

The Snowmaiden

By C.E. Leo

I.

After the flood, the waters in the desert took a long time to recede. During the worst of it the flood had filled not only the valley up to the top of the mountains, but it had also washed over the mountains at certain points, spilling into the other valleys, beyond. Few, very few, valley dwellers survived. Many of the ones who did awoke only to find themselves in strange lands, aliens surrounded by other aliens, everybody adrift aimlessly on an immense body of water, bodies floating through debris, people floating with corpses. Some, mostly mountain people, were able to find refuge in caverns and holes at the very tops of the mountains that were never quite filled up completely. Others were washed into holes or covered by thick layers of mud that barely allowed enough oxygen through for a desperate type of survival.

Those who emerged from the caves or the mud at the top of the mountains could scarcely be recognized as alive or human. They were wasted, shriveled, ghastly, like scarcely-animate corpses. They had missing teeth, broken bones, bald patches of skull with bleeding roots. Many died shortly thereafter. And those who were hidden or buried further down, where the water remained for a long time, they couldn't be called alive at all. They, the ndchny as they came to be named, the Unlucky, were dead.

As the waters receded, more and more ndchny floated to the surface, bloated and unrecognizable. As the waters receded, people began to wonder why some had survived, and others had not. They began to believe that they, the survivors, had pleased the gods, and that the others, the ndchny, had not. They began to desperately seek ways to continue to please them.

And as the waters receded, the valley dwellers followed the flood line down, down toward the valley, toward home. Some displaced strangers tried to turn back toward their own native lands – many, in fact, tried, and many died in the effort. Some stayed in the mountains with the mountain people. And others followed the valley dwellers down, down, down toward the desert on the valley floor that for many years after the flood remained covered in water and scattered with broken pieces of animals and homes, with broken pieces of human.

II.

Here, after the flood, time itself loses meaning for some days. Nobody is certain what year it is, or how many days have passed since the flood. Most assume at first that winter is nearing. But the weather is unpredictable, wild. In between unexpected storms, everything is oddly still, neither cold, nor hot. Strange, colorless clouds hover motionlessly against the horizon in thick clumps, hiding the sun.

Days pass. Years pass. For the Valley Dwellers, this is more difficult to endure than most of the desert winters they knew before the flood. Unlike the Mountain People, the Valley Dwellers have never had to build homes to withstand the weight of snow; they've never had to protect their livestock from freezing to death, or prevent their water supplies from turning to ice. In the past, winter for the Valley Dwellers had at worst heralded cold nights, faded sunlight, a limited supply of seeds and fruit soon alleviated by bursting spring. One could even hunt easily in winter provided one could withstand the strong, dusty wind that constantly rustled the dry air.

But now, the Valley Dwellers live near the flood line in this new world with no seasons. Sometimes the wind blows in savage, unpredictable gusts. It whips the remaining waters about, knocks over fragile shelters. Other times the rains return and the water creeps up the mountainsides and the people hold their breath. They pray. They watch, and they wait.

It is difficult to build a fire with the wet brush near the water line, covered as it is in sticky mud. People learn to leave the wood out in the wind, to cover it with animal hide in the rain, or to gather it from higher up on the mountain, where the mud created from the flood has been drier for longer. Hunting is scarce, but hides are everywhere, floating by on bloated bodies. Some people gather scattered bones to fortify the structures of their newly made shelters; others grind the bones into dry powder and mix it with mud to create strong bricks for building walls.

Most do not, for fear of offending the gods.

And up on the peaks around the valley, the mountain dwellers continue, every once in a while, when the time seems right, to prepare for winter. But winter does not come, not to the mountains, not for a long time.

III.

The Snowmaiden

Roshlya and Trivyam are brother and sister, and Nataya is their sister too, but she is older and spends all of her time now with Nikkyam. Their mother, Naya, says Nataya must call Nikkyam “brother” now and that she must call Nikkyam’s father, Stonyam, “father” too, but Nataya will only call Nikkyam “Nikki.” Naya and Stonyam spend all of their time together these days, just like Nataya and Nikkyam.

