

## **Where The Wild Dogs Are**

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Amara remembered the leaves crunching beneath her shoes as she walked through the unfamiliar grassy road, the shadows of the trees blocking out the sunlight, while squawking birds rustled within the leaves, the branches glistening with humidity. She followed her mom's footsteps, her arms aching from the basket of food she was holding, wishing she had an excuse to get out of this like her brother did, but mom insisted because it was grandmother's birthday. Her dad followed behind, quietly grunting now and again. Her mom was holding a bunch of fresh, pink flowers, her chapped fingers gently holding the stems together.

"Your grandmother's favorite," was what her mom said as she picked the flowers up from the florist. Amara glanced at the bunch of flowers in her mom's hand. The faded pink matched the sunset she sees whenever she goes home from school after long meetings with the debate club. She was not sure what Grandmother would do with those flowers. Or the few packets of cream filled buns in the basket. She had never met her. "Your grandmother worked very hard when we were young. She used to work all day in a factory, and she was given a cream filled bun for lunch every day. Even though she was hungry she would always save the bun for me because I was her favorite out of all my siblings." Amara remembered scoffing at the story, wondering why her grandmother would save the bun for her daughter if she was so hungry. She saw the exact same brand in a convenience store one day and saw that it only costed eight dollars.

"We're almost there," her mom said, gesturing to a steep slope. Her mom was wearing a pale yellow cardigan, and looking at the yellow fuzz Amara remembered how soft

it felt, she imagined that was how petting a duckling would feel like. Her mom has a kind face, her eyebrows droopy, framing her steady, black eyes. Amara always thought they looked like the liquid pools of ink during her Chinese calligraphy lessons when she was a child, the shiny surfaces reflecting off the fluorescent lights in the classroom.

Amara walked up the slope hurriedly, leaving her parents behind, and her shoes somehow slipped on the slick grass. Her vision tilted and she barely managed a cry before she felt her mom's sturdy fingers gripping her arm, holding her steady.

"Careful. You alright?" Her mom casted her a worried look. Amara nodded and shook off her mother's hand impatiently. She does not like it whenever her mom looks at her like that. She was not a child. She continued walking up the slope, this time making it to the top.

They kept walking through the forest until they arrived at a clearing. The road ahead was covered with wilted, brown leaves while the sides were scattered with buttercups, the smattering of bright, yellow dots stark against the dark forest floor. In the middle of the clearing was a grave. That must be it, Amara thought. The faded stone was partially covered with dust and leaves, with old incense sticks stuck onto the dirt. It looked undisturbed, yet there was an unsettling air around it. Trees stood at the edge of the clearing, their trunks peeling and crawling with ants and parasites, their branches lean and sickly-looking. The leaves were sparse, yet they casted faint shadows over the forest floor.

They all started walking towards the grave when they heard a slight rustle from the trees. A pair of eyes appeared behind the bushes and a wild dog stepped into the clearing, the dry leaves crunching under its muddy paws. It stepped in the middle of the path, blocking their way to the grave. Its matted fur clogged with dirt and ash, so much that Amara could not tell the color, but it looked like a mix of dark brown, white, and grey. Two smaller dogs emerged, and they had the same colored fur, their stance equally as aggressive as the big one.

Flies buzzed around and landed on their clogged fur, their large tails swishing in the air dangerously like weapons. The biggest dog stared straight ahead with a glare, its muzzle pulled back into a snarl. A low growl could be heard from its throat, the slow rumble echoing across the clearing. Its eyes shone a flash of black that somehow looked familiar. Amara's eyes widened. She looked over to her parents, who were frozen in place. Dad immediately stood in front, shielding mom from view. Mom looked frantic.

