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The Alpha's Concubine
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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Ravven (http://www.ravven.com) for her wonderful work in designing the cover art for this title, to Anna for her assistance with nitpicks and proofing, the lovely folks of KBoards for providing a wealth of knowledge, advice, and assistance in all-things authorly, along with everyone else who helped to encourage me over the course of this project!

For newcomers to the series:

Don't you just hate it when a book series has a bunch of titles that aren't numbered? With prequels, spin-offs, and mainline entries all jumbled together, with no indication of where you should start reading?

Ahem.

Well fear not, for as The Moon People Saga continues to expand I shall be adding some little reading lists here at the start of each book so that you're not too lost with where to begin.

Chronological reading order:

- 1 Daughter of the Night
- 2 The Alpha's Concubine
- *3 Daughter of the Moon*
 - 4 Sun Huntress
 - 5 Sisters of Syr

This reading order is suggested for those who wish to experience the story by following its chronological progression, with the first book taking place at the beginning of the timeline, and the last most recently.

Author's reading order:

- 1 The Alpha's Concubine
- 2 Daughter of the Moon
- *3 Daughter of the Night*
 - 4 Sun Huntress
 - 5 Sisters of Syr

This reading order is the one I personally recommend as the author, corresponding with the order in which the books were written. I feel that certain story elements, mysteries, and revelations are more compelling when the series is experienced in this way, and that the consistency of the writing style flows more naturally from one book to the next.

Content Warning:

This title contains explicit sexual content.

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Netya had never seen the spear that hung above the hearth in her mother's house as anything more than an ornament. That it had once been a weapon of war, used by a father she could no longer remember to fight enemies she had never seen, was just a story told by the elders around the fire. She thought Layon looked silly carrying it over his shoulder now as he walked beside her. What did they need spears for? Nothing would happen tonight. Not to them.

Still, her mother had refused to let her stand watch over the farmlands after dark without an armed escort. Netya had no interest in watch duty. Scaring off wild animals when she could be tucked up in bed beside the fire was the last thing she wanted to volunteer for. She had only used it as an excuse to get away from the village and spend some time alone with Layon. *That* was an adventure she was excited to pursue.

Ever since she had come of age the previous summer she'd begun to notice the way he looked at her, and the way her eyes were drawn to his golden hair and smiling lips as well. Being out here alone with him gave her a tingle that reminded her of sneaking out at night as a child. But this tingle was quite different. Layon made her apprehensive, excited, and curious all at once. He was a window through which she dared to glimpse all of the things that might await her as a young woman. Tantalising mysteries that had once seemed leagues away suddenly felt possible in his presence.

"Up here," he said, pointing with the spear. "Are you sure you want to see them? They might frighten you."

"Yes," Netya whispered, her eyes glittering as she searched the moonlit trees. "Mother never allowed us to come this way before."

"You never went to look by yourself?"

She shook her head, reaching out to run her fingers over the aged wooden stakes lining the side of the path. The ground sloped uphill, leading them through the trees as the moon rose overhead. Anxious winds whipped at Netya's dark hair, tugging at her braid, struggling to find a way in through the tightly-wrapped furs that clad her body.

"My brothers took me four summers ago," Layon said with a smile. "They were just trying to scare me, but I didn't know that back then. I spent all night trying to be brave while they told stories about how the spirits of the Moon

People were still there, waiting in the dark to catch us."

"Did you believe them?"

"I would have believed anything they told me when I was a boy." Layon shrugged. "But I have never seen a spirit hurt anyone, have you?"

"They say you can not always see the work of the spirits."

Layon laughed. "Then the spirits of the Moon People are no more frightening than those of our own, if they even exist at all!" He stopped abruptly and pointed again with his spear, and this time Netya was able to make out the wall bordering the farmlands in the distance. It was a short dry stone barrier, built from chunks of slate stacked together in an uneven jumble to keep out wild animals.

"Your last chance to turn back," Layon teased, his breath tickling her ear as he leaned in close.

She gave him an impatient shove, but the back of her neck prickled as she saw the white shapes on the wall glowing in the moonlight. This was the direction the Moon People came from when they arrived from the west, and the warnings displayed on the wall were the first things they would see. It was a clear message not to come any farther.

