding at the small band of sabres flanking him on his right and his left as he crept nearer to the lipped overlook, halting mid-stride as he noticed a tigress saunter past the very grasses he was concealing himself in.

He recalled the commands he had given to his sabres only an hour before to his pack, his eyes glinting anticipation.

*My first real raid as Alpha,* he noted with anxiety.

*Let's make it count.*

"Juan, Alvaro and Tito, take the northern cleft. Bernardo, Rogerio and Felipe, the southern. Brutus and I will come from the east. Take out any sentries, but do so quietly. We will trap them against the cliff walls to the north."

He paused, looking every sabre in the eye, giving them his best shot at an authoritative stare. He saw no dissent in their gazes, only eagerness and resolve. When he turned to Brutus, he was greeted with an overly neutral stare, tinted ever so slightly with disappointment.

*Good enough,* he decided.

"Understood?" he whispered firmly.

A chorus of 'yes, m'lord' staggered back to him. Brutus' voice was the last - and least sincere - of the group to reply. Cortez, incensed though he was at such a lacklustre show of approval from the elder, refused to rise to the bait, turning his gaze eastward instead.

"Very good," he murmured. "To your positions."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The alpha caught his breath as she stalked past him, his eye tracing her gracile outline as his face roved over her form, admiring the light golden colour of her fur until he came up to her eyes. He saw to his delight that they were big and brown, with hints of humour mingled with strength glinting in their depths.

Cortez sniggered to himself appreciatively, knowing full well what tigress was *his* when the hunting party made their attack on this family group consisting of an elderly male and his mate and their band of ten sabres, the golden-furred beauty among them.

"Shh," a voice hissed in the alpha's ear, and he sat back on his haunches, glaring at the older sabre who dared to interrupt his appraisal of the new alpha consort he wished to make for himself.

"Shh," the older male said again, causing Cortez to curl his lip disdainfully as he looked at Brutus,
a senior tiger in his pack, and one who had served his own father before Cortez had taken over the role of alpha when his father had died.

"Well, would you have them onto us before we can spring our ambush?" Brutus continued, his amber eyes sharp on Cortez. The young alpha scoffed as gazed at the hardened body of the warrior elder in front of him, noticing the thickly bunched muscles and the myriad scars earned in battle that were scattered across his chest.

Brutus was a fine sabre; a sabre of sabres. Though he would never admit it, he understood why his father chose him to be his second in command.

He hated him for that; now he trapped under Brutus' shadow, his stances and tones as authoritative as his were lacking.

He would sooner die than admit his fear of Brutus.

"To hell with what you say, Brutus," Cortez retorted. "We're doing things my way now, and your 'guidance' is not necessary. I know what I'm doing here."

He scoffed inwardly, remembering, with a burst of exaltation, when he had instigated the excursion to kill off the two males – the brothers of the females in this pack – as a means to get closer to this pack to steal their ladies to mate with.

He had performed admirably, but that had done nothing to convince the elder he was worthy to lead. He raised his head, growling a signal to his sabres to burst out of their places to attack. Instantly, five tigers leapt out of the bushes, two immediately cornering a pair of tigresses licking each other companionably while the other three advanced on the elderly alpha and his equally ancient mate.

Cortez roared,

"In case any of you mangy pieces of fur forget, I get my choice of the ladies!"

As he bounded out from his own hiding place, sending a nod at the sabres who had sectioned off the alpha and his mate, pleased with their work. When he glanced back, he noticed Brutus eying him with resentment, in response Cortez shrugged lightly, paying no heed to the fact that he had just slighted the most respected elder of his father's pack.

He swept his glance around the meadow in a quick survey, gratified to see that his sabres had already herded all the tigresses into a corner, ordering them to line up in a row so that their alpha could inspect them.

Cortez strolled up to the line of tigresses, ignoring the other five in front of him as he stepped up next to the golden-furred tigress he had admired, rubbing his neck against hers. She pushed him away, her eyes muddy pools of anger, making the alpha chuckle at her gall.

"You're mine," he purred, underlying a hint of seductiveness in his tone while he grabbed her by the scuff, dragging her forward, away from her sisters. "Now tell me your name."

She raised her head firmly, refusing to look at him as she gazed off into the distance. Finally, after what seemed like an aeon of silence, she muttered,

"No."

"You will tell me your name," Cortez ordered, his body stiffening with fury as he contemplated the
suppleness of her form, "If you desire that the rest of your pack – barring those of your sisters that my sabres take – to remain alive when we leave."

Hearing his ultimatum, the tigress glanced at her sisters and pack-mates and then looked into the alpha's eyes.

_Fearless, Cortez thought approvingly. What a beauty she is! And she is perfect to become my second mate … although it is a shame "the Scarlett" - she never gave me any other name to call her - had to be banished for overstepping her place._

The tigress took in a deep breath. She looked him in the eye defiantly.

"My name is Lucita, if it please my lord."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"All right, everyone!" Cortez shouted, descending from the viewpoint rock. He swept his gaze over the members of his pack gathered before him, pleased to see that everyone was here and accounted for.

His stare fell upon a medium-sized cub with dark green eyes and a tight, heavily built physique – his firstborn cub, Soto - who stood with his hunting party eagerly, however all the while he cast hate-laden glares at Lucita whenever she was present. He was scowling even as Cortez looked at down at him with love, remembering the union that had produced him.

_Wait... the alpha realised with horror as he took in that all his males were nearby. Where is Lucita? Where is my alpha consort, my hope that my line will go on? Where is mi bella?_

"Cortez!" A voice called out, with the timbres of a musical female tone. It was Lucita. She appeared, loping to the top of the headland, panting with exhaustion as she skidded to a halt beside the alpha, wearily laying her head on his shoulder.

_See? I knew she'd come around._

"Cortez!" she exclaimed again, gasping for breath. "I've found a birthplace for our cubs! Come see it."

x-x-x-x-x-

"Wait," Ellie said, holding up her trunk. Diego paused in his narration, glancing at Ellie curiously. "So you mean to tell me that your father just stalked into your mother's camp and made off with her, Diego? That is just simply ... barbaric."

Manny and Sid exchanged amused glances that the female mammoth didn't notice.

Diego sighed,

"Ellie, that's just the way it's always been done within my own species. I warned you it might offend you."

"True," Ellie agreed, snuggling up against Manny. "I'm not angry at you, Diego. It just angers me to see anyone – even if she is a sabre – being treated like that."

Sid let out a barking laugh,

"Hey, Ellie," he asked. "When did you become a feminitht?"
"All right, that's enough," Manny ordered, glaring at Sid and Ellie, who hushed up quickly, looking discomfited as they realised they were interrupting the story.

"I muth thay," Shelley added, "I like how you told your thlory at the beginning, Diego, with the first part and your father – Cortez – having the flashback that continues it."

"Well, it's nice of you to say that we sabres are good at some things, Shelley," Diego retorted, exchanging a glance with the cub.

Not hearing the tiger's comment, Sid scoffed at the lady sloth,

"I could do that ath well, Thelley. Probably even better."

"Oh really, Thid?" Shelley countered with a pointed glint in her eyes.

"Diego, as you were saying… ?" Manny interrupted the two squabbling sloths, darting a glance at his friend. He noticed that the sabre was regarding Axel with deep interest, his eyes half-lidded.

Ah, so he's thinking about the cub. Manny thought. I wonder what he's pondering about him.

Diego snapped out of his reverie just as the bull mammoth was about to repeat his question. He inhaled deeply, and then continued,

"My mother Lucita, having got my father's attention with the news of the birthplace, convinced him to come see it with her…"

x-x-x-x-x-

"Of course, my Lucita," Cortez growled, his thick accent caressing the words. He stepped up next to her, laying his head against hers gently as he rubbed against her lovingly. To his surprise, she didn't shy away from him either, and he took it as a sign that she was beginning to actually put her trust in him.

"Come," Lucita whispered, her chest heaving marginally as she moved backward, her eyes seeking out Cortez's. The alpha glanced around at his pack standing anxiously before him as he muttered,

"Soto, for the moment you're in charge."

x-x-x-x-x-

Hearing his father's words, Soto's lips curved upward in a lopsided smile as he turned to face his sabres while Cortez vanished into bracken after Lucita. He loped up onto the headland, scouting the land like he had seen his father do, casting his gaze over to where his stepmother had led his father off to, his eyes darkening with hidden, seething resentment.

As Soto stood alone, watching the night shadows blanket the landscape, Lucita led her mate to a small cave, located near a secluded area near the smoking mountain in the territory.

This is made just for her, Cortes mused, noting the interior suggested that some months before that a cave bear had denned in the cavern. He looked around for his golden-furred mate, but she was nowhere to be seen, having vanished into the underground. The alpha loped into the cave, attempting to follow, but he came face to face with a stranger who whirled on him in the darkness.
Lucita snarled at him, baring her teeth menacingly, her hackles raised as if she was about to fling herself into battle.

Cortez realised with a thud that she obviously didn't want him around when she gave birth, so he turned away sharply, his light green eyes glinting with anger mingled with annoyance as he shrugged his shoulders marginally, deciding it was time that he take Soto out on the hunt, since the night was brisk and clear, and the rising full moon would ease their ability to catch prey.

Lucita glanced briefly at the mouth of the cave, checking quickly to confirm that she had been left alone before padding deeper into the cavern, lying down on a pile of dried grasses with a sigh. Turning her head sharply, she nipped at her swollen belly, steadfastly trying to ignore the pain coursing through her as the birth pains assailed her with increasing frequency.

Gritting her teeth, she repressed the groans seeking to flee from her – sabres were taught not to outwardly express their anguish during birthing, preferring by sabre law to suffer in silence – as the first cub slipped into the grasses behind her. Gathering her strength, Lucita gently caught hold of the baby's scruff in her teeth, pulling it up next to her so that it could begin to suckle. The cub sought eagerly for its mother's teats, beginning to suckle hungrily as the tigress allowed a smile to come into her eyes. Joaquin, she named the cub, her oldest boy.

Another contraction struck her, and she nearly cried out because of the pain as another small, faintly spotted cub emerged. Drawing it over to the first cub, Lucita noticed that this one was a tigress. Estela, she called her second-oldest in her mind as the cub latched onto her, suckling as avidly as her older brother.

She immediately set to work, licking her cubs dry with her rough tongue, glad for a distraction from her contractions, which continued to attack her, causing the tigress to ponder dryly that she felt as if a mammoth had sat on her stomach as the next cub made its appearance, raising her number of young to three.

Once again she reached her head over to grab hold of the cub's scruff, making it mewl in protest over the treatment as Lucita smiled at the pluckiness of her third young one as she placed him next to his brother and sister. Diego, she thought as she drew her tongue over the cub, drying him off as he snuggled up against the warmth his siblings provided. The tigress allowed herself to rest momentarily, noticing that the pains has ceased for a while, licking her three cubs, who slept beside her. Later, that evening, as the moonrise crept over the land with white light, flooding the cave with illumination, she gave birth to three more cubs, upping her number of cubs to six. Once again she repeated her movements of pulling them over to her, and licking them clean as she named them in her mind. Hermosa, she decided to call the tiny female with her spots as round as flowers, Marco was the male who pushed himself in between Joaquin and Diego to get to her milk, already a fighter, she thought approvingly, licking him, and last of all, Ramón, who despite being the last born was not a runt, instead he was thickly tubby for such a last-born, an attribute that pleased Lucita.

Once she had given her cubs one last final lick, she laid her head down on her forelegs, drifting off into a restful sleep as her babies ate hungrily, and once full, broke away from her, nestling with their siblings in one huge ball of fur. Opening one eye, the tigress used her foreleg to draw her cubs closer to her protectively before giving in to her weariness.
Silent pawsteps padded towards the cavern as the outline of a shadowy, lithe form crept into the cave, the shadow's dark green eyes glowing intensely yellow as it stole deeper into the cave, its eyes brightening with insane delight as the footsteps moved in closer on the sleeping tigress and her cubs.

Abruptly, Lucita awoke, blinking her eyes rather blearily at the harsh moonlight filtering into the cave, sensing that ... something ... was not right. The tigress raised her head, angling her ears to pick up any faint noises – and that was when she heard the snap of a twig breaking underneath the intruder's paw.

Her ears laid flat against her skull as her heart began to pound; however, Lucita squared her jaw defiantly, leaning over her babies with her body, using her forelegs to pull them closer to her, every muscle in her frame tensed for action if need be.

Lucita glanced up, her gaze straying towards the moonlight dappling the surface of the cave with a pathway of white light, poking into her eyes so that she blinked against the strength of it. Opening them, she noticed that it was dark – a shadow stood over her, blocking out the light of the moon.

The intruder advanced, the husky physique of its form not belying how it moved with a slender grace for one so heavily built. The sabre halted in front of Lucita, its yellow eyes glimmering furiously at the alpha consort. Silently, Lucita cast her eyes over the sabre in front her. She bit back a gasp of disbelief.

This – this is no sabre. It's a tigress!

The unknown saberess said nothing. She only glared at the alpha consort with dispassionate coldness in her dark green eyes that were slipping into more of that lurid yellow colour as she glanced with clinical appraisal at the small balls of fur snuggled up against Lucita.

Striding toward the alpha consort, she forced Lucita to creep back up against the wall, her foreleg still around her babies. The alpha consort turned her eyes upward, intercepting a deadly vicious glance directed towards her little ones, anger rising within her as realisation struck her like bitterly freezing rain seeping into her fur,

This tigress means harm for my babies.

Immediately as that thought penetrated her mind, Lucita rose to her feet, her little ones mewling in protest as their mother's warmth dissipated from them. Shivering in the frostiness of the night, the cubs snuggled together, seeking each other's body heat.

Hermosa yawned before falling back to sleep again, her head resting on Diego's chest. The alpha consort threw her head back, glowering at the saberess who had the gall to break into her birthing den. Slowly, she paced forward in front of her cubs, matching the intruder's steps paw for paw as the two eyed one another, snarling viciously.

Bunching her muscles together, Lucita jumped forward, landing squarely on the shoulders of the saberess. The saberess tossed her head, placing her own paws on the alpha consort's shoulders as she easily propelled Lucita off of her, slamming her up against the cave wall.

She groaned as her skull made contact with the roughness of the wall, her eyes half-closing as pain overwhelmed her. Darkness engulfed her briefly. Lucita returned to consciousness to find her head throbbing painfully as she forced herself to rise to her feet again.
My babies. Are my babies all right?

She raised her head to the little alcove where she had placed them, her eyes widening. She noticed that the walls were now stained red – deeper than ochre- as she saw, rooted to the ground, unable to move, the saberess swipe her claws viciously across the mewling bodies of her two oldest cubs.

One second later, the mewling stopped as if a light has been turned off, and the saberess looked at Lucita, vengeance flitting in her dark green eyes as she growled at the alpha consort warningly.

Cortez's mate glanced down at their two oldest cubs, sensing immediately that by the still limpness of their bodies that her babies were no more. Rage surged through her slight figure, lending her the strength to strike out at the unknown tigress again, blinking away the tears in her eyes as she snarled,

"Why are you doing this to me? What have I ever done to you?"

In response the saberess coolly swung one of her massive forelegs at the alpha consort, succeeding in easily knocking her down. Lucita watched as if in slow-motion the tigress' paw came down once more at her, but before she could move out of the way, it struck her hard, bruising her on the shoulders.

The alpha consort sank to the ground as the saberess leaned in close to her, a pleased smirk playing around the corners of her mouth as she whispered,

"This is the price you have to pay for taking my place!"

Lucita groaned at the words as she struggled to rise again, but her legs trembled beneath her, not giving her enough impetus to stand. The saberess turned away from her, lifting her paw above the cluster of her middle and youngest cubs.

She brought her paw down hard, raking her claws over them. Little rivulets trickled out from the small forms, staining the ground with the same sickening colour, collecting into a dark red pool.

No! No!

Finding strength she didn't know that she had, Lucita forced herself to rise onto her feet, tottering slightly as she regained her balance. Throwing her head back in defiance, she jumped forward; thwarting the saberess' final blow with her body as she bent protectively over her cubs. The alpha consort winced in pain as she felt the saberess' claws scrape her side.

Ignoring the pain, she lowered her face to the ground, touching her cubs with her nose anxiously as the saberess watched her with cold disdain glowing in her eyes. As she nosed her cubs, hoping against hope that they were still alive, the harsh reality of it struck her. She nuzzled their small, still forms forlornly, getting no response.

Letting out a sigh that reached to her very marrow, Lucita raised her head. She brushed it against the face of one of her little ones. Stirring marginally, the cub lifted its head towards her in response, mewling faintly.

One of my babies is still alive, Lucita thought as a rush of relief flowed over her. Bending down, she nosed at the baby, trying to see who it was.

Diego. My little Diego is alive.

Lucita fully raised her head, staring at the tigress with unshed tears glimmering in her eyes.
Expanding her chest, she took in a deep breath before snarling viciously as she stepped in front of her remaining cub, defiance shining in her brown eyes.

The saberess growled in frustration. Her hackles lifting in anger, she attempted to snatch at the tiny cub, although it was to no avail, Lucita whacked her paw away as she gently pushed Diego into a corner so that she had the upper hand over the saberess.

The tigress glared at the alpha consort, bitterness flitting in her dark green eyes. She turned away, reluctantly conceding defeat as she slunk to the mouth of the cave. Pausing at the "door" she looked back, muttering,

"This is the price you have to pay, alpha consort, for taking the place that was properly mine. Oh, and that ... damn cub of yours? Trust me, he won't amount to anything."

Lucita sank down beside her only remaining cub as he crawled up next to her, snuggling into the warmth that she offered as she gazed at him, nuzzling him affectionately as tears darted into her eyes that she refused to wholly shed as she glanced at the still bodies of her cubs.

The moon reached its zenith in the sky, clouds beginning to cover its light as brusque winds filtered past the cavern. The alpha consort finished blinking away the stray tears from her eyes defiantly, as sabres females were not supposed to cry, for it was seen as weakness. Inhaling a deep breath, she composed herself, standing to her feet, swaying gently as she tried to get her bearings again.

She stepped forward, moaning slightly as the bruise on her shoulders throbbed with her faltering movements toward the back of the cavern where the soil was moist. Angrily, she scraped her paws along the dirt, opening five little burrows. Lucita gave one last long gaze at the still forms of her beautiful little cubs before she roused herself, grabbing their scuffs one by one and laying them in a respective burrow. Diego crept up next to her, his eyes slowly beginning to open. Lucita glanced at him solemnly, and then looked away. Instantly, she returned her gaze to her only remaining child, struck by the colour of his eyes.

*He has Cortez's eyes.*

Letting out a sigh, she picked up Diego by his scruff, removing him from the resting place of his siblings. She set him on the ground over by her bed of moss, and then lay down next to him. The alpha consort bent her head down to lick her son thoroughly, praying,

*Oh my son, be strong ... be strong so that you may not die like your siblings...*

The fire crackled loudly in the midst of the silent cave as Diego finished the beginning to his tale. The tiger glanced up, noticing that the eyes of the two females present were wet with tears, and that even Manny and Sid appeared shaken. He glanced over at the cub, determining with a brief glimpse that Axel seemed perturbed.

"That's harsh ... that's really, really harsh," was Manny's comment. Manny knew some parts of Diego's story already, but if the sabre remembered correctly, he hadn't known this part. It was a secret of his past that even Diego had tried to forget, concealing it in the dark corners of his brain where his thoughts vanished, knowing that this story in his past had the potential for danger.

"Those poor babies," Ellie added, wiping a tear from her eye. "Your poor mother."
Shelley looked up from her work of plying a few threads together.

"That tigereth," she asked pointedly, "who wath thhe?"

Diego averted his gaze from the she-sloth, the light of fear and embarrassment shining in his eyes.

"I'd rather not tell any more about it right now," he hedged.

"Yeah," Sid broke in. "That part of your thlory wath too thad. Let Manny tell again now, Diego."

Par for the course for his statement, Sid saw a large brown mammoth trunk heading straight for his head, whacking him.

"It's not Diego's fault his story is harsh," Manny admonished the sloth.

A sigh from the corner that the tiger lay in caused both Manny and Sid to look up.

"It's okay, Manny," Diego mussitated. "We need a change of pace for a while anyway. Just continue telling about your growing up."

"Ah... all right," Manny agreed, meeting the tiger's green eyes briefly. "My story starts again with me spending time with my father, Clovis..."

Review?
Legacy

Chapter Summary

Manny and Diego review the two different legacies they were born into to the herd.

Manny chuckled,

"My part of the story isn't that much right now, so we'll be back to Diego soon if he doesn't mind."

He glanced over at the tiger, raising one eyebrow inquisitively. In reply, Diego shook his head, indicating that he wasn't bothered by it.

Shelley clapped her hands in delight, her eyes brightening. Sid glanced at her, quietly taking her hand with any of the others noticing as he whispered,

"I'm glad you're enjoying the thhories, Thelley."

His remark caused her to giggle at him before she batted away his hand with her plying instrument, obviously annoyed that Sid had intruded on her personal space.

"Okay then," Manny went on. "As I was saying... I was spending some quality time with my dad, Clovis..."

x-x-x-x-x-

Clovis breathed in deeply as he strode through the forests of the Bredelands, making his way towards his mate's birthing thicket. The large dark brown mammoth bull emitted a joyful trumpet into the air as he briskly stepped along, holding his head erect yet without arrogance.

Oh, it'll be good to see Millie and Manfred again, he rejoiced. I do realise that taking on the responsibilities of an Elder (maybe even one day a Regent Elder) are important, such as being the diplomat between a border dispute with the Steppe breeds and the dire wolves of the border don't compare to the significance that my Millie and our little Manfred have for me – they are truly more essential than any rank offered.

As he neared the clearing, his heart quickened with excitement as he anticipated looking into his mate's eyes again and tossing their calf into the air, and a thought entered his mind.

"I'll surprise them both," he said to himself, tiptoeing around the back of the thicket. Brushing aside some leaves, he peered through the hole offered to him.

"Manfred, Manfred," he heard Millie's voice calling as she looked around the miniature clearing for their child. Clovis wondered if they were playing hide and seek.

"Manfred," Millie let out a sigh. "Come out, sweetie. It's time for your lunch." She paused as if in thought, and then continued, musingly, "My boy, that name of yours is a mouthful… Manfred, come out of your hiding place now, it's time for lunch."

Clovis wagged his eyebrows from his own hiding place, quietly removing the leaves in front of
him so that he could get through without his mate seeing him. Gracefully he emerged into the thicket, sneaking up behind Millie, who was still calling for their calf.

The bull crept up behind her silently, pleased to see that she was much too concerned with discovering the location of their disobedient child, and slipped his trunk into hers, intertwining them as he leaned in next to her, planting a kiss on her lips.

Nearby, in the cover of the bushes, a chortle emanated, causing Millie and Clovis to break away from each other, gasping a little as they gazed into each other's eyes hungrily.

"I missed you, honey," the light brown cow murmured.

In response to her statement, Clovis intertwined his trunk with her own, glancing over towards the bushes as he replied,

"So did I, dearest, more than anything. Now where is our rascal of a son?"

x-x-x-x-x-

"Wait, wait, wait," Crash interrupted, raising his hand. Manny paused mid-sentence, sending a stone-cold glare over at his brother-in-law. "Objection!"

The mammoth bull sighed,

"What is it, Crash?"

"You said you 'were spending some quality time' with your father Clovis. I don't see that happening. I only see yucky stuff happening between your parents."

Eddie, taking his brother's lead, hopped onto Manny's right front tusk.

"Yeah, what he said," he added.

Manny rolled his eyes in annoyance. He opened his mouth to say something cutting towards the possums but Diego got there first.

"Hey, you two morsels; behave or you're facing a punishment down my throat."

At his comment, Crash and Eddie plumped to the ground beside Manny, shooting nervous glances in Diego's direction.

Manny cleared his throat, bringing everyone's attention back to him. The two possums appeared to be penitent, silently waiting for the mammoth to continue.

"Anyway, as I was saying…"

x-x-x-x-x-

Another giggle emanated from the leafy fronds encircling the thicket as the two year old burst out the covering, crying out,

"Daddy! Daddy!"

Clovis grinned, reaching out his trunk towards Manfred, scooping him up boisterously.

"Come here, little guy!" he exclaimed, throwing him into the air as Manfred laughed
appreciatively. Setting the calf down upon the ground, Clovis affected a stern expression as he looked down at his son.

"Manny," he asked. "Have you been a good boy for your mother while I was gone?"

The small dark brown calf glanced from his mother to his father, his eyes wide. Slowly he nodded.

"Manny!" Millie blurted. "Oh Clovis, that's the perfect nickname."

The newly christened Manny raised his trunk into the air, seemingly in agreement with his parent's consensus. Clovis chuckled, leaning in close to his mate as they watched Manny explore every nook and cranny of their thicket, proud smiles wreathing their faces.

*Just think,* Clovis mused, not realising he was speaking his thoughts aloud, *just think – one day our Manny might well indeed be our legacy within the herd. May our son be a great one.* To his side, he vaguely heard Millie chuckling. She twined her trunk with hers, murmuring,

"I hope so too, my Clovis."

x-x-x-x-x-

Manny looked up from the fire, noting with pleasure that both Ellie and Shelley were discussing in low tones how cute he must have been as a calf, while the cub Axel's eyes had brightened visibly at the mention of his younger self's relationship with his father.

A shadow passed over his eyes as Manny remembered his father, brought on all the more keenly by the words the Chancellor had said when he had originally gone before the Council seven years before, this day to defend his friend the tiger in an attempt to keep him from being expelled from the Valley. The Chancellor's words echoed though his memory,

"Well, now aren't you just your father's son!" that he had cried out upon first meeting him that day prior to the petition before the entire Council.

The cub raised his head slightly, fixing Manny with a hard stare.

"Hey, mammoth," he began, lifting an eyebrow with nonchalant flair, "what's a legacy?"

Ripped away from his reminiscences, Manny turned to the cub, a gentle smile playing around his mouth.

*He's only around maybe eleven,* Manny reasoned. *Stands to figure that he wouldn't know what a legacy is.*

"A legacy is well, the heritage given to others," Manny explained, noting with amusement the skepticism that still glittered in the cub's eyes.

