

## And the Sea Roared

As the sun set over the vast expanse of water, Calici HighWater sat on her perch of rocky outcropping. The little otter maid brooded silently to herself, her hazel eyes unfocused and staring out across the bay. Occasionally, a wave would crash on the rocks, sending up a fine spray. Calici was close enough to feel the mist, taste the salt, but she did not get wet, as if the sea was considerate of the lone observer.

Calici sighed deeply. “Can I really do this?” she murmured. The Trials were tomorrow and she was beginning to have doubts. Every year at Spring Equinox, the local otter Clans gathered for the Trials, a tradition in which the youth of the Clans performed tasks to prove they were ready for adulthood. The normal age to take part in the Trials was fifteen, Calici was only fourteen.

The HighWater Clan were the hosts of the Trials, being right next to the great bay where Calici sat on her vigil. As she watched the other participants from the other Clans arrive, Calici quietly stole away to the bay, feeling insecure for the first time. She was among the smallest signed up for the Trials. Could she really hold her own against the older otters?

Everyone agreed that Calici showed great promise and her Clan was very proud of her. Despite her smaller stature, she was easily the best rigger, sailor, and swimmer in her age group. Calici could even put a few adults in the Clan to shame. When the time came for the youths to sign up for the Trials, she had boldly put her name down.

This caused much debate amongst the Clan Elders. She was not the traditional age, she was too young, she was too small. She should wait for next year, where she was sure to shine, despite her smaller size. Calici argued her case heatedly, reminding the

Elders that there was no law stating the age for the Trials. She was confident that she would show the other Clans what the HighWaters were made of.

The Clan was split, arguing amongst itself. In the end, it was decided that there was no harm in letting her take part in the Trials. If she failed, she could repeat the Trials next year and no one would discredit the Clan too much. If she passed, the honor and prestige the Clan would get! It was worth the risk.

Now, however, Calici felt small and unsure of herself. She had been so confident, never doubting that she could complete the Trials easily. But seeing the older, larger otters shattered her delusions. They were so graceful! How could she believe she was better than they?

She sighed again. She picked up a small rock and idly turned it over in her paws. She imagined herself as that rock, nestled safely with the larger rocks. The larger rocks stood firmly against the waves. Likely the smaller rock would have been swept away. Would she be swept away by the other participants, too?

Tossing the rock out over the water, Calici watched as it skipped several times before sinking. She smiled briefly. Skipping stones was another thing she was good at, not that it will help her in the Trials. She had fought so hard to take part this year, it was too late to back out now, not to mention cowardly. "Can I really do this?" she said again. The sea's reply was a wave gently sliding up over the sands, then softly whispering as the wave receded.

The little otter smiled at the sea's voice of comfort. No matter what happened tomorrow, the sea would still be there, as would she. Whether she passed or failed, in the grand scheme of things nothing much would have changed. She would still be the same.

Not that she planned on failing! Calici leaped from her perch, landing lightly on the sands. She would pass and with flying colors! She thumped her thick, rudder-like tail against the sand to emphasize her thoughts. “Thank you,” she breathed to the sea as she turned and ran back to the Clan. The waves crashing mightily in a dull roar onto the rocky outcropping was the response that reached her ears.

Morning dawned bright and clear, with all the makings of a beautiful day. The three Clans crowded on same beach Calici visited the previous evening. The participants awaiting the Trials were lined up on the sands. There were eleven otters signed up, all of varying sizes and colors.

Being the shortest by half a head, Calici tried not to be too self-conscious while she stood with the others. More than one otter from the other Clans looked questioningly over her. One female, among the tallest, looked down her short muzzle at her. “Aren’t you a bit small yet to be taking part?” Delula LongShore sneered.

Calici bristled slightly, but did not rise to the bait. “Size has nothing to do with the Trials,” she said with a serenity she did not feel.

Delula frowned, somewhat surprised. She turned to her Clanmates with a toss of her long blonde hair. “I heard she’s only fourteen, a guppy,” she said overly loud.

Sighing, Calici forced herself to stay where she was. In a bout of rare youthful wisdom, she understood it would be far better for her to stand there politely and in readiness for the Trials than to respond to the jibe. Instead, she said respectfully, “There is no law pertaining to age limits for the Trials.”

The taller otter waved her hand dismissively. “Age is unspoken! Traditionally, the age is fifteen because that’s when we’re ready.”

However, the other HighWaters did not take kindly to one of their number being picked on. “She was deemed ready to take part by our Elders,” Mondegu said sharply.

Turning her head with a sniff, Delula arched a fine brow at the male. “The LongShores would never have allowed a guppy to take part. Our Elders must have more sense.”

All of the HighWater Clan took offense to this. A gentle murmuring among the gathered spectators rose as those nearest heard what was going on. The LongShore Clan looked horrified at Delula’s comment. Just as the HighWater participants were about to respond, help came from an unexpected quarter. “Are you suggesting that the HighWater Elders have no sense?” a voice drawled.

Several heads turned to face a young male standing with the DeepTide Clan of Trial participants. Delula looked around, noticing how the other LongShores had stepped away from her as if they didn’t want to be associated with her. She gulped as she realized her insult. “I didn’t say that,” she protested feebly.

Perollo DeepTide chuckled. “No, you didn’t, but you implied. Look, what does it matter if she takes part? Her Clan deemed her ready, what business is it of yours? Unless you are threatened by a younger female?” he asked dryly.

“I’m not threatened,” sputtered Delula. One of the other LongShores touched her shoulder and shook his head, murmuring. She settled back with a glower but held her tongue.

Calici and Mondegu nodded their silent thanks to Perollo, who accepted with a gracious bob of his head. Silence reigned across the beach once more.

When the sun reached the specified height, an otter of middle years strode out onto the sand. The spectators quieted immediately and gave him their respectful attention. “The Equinox is upon us,” he said. “The time has come for this year’s young otters to prove they are ready to accept the status of Adult. Each has three tasks to perform. They must rig their crafts,” he said, gesturing to a row of small, one-person boats. “They must sail to the testing site, and they must swim back. They must do this before the sun touches the horizon again. Once they return here, they will have proven they are fit to be Adults.”

He fixed each youth with a stern stare. “This is not a competition. It matters not who gets here first or last. What matters is getting here in the allotted time. Good luck, young ones.”

Calici managed to sneak a quick glance at Delula as the participants dashed to the boats, catching the LongShore female’s dark look. Calici sighed. It would seem it would be a competition for her anyway. Very well, she thought to herself as her paws moved, setting up the boat’s riggings almost without thought. If Delula wanted a competition, so be it. The young HighWater would not see this as a contest to be the best otter of the bunch, but she vowed to herself that she would at least beat the LongShore female.

All eleven otters strove to quickly set up the boat’s lines. As the Clans were heavily dependant on the sea, being able to set up a boat or ship efficiently was vital. Speed was not terribly important in setting the lines in a craft, although it was handy. What mattered was getting the lines set correctly. If the riggings loosened while the craft was amid sea, any number of catastrophes could come up.

Calici was not the first to set her craft into the water and begin to sail to the testing site. She didn't focus on speed as some of the other participants were, relying more on her deft paws to set the riggings correctly in the first place. She ignored Delula's gloating look of triumph as the older female shoved her craft into the sea before Calici.

Once she was confident her lines were sound, Calici eased her boat into the water and shoved off mightily. As soon as the boat was floating free, she climbed aboard and unfurled her sail. The winds didn't fill the sail right away, causing her to worry momentarily. If the winds wouldn't carry her at the start, it would be very difficult indeed for her to finish the tasks in one day. Before she could complete this thought, the sails filled, dragging the boat out to sea.

She expertly handled the sails and rudder, letting out an exultant whoop. The winds were strong that morning and she nearly flew across the water. Calici steered her craft towards a cluster of small islands several miles offshore. She could see the other participants ahead of her. She really wasn't that far behind them.

The islands grew larger on the horizon, as well as a few sails. One sail suddenly collapsed. The little otter maid soon reached the boat. She watched as the male scrambled to redo some of his riggings to get the sail back up. She shook her head as she recognized the male as Perollo. He seemed rather sensible, pity he was having issues.

After a moment's hesitation, Calici steered her small boat over to the DeepTide's. He eyed her with a mixture of curiosity and puzzlement. She tossed him a rope and shouted to him, "Two pairs of paws halve the work and the time!" He nodded and

gratefully secured the rope. The small otter leaped over and the two of them set about setting up the sail's riggings.

In very little time, the sail was back up and full. Perollo grasped her shoulder in thanks and helped her over to her boat. She grinned and waved cheerily to him before the winds took her away.

Calici sailed on, moving ever closer to the islands. Despite the delay, she gained on yet another boat, hiding a smirk as she passed Delula. The look of venom on the other female's face made the HighWater otter giggle inwardly. Would she still think her to be a guppy?