Stonyam and Father – or, rather, *Ndchny*, as the children are learning to call all of the dead – used to hunt together. Stonyam’s wife, also now named *Ndchny*, would sometimes sit with Naya and the two would wait for their husbands to come home while keeping watch over the young ones as they played. Nataya and Nikki, always in trouble, always going missing, and – *Ndchny* – amused and scolding, disguising her amusement behind scathing rounds of curses and slaps. This is how Naya remembers them all: Nataya, Nikki, Roshlya, Trivyam, and *Ndchny*, waiting for Stonyam and *Ndchny* to come home. Braiding Nat’s hair. Roshlya running off to pick bright white ghost flowers for Nat to hold in mock marriage ceremonies to Nikki. Trivyam bored. Nikki complacent. And now Nataya will not call Nikki “brother,” and the only one that Naya watches for when the sun sets is Stonyam, and when he comes home, he comes alone.

“I miss being warm,” Nataya says, leaning forward and chewing on a thumbnail.

She is sitting on a dying log near the edge of the water, looking over the great depths of the lake. Nikkyam, standing a few feet away and tossing tocks into the water, glances over at her quickly.

“You cold?”

“Nah.” Nataya shakes her head, quickly. “Not cold, just ... nothing. This weather, it’s nothing. It’s not warm, it’s not cold, it’s just, almost like waiting. It reminds me of holding my breath for a long time.”

She is quiet for a moment, eyeing the tiny ripples in the water as another of Nikkyam's rocks hits the surface. Then she says, "I miss that feeling, though, of being hot all the way, all the way down to my bones."

Nikkyam nods. "Me, too." Still gripping the last of his rocks, he walks over to join her on their makeshift seat. Lifting his eyes to the strange sky, he says, "I wonder when the sun will come back out."

"I wonder when the water will all be gone."

"When Dad and Naya will be married."

"Naya." Nataya laughs shortly, shakes her head, pushes him a little bit with the side of her shoulder. "*Mother*, Nikki." He frowns a bit, and she nudges him again, so he laughs, too.

"Nat! Stop!"

"They're already married!"

"Are they?"

"They *act* like it."

"They *do*."

"It's weird."

"I know." Nikkyam nudges Nataya, now. "Huh, sister?"

And Nataya stops laughing. "Don't," she says.

They are both quiet for a moment.

"Okay," Nikkyam says. He brushes his hand over hers briefly, squeezes, lets go.

Roshlya and Trivyam's voices ring out somewhere nearby, chanting a childlike riddle in disjointed harmony as they struggle down the mountainside, dragging a giant, wet tumbleweed between the two of them. The sun, beginning to set, breaks briefly through the clouds and glares against the water; instinctively, both of the younger children glance over their shoulders to see if they can spot the silhouette of Stonyam approaching.

And somewhere far off to the east a set of slim white fingers claw brokenly out of the still-moist mud. The sun sinks lower. The clouds, almost imperceptibly, begin to thicken and drop. And Nataya and Nikkyam unconsciously pull a bit closer together, because it has begun to feel even colder.

All around the pale fingers that peek from the darkened dirt, the earth is beginning to splinter. Soon a bony wrist emerges, followed by a lean white arm. The fingers stretch forward. They scratch hurriedly at the ground, dragging clumps of mud backwards into the hole, widening its radius. Tiny bright spots of red gleam around the fingernails like strange red stars. Suddenly, the earth at the edge of the hole bursts outward, hit hard by a quickly-moving white fist coming from the bottom up. The mud begins a slow, cascading slide into the hole. A forehead gleams whitely against the earth. A head appears, straining upward, spitting, gasping, with unnaturally pale skin and hair of a strange blue, an ashen blue like the faint line around a corpse's lips. Finally, as the hole collapses more deeply in upon itself, a stark white slip of a girl pulls herself out of the ground, covered in nothing but mud, bleeding at the fingernails. The piles of earth at her feet glint strangely, as if riddled with smooth pottery shards or like sunlight on hard broken bits of water.

She is a marked contrast to the dark, gritty earth here, more than halfway down the mountain. She gleams starkly against the Joshua trees and tumbleweeds like an evening primrose abandoned to wither in the still-drying dust. Everything around her is still, except for the mud sliding silently into the hole. Lizards and insects have avoided this frigid, tomb-like hole. Snakes have long since fled the spot.

But she is not dead. She is not *of* the dead. She is not *ndchny*. There is a faint pink tinge along her cheekbones and at her throat, like early twilight. She pulls herself to her feet and sways as if drunk, her eyes pointed at the ground. Abovehead, thick, colorless clouds move closer and closer to the ground, as if pulled by an unseen force. The sun is nearly set now. Disappearing rays of light pulse behind foggy billows. The strange, glinting shards in the earth at the girl's feet seem to disappear and the mud is again soft, moist, dark. Quiet.