"How many of them are there?" Netya whispered, trying to count the sunbleached ornaments.

"A dozen. They say there used to be more."

Excitement quickened Netya's steps as she hurried ahead of Layon, her apprehension only making her more inquisitive. She could make them out clearly now. A dozen skulls, just like Layon had said, displayed proudly on the wall like trophies. Everyone knew they were here, but seeing them for the first time made the legend real. It filled her with an uncanny sense of wonder.

She had seen animal bones before, but these were nothing like the skulls of the wolves the hunters brought back from the forest. These were much larger, their fangs huge, empty eye sockets absorbing the darkness around them. Even in death, stripped of their flesh, Netya thought they watched her with an intelligence greater than that of any animal.

She made her way down the wall, eyes wide as she examined them one by one. Some were old, so ancient they were falling apart, while others were marked with notches from the weapons that had killed them. Her breath caught in her throat as she came to the final skull, so new that it still shone like polished stone.

"Is this the one they talked about?" she said, still whispering. She was

almost afraid to speak aloud in the presence of these mighty creatures, even if they had long ago departed from the world she knew. Surely their spirits still lingered nearby, like Layon's brothers had said. Malevolent or not, she had no desire to disturb them.

"Yes," Layon said. "They caught it at the end of the winter. It's a good omen. It means the Moon People will not come again for a long time."

Part of Netya was almost disappointed. As terrifying and dangerous as she knew the Moon People to be, now that she had seen their skulls she was desperately curious to witness what they were like in the flesh. Were they people who possessed the bodies of animals, or animals who took on the shape of people?

She reached out with a quivering hand to touch the skull, feeling the cool, smooth contours of the bone beneath her fingertips as they traced the beast's muzzle. She could practically feel the power that had once inhabited it. The weight of its body, the hot breath snorting from its nostrils, the sharp points of fangs that could pierce flesh more easily than any spear.

"You really aren't frightened, are you?" Layon's voice came softly in her ear. He was standing close to her again, and the strange tingle returned as she curled her fingers through his.

"I am," she said, surprised by her own breathlessness. "In a good way." "You are strange."

"I do not try to be." She let her finger trail down one of the skull's long fangs before finally withdrawing and turning to face Layon. He was looking at her curiously, with the same enticing glint in his eye that she had only caught snatches of so many times before. It drew her in, just as the wolf's skull had, calling to the part of her that longed to embrace the unknown.

"You do not try to be, but you are," Layon said. "The other girls sometimes call you a witch."

"I'm not a witch."

"No, but none of them ever asked me to take them out at night to see the skulls. And I don't think I would have wanted to bring anyone else even if they did."

Netya's body warmed. She wondered for a moment if she might be unwell, but this feeling was far more pleasant. Even holding Layon's hand felt different than it had before. She didn't think she had ever wanted to feel someone's skin against hers as much as she did in that moment.

Their eyes remained locked for far longer than was polite, and yet still she

fought the urge to look away. She wanted to keep on feeling whatever it was she was feeling. Captivated by something every bit as fascinating as the stories of the Moon People.

Layon rested the spear up against the wall, the flint tip knocking against one of the skulls as he leaned in to touch her. The back of his fingers brushed her neck, sending a visible shiver through her body as they stroked their way down until his palm rested over her pounding heart.

"We could stay out here all night," he murmured.

"What would we do?" she said, her eyes finally leaving his as they became transfixed by his fingers. He stroked the braid that hung over her shoulder gently, savouring its silky touch against the pad of his thumb.

"I can show you," he said, and moved forward until his mouth was against hers.

Netya breathed in sharply, and when she did she tasted the exquisite rush of his warm breath filling her lungs. Her lips tingled with a thousand pinpricks of pleasure. The soft, wet heat of Layon's mouth drew her in, and without knowing what she was doing her lips and tongue were moving in rhythm with his, finding new places to settle and new touches to relish. The glow of her body increased a dozen times over, centring in a tight knot just below her navel that longed to be touched.

Before that evening, the unknown had been something other people concerned themselves with. Now, it was hers to explore. The night that stretched before them felt like it held all the time in the world.