Finally the islands loomed before the little otter maid. She guided her craft toward a beach on the largest island, where she could just make out a small group of adults out on the sands. One boat was already beached. Calici was still too far away to see who had taken to the waters.

As soon as the boat crunched on sand, she leapt out and dragged the craft up onto the beach. Older otters, the Elders of the Clans, came forward to check over the boat. She bowed to them once more before she whirled and pounded down the beach. She ran to the water's edge, into the water, and launched herself into the brine.

Underwater, the otter maid knifed her way through the shallows, her short limbs working to guide her back to the mainland. Her thick tail propelled her, granting her speed. Calici tried to pace herself. She had several miles to swim before she reached her destination and only a certain amount of time to do it. If she tried to go too fast at first, she could tire herself out quickly. Too slow and she would not make it in time.

This was the leg that worried her. She was confident in her rigging and sailing abilities. She knew the Elders would find nothing wrong with her lines as they inspected her boat. She knew she was a good, strong swimmer, but she had never attempted to swim such a distance. Since she was smaller than the other participants, she was unsure of her stamina.

Over time, some other participants passed her, Delula being one. Calici did not try to overtake these, not daring to waste precious energy. Delula smirked at the younger female, even swam a circle around her. Calici's goal was to make it to the beach. She saw she was making good time. She smiled softly to herself, sure she would make it in time. It did not matter who got back first.

Near the halfway point, the HighWater passed an otter, then another. Her slower, yet steady, pace allowed her to travel the same speed, unlike those who wasted their breath and energy by swimming as fast as they could right away.

A floundering form entered Calici's range of vision. When she drew nearer, she saw that this was Delula. The other female was visibly struggling to continue. Calici looked to the beach then back to Delula. "You've about a third of the way left," she called.

Panting, Delula tried to hiss, "I don't need you to tell me that."

With a sigh, Calici swam closer. "Are you going to make it?"

Angrily, the LongShore feebly splashed at her. "You have no call to taunt me."

"I'm not taunting you," she said. "Look, you're tired, I can see that. If you're not sure you can make it, I will help."

She tried to laugh. "You? Help me? I don't need your help!"

Calici shrugged. “Perhaps you do, perhaps you don’t. I know I will get there in time. I don’t need to help you. The question is, will anyone else help you?”

Delula bravely tried to swim a few more strokes before she hung her head. “I doubt it,” she said in a small voice. Calici swam over, giving the larger female her tail to hold onto. She towed the LongShore female for the rest of the journey. The extra weight really slowed her down and with Delula holding on, she couldn’t use her tail, but she persisted. Kicking and occasionally using her tail, Delula tried to assist.

Most of the other Trial participants passed them, giving the pair odd looks. Perollo raised an eyeridge but grinned in approval before he swam on. The sun sank lower in the sky, causing Calici to worry. She steeled her resolve, comforted by the gentle current helping her along to the shore. She would get there in time! That it would be otherwise was unthinkable.

They were nearing the beach when Delula suddenly jerked on Calici’s tail, startling the small otter, submerging her. The LongShore female shot forward as she swam on to the shore. Calici broke through the surface again, coughing and sputtering. Glaring angrily, she dove to the bottom of the shore, scooping up a small rock. With well-practiced form, she sent the rock skipping across the sea to clip Delula on the ear. The LongShore yelped and shot her a venomous look before she emerged from the sea.

Calici pushed on, diving to scoop up something else from the sea bottom before she made it onto the beach. The sun was still above the horizon when she turned to look. She had made it. She proved herself worthy of adult status. She grinned broadly at her Clan, who practically glowed with approval.

Finally, all the young otters stood on the beach. The middle-aged otter who started the Trials smiled at them all. “Welcome home, Adults,” he said simply.

With that, the Clans roared their congratulations to the participants as they all made their way back to their own Clan. Calici was subject to an assortment of back slaps, paw shaking, hair tousling, and arm clasping. She took it all in stride, wading deeper into the seclusion of her Clan. When she was surrounded, she shyly opened her paw to reveal what she picked up. It was an earring. Those close enough to see clearly looked over to Delula, standing amidst her own Clan. She was missing that same earring. The significance of the pilfered earring only further solidified her status as an Adult for her Clan. The HighWaters were also great smugglers.

Raising Calici onto their shoulders, the HighWaters erupted in noise again. She laughed as they bore her up, her voice lost in the bellowing. The birds high overhead shrieked at the noise. The other Clans roared louder, trying to drown out the HighWaters, who only roared louder. And the sea roared, loudest of all, the sea roared.