

Liko

Liko was alone again. They left him. The herd had moved on, finished grazing at the field, leaving him to look up from the grass and find himself utterly alone. He spent the rest of the day in a panic, running through the forest, searching for his herd, only to find that no one had even attempted to look for him. Liko didn't like getting left behind. He knew why they ignored him. His skin didn't match the fur that the rest of them had, and his odd appendages made it hard for him to keep up. At night, he would curl up alone under the thicket, watching the other calves tuck into their mothers for warmth. He would study his feet, and wonder why they split into five instead of two. He would look at his hands with hatred, and confusion. He hated feeling this way, where the other deer just pretended he didn't exist. That night, as he drifted off to sleep, he dreamt of waking up with hooves instead.

The next day, the herd was roaming the south meadow. The open sky had melted the snow early enough for the ground to have dried, and the air was warmer than it had been in weeks. Liko loved the meadow. The edge of the field led to a small range of wildflowers, which Liko liked to weave into small wreaths, and arrange in the dirt between the patches of grass. He would layer them, making sure to be gentle with the petals. Stem over stem, flower beside flower, braiding and tying. Today, Liko was choosing between some small, delicate, purple flowers and a tall, orange flower with rounded petals, when he heard footsteps stampeding towards him. The other deer were scattering, darting across the field in all directions. One fawn tripped in the grass, knocking into Liko as she fell. Liko strained to look up, searching for the cause of the panic, but with the herd rushing around him, there was no way to get a clear view. Suddenly, a roar echoed through the meadow, sending the deer into a larger, more frenzied fit of chaos. Liko stumbled, dizzy from all the commotion, unable to find direction.

He reached to the ground to gather his work, but couldn't feel the petals. Confused, he looked back at the ground and dropped to his knees when he saw it. His flowers. Shredded. Eyes wide, looking back in horror, he watched as hoof after hoof landed on his intricate weaving. His beautiful flowers had been trampled, crushed into the dirt. Feeling tears welling up in his eyes, Liko clutched the ground, hiding his face as the last of his herd rushed by him. His chest hurt, and his throat ached, and his little hands were trembling.

Feeling a shadow cast over him, he risked a look up, finding himself face to face with a horrifying, giant, seething brown bear. Liko's eyes darted around, seeing a huge, snarling mouth full of dagger-like teeth, yellowed and sharp, mere inches away, and dark, crazed eyes, staring down at him, surrounded by a mass of rough, matted, grease colored fur. Hot, wet breath fanned Liko's face, the smell clogging his throat, as he sat there paralyzed, the flowers now the furthest thing from his mind.

The bear sniffed, then cocked its head, relaxing its snout. It seemed confused by his smell: deer-like, yet, something else. Liko kept still, trembling, frozen in fear. Leaning forward, the bear hovered its nose over Liko's skin, smelling him. The bear opened its mouth, and Liko closed his eyes and felt his heart stop. Then, he felt something wet and rough on his face. He

opened his eyes, and looked at the bear, who was sitting back, smacking its lips, confused. It stared at Liko for a moment, before continuing to investigate him. Taking deep breaths, Liko tried to calm down, attempting to stop his trembling.

The bear, seemingly having come to a decision about the boy, wrinkled its nose, before turning away and taking a few steps toward the other side of the field. It then stopped, and looked back at Liko. It seemed to expect something from him.

Liko looked towards the trampled flowers, and the trail back to the herd that had left him, feeling a sort of emptiness. They wouldn't worry about him. He doubted they would even notice if he left. Turning back towards the bear, curiosity bloomed in his chest, tugging at him. The bear was still a few steps away, looking at him, almost as if it was waiting. Taking one last look at the flowers, Liko pushed himself back onto his feet, before darting through the grass to catch up to the bear.