When their lips parted, it was with a jolt of fear as the howl of a wolf rent the darkness.

—2— The Moon People

Layon stepped back and picked up his spear. His eyes scanned the dark trees, flitting from one patch of shadow to the next. They had no reason to fear wild wolves. The beasts would only attack if they were desperate. Netya could not recall the last time anyone had been hurt by one.

But the skulls on the wall had not come from those wolves. Months, even years could pass between the rare occasions the Moon People ventured into their land, and yet every time they did, blood was spilled. It was the first time the howl of a wolf had frightened Netya. Neither of them needed to say a word to know what they were both thinking.

"It's probably not," Layon whispered, but he gripped the spear with both hands and raised the point in front of him. The flint tip was old and dulled with use. Not as sharp as the fangs on the skull.

Netya moved in close beside him, stifling a cry of alarm as she bumped into one of the grisly ornaments on the wall behind her. Its jawbone clacked, the wind whistling in her ears like the laugh of an angry spirit. Now she was afraid. Now she was ready to believe the stories Layon's brothers had told.

He gripped her arm suddenly, his fingers digging in with a sharpness she had never felt before. Without speaking, he gently raised the tip of the spear. When her eyes finally followed it, she saw what had provoked him to grab her so tightly.

It was far away, so dark it could have been a shadow, but it moved with the grace of something otherworldly. It wasn't the creature's size, though Netya quickly realised it was far bigger than any wolf she had ever seen, but its movements that filled her with fear. It melted into the shadows like smoke, spilled out across the grass like black water, then leaped atop the wall in a bound so smooth Netya couldn't be sure whether she had even seen it happen at all. With a lazy sweep of its hind leg the creature sent a heavy slab tumbling to the ground, before raising its muzzle to the sky and howling a second time.

The experience was so surreal that Netya's fear couldn't help but take its leave of her for a moment as she stared in wonder at the beast. It was a childhood legend come to life. The work of the spirits, or some other powerful magic she could never hope to comprehend. She longed to watch it

for just a moment longer, to see the way it moved again and hear that eerie howl erupt from its chest one more time. Her curiosity drew her toward danger, but her fear was strong enough to pull her away from it.

As the creature shifted its position Netya realised it was looking down the length of the wall in the opposite direction to her and Layon. In a moment its head would swivel, and it would see them standing in the moonlight just as clearly as they saw it.

"Behind the wall," she whispered, so softly and so fast it was barely a hiss. "In the shadows."

Without waiting for Layon to let go of her arm she pushed her foot into a crack between the stones and hauled herself up alongside the skulls, wobbling on top of the wall as she bent to help her friend up after her. Had the beast looked yet? Had it seen them? Her heart beat so hard it stole her breath away. Layon clambered up alongside her, tossing his spear into the grass on the other side as they toppled over the wall in a heap together.

A dull pain shot through Netya's body as she landed hard on her hip, but she dared not cry out. Layon landed almost on top of her, the weight of his body pressing uncomfortably against her back for a moment before they scrambled to extricate themselves from one another. A loose piece of slate they had kicked free in their clumsy ascent thudded into the grass on the other side of the wall. It was barely louder than the sound of the wind in the trees, but it made Netya's heart jump in her chest.

Layon grabbed the spear with one hand while tugging her back against the wall with the other. They hunkered down together, the dampness of the grass seeping into their fur clothing as they pressed themselves into the tiny patch of shadow, letting the darkness swallow them up.

For a few moments they were alone with the sounds of their quickening breath. The beast was obscured from sight by the angle of the wall. All they could do was wait, the hard shaft of the spear pressing against Netya's breast as Layon held it close.

In a flutter of shadows, the beast hopped down on their side of the wall. It looked their way, yellow eyes shining like the stars above, but it had nothing to see but blackness. It moved again with such sleek grace that Netya found herself captivated by the wolf's movements once more. It had looked like a creature made of water and shadows when she first glimpsed it, but now she could see powerful legs and a swishing tail as it crept across the field, eyes set on the enclosure of wood and leather in the distance where the livestock

were kept.

This creature was like nothing she had ever seen before, but it was no spirit. It was hungry, just like any other earthly being, and it prowled on the legs of a wild animal guided by the grace of a dancer. It was one of the Moon People.