"Ah ... legacy," Diego mused, almost to himself, causing the group to glance up at him, curiosity in their faces. The sabre turned his head to look at Manny, his green eyes melancholy.

"I'm afraid to say that the legacy I was born into was very different from yours, Manny," he continued, letting out a sigh as he finished.

"What was your legacy?" Manny queried, shooting a stern glance at Sid to warn him not to blurt out anything insensitive.

"Oh, it's just one where my father was so pleased with my mother for giving him only one cub to
extend the lineage of his pack and so forth,” Diego retorted, sarcasm belying his light tone.

Nearby, Sid exchanged a puzzled glance with the tan-coloured she-sloth, not understanding. Axel raised his head, interest dancing his eyes as he asked quietly,

"Mr Diego, who was 'The Scarlett' you mentioned earlier?"

The sabre's eyes dimmed at the question as memories assailed him from his earlier life before coming across that mammoth, that baby and that sloth the day Soto had practically issued his death warrant for failing to retrieve the baby.

"Kiddo, don't call me 'Mr'," Diego replied, gruffness in his voice. "Name's Diego."

"I gueth Diego doethn't want to tell you right now, Axel," Sid added helpfully. For his pains the cub stood up, growling at him menacingly. Sid instantly retreated closer to Shelley, who rose to her feet, staring down at Axel with a baleful light in her eyes. Placing her claws akimbo on her side, she ordered,

"Down. Sit. Down now. Cub."

Reluctantly, Axel sank to the ground, sending a resentment-laden glance at Shelley.

Diego scoffed,

"Is it really so hard to remember that he has a name and feelings like you do, Shelley? What right have you to treat him that way?"

Shelley raised her eyebrows in surprise at Diego's comment.

"Oh! Well, if I muth thay my piece, thir, the truth ith that I haven't truthted him ever! He juth ended up tagging along with me, and I took pity on him and let him thtay with me – but I have kept my dithance thince I fear he might turn on me any moment."

Manny rose to his feet, his shadow cast ominously over the dancing golden flames reflected against the back of the cave.

"Now, now, Shelley," he soothed.

Eddie spoke up then.

"Can we hear more of Diego's story?" he asked, his eyes brightening. "I'm curious about how Diego's legacy is different!"

Crash raised his hand. "Before we start Diego's story again, I have a question for you two: why do your stories focus so much on your dads?"

Manny and Diego exchanged a brotherly glance before Manny answered,

"Apparently, Diego and I were really close with our dads, and when we tell our stories, we remember it through their eyes since that's the way it was told to us."

Crash slammed his hand down upon his fist.

"Cool!" he responded. "Can we get on with Diego's story now?"

Diego chuckled, turning his head slightly. He met the gaze of the cub in front of him, but Axel
looked away briefly, his face stormy.  

"Okay," the sabre declared, gazing back into the cavorting red-blue lights of the fire, slipping back into his memories. "It was the morning after the attack, and my mother knew she would have to let the alpha see what cubs she had brought forth as the continuation for his pack ... and my mother knew he wouldn't be pleased when he saw that she had only one cub who his legacy would rest upon..."  

x-x-x-x-x-

Laying on his side in the communal cave that he had selected for his pack, Cortez groaned, missing the warmth of Lucita, who usually slept right next to him during their travels. A sliver of sunlight darted into the cavern as he attempted to close his eyes again to snatch a few precious nuggets of rest. Unfortunately for the young alpha, the light insisted on creeping in, prodding at his eyelids so that his sleep was interrupted.  

Resigning himself to the fact that it was now morning, Cortez rose groggily, peering around at the males of his pack. His gaze fell upon the sole cub resting with the other adults. His coat was of a burnished amber hue, and his incisors were already developing quite well.  

*Quite well indeed,* Cortez thought approvingly as he bent down to lick his son's head. *Soto took down an antelope all by himself last night after only a bit of training from me. And that scoundrel Brutus.* He raised his head, blinking his eyes against the irritating early dawn sunlight as he mused; *It's a shame that he has no chance at becoming the alpha though – due to his mother's overstepping her place within the pack, he is now illegitimate. The honour of becoming the next alpha in line will instead pass to Lucita's oldest cub.*  

*Cub.*  

*Lucita's probably had her cubs by now!*

As the thought penetrated his skull, the alpha let out a small, rumbling growl which carried a tone of authority under it. Immediately, his sabres rose to their feet, inquiries in their faces as to why they had been awakened so early. The slight breeze they caused as they stood up roused Soto, and he opened his eyes blearily, trying to figure out what was happening. Satisfied that he had gotten everyone's attention, Cortez loped to the front of the cave, his bright eyes gleaming in the half-light that shrouded their hideout.  

"I have great news," the alpha proclaimed as his sabres turned to face him. Soto rose to his feet; his dark green eyes alight with curiosity, something that made Cortez proud. He hoped that his eldest son would like his new brothers and sisters.  

"My alpha consort, Lucita, has given birth to cubs over the last night – it only seems fair that we go see my cubs," he paused, and then continued, "my cubs that will be the legacy for the future of this pack."  

During his speech, Cortez glanced down at Soto, and to his surprise he noticed that the cub's face was knit in a tight scowl. Idly, the alpha speculated as to why. Throwing his head back and lifting his shoulders with satisfaction, he dashed out of the cave, his sabres hard on his heels. Soto trailed along after them reluctantly.  

...  

Arriving at the old bear's den, Cortez skid to a halt, his sabres falling into an orderly line behind
him, all eyes on the silent cavern in front of them.

"Lucita, consort of the alpha, come forth!" Cortez bellowed, striding over to the cave impatiently.

Silence emanated from the cave in reply.

Where is she? Cortez fretted, pacing back and forth on the rise adjacent to his mate's birthing place. He glanced around dourly, noting that the greyness was beginning to ascend from the corners and hills, revealing the verdant grasses and tan colours of the soil as the light at dawn extended beyond the mountains and into the pack's northernmost half of the valley.

A subtle movement, made as if by a sabre padding like a wraith across the ground, radiated from the opening of the cave. Cortez's head snapped forward eagerly as he watched Lucita step into the light, admiring the slender form of her body as arrows of dawn pierced the clearing.

The alpha noticed, to his surprise and annoyance, that in her large jowls she bore only a single cub. It was small in appearance, the faint spots scattered throughout its fur resembling that of the young lion cubs that he knew of since they resided on the plains beyond the tall, concave mountain that occasionally spewed out smoke and flames that he had dubbed Vetta Inferno.

The alpha glanced around briefly, wondering why his mate had emerged from her birthing den with one mere cub when he was convinced that she had been distended enough to imply several. He turned his face toward the cub again, catching a glimpse of its eyes, which were green.

It's like my own eyes reflected back to me, Cortez realised with a pang of fatherly pride surging through him. He has the eyes of a hunter, that one.

He bent his massive head in a slight incline, granting his mate permission to join the males on the plateau adjacent to her cave. Lucita glanced up at him, a tremulous light glinting in her expression as she took her only cub over to the flat surface, knowing that her alpha would insist on a Presentation that all the sabre packs performed; so that their next generation might be introduced to the elders and the alpha of the group.

Cortez idly noted the fear lingering in his mate's eyes as she laid the cub down upon the grassy table, casting nervous glances at the other sabres gathered nearby, already waiting, her gaze falling upon her stepson; who glared at her briefly and then the elder, Brutus. Cortez growled low in his throat, tearing her stare away from the well-built elder. She bowed her head deferentially to Cortez before pushing the cub into the centre.

The cub, not realising the significance of the event he was the impetus of, began to prowl around the smooth hillock after a beetle. He extended his paw, trapping the beetle under it with some delight as Cortez watched him with pride tempered by an underlying hint of anxiety as he wondered why his Lucita had produced only a single cub for the continuation of his lineage.

The alpha looked on as his new son removed his paw from the beetle, observing silently as it peddled away. He darted after it, skidding to an abrupt stop as he stared up at the massive elder Brutus, curiosity shining in his eyes.

Cortez uttered a low, angry growl as he stood nearby, forced to watch as the elder knelt to the ground, covering his eyes with his paws before jumping at the alpha's new son, shouting.

"Where's the cub? There he is!"

Immediately, the sabres gathered in a circle around the young cub of Lucita broke into whispers, as no one had ever seen Brutus act so unrestrained as they chuckled with each other, knowing that this
was an anecdote that had never happened before in the history of the sabre clans and thusly would be retold over and over. Cortez narrowed his eyes angrily, jealousy flashing briefly in his visage.

*How dare my son go over to that scrungy excuse for an elder instead of me first?* Cortez groused inwardly. *I'm his father, not that pathetic "elder" that I inherited from my own sire.* Seeking for a means to calm his rapidly escalating fury, the alpha diverted his gaze from the elder and his son, noticing out of the corner of his eye that the cub had let out a squeak of fright because of the elder's game and that he had scurried behind his mother, peering out from behind her apprehensively.

*Good.* Cortez thought, a smirk playing around the corners of his lips. He swept his gaze around the plateau, his eyes seeking out any slight signs of movement that might hint at more cubs beside the one that now hid behind his mother's back. Finding no cubs, the alpha turned to his mate, his features hardening.

"He is the only one?" he questioned Lucita, advancing at her, anger visible in every pawstep. He stopped short in front of her, gesturing at the still frightened cub. "How could you give me only one measly cub, Lucita?"

He was pleased to see that his mate hang her head in shame. She knew how important a fine litter of cubs was to the pack, and he couldn't believe that she would betray him in this way. Lifting her eyes, she stared into his face in an almost defiant manner, a wisp of sorrow glistening in her eyes. She glanced down at their son quietly before replying at last,

"Yes," she conceded, admitting the fact that she had disappointed Cortez. She took in a deep breath, "There were..." she trailed off, her voice faltering marginally. "Complications."

As her statement sank in, the sabres clustered around the alpha began to whisper once more. Cortez whipped his head towards them, and the murmurs abruptly faded away. Turning back to his alpha consort, Cortez flattened his ears back against his skull as he stalked towards Lucita, emitting a roar that echoed throughout the area, his eyes cold as he stared at her. Silently, he raised himself to his full height, his sabres falling back, watching with keen interest as he towered over his mate. Lucita stood firm as Cortez lunged at her abruptly, nearly knocking her over as she swayed on her feet, glancing back at their son in alarm as she sank to the grass, biting her lip as if in pain.

Satisfied that he had taught her a lesson, Cortez began to stroll off, noticing that out of the corner of his eye that Lucita had risen to her feet and was loping toward him. He didn't see her leaping at him, claws extended, until it was too late. Her claws tore into his shoulder, leaving a puncture wound down his foreleg. The alpha bit back a groan, narrowing his eyes, which were darkening to a near-black with shock and latent rage as he glared at his consort, frustration seething through the very core of his body.

*Betrayal. Utter betrayal.* The thought resounded through his mind like the pang of an injury refusing to heal. He raised himself onto his hind legs, swinging his paw at his mate with a swift uppercut, easily succeeding in knocking her to the ground, as his right paw with claws unfurled ripped down her left shoulder, causing blood to trickle down her leg while she gritted her teeth against the burning sensation of the pain. Her single cub whimpered in alarm, crawling over to his mother, burying his head into her fur.

Watching the scene, Cortez felt his heart soften momentarily as he cursed himself for his rash actions toward his alpha consort.

*I didn't even think to ask what happened,* he chided himself as he moved in the direction that his mate now lay in. Much to his astonishment and irritation, he saw Brutus come alongside his mate, trading glares with Cortez as he did so, nudging Lucita back to her feet. Cortez stopped short, his
shoulders shaking imperceptibly as he watched the elder hold up Lucita as she attempted to recompose herself.

Once Brutus saw that his mate was able to stand back on her own feet unaided, he pushed the cub in her direction, and she nudged the cub closer to her. The alpha observed silently as Brutus gently herded his mate and his cub into the centre, the place of honour according to sabre customs, before respectfully withdrawing to some distance away. Brutus turned to face the rest of the pack so that he could address them, avoiding making eye contact with Cortez.

"The birth of a cub is basis for celebration, even if there is only one," Brutus reminded everyone, and the alpha winced inwardly, knowing it was directed at him. His mouth slumped into a frown as Brutus went on, swiveling his massive head in Lucita's direction where she stood proudly in the centre with her cub.

"Lucita, what are you going to call him?"

His golden-furred alpha consort glanced up from licking her cub with slow, comforting strokes as he leaned against her legs, purring softly.

"Diego," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper. "His name is Diego."

The elder inclined his head in response as he drew back his substantial head, expanding his chest to allow room to emanate a long bellow. It was the final part of the Presentation ceremony, and privately Cortez writhed, realising full well that he should have opened the welcoming roar to his son, but he stayed quiet. One by one his sabres took up Brutus' shout, and even Soto grudgingly offered his own snarl of greeting to his new sibling, keeping his eyes on Lucita. The tigress ignored him, turning her head aside so as not to face her mate. At last she raised her head, adding her own voice, blending in with the males of the pack yet creating her own modulation.

The alpha rose to his full stature, his gaze dropping down to eye-level with his young son as he took in a deep breath, exhaling the loudest roar of any of the others.

*Roar, my son, roar my Diego,* he thought at the cub peering around at the sabres with wonder dancing in his eyes. *Roar, and show them what you're made of.*

Tentatively the cub stepped into the middle of the centre, glancing around curiously before letting out a roar that was an indication to Cortez of what kind of a sabre his son would become, and he smiled.

---

Back in the cave, all was silent for the breath of one moment before Crash spoke up.

"Whoa, your dad was intense," he commented, aiming his remark at the sabre.

"Yeah, he is," Eddie added, tossing a rock towards the fire.

"In fact, he's much more interesting…" Crash began to say but paused mid-sentence when he saw Manny glaring at him. Crash gave a nervous smirk, disappearing behind Ellie's tuft of hair.

Shelley plied her grasses beside the fire, turning her head to look at Sidney, a suggestive light flitting in her expression.

"Thidney," she purred, "why haven't you told me your thtory?"
Sid blushed, glancing up at his friends, rubbing his claws together in an embarrassed manner.

"Well, uh," Sid stumbled over his words. "My thtory ith very thimple in comparithon to my friendth, tho I'll tell it to you another time, juth not around a campfire."

"Why thank you Sid," Manny called at him, sincerity in his voice. "I suppose it's back to me, isn't it?"

"Yes," Diego confirmed. "I think our paths might be crossing soon, my friend," he continued, winking at the mammoth.

Review?
"Aye," agreed the mammoth, his mind trailing back to the happy days of his childhood as a face surfaced in his imagination of his old friend, William, now the Elder of the Three Fjords herd.

The herd I left...

"So, Manny, what happened next in your story?" Ellie's voice spoke up beside him, shaking Manny away from his memories. He started marginally.

"Hmmm..." the bull murmured, rubbing his head reflectively. "Let me remember..."

"Remember?" Ellie teased, twining her trunk into his as she gazed into his eyes. "But I thought that a mammoth never forgets."

Manny chuckled,

"True... and I have it now!"

"So, what happens next?" Crash queried, his eyes bright with interest.

"Well, as it happens," Manny continued, "I wasn't behaving well that day and I was trying my mother's patience..."

x-x-x-x-x-

"Manny!" Millie called out as she stepped outside of the thicket. She glanced skywards, idly noting to herself that the sun was at its zenith and that shadows were beginning to fall across the grasses from the trees overhead.

Where is my little Manfred, she pondered to herself. She needed to find him quickly. Clovis wanted both Millie and their calf present at the voting to confirm whether or not their herd would remain in the Bredelands, in the diocese known as the Three Fjords, where the rivers and the mountains came together.

She swept her gaze around the vicinity that served as a nursery ground for pregnant cows and cows that had just given birth, where Clovis had installed her and their calf in a month before he departed.

He had gone to return to their herd assembly of all the mammoth species, as some pressing issues were being discussed and his presence was mandatory during the councils, since he was the herd's Elder and therefore their representative before the main Council, their guide when it came to the migration routes, and ultimate executive of decisions.

Which is why he needed Millie, along with their calf to be there. He wanted to consult with Millie
on the matter of staying in the Bredelands because she was his mate, and he loved to hear her opinion.

*Now where is Manny?*

Nearby, a giggle sounded in the far left of the meadow and Millie's head snapped forward as her ears caught the sound. She peered around a tall aspen tree as a bright blue butterfly flitted past her as a dark brown bull-calf followed in hot pursuit after it avidly. Millie watched as her son galumph by her, laughing as he chased after the pretty splash of colour. Letting a secret smile creep into her face, Millie sauntered out of her hiding place, making no loud sounds in spite of her mass, due to the rubbery soles of her feet, tiptoeing over to the young calf. Slipping her trunk around his body, she scooped him up as he protested,

"Mama, leggo! I wanna chase the pretty butterfly!"

"Not now, Manny," Millie chuckled. "We have to leave. It's time to go meet your daddy and the rest of the herd, and decide whether we remain here in this 'Broad Valley of the Glacier' or no."

"But I wanna stay here! I was having fun!"

x-x-x-x-x-

"Okay, waaaaaaait," Crash exclaimed, holding his paw up as the two mammoths, the older sabre and young tiger and the two sloths turned to look at him, annoyance flitting in their expressions. Crash noticed their reaction and tried to smooth it over.

"Well, Manny, you said you were only several months older since the last time," he began. "So how old are you, exactly?"

The mammoth bull frowned as if in thought, knitting his brows in such a manner that indicated the question bothered him a bit, more so because it should be obvious.

*But not to my mate's possum brothers,* Manny thought, rolling his eyes.

"Well, I'd say I was possibly around at least twelve months," he replied, a hint of irritation underlying his tone.

"Hey, Crathh," Sid spoke up from the corner, where he was holding some fibers of thin grasses for Shelley to remove from his claws so that she could ply them into a basket. "Thlop interrupting the thtory," he scolded.

"Yes, Manny," Diego seconded Sid's comment, with a sarcastic roll of his eyes at Crash. "Please continue. Any more interruptions and I'll eat them."

x-x-x-x-x-

Clovis rose from his tussock, stepping into the midst of the circle of mammoth sitting around him. In the distance, water burbled down the mountainside, slicing through the rocks as it trickled down the fjords into the sea twenty leagues away from where Clovis' informal council now sat. A brisk wind carried the salty aroma of the sea into the area, causing a few of the mammoths to shake their woolly coats as if to ward off the chill.

The reddish-brown bull glanced around, noting that the night shadows were lengthening with every moment as he looked for any sign that his mate and child might be arriving, and soon.
He raised his trunk into the air, breathing in deeply to discern any foreign scents that might be around as he hurried to safeguard against his mate and calf being ambushed by a pack of sabres. Smelling no indication that danger might be nearby, he returned to his tussock, idly tuning out the discussions whirling around him as he longed for Millie to be next to him again.

"Clovis," a voice said from behind him, making the bull start slightly as he shook himself out of his thoughts. It was Abelard, his second-in-command. Clovis recalled that how only a week after his Manfred was born; Abelard and Heloise had been blessed with a male calf that they had decided to name William. Clovis hoped that his son and Abelard's would become good friends much like their fathers already were.

"Clovis," the bull repeated, "It is time for the voting to commence – and the decision be made whether we remain in the Three Fjords or no."

"Can't we just hold on a little longer and wait for Millie and my son to arrive?" came the Elder's plea. "I want Millie to side with us about staying here. She has good repute within the council here, and they respect her – actually, our judgement." Hearing the concern for his family in his leader's tone, Abelard relented. He turned to the circle of mammoths gathered before him, declaring,

"Elder Clovis has decided that we shall wait until Millicent, our Madam Elder and her child arrive, and then we will determine the voting."

x-x-x-x-x-

"Okay, hold up," Diego exclaimed. "Sorry for interrupting, Manny, but if it doesn't bother anyone, I think my story needs to be brought into this period of time right now."

"Why?" Crash blurted out, receiving a stern glare from the sabre.

"Because my story is slowly beginning to intersect with Manny's, and he knows this. Right, Manny?"

"Yeah, but how does he know?" Eddie persisted, taking the words out of his brother's mouth.

"Because he obviously heard my story sometime back," the tiger retorted.

"I didn't know about the tigress who killed your siblings though," the mammoth said in an undertone, causing the sabre to flinch imperceptibly at the quiet comment.

*I didn't tell you about her on purpose, Manny,* he answered in his mind to his friend, *because I hope you'll never have to come across her or experience the things I had to undergo while living in Soto's pack.*

"When?" Sid asked, simplicity in his expression, which prompted the sabre to shift out of his musing thoughts, rolling his eyes in barely-contained irritation.

"Not long after we got to the South and ended up in the Meltdown Valley, Sid, Manny asked to hear more of my story while you were off trying to seduce the ladies." Diego explained, earning a look of dawning realisation from the sloth.

"Oooh!" he exclaimed. "Tho that'th what you two were doing when you'd go off together… you were juth talking?"

"Yeah," Diego admitted. A distant look entered into his eyes. "I first let some of it slip to Manny when we were on our way to Half-Peak – you heard it referred to in the story as Vetta Inferno – as
a way to lower his guard against me ... and it worked, much to my regret now."

Manny shifted next to Ellie, causing Diego and Sid to glance up at him. Sid's eyes were bright with interest.

"It did," Manny spoke up, agreeing with the sabre's confession. "My guard was lowered after hearing parts of it ... some of which, well... you haven't heard yet... and so I let him lead us there, thinking he was just being cynical about how bad things were within his pack, and only after coming face to face with Soto did I realise he'd told me the truth."

"After the incident at Half-Peak," Diego continued, "I was worried that Manny wouldn't want to hear more of my story, so I kept low about it until we made it back to the Bredelands, a place Manny had led us to because he grew up here, and the name was also familiar to me since I lived there in the northern territories. Once we settled into a groove with the other valley creatures, Manny asked to hear more of my story, which surprised me, because I was sure he wouldn't want to have anything more to do with it, since I'd used it to manipulate him into feeling sympathetic for me." The sabre glanced up at his friend, a grateful light sparkling in his eyes. "But he wanted to hear more of it, despite my manipulation of him with it the first time... and to be honest, I'm glad he wanted to."

"Well, it wouldn't have been fair to let you keep that story of yours all to yourself," Manny responded. "And I was happy to share in keeping the secret of it. And now all of the others here, including our new friends Axel and Shelley can have some part in it too."

Crash piped up,

"So does this mean we're back with Diego's intense dad Cortez again in the story?"

Axel's eyes brightened as he added quickly,

"Does it mean that, really? And ... Diego, I think your dad was one hell of a sabre."

A flash of irritation crossed Manny's face as he heard the cub use that uncouth word; and he rose to his feet, only for Ellie to extend her trunk to his shoulders, gently pulling him back.

*Good for that cub that Peaches isn't around to hear it,* Manny groused inwardly, shooting a glare at Axel, whose happy expression dimmed as he slowly comprehend that the mammoth was latently furious with him. Shelley intercepted the glances between mammoth and sabre cub, and decided it was time to smooth things over by returning to the story.

"Diego," she began. "If it'th no bother, but I think we would all appreciate hearing more of your thtory – cub here ethpecially."

"Name's Axel," the cub muttered under his breath, "not 'cub'. But to heck with it, can we hear more the story?"

"Of course," the tiger replied as he thought, *Axel is so brash. He reminds me of myself when I was younger.* "Unfortunately, my life after the presentation incident didn't get any better for me. And having a half-brother like Soto around was just the icing on the cake..."

Cortez loped to the centre of the meadow, casting his gaze across it as he sought out familiar outlines lying down beside each other, an intimation that Lucita was probably washing their cub, Diego, while other shapes of a rougher edge denoted the appearance of the males of the pack. He
padded on his route, receiving nods of deference from his sabres – and his alpha consort – as he went by them.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched as Diego wrestled free of his mother's grip, bounding over to him. He stopped short once he had reached Cortez' side, his eyes wide with awe at the sight of his father.

Awkwardly, the alpha bent his head down, licking the top of the cub's head as Lucita watched nearby. He couldn't help noticing that she regarded him with something resembling reserved disinterest nowadays, and he felt he knew why. Pushing his cub's head away from him with a playful nudge, Cortez murmured,

"Go back to your mother, Diego."

"Aww... but Dad," the cub whined. "Do I have to? I wanna spend time with you."

In response, the alpha uttered a low, menacing growl. Fear glinted in Diego's eyes as he whispered, "Okay, I'm going ... sorry for bothering you, Dad."

*It's not you, Diego,* Cortez thought in reply but his words remained unuttered as he watched his cub crawl back over to Lucita, settling in between his alpha consort's forelegs. She glanced upwards, and their gazes locked. He looked away quickly, aware of the scornful indictment he saw glittering in their depths.

He averted his gaze from his alpha consort and the cub, noting that his firstborn cub, Soto, lay on a tall boulder known to the sabres as being sacred ground, fit only for the alpha's paws; jutting out into the meadow, a baleful glint in his expression as he stared down at Lucita and Diego.

Cortez sighed inwardly, wondering what might have caused Soto to look so vindictively at his new stepmother and half-brother. At once his complacence melted away as anger swept over him; Soto should not be there – his being there was overstepping his place in their pack. Narrowing his eyes, Cortez shouted at his older cub,

"Soto!"

Hearing his name called, the cub propped his head onto his forelegs lazily, ignoring his father. Breaking into a run, Cortez leapt onto the boulder, his face warped in a sullen glare. Grabbing Soto by the scruff of his neck he pulled him close to him before retracting his incisors, depositing Soto onto the ground. The older cub hit the ground with a thud, causing Diego to laugh as he watched the interaction between his father and half-brother.

Lucita angled her head slightly so that she was looking at Cortez, and he glanced at her bashfully, hoping that she might have a glimmer of sympathy for him. He groaned to himself when he comprehended that her gaze was cool and distant, his thoughts falling upon one another as he recalled the incident that had lead to her treating him so reservedly, making all the love he had worked so hard to earn from her shatter to pieces. Worst of all, it was entirely his fault...

He had been out on the morning prowl with his oldest son, and on their way back to the shared cavern he noticed a silhouette of a delicate form – that could only suggest a tigress – standing firmly on the boulder against the pale pinks and golds of the sunrise.