All is quiet.

She is steady on her feet now. Looking to the sky, she points her arms straight up, far past her head, fingertips straining towards the heavens, arms stretching skyward, and bright white flakes begin to fall from the clouds in a lazy drift, like ghostly leaves scattered in the wind.

“Look,” Roshlya says, pointing out of the door of the hut. “Bones.”

Something is falling slowly from the sky in no obvious pattern, bright graceful flakes, floating here, then there, disappearing when they land.

“*Bones?*” Alarmed, Naya turns toward the door, and starts, uncertain. She squints. “Bones – ash?”

She turns back toward Stonyam, confused and alarmed. “Stonyam –ash falls from the sky.”

“*Bones,*” Rosh repeats stubbornly, and Triv, excited, begins to jump around in circles, grabbing Roshlya by the arm, pulling her with him.

“Bones, bones, bones!” they cry. “Bones, falling from the sky! Bones –”

“Stop,” Stonyam says quietly, and the two pull immediately into a dark corner of the hut, whispering fiercely, only to stumble dimly into Nikkyam and Nataya. Triv accidentally treads on Nikky’s foot; Roshlya bumps into Nataya’s thighs and squeals with excited delight.

Stonyam rises from where he was crouched near the fire pit, tending to the flames, and squints out of the door. He sniffs the air.

“There is no fire nearby,” he says, and reaches out. “The air is very clean.” Quickly, he pulls his hand back in. “And *cold.*”

There is no holding the two children back, now. They are out of the door, in the open air, followed by an uncertain Nataya. Nikkyam stands by his father, crosses his arms, and attempts a thoughtful squint.

“Reeeeeee!” Roshlya screams. “It’s so cold! I can’t breathe out here!” She puts her hand out to catch a drifting flake, and stares, dumbfounded, as it turns into water.

“It *melts!*” she cries, as Trivyam, making the same discovery, exclaims, “Water bones!”

Nataya stares up at the sky, blinking. The strange white flakes grow thicker and begin to crowd her eyelashes.

“Ma?” she asks, and Naya is there, outside, wrapping her warm arms around her daughter. “What is this?”

Nataya turns to the hut, to the man and his son, both leaning against an edge of the doorway, both pairs of arms crossed.

“What *is* this?”

Stonyam comes out slowly. He crosses his arms more tightly as he raises his face to the sky.

“*Boooooones.*” Roshlya is emphatic, but Stonyam shakes his head slowly.

“Rosh,” he says, “Do you ever remember, a long time ago, before the flood, do you ever remember seeing the mountain tops turn white?”

“No,” Roshlya pouts.

“Me either,” Trivyam adds.

“I do,” Nikky says, and Stonyam nods, slowly.

“This,” he says, raising one hand to his chin, stroking it, “I think this is what once made those mountains white. They say that it is very cold, that it falls from the sky. But up there, it stays on the ground, it falls on itself, and builds up, like a wall.”

“Does it stay there forever?” Triv asks.

“No.” Stonyam’s hand stops moving on his chin, and all is quiet for a moment.

Then, quietly, Nat asks, “What happens when it goes away?”

Naya looks at Stonyam. Stonyam looks toward the crevasse of water, almost invisible in the darkness except for its density, not far from the hut.

“It changes,” he says. “It turns into water.”

The girl is lost. She has never seen this part of the mountain before. She is much too far down. Not far below her, the giant lake on the valley floor is beginning to freeze over. Snow falls thickly from the sky for days on end, and this is a blessing for her, this girl with wide-webbed, flat feet that glide easily over deeply-piled snow drifts. The clouds obscure the sun, but this, too, makes her journey easier. She is accustomed to finding the bright orb’s movement through dense skies and thick flurries. She scans the mountaintops and spots her own peak, far to the west and high above her. And so she travels west, clothed only in thick layers of snow clumped on her skin like white fur, like clouds.

For the valley dwellers, however, this fierce winter is not so kind. More animals die. People disappear. Most huts are not constructed to withstand the heavy build-up of snow upon their roofs. Hides with which to cover windows and doors, once abundant, become harder to come by as the snow piles on the ground, and the flood-water rivers that once carried dead animals and their skins to the great lake freeze over and stop moving. Few have stored enough dry firewood to stay warm or even enough food to stay alive. The population dwindles to an alarming count. More and more people are named *Ndchny* every day.