The slates on the wall clacked as another wolf mounted the barrier and jumped down into the field behind the first. A third followed, and then a fourth.

"We have to get the others," Layon breathed into her ear.

Netya nodded, unable to tear her eyes away from the procession of shadowy hunters making their way across the field. It took a tug on her shoulder to finally make her follow after Layon, crawling on all fours along the strip of shadow at the base of the wall in the opposite direction to the wolves. They moved at an agonisingly slow pace, barely daring to let their bodies brush through the damp grass as it wet their palms and knees. They had only just cleared the stretch of wall ornamented by the skulls when the shape of another hulking wolf dropped down directly in front of them.

Netya froze, swallowing a cry of shock. The beast was so close that even the shadows wouldn't hide them if it chanced to look their way. Layon was ahead of her, rising slowly into a crouch, the spear clutched in both hands.

Panic erupted in Netya's chest as she realised what he was about to do. She couldn't tell him to stop. Even a whisper would alert the wolf. It all happened within the space of a few seconds. The wolf's paws hit the grass, Layon drew back his spear to lunge, and Netya, in her desperation, reached out to try and stop him. She wasn't sure what made her do it. Perhaps it was fear: for Layon, for herself, or even for the majestic beast standing before them. She had never seen real violence before, nor did she want to. The thought of what had happened to the creatures whose skulls now adorned the wall suddenly hit her with nauseating force.

Her fingers found Layon's fur shawl just as he lunged, tugging back as he leaped at the beast with the spear held out in front of him. He was too strong for her to stop him, but her grip sent him off balance. The thrust that had been aimed at the wolf's neck missed its mark, the dull tip of the spear grazing the creature's shoulder with a long gash. Dark blood spilled out through its fur.

The wolf's howl of pain was deafening, so loud that Netya stumbled back in shock, the stones of the wall digging into her back. Whatever impulse had driven Layon to attack the creature abandoned him as it whirled around with

anger in its eyes, teeth snapping at the bloodied tip of the spear. He tried to back away, jabbing at the wolf to keep its jaws at a safe distance, but with the wall behind them there was nowhere to go. A wild animal might have bolted in fear or thrown itself straight on to the spear in its anger, but within seconds the spurt of bestial aggression left their attacker. It paused, backing off, eyes studying its opponent, then twisted its head to the side and lunged.

The wolf slid past Layon's panicked thrust with ease, jaws snapping shut around the shaft of the spear and clenching tight. With the sound of splintering wood it tore the weapon from his hands, hot breath snorting from its nostrils as it snapped the spear in half like it was a twig.

Rough stone scraped Netya's palms as she scrambled backwards over the wall, trying uselessly to tug Layon after her as she lost her balance and toppled over, landing on her back on the other side. The wolf cleared the wall in a single leap. She didn't even manage to sit up before a heavy paw struck her in the centre of her chest, knocking her back down and driving the wind from her lungs.

As she gasped for air she could hear Layon shouting nearby, calling for help, raising the alarm that the Moon People were here. Only a gracious wind would carry his voice all the way back to the village from where they were, but even if it did, there was no time left for help to arrive.

Netya huddled on the ground in fear, the heavy breath of the wolf in her ears as it stood over her. A threatening growl rumbled in the back of its throat, warning her not to try and fight or run. At some point she had closed her eyes, but once she caught her breath she forced herself to open them and look at the beast standing over her. It was a monster. Huge and vicious and powerful. But its golden eyes watched her with intelligence. Intelligence, and perhaps even fear. An anxiety that mirrored Netya's own. For an instant she was able to see not just the enormous wolf that loomed over her, but another person. One who had been attacked, and had responded in kind.

"I'm sorry," she said in quavering tones, looking at the creature's bleeding shoulder. "I didn't know he'd do that. I tried to stop him."

The wolf stared at her, then raised its head and let out a low howl. Netya could not see what was happening on the other side of the wall, but she heard the drumming of heavy footfalls against the earth, the sound of fur whipping through the long grass. The rest of the Moon People had come back, and they were going after Layon.

"Please don't hurt him!" Netya cried out, trying to climb to her knees, but

the wolf pushed her back down with a growl.