His jaw tightened with fury at the temerity of this action as he stared with growing anger at the tigress, knowing that it could only be his Lucita, as no other females resided in the pack beside the alpha consort.
Soto glanced up at him, a pleased glint in his eyes, but Cortez didn't see it – he only saw that once again another one of his tigresses had overstepped her place. He dragged his front paw along the ground restlessly, grasping the fact that he would need to confront Lucita. Rolling his eyes in irritation, he turned to the huskily-built cub next to him.

"Soto, head back to the pack's cave. I have to deal with your mother."

As he said the word "mother," Soto flinched imperceptibly, his eyes darkening to a sullen yellow. Under his breath, he let out a low, menacing growl at his father, but Cortez had already loped in the direction of the rock.

Glancing back, Cortez watched as Soto stalked away, his hackles upright as he ambled along the road that lead to the communal den. The alpha shook his head as he strolled up the overlook stone, walking slowly in an attempt to stem his rage against his alpha consort.

Upon reaching the boulder, he stared up at the tigress on the rock, who was gazing around the early dawn meadow with a light of contentment in her expression. She looked so beautiful, with the rays of the sun brightening her fur to a golden hue, that he was rather loath to disturb her.

Growling under his breath to himself, Cortez cursed his own weakness. Cortez leapt onto the boulder gracefully, with barely any sound, which pleased him, since he wanted the element of surprise in this encounter with his mate. He saw that Lucita wasn't aware that he was there, as she was basking in the warmth of the just-appearing sun, now visible over the lip of the mountains to the southwest.

Cortez idly remembered that those mountains were the last border into the Bredelands, a river valley where prey flourished in profusion, and the mammoths there would be a treat after the exertions needed to bring down Steppe mammoths. Pushing the tempting thought of relocation away from his mind, Cortez turned to Lucita, a snarl in his voice as he demanded,

"Lucita, why are you here? Who gave you any right to be here?"

He gazed into the large brown eyes of his mate, seeing them widen in astonished fear mingled with abrupt realisation as she backed away from him, her movements jerky and unstable as Cortez padded up close to her, his shoulders down in the manner of a hunter ready to pounce.

"I-I didn't mean anything by it," Lucita pleaded, her eyes wide with fright as she stepped away from her mate. "I only thought it was my right as your consort."

"Your right?!" Cortez roared, advancing at her as she shrank from him. In that moment of vulnerability from the tigress, Cortez was suddenly amazed that this confrontation was effectively becoming an engagement between prey and predator, and he knew Lucita felt it too – the subtle fear in her eyes betrayed it.

Breathing heavily, the alpha ignored the sensation he was evoking between him and his mate as he strode up next to her, his bright green eyes meeting her brown ones steadily as he continued, anger searing his expression,

"You are never to climb that Stone – that is mine, and in the Code of Honour of my pack it is fit for the alpha's paws only, and none other." He paused briefly, his chest heaving with the emotion of fury before he went on,

"And I would have you remember that the last time this happened-" he noticed Lucita glance up at him quickly, obviously wondering why he had stopped short again. A shadow crossed over his
features momentarily as a memory niggled in his brain, taunting him with the bittersweet aura of it.

He bowed his head slightly with regret, looking away from his mate before amending, "I had to banish my previous alpha consort, she who is known only by the name 'The Scarlett.' She is most certainly dead as well, as no sabre has ever survived the death warrant banishment from the pack implies."

He turned to face Lucita, his gaze sweeping over her slight, agile form, vaguely aware that at the mention of his previous alpha consort a tremor had coursed over her body as she shuddered, and for a moment Cortez was bemused, wondering what could cause his alpha consort to behave in such a way.

He blinked as the sun's rays pierced his eyelids as he surveyed his territory from his place of overlook, and when he glanced over at Lucita he noticed two silent tears making paths down her face.

_Females_, he thought irritably.

"Cortez," a soft voice murmured at his side, which he pretended to ignore. He couldn't help noticing that she had deliberately inclined her head away from him. _Why? "It will not happen again. I beg your forgiveness."_

The alpha angled his head to glance with a sideways leer at his mate. An age seemed to go by before he finally spoke to her again.

"You have my forgiveness," he replied, his tone hardening. "But it will not happen again – if you value your place in my pack."

Lucita flinched slightly at the tone of his words before turning away, padding down to the lip of the rock. She didn't look back once before she jumped to the ground, leaving Cortez alone on his boulder of solitude, glaring out over his territory.

He glanced around, seeing a rabbit dart past, and realised that the smallness of the prey (although were plentiful herds of antelope living next to the fiery peak of Vetta Inferno) in this area would never be able to sustain his pack.

He frowned in concentration before leaping down from the Rock, where his adolescent cub Soto met him. He glanced down at his son, pleased at the girth of his chest and the proud intelligence that glinted in his eyes.

_It really is a shame that Soto could not become alpha – he at least looks the part_, Cortez mused, a hint of ruefulness coming into his expression as he began to lope forward, Soto matching him stride for stride, causing him to remember when another had done thus with him.

Abruptly, he turned to his lad, his voice harsh as he questioned, "What is it, Soto? What do you want with me? Can't you see that I'm busy!" _Feeling sorry for myself_, he added mentally.

Soto's facial expression remained placid as he countered,

"I only thought that it might be good to tell you that we should probably leave this area – there is hardly enough prey for us here, and it might be advisable to journey over the Mountains of Eira into the ... Bredelands."

Cortez let Soto speak, his brow furrowed as he listened. Inwardly, he was pleased that Soto was showing interest in the care and protection of his pack members, but somehow his words resonated
dully with the alpha – and in a moment he knew why as Soto continued,

"And best of all, this journey would mean that some won't make it – like the new cub for instance."

Anger coursed through Cortez's body as he realised what his older son was intimating. A snarl rolled in his throat as he glared at Soto, brushing him aside as he replied,

"We are not leaving, not while your brother is so young and unable to make the journey over the Mountains of Eira, and that is final."

He raised his shoulders, stalking in the direction of the communal den of the pack. Glancing back over his shoulder, he noticed Soto hurrying along after Lucita, his expression grim. Cortez supposed he was likely going off to torment his alpha consort, as he had been doing off and on since the birth of Diego. Cortez watched from a distance as Soto harried Lucita, but she only strolled forward into the den, ignoring him.

Apparently frustrated, Soto left off his ridicule of the alpha consort, loping over to a small rise that overlooked the territory, his eyes turning a sallow yellow – a sign that he was angry. He lay down on the rise, averting his gaze from Cortez. Cortez sighed. He wondered if Soto was remembering his mother, who was certainly dead now...

The memory faded away as Cortez raised his head from his forelegs on the Stone, his gaze idly falling upon his ranks of sabres sharing a kill together while Lucita stood some distance apart from them, licking Diego gently. Soto was eagerly ripping into the antelope that Brutus had taken down while Cortez had been overseeing his territory and contemplating sad memories of months earlier. Not willing to join the others in their meal yet, Cortez glanced towards the Mountains of Eira.

*The last stronghold before the Bredelands... A small voice in his mind whispered to him. Life in the Bredelands would be so much better instead of here – hell, think of the good an invasion might bring us!*

*I don't know... another voice spoke up, to the alpha's consternation. An invasion might not be a smart idea right now – I think it would be best to wait until Diego is older and able to make the journey.*

*Isn't he nearly almost a year old now, though?* Hissed the treacherous voice in an undertone, which caused Cortez to look up, noticing that his younger cub had extricated himself from Lucita and was now tearing into the kill, chatting with Brutus as he did so, an element that immediately soured Cortez's mouth as he watched them together, and the knowledge stung him that if anyone acted like a father to both of his sons, it was that infernal elder!

Annoyed, he turned away from the scene before him, looking at the snow-encrusted peaks shining off in the distance. Cocking his head, he inhaled deeply, glad that everything was at peace. Even Vetta Inferno, the volcano he considered part of his territory was not smoking, which was a good sign. He repressed a groan as realisation struck him: once the volcano truly began to smolder and spit flames into the sky, *then* it would be time to move.

x-x-x-x-x-

"Is it back to me now for a bit?" Manny queried, glancing towards the sabre basking in the light of the fire.

Diego raised his head, his eyes brightening as he looked over at Axel, who smiled back at him.

*Well, Axel's responding to Diego, Manny noted. That's good – maybe Diego will be able to break*
the ice with him, since he's rather cold to us at the moment.

"Yes, I think it is," the sabre replied at last, swiveling his head marginally so he could sweep his gaze around the cave. He watched as Ellie snuggled up close to Manny, obviously relishing being close to him, while Sid continued to make eyes at Shelley, causing the possums to snicker to themselves. Diego sighed inwardly as he looked upon the couples, knowing that that type of relationship had never been possible for him to have. The memory of the chestnut-furred mate of the Regent Elder who had been present when he and Manny had gone before the Council with the petition rose to taunt him.

Sid spoke up, rudely interrupting Diego's contemplation.

"Hey Manny, if it's time for us to go back to you, why haven't you thlarted yet?"

"Okay, okay, okay," Manny conceded. "Back to me now again – are you sure you all still want to hear it?"

Immediately a clamor erupted as Shelley and Axel exclaimed simultaneously "Yes!" and then looked at each other in astonishment while Ellie said,

"Manny, of course we want to hear it!" as the possum brother hooted in agreement, knocking their fists together. Manny noticed that Diego only nodded silently before he placed his head upon his crossed forelegs, staring into the fire. The mammoth wondered what was bothering him, but wisely decided not to push it, as his friend was probably just remembering his father.

"Anyway, as I was saying, my mother and I had just left the nursery area, and it was beginning to get late, which was making my mother anxious since she feared predators might be about..."

x-x-x-x-x-

"Whether you were having fun or not is not the question here, mister," the she-mammoth reproved her son as she wrapped her trunk around his stout little body. She lifted him up and onto her back as she continued, "The issue at hand is that we need to get back to your father, who needs our company."

On her back, she noticed out of the corner of her eye as Manfred raised his trunk happily into the air, attempting to trumpet. He inhaled deeply, and then blew out. No sound emanated from his trunk, however, and Millie saw the corner's of her son's mouth turn downwards with disappointment.

She turned her head, smiling at him as she started to briskly walk in the direction of the Mountains of Eira that stretched from one corner of the Bredelands Valley to the farthermost end and served as a buttress for the mammoths against predators and it was in that area of the Mountains that lay the territory, or diocese, as the pachyderms called it, of the Three Fjords and her mate's likely site for permanent residence.

Millie went on, "You'll get the hand of it in time, Manny."

She felt the weight of her calf's body sink onto her back, and knew he was resting, probably had his head on his forelegs. She was aware of a whoof of air that caused a small breeze to ruffle the tuft of her hair, and she glanced back at her calf, asking,

"What's wrong, sweetie?"

"Will I have any friends in Daddy's herd?" he asked her, sounding as if he had been ruminating over this question for some time.
The cow nodded her head briefly at her son, and then picked up her pace as she realised the midday shadows had gradually become much longer. She inhaled deeply, reaching her trunk into the air as she inspected the area for any sign of hated predators that might be nearby such as the sabres and wolves. She shuddered as memories of a bloodbath at the paws of sabres she had experienced at only five years old flowed back to her, and she snuck a look at Manny to make sure he was all right.

She had lost her mother in that battle, (which had been a failed attempt at an invasion of the Bredelands by the sabres), and afterwards her father had never been the same, she remembered, and when he was elected to become Regent Elder over all the dioceses he had declined that honour, instead choosing to stay with her.

Millie smiled as she saw, in her mind's eye, the face of her mother Agatha before her. Soon it shimmied out of view and was replaced by that of her father Kenrich, who beamed at her, though sadness lingered in his expression.

Millie, through her thick fur, felt the slight rise and fall of her calf's stomach, and knew he was asleep. Reflecting on her memories, she decided that if something like that should happen to her family, she would want Clovis to go through with his administration of the Eldership he held, and not withdraw like her father had done, even if she knew it was solely for her sake. She would want most of all for him to inspire their son by being true to his duty to their species.

The light-brown furred female mammoth was so lost in thought as she approached the Three Fjords territory as dusk fell over the land, causing every bush and tree nearby to turn grey in the fading light as the sun slipped behind the Mountains of Eira in the southwest. On her back, she felt Manny stir as he came awake. She glanced back at him, noticing that he appeared to be surprised that the sun had left them so quickly.

Hearing the burble of the Fjords as they emptied into a spring in the middle of the diocese, Millie rejoiced, knowing that they couldn't be far away from her mate and the herd. She stepped along, her pace quickening as she anticipated her reunion with her mate and her friends in the herd.

Coming to halt to catch her breath, Millie lifted her ears slightly as she caught the subtle noise of branches rustling as she scooped Manny off her back, placing him behind her front legs protectively. Fear struck her heart as she worried about the encroaching predator advancing upon them with every stride, but she girded herself, glancing down at her calf affectionately, knowing she would defend him with her life.

Review?
Many Meetings

The calf William is credited to Trev/thelonemongrel since he essentially gave me the name :) and has a character named the same in his upcoming story LiT: Yesterday's Child, but our two versions are different - marginally. Nevertheless "William" still belongs to Trev -if only because he gave me the name! :)

Also, the Bredelands is the joint work of both of us.

The name "Elder Titan" is © to goldenpuon

---

The bushes crackled as the shadowy figure advanced upon the she-mammoth standing protectively in front of her calf. Abruptly, the patter of the footprints ceased for a moment.

Millie glanced down at her child, inhaling a sigh of relief which was cut short as she heard a stick break under the paw of the intruder slinking with every step closer to them. The leaves rustled once more and Millie tossed her head, lifting her tusks in preparation, looking at her calf out of the corner of her eye from where he stood, eyes wide, behind her right front leg.

Millie angled her head slightly, raising her ears to pinpoint the quiet sounds emanating from the foliage, her lips tightening as she narrowed her eyes, intent on defending her year-old son.

Several heart-shaped leaves scattered to the ground, and Millie turned her gaze forward as a small, light tan-furred mammoth calf burst into the clearing, his mouth opened in a wide, friendly smile before he dashed away, letting out a trumpet that spoke of triumph as he chased after a small bucktoothed squirrel clutching an acorn. He turned back to Millie, his face still open in his friendly smile as he approached again.

x-x-x-x-x-

"Surprise!" Manny exclaimed gleefully, throwing his trunk into the air as if he was brandishing it. He swept his gaze around the cave, noting that every creature sitting beside the fire – with the exception of Diego – was holding their breaths.

Sid had clasped Shelley's hand tightly, and it was obvious the lady sloth was annoyed. She rolled her eyes, placing her claws over Sid's so that she could extricate her claw and keep up her basting work, while Crash and Eddie's mouths had dropped open in utter disbelief.

_Ellie smacked him with her trunk playfully, scolding him, "Manny! How dare you do that to us!"_ and while Manny watched, she directed a friendly glance at the cub Axel, whose green eyes had become round with excitement before turning back to Manny, pointedly saying, _"You have a very cruel sense of humour, mister – and I love you for it!"

The bull mammoth swiveled his massive head, smiling gently at the sabre cub as he queried,

"Glad it wasn't who you thought it'd be, Axel?"

Bashfully, the cub ducked his head beneath his paws before glancing up at Diego, who nodded encouragingly at him.
The cub raised his head, meeting Manny's gaze directly as he replied, "Yeah, I'm glad it wasn't who I thought it would be – no offense," he continued, in a tone filled with a suspicious bent, "but I thought that it might perhaps be one of us sabres ... and I know that citizens of the Brede valley and its territories don't like our kind…"

Manny felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth as Axel opened himself more to the herbivores of the herd, although he, like Diego, was still very reticent and refused to speak much about himself, not even to Shelley, who had been his travelling companion out of default since they have lived together as scavengers in a band of marauders for several years.

Manny sighed inwardly, remembering when Sid had told him that specific information earlier that morning after the members of the herd started a mini-party to celebrate the arrival of Shelley and Axel into their herd, just before Elder Titan had burst in, nearly spoiling the mood. He was ashamed that he felt glad when the sabres had disappeared to hunt and the sloths to forage, or else Titan would have had his hide.

The sound of arguing brought the mammoth out of his reverie. He glanced up, catching Diego's amused smirk as he did so, and saw Shelley pleading with Sid to let go of her claw.

"Thid, come on, I have to work on my bathket!"

"Why do you need to work on a bathket?" Sid retorted, still gripping her hand tightly as she pursed her lips with annoyance.

Axel let out a rumble of a laugh.

"Hey, Sid," he called out. "She only wants to work on it because she's studied the humans in her free time and aspires to be a 'scientific' sloth."

Sid's mouth dropped open in astonishment and he reluctantly let go of the female's claw as he gaped at the cub,

"Are you being tharcathic?"

"No," Axel countered, in a tone that said "Yes."

"He's being sarcastic," Diego grinned. "After all, who's ever heard of a 'scientific sloth'?"

Sid pouted,

"You've heard of me!"

"Sid, I'm sorry, but of course you count. Having water camps and raising dino kids for one day makes you completely scientific in every way," the tiger retorted.

Manny heard Shelley utter a hmph as she returned to plying her 'basket' as she termed it, glaring at the two sabres and the only male sloth present.

"Boyth, boyth," she exclaimed. "Let'th get back to the thtory, thhall we?"

Turning to Manny as silence fell over the cavern again save for the crackle of the fire, Shelley continued,

"Thir, I very much approve of your thtorytelling thyle, but how you did that to uth wath deplorable – now who ith your friend?"
My friend... my first best friend I ever had.

"You really want to know?" Manny responded, his face beaming as he recalled the days of his youth. Axel and Shelley nodded in unison and then glanced at each other with astonishment, while Sid and the possums looked keen for him to continue as Diego laid his head upon his paws, staring up at his friend, interest shining in his eyes.

And he's heard the story already... Manny pondered. But to be fair, William is his friend too. His actions before the Council proved that fact to both of us. That thought caused him to smile as he took up where he left off.

"As I was saying, my mother didn't expect to encounter a mammoth calf instead of well, a predator, but she took it in stride..."

x-x-x-x-x-

Millie smiled at she looked at the extremely tan-coloured calf before her, his eyes sparkling with mischief. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Manny peer out behind her tree trunk of a front leg again, obviously curious about seeing another mammoth child.

"And who do you belong to?" Millie inquired of the calf.

My mind is playing tricks on me, she chided herself. I know this calf looks familiar, but why?

"My name's William, son of Abelard!" the calf shouted. He darted over towards Manfred, gaiety in every step. "And I'm playing at bein' on patrol like my daddy told me Steppe mammoths do."

"Why, so you're the son of my best friend Heloise!" Millie rejoiced. "I must say, I have heard of you, Master William, but we haven't met yet – my name is Millicent, Madam Elder of this herd." She paused, and then amended, "My thanks to you, young William, for protecting our diocese - and my son and I - so well, although you gave me a fright doing so! It is greatly appreciated."

However, the young calf was too exuberant to pay attention as he bounded over to her own calf as Millie hid a smile.

"What's your name?" he asked as Manny smiled shyly at him before mussitating,

"My name is Manfred, son of Clovis."

"Son of Clovis?" the calf repeated. "That means you're only a week older than me, Manfred."

He giggled, and then extended his trunk, touching Manny on the shoulder.

"Tag, you're it! Come and catch me!"

"Okay!" Manny replied, dashing out from under his mother's underbelly. Millie laughed, glad to see the two calves enjoying spending time together like their families had hoped they would as she cast her gaze skyward, noting that the sky had turned from light blue to a silvery grey.

"Boys, boys!" She called, just as Manny grabbed William by the trunk. "It's time for us to go – I have an important appointment to attend, one of our informal councils. Come, up on my back."

...
moment that William looked thinner in appearance then he did. Just as he was thinking that, William poked him as he kidded,

"You look like you eat a lot!"

Manny frowned, although he was not annoyed with his new friend, merely amused.

"I'm not fat. It's just all this brown fur that I inherited from my father, Clovis. It makes me look … poofy."

Sid scowled,

"Tho I wathn't the firtht one to call you fat, even in joke? Why?"

Diego growled under his breath, forcing Sid to glance over at him, fear glinting in his eyes.

"One more interruption from any one of you," he said, pointedly looking at Crash, Eddie, and Sid, "and you'll find out much I like to eat junk food."

Recovering his composure, he turned to Manny.

"Manny, please continue. There are some of us here who are actually interested in hearing your story and more about William," he finished, nodding at Axel and Shelley, who had been listening with rapt attention and who were now glaring at Sid. Shelley had her arms crossed, her eyebrows raised in manner that indicated she was not pleased with Sid's behaviour.

Sid immediately tried to placate her as he batted his eyelashes at her, reclining on his side as he gazed up into her eyes pleadingly, whispering,

"Thlorry, Thelley."

While the two sloths were making amends, Diego saw Axel glance up at Manny, repeating his request, wondering if the mammoth could continue his story.

Manny cleared his throat, bringing everyone's attention back to him,

"Millie, my mother, carried us two calves on her back deeper into the forests, eager to see my father again. As we drew closer to the Fjords, the sound of bubbling water from the springs nearby greeted us…"

Clovis raised his head, vaguely aware of the burble of the spring sluicing its way down the side of the confluences of the Three Fjords behind him to his left, teeming into a large pool at the core of the meadow as the subtle sound of thuds of footsteps reached his ear.

He sat up quickly on his tussock, glancing at Abelard, who quirked an eyebrow at him in response as the other mammoths in the conference perked up considerably, noticing that their leader's pensiveness had vanished, and quietly they began to whisper amongst themselves. Clovis indistinctly heard their murmurings,

"Look, what is up with our Elder? Do you think his mate might be near, possibly?"

"Do you think there might be danger?"
He shook his head slowly, pointing his trunk in the direction of the approaching sound he had keyed in to. Arising from his tussock, he hurried out of the clearing designated as the meeting place for the informal council he had requested. He passed underneath an organically formed arch that had come about because two aspens branches had intertwined above it. He noticed a tan-coloured silhouette with two dark bumps on top of it emerging from the forest, and in spite of himself, his heart leapt at the sight as he stared at Millie yearningly, her form outlined with gold because of the fading light in the sky behind her.

x-x-x

Abelard had followed him, but stopped short at the entrance to the informal council, his face turned upwards in a slight smile as he realised who the other calf was on his Madam Elder's back was – his son, William. Like Richard, he had a tendency to dart off and explore. And Abelard thanked Brede daily that she had given him such a kind leader like Clovis and his mate's best friend as their Elders, and good friends, to boot. Sure, Clovis had inherited the role from his father, but he had his father's generosity and kindness.

He had heard tales of some Elders ejecting families from their herds if they didn't keep to the right protocol, and Abelard was glad that Clovis and Millie were so open-hearted that instead of even hinting that his family should leave for being a potential danger to the herd, they actually helped his own family out rather than laying down the law.

"Millie!" he heard Clovis cry out as he hurried over to his mate. Abelard faintly heard him say, "Millie, oh dearest, I've missed you and our Manny so much! And you are here just in the nick of the time; the informal council is getting restless," as he scooped up William into his trunk before setting him on the ground. William immediately darted over to his father, wrapping his trunk inside Abelard's as the two watched Clovis take Manny off of his mate's back and then toss him into the air joyfully. Abelard knew that in that moment of father and son reuniting, they were the only two creatures in that world.

x-x-x

Clovis turned to Millie after setting their calf down by his forelegs, causing Manny to press against his forelegs affectionately as his father extended his trunk to his mate. He shivered with palpable joy as she took his trunk in hers, her green eyes meeting his for one long look as he guided her underneath the archway entrance to the stomping grounds of the informal council.

As they stepped over the archway, Manny trotting beside them, the semicircle of mammoths gathered lifted their trunks simultaneously in a trumpet of welcome for their Elder and his family.

Returning to his tussock, Clovis sat down, glancing at Millie as she did the same on the one designated for her, cradling Manny in her trunk as she looked around, smiling at the councillors and speaking gently to a few of the cows present about their calves and migration issues.

Raising his head, Clovis noticed that the tips of the aspens were touched with yellow as the sun had nearly completed its descent beyond the Mountains of Eira. He cleared his throat, immediately causing all talk to cease.

"My friends and fellow council members," Clovis began, sending his mate a loving glance, "now that our Madam Elder has returned, I wish to ask her thoughts on the viability of this diocese for our permanent residence within the Bredelands. I know the rest of you have all given your reasons for staying or continuing on in the migration route, but I would like to hear the Madam Elder's thoughts before voting commences."
Out of the corner of his eye, Clovis noticed Abelard's mate Heloise stand up, reaching out her trunk into the firs nearby, sending a wink at Millie before she opened her trunk, releasing a cascade of fireflies into the cobalt blue dusk gradually filling the area with a soft ambiance, causing the mated pairs in the council to snuggle up against each other as they enjoyed the flickering evanescent glow provided by the insects.

Heloise made her way back to her tussock, taking William out her mate's grasp before settling down again, and then Millie spoke up, while Clovis gently maneuvered their calf underneath his tusks, smiling proudly as his mate gave her opinion that he had been longing to hear on this decision.

"Thank you, good Heloise," Millie began, nodding at her friend gratefully, "for providing us light for which we can conclude this informal council. Now, I know that I have not been long in this diocese, but thanks to my faithful mate and our Elder, Clovis, who has been exploring the area for the benefit of our herd all throughout the territory known as the Three Fjords, has explained to me the lay of this land, and how it will provide for us and our children, such the ones you see here."

She went on, using her trunk to point out Manny, using his small trunk to inspect his father's large white tusks while Clovis smiled on, amused by the attention of his son, and then indicating William, who had drifted off to sleep in his mother's trunk as she rocked him gently back and forth all the while paying close heed to her friend.

"And so," Millie continued, "now that I have seen the territory of the Three Fjords myself, I agree with my mate, and I agree sincerely, and out of my own opinion. In the middle of this territory is a large spring that I noticed while coming in here even though it was getting dark was that the spring that the Fjords empty into is plenty large enough to sustain us all, calves, cows, and bulls, and since this diocese is adjacent to the Mountain slopes, there is room enough for the calves to clamber on the rocks as they get grow up, and it will help them grow strong and sturdy, such play."