“What should we do?” Amara asked. She looked around. There were only scattered rows of trees and bushes. No one could have heard them even if they called for help. Dad glanced at the basket, grabbed a packet of cream buns, and threw it to the dogs. The biggest one snapped its jaws when it landed at its feet, sniffed it, and stomped it under its paw in disgust and spat on it, the plastic packaging crinkling under its muddy feet. Then the dogs steered its direction towards mom.

They didn't want the food. They wanted *her*. Mom looked desperate.

“I'm just here to see mom,” she said, stepping forward.

This sent the three dogs into a raging frenzy, growling and barking. The biggest one bared its teeth, the growl emanating from its throat as a string of saliva dripped from its jaws, rancid foam gathering at the lip. It stepped in front of the grave, as if staking its territory, its stance almost possessive. The dog's claws juttred out from its paws, its eyes gleaming with insatiable anger and its hind feet strung like a bow and waiting to pounce. The whites of its eyes were tainted with a sickly yellow, the red veins sticking out, the crooked spindly lines crawling on its eyes like little red vicious spiders. The two other dogs seemed to be riled up by the biggest one, their barks echoed their leader's, howling nonsensical threats and snapping their jaws at mom, who was starting to cower in fear. Dad stepped in between them,

blocking mom from view, as the dogs continued to bark at her. He tried to yell at the dogs to scare them away, but they only seemed to be riled up even more.

The biggest dog was getting more aggressive by the second, and its hind legs bumped into the old incense sticks, making them fall against the grave, the loose dirt getting onto the stone. The front of the grave was now a mess of wilted leaves, stranded incense sticks, and wet, muddy paws.

“Stop! Please, we don’t have to be like this!” Mom yelled out, her voice shaky. She could not seem to bear the sight of grandmother’s grave being trampled, and dad stepped forward to try to shoo them away. The dogs could only bark. The loud, hoarse sound unintelligible. Amara saw the two sides collide, with the grave in the middle. She saw panic and desperation in her mother’s black and steady eyes, and the same shade on the dog’s eyes, but this time filled with another kind of desperation, the one that longs for the unfulfilled attention that will forever be inferior to another. Not that it mattered anymore. The grave stood silently between the two, unmoving. The more the two sides fought against each other, the more dirt was kicked up by the flurry of paws, covering the faded stone in the middle of the clearing. The dogs advanced on Amara’s parents, and her dad kept mom behind him, constantly yelling and shooing to keep them at bay.

Amara knew she should have joined her dad. She was supposed to be a part of them, bound by more than just the blood coursing through their veins, but she found herself standing frozen in place, unable to move. She saw the sharp, yellowed teeth of the dogs snap ferociously, and felt a chill down her spine as she remembered the day when the quiet girl in class getting pushed around by a bunch of their classmates and ended up falling onto the floor. The girl laid there, her eyes hidden by her unruly bangs. The loud rowdy group closed in and started kicking. Amara just stood there, watching. When one of them looked over she quickly

turned away, averting her eyes. It was like how her mother taught her – never make eye contact with a wild dog unless you want to get bitten. The loud growls and barks pierced her ears and she saw the dogs again, this time gaining on her parents. Her blood crystallized in her limbs, freezing over her body. She swore she could see a glint of enjoyment in the biggest dog’s eyes as it snarled at her parents, who were backing off. The dogs paid Amara no attention.

Then her mom started to cry. She remembers the tears streaming down her mom’s face, those chapped fingers trembling while covering her face, her breathy voice whispering, “No...no...please go away...” as if the dogs could make sense of her pleas, as if they would feel sorry for her. Amara remembers the hot anger ripping across her chest, but it was directed at her mother instead. If it was her she would never cry in front of the dogs. She remembers looking away in embarrassment, her face burning with shame, as if it was seared by a red hot iron. The dogs seemed even more satisfied after seeing her cry, their muzzles pulled back as if they were smiling. Another growl pierced the air as the dogs surrounded her, the mess of their bodies jerked around with feral anger. Her dad tried to step in between to separate them, but the biggest dog got ahold of mom’s ankle and mom screamed. The teeth sunk into her flesh and the thick red liquid dripped out, staining the stone grave on the ground, dripping down the intricate engravings, like when a tear slides down someone’s cheek.