A male voice she did not recognise called out nearby, speaking words she could not understand. The stones on the wall rattled, and three more wolves jumped down to join the first. She did not know who had spoken, or what might be about to happen to her, but she was not dead yet. Perhaps the wolf was only waiting. Would her skull soon be adorning a wall somewhere, in whatever land the Moon People called home?

Two more wolves mounted the wall further down, followed by a man. For a moment she thought it might be Layon, but this person was taller, broader, and his long hair was the colour of the night sky. A shiver ran through Netya's body as she realised that he was no man from her own village. He was one of the Moon People. Not a beast, but a person. At first glance he looked like any other hunter, his legs bound with fur moccasin boots and covered with a kilt of animal skins, a headband of soft leather keeping his hair back from his face. Aside from a necklace of animal teeth his thickly muscled chest was bare in spite of the cold wind. He seemed not to feel it at all, approaching her as though he wore the same thick coating of fur as the wolves around him. In his hand he held the head of the broken spear.

Netya's eyes flitted desperately between the wolves surrounding her, but it was the man to whom she directed her pleading look. He was the only one she could appeal to. Was he their leader? And where was Layon? She heard his voice in the distance, still calling for help, but it was growing fainter. At least he had gotten away.

The man looked at her, but his expression held no sympathy for her wide eyes. He looked her up and down, then knelt beside the wolf standing over her and put a hand on its flank, examining the gash Layon's spear had left. He leant in and murmured something into the creature's ear, but once again Netya could not make out his words. He seemed to have a strange cadence to his voice that sounded nothing like the way her own people spoke, and she only made out snatches of words that made no sense by themselves.

The wolf snorted and bobbed its head, then stepped back. Netya didn't have time to feel relieved before her breath was taken away by what happened next. For a moment she thought the wolf was rearing up on its hind legs, but it wasn't just rearing, it was changing. Its body rippled with the same uncanny grace she had glimpsed in the shadows, fur seeming to melt away into the night as smooth skin and clothing of animal hides replaced it. Yet again the motion was so fast and so unnatural to Netya that she could barely make

sense of what had happened. Just like all the other tales of the Moon People, this one was now real to her too.

A sandy-haired girl stood where the wolf had been, close to Netya's own age by the look of her, but a little taller, her bare arms toned by labour and bronzed by the sun, just like the body of the man beside her.

He spoke again, examining the wound that had remained on the young woman's arm even after she changed, and when she responded Netya finally realised that they were not simply talking in voices that sounded unfamiliar to her, but with words that her people did not use. Every now and again their speech sounded familiar, so close to Netya's own that she could almost make sense of it, but try as she might she couldn't wrap her thoughts around their exotic tongue.

Two more of the wolves changed, taking on the bodies of men as they approached the one who Netya was now sure must be their leader. They bound the injured girl's shoulder with a strip of cloth, much to her apparent protest, but a concerned look and a few hard words from the leader silenced her, and she hung her head in shame.

Netya was still recovering from the shock of everything she had just witnessed, her heart racing as the Moon People conversed in hurried tones. The leader pointed in the direction of the village, then gripped the arm of one of the other men and shook him roughly. As their eyes fell on her, Netya realised that she must be the topic of their conversation.

She finally sat up, shivering as she curled her legs to her chest, looking to the leader once more. "Did you let Layon go?" She tried not to stammer. "Are there more of you going after him?"

The Moon People fell silent. The leader looked at her for a long moment, then stepped forward and spoke.

"We do not kill without need."

She thought she saw his eyes move to the skulls on the wall for a moment, but perhaps it had just been her imagination.

"You can speak like me?" she said.

The leader did not respond. Instead he bent to pick her up by the arm and hauled her to her feet as if she weighed nothing. He turned to his people and rattled off another sharp set of instructions in his own tongue, then walked Netya to one of the wolves and pointed at its back.

"You will ride. Hold tight, or you will fall. We will run all night. Your people will not be able to follow."

Netya's stomach tightened. Riding a wild beast? She had never even considered such a thing. But before tonight, there were many things she had never considered.

"Where will you take me?" she said.

"With us."

