

The Bottom of the Pack

By Ziva Taylor

My side radiates with pain, it feels like fire under my skin. George laughs. John shouts. I whimper as I limp to a bush.

I hear George viscously shout back at John. John needs to leave, he's at the bottom of their pack and George is above him. You don't mess with higher members of the pack, it only leads to trouble.

Time passes. John appears by my side, littered with bruises.

"Look what he's gone an' done to ya, girl," he whispers, his warm hands gently stroking my fur, "You're not a bad dog, you were just tryin' to stand up for me."

John is good to me. Ever since we met on the boat over here we've had a connection as fellow runts. But his injuries are my fault— I should never have bitten George, even if he was making John hurt inside. Now he's hurting on the inside *and* the outside. Stupid me.

"The bloody bugger,' John hisses, "He's rotten to the core."

John smells angry. The kind of angry where you don't think things through. The kind of angry where you bite back. The dangerous kind of angry. I'm scared for him— we both can be reckless at times, but he doesn't know where to stop. He pats my head and leaves.

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The pain in my side dulls, but it still burns. I still hide under the bush, waiting for John.

Stock graze quietly in the fields, the bush screams in the wind. Clouds cover the moon. They know what happens before the rest of us do.

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I hear him before I see him, leaves and twigs crunch under his black boots.

He sits down next to me as I cautiously wag my tail.

John smells like blood.

"I took care o' George," he breathes. I look at his shaky hands, stained with blood. His hands were so gentle and kind to me. I nuzzle them, they deserve to be loved regardless of what they have done.

He begins to cry, holding me gently in his arms. I know this is the last day we'll spend together.

John walks down to the river, I limp beside him. I'll follow him wherever he goes, heaven or hell. Two runts together.