

DRAWN-OUT CONCLUSION

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Day One of the March:

Clusters of white pour through the valley below me, far too belated for mother's liking. I can feel her discontent like the frigid water that lapped over my back at last winter's river crossing. I share her feelings. Even now, somewhere far in the distance, I can practically *smell* the mangy wolves loping after us; emaciated, salivating. Grey swatches on a rolling plain of mud and wildflowers. I smell this, but do not see it. My eyesight is weak, even among my kin. So is mother's.

We descend the foothills to rejoin our herd. As we do, one white figure breaks away from a tail-end clump to hail us. 'Oh you, *baa*, I remember you! It has been three moons since last I've seen you two,' bleats the ram, sliding beside us. A strange smell clings to him.

'My lambkin had taken a terrible fall on that last climb,' mother explains. 'We were forced to lag behind.'

At my mention, the ram tilts his muzzle down to get a good look. 'This march must be a terrible fright for you, no? You must be strong for your mother.'

'I am not afraid,' I say, and mean it truly.

'Brave,' laughs the ram. 'I was with the party who spotted the things. I am not nearly so assured.'

Day Three of the March:

The ram's name, as it turns out, is Mustardplant. He is one of the herd's laggards, always upon its back end. Mother wishes to stay at the group's head—and far away from the wolves' maws—though my weak legs quickly prove that to be infeasible. Soon enough, we are marching along with Mustardplant.

As the flock settles down on the third night, I feel myself grow curious. Once mother falls asleep, I approach Mustardplant.

'Mustardplant, my eyesight may be poor, but I see enough to know you are large. Large and strong. Why do you choose to be back here, with the slow and infirm?'

'What a silly question you ask, lambkin!' Exclaimed the ram, settling himself on a bed of milkweed. 'Where else is there to be? Perhaps those in the back are infirm, but I say, if the wolves are upon, front or back it will make no matter. We are food all the same. If that is so, then let me be eaten first! It's best to avoid a drawn-out conclusion.'

Mustardplant smells worse than before. I leave, confused. And perhaps a little anxious.

Day Six of the March:

We hit barren ground on the fourth day, and now we stride upon dirt and stone. My belly roars its discontent. I root around the thin, dry topsoil and turn over nothing but chips of flint.

The row of hills to the east grows as our march progresses, shedding their soft rolls of fat to grow tall and rocky. Now they extend so far into the distance they seem to curve with the world. I find their altitude unnerving, but what lies to the west is profoundly worse.

To the west the hills have receded into the earth, and what's left for us is a broad brown expanse. To my poor eyes it looks to stretch unbroken, jutting out from us until it meets the overcast sky. From that great field the herd can see a threat from miles and miles away. That's a good thing I suppose, but it also means that whatever is out there can see us as well. My kind has made fleeing a specialty, but without anywhere to flee to our ground becomes a killing field. I preferred the valley corridor.

The wolves aren't within seeing distance yet, but the back of the herd lags further and further behind the main group each day. Plague has begun to gnaw at our flank. She sweeps her three long claws at night and a half dozen sheep do not rise the next morning. No one tries to inspect the corpses, but they're there, and they bleed. I never knew sickness could cause bleeding. I hope that the wolves will sate themselves on the dead and leave us, but I know in my chest they will not. The sickness stinks too bad, reeks of rot and dank fur. They want something fresher.

I approach Mustardplant that night, but the smell drives me off. He has begun to smell of rot too.

Day Seven of the March:

Mother strikes upon dormant seeds in the ground, three of them in all. She gives two to me. Instead of filling me up, they remind me of the gaping hole within my belly I have been trying to pretend does not exist. I regret not feeling at least a little scared at the start of our grand march. It would have prepared me for this. In my despair, I truly begin to think that death is upon me. And this is what I tell mother.

‘You are too young to be worrying about death,’ she bleated, amused. ‘Nothing will happen to you.’

I snort. ‘Last night Mustardplant and a few others with the rot circled back a few miles. They saw the wolves, mother, like tiny specks on the horizon, but they *were* there. Maybe two days away. They told me, after you fell asleep.’

She looks at me with anger. ‘I told you to stay away from them. If you catch their sickness...’

Mother trails off. I do not know how she is so assured of our survival. Then I study her wide face for a few moments longer and realize she is not. She is pretending for me. Dread leaves me half a heartbeat to appreciate her effort before it lays its talons around my mind.

I awaken that night to a smell like a rotting corpse and see a ragged shape that can only be Mustardplant standing near.

‘Lambkin,’ he drawls quietly, and swings his muzzle to motion me away from mother. I follow at a distance, making sure to keep space between us.

‘Mother tells me I should stay away from you. Says I could catch your...’

‘My rot? I don’t think you have to worry about that.’ he lets out a yelping laugh. ‘I was wondering if you gave any thought to what we talked about four nights ago? It’s been on my mind lately.’

‘Yes, I remember. I understand you a little more now.’

‘Do you?’

‘I do. What we’re doing now, that’s just a drawn-out conclusion. It won’t end any better for us if we continue this march. Be it by wolves or hunger, we’ll be reduced to sun-bleached bones by the season’s end.’

‘So do you want to stop? Be wolf-feed?’ His voice is amused, almost derisive.

‘...No. I spoke to Mother this morning, and I realized she was putting up a front for me. She was convinced this march would be our end, but to me she acted like nothing in the world was wrong. And I realized at that instance how much I loved her for that attempt.’

Mustardplant is a silent shadow.

‘If I can push the end just a little bit off, then I have a little bit more time to appreciate that mother of mine. Who knows what else I might discover the beauty of?’

Clouds pull away from the moon and cold light floods the plain. The ram smiles and his teeth must’ve gleamed because there was a flash before my eyes.

Only the teeth of sheep cannot reflect light.

‘That’s how you think?’ Mustardplant says. ‘So in the end we disagree... But a drawn-out conclusion you wanted and a drawn-out conclusion you got. I congratulate you, lambkin.’

There is a quickening rhythm in my chest. Mustardplant’s skin *sloughs* off before me. Matted stinking fur drops to the ground to reveal something lean and hard and brown. The coyote kicks the hide away and shivers. ‘Well, that’s that, young one. I’m sure you’re old enough to know how this ends.’

Stinks like a corpse. ‘How many of you are there?’ I ask, because there is nothing else to say.

‘A little under half of the slow group. It helps when everyone there is so old. The eyesight...’

One more question pops into my head. ‘Why would you bother telling us how close the wolves are? Seems risky to circle back.’

‘No risk at all. There never were any wolves. Your kind has a strong imagination, you know? All we really did was nudge your minds a bit, and you’ve gone and marched yourselves to exhaustion for us. A herd of rams can be a fearsome thing for a mangy pack like mine... But if they’re too tired to resist? We’ve limited our appetites so far, but tonight we feast.’

I nod weakly. I am grateful they held off until I could see at least one glimmer of light in this march.