The leader turned away, gazing down the length of the wall as the two other men changed back into their wolf shapes, the injured girl climbing astride one of the huge creatures and taking a tight hold of his neck fur. As soon as she was safely in place, her bearer bounded away into the trees.

Netya gave the leader one last desperate look. "I tried to stop Layon from hurting her."

He met her eyes, his expression once again impassive. "And yet, she was hurt. Now ride. You will not be harmed, but if you run, we will catch you." Without another word his body changed, and a moment later an alpha among wolves stood before her, huge and dark, bright eyes burning into her as she stared at him.

Feeling as though she was walking through some strange dream, Netya swung her leg over the back of the wolf beside her, trying to follow the lead of the wounded girl as she gripped the beast's fur and tried to tuck her legs in against its flanks. The feeling of a warm body reminded her for an instant of the way Layon had touched her, and her heart ached as she stared in the direction of the village. How long would it be before she saw it again?

The musky scent of the wolf filled her nostrils, the heavy thud of its heartbeat pulsing against her thighs. Danger was no longer a distant fantasy for her. She was living it. The very creature she sat astride could kill her in an instant if it so desired.

She didn't have long to think of home, or Layon, or where she might be going. The alpha howled, and her wolf broke into a trot, then a bound, and within moments she was clinging to the creature's neck for dear life, the farmlands and the wall of skulls disappearing into the night behind her as the trees whipped by in a blur.

The Wounded Girl

They ran all night, just as the alpha had said. It was an anxious, exhausting, exhilarating experience for Netya. For the first hour she clung to the wolf so tight that her body was soon aching, terrified that the jolting motion of the creature beneath her would send her toppling head first into a patch of rocks or the trunk of a tree if she loosened her grip for even an instant.

The cold wind stung her eyes until they were streaming. The wooded lands around her village thinned out, and soon she was already further than she had ever been from home. The last of the trees disappeared as the wolf pack streaked out across the open plains before them, nothing but endless grassland to be seen in every direction. Was this the edge of the world, where trees and water and animals stopped existing, and every direction held more of the same nothingness?

The Moon People ran east, never altering their course. Eventually the plains became more uneven, rocky outcroppings breaking up the land as bushes and shrubs began to appear. It was only then that Netya realised she was no longer clinging to her wolf as tightly as she had been back in the woods. Every time she shifted or slipped the beast seemed to respond instinctively, catching her weight and rebalancing it so that she stayed firmly in the middle of its back. Stiff and aching, she finally allowed herself to sit upright. It was still an unnerving feeling to be moving so fast on the back of an animal, but once her fear of falling began to subside she found herself staring in wonder at the ground as it rushed by beneath her, almost enjoying the sensation of speeding through the night faster than she had ever imagined possible.

The injured girl riding up ahead was no longer even holding on to her wolf with her hands. She sat upright with her hair streaming out behind her, straddling her companion with an ease that told Netya she had done this many times before.

Just like the apprehension she had experienced as she approached the wall of skulls earlier that evening, Netya felt as if she was being dragged deeper and deeper into an unknown world full of secrets and danger. Had she been given the opportunity she would likely have turned back and run home, yet some small part of her was almost glad that she had been denied such a

choice. She was experiencing things beyond her imagination, things beyond even the oldest and most fanciful tales of her people.

As the hours wore on exhaustion began to take hold, and even Netya's racing thoughts could not keep her eyes open as the rush of adrenaline burned out in her veins and her aching body called for rest. It was impossible for her to sleep as she rode, but she slumped forward over the wolf's back and closed her eyes, warm fur shielding her cheek from the biting wind as she fell into a fitful doze.

In her muddled snatches of wakefulness she saw the surroundings gradually changing. Just as she had suspected, the open land seemed to go on forever, but it was no longer barren and devoid of features. More than once she was jolted back to reality by the splash of cold water soaking into her moccasins as the wolves waded through streams. They climbed hills and descended through valleys, barely pausing for rest. Eventually she saw the silhouettes of trees in the distance, but they were a long way away.