In front of the hut, all four children are shaping the snow into something like a person. They have been given permission to play outside if they use small pieces of hide to keep their hands dry, but have been told they must work quickly and come into the hut and dry off by the fire as soon as they are done.

Suddenly, a large chunk of snow falls out of the snow figure's side, near its ribcage. Roshlya cries out and Trivyam turns red, but Nataya is quick to step forward and reshape the snow-person's middle with her clumsy hide-paw hands. She scoops out another chunk of snow from the snow figure's other side, then bends to pick up the first fallen clump. Grinning wickedly, she fixes both frozen mounds to the front of the snow sculpture's chest. She runs her covered hands over the new bumps on the torso's ribcage to smooth them, then steps back.

"Look," she says. "It's a girl."

"A girl!"

And the young ones are happy again. Nikki blushes fiercely.

Naya, watching from inside the hut, feels a warm hand on her shoulder and leans back.

"They should come in," Stonyam says softly.

"Let them play a moment longer," Naya replies. She doesn't say, *who knows how much longer they will be able to play?* Stonyam has done well for his new-formed family: before the blizzards began, he had plenty of wood stored away in the hut and under hides outside, and he had been keeping extra hides dry in the hut as well. But the wood is dwindling nevertheless, and

hunting is more scarce than ever. When animals can be found, they are usually already dead, and many are buried too deeply in the drifts to be seen. Naya, however, has noticed that the frozen carcasses that Stonyam is able to dig out of the snow do not rot quickly, and so she has begun to store what Stonyam does bring home – mostly quail, now – in the same way. She buries the meat outside in the snow until it is brought in to be cooked, then leaves it by the fire to slowly lose its frozen hardness. In this way, the uncooked meat left in the snow stays fresh longer.

A wild shriek from Nataya rings through the air. Stonyam and Naya look up just in time to see two snowballs, hurled from the direction of Roshlya and Trivyam, hit Nat squarely in the face. Nikky flushes dark red and seems to grow a little bigger. He reaches down and immediately begins to gather a thick clump of snow into his own hands, packing it densely. Nataya is crying, shaking snow out of her hair, holding her eye where she was hit.

“Okay!” Naya calls loudly, stepping outside. “That’s enough. Come in, now. *Now.*”

The girl travels more quickly at night, when the snow becomes smooth and icy and she can glide over it like air over water. She is all but invisible in the snowfall, covered in thick flakes that mold to her body and turn her hair and eyelashes white. She is like a gust of wind, dragging snowflakes up in tiny tornadoes as she moves across the mountain.

When the sun rises, it rises behind her, and when it sets it reflects in her eyes, which are pale and cloud-ridden and silvery-pink. She glides over animal carcasses, human bones, snowed-in shelters, broken homes. She moves without pause. Until one morning, when the muted rays of early dawn faintly illuminate a bare brown foot peeking out beneath a tangle of snow and dead yucca, and she stops.

She looks closely.

Scarred and tanned, this foot stands out against the tumbled snow like mesquite bark on white quartz. And she pauses, now, because this wild foot, with toenails curling like a prairie-falcon’s talons, does something unexpected at the end of a long winter’s night spent buried in the snow.

This foot *moves*.

Slowly now, the girl approaches the twitching foot, eyeing it carefully. Suddenly, several feet away, she slides a bit. Glancing down, she sees that the snow at her feet is melting. An uncomfortable sensation begins to spread through her toes. She hesitates. Steps closer. Slips, and slides down a short, steep slope into a pool of warm water. The ice drains off of her knees, her hands, her forearms. She stands quickly, slips again, tumbles backward and lands on something soft, the uncomfortable sensation spreading now across her back as she turns, grappling wildly for a handhold, closing her fingers upon a long brown limb. A leg, covered in water, stretching up over the bank of the shallow pool, the foot resting over the edge. Twitching.

On her knees now, she begins to push herself up and just when she has almost gained her ground, up on one knee, one foot pressing into slippery soft snow, a long-nailed hand grips her blue hair, and she is yanked back down.

She is underwater. Warm liquid fills her mouth. There is a hand on her chest, pushing her down, but briefly, for only a moment. Through the chaotic motion of rippling water, she sees a brown blur move up the slope of the pool and stand on the banks, stretching tall. She sits up out of the water, and they stare at one another.