Amara knew she should have intervened. There was a moment when her dad glanced at her desperately, and the shock of bewilderment crossed his face once he realized she was not coming. She stood at the side, fingers trembling, watching as her mom was circled by the dogs. Amara did not know why she didn’t try to step forward. All she could remember is the overpowering urge to yell, “Get up. Get up!” at her mom, wanting her to stand up with her own two feet and stop cowering. Stop crying. Stop begging. The moment you’ve shown your weakness is the moment you’ve lost the battle. She wanted to yell at the shivering ball on the

ground as it was dragged around like a rag doll. The biggest dog continued to bark ferociously and howled with a triumph, like it finally won. Its claws dug at her mom's bloody skin, which was now scarred with red, bright betrayal.

Dad seemed to run out of patience and rushed forward, kicking the dog's legs. The dog's grip on mom's ankle loosened and dad managed to pull her back behind him. He could not seem to contain his anger anymore and grabbed a rock from the ground and swung it in front of him. The dogs stepped back, jaws snapping, their saliva still stained with red. Dad's voice got louder, and the three creatures backed away, still growling. Amara looked into those black eyes and swore that they almost looked smug. With her dad's threats, the three dogs eventually left, their tails still swishing like whips in the air, the buttercups squished under their paws.

Years passed, and they never went back to the clearing after that. But Amara could sometimes catch a glimpse of the scar on her mom's ankle, the skin unusually shiny and bumpy, stretching across the length of a hand. Every time she sees the scar, Amara would always find herself standing in the clearing again in her dreams, perhaps looking at her trembling, frozen self, trying to understand the rush of frozen cowardice that overwhelmed her body, and the shame that ran to her toes, imprisoning her limbs. Perhaps that scar would not have been there if she had fought for her mom instead of standing there watching. Amara would sometimes conjure up scenarios. In one of them she was standing between her mom and the dogs, and dared the dogs to keep going. Her heart was calm, and her body still, as if she was in a meditative state. The dogs continued to growl and bark, ignoring the warning in her voice.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," she said, feeling her lips curl into a sinister smile, feeling the wind ripple through the air and channeling her telekinetic powers to snap the

biggest dog's neck with a satisfying *crunch*, its head dangling awkwardly in the air, held only by its skin. Its eyes seemed to pop out of its sockets, suspended in the air like helpless children swinging on red monkey bars. The rest of the dogs would stare up at her with horror and whine, the pathetic sound squeaking out in hushed breaths, tail between their legs, retreating back to the bushes where they belonged. In another one she was holding a gun to one of their heads, and shot a warning shot into the air, the sound bouncing off the forest floor, making the dogs jump in fear. Even the trees seemed to shake. She imagined running through the clearing again and again, trying to find something. But she could never find it, no matter how many times she dreamed about it.

Her mom never talked about it again, except for that one night when the humid air seemed to penetrate through the walls, the desolate silence searching for buried wounds. She might have said it when she was wiping the table with a dirty rag, cleaning away the remnants of the meal they had. She might have whispered it, or said it to her face.

“Your brother would have protected me if he was there.” Then she went back to wiping the table, as if she made a remark on today's weather.

Amara remembers thinking about those soap operas on TV late at night where women slap each other because they were wronged or betrayed by a best friend. She imagined how it would have felt like to be slapped, that hot flash of pain blinding the side of your cheek, staring at the face of righteous indignation, wondering if you really deserved it.

Her mom never brought it up again. Some days Amara would have sworn it did not happen. That they were not attacked by feral dogs. That she did not somehow hide in the shadows, legs frozen, watching as her mother was being devoured. That it was just a figment of her wild imagination; and that those dreams, those visions could only account for her madness and not her shame.