She swept her gaze around the councillors eyeing her with bated breath as she continued, her words a pleasant, distant murmur to Clovis as he chuckled to himself,

*I was not in jest when I asked Millie if she was looking to get herself nominated by the Major Council for the selection for Regent Elder, look at the oratorical chops on my beauty! It's a shame that she would never ask to be a nominee though – I know her, she'd prefer to stay here and take care of our son, instead letting me move up within the hierarchy from Elder to possibly Regent Elder, although, to do so, think what honour it would bring our clan! I long to become Regent Elder, if only to foster Millie's own interests, and our Manny's, and my very own herd that I serve."

He was snapped out of his thoughts as Millie's sweet voice penetrated his mind,

"And so, I cast the first vote," she declared, throwing her trunk into the air, causing a swirl of fireflies who were resting on the aspen tree above her head to smoothly take flight. Their little glimmering light over her head so that it looked like she was wearing a chaplet, signifying divine worth from Brede, around the tuft of her hair.

Clovis caught his breath, pulling Manny closer to her as he gazed at Millie with his large brown eyes widened in admiration as he stared at her lovingly, hearing her complete the sentence, "and my vote is this: we stay in the diocese of the Three Fjords. Now, my fellow friends and herdmates, what do you say?"

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Clovis strolled through the meadow adjacent to the Three Fjords, idly hearing the babble of the
broad streams as they coursed down the Mountains of Eira into the sea beyond the cliffs, taking a patrol of his territory to make sure everything and every creature was well-provided for. A smile darted into his eyes as he recalled the night when his mate had returned with their son, and the subsequent voting that had taken place, ensuring that his herd would remain here in these light-dappled forests that supplied the mammoths' shelter and food at the same time.

He strode forward, musing to himself, *Brede did indeed smile upon us when it came to the selection of this diocese for our herd. After my Millie said her piece, the voting was unanimous, and thus we are here.*

He grinned to himself as he caught glimpses of two calves chasing each other, one dark brown and one of a lighter hue of brown verging on near-blond, and Clovis knew he was looking at his own Manfred and William, once again amusing themselves by playing tag amongst the aspens as the light sliced through their leaves, making odd patterns appear on the loam.

The Elder raised his head, sweeping his gaze around the perimeters of the diocese, noting the tall foothills to his left that opened to a few caves eroded out of the rock. His curiosity piqued, Clovis decided to investigate them further, giving a nod of recognition to Manny and William as he passed them, setting off in the direction of the caves, having heard tales that a sloth family resided in one of them. Behind him, he faintly caught words riffling on the wind as Manny exclaimed to William proudly,

"That's my dad!"

Clovis ground to a halt as his son's words echoed through him, and he turned his head to look back at the male calves, who had stopped in their play and were watching him, respect and quiet interest shining in their brown eyes. Raising his trunk in salute, Clovis let out a deafening trumpet that rattled the leaves of the aspens nearby, causing them to quiver slightly.

He met Manny's eyes, noticing the silent, proud smile that wreathed his son's features. Breaking off his eye contact with his son, Clovis began to stride off in the direction of the caves in the foothills, shaking his trunk at the two calves up and down slightly in a gesture of farewell, and the two calves hurriedly returned it as best they could in their nearly one-year-old of age manner.

Reaching the foothills of the Mountains of Eira, Clovis noted a cave situated near a long forgotten ice tunnel. Placing his hoofs on the incline that lead up to it, Clovis scrambled onto the ledge, panting from the exertion. Lifting his head, he caught snatches of voices issuing from the mouth of the small cavern, but they were indistinct for him to fully grasp, so he advanced until he was standing just outside. He peered in, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the gloom, shaking his head marginally so that he could see more clearly.

A short female ground sloth placed her tiny, scrawny grayish-brown covered in minute bits of algae on a curved rock bed, murmuring in a soft voice that was clipped with a slight foreign accent to it, "Lie down and go to thleep, my little Thidney."

Ah... Clovis thought. *Her accent! I have only heard tales of creatures with an accent such as hers, she must have been born in the lands beyond the Aurea Tasangot that my Steppe brothers reside in... so that means she originated from...*

His ponderings were abruptly cut short as the female's mate emerged out of the darkness in the cave into Clovis's line of vision, and the Elder noticed immediately that he was study despite his slight appearance, and that, like all sloths, he wended his way slowly but surely over to his mate, setting his claws down gently on her shoulders. Behind him followed five other sloths, the first
emerging into the light made Clovis wince slightly, he was quite uncouth in appearance, whilst three young sloths trundled in after him. Clovis waited, hoping he would learn their names from either Manon or her as-of-yet unnamed mate.

"Manon, thweet mate," Clovis heard the male croon as he massaged his mate's shoulders as the two of them looked down into the little bed made of rock that Manon had cushioned with leaves at their sloth baby, who was slumbering peacefully, sucking his thumb, adoration evident in their expressions even in the dim light of the cave.

Oh, Clovis realised. Now I know where she originated from – she comes from the lands beyond the Steppes that we mammoths have heard called "Fransk," meaning she is essentially an immigrant in our Bredelands, since her mate appears to be genuine Bredelands stock.

"Ah, Edmund," Manon replied, reaching her claw up into her mate's. "Ithn't he perfect? Our little Thidney…"

"Oh yes, he is," Edmund declared as his boys crept up to the cradle. Turning to them, he asked,

"Marthhall, Bernie, Zak, … my odiouth brother Funguth, what do ye think of your new brother Thidney and in my brother' th cathe, nephew?"

He is most certainly Bredelands stock, for sure! His very name admits to the fact.

"Thidney?" complained Zak in a loud voice, causing his mother to hush at him. Getting the hint to be quiet, Zak went on, still grumbling, "Yuck. Let' th call him Thid the Thloth instead."

x-x-x-x-x-x

"And thlo finally I make an appearance in thith thtory of you two' th!" Sid exclaimed, crossing his arms sullenly. "I mean, come on, that' th all the mention I get?" he pointed to himself, winking at Shelley meaningfully as he continued, "I made thith herd, I thhould get more attention!"

Manny sighed, not appreciating Sid's antics, especially this late at night. He glanced up, meeting Diego's green eyes, and saw the same irritation reflected there. In response, the sabre rolled his eyes, nodding obliquely at the cub, whose face had brightened with interest.

As Sid rambled on, Axel looked up at Manny, a question in his eyes. Shelley was pointedly ignoring Sid's complaints, and she had momentarily ceased in the production of her 'basket' as she said it was called, looking at Manny with deep interest.

Feeling embarrassed, Manny hissed in a low whisper to Diego,

"Okay, so what do those two want with me?"

Diego chuckled,

"Seriously? Manny, old pal, I think – because after all, they are strangers to this valley – they're looking at you to explain how things are run."

"Like the mammoth government," Shelley broke in, clapping her hands together eagerly as she glanced briefly at Axel, who looked just as impatient as she was to learn more of it, Manny noted with a small amount of pride.

I guess there are other tigers out there like Diego… At the thought, a small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he turned to Axel, about to speak to him when Shelley interrupted, so
Manny turned his attention to her again. Off to his side, he thought he heard a soft sigh emanate from Axel but shoved it away, although he chided himself for ignoring the cub like that – something about it seemed wrong.

"Where I come from," Shelley continued to explain, "there was no form of governmental control at all – no councils, no Elders, no then the of order, thlo I dearly would with to know more of it, if you could explain it to me, Manny."

"I would too," Axel added. "After all, we're new here, and I would at least like an idea of how things work." Manny saw that he said his piece respectfully enough, but as he ended it, he knitted his brow as if was slightly bothered about something, although the mammoth bull was in no hurry to ferret it out right now.

"Well ... Okay... so listen," Manny began, "I think I can tell you the ... basics of our government, since ... you know, Diego and I still have a story to finish," he went on, winking at the female sloth and the sabre cub before him. "And if I remember correctly, it was one of you two who requested it."

"Yeth, I did," Shelley asserted, placing her paws akimbo on her hips. "But that doethn't mean I don't want to know more about what we have only heard about in the thtory."

Ellie jostled Manny with her trunk playfully before she spoke up,

"Oh Manny, you should tell us!" she exclaimed, siding with the female sloth. "I was never raised a mammoth, so I have very little idea of what's going on here too... so, please, can you tell us more about it?" Manny felt his resolve not to tell anymore about how the mammoths governed the Bredelands crumble as Ellie turned her big green eyes on him pleadingly.

Taking her trunk in his, he replied, "Well... All right." He paused, and then went on, "It's like this: for every herd, there is one leader, called the Elder, who is in charge of overseeing the herd and making sure everyone is well-cared for, and one of the means of doing this are informal councils like the one my mother took me to in the story, and these are ones where half of the number of the herd gathers to discuss and make plans for whatever motion is being carried. Higher up in the rank of Elders are the Regent Elders, who instead of just managing one herd, oversee all the dioceses of the Bredelands as a sort of governor. He or she also attends Major Councils ... these are different from the informals in that pertinent matters of state are discussed and nominees for the next Regent Elder, or RE, are put forth…"

He glanced over at Shelley, who had returned to plying her basket as she took in Manny's information, her eyes alight with enthusiasm, and then over at Axel, who was staring at Manny, clearly interested in the intricacies of what the bull had to convey to the group sitting around the campfire, and then finally over at his mate, who beamed at him.

He had been so caught up with what he was saying that he hadn't realised when his trunk had slipped out of Ellie's, but as he went on, explaining concepts such as the Chancellor, who moderated the Major Councils after a tenure of twenty years of holding sway over the valley as a Regent Elder, she intertwined her trunk back into his, smiling into his eyes happily.

... 

Diego smirked at Sid, who was still moping off in his corner, obviously annoyed that Shelley's attention had focussed totally on his gargantuan friend and no longer on him. Noticing the tiger's complacent smirk, Sid petulantly stuck his tongue out at Diego, causing the sabre to chuckle at Sid's immaturity, although it was tempered slightly by the fact that he knew that Sid was the
youngest out of the trio that had originally formed the herd, and so it caused the tiger to be more lenient with him than Manny usually was.

He watched, amused, as Shelley and the cub fastened their eyes on his friend eagerly, taking in Manny's every word as if it were a morsel of delicious food – *in this case, food for thought!* Diego thought, a secret smile coming into his eyes as he looked at Ellie, Axel and Shelley all enjoying his friend's teaching.

"Diego?" Manny asked, having concluded his overview of the mammothian government of the Bredelands to the others, he had turned back to the tiger just as Diego was thinking of him. Diego grinned slightly, appreciating the irony of it as he glanced over at Manny, raising his eyebrows slightly.

Hearing his unasked question, Manny responded, "Diego, aren't we back to you now? At least when it comes to the story?"

Immediately, everyone swiveled their heads to look at Diego, with the exception of Sid, who was still acting surly as Manny went on,

"After all, you yourself have said that our paths will be crossing soon, Diego."

"Well… uh, yeah, I did… but I didn't mean now," the tiger hurried to explain. "Manny, it's only fair if you keep telling your part of the story at the moment."

xxxxx

"No, it isn't," Manny insisted, knitting his eyebrows together as he regarded his friend solemnly, a hint of annoyance in his expression, somewhat at a loss as to why Diego would prefer for him to continue his story instead of them turning their attention back to the sabre.

"Buddy, it's okay," Diego smiled as he hurried to explain. "I didn't need to hear anything more about the mammoth government because our paths will – are crossing soon," he added with a wink at the mammoth, "and because of that, I know about what you were just talking about, but it's not time for me to reappear yet."

"Oh," Manny responded slowly as the realisation dawned on him as his mind brought up memories of when Diego had first conveyed his past to him, and a faint blur concealed his vision as he recalled catching a glimpse of a sabre cub and his friend, a wolf, during one of the storytelling sessions given by the older calves, the one most inclined to do it being a tall black-furred Imperial calf a few years older than Manfred himself.

*So that was Diego,* Manny considered, wondering why he would have decided to repress that memory for so long.

He glanced up at his sabre friend, noting absently how the waves of light from the fire played against his fur, making the two long, slender scars on his side that extended from his lower chest to the underside of his hind legs glisten with a red glow. Diego intercepted his glance and growled warningly at him, his eyes lightening to a dark yellow, a sign that Manny knew meant he was at least annoyed.

The mammoth nodded at his friend respectfully before speaking again.

"All right, we are getting back into my story…” he began, glancing around the circle of animals before him. "Anyway, it goes like this… Six years have passed, and my herd was living happily in the Three Fjords until one day when that peace was brought to an abrupt end…”
It was a lovely morning in the Three Fjords territory, the breezes from the sea coming in brisk and sharp, spreading over the flower-dotted meadow where two calves were playing together. Their laughter filled the air as they dashed after each other, attempting to reach out and touch the other with their trunk. Finally they collapsed onto the ground near each other as William panted,

"Haha! Manny, that was fun! Come on, let's do it again."

Manny rose to his feet carefully, and then extended his trunk to William to help him up. His chest heaving from the two's exertion, he replied,

"Sure, William, but not right now. Let's rest a while instead. And who knows, we might even see my dad stop by when he comes along in his patrol."

William's mouth opened in a delighted grin at the mention of the Elder of their herd. As Manny fell in step with him, he exclaimed,

"Manny, it's so cool that your dad is the Elder for our herd – and he does such a good job of it too! When I ever become Elder of a herd, I hope to be just like him."

Manny remained silent for a few minutes, although he agreed completely with William, but at the moment he was aware of a change in the ambiance surrounding the Three Fjords diocese.

Lifting his ear flap, he tuned in beyond his herd's diocese, noticing that there was a silence covering the areas outside the Three Fjords territory – a hushed, murmuring silence. The young calf felt his heart quail within him as he contemplated the hollowness echoing throughout the Bredelands.

Finally, he answered his friend, pensiveness in his tone,
"Yes, same for me – I hope to be just like my dad, too, when the time comes for me to take his place as Elder over our herd..." Trying to shake away the anxiety pounding through his body, Manny punched William lightly on the shoulders as he continued, "with you at my side as my Second in Command, Will."

Just as Manny had finished his statement and William was about to respond, they were interrupted by loud pounds of footsteps trundling in their direction as a Steppe mammoth burst out of the foliage, stopping abruptly as he swayed slightly as if exhausted.

Manny noticed that his eyes were wide with pain, and a glance at his tusks caused Manny to see that there a little bird with him, her feathers matted with sweat like her compatriot's.

"Is Clovis, son of Alfred here?" the Steppe mammoth gasped, seeking for fresh air. He looked pointedly at Manny. "Are you his son? Hurry, get him, I have urgent news for him."

Clovis swung his head forward as rustling sounded nearby. He looked up, concern flitting into his eyes as he wondered who it might be. He muffled a fatigued sigh, it had been a long day today; he had gathered all of the males in the herd for a council to see how the respective families within the herd were doing, and then sent off one of their avian friends to the core of the Bredelands with a report to the Regent Elder on various matters, after which he then took a march throughout his diocese with Abelard, on scout for any predators, knowing that Millie and the calves were relaxing in the meadow.
It was only now, by midmorning, that he had retreated into his and Millie's thicket to rest and hear a brief report from another one of the mammoth's avian messengers that he had expressly given to the sloths, beavers, tapirs and other small beasts in the area so that he could have full knowledge of all of their needs.

"Daddy?" a voice murmured, and then Manfred emerged, although Clovis saw William nervously glancing inside as he stood diffidently under a curtain of bushes nearby.

Wiping his forehead wearily, Clovis asked, "What is it, Manny? Is something wrong? What caused you and Will to stop in your play?"

He noticed his son dart his gaze outside, and then shake his head solemnly before he explained, with typical childish frankness,

"Daddy, there's one of the bodyguards – a Steppe mammoth, like you told of me before - waiting for you out there. He wants to speak with you. A bird's perched on his tusk..."

A bodyguard? Here? With a bird, most likely one purposed for only the Major Councils? This can't be good, oh not at all!

Clovis heard Manny explaining more about their visitors, but for Clovis his words had been replaced by a loud roaring in his ears as the Elder comprehended just was his son was saying to him.

Hurriedly he rose to his feet, thanking Manny for telling him this news as he made his way quickly over to where the Steppe mammoth and his companion were patiently awaiting him. He gazed at them rapidly, giving a cursory once-over of the pair, recognising the bird, Sonia, who had told the others of his species of his son's birth. Sonia raised her head, and the brightness in her eyes let him know that she recalled him as well as she chirped a weary fluting call to him as a salutation.

"Greetings, my brother," Clovis addressed the Steppe mammoth as he extended his trunk to be shaken. "Who are you, and what news to you bring that would cause you and Sonia, one of our messengers, to be in such a state of disarray?"

"Greetings to you as well, brother," the Steppe mammoth replied laconically, making Clovis remember that this breed of his species were usually more taciturn than other mammoths, and when they conversed with others, they were usually short and to the point, which made them dependable bodyguards and allies of their bird messengers. Clovis looked on, curiosity in his expression as the Steppe mammoth continued to pant, having not yet caught his breath before he went on,

"My name is Vincent, of the Aurea Tasangot clan. I come bearing sad news, for our Regent Elder, the great Augustine, is dying, and that he has ordered an emergency meeting of all the Elders from all the dioceses."

For Clovis, time seemed to slow as Vincent explained to him what had happened, that Augustine had been mortally injured whilst defending his borders from the threat of sabres, captained by a fearsome tigress with a scar slicing across her right eye, who had concealed themselves away in the foothills of the Mountains, and that he was ordering all Elders to migrate to the Vale of the Seven Oaks so that he could speak to all the nominees one last time, but Clovis heard none of it.

No! Regent Elder Augustine, dying? This can't be, this can't be, this can't be... he exclaimed inwardly as tears began to well up in his eyes.

---
Review?
Pilgrimage

Hello everyone! My apologies, this turned out to be a long chapter! But tis a good 'un, so get ready for a pilgrimage! Also, to those who were eagerly following Cortez and his shenanigans, this is another mammoth-centric chapter, but don't worry, Cortez and Diego and Lucita will return in chapter seven! ;)

William is still copyright to Trev/thelonemongrel, by the way... just wait till his sequel story to Origins, LiT: Yesterday's Child and you'll find a surprise therein! :P *smirks knowingly* ;)
(Though I do advise you, read Origins first so this story will make sense.)

Inside the cave, Manny glanced around at the faces before him, stopping briefly when he looked into the sabre cub's eyes. Axel stared back at, the expression in his green eyes flickering momentarily with a sudden, sharp pain as he asked softly, causing the other beasts in the cavern to look up at him,

"That Regent Elder – Augustine, you said his name was – you knew him, right?" The cub queried, hastily tacking on a "sir" when Shelley darted an inspective, pointed look at him.

The bull mammoth shook his head slightly,

"No, I never knew Augustine..." he replied. "But ... I knew from my father that he was a great mammoth, and so the Valley was hit hard by his loss."

At the word "loss" Manny noticed Axel flinch imperceptibly, his eyes gradually deepening to a bright yellow before he buried his head in his forelegs. Sid, finally giving up his sulking, glanced over at Manny, annoyance glinting in his expression as he pointed at the forlorn cub beside the fire.

"Thee, Manny ol pal, you've hurt the little guy'th feelingth. That wath thlo nice of you."

Manny scowled at the sloth.

Why does Sid always have to be so exasperating? he growled to himself, just as Sid went on,

"Thlo I thluggeth you apologithe."

Manny let out a sigh, wanting to protest, but before he could, he caught sight of Ellie glancing at him, disappointment etched on her pretty face.

All right. Fine.

He turned to Axel, seeing out of the corner of his eye Diego pad by him, his movement barely a shadow as he crossed over to where the cub lay. The sabre looked over at Manny briefly before settling down next to him, giving Axel a gentle lick his forehead. Manny noticed that his friend's gaze held only sympathy and not disapproval like all the others surrounding him, so he ventured,

"Hey... Axel... I'm uh, sorry if I made you upset..."

"It's not you," Axel responded, his voice muffled.

"Then what is it, Sweetie?" Ellie broke in, concern in her tone as the possum brother darted a glance over at Manny, their faces twin in their disapproval of him.
Axel buried his face deeper into his forelegs, his voice emanating from them garbled and weak. Diego raised his head from the cub, speaking for him,

"Guys, Axel says he doesn't want to talk about it right now."

"Oh well," Shelley shrugged. "Can we get back to thtory now? Whote turn ith it now?"

"Diego's."

"Manny's."

The mammoth and the sabre answered simultaneously.

Shelley mocked incredulity. She stood to her feet, placing her claws akimbo on her hips as she trilled mockingly,

"The two leaderth of the herd and they can't even remember whothe turn it ith next for their thtory – ithn't that funny?"

"Yes, it is," Ellie agreed with the lady sloth, who had sat down again, resuming her plying of grass threads. Ellie turned to her mate,

"Well?" She asked. "Whose turn is it now?"

"It's Diego's," Manny countered, rolling his eyes. "It's about time now for his story to intersect with mine… somewhat."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"It's Manny's," Diego retorted. "And I know because I heard it first."

"So…" Crash responded, nonchalantly tossing a strawberry into his mouth. "What credibility does that give you, Diego?"

Diego growled at Crash's statement, sending him clambering up next to Ellie in fear.

"Okay, okay!" Crash added. "I didn't mean anything by it."

Of course you didn't, you nuisance of a possum, the sabre thought with barbed sarcasm.

"Be glad you didn't," Diego rejoined, a low snarl underpinning his words as he glared once more at Crash, who shrank into Ellie's fur, genuinely frightened this time. "And for the rest of you," Diego continued, "why don't you keep up your loud chatter, I'm sure Manny would greatly appreciate you waking up Peaches."

"Thanks for that reminder, Diego," Manny smiled at his friend. "But… I still think it's your turn to go again."

"Chronologically, your story needs to be told before mine," Diego went on. He paused briefly, catching Manny's eye, hoping his friend would key into his unspoken question.

"I think…" Manny said, glancing over at Diego, lying down protectively next to the sabre cub, "that another 'change of pace' is necessary at times… so, it's only fair that we get back into what was happening with you, buddy."

Diego noticed his friend looking at him, hints of compassion in his expression. "And we've talked
about my own species for quite a bit now, so it's right that we hear a bit more of your story before getting back into mine…"

"Ah, all right," Diego agreed. "My part is going to be rather short though, Manny, so we can alternate between our stories. Really though, Manny, I still think you should go first… your story has always gone before mine…"

"Why don't we put it to a vote?" Sid suggested. "I vote for Manny to keep telling hith thtory!"

"Good idea, Sid!" Ellie grinned. "I vote also for Manny telling his part of the story for a bit, and then we can revert back to Diego – does that seem okay, boys?"

"Sure," the mammoth and the sabre replied at the same time. Realising that they had done so, they chuckled quietly before Manny cleared his throat, bringing his audience of seven to look up attentively at him once more.

"Anyway… as I was saying," Manny continued. "All of the herds that were governed by Elders in the Bredelands were hit hard by the loss of Regent Elder Augustine, and when the leaders of each respective herd learned the news that he was calling for an emergency meeting of all the main Elders, no one wasted any time in getting to the diocese that the RE largely monitored and helped, alongside the Chancellor Major, oversee the Major Councils… at an area known as…"

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

"The Vale of the Seven Oaks," Clovis announced before the informal council, made up of Millie, Abelard, Heloise, and a few others, upping the number of those present to six. He glanced around, noticing the sadness glimmering in his mate's eyes, and sighed inwardly.

Millie had had a special bond with the late Regent Elder because he had been close with her father Kenrich. He knew it tore at her heart to hear that another bull she highly respected during her maturation years was dying.

"According to Vincent, Augustine has called for an emergency meeting of all the Elders from every diocese in the Bredelands, more so because he knows that the elections that occur after two decades for the Regent Elder are pending, and would like to give a word of advice to all the candidates." He paused, and then declared, "Including myself."

He saw Millie smiling proudly when he said that, although fragments of sorrow still lingered in her expression.

Abelard spoke up,

"But is it really necessary that we journey so far inland, into the core of the Bredelands for this, Clovis?"

"Yes," a cow – her name was Bernadette – seconded Abelard's opinion. "It's only fair that we put this to a vote, honoured Elder, our calves are still quite young to make this journey – isn't your own son almost seven seasons of age?"

"It is true that he is," Clovis responded. "But I still feel it is right that we should go – Augustine is depending on the herd of the Three Fjords being present, and he was one of the ones who welcomed the birth of my son Manfred, this herd's 'Hope' – however, it is only correct that we bow to protocol and put this to a vote." He lifted his trunk into the air as he went on.

"And I cast the first vote for us going – it will be a good time to introduce our young ones to our
laws and traditions, you yourself can't disagree with that, Bernadette," he finished cheekily, causing the dark brown matron to humph noncommittally, as if she knew that Clovis was right but wasn't willing to give him that yet.

*To be fair to her, she is the matron of oversees the welfare of our children, along with assistance from my Millie and Abelard's Heloise,* Clovis thought, a frown knitting his brow as he regarded the cow, who was several seasons older than any of the other bulls or cows in this council. Because of that she deserved respect and the freedom to air her own opinion, since she had experienced the world and knew wisdom.

Bernadette looked thoughtful, her eyes full of consideration. After a minute, she slowly raised her trunk into the air, casting her vote for "Go."

Clovis noticed a ghost of smile playing around Millie's lips, and he knew she was pleased that the informal council was siding with him on that they should go. However, he fully comprehended that at least some opposition was expected: just because he was the Elder, it didn't mean he had full authority, rather, it implied that he would act solely after hearing the needs of his fellow mammoths, and then his decisions would derive from that constancy garnered from his interest in their lives.

Seeing Bernadette's choice, the two other mammoths present at the council – a bull and a cow – glanced at each other before lifting their trunks in unison whilst at the same Abelard and his mate made the same gesture. Clovis glanced at Millie, who silently hoisted her trunk into the air, casting the final vote in favour of the herd's departure from their lovely Three Fjords for at least a little while.