This other woman – she is a wild one. Covered in scars from head to foot, she has embraced men, animals, and Joshua trees with equal enthusiasm. A shock of reddish-gold hair sticks out from her head in tangled spikes like saltbush scrub. Her skin is burned and flaking, her eyes a fiercely-lit yellow.

She stands still as a cactus. Her clawed feet grip into the snow beneath her as it melts. Her body is already dry.

And the blue-haired one, she is not afraid, but she is shocked, and restless. Something deep inside of her chest pounds like a drum. She rises unsteadily to her feet and, watching the wild one without blinking, she stretches her hand out to her. She is asking for help.

In one quick grasp, the other one grabs her hand and yanks her up and over. The girl cries out loudly. She is on the snowbanks again, clutching her hand. Gasping. Her palm is burning. And before she can move, that sharp-taloned hand is in her hair again, turning her, yanking her closer. Blue lips meet red mouth, frigid breasts brush nipples hard and sharp like arrowheads, and the burning spreads through her body, her chest, her belly, her mouth.

The blue-haired girl breaks away, breathing hard, bent at the middle and clutching her chest. The wild one stands, as if frozen, one hand to her lips.

The sun breaks over the horizon in a bright flash; wisps of clouds flee its golden rays as it climbs quickly into the sky. A beam of light catches one side of the pale girl's face. Sparkles of frost along her cheek dance like fading stars, and there is one brighter gleam, a streak of water, that trails along her cheekbone and pools on her lip.

Her hands, too, glisten.

Her arms shine brightly.

Drops of liquid fall from the tips of her breasts, from her stomach, like sweat.

She is backing away now, but she is still looking at the other one, the one with the hot skin, who hasn't yet moved from her spot but seems almost, for a moment, to shiver a bit.

Small streams of water flow between the two women like tiny rivers: fresh, hot springs at the tips of the burnt one's scarred toes slow to crystal-ridden creeks at the pale one's feet. And then those frosted feet are moving, they are running, and the blue-haired girl is running with them, westward, toward her mountain-peak home, and the golden woman, that feral queen, she continues to stand, motionless, like a stalagmite.

The snowgirl that the children built is melting. Bit by bit, the sun is breaking through the clouds, a little more each day. White frozen mounds of snow turn to water, flowing toward the lake, filling it. Between twilight and dinner, Stonyam works to build another hut for his family, further up the mountain, away from the increasing waterline. The little ones, Rashka and Trivyam, they are saddened, somehow, by the shrinking snow, by the plaintive sight of the snowgirl's slow disappearance. There is an element of quiet disenchantment in their disappointed listlessness; at times, one or the other may be seen eyeing the melting snow

hungrily, stooping to form sloppy snowballs riddled with rocks and bits of twig to sling half-heartedly into the lake, or gently attempting to reshape the crumbling snow girl back into form. But Nataya spends as much time in the warming air as she can, basking in it, her breasts two blossoming buds beneath her mother's old dog-hair shirt, her arms wide open, welcoming the spring.

The girl can only travel at night, now. During the day, she crawls into what little shade she can find beneath large rocks, and she sleeps. Sometimes she is able to bathe in a cool stream of melting snow while she rests, and the water slows around her and her skin shimmers again with frost. Other times, she is able to scrape enough dirty snow together to blanket herself beneath it. But even asleep, even at night, water streams off of her skin like sweat and there is that smoldering, somewhere in her chest and eyes, that burning the strange woman gave her with her hands and with her lips.

Nataya and Nikkyam are sitting on their log, watching the sun as it sets. There is almost no snow left on the mountainside now – a few dirty clumps, here and there, and the last disheveled bits of the melting snowgirl. The rest has disappeared into the lake and, where Nataya and Nikki are sitting, the water creeps up to their toes. Nataya dips a foot in the lake and shakes the droplets on Nikki's leg.

“Nat!”

“What?”

“That's cold!”

“So?” And she dips her foot again, and shakes it. His leg shoots out a bit this time and the tips of her toes brush his ankle.

“*Stop!*” Nikki says emphatically, laughing. Nataya is laughing too. She bends over at the waist and leans forward to dip her hand into the water, then quickly flicks her fingernails against her fingertips and sends a spray of ice-cold droplets directly into Nikkyam's face.

