

First Place Winner

Where Hyenas Go to Dream

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She had stopped using her name three days ago.

With each sunset, Memma grew more silent. The elders said the transformation was coming. The one from which the Nakali don't return. Her laughter became harsh, stuttering. Her gaze lingered too long on the horizon. When Kairu addressed her, she blinked like someone surfacing from dreams he couldn't share.

To him, she was still his Memma, his grandmother. The one who sang him lullabies, weaving them into his hair with every braid. He remembered how she'd press her thumb to his forehead when he cried, whispering, "Your soul sits here, little flame. Keep it steady." That thumbprint had felt like armor once. Now, it felt like a memory slipping through his hands.

Dusk stretched along the Nakali camp to a sky of shadows and orange smears. The last sunbaked heat peeled off the stone where Kairu sat, cross-legged, beside his father.

Kairu's father thumbed the back of a sheep femur, thumb as broad and chipped as the femur itself. He drew a dull flake across the bone's length, working at an old groove.

Kairu closed his hands around his knees and pressed inward, as if trying to compact himself smaller. "What if . . ." The words withered, but he forced them out. "What if she doesn't remember me again?"

"She will. And if she does not, you'll remember for her."

His father handed him the piece he'd been carving. A weathered bead. "Tie this into your Memma's braid. She is not ending, Kairu. She's becoming. Let her know she's loved on both sides of the veil."

Kairu rolled the bead in his own hands. It was lighter than he'd expected. The groove fit the tip of his thumb perfectly.

His father left. But the fire's warmth didn't fade. Kairu remained seated until his mother came over, pulling her shawl closer as the night began to blow a light dust in the air.

"You remind me of her," she said.

Kairu blinked. "I do?"

"She used to sit just like that. Watching the fire like it owed her answers."

She reached into her braid and took out a smaller bead engraved with crescent moons. "Beads carry memories," she explained. "You'll braid your own. That's how we pass things on." She kissed the top of his head.

Before dawn, the Nakali camp stirred. They moved through the dark, shuffling into the packed-earth ring beyond the last tents.

The tribe formed a circle, shoulders pressed close, and eyes fixed not on each other but on the ochre-smeared earth between them.

A drum began, slow and steady. The sound vibrated through Kairu's shins and jaw, though he was already kneeling. The elders, faces striped with ochre, shuffled forward as dust swirled up like orange ghosts. One lifted a pouch and scattered pigment before Memma, who stood at the circle's edge.

Kairu kept his gaze low. He heard the click of claws, then the hush of a dragging foot. Memma's silhouette wavered. Long and lean, a crooked shadow was spit out by the pale fur on her shoulders and hips. Her hands were still nearly human, knuckles gnarled, fingers flexing, nails black as seeds. But her face, he didn't want to remember her mouth had stretched wide, the new teeth pushing through, the laugh too wet, too full of hunger.

One by one, the memory beads were braided into his Memma's fur. The oldest woman, her hair a pelt of white, braided thick with leather, took each bead in her palm and whispered over it. Kairu's mother stepped forward and offered up her bead without hesitation.

The silence wrapped around Kairu's shoulders, tighter than any blanket. His hand grasped only the smooth bead where a memory ought to be.

Kairu tried to think of a memory he could give to Memma. Nothing surfaced but the image of her face when she forgot him. The way her eyes slipped past, and her lips trembled, empty of names or affection.

A low yip, half-laugh, half-cough slipped from Memma's throat. It was not her old laugh, but something smaller, feral, an echo distorted through teeth. Kairu looked up, involuntarily, and found her watching him with both sets of eyes. His grandmother's was wet and dark, and the emerging hyena was pale and ringed with black. He expected to find anger or disappointment there. Instead, she watched, fully, as if there was nothing else in the world but him.

Memma's eyes narrowed, and, for a heartbeat, Kairu thought he saw her smile. Not with her mouth, the lips pulled too tight for that, but with the smallest lift at the edge of her eyes, the look she used to wear when she was about to surprise him.

She dipped her head, slow, deliberate. A bow or a challenge, he did not know which. And in that moment, Kairu realized she was not asking for anything from him. She was only waiting to see if he could let her go.

The ceremony continued until the matriarch drew a circle in the dirt around Memma. "She needs to step out by herself."

A hush fell over the gathering, an almost eerie silence that seemed to swallow all sound. Then Memma's laughter erupted, a deep and guttural sound that echoed through the air. Slowly, she stood up, her entire body trembling as if caught in an invisible wind. Her fingers elongated and stretched, morphing into the unmistakable shape of paws covered in coarse fur. With an air of determined resolve, she stepped out of the circle of onlookers and ventured into the vast, open plains without so much as a backward glance.