*Which will probably be around two to three months,* Clovis realised with a pang as he swept his gaze around area. His gaze took in the susurration of the water of the Fjords as they burbled their way down the mountainside, as the winds carried fresh breezes in from the sea that the Mountains of Eira held back and then falling upon the woods nearby with their aspens fluttering lightly with each frisk of mistral drafting into the hollow sea-cast while the firs nearby stood tall and strong, impervious to any strong forces. *And I will miss our Three Fjords diocese. For here is a place where beauty refreshes the soul, thank Brede for that, and it is a good place to raise our young ones in the Traditions, so that they can grow up to become honourable members of our species.*

"Clovis?" Millie's sweet voice broke into his thoughts as he felt rather than saw her intertwine her trunk into his. He leaned close to her, knowing that she wanted to just rest on him for a bit, yearning for his strength.

"Clovis," Millie continued. "I sent the others off to spread the word that we'll be leaving soon…" she glanced around briefly, her eyes seeking out the gentle outlines of the trees, the icy blue water of Fjords as they sluiced their way into three disparate pools in the center of the diocese that the herd used for drinking water and to wash their calves during the communal bathtime and the faint roar of the sea, muffled slightly by the Mountains of Eira standing in the way.

Clovis realised that he and his mate had learned to appreciate the steady thunder of the breakers, as they crashed against the foothills of Eira, protecting their section of the Bredelands from potential flooding.

*As if that could ever happen!* Clovis chuckled to himself at the thought as Millie mussitated in his ear, playing idly with his trunk as he watched her gaze sweep the perimeters of the Three Fjords, hungrily taking all the loveliness around her.

"I will miss the Three Fjords, dearest. It's not just been your diocese; it's been our *home,* and I will
be sad to leave it for a while… your choice for us all was perfect, darling."

She smiled into his eyes. Clovis felt himself beam in response to her words, wondering what he had ever done to deserve such a loyal and loving mate like Millie. He thanked Brede for her every day; she was surely a gift.

"As will I," Clovis responded, clasping Millie's trunk in his own as he began to walk forward, seeing the bustle of action around him as the bulls and cows of their herd made preparations to depart. He caught sight of two calves in the centre of the meadow playing together, most likely the game "tag", or if not that, "hide and seek." He peered closer, trying to determine which calf was his son before he said to his mate,

"Let's go pick up Manny, my dear. We've got quite a journey, er… actually, a pilgrimage ahead of us."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The gentle light of the sun at its zenith bathed the meadow in a soft ambiance where two calves stood in the centre, engaging in playing a game with each other. Manny glanced back towards the copse of trees on the right, noticing his friend's eyes light up with excitement,

"Hey, Manny!" William called, indicating the dark shape that had just emerged from the forest with his trunk. "It looks like your dad's here!"

The young calf stopped short in the middle of his run, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to discern the shadow,

"You're right," he confirmed. "It is Dad… I wonder what he wants?"

William beamed at Manny,

"Don't worry," he called, over his shoulder. "I'll go find out."

"Thanks, Will," Manny said. He watched as his friend hurried over to Clovis. He shifted uneasily on his feet, anxiety pitting in his stomach as he wondered what his father might have come to tell them about.

William returned after a series of interminable minutes, panting heavily.

"Your dad told me we're going on a journey!" Will exclaimed, his face dancing. "A pil-grum, a pil-grumege," he continued, attempting to sound the difficult word out.

Manny gave his younger companion an encouraging smile,

"A pilgrimage?" he asked. He knew the word because he had overheard Clovis discussing the matter with Millie only the night before.

"Yes," William nodded. "He told me that we'll leave tomorrow at first light."

"Which means we will probably be asleep when they leave," Manny commented, a thoughtful expression plastered on his face. He turned to William, a question in his eyes, "Do you think this might have anything to do with... Well… the arrival of that Steppe mammoth yesterday?"

William shrugged as Manny glanced around the meadow, recalling the silence that had seemed to tremble in the air that afternoon before Vincent had burst in on their game.
"Well…” Manny muttered, narrowing his eyes. "You know… I think it might just have something
to do what that… but what is important about it, I don't know."

"Me neither," William agreed. "But the pilgrum-age thing sounds fun; we might meet more calves
since we're all taking the same route, but we probably won't be able to talk to them until we reach
S' Oaks. According to your dad the journey won't be that long; Seven Oaks is a stone's throw from
the Three Fjords."

Manny was still pensive,

"Do you know what that means for our herd?" he queried.

William's face widened in an incredulous smile,

"No."

"It means… that we're important to whatever goes on in Seven Oaks," Manny explained. "Just how
we are, I ... have no idea."

"Manfred! William!" Clovis' voice rang out over the meadow. "Come along now."

Manny glanced overhead. He and Will had been spending time together in the meadow since early
morning, and now it was late midday, the sun was already beginning to dim.

"Okay, I've got to go now," Manny said. "Will, you should probably go find your dad."

"See you tomorrow," William called, waving his trunk at Manny. "On the pilgrum-age!"

"See you tomorrow!" Manny exclaimed. He stopped short at Clovis' legs, gasping from the
exertion. His father gave him a loving smile as his trunk wrapped around that of his son, lifting him
up onto his back as the shadows of impeding night began to lengthen, ushering in the twilight.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Manny stirred, feeling the soft fur of his father underneath him, and he blinked his eyes blearily as
the early morning sunlight filtered in, and he reluctantly came awake. He raised his head, using his
trunk to rub at his eyes as he stared around him, his mouth falling open in amazement. Mammoths
of every size and shape were shoulder to shoulder with the members of his herd, their heavy
footsteps causing the ground to rumble as they strode forward in a phalanx composed of various
herds walking side by side yet still remaining in their own groups.

Wow. Was Manny's first thought, and then the second immediately followed, Where's William?

Just as Manny was thinking, a voice called out,

"Manny! Hey, Manny! Over here!"

The young calf looked up, his face lighting up with a smile as he recognised William, sitting atop
Abelard's head, a row down from him. Manny had just opened his mouth to shout back when
Clovis interrupted him,

"Have you ever seen anything like this in your life, son? Look around you, walking alongside your
mother and I are all the respective breeds of mammoth who govern the Bredelands – there's not
been a gathering like this in our lifetime."

Manny shook his head slowly in reply to Clovis' question as he stared around him, his eyes wide as
he took in the sight of the mammoths before him: leading the way was a huge, dark brown Imperial mammoth, whose black-furred son, who looked only a few seasons older than Manny himself, rested on his back. He let out small trumpets to the other calves in his band, a subtle hint that he was the leader.

Manny glanced down the backs of the other Imperials marching along behind their Elder, and resting on the back of a large, auburn furred cow sat a chestnut-coloured female calf. She looked around his and William's age, Manny noted with interest. She let out small trumpets back at the black-furred elder's son, who looked back at her, waving his trunk at her with a meaningful gesture, whereupon she giggled and looked away.

Manny smiled, seeing the interactions between the two, and hope rose in his heart as he wondered if the two Imperial calves he had seen would turn out to be friends, and he was very grateful that the mammoths allowed all of their assorted breeds to mingle with each other, in a sort of unwritten rule to form bonds between herds and create an impression of stability and integrity among all the strains who governed the Bredelands.

_I wonder if he's a 'hope of the herd' like me._

Manny contemplated as he swept his gaze further down the rows of the Imperial mammoths falling in step behind their Elder, all hued in various shades of brown, ranging to brown fur so dark it verged on black, like the calf sitting atop the Elder, to almost white. He noticed the Southern mammoths marching in step behind the Imperials at the front.

Some of the calves looked like they were shivering in the brisk, cold air. Clovis explained that this was because the Southern mammoths lived mainly in the Ademais Marches outside of the Bredelands, but since the Marches of the Ademais was the farthest extent of the territory governed by their species, they were still included as an essential component of the Major Councils, and had their own Elders in the Ademais Marches.

Manny nodded solemnly as he digested the information his father had conveyed to him, his stare falling upon one of the calves sitting atop a cow, a little female. She turned her head to look at him, and he felt a blush making the fur on his cheeks warm as he looked at her. He noted that her fur was the lightest shade of brown he had ever seen in his life, lighter even than his mother's or his best friend's William colour of brown.

He met her eyes, and found they were large and hazel, sparkling with happiness as she grinned shyly at him before ducking her head away from him as she buried her head into her mother's tuft. Manny beamed as he watched her, wondering if he might be able to be friends with her once all the herds reached their destination, the Vale of the Seven Oaks.

A cry from William alerted him, causing him to look up as he watched, eyes wide open, as loud rumbles shook the ground – it was the Columbian mammoths travelling at the centre, second-largest after the Imperials, and their fur colour was much the same as their close relatives - and they were so big that they made the ground tremble with every step they took.

Manny eagerly inspected the backs of the adult Columbians, searching for a hint of any calves amongst them, but to his disappointment he found none. He was racking his brains, trying to determine why the Columbian mammoths in tow with them were calf-less, when his attention was diverted to another sight.

Marching stolidly at the flanks of the diverse herds on the outskirts were several medium-sized mammoths, their fur matted with sweat as if they had travelled some distance away to join the pilgrimage to the Vale of Seven Oaks.
Manny noted that in appearance they seemed to be the roughest of his entire species, their tufts shorter than the Woolly Mammoths and their bodies built much more stockily in comparison to the regal Imperials, and the colour of their fur was very dark, being commonly auburn to dark brown, with only a few light-coloured individuals amongst them.

He dimly heard William call out a greeting to a light brown female calf, who had placed her hoofs on her mother's tuft, vainly attempting to see the children journeying along with her.

Manny peered closer at her, noticing that she was not merely ochre; her colour verged on a yellowy blond that stood out amongst her more ordinary furred relatives. She tipped her head to one side, trumpeting a reply back to his friend before sending him a lopsided grin. She then narrowed her eyes, looking fierce as she suspiciously glanced at the perimeters beyond the procession. Manny found himself wondering what she might possibly be doing, but he wasn't to find out until sometime later.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Clovis heard Manny exhale a soft, contented sigh as he nestled deeper into his fur, smiling happily as he glanced around at his travelling companions, who looked back at him, some with grimness in their expressions, whilst others returned his grin with one of their own, letting him know that they had great expectations for Clovis' herd's "hope" as much as his own herd did.

The reminder that Manfred was their 'hope of the herd' brought Clovis to the situation at hand; Regent Elder Augustine had been grievously injured in battle, and upon his death and once they gathered him to his fathers, Clovis mused, a new Regent Elder must be chosen – but whom? In his heart, he dared to hope it might be himself.

He turned to gaze at Millie walking alongside him, and they shared a deep look before Clovis allowed his mind to wander back to two-and-a-half seasons prior to Vincent's announcement, when his Three Fjords herd had been visited, or rather, descended upon, by a quintet of non-elders selected by Augustine's Major Council by his Chancellor, Ambrose, to inspect him and determine if he was worthy of nomination or no...

The thunder of footsteps outside his thicket drew Clovis away from his meeting with his messenger bird, Tessa, that he had bequeathed to the sloths and other inhabitants of the Three Fjords diocese. Tessa had just then been relaying a missive from the lady sloth, who originated in Fransk, along with her mate Edmund, of the Bredelands stock;

"Pleathe, honoured thir," Tessa reiterated Manon's words to her to the Elder, "I thtand before you with my little toddler Thidney in my arms – you know of uth, living in the foothillth of Eira, and I have troubling newth for you." Tessa emitted a sob, repeating what Manon herself had uttered, before altering her voice to match that of a sturdy male's.

"Reportth have come by uth living in the foothillth of Eira,” Tessa replicated in Edmund's vocal intonations, having picked them up at first glance when she had flown over to meet the sloth family, and she did this with every creature she came in contact with.

Clovis knew that she would also never forget any the conversations she reiterated back to him, because the avian messengers had been gifted by Brede with a photographic memory that enabled them to play back and keep within them at any and all times, so that no information would be lost.

"Of a band of thlabres living off in the north, next to the tall, jagged mountain that thmoketh… and honoured Elder, we are beginning to fear for our thafety – what thhould we do?"
Oh Brede...Clovis groaned as he heard a rumbling that shook the ground, indicating that a group of mammoths had entered his domain brought him sharply out of his tussock. He nodded at Tessa appreciatively, murmuring,

"Thank you for the conveyance of such news, my Tessa. And now tell Edmund and the others residing in the same parts of the diocese that 'I, Clovis, had heard your pleas for assistance, and I will go and take a reconnaissances of this band of sabres for myself once time allows me to do so.' Carry this message to them, little friend."

"With pleasure," Tessa chirped, spreading her wings and rising aloft whilst below Clovis emerged from his thicket, extending his trunk to the four mammoths standing in front of him humbly, nodding a regal goodbye to Tessa as he glanced over at the group of mammoths standing in the meadow of the Three Fjords. He noted that they were each a different species of his own kind, and butterflies erupted within his stomach.

Oh, Brede... he exclaimed to himself. And to top it all off, the quintet of non-elders selected by RE Augustine's Chancellor had their appointment for my ... Inspection today. Brede, I forgot.

xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Clovis cleared his throat, embarrassed, attempting to cover up the abashment he felt over forgetting this appointment,

"Most honoured quintet sent by Regent Elder Augustine to oversee the nominees and judge if they are found wanting, how are you this day?"

The four mammoths turned their heads as one to stare at him, and he drew himself up, feeling the probing glances as he tried to hide his anxiety. Millie's head emerged from a copse adjacent to the one where he commonly met with Tessa.

She swiveled her gaze around, her stare falling on the quintet sent. Realising instantly what purpose they had come here, Millie sent Clovis a wink, and then vanished into the trees. Clovis felt a smile tugging at his expression. Millie's wink had indicated her confidence in him. She knew the interview would turn out well; at least Clovis hoped it would.

Clovis turned back to the small group in front of him, noticing them exchange glances of approval as he straightened himself, grinning at the newcomers pleasantly as they shook his trunk one by one, craning his head up to look two of them in the eye as they introduced themselves.

"Good day to you, Clovis son of Alfred," one of the cows greeted him with a smile.

Clovis grinned back at her somewhat bashfully as she went on,

"My name is Julia, daughter of Octavian …"

"So, you are the descendant of the infamous Julius, the Imperial mammoth who set himself up as Chief Elder during the Dark Times after Brede had ushered in a Golden Age with her creation of the Bredelands, and who has done everything you can to live down the smear put on your family's tribe! ..."

Embarrassed, Clovis juddered to a halt as he met Julia's gaze.

To his relief, she said nothing, but regarded him thoughtfully.

Clovis added, blushing, "My sincerest apologies if my gushing recognition of you has upset you,
marm. It's just that I've heard so much about you, it's such an honour to meet you at last!"

Julia stepped up next to him, grabbing his face with her trunk as she inspected his physiognomy. Clovis took in a deep breath as her stern glance roved over his face, but he returned her gaze strongly, trying to conceal how much this part of the Inspection bothered him. Apparently satisfied by what she saw, Julia withdrew.

Fixing her stare on Clovis, she asked, "So, you are one for our oral history, Clovis? I must say, that is one of the qualities I look for in any nominee – a sincere knowledge of our past and history and how Brede has impacted these lands that she carved out of the ice centuries ago, before our time – because it is essential, isn't that right, Cyrus," she said, giving a pointed look at the Columbian mammoth next to her. He nodded gravely in response before she continued,

"If we, and namely the Elders, do not care to learn from our past and the history carried down orally since the creation of the Bredelands, we are doomed to repeat it. It's why our oral history is one of the first, and one of the most important lessons given to our calves. Another Julius may arise..."

"Another Julius..." Clovis repeated, a feeling of dread squeezing his heart. He bowed his head deferentially to the matriarch of the councils. "What exactly do you mean, marm?"

The light of sorrow crept into Julia's eyes, "For if we do not learn from our history, no matter how we are frightened and repulsed by some of its events, another Julius may arise …"

Cyrus let out a rumbling laugh that broke into the silence breathing in the air between all the five mammoths after Julia had mentioned her cryptic remark about 'another Julius.'

"Come now, Julia," he reproached the cow. "Let's not bring remnants of the past into this happy occasion – do you think Clovis worthy of nomination to Regent Elder or no?"

Julia tossed her magnificent head mockingly at Cyrus, "I deemed it viable to bring up in this conversation, Cyrus son of Athelstan, because I had a sense that Clovis would be for our oral history (which is always high on my list for potential nominees. Darius, son of Augustine has the same beliefs about it as Clovis, by the way) being taught so that 'another Julius' does not enter into our path again." She paused, and then amended, "And in answer to your question, yes."

Clovis was rather amused to see the matriarch of the councils and her aide, the Columbian mammoth, speak about him as if he wasn't standing right in front of them.

"I am standing right here," he interrupted, just as Cyrus cried out,

"Well done then!"

He went on,

"Thank you for taking your part of the Inspection, Julia daughter of Octavian, now it's my turn with young Clovis!"

*He's a jolly fellow.*
"I might remind you, Cyrus," Julia muttered under her breath, "that this is an … informal Inspection, so pray halt your overuse of our titles."

"Of course, Julia 'daughter of Octavian'," Cyrus retorted, rolling his eyes with droll emphasis as he turned to Clovis. "Now, first things first – how old are you, me young bucko?"

The Elder of the Three Fjords herd glanced around the circle of faces before him nervously. He hadn't expected such a question.

"Uh… just approaching my twentieth season," Clovis stammered. He observed quietly as the quartet exchanged glances portending deep interest.

"He's young for an elder," the second cow, a Southern mammoth, murmured as she peered at Clovis keenly out of deep-set, ancient eyes. He noticed that she looked older even than both Julia and Cyrus combined. The woolly mammoth cow beside her nodded in agreement. Clovis didn't know their names.

"That brooks no argument," Cyrus reminded her. "Clovis has done a fine job taking care of his tribe and the creatures of the Three Fjords diocese – I heard from a certain little bird that he's even going to venture into enemy territory for the safety of those he leads, after we are done here."

*How does he know? Oh… of course. Tessa.*

"Yes, I am," Clovis affirmed, watching as the unnamed cow stared at him inquisitively. "I heard from Edmund the sloth via my bird Tessa that there is a chance of danger from sabres living nearby deep in the Mountains."

He was surprised to witness a smile beam on the cow's face, but he still wondered who she was.

"He is Regent Elder material, you can be certain of it, Cyrus." She whispered aside to the Columbian mammoth.

"So we are in agreement then," Cyrus enthused as the two cows nodded solemnly.

He turned to the other bull standing shoulder to shoulder with him, a Steppe mammoth. "What do you say, Quintus?"

Clovis knew that his name was only a title, as it meant "fifth". He was the official representative for the Chancellor and had the ear of Ambrose, his Second– everything banked on his decision for the Inspection.

"Hmmm" Quintus contemplated, striding over to Clovis. He seized his tusks with his trunk, testing the weight of each one. Once he had scrutinised them to his satisfaction, he finally said,

"Clovis has the makings of a potential Elder, as you have all commended with note. However, I want to see proof of this in action, therefore, Clovis son of Alfred, I bid you to seek out this sabre pack nearby that is tormenting your lieges."

"I was going to do so already, honoured sir," Clovis explained. "The other beasts who live under my rule mean a great deal to me, and I try to give them the best we can provide them."

"Very well," Quintus responded. "However, I want more news of this pack, this intelligence is essential, our Regent Elder likes to know whenever a potential threat is encroaching upon our Bredelands – now go!"
Clovis raised his trunk in farewell to the Quintet and Millie, who stood at the edge of the forest, gently playing with Manny's trunk as he enclosed it around hers. Seeing them together, looking so alone despite the herd surrounding them made Clovis' heart lurch.

"I promise I'll come back, Millie," he whispered, staring at his mate and their son with something amounting to hunger in his eyes. "By Brede, I swear I will."

He took into the woods at a fast clip, his nose alert to every scent. Night began to cascade, deepening the sky from blue to smoky black as he traversed through the forests and over hills. Finally, he stood below the foothills adjacent to the rumoured mountain where fire crackled into the night.

Walking gave Clovis time to mull over the day's events. Julia's remark that he was one for history sent his mind spiraling in that direction and the kindly face of the Southern cow appeared in his mind's eye. At once he realised who she was.

Her name was Cornelia, daughter of Tiberius of the Gracchi diocese located near the immense river that the mammoths knew as "Rubic's Con," after an incident in their past where the Regent Elder Rubic conned his way into the Bredelands over a game of "cherries" that ousted the previous mammoth leader, giving the Imperials and other breeds access to the plentiful domain that Brede had guided them towards.

Clovis stealthily advanced, wary to not collide with any loose stones from the scree as he crept down into the territory where the monsters lived, breathing heavily. A flash of movement caught his eye, and he drew in his breath sharply. A large shadow materialised out of the dusk into the vivid, frightening outline of a sabre, its eyes glinting eerily yellow in the half-light between night and day, glaring at him.

He peered around, noticing several pairs of golden eyes staring at him in the darkness. He flinched as low growls emerged as he turned back to the leader, warning him to tread carefully.

"Who are you?" he demanded, attempting to stifle his fear by putting up a bold front.

"The alpha of this pack - name's Cortez, friend," came a low growl in response.

"Clovis." The Elder introduced himself brusquely. "And I'm not your friend. I'm here to speak with you on behalf of my lieges, who have reported attacks against them. I respectfully insist that you stay away from my diocese, the Three Fjords."

"Fine … Clovis." Cortez rumbled, his eyes flashing dangerously. "I will agree to your terms, mammoth – but only for this one-time truce. I have a grudge against your kind that you have brought upon yourselves. Now get out of my territory before I order my pack to bring you down."

Heeding the sabre's words, Clovis nodded and turned away. He glanced up at the sky, realising that he would have to travel home in the dark, repressing a groan. He eased into a run, eagerly retracing the familiar stones and moved onto the path, setting off for home. He was greeted by the welcome sight of fireflies illuminating the council area, and smiled, knowing that Millie had ordered for them to be released so that he could recognise his home.

Quintus stepped forward out of the light, meeting Clovis' gaze as he sought around for Millie.

"How did it go?" Quintus inquired, eyeing Clovis pointedly.
"I made contact with the alpha of the sabres, who is known as Cortez," Clovis panted, exhausted from his hard run. "He agreed to a truce with me … but I think we should keep an eye on him, he has the potential to be a threat."

He paused, and then repeated the words that Cortez had snarled at him. "He says that he bears a grudge against us mammoths for a reason I was unable to determine, ladies and sirs, as it was getting late and I wanted to return safely to my diocese with the news."

Quintus considered him, contemplation in his eyes. He turned away from Clovis, and the Elder felt his heart sigh, feeling that he had lost all chance for a nomination. Quintus swept his gaze around the area, noting with pleasure that the entire herd had assembled, including young Clovis' mate and child. Quintus stepped next to Clovis, taking his trunk in his and raising it into the air as he proclaimed,

"The quintet has decided! Clovis son of Alfred has proven himself worthy to be in the elections for Regent Elder!"

As the words thrummed into the air, cheers erupted from Clovis’ herd. Clovis felt as if his heart would burst from pure joy. He looked over, meeting Millie's eyes, holding her gaze deeply. She looked back at him, and her glance was like a touch on his lips.

A hail from the Imperial mammoth leading the vanguard of the mammoth ranks broke Clovis out of his reminiscences.

*Brede, I didn’t realise that memory was so long,* he chuckled to himself as he trumpeted a reply back to Darius.

The Imperial mammoth had called for them all to halt. Clovis stopped short immediately, hearing the roar from the waterfall thundering beyond the firs and aspens dotting the forest. He looked closer, noticing a row of seven trees – oaks – standing at the entrance to the dale. They were tall and firm and straight, as if on guard to protect the Regent Elder who now lay close to death within the hollow of governance.

"Seven Oaks!" Clovis heard Darius trumpet, "we've made it!"

"So… I guess it's back to Diego now," Manny began, glancing about the campfire. "Any questions?"

"Yeth," Sid retorted. "Diego keepth thaying that you and hith 'patthth are going to crothth thloon' but I don't thee that happening, Manny!"

"Our dads just met," Diego protested. "Who's to say that we won't be having an early encounter of our own not long after?"

Sid merely huffed, crossing his arms belligerently, hunching inwards like a turtle into its shell. Shelley frowned at him, but Sid was too deep in self-pity to notice.

Ellie looked at Manny,

"I know, because I heard you three's story previously, but I couldn't help noticing that your fathers said the same thing to each other that you did when you first met..."
Manny glanced at Diego, sharing a chuckle with him,

"Like father, like son, I guess," Diego grinned at Ellie. "It's the only … logical conclusion."

He glanced around at the other animals around him, a sad light in his eyes,

"I didn't have a brother like that, however – as far as I know, Soto hated me … ever since I was born, especially since it was … intended that I should have died."

He gave a long sigh, "Along with my siblings."

Sid exchanged a nervous glance with Shelly at Diego's offhand remark. He turned to the sabre, his eyes wide with fright and anger,

"What do you mean by that, ol’ pal?"

_The thought of something like that occurring frightens him_, Diego realised.

"Yeah, what do you mean?" Axel echoed the sloth.

Diego chuckled, but there was no humour in it, "Ah, Soto was a great brother," he began, the cheerfulness in his voice not fooling any of the beasts listening to him. "Always finding ways to make it seem like he was helping me and caring for me when it was only a front to disguise his yearning to get rid of me… What's worse, I had no idea of his motives towards me when I was at such a young age… I think I only survived those precarious early years thanks to the vigilance of my parents…"

---

Cortez strolled along through his territory. He was on the prowl monitoring their borders along with Brutus. It was all perfunctory and routine, and all done out of the sense that his encounter with that mammoth Elder – who had called himself Clovis – had shaken him.

He had to work even harder to protect his lands now, and discipline the rowdy near-adults in his pack that were often wandering into Bredelands dioceses in search of mischief. He stopped short, surveying his domain of the Bredelands' northern border with a proud smile as fresh and welcome scents filled his nostrils.

_Maybe I was wrong to think leaving here would be a good idea_, he chided himself. _As of right now, we are doing fine…_

"Except for one thing," he muttered aloud, causing Brutus to glance at him, his expression inexorably neutral as he supplied,

"What is the matter, m'lord?"

"Nothing," Cortez growled, his eyes deepening into lurid gold. He loped ahead, ignoring the elder entirely as Brutus trod along after him somewhat grudgingly. Cortez stopped short as the whiff of scent from the birthing den came to him, causing an unwilling memory to rise up before his eyes.

---

Two weeks _before Clovis' Inspection_

---
Cortez came to a halt when he noticed Lucita's birthing den loom into his line of vision. He knit his brows as he stared at the cavern. No one knew that he had inspected the den a week or so after Diego's birth. No one knew that he had found little burrows of earth inside it, breaking his heart. No one knew except himself and Lucita and possibly, Brutus, that he had to allow himself to think. No one in his pack knew that his cubs, bar one, had been murdered.

His comprehension of this truth sliced Cortez to his core. He bowed his head in grief and regret, realising that now there would never be any chance that he would be truly and finally accepted as the Alpha of the pack – he had been banking on Lucita to come through and provide him with cubs to sustain his legacy, but now those dreams were shattered.

His only hope was that Diego, his second-born cub with true legitimacy to the Alphacy, would prove himself worthy of succeeding him as Alpha by the time he entered fifteen seasons of age.

"It was a mammoth that did it," a voice uttered beside him. Cortez started, shock creasing his face. He turned to face the elder, his eyes fierce.

"If you have known this for so long, why didn't you tell anyone?" he demanded through gritted teeth. Realisation and horror thudded through his body, shaking him. "You were on patrol that night, Brutus!" he went on, staring the older sabre in the eye.

He hoped Brutus didn't see the liquid creeping into his eyes as his mind turned back to the image of little burrows he had found. His cubs. His. And they had been snatched away from him… by one of his ancient enemies, the species he killed day after day to maintain his pack. He winced as fierce anger throbbed through his body.

*I'll make them pay. I'll give them hell to pay for committing such a crime against me like they have.*

Brutus shrugged,

"I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

Cortez let out a rumbling, ominous snarl. He stepped up next to the elder, forcing him backward.

"You didn't think it was that big of a deal?" Cortez repeated. He swiped a paw across the elder's face, leaving three red welts on his cheek. Brutus growled, lifting himself onto his hind legs as Cortez struck him, knocking him solidly to the ground. Cortez looked on with satisfaction as Brutus attempted to recover his breath, glaring at him.

"It is very much a big deal – to me, your Alpha - in case you have forgotten," Cortez whispered in a low, dangerous voice as he leaned in close to Brutus's face. "Now, you will tell me all that you know ... or..."

He stopped short with a pregnant pause, eyeing the elder with pointed emphasis.

"Or ..." he hissed. "Your pound of flesh that you owe will be called in for."

x-x-x-xx-x-xx

"Aw come on," Shelley protested. "You can't end it there, Diego!"

Diego watched her reaction with amusement, the hint of a grin on his face.

*To think that this was the sloth who just a few moments ago didn't want to hear about anything involving sabres! Ha, I've succeeded.*
He caught Axel gazing at him, his eyes wide with wonder.

"Shelley's right," he seconded. "You can't end it there, Diego! There's got to be more! Tell me there's got to be more!"

"Oh, but there is," Diego countered, winking at Manny.

He saw from his position next to Axel that Sid had gotten over his pity party. Uncrossing his arms, the sloth stood wobbily to his feet.

"I wathn't able to hear thith thtory the firth time Manny heard it," he exclaimed.

"And Diego," he continued, slyly poking the tiger in his side with his claws.

Diego uttered a warning, playful growl at him, hoping Sid would get his message and realise he meant it all in fun. The sloth slunk away as if out of fright, finishing his sentence hurriedly, his breath emerging in gasps,

"And you haven't even given uth what you promithed – which it wath about you and Thoto, Diego!"

Nice to know that I've still got my touch, Diego congratulated himself, quirking an eyebrow at Sid. The sloth didn't appear to notice.

"Well?" He demanded.

Diego glanced over at the mammoth sitting next to him, wondering what he would say.

Manny chortled,

"Looks like you're outnumbered, Diego! And Sid's right, leaving your story like that was just … cruel. Go on, tell us more!" He sent Diego a massive grin, nudging him playfully,

"And it's not like the hearing of your story will harm anyone, buddy. So... take your turn ... it's about time you were in the spotlight in this ... shared story of ours."

Review?
Shame

And thank you so much to one of my new reviewers, Elisheva-P for the fanart she drew for me of Cortez on DeviantArt! The link to her drawing doesn't show up very well on this page because of stupid fanfiction's formatting, so I'll include a link on my profile page and you can find it under the info about CI: Lacrimosa. :)

Also, my thanks to For the Kingdom for her care in betaing this for me! Now everybody, enjoy the chapter! :)

Diego shrugged, "Well, if that's the way you want it," he agreed, inclining his head slightly towards Manny. "Anyway, where was I? Ah, yes… Soto, and what a good brother he was to me…"

Diego cleared his throat, his eyes glazing over. He glanced around at the circle of faces gathered near him, the soft glow of the fire illuminating Manny and Ellie, darting shy looks at each other, Axel's sun-hardened face glinting with sincere interest, Crash and Eddie staring at him, eager to hang on his every word, and Shelley plying her basket whilst keeping an eye on the sabre cub. He saw Axel catch Shelley's eye and then turn away, his shoulders expressing his discomfort.

"Well?" Sid pressed, breaking the silence. "What happened between you and your brother, Diego?"

"I heard… about Soto," Axel amended, immediately drawing the attention of everyone gathered.

*He seems apprehensive when mentioning my brother.*

"You… heard about Soto?" Manny asked. He removed his trunk from Ellie's, squarely meeting Axel's eyes. Diego noticed that the cub didn't flinch.

Axel let a pause rent the air before standing, his hackles raised,

"Yeah… I heard about Soto," he growled defensively. Diego noticed a blank expression flicker on Manny's face momentarily; though the sabre had some idea why Axel was so flustered - he didn't want them to think that he was in support of his brother. "I heard from rumours amongst the band the sloth lady and I were a part of that he was a scoundrel, a brute, and that he didn't seem to care how his actions affected those he lead and that those who joined his pack faced a good chance of being neglected since when Soto made up his mind about a matter, nothing would change it. There, happy now?"

Diego exchanged a glance with Manny. A wordless communication passed between them with that one look.

"Well… that's sounds like an accurate description of Soto to me…” Manny mused. He extended his trunk to Axel, gently patting his tight shoulders. "It's okay, kid… no need to get so riled up about it… we understand what you mean about that."

A rare smile broke through Axel's scowl,

"Thanks… Manny, sir," he replied, easing himself down beside the fire.

Sid pouted,

"Are we ever gonna hear about what Diego *never told us about* when he mentioned that part to us
about his dad and the elder? I would like to know what happenth."

Diego found himself rolling his eyes once again at Sid's persistence.

"Trust me Sid, once you hear this you're gonna wish you could unhear it," he said darkly, his brows meeting in a scowl.

Sid didn't appear to hear Diego's admonition to him and everyone else,

"Thlo?" The sloth lisped. "Your partth of the thtories have alwayth been the belth, Diego! Come on, would you juth pleathe tell uth?"

The sloth was so earnest in his appeal that Diego considered that if he took much longer to concede and move on with his part; Sid would throw himself down at his feet, begging for him to continue. Scarcely had the thought entered his mind when he felt a coarse tongue licking his paws and raised his head to find that Sid was babbling,

"Pleathe continue, pleathe continue," over and over again as he massaged the sabre's paws with his tongue.

So I guess even Sid can stoop that low... and for something as simple as a story!

Diego shook Sid off of him, emitting a low, fierce growl under his breath. Sid hurriedly backed away, his eyes wide with fear.

And that's why you don't play with fire.

"Diego?" Ellie's soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "I know you don't want for us to hear some parts of your story, but we're your friends and ... We care about what happened in your past, Sweetie. Don't be afraid to let us know."

The sabre's eyes misted as he heard the she-mammoth speak to him, giving rise to memories when another, not too much different from Ellie herself, had called him her sweetie as well. Drawing in a deep breath, Diego tried to act as if nothing had bothered him,

"It's nothing, Ellie, thanks. Anyway, since I know some of you, he went on, sending a pointed glare in the direction of his friend the big floppy green thing, "would like to hear more of my story... well, my past, let's continue."

"It had been a great day on the outskirts of the Bredelands where my pack scrounged for food, bringing much consternation to my father, who still wasn't fully respected within his pack by his main sabres, Juan, Alvaro, and Tito, a circle of friends who were ambivalent about my father's succession to Alpha. I remember them being brutes." He let out a sigh, once again feeling the compulsion to want to apologise for the misdeeds his own species had committed amongst the other creatures and even their own kind.

Do I continue with this or do I just let Manny go, Diego pondered.

"Diiiego," Sid muttered, his eyes glinting in the warm glow of the fire, "Please go on."

Fine, Diego snapped at himself, I'll continue with this... as much as it gives me pain to even tell my story... to remember ... her... I will. A sabre must not show weakness.

"A sabre must not show weakness," Diego blurted out, earning a few surprised glances from the others.
Gaining control, Diego hurried on, "that was what Cortez believed, and thus he never let on to anyone, not even to Brutus, who was closest to him by right of birth, to his other members of the pack, who I recall being named Bernardo, Rogerio, and Felipe. Although they didn't as well have much faith in my father's leadership, instead preferring to obey Brutus, they treated my mother and I well enough. Soto was another matter, however."

x-x-x-x-x-x

Cortez raised his massive head, staring down at his pack from where he reclined on his Stone that assured everyone that he was the one in power. His eyes glinted as his gaze roved back and forth, assiduously taking in what was happening below him.

Tito, a minuscule sabre, befitting his appellation, chased after a rabbit, emitting a roar that matched his size. Nearby, a tigress with a large, heavy form reclined in the grasses, her face alight with appreciation for Tito's efforts.

Cortez faintly heard Tito exclaim to the tigress, bringing her the rabbit, "It's for you, Elisabet."

Cortez watched with disdain as Tito leaned close to her, nuzzling her affectionately. "So that we can have large, healthy cubs."

Inwardly Cortez sniggered, **Large, healthy cubs? Tito, you are fooling yourself.**

Rogerio paced into the meadow, his dark brown fur matted with sweat. He was obviously exhausted. Cortez beckoned at him to stand near the Stone,

"What news do you bring?" the Alpha inquired, his mouth tightening as he noticed Brutus pad up behind Rogerio. The elder merely sent him a blank, almost disrespectful glance before angling his face so that he was looking past the alpha indifferently. Cortez clenched his teeth.

How dare he, he muttered to himself.

"What news do you bring?" he snapped at Rogerio. Rogerio stepped back slightly, his eyes wide and uncertain.

"The Steppe mammoths are becoming ... clever," he growled. "Food is growing scarce. I hope you're pleased, oh great and mighty alpha." He threw back his head, directly meeting Cortez's eyes. "All of your decisions have only brought us close to ruin," he went on, his tone accusatory. "It might be better for us if Brutus was the Alpha, not you."

Cortez rose to his feet, his claws extending with his every movement,

"Is that a challenge?" he snarled, leaping down from the Stone, eyeing Rogerio coldly. "Why don't you just come at me then, take me down and reinstate wonderful elder Brutus as our leader?"

"Maybe I will." Rogerio countered, leaping onto his back legs. His claws swiped across Cortez's cheek, drawing blood. Cortez remained silent, remembering a sabre axiom his father, Ferdinand, had taught him long ago: **A sabre must not show weakness. To show weakness is to lose your position of authority in your pack.**

"I. Will. Not. Show. Weakness," Cortez muttered through gritted teeth, throwing himself onto Rogerio. In his periphery of vision, he could see Brutus watching the fight with a dull expression on his face. Rogerio smacked at Cortez again, nearly making the alpha collapse. Cortez stumbled marginally before giving Rogerio a ferocious blow to the head that effectively knocked him cold. Satisfied that his work was finished, Cortez cast a glare full of self-assurance at Brutus. The elder
grunted in response, looking off to something behind him.

Disappointed that he had failed to make any real affect, Cortez pivoted. The rustle of grasses alerted him that Rogerio had risen to his feet. He could feel the sabre's yellow eyes boring into the back of his skull, but he ignored it, striding forward, the thrust of his legs' quick movements indicating just how furious he was.

He hardly stayed unconscious for barely six minutes. I gave that traitor a kindness, Cortez snapped to himself. It's not even one he deserves.

"Dad! Dad!" The happy voice of a seven-year-old cub scattered his bitter thoughts. "Come on, Mama says that you said that Soto is gonna take me out on a hunting lesson today!"

"Diego!" Cortez exclaimed.

Damn, I completely forgot about that.

Lucita came up behind Diego, bending down her head to nuzzle her only son affectionately as the cub purred, enjoying his mother's caresses. The sight only served to further infuriate Cortez. Due to his own actions years ago regarding his Stone, he had forever lost Lucita as a mate. As he gazed at her sleek body that still revealed her strong musculature a decade after the raid that made her his, his desire to mate with her rose anew in his bones, causing him to tremble.

Lucita glanced up at him from licking their son, sending him a look laden with cold disinterest.

Brede damn it, I want nothing more than to make it up to her, make up for my mistakes to her and the pack. Maybe once I do my pack … Lucita will give me my full honour as alpha.

He paced next to Lucita, laying his head on her neck in an attempt to nuzzle her, but she merely pushed past him. Her last act before she went to join the other tigresses – the last remaining remnant of HER family – Cortez realised with a sudden pang, was to nudge Diego in the direction of his father and murmur,

"Take care that your elder son … Soto," she hissed out the name, "watches over our son whilst out on the hunting lesson today, or you will both have me to deal with."

Cortez found that he could not stop himself from rolling his eyes, mainly to keep at bay the memories assailing him. The faint echo of laughter reverberated through him, and he saw her laughing dark green eyes again… mocking him with their enticement. Her sheer nearness was tantalising to him. Abruptly, Cortez shook his head, his eyes flaming with anger. Lucita's eyes dilated with puzzlement at his strange behaviour.

He glanced at his younger cub. To his amusement, Diego was trying to imitate his actions, trying to do a sarcastic eye-roll of his own, but he mixed up how to do it, making Cortez laugh deep in his throat. Lucita's expression was one of barely-restrained patience, and out of the periphery of his vision he saw her glance stray over to Brutus and Rogerio, at once melting into something resembling pity.

Cortez urged Diego forward, pushing him slightly with one of his big paws as Lucita held his gaze meaningfully, but he saw that her eyes were still cool towards him. In that moment, he knew he had to do something… anything… to try and win her over to him… to love him again.

Determining that he at least needed to give Lucita a bit of assurance regarding Diego under Soto's tutelage, he muttered,

"Come, Lucita, we both know that Soto would never harm his own brother," but even as the words
left his mouth he knew it was a lie.

"Finally!" Sid exclaimed. "We've finally gotten to that part Diego kept holding over our heads..." he sent a pointed glance at the sabre, indicating him with one claw, "Very bad boy, Diego, very bad boy, to do that to us!"

*Oh Brede above, please spare me from any more of Sid's antics!* Diego pleaded, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

Much to his exasperation, Crash and Eddie were in agreement with the sloth.

"Yeah," Crash said bluntly, reaching up his small hands to knock them against Sid's in a fist bump. "What is it with you, Diego? We don't want to hear about your dad, we want to hear about you!"

Shelley peered over at Diego through her work of plying the basket. Diego noticed that the bottom of it was slowly beginning to curve out and form a rounded shape. Momentarily, Diego's frustration with Sid was forgotten.

He rose to his feet, carefully padding next to the fire as sparks flicked into the air beside him. Ellie exchanged a disappointed glance with her mate. Diego guessed that she had been enjoying the story and was a bit annoyed to have it stopped unexpectedly like this, but his curiosity (a trait his mother had warned him against) was piqued,

"Hey, Shelley," he said, coming to a halt next to her. Axel lifted his face, his eyes meeting Diego's. The expression in his eyes struck Diego to his core. Here was a cub who had known no sort of family, not even one as screwed-up as his own pack. Diego was humbled by the admiration gleaming in the cub's eyes, deepening his resolve to protect him and care for him, to treat him like a son.

I'll be like a father to him, Diego decided. I don't know if he's ready for it, but damn, I will.

As if to prove his thoughts were genuine Diego bent his head down, and brushed it against Axel's. The cub started, leading Diego to speculate that he was unused to affection being expressed to him in any way. He licked the cub's forehead, which Axel brushed aside with his paw as if embarrassed, before turning his attention back to Shelley,

"Hey, Shelley," he repeated, gesturing at her strips of grasses she had laid out beside her, "what exactly are you doing?"

Shelley gave him a bright smile, her claws flying across the strips, binding them together as she answered,

"I'm making a basket," she explained. "Didn't Axel, here tell you about it already, thir? I know how to do it because there were days when life in our mishmash of scavengers and outcasts became too much, so I would slip away, leaving Axel with them-"

"Which is something I really appreciated, Shelley," Axel broke in with a sneer.

"So that I could eavesdrop on the humans, hoping to learn more of them, their craft..." she trailed off, a distant expression overwhelming her face. Taking a deep breath, she went on, "Don't ask for more of my past, Mr Diego, sir. I only want to know more of yours, mine is not important."

"Of course it is," Diego insisted. "And besides... you all won't want to know of my past... It causes
me shame even today…"

"Diego" Manny spoke up. Diego could tell from Manny's earnest expression that he was trying to encourage him. "Don't say that. Listen… look, your past also includes me, Sid, and that baby we returned to his family. You do have something to be proud of in your past, and never forget that. I haven't and I won't."

The sabre felt tears welling up in his eyes as Manny's words seeped in.

"Thanks … again, Manny," he managed to say, exchanging a glance with the mammoth, who sent him a smile tinged with pride.

Diego padded around the fire, returning to his spot next to the "lovebirds" Manny and Ellie. He sank down to the soft dirt, raising his head to meet the eyes of two mammoths, a set of possum twins, two sloths and one sabre cub, who stared back at him, interest gleaming in their eyes,

"So, I guess it's back to my story," Diego offered. His green eyes dimmed hazel as memories encroached, flitting through his head as laughter echoed down the passageways of his mind whilst at the same time tears flowed in the recesses of dark niches he would prefer not to remember. He briefly saw her face in his memory, tears streaming down her brown fur, her shoulders slumped in grief before he dashed off, not looking back once.

"Yeth!" Sid said jubilantly, thrusting his clawed fist into the air. "Finally! Diego, you're taking FOREVER to get to the part with you and Soto, I mean come on, we want to hear the part about you!"

Diego held in a sigh. He rolled his eyes, his paw tapping the ground impatiently,

"Sid," he countered, a sarcastic inflection in his tone, "wouldn't you rather have the whole story instead of some pared-down version of it that gives you nothing about what made me who I am at all?"

Sid had the decency to look somewhat abashed,

"Uh… sure, Diego ol' pal," he muttered, his eyes shifting across the room in an embarrassed manner. "I'm very thlorry, please continue."

"And this time there'll be no more interruptions?" Diego retorted, his mouth opening in a wicked grin. Sid glanced at Crash and Eddie nervously, and the trio nodded their heads in assent.

"Although we can't really promise that we won't interrupt," Crash supplied, earning a glare from Manny. "But we'll be much much quieter from now on!"

"Great," Diego said, rubbing at his head wearily with his right paw. "So, as I was saying…"

x-x-x-x-x-x

Lucita's brown eyes were cold as she stared back at Cortez, her distrust of his words evident in the tight lines around her mouth.

"He'd better be safe with your son," she murmured, flicking her head over in the direction of Brutus.

The elder stood protectively next to Rogerio, conversing with him.
Cortez lifted his ears, pinpointing the faint sounds of the voices as the wind carried them. "Hunt" and "Mal" and "Midday" and the words 'I'll do it' reached him and he snapped his massive neck up, his eyes glowing.

He snarled bitterly as Brutus' nickname for him - 'Mal' - and his intentions to carry out the alpha's duty of the noon hunt and patrol entered his head.

Lucita glanced at him warily, and then amended, in a tone that was scarcely audible, "Soto had better keep our son safe on this hunting lesson..." she paused, and Cortez waited, ignoring Diego twining himself around his legs and hoping that she would utter his name.

He could hear it being formed by her lips but her next sentence dashed his hopes. "Or I will possibly take Brutus up on his offer to be Diego's godfather. He is your uncle, after all, and unlike you, he actually treats us kindly."

"Diego will be safe on this hunt," Cortez said, his face darkening.

He glanced around the perimeter where his sabres lay, his heart sinking as he knew that his position of Alpha of the pack was one of uncertainty, especially in his own, since all of those who followed him did so unwillingly, very unlike the experience his father had had with his pack - everyone had loved their leader, bar one - and sought to do whatever they were bidden immediately. Dark thoughts clouded Cortez' mind.

Mal – the word for "Bad". A word – nickname, rather that Brutus prefers to call me, as he has called me for seasons, "Bad". He first nicknamed me after his unsuccessful attempt to usurp my father's place when he saw what a pathetic role I played in helping my father defeat his ... half-brother. For that crime against our Code, he now has the 'pound of flesh' punishment upon him, although no one will ever carry it out, or want to, besides me. He has no confidence in my abilities as Alpha of the Vetta Inferno pack of the Allgraig Tundra territory, and because he is so "respected," everyone listens to him, but not to me. Brede damn it!

He heaved a sigh, his anger rising against Lucita. Her actions towards him had only served to remind him of another, and the end result was the same: they both enjoyed cutting his heart into pieces.

The difference between his lovely new mate and The Scarlett was that Lucita had no desire for power within the pack. He had noticed her basking on a rock sometimes in the high meadow, her eyes buried in sadness. Three of her sisters remained with her, but her family was gone – like he had planned.

"That will be excellent, then," Lucita went on, eying him silently. "I will send for Soto."

She threw her head back, a long, robust roar emanating from her slender throat. A few moments later, Soto emerged from the bracken, his face livid. Cortez knew he should have warned Lucita against being the one to summon his oldest son, but now it was too late.

"Soto," Lucita addressed his cub, "your father would like for you to be the one to give Diego his first lesson in hunting today."

Soto scowled at Diego, who shrank down near Cortez's paws, "You, of all tigresses, should not be telling me, the heir apparent to the Alphacy, what to do in this instance." He snapped.

"The heir apparent to the Alphacy is Diego," Lucita stated. "I'm sorry, Soto, but your right was
revoked when your mother," a shudder passed through Lucita, "overstepped her boundaries and was banished."

"Don't bring my mother into this!" Soto snarled, advancing upon the alpha consort.

"Soto," Cortez said. His tone carried a ring of authority not to be brooked with. Soto stepped backwards, his shoulders heaving as he bowed his head to his father. His eyes glinted at Cortez with a gleam that implied anger despite his deferential posture.

"Soto," Cortez went on. "It is time for Diego to learn how to hunt, and I have chosen you for the task of training him. Do it well, my son, as we need him to prove to be an asset within our pack."

The eyes of the ten-season-old's cub flashed at Diego. Cortez felt Diego shrink into a tiny ball next to one of his enormous paws at Soto's glance. His older son subtly appeared to be weighing the younger cub for any weakness.

Soto's eyes narrowed.

"I'll do it," he rasped, lifting his head to glare at Cortez.

"Excellent," Cortez said. He thrust Diego out towards his older brother with his right paw. Soto's face crinkled into a scowl whilst Diego gave a timid smile at his brother. Soto merely scoffed,

"Come along," he ordered the cub, striding past the relaxing sabres and tigresses basking in the cool highland meadow. "And be quick about it."

"Y-Yes, Soto," Diego stuttered, nearly tripping over himself in his attempt to catch up with his big brother.

"He had better be safe," Lucita murmured, watching the two cubs rush off across the meadow together, the midday sun shining down on them. She glanced overhead, noting the sun was at its zenith – the perfect time for hunting.

"He will be," Cortez growled under his breath. He leaned his head against Lucita's neck, emitting a low purr. She rolled her eyes, sending him a cool glance before she loped forward, freeing herself from his advances. To Cortez her movements mirrored the flight of birds travelling across the sky as she gracefully padded over to visit with her sisters.

I wonder if I will ever be able to make her care for me again.

Cortez padded under a canopy of aspen trees and firs, his nose on the alert for any dangers that might threaten his pack. He had decided to undertake this duty himself for a number of pertinent factors. Firstly, it would give him a chance to commend Soto for taking an interest, however grudgingly, in the tuition of his brother, and secondly, there would not be any reason for Brutus to do it and gain more favours within the pack since his uncle normally took upon this duty himself.

The scent of antelope tickled his nostrils as he inhaled deeply, relishing being on the prowl at midday. His stomach grumbled as the scents of antelope on the wind continued to beguile him. The grasses dipped low with the motion of the breeze as the sun dappled patterns through the leaves of the small forest he stalked in.

It's really a shame that there is no elk or aurochs here this far in the Allgraig Tundra, Cortez groused. No! Of course not! They all reside within the protection of the mammoths within the great
Inner Bredelands, thus cutting my pack off from a better food source. And they – the mammoths killed my cubs as well. And, eventually, they will pay for their crime dearly. Eye for an eye; and blood for blood, as Brede has set down from time immemorial.

The crackling of a branch snapped his head forward, and his nostrils flared, seeking to pinpoint the scent. Tendrils of smell reached him, one smell utterly redolent of the identifying musk of his former mate mingled with the scents of other sabre males, and he knew he had recognised Soto. Another scent pierced his nostrils; the smells associated with a clean, tongue-licked fur blended with the absence of prey scents assailed him.

He lifted his massive head, his sharp eyes darting back and forth as he padded through the light-dappled forest paths. Up ahead, he saw a fit and muscular sabre stretched out, lying low amongst the grasses, whilst a much smaller specimen mimicked the first one's movements impeccably. A slender antelope moved into his line of vision as he watched the proceedings.

Cortez allowed a rare smile to grace his rough features.

Soto has grown so much, he thought to himself. I almost didn't recognise him when I first saw him over there, guiding Diego in the way of the hunt.

A low growl emanated from the cluster of grasses beyond him as Soto burst out, his jaw gaping as he brought his incisors down upon the antelope's neck. Cortez angled his gaze, his ears picking up Diego's glee,

"W-Wow, Soto! That was so awesome! When can I try?"

"Once I've had my fill," Soto retorted, ripping apart the downed prey with his incisors. Blood streamed out onto the dark brown soil in a pool. Diego crept out from his hiding place, carefully making his way over to Soto as Cortez emerged from the bushes.

Diego was momentarily startled.

"Hi-hi Dad!" he exclaimed, gesturing at Soto, whose formerly complacent face transformed to one full of thunder at Diego's motion towards him, "Did you see Soto? He was just showing me how you hunt – I can't wait to try it myself." He came up against his father's massive forelegs, intertwining himself around them affectionately.

Cortez's face crumpled as uncertainty spread across his expression. Forcefully, he nudged his young cub away from him, attempting to ignore the hurt lingering in Diego's green eyes. Clearing his throat audibly, he turned to Soto,

"Soto," he addressed the older cub. "I just wanted to commend you for taking an interest in your brother – it is very good of you to teach him how to hunt."

Soto averted his gaze, his eyes stony, making Cortez feel as if his praise was a lost cause. Ignoring Soto's tenseness as his stomach rumbled, reminding him of his hunger, he crossed over to the kill, bending down to tear off a chunk of fresh meat.

He chewed thoughtfully, inclining his head slightly at Soto in appreciation for letting his alpha take some of his antelope. Satisfied with his brief repast, he glanced from Diego to Soto, noting the bright, eager expression in his younger cub's face before he strode past the two, leaving Diego staring after him.

Soto levelled a harsh look at Diego as he rose to his feet, blood dribbling down his heavy jowls. Opening his mouth, he scooped Diego up into his jaws, his incisors scratching the cub rather
deeply, yet Diego did not cry out. Soto knew that his brother was merely adhering to the sabre code, but a glance at his face made him think otherwise. Diego had gritted his teeth against the pain, fixing his attention on Soto.

Annoyed by the fact that Diego was trying to impress him, Soto deposited the cub roughly onto the ground, causing him to somersault at least twice before he came to a halt. Diego gave Soto a grin that he regarded as being brazen.

Rustling in the bushes caused Soto to raise his head, his eyes narrowing as he inhaled. He cocked his ears slightly; aware that a stray antelope buck had just wandered by. A plan began to form in his mind.

"Diego," he whispered. He indicated the motion of the prey animal nearby, bending down his head to show the cub how to breathe in the scent. "Now go get that antelope – do just as I showed you!"

*And if all goes according to my plan, this hunt of yours will cause your demise... my brother.*

Diego's mouth cracked open in a smile.

"Sure, Soto!" He said, confidence emanating from him, much to Soto's irritation. "I'll do just as you showed me and make you proud!"

*The only thing that would make me proud of you is for you to die so I can regain my place in succession for the Alphacy.*

The seven-seasons-old cub immediately pressed himself low to the ground, his gaze concentrated on the buck. Carefully, he thrust himself forward, stalking the antelope quietly. At last, he saw that an opening that was valid to him. His muscles bunched together as he leapt out of the grasses, flinging himself onto the buck's leathery neck. His sharp little sabres cut into the skin of the antelope, driving it into a fury of self-preservation.

The antelope reared onto its hind legs, shaking its neck violently as Diego extended his claws, seeking for a good hold on the buck, but it was too late. The buck shook its head down and from side to side, knocking Diego into a boulder. Diego's head made contact with the rock. He slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Soto glanced over at the cub, noting with pleasure how limp he appeared. He gave a satisfied nod of his head as he began to trot forward, confident that the little nuisance that pestered his days and threatened his succession was taken care of. He stopped short as a tigress emerged from the foliage, his face darkening when he recognised who she was.

Lucita. The alpha consort. And my scrungy 'uncle' is with her!

Soto found himself in a quandary as the alpha consort – a title that should have belonged to his mother – glanced in his direction. Her brown eyes widened as he realised that her quick look had immediately clarified to Lucita that he was alone.

Brutus peered over her shoulder, his gaze inexorably neutral as he looked the older cub up and down, suspicion glinting in his eyes. Soto cursed the day Brutus had decided to befriend the new alpha consort and her runt of a son. He narrowed his eyes as he watched a protective smile slip onto Brutus' face as the elder turned to gaze at Lucita.

*He loves her.* Soto realised, comprehending the fact with no emotion. *This should come in handy someday and if Father hears, he will be SO pleased.*
Inwardly he chuckled from the sheer delight of knowing that Brutus loved Lucita, although he had no idea if she reciprocated.

"Soto?" The alpha consort's soft voice tore him out of his musings. "Where is Diego? He was here with you on a hunting lesson, wasn't he?"

Soto smirked, brushing past the alpha consort and the elder haughtily, saying nothing.

Lucita grew worried.

"Diego!" she called out, loping into the serene meadow. "Diego, where are you?"

Fear gripped her heart. The memories of her newborn cubs lying still in the dust rose to taunt her. Tears brimmed in her eyes as she strove against a new reality that threatened to break her: her only son might be dead.

"Diego!" she roared, but only silence met her call. Her shoulders slumped as she hung her head. Out of the periphery of her line of vision, she caught a glimpse of pale tan fur. She looked up, her face brightening with hope as she crossed over to the slight form, recognising it as Diego even as her heart rose in her throat.

*Is he all right? Is my baby all right?*

Reminding herself that the elder Brutus had been shadowing her, although she was completely at a loss as to why – she assumed that Cortez had ordered him to do so since he believed that she might try to escape; she blinked away her tears violently. Her little son lay limp and still beside the rock he had fallen beside, the only movement she noticed was the faint breeze playing with his fur.

*Diego...*

She bent her head toward her son’s face, gently licking his cheeks and eyes and his forehead to his scruff. Her heart was pounding, thudding against her chest with each breathless moment as she continued her ministrations to her son. She happened to glance up at Brutus and to her surprise noticed a mask of pain etched upon his rugged visage.

Why should he care, she wondered, turning back to her son, continuing to lick him. Diego's eyes fluttered open blearily as she watched and his lips curved upwards to one side in a painful crooked smile,

"Mama?" he whispered. He raised his head, shaking it as he gradually began to understand where he was. He blinked in astonishment as the memory of what occurred before his fall rose to his mind, as he didn't recall his mother being anywhere nearby when he had been spending time with his big brother. His attempt to take down the antelope floated back to him as Lucita continued to lick his forehead.

"Mama!" he said, wobbily standing on his feet. "You should have seen me, Mama! Soto taught me how to take down a deer, and I *almost* got an antelope, all by myself! It was so cool! Soto's such a great brother!"

He watched as Lucita carefully tried to hide the disbelieving smile that had crept onto her face,

"Oh, is that so?" she replied. Her tone indicated that she had her concerns with his big brother, so Diego hurried to reassure her.

"It's okay, Mama... Soto wouldn't ever try to hurt me! And besides, I almost caught an antelope!"
he let out a laugh. Lucita hesitated for the barest of moments before joining in, their laughter echoing through the glen.

Brutus stood nearby, watching the tigress and her cub recuperate together via the medium of laughter, his brow knit in a melancholy scowl. He gazed at Lucita, his eyes once again appreciating the subtle contours of her muscular form befitting a huntress, the paleness of her fur lush and inviting to his own body. Drool began to trickle from his mouth but Brutus realised his mistake just in time. He cleared his throat, causing Lucita and Diego to glance up at him, curiosity shining in their eyes.

Despite his efforts, seeing the eyes of the alpha consort and her cub look at him so trustfully made a smidgen of compassion worm its way into Brutus' heart. His eyes flamed as he darted yet another sly glance at the alpha consort, knowing that he could never call her by her true name because of the bindings as defined by sabine code.

*It's not fair,* he muttered to himself as Lucita rose to her feet with the grace of a luscious antelope careering away in an attempt to protect its life. She nudged Diego forward, quite obviously eager to return to the relative safety offered by the pack's den near Vetta Inferno, the smoking volcano. The alpha consort looked into his eyes for a precious two seconds, although to Brutus it seemed like he returned her gaze for a lifetime.

He choked back a sigh. *I wish I could do more to actually help them – poor alpha consort, despite living in our pack for several years she still has that haunted, sorrowful look that appeared in her eyes the day my nephew first ravished her away from her family, although she has never attempted to escape even though Cortez thinks she might since things are so strained between them. And that Diego... he's some cub. It's rather admirable how well he puts up with Soto, because I have seen with my own eyes how badly Soto treats him. But what could I do to help them? Nothing, especially since Cortez is very keen on reminding me that under our Sabine Code of Honour, I still owe a pound of flesh and to grow close to ... her will only make Cortez find a way to pay me my dues.*

The alpha consort pushed at Diego with her right paw, gently urging him past Brutus. He caught a glimpse of the expression in her eyes, immediately feeling contrite because of the guilt he saw there. She had witnessed the passion that had consumed him.

*She knows I care for her,* Brutus cursed himself for being so transparent as Lucita ducked her head quickly, averting her gaze. He heard her whisper to Diego to run along and that she would keep up. The wind from their escape was the only impression Brutus had of their departure.

x-x-x-x-x-x

Dead silence held the occupants of the cave in its grip.

"Wow," Axel spoke up, finally breaking the oppressive, thinking silence. "Wow. Just wow. I knew Soto was bad, but not that bad." He glanced at Diego, his eyes revealing a brief flash of unhidden sympathy.

"I knew already that Soto was a complete jerk from your previous story, guys, but I say, Diego, your brother!" Ellie spluttered. "It's unforgivable that he would behave that way towards you."

Diego managed a grin, enjoying seeing Ellie, kind, gentle, give-everyone-a-second-chance, Ellie so worked up, something that didn't happen very often.

"Ah, it's fine, Ellie," he said. "Soto was like that. Nothin' I could do about it." He sighed, rubbing
his paw across his forehead wearily.

Ellie frowned, clearly a bit put out by Diego's resignation to his life with his brother. She opened her mouth as if she was about to speak but someone else got in first.

"Talk about romantic entanglements!" Sid chirped. "Gothh, Diego, your story is so much more fun to hear than Manny's!" He stuck out his tongue at Manny, who simply rolled his eyes in response.

Diego shrugged, growing a bit tired of the attention.

"I guess," he said, his tone noncommittal.

He crossed his front paws and then placed his head down onto them, staring into the fire. He caught Manny looking at him, worry etched on his face, but Diego refused to say anything.

_It's been a long day. And since Manny wants neither of our stories told to Peaches – not even the one with the baby in it, how we met – it's gonna be a long night, too._

Shelley seemed aware of his sudden despondency.

"Mr Manny sir," she addressed the mammoth. "I greatly wish to hear more of your story, sir. And despite what Mr Romantic Entanglements over here says," she went on with a flippant gesture at Sid, whose face crumpled as he understood that he was being a nuisance and his efforts to impress Shelley were falling flat on his face.

Diego idly wondered if he was a bit jealous of him and Manny and how the two newcomers to the herd were so interested in _their_ stories but not his. Well, _yet_, anyway. Diego had a suspicion that sooner or later Shelley would ferret it out of Sid, herself, if only because she was so cheerfully nosy. "I think that your story is just as much fun as Mr Diego's and I, for one, would like to hear more of it."

"Me too," Axel seconded the opinion. He glanced over at Diego, a smile brightening his face. A look of silent communication – a sort of intangible understanding - passed between the cub and the sabre, unnoticed by the others, but it sealed them forever to each other: one as the father, one as the son.

"Agreed," Diego added.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Manny raised his eyebrows slightly at Shelley's question. He surreptitiously glanced over at Diego, noting with concern the posture of weariness that emanated from his friend. His mind trailed over to what he knew of Diego's past and the secrets he was unwilling to divulge, even though Manny realised that the tiger would have to confess them sooner or later, as he recalled one day, not long after the trio had returned to the Bredelands following giving back the baby to his tribe, that the sabre had mentioned the name of a female mammoth that he'd known somewhat closely before she was Madam Elder...

"Mr Manny thir," Shelley's voice intruded on his thoughts, interrupting him just as he felt he had reached her name. "Will you pleathe continue your thltory so that your friend the tiger can have a retht from his exertionth of memory?"

Manny smiled, to no end amused by Shelley's vocabulary. Such words and phrases were not normally found in the species of the sloths at all, since the breed, so given to laziness, was prone to using short, easygoing words that served to get their point across but went no deeper than that.
The mammoth tapped his head reflectively,

"Hmm... now where was?" he murmured, noting the eager glances of Axel and Shelley. Axel's light green eyes were shining with interest. Shelley had focussed her attention on him exclusively.

Manny noticed Sid had crossed his arms again and was sitting off in the corner sulking. A tendril of compassion for the little sloth crept into Manny's soul. Sid had been rather shoved to the side due to the fact that his story was just so much more compact whereas his and Diego's met at crossroads occasionally, but Sid just didn't have much interaction with them both when he was growing up.

"Hey, Sid," Manny called, making Sid snap up his head expectantly. Manny gestured with his trunk at Shelley, still plying away at her basket. "Look... I know your story doesn't seem to be as important as mine and Diego's, at least right now, but I'm sure Axel and Shelley will be interested in hearing it sometime later." He winked at the cub, who grinned shyly at him, and at the lady sloth, who winked back.

"Oh, thanks Manny ol' pal!" Sid exclaimed, dashing forward and giving Manny's trunk a loving hug.

"Tho, who wants to hear my story later?" he asked, turning back to Shelley and Axel, wearing a dashing smile on his face. Manny rolled his eyes,

I didn't mean for you to ask them right NOW, he thought at Sid.

"Sure!" Axel piped up, almost as if he was imitating Diego when he was younger. "But can we get back to Manny's story now, Sid?"

"Fiine," Sid muttered, slumping down beside Shelley. A moment later he had bounced back again,

"Hey, Manny, did you ever have any romantic entanglements like what happened with Diego's relatives? Did you? Did you?"

"No." Manny heard himself say, knowing full well that it was flat denial. He saw right away that Sid didn't buy it at all,

"I don't believe you," Sid said. "I bet you did – ooh, when will we get to that part, when will we?"

"We'll get to it when we get to it!" Manny rumbled, glaring at Sid. "Anyway… my herd, known as the herd of the Three Fjords, had arrived at the Vale of the Seven Oaks. Everyone began to get settled, although the Elders of their respective herds were called away within hours of reaching the locale where the mammoth government was situated for an audience with the dying Regent Elder, Augustine, who had desired to speak with the Elders about to enter the election process and give the candidates… a few words of wisdom before he died..."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-

Clovis stood atop a small hillock, watching the leaves of the Seven Oaks of the Vale flutter gently in the breeze. It had been a mere fortnight since the mammoth herds had arrived at the cornerstone area of the mammothian government, but Regent Elder Augustine still lingered. Thus Ambrose, his Second, had advised the Elders of the herds a week ago as he and Millie watched, standing with the other Elders at the forefront of their herds,

"Our RE is still alive, although he is on the brink of death. Before he dies, he requests an audience with the main Elders of the herds, but he commends you all to choose an area of grazing for your
herd members before he summons you before him. He realises that all of the main Elders here have been weighed and not found wanting by the quartet of non-elders and Quintus and he wishes to speak with all of you, but he urges you to relax from your pilgrimage and I will call for you when Regent Elder Augustine requests an audience."

He turned to the brightly coloured tiny bird next to him,

"Sofia, recite the names of the Elders the Regent Elder requests an audience with."

Sofia, the messenger bird, nodded alertly in response,

"Yes, good sir Ambrose." She shook her head, as if to call up the memory of her last meeting with the Regent Elder. Clovis held his breath, glancing at Millie. He noticed that her eyes were wide, probably from the adrenaline pulsing through their veins in tandem.

He knew this was a momentous occurrence; the Regent Elder only chose the best to pass on his advice on leadership, his wisdom unto. He peered over at Darius, the Elder of the Imperial mammoth herd.

Clovis saw that he appeared to be just as worried as himself, although his stakes were even higher: Darius was the son of the Regent Elder. Clovis knew that being the son of the Regent Elder did not imply that he would become his father's successor. Only election based on his own virtues and morals would determine that, not his connection to his father. However, it wasn't too implausible that the RE's son would take his place, since election tended to favour families with a history of leadership, so Darius had as much a chance as any of the nominees.

Darius scratched his head in a nervous gesture, mouthing at Clovis,

"I do wish they'd get on with it and end this suspense – how long can it take for one little bird to just recall names?"

Clovis shrugged as he gave Darius a grin that he knew was both inane and filled with anxious excitement,

"I don't know, Darius. Our birds are always prompt. It might be that little Sofia is nervous herself."

Darius smiled back, pleased by Clovis's apt response, whilst Clovis sighed inwardly out of relief. He had admired Darius for many years, as they had grown up together as "Hopes of the Herd."

Even so, they had never had the opportunity to grow close since their fathers directed their herds into different dioceses, thus leaving Clovis and Darius to interact only each other during events that summoned them both back to the Vale of Seven Oaks. Clovis knew he had nothing to fear from Darius, but deep in his heart he often wished that they could become better friends; and the election processes at the Vale in past seasons did bring them into contact, yet nothing more than a few casual greetings would be exchanged.

Sofia drew in a deep breath, making Clovis and Darius forget their conversation as they hung on her words,

"David son of Jesse and Miriam daughter of Naomi, Elder and Madam Elder of the Marches of the Ademais diocese."

There was a long pause. It appeared that Sofia was straining to remember. At last, she chirped,

Clovis' mouth was dry. Sofia had named the other worthy candidates, but there was no mention of him. Or Darius either, he noticed to his dismay. His ears drooped as he turned away. An ear-splitting shriek sounded beside him. Millie had let out a trumpet of cheer, nudging Clovis eagerly.

He heard, over her excited squeals,

"Clovis son of Alfred, Elder of the Three Fjord diocese. And Darius son of Augustine, Elder of the Inner Bredelands diocese."

*I've been chosen!* He exclaimed. *I've been chosen! Oh, I wonder what our dear Regent Elder will say to me!*

Review?
Two Days Later

Pastel pink tendrils of light crested the dark-grey clouds surrounding the distant peaks of the Mountains of Eira as the sun's rays crept down to the forest floor, teasing a chocolate-furred calf until he unwillingly opened his eyes. Manny yawned, stretching his thick legs out as he slowly awakened.

He rose to his feet and, wobbly, trudged up the hill, his face stuck in a squint as he tried to determine the large blurry figure that stood on the overlook of a small knoll. His vision cleared as the sun spread its yellow down into the meadow, helping him recognise the figure watching protectively over something.

It's Daddy.

Manny let out a trumpet, breaking the calm that emanated from the silence present at dawn. Clovis shot a glare at him that transformed itself into a smile of greeting as the little calf drew close to him. He sank down to his knees, allowing Manny to clamber up from his forelegs onto his back. Manny grunted as he burrowed his way through his father's warm fur, finally reaching his back. He hurried to climb onto Clovis' topknot, heedless to Clovis' groan of pain as Manny's hooves dug into Clovis' skull.

Manny parted the hair of Clovis' topknot, his eyes widening as he looked on the same view his father had been seeing: their herd. He smiled, noting that William slept nearby in the curved area between his parents intertwined trunks, whilst William's older brother Richard had risen already, sending Clovis a nod that signaled he was ready to take over guard duty. Manny's eyes traced the outline of each mammoth in their herd, realising that in all they numbered around fifty.

"Some herds have even more than we do," Clovis said, as if divining Manny's thoughts. "A good example is that of my friend Darius – his herd of Imperials numbers at least one hundred."

"Whoaaa," Manny gawped, unable to comprehend such a large number. "What about the other herds?"

Clovis smiled, glad of his son's interest. My son will make a great Elder one day, I am sure of it.

"Well, if we're talking breeds-only, my son, then the Steppe mammoths usually travel in groups that offer the most accessibility to them and the best number that allows them to pick and choose bodyguard material. You will most often see them in groups of around twenty.

"The Columbians, close relatives of the Imperials like my friend, come together on the pilgrimages here in groups of fifty, like we do. And, last but not least, the Southerners from the Ademais
Marches, you will commonly see them in smaller groups of thirty since travelling up north from the South is hard going. Listen, Manny: all these numbers are important. When the time comes to elect the Regent Elder, a group of ten will be selected from each species of our kind to cast the vote -"

A catch emerged into his voice.

"-And-and this will likely come to pass when Augustine … dies, and is gathered to his fathers. A day none of us wish to see."

*Especially because it is a rarity for a Regent Elder to die in office; most live out their full twenty years of Regent Eldership before succeeding as Chancellor. A gathering like this hasn't been seen in our lifetime for that exact reason… we have come as one, to pay our respects.*

Manny grew pensive.

"He's a great guy, isn't he?" he asked, breaking into Clovis' thoughts, his voice sad. "Did you know him pretty well, Daddy?"

Clovis nodded,

"Aye, that I did, although your mother knows him somewhat better than I do, son. When her father, your grandpa Kenrich chose to give up the Regent Eldership to stay with her instead, he passed it on to his friend Augustine – your mother's godfather after the death of her mother in a battle with the hated sabres. Why, your mother and I were even present for Regent Elder Augustine's ascension day, although we were a bit distracted from it because you chose to be born on that auspicious day." He smiled. "It is not uncommon for close friends to assume the mantle of leadership should the one chosen refuse his post, and it has held us in very good stead over the many years we have governed this land."

Manny perked up, filled with curiosity,

"Sabres?" he asked, jumping up and down on Clovis' topknot, filled with excitement. "What are those, Daddy?"

Clovis scowled, remembering his encounter with the hostile sabine Alpha Cortez only half a year ago. He recalled the bitter tone of the sabre's voice, and the admonition with which he had warned him: *I have a grudge against your kind that you have brought upon yourselves.*

The words rolled around in Clovis' brain, distracting him. Manny clambered down his leg, tumbling to the ground in a somersault as he dashed off to play with William, but Clovis hardly recognised the movement as he contemplated the words the alpha had snarled at him.

"What grudge would he have against us? What cause has he for it?" he muttered, beginning to pace restlessly. "We mammoths have held our peace with the sabres of the region, er, I mean, *diocese* for many seasons. What could we have done to make him to seem so vile against the mammoths?"

He drew himself to a stop at the edge of the knoll, his eyes darting back and forth as he sought any traces that might betray nearby predators. Manny's laughter reached him, making guilt rise within him as he realised that he had totally forgotten to tell his son about sabres and the dangers they afforded him.

Heaving a sigh, Clovis resumed his pacing, muttering,
"I have to bring this threat before the Council. Quintus and the four other non-elders who judged me as worthy of being here today know of it as well, but it's not their place... It's mine, to tell the Council, so we may all discuss -"

"Discuss what?" a booming voice interrupted. Clovis turned on his heel, raising his tusks in advance just in case. He lowered them when he saw that it was only Darius. The dark brown Imperial bull's face was sorrowful.

_He must have only recently talked to his father._

"Well, discuss what?" Darius enquired again in a cheerfully bland tone.

"Something a sabre alpha told me," Clovis hedged. "The night the quintet of five descended upon my herd."

He fell into step alongside Darius, noting how downcast he seemed,

"Well... I... um," he managed to say, uncertain how to speak to his friend. "I trust your time with Augustine went well..."

"The Time of Lacrimosa is coming," Darius said, his eyes hooded. "The others have spoken with him already; Clovis, my father specifically requested that you see him last." The huge mammoth allowed a massive sigh to emanate from him as he slowly brought out a pinwheel designed by one of the beaver artisans, created from a strong stick and the delicate petals of a prairie flower.

Tears brimmed in Darius' eyes as he continued,

"He only gave me this, Clovis, and said that he was 'so proud of me' in a manner that better communicated 'disappointed'... that was all."

"A memory of happier times in bygone days?" Clovis wondered, placing his trunk next to the pinwheel, gently touching it so that it spun.

"Nein!" Darius snapped. "Nothing of that at all… now go, Clovis, it is your turn to speak with ... my father. By Brede, I hope you get more out of him than I did."

Clovis frowned, unsettled by Darius' words.

"Come, Darius," he cajoled. "Your father loved you - you know he did – isn't that pinwheel proof of it?"

Darius looked down at the pinwheel; the wind causing it roll over and over in a gleeful circle. He blinked away tears,

"I can only hope that he did," he whispered. "Now go, Clovis. The Regent Elder is close to death and he wants you to be at his side."

"All right," Clovis said. He strode down the grassy knoll into the flatter ground of the meadow, greeting members of his herd by name as they awoke. When he reached the far side of the meadow and stood near the opening to the RE's thicket, he stopped and looked back. He watched as a dark brown bull in the distance gazed mournfully at the spinning red pinwheel.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Ambrose stood outside the passageway of the thicket. Sofia perched on one of his tusks. They both
gave Clovis disinterested, curt stares before Ambrose gestured with his head towards the entrance.

"Augustine will see you now, good sir," he said with terse emphasis.

Clovis inclined his head respectfully at the two. Sofia motioned at him to lean down next to her,

"You might find a friend in there, too."

A friend? Who might that be?

Clovis carefully walked forward into the thicket, stepping on his toes in an effort to still the ground-shaking noise that always emanated from him whenever he moved, out of respect for the Regent Elder. He went in, branches striking him in the face until he arrived at the swept ground of the thicket.

He recoiled in surprise as he looked past the Regent Elder who was lying on his side with his legs propped up under him. Clovis met the gaze of Elder Darius. Clovis blinked in surprise, noting the presence of a small black-furred calf lingering near the very back of the thicket.

Darius' son, Clovis decided. Sympathy clutched his heart for the young one; he was only three years older than his own son. Clovis gave an inward sigh, thinking to himself that such an age was much too young for anyone to have to come face to face with death.

Darius glanced at his son and then nodded at Clovis, mouthing,

"He wanted to be here – Augustine is his grandfather and they are quite close." He paused, and then amended, "He's told me that he wants to be just like him when he is of age to attend the Councils."

Clovis mutely turned to gaze at the calf, but the black-furred son of Darius merely shook his head and looked away from him. Clovis turned back to Darius and was about to speak again when Augustine's voice broke the silence.

"I see you two... know each other," Augustine creaked, interrupting Clovis, raising his head stiffly. Despite being near death, his eyes were bright and alert. As he did so, Clovis noticed the huge wound on his abdomen. It was so deep that he could see bone, and he couldn't help admiring Augustine for enduring it to remain with them for so long. He also saw that although it had been staunched several times, it had only reopened, leaking blood onto the floor, filling the small area with a sickly sweet scent.