“Sto-hop!” Nikki exclaims. “Don't–” The next spray of water gets him in the eye. He grabs her wrist with one hand and yanks her down with him as he dips his other hand into the

water and splashes her with a full-bodied wave that hits her legs like a slap and streams down to her feet. She screams, and laughs, and pushes him with her one free hand and he grabs that too then suddenly, almost without thinking, pulls on both of her wrists so that she falls toward him, and they kiss.

They stay there like that for a moment, their warm lips touching lightly. Their breathing slows, their eyes close. Nikki's hands drop into his lap, and Nataya's with them. Their fingers intertwine, and Nataya feels as though she has been lifted up somewhere very high, very quickly, and left her stomach behind her on the ground.

"Ack!"

Nataya and Nikkyam pull apart. Roshlya, standing some distance behind Nataya, is pointing. And yelling. "*Ack!*"

Nataya gasps sharply and scrambles off of the log, away from Nikki, her eyes wide.

"It's okay. Nat, it's –" Nikkyam tries to talk to Nataya quietly, to squeeze her hand, but she is backing up away from the log now, quickly, until she stands behind Roshlya. She grabs the child, wraps her arms around her little sister and tries to turn Roshlya's head into her chest, but Roshlya, struggling wildly, manages to break her head free, to turn and stare.

Nikkyam spins around on the log and slides to a crouch, muscles tightly coiled, and watches.

Trivyam, on the other side of the hut, standing in front of the tiny, melting, barely discernable clump of the snowgirl, holding dripping hides in his hands, stands perfectly still.

A strange girl is approaching. She is thin, wasted. She is naked. She can barely walk a straight line, and seems to be streaming sweat. Her skin is unnaturally pale and her hair is such a strange blue.

Suddenly, she looks up from the ground – sees them – and pauses, briefly, as if frozen in place.

Then her muscles sag slightly and she turns toward the top of the mountain and begins to work her way slowly up the steep incline. A rock, slippery with half-melted snow, comes loose beneath her foot, and she falls. From her hands and knees, she pushes herself back up to standing, takes another step, falls again.

In front of Trivyam, one of the snowgirl's breasts falls off of the statue and lands in front of his feet with a wet thud.

Roshlya, struggling wildly now, breaks away from Nataya.

"Roshlya, *no!*" Nataya cries in a hoarse whisper, but Roshlya begins to run toward this uncanny white girl, jumping nimbly out of Nikkyam's reach when he grabs for her.

Nataya's hands are at her mouth. She feels unable to move.

When she reaches the girl, Roshlya stretches both hands out and pulls the girl up to her feet, her tiny arms straining despite the strange girl's desperate frailty.

The sun is nearly set now. A soft bright blue glowing at the edge of the mountains fades a bit more by the minute, but Trivyam is still clearly visible as he, too, runs up the side of the mountain, gripping the newly-fallen clump of snow in his hands. He stops in front of the pale girl, his chest heaving. Then he stretches his hands out, holding the snow like an offering, like a wise man at the ceremony for *ndchny*, raising wine to the moon.

For a moment, all is still, and almost unnaturally quiet. Only Nataya's ragged breathing breaks the silence in the air.

Then slowly, gratefully, the pale girl reaches out. She gently scoops the dirty snow from Trivyam's hands and pulls it to her chest. The children's eyes widen as the melting clump crystallizes into sparkling, solid snow between the wasted girl's palms. She nods, then turns and continues to work her way up the mountain, into the blue twilight. The first silver star shimmers directly overhead as she goes on beneath it, still clutching the newly-frozen snow near to her heart.

And some distance to the east, a tall watchful figure with hair like saltbrush scrub sinks back into the shadows.

When the pale girl with the blue hair reaches her mountain-peak, it is with little initial fanfare. Almost invisible now, she crawls into the dark quiet of the cave in which she first awoke, ages ago, and sleeps the months away. Small pools and streams that remain from the flood freeze into dimly-lit crystals over and around her as she rests.

Finally, when the sun's journey through the sky is at its shortest, she steps outside of her cave and stretches fully, reaching her arms to the sky. When the quick white flakes begin their flurried dance overhead, the Mountain People rejoice. A great festival is held; the muffled sounds of singing and chanting float densely through the snow-thick air, and torches burning in bright scattered huts across the mountaintop glow softly against the new snow as it gathers silently on the ground.

Roshlya and Trivyam are playing "Weird Girl," and Nataya is playing too, but she is growing bored and wishes that she could be alone with Nikkolas.

She is not quite able to stop glancing at him. She feels wildly self-conscious, engaged in this silly, dirty child's game with him whittling a stick at a distance – she is sure, almost every moment, that he is watching her. But every time she chances a look at him, his eyes are somewhere else, pointed at the sky, staring at the ground or, often, gazing just over her shoulder, to the left or to the right. She wonders half-heartedly if the game will end soon, but it never does, really, it just starts all over again. The children, still lost in startled enchantment, never seem to grow weary of reenacting every moment of the strange girl's visit, from start to finish, in feverish repetition.

"Bones!" Rashka cries, throwing a handful of dust in the air and spinning in circles beneath it as it drifts slowly down. Nataya coughs.

"Now fall!" Trivyam exclaims, eyes bright, readying himself to run up the hill to her with a tired old mud clot in his hands, and Nataya, having perfected the art of imitating the blue-haired girl, pretends to slip on a rock, and falls.

It wouldn't matter, anyway, if the children magically grew weary of the game. Naya and Stonyam are having "grown-up time"; they are talking, in the hut, and Nataya and Nikkyam have been charged with keeping a close eye on the children.

"At all times," Naya told Nataya, firmly. "We don't want any more strangers wandering so near to any of you again. So," and here, she had paused, "so you and Nikkolas stay close, and watch them. Don't you two go wandering off alone, please. Just stay here."

Nataya pushes herself up from her hands and knees with a long, cat-like motion and Naya, watching from the window, notes Nikkolas' eyes as they lock firmly onto the fleshy roundness that is beginning to swell on Nataya's body, just below her hips.

Naya sighs as she turns away from the window.

"It won't be long, now," she tells Stonyam. "And it won't do any good to tell them 'no.' It would just add more bush to the flame."

Stonyam is leaning against the wall at the back of the hut with his hands buried in the folds of his loincloth, near his hips, his eyes trained steadily on Naya's.

"She'll be fertile, soon," Naya continues. "Already, her body is changing. And he's well into his manhood, he has been for some time. His voice, it almost sounds like yours. I don't think it's happening already. I don't think they've joined their bodies, there is such a sense of tension between them, I don't believe he has broken into her, but I don't know. I don't have any way to know."

She runs her hands through her hair. "I can't imagine the shame. If her brother, even her brother by marriage, gets her with child. I can't imagine how people will look at her."

Stonyam clears his throat and raises himself to standing straight up. "Nataya has never seemed particularly concerned with what people think of her," he says, honestly, and Naya glances again out of the window, at her daughter's budding breasts and swelling hips.

"She will," she says.

Outside, the sun seems to grow large and heavy. It beats heavily down upon the children as they play in the late afternoon. Somewhere off in the hills nearby, a wild, longnailed woman sits atop a spiky bush, a rattlesnake wound around her thigh, her eyes closed, her mind working fiercely, trying not to think of the snow that fell not long ago. The steadily-shrinking lake amplifies the sun's bright rays into a blinding gleam that catches Nataya in the eyes as she spins Roshlya around in the air.

Nataya squints, and shakes her head. Her younger sister's small body is slick with sweat, and for a moment, Nataya almost drops her. But she tightens her grip and catches Roshlya, who

giggles and squeals, mistaking the near-drop for a playful jest. Breathing hard, Nataya puts Roshlya down. When she steps back, she nearly stumbles over Nikkolas, who had moved closer the moment that he saw Roshlya slip and was waiting to catch her if she fell. Now, it is Nataya who almost falls, but with one hand at her elbow and another at her waist, Nikki steadies her.

They stay paused that way for a moment. Nikolas moves his hand up to Nataya's hair, tugs it gently away from her neck, breathes in deeply. Nataya shivers. She takes a deep, deliberate breath and steps away from Stonyam's son.

"Come on, guys," she calls to Roshlya and Trivyam. "Let's find some shade. You're starting to burn."

Inside the hut, Naya grits her teeth. "Stonyam," she says. "What will we do?"

And now Stonyam comes to her. He wraps his arms around her from behind and places a cool hand on her forehead, pressing it gently back so her head rests against his chest. He kisses her cheek.

"Naya," he says. "Can you still bear children?" And she hears his voice, she listens to it, and she understands. She hears his thoughts, she knows what he is going to say. A shudder runs through her body.

"No," she says.

"Naya," he repeats, holding her, and she shakes her head wildly, starts forward, puts her hand to her mouth. He tightens his grip. He kisses her cheek again, and he smooths her hair back.

"No, Stonyam!"

"Naya, they are young. The Valley Dwellers are dying out. We need new life, young marriages. And you and I, we have loved before. We have been loved. We don't need to now."

Naya, she puts her hand to her heart.

"We can't stop them, anyway. You said so."

Naya starts to gasp, heavily. She takes in giant, gulping breaths, hand to heart. She begins to bend at the waist, and Stonyam bends with her, tightening his grip on her waist, holding her more closely to him.

“Stonyam, I can’t” – she falters. “I can’t, I can’t *breathe*. I don’t want to – ”

“You won’t be alone,” Stonyam says, and his voice is a shake, a small sob. His cheeks are wet. “I will be as *your* brother, I will hunt for you, I will build your shelters, you can take the new one I’ve been building, and I’ll stay here until – ”

And she shakes her head again, a swift, sharp toss, and her eyes catch sight of Nikkolas outside, brushing Nataya’s hair away from her neck, smelling her.

“I,” she grabs Stonyam’s hand and grips it tightly, presses it into her chest. She begins to breathe more deeply. Her eyes narrow. She steadies herself on her feet. Behind her, Stonyam sniffs wetly, and the sound seems to echo in the silence. They stand that way for a long moment.

Then, Naya turns to Stonyam and peers at him, closely. She wipes the tears from his face with her thumbs, places her palms of either side of his cheeks, and looks. And looks. Stonyam, looking back, seems almost like he must have as a young boy facing his trials to manhood: saddened, exhausted, terrified. Determined.

And Naya bites her lip. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. You take them, please. Take the children somewhere, I don’t care where, just go for a while. Leave me. Come back after the sun has set. I will make dinner.”

Stonyam nods, and walks slowly to the door, like an injured man, or an old one. At the opening of the hut, he turns back to look at her. He hesitates.

“No,” Naya says. “There is nothing else you can do. Please, just take them. Come back after sunset.”

Quietly, resignedly, Stonyam turns and leaves the hut.

The hide closes over the doorframe and swings back and forth for a moment. Naya walks to the door and runs her hand over the rough fabric. She steadies her hand against the frame. A deep, shuddering breath runs through her body.

Then her knees buckle beneath her. Hot tears spring to her eyes. A wild wail rises out of her throat, a biting keen. She pounds her fists on the floor, curls into tight pose like a newborn child, rocks from side to side. Shoves a fist in her mouth. She is gasping, sobbing, striking out at unseen ghosts. The sun’s rays grow long along the walls of the hut and glow a deep amber. After a while, they begin to fade.

Tears run over the tip of Naya's nose, up her nostrils, into her mouth: a flood of salt. She loses sight of everything but the overwhelming throb that swells inside of her as if it may threaten to rip her apart, and the shadows grow longer.

After some time, Naya sits up. She pulls her knees to her chest and leans back against the wall, runs a hand across her cheek. Her tears have grown cooler in the fading light. Her chest rises and falls heavily. She places her hand carefully against the floor and pushes herself to her hands and knees.

Her hair hangs heavy in her face and she rises, slowly, to her feet. She lights a flame in the lamp inside of the opening to the family's small hut. She begins to make dinner.

Further down, closer to the receding lake and the valley floor buried beneath it, the burnt-gold woman finds that her ardour has cooled somewhat. Many months now pass between her wrestled encounters with coyotes or cacti, and as time passes, the months become years. She wanders the hills and watches her land and, although she is tired during the darker months, she always waits to see the western mountaintop turn white before she takes her long winter's rest.

The water disappears and the years wear into centuries and the centuries into millennia, and from time to rare time the pale girl on the mountain leaves her frozen peak and wanders down, down toward the desert floor, searching. The white flakes fall thick and cold after her and they cover the desert bushes like blankets of bones or stars. When the pale girl finds her scorched queen in her slumbering hole and wakes her, she only ever stays a moment. Then she begins her long journey back to the tops of the mountains, invisible and quiet, like a dark wind rustling softly through the cold night.

When the scarred woman knows enough time has passed, she emerges from the hills, and the desert thaws once again into spring. Sometimes in her summer wanderings she comes across the pool in which she once lay unconscious and thoroughly cold for so long. The water there never evaporates completely; it always feels bright and clean, and when she cups the icy liquid in

her palms and brings it to her lips to drink, the sharp sting against her blistered lips reminds her of the girl who woke her up.