Kairu rested on his bedroll that night. The tribe warned him, all of them, in whispers and jokes and the knowing glances passed around the fire: Don't follow the hyena, not even if it's your blood. He remembered the story of a cousin who'd gone after her grandmother, chasing a shadow across the plains, and had never come back. They said she left behind a strand of beads, all of them cracked down the middle, as if her whole life had split apart.

Kairu stood at the edge of the camp, watching the darkness beyond, hands trembling. He just couldn't let go. Not yet.

A shadow moved behind, so light he almost missed it. He spun, expecting to see a disapproving elder. Instead, both his parents stood there, arms crossed, watching as

they did storms that rolled in from the east: not afraid, but with the uneasy respect of those who knew their place in the order of things.

Kairu waited for a scolding. Instead, his parents held each other's gaze. In the silence of their eyes, Kairu saw a question, an answer, and an old pain. Maybe they were remembering their loved ones, the night they lost them. Perhaps that was what parents always saw in their children. Echoes of the goodbyes they couldn't finish.

"If you follow," his father said, thumb brushing the bone bead in Kairu's palm, "do it with your eyes open."

His mother squeezed his arm, but she smiled. "Even the desert gives gifts, if you ask with kindness."

Kairu wanted to say thank you, or sorry, or something to mark the moment, but all he could do was nod.

He turned to face the black beyond the camp. Each step from the firelight felt colder, as if he might float out of the world. The grasses whispered as he passed. He followed the prints: round, clawed, barely visible. She had to be close.

The wind picked up, and with it, he heard something. Not sound, but memory. A hum, a breath, the rhythm of a lullaby she used to sing.

Where the wind forgets your name, I will carry it . . .

Time unraveled in the plains. Days, hours, moons. He followed the strands of her scent on the wind and the pull of something more than a map.

He saw himself as a child in Memma's lap, as she traced stories into the dirt with a stick, calling them her "root-tales."

Then the vision faded, and there she was: curled and still, lying beneath a fig tree.

Kairu crouched next to her. He felt the roughness of her fur, which was cooling as he pressed his forehead to hers.

"I found you," he murmured.

The wind moved. Her voice came back, not spoken, not imagined.

We don't remain in the body... we remain in those who carry our flame.

Kairu couldn't recall getting up or how his feet seemed to skim the ground. He sprinted with her through the vast expanse of grass, his legs growing weary and his lungs aflame. The bead jostled softly in his pocket. Unshapen, silent. He clutched it tightly, regretting not knowing which memory to etch.

The sky flickered as the moon tilted and shattered into countless glowing fragments. Every fragment descended softly, casting a silver-blue glow over the grasses. As they touched down, they became memories:

—a melody whispered into his hair as she braided it,

—a quiet offering of dried figs,

He picked one up, feeling its warmth spread through him.

A memory blossomed in his mind. He remembered how she once made a feast from almost nothing. Flatbread, wild herbs, and roasted roots. She smiled as if it were the richest meal in the world.

He gazed at the fragment in his hand and then at the multitude of others strewn about. He bent down and collected them, cradling their gentle light against his chest. The shards didn't burden him. They wove together into a resilient, threadless tapestry.

He could stay here, reliving these moments endlessly. No farewells. Just her.

But as his hand touched the surface, he felt a tug on his tunic. A sharp grip that almost tore the cloth. He spun, startled, and saw Memma, eyes gleaming black in the fractured moonlight.

He tried to resist, but she tugged again, harder, and this time he let the shard drop. It shattered on the ground, the memory spilling out in a cloud of warmth and then fading. Memma looked at him with a mix of pride and sadness, and in that look, he read the whole message: his place was not in this dream.

He set the bone bead on his knee and pressed the flake against it, rolling it the way he'd seen his father do. Each groove rippled with memory: the edge of Memma's grin, the arch of her brow when she pretended not to care, the press of her palm when he failed and she forgave him.

He turned to Memma, now fully hyena, but her eyes never left his. He parted the fur at her neck and wove the bead into her mane.

"Where the wind forgets your name, I will carry it."

Memma's ears twitched. She leaned in and touched her forehead to his, just like when he was small and scared of thunderstorms.

His voice cracked. "You remember."

She didn't answer. But her eyes stayed on his, bright and full, as if to say: I never forgot.

He buried his face in the warmth of her neck, breathing in the salt, musk, and dust.

"Thank you for the songs, the stories . . . for staying as long as you could," he whispered.

Dawn stretched pale fingers over the plains. The fig tree loomed like a sentinel, but something in the stillness had changed. He no longer felt like a boy chasing what was lost. The memory of the shards still warmed his chest. He let them rise and fall, not fighting the ache.

Kairu didn't look back as he crossed the ochre line into the world of the living. Knowing she remained, waiting in the place where hyenas go to dream.