Trying his best to ignore the RE's lethal injury, Clovis replied,

"I... er... ah, yes, that we do, good sir."

Regent Elder Augustine made an effort to smile even as a hacking cough expelled from his lungs. Regaining his composure, he turned to Clovis. He noted that his son had moved from standing protectively behind him at the very back of the coppice to stand next to Alfred's son,

"I see you two... know each other," Augustine creaked, interrupting Clovis, raising his head stiffly. Despite being near death, his eyes were bright and alert. As he did so, Clovis noticed the huge wound on his abdomen. It was so deep that he could see bone, and he couldn't help admiring Augustine for enduring it to remain with them for so long. He also saw that although it had been staunched several times, it had only reopened, leaking blood onto the floor, filling the small area with a sickly sweet scent.

Trying his best to ignore the RE's lethal injury, Clovis replied,

"I... er... ah, yes, that we do, good sir."

Regent Elder Augustine made an effort to smile even as a hacking cough expelled from his lungs. Regaining his composure, he turned to Clovis. He noted that his son had moved from standing protectively behind him at the very back of the coppice to stand next to Alfred's son,

"I have seen ... many worthy candidates..." Augustine murmured, reaching up his trunk to clasp it in Clovis' as he held the gaze of his own son meaningfully. "But.. none ... are as ... worthy to ... assume my Regent Eldership... than the ones I see standing before me ... right now."

Tears brimmed in Clovis' eyes. Could it merely have been a few seven years ago when Augustine had been elected to the office of highest leadership in the Bredelands? He grasped the RE's trunk, taking in how grey the fur on his trunk had become. It made him wonder how intense a responsibility those seven years had been to age him so much, given that Augustine had only been
in his early seventies the year he was elected and Clovis had witnessed the birth of his "Hope of the Herd" that same election year.

Now Augustine was seventy-seven years old, a venerable age for any mammoth, especially the Regent Elder. Clovis remembered seeing Augustine a few days before Manfred's birth when the Elder had stopped by his herd's previous region located near the very outskirts of the Bredelands to pay them a visit, noticing even then the grey and white hairs mingling with the mahogany of his natural fur colour.

"Clovis... I see greatness in you..." The Regent Elder whispered, snapping Clovis abruptly out of his memory, thrusting him back into the lurid present. "... but... your time is... not yet... come..."

What can Augustine mean by that? Clovis began to worry. Does that mean that my time will never come? Maybe Brede has some dire providence in store for me... but Brede wouldn't do that to me, would she?

"You... worry... too... much." Augustine chided, struggling to breathe. Darius went up to him, propping him upright with his large tusks, his dark eyes filled with concern.

"Maybe Clovis should leave, Father," he said, darting a glare at Clovis.

"NO," The Regent shot back. "Not... until... he ... hears ... what I ... must tell... you both."

Clovis and Darius exchanged a look, their expressions conveying their puzzlement,

What could be so important that he needs to tell us both about it?

Augustine chuckled briefly. Clovis couldn't help noting that for a moment his face radiated sheer peace. His thoughts rattled inside him as he realised that Augustine looked like a young calf with a secret he was bursting to tell,

"I… have had... a vision from... Her... the great one... who founded our Bredelands... about... the son of Alfred... and my son," Augustine began, pausing briefly as he sought for breath.

His wound must be aggravating him, Clovis sympathised. He obliquely looked over at the wound, his mouth rising into his throat as he saw blood was trickling to the floor in a heavy stream. Without thinking, he immediately removed his trunk from the RE's and pressed it against the injury, trying to staunch it.

"Leave. Me." Augustine ordered, shooting him a frustrated glare. "It is no use. I … know… I do… not have long to remain here… before Brede's… summons to go… to… Elysium… arrive. So pay heed and listen to me, you young fools. Here... Is the wisdom I bequeath to you: the first duty... of... our government ... of any government... is to... protect the Powerless... against the Powerful. Heed this axiom; and you will govern well."

He coughed, and then went on hoarsely, speaking clearly for the first time without long pauses in between his words, "The title of Regent Elder is a dangerous one; you have as much to fear from your own members of our mammoth councils as you do the outside threats of the sabine tribes and the menaces of the cold times. Despite those very current perils, remember the axiom..." He stopped short, gasping for breath. He continued, feebly, "... you... two shall rule your dioceses... Very well..."

Clovis looked up, noticing a glint in the still regal Elder's eye; he appeared as if he wasn't quite finished with his speech, despite the pain fringing his eyes.
"Yes, great Sir," Clovis said, chastened by the RE's wise words about governance and the fortitude he displayed. "Pray, continue..." he let his words trail off.

Augustine is dying. Today. Tears brimmed in his eyes. Shaking his head vigorously, he attempted to blink them away.

"Brede... told... me... that you... and my son... have a... destiny... set in place... for you..." The RE went on. "A... destiny... that you two will... have... together... as great leaders of our Bredelands." He paused again, a tremor shaking his massive form. His legs slid out from under him and he collapsed on his side, causing Darius to remove his tusk from where he had placed them under his father out of necessity and back up, quivering.

"Father!" his garbled cry filled the air. Clovis rushed to his side, propping Augustine's head up gently with his tusks as the RE managed a small smile, comfortable in its finality.

"I... have had... a good life..." he mused. "... now... go... rule well... my sons."

His eyes rolled back in his head as a sigh emanated from his enormous mass whilst his trunk grew limp. His large body, once so magnificent and erect, slumped, leaving him inert, his legs stiff and becoming cold as he lay in the grotesque position of death, yet a mask of peace was stretched across his face.

"Father! No, Father!" Clovis faintly heard Darius exclaim, seemingly from a long distance, his voice muffled by tears.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x

The sun had reached its zenith in the clear blue sky by the time Clovis had left the thicket of the Regent to return to his herd. Along his way back, he heard little animals such as the sloths and beavers chatting happily together as birds chased each other across the welkin. Clovis trudged forwards, the noise of his movements scattering the beasts in his path as they scurried out of the way, having no indication of his sorrow.

He can't be dead. He can't be dead, Clovis repeated to himself, unwilling to face the reality of a mere five hours ago.

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Five Hours Earlier

Chancellor Ambrose, his eyes wet with tears, let out a mournful trumpet over the prostrate body of Augustine. The former Regent Elder's regiment of five Columbian mammoths, his chosen aides, had united themselves, linking tusks to lift the body and lay it out in state befitting for a regent elder of the Bredelands. They strained as they carried it out.

Nearby, Clovis watched silently with Darius. Both of them could think of nothing to say. Their grief wrapped them in a solitude that neither was willing to break.

Clovis snapped to attention when he saw the Chancellor stumble forward, next to the body of his oldest friend,

"We have lost a great Elder, a great friend." The Chancellor began, staring around at the assembly he had called for of a group of several leaders from Augustine's court. Not one of the faces was familiar to Clovis.
"And so, as our ancestors have done in time past will commence once more. A fortnight is to be set aside to prepare Augustine for burial. It is a time that you all know, because it is not lost on me that many of you here have lost those dear to you, and to honour them we devote to them a fortnight: the Time of Lacrimosa is at hand. Now, prithee, return to your herds and let them know that the Time of Lacrimosa has come – you will all have a part to play in it."

Clovis turned away, when the voice of the Chancellor calling his name halted him,

"Clovis – I know your mate had a personal kinship to Augustine, and as such, I have chosen you to help gather the dirt to form his barrow."

Clovis looked up into the Chancellor's kind, sad face.

"It-it would be an honour to serve our Regent Elder this one last time, sir," he stuttered, his voice thick with sobs.

"Hey, watch it, mister!" A beaver shouted at him, kicking a dirt clump in Clovis' direction. It hit him in the face, making Clovis scowl. "You're going to trample all of us if you aren't careful!" He narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Clovis. Clovis held in a sigh, aware that he looked a mess. One glance at the beaver revealed that its fur was streaked with lines of grey, so he knew it was an elder of one of their lieges of some sort.

The beaver stared at him intently as recognition dawned on his face. He grumbled to himself, "bout time that 'Regent' of yours went… some of us think that he had overstayed his welcome as leader, anyway."

Clovis stopped short, his body heaving from his run, his fur matted with sweat from the heat and his exertion.

"What makes you say that?" he muttered. His tone was dangerously low. "He protected and guarded this Valley as best he could, and he deserves your respect."

"So?" The beaver retorted, flinging mud at him. At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to just lash out at the nasty beaver and tell him who was in charge, but Augustine's gentle axiom restrained his wrath.

"Please. Explain," Clovis said through gritted teeth. The beaver let out a scornful whistle mingled with another hmph before continuing,

"Well, Sonny boy," he declared, as Clovis winced at the appellation. "For one, there's the fact that your 'avian messengers' are quite discontented with their lot, ya'-see, because most believe he (and the rest of you, by extension) treat them as nothing better than message carriers, allowed no real lives of their own. Also, for two, Augustine was always putting himself into danger for this Valley, and he paid for it in the end."

Clovis struggled to contain his rising anger,

"Well... well..." he spluttered, lost for words. The beaver decided to help him out,

"Name's Agathon," he extended his claw to the mammoth, who numbly shook it, Augustine's words about remembering the weaker ones in their Valley echoing in his mind.

"Well, Agathon," Clovis cleared his throat. He took several deep breaths to calm his nerves. He
glanced down at the beaver. Agathon watched him with bright, piercing eyes. Clovis sighed, "What is it that you want with me? Augustine was a great leader, at least to my kind, if not yours and all the other species of Brede's lands."

Agathon shrugged,

"Just thought it best for someone to know what we think," the beaver managed at last, a grim smile touching his features. "What we think about your species, the high and mighty mammoths. Despite the fact that at heart ya'll don't really seem to care a damn about us."

"What?" Clovis spluttered again. "That's not true! You know it's not true!"

The beaver folded his arms across his chest. His eyes lit up belligerently,

"I call 'em as I see 'em." He scowled. "Now, be off with you, young scamp. After all, don't you mammoths have a somewhat important... Time," he paused, and then remarked drily, "to commence?"

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

Clovis stepped onto the knoll from which he had watched the sun rise only that morning. It seemed like days earlier now, he said to himself, repressing a sigh. His encounter with Agathon had left a deep impression on him. The words of the beaver continued to scuttle around in his mind, provoking him to thought despite his sorrow.

Millie emerged from one of the copses of trees designated as home for the Elder. Her welcoming grin transformed its joyous beginnings into concern... which quickly translated into sorrow.

"She knows. By Brede, she knows already."

"Millie!" he exclaimed, hurrying to meet her, glad that they were alone. His trunk found hers as he leaned his head next to her, smelling the scent of tears on her. "We need to summon the herd together."

"Yes, I know," Millie mussitated. He heard the sobs rasping her voice. "I just don't think that I can, not right now. Augustine meant so much to me..."

"Shh, shhh," Clovis consoled her. "I'm here, Baby, I'm here."

"If you need someone to gather the herd, that has been done already," Abelard commented. All Clovis heard was the rumble of footsteps nearby. He sighed inwardly, relieved that Abelard had done his bidding without needing to be asked.

He felt Millie reluctantly loosen her grip on him, catching the glint of tears in her eyes as she turned away, heading back toward the grove. He assumed that it was to fetch their son so that he could take part in the announcement.

His line of thought was proven correct when Millie re-emerged from the thicket, Manny's trunk wrapped around her brown one. The calf's eyes were large and curious.

Clovis raised his head, sensing more than actually perceiving the appearance of the other woolly mammoths that now stood around him, pressing together in a tight semicircle. He saw discomfort on the faces of a few of the younger calves, trapped between their parents' tree trunks of legs as they waited for him to speak. William met his eyes, appearing interested.
A heavy sigh expelled from Clovis' lungs,

"I bring sad tidings." He began, knowing that whilst some of them suspected, most were oblivious to the events of the day, needing an explanation. His voice cracked as he stammered over his words, "... Regent Elder Augustine... is dead. The Chancellor has announced that a fortnight will be set aside to honour Augustine... it is..." He choked back a sob, hearing as if from far away the sound of Millie weeping beside him. Tears awakened in his own eyes as he glanced at hers. "... It is now the 'Time of Lacrimosa'..."

His herd members stared back at him with astonished, tear-filled eyes, some of the cows already noisily snuffling along with their Madam Elder.

"Is it true?" Abelard voiced the others' concern, although Clovis suspected that they all knew that he wasn't prevaricating. He glanced down at the calves in his herd, his gaze drawn to Manfred and William. Both seemed uncomfortable and bewildered by the sudden violent display of emotion within the herd, and momentarily they reminded Clovis of the black calf who had stood in the back of the thicket watching his grandfather succumb to death. Abelard's stare bored into him like the hot sun.

"Aye," Clovis murmured, finally answering his friend. "It's true. This herd will be expected to participate in the Time of Lacrimosa, Abelard." He turned back to the fifty cows, bulls and their calves that made up his herd, determination glinting in his expression. "I know that many of you would prefer to not have any part in these preparations for Augustine's final rest, but trust me. I think that this is the best thing we could do to work through our grief and pain over the loss of our admirable Regent Elder during the Time of Lacrimosa."

Millie looked over at him, a watery smile on her face. She moved through the herd,

"He's right," she said softly, tears shining in her eyes. "This is the best thing we can do." She turned and met Clovis' gaze, her eyes probing him expectantly.

Without a word, Clovis nodded, lifting his trunk into the air. He expelled a long, loud trumpet that was immediately echoed by Millie and the rest of the herd: the Farewell Call, familiarly known as the 'Trumpet Salute,' given only to strong leaders of strong and worthy character, Elders who had nobly led.

He trumpeted again and again, noting absently that Manny had followed his actions, letting out sad little trumpets of his own. Clovis heaved a sigh before emitting another trumpet, knowing that all over the Bredelands it was only Day One of the Time of Lacrimosa for the entirety of mammothkind gathered in their districts at the Vale of Seven Oaks.

---

Day Two of the Time of Lacrimosa

Clovis rose early the next morning to find the Chancellor standing on the edge of the meadow, silently waiting for him.

"Good day, Chancellor," Clovis murmured, following the protocol determined by Brede eons ago when mammoths had first settled the Bredelands.

"Good day, young Clovis," The Chancellor replied stiffly. He narrowed his eyes, seemingly deep in thought, before turning away. Clovis noticed that he seemed more depressed than he had been the day before.
He's struggling with his grief. The knowledge of the Chancellor's inward suffering assailed Clovis like the piercing of a sabre's incisors into his flesh.

"We have work to do," the Chancellor uttered, snapping Clovis out of his concern. "You have been elected to build up the barrow. You will join the others—among them the respected Elder Darius—in employing your tusks to carve out a place for Augustine to be gathered to his fathers."

Clovis sighed inwardly, feeling a tear tremble on his eyelashes,

"I hear and obey, good sir," he whispered.

Manny abruptly paused in his telling of the story. A quick glance around the room of the cave made told him strongly this part of his story had affected his friends. Tears shone in Diego's eyes. Eddie was blubbering. The green eyes of his mate were moist. Shelley had even momentarily halted in her weaving, sitting stone-faced. Axel blinked hard, but that couldn't stop a single tear from making a track down his angular face. Even Sid appeared to be emotionally stricken by the passing of the Regent Elder. To be honest, though, Manny found this the least surprising of the reactions - Sid was apt to be stricken emotionally most of the time.

The only one unmoved was Crash.

"Are you really going to tell us all about those days that make up the Time of Lacrimosa?" He complained.

Manny found that he couldn't keep from rolling his eyes—again. By now he'd lost count how many times he was losing patience with interrupters (namely, Sid and Crash and Eddie) of his and Diego's story. It made him wish those three would just be quiet so that they could finish it before night ended and the opportunity to tell it all was lost to their new friends, because there was no way he was going to let Peaches hear this story, either.

"We have newcomers here," he retorted, making a pointed gesture at the still weeping cub and sloth-lady, "and they have shown an interest in learning all they can about the Bredelands..."

He let an awkward pause hang in the air, all too aware of Crash's stony glare boring into his eyes. Everyone else was now watching him as well, curious as to what he would say,

"... And, so... we can respect their interest and let them hear it."

Crash remained immobile, the cold expression in his blue eyes not changing. Manny decided it was time for one final statement,

"Or maybe you should tell them about it, Crash, since you know everything about the Time."

"Okay, fine," Crash muttered, his voice tempered with sarcasm. His dejected attitude showed that he knew he was beaten. "Continue, O Wise One."

Axel rubbed away another tear,

"Yeah.." He mussitated, "please continue, Mr Manny, I really want to know more about all this, even though it's a sad Time... it's one where a family banded together at least to celebrate the life of one they deeply loved."

Manny felt tears welling up in his eyes at the cub's simple words. They made him wonder what
experiences he must have undergone to speak in a way that implied he knew none of the comfort and stability that mourning together during the Time of Lacrimosa afforded the mammoths.

"Sure, kiddo," he responded, extending his trunk to Axel. He let his trunk slide down Axel's scruff gently, making Axel let out little purrs of laughter. Axel grabbed hold of his trunk, beginning to bat at with his paws. A small half-smile emerged onto Manny's face as he watched the cub shedding his inhibitions, glad that Diego had decided to care for him.

Removing his trunk easily from the cub's paws, Manny found it intertwining with his mate's again. He looked into her face and noticed that her smile was still unsteady from her emotion.

"Okay..." Manny spoke up. "It was only Day Two of the Time of Lacrimosa, and my father and the Chancellor both realised that first preparations needed to be made for Augustine's resting place...A barrow where his bones would rest still needed to be carved out of the ground, or at least begun today, and then the Chancellor would send scouts out across the Bredelands in search of a monolith that would... that would... match Augustine's majesty and serve as a reminder that he would not be forgotten as the years went on..."

x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x-x

**Day Two of the Time of Lacrimosa**

Clovis made his way up through the high meadow aglow with flowers of all different sizes, shapes and colours, swaying in the wind as if they were dancing. Any other day, Clovis would have appreciated the beauty of the sight, but today they only mocked him with their glorious colours, almost as if Brede had designed them deliberately to be an affront to his pain. Clovis knew he was being disrespectful to the goddess of the Bredelands who normally manifested herself as the guiding spirit of the region, but at that moment he didn't care, too immersed in his own misery to be aware of his contempt.

"Clovis!" A voice reached him. He raised his ears slightly, trying to ascertain who it was, although he suspected that it was one of the Imperials.

His suspicions were confirmed when Darius emerged. Clovis noted instantly that his large, magnificent tusks were gritty with dirt. He'd already been working at the barrow for his father's resting place.

"Darius!" He shouted back. "I see that you have been digging –I'm ready to help. The Chancellor also told me that after the barrow is dug a monolith needs to be sought out... he has put you and me on one of the search parties."

"Aye, I heard that from him too," Darius responded, knitting his brow. "Come, let me show you where the barrow is being unearthed, and then we can discuss more amongst our work."

He led Clovis over to where a score of mammoth bulls were gathered near the centre of the lea. The massive tusks scooped away the soil, creating a deep recess in the grasses. Clovis watched for a moment, noting the particulars of how it was done by the bulls: they sliced their tusks into the earth, heaving it outwards into enormous clumps four inches deep and one meter high. One bull stood apart from the rest, using his tusks to sculpt the unearthed dirt into squares of the same lengths so that they could be lifted to place over the body once it was interred. He nodded gravely at Clovis before impatiently flicking his trunk at the hole nearby.

Clovis blinked. It hit him that underneath all the dirt and grime was Quintus, leader of the quintet of Inspection. Barely had the recognition entered his head before Darius had pulled him away. The
Imperial grunted from the effort as he slid his tusks into the earth whilst Clovis watched him, waiting for instructions.

Darius raised his head, his tusks balancing a square of earth,

"Clovis I will take out the soil to form the barrow," he said, unceremoniously sliding his cube onto Clovis' tusks. Clovis caught it, nearly sinking to the ground under the weight.

"Gosh, these are heavy," he exclaimed as Darius sliced his tusks into the ground again, coming up as if for air with another perfect thinly-cut square, which he plopped onto Clovis' tusks.
He repeated the motions until Clovis bore five massive slabs in his tusks.

"Now take those over to Quintus so that he can sculpt the edges so that they're easy to carry come the formation of the burial," Darius ordered. A smirk played at the corners of his mouth. Clovis nodded at him, and then tried to take a step forward, but it was too no avail. His right foot slid out from under him on the soft grasses as his tusks, weighed down with earth, skimmed the tips of grass blades. Despite himself, Clovis saw the humour in the situation.

He turned to look at Darius, nearly losing his balance again from the mere rotating of his head,

"Brede confound it all, Darius!" he said, his tone one of light teasing, "You've gone and made me top-heavy!"

Darius chuckled, much to Clovis' amusement,

"You were asking for it, you know," he retorted, sliding off two of the slabs Clovis was holding carefully. "Now come along, we must take these over to Quintus before the day gets any later."

"Don't we also have to seek out the monolith?" Clovis muttered, walking in the direction of Quintus' work area with Darius treading next to him, his steps ambivalent as he struggled under the weight he was carrying.

Darius heaved a sigh, his previous buoyancy forgotten.

"I heard from The Chancellor's avian messenger that has been postponed until Day Three of the Time," he replied. "We started late on our preparations for the barrow and that search has commonly been on the third day, so as far I could tell from Estella we've made good progress for today."

Clovis had the decency to look embarrassed,

"I'm sorry I arrived late," he murmured. "Maybe if I hadn't been things would be going more smoothly."

"Don't worry," Darius said brusquely, "All of us are in mourning right now. If anything's it's understandable."

He glanced at the deepening indigo hue evident in the sky. "Now return to your herd, Clovis. I will meet you in the meadow for the search tomorrow."

**Day Three of the Time of Lacrimosa**

Clovis wended his way ambivalently through the grasses of the meadow, his eyes darting back and forth cautiously. Out of the periphery of his vision, he caught sight of a dark brown blob in the
distance looming into view. He managed a smile.

Ah, it's Darius.

"Well," the Imperial said by way of greeting. "I suppose we should begin our quest. Shall we not, friend Clovis?"

"Aye," Clovis replied laconically, fearing to meet Darius' eyes, knowing that he would find vestiges of the sorrow that lingered there; he saw it reflected in Millie's every morning.

"Let's go," Clovis said, earning a thoughtful glance from Darius. "We have a long journey ahead of us –at least four days – since the best places to seek out monoliths is the Passere, deep within the mountains of Eira."

Darius raised his head.

"We must be on the lookout for sabres," he bellowed. Clovis saw that he had narrowed his eyes and set his jaw.

He is angry – violently angry – at the sabres. He is very justified for it, too. I would be, if the same thing that happened to Augustine happened to either Millie or our son.

Darius strode forward, his every footnote making the ground near Clovis tremble as the woolly mammoth walked abreast with his much taller friend. The two plodded through the meadow in companionable silence, Clovis' thoughts of Augustine and his impact on the Bredelands consuming him. The image of Millie watching him depart as Manfred stood at her side. Confusion filled his eyes as he reached up his little trunk to intertwine it with his mother's. Fury surged through Clovis as the memory faded from his vision.

"Brede!" He muttered aloud, not caring whether Darius heard or no. "It's not fair. Our young ones shouldn't have to experience death at such a tender age. But since time immemorial they have had to... even my lovely mate had to undergo loss at an age not meant for it."

"I agree," Darius mussitated. Clovis' ears drooped.

Crap.

Darius turned his head to look Clovis square in the eye,

"My calf, Samarkand," he continued as Clovis held his gaze, "watched his grandfather die. I still don't know what repercussions it might have on him, but I hope he will be able to overcome his feelings of grief and anger... but I can't know how he will ultimately take it. I ask of Brede that she will give him strength though."

Clovis tried to repress a sigh but eventually failed,

"I agree..." he said, attempting to search for words of comfort. Awkwardly he reached out his trunk and punched Darius lightly on the shoulder. Seeing his surprised look, Clovis tried to explain,

"It's what guys do... they punch each other on the shoulder... makes us feel better. My own father swore by it."

Darius rewarded him with the barest hint of a small grin. The returned to walking beside each other in silence, keeping company with only their thoughts and enjoying the beauties of the lush grass beneath their feet and the soaring white peaks of Eira gleaming in the distance.
"I have a question to ask of you, Clovis," Darius broke in, causing the silence between the two to fly away. He stopped short, drawing himself up so that he was looking down at Clovis.

"About what?" Clovis heard himself asking nervously. Immediately he was embarrassed of his fear, especially since it was only Darius. His friend.

Darius' glance roved from Clovis to the farthest edges of the lea and back to Clovis again, leaving Clovis feeling even more uncertain.

Darius cleared his throat, sending Clovis a gentle smile.

Clovis found himself relaxing, glad that the heat was off him.

"What do you need to bring up before the council so that we can discuss it?" He paused, and then went on, a shrewd light in his eyes, "Does it involve... them? Sabres?"

"Oh Manny!" Ellie squealed. "You can't end it there!"

"Yeah, what happens?" Axel asked, flinging himself to his feet. "Brede, you and Diego's story is just so exciting, Mr Manny!"

"Don't call me Mister," Manny muttered, rolling his eyes dourly. "I'm not... used to it."

"Sorry," Axel apologised, sitting back on his haunches only to find Shelley glaring at him. Manny noticed the tension between the two as they silently began arguing,

"Shelley," Manny grumbled. "Stop beating up on the poor kid."

Shelley frowned at Manny,

"He wath being disrespectful," she countered.

"About what? About who?" Manny retorted, knitting his eyebrows together as his face warped into a frown. "I didn't hear him say anything wrong."

Shelley's eyes were livid with anger as she glanced past at the mammoth over at Axel,

"You spoke Her name inappropriately," Shelley whispered in a low, ominous tone. She pointed a claw at the cub indigantly as Manny watched Axel cringe in humiliation, his eyes wide with puzzlement, "You of all animals should know you should not do that, cub! It's not meant for one such as you to say Her name!"

"I didn't do anything wrong," Axel muttered in reply to the sloth, a downcast expression on his face.

Confusion spiraled through Manny. He opened his mouth to ask a question and was about to speak when another voice broke into the conversation.

"He doesn't know who Brede is," Diego explained.

Review?
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!