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or saw no need to do so. In the end, it mattered little. After a night spent trudging through the jungle, the first rays of sunlight revealed a break in the treeline. Yet what awaited the feeling kit only filled them with dread. Stepping out from the trees, they found themselves met by a seemingly endless expanse of sand.

They had never seen such a thing, only knowing the word desert from stories. Their training hadn't advanced nearly far enough to help them here, and what lay ahead was only the promise of a slow and painful death. Yet to return to Golmore, to their people would just be accepting a sentence to death by ilms. At best, they'd be accepted back to continue their life as a male, and that would be no life at all.

Swallowing hard, Rael made their choice.

By the time night fell they were light-headed from exhaustion, and nearly delirious from lack of water.

Their movements had grown steadily more sluggish as the bells passed, searching desperately for water, or simple shelter from the scorching sun. And with night came a deeper cold than they'd ever experienced.

They collapsed a few bells later, shivering under the light of the moon, and utterly lost. They couldn't have found their way back to the jungle even if they'd had the energy to try, and there was no water left in their body for tears. They felt their breaths growing lighter, what was left of their reserves slipping away in a futile attempt to keep them warm.

Much of the rest of that night was a blur to the youngling, but they remembered a few things with perfect clarity. A figure in the distance, bursting into a sprint towards them. The feeling of large arms embracing them, and words in a strange tongue that they didn't understand. Water at their lips, fresh and cool, and a sudden banishment of the cold.

When they next awoke, Rael found themselves under a blanket beside a small fire. The rasp in their throat was gone, and as they stirred they saw a great figure sitting across the fire from them.

Something

small sizzled above the flames, the scent delicious to the starving teenager.

“You awake.” The figure spoke softly, leaning forward across the fire. His fur was a dark blue, almost indigo, with long white hair swept back around his face like a mane. They stared at him, wide-eyed and confused whilst he considered them. “What your name?”

“R-rael,” they replied. The words were rough and clearly unused – this man knew only some of their tongue, not more.

“Rael.” The huge man nodded. “Where you from?”

“Atoel,” the kit replied after a moment. For a moment they hoped that the man wouldn’t know the place. If he did, he could return them to it, and the life they had been willing to die to escape. “My forest name is Rael Atoel.”

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