Rosy dawn was making its first greeting to the horizon when the wolves finally stopped, and a pair of human hands gripped Netya beneath the shoulders to ease her off the back of her bearer. In her sleepy daze she heard the murmur of voices nearby, the crackle of fire and the sounds of people awakening. For a moment her fear returned, and with a whimper she struggled in the arms of the man supporting her, but he held on tight until her protests stopped. She was too tired. Her body felt bruised and sore from the long ride, and more than anything she wanted to sleep.

The man lifted her easily in his arms, carrying her somewhere away from the bright fire and the voices of the others. Wherever it was, it was warm. The wind was gone, and a bed of soft furs reached up to embrace her body as the man set her down. Netya welcomed it, and within minutes she had fallen into a deep sleep.

Waking up was a surreal experience. She had slept outside of her mother's house before, but those times had been few and far between. She was used to wooden log walls and the cosy warmth of a nearby fire. The smell of cooking or the sounds of her sisters would awaken her, and she would reluctantly drag herself off her cot to help her mother prepare the morning meal while she waited for the fog of sleep to leave her mind.

This time she awoke to a draft and the glow of evening sunlight shining through the animal hide wall of a tent. She clutched the warm fur beneath her, brow furrowing as she tried to snuggle back into it. Everything felt different. The brightness, the musty smells, the lack of noise. Even the air seemed different in this place. It was only then that Netya remembered where she was.

Her eyes opened, blinking several times as the realisation jolted her awake. Her fingers tightened in the fur, breath quickening. Memories of the long journey rushed back, the wolves, the Moon People...

She sat upright and froze when she saw another person in the tent along with her. It was the girl who had been injured the night before. She sat across from Netya tending the coals of a small fire. In her lap she was preparing what looked like a bowl of food, mixing the contents with a smooth, oval-shaped piece of stone. The girl looked at her curiously, continuing with her work as Netya took in her surroundings. The tent was not large, but it was filled with rustic furnishings. The furs she had slept on were decorated with wooden beads around the edges, stained with shades of red and blue and attached by roughly woven strings of animal hair. Dozens of hide pouches hung from a wooden frame on the other side of the tent, and a stack of bowls, pots, and stones for cooking sat alongside them. There were baskets woven from grass and filled with pieces of smoothed bone and wood ready to be carved into utensils or tools. Someone's clothing, a heavy set of fur and leather garments, lay draped to dry over another wooden rack near the tent's closed flap.

Though Netya was not unused to seeing similar dwellings among her own people, this one seemed yet more functional and basic. The wooden furniture was lashed together from raw branches, not worked skilfully by a craftsman, and even the hides layered to form the walls of the tent were uneven and mismatched, as though they had been stitched together out of necessity rather than by design.

"Where is this?" Netya said at last. It took a moment of silence before she remembered that the Moon People had spoken differently to her. "Do you understand my words?"

"Yes," the girl said. "I know them well. That was why they sent me to tend to you." Her voice still held an unfamiliar cadence that sounded both sweet and strange to Netya's ears, but her language was clear and understandable.

"How? I have never heard of anyone who speaks the way you do," Netya said.

"Our people travel far. It is in our nature. With our wolves' legs we can run

for many hours, see people and places a long way away. There are more of your kind far to the north. We learned to speak as they do in the time before I was born."

Netya's curiosity perked. Once again she was reminded of the tickle of excitement she had experienced the night before, that sensation of delving into something unknown. She knew there were more of her people living in their own villages all across the wooded lands she called home, but she had never heard of any who came from the north. In one short night the world had become far larger than it was before.

"But not all of us understand your words," the girl continued. "It is mostly only those of the highest rank. The senior pack members will be able to talk with you, but the others may be uncomfortable." She gave Netya a sympathetic look. "To them, you are one of our enemies. Some of them would have killed you if not for the word of our alpha."

Netya's skin prickled. "I think my people would do the same to one of yours. I do not know why, but they see you as monsters."

"And you don't?"

Netya shook her head. "You frightened me last night, but you do not seem like a monster. Layon would have killed you, but you let him go, and you did not hurt me. I am sorry about what happened."

The girl smiled and turned so that Netya could see her wounded arm. It was wounded no more. Her bronze skin had reddened, and it looked as though she would be left with a scar, but the painful gash was practically healed already.

"I have heard your people are hurt more easily?" the girl said.

Netya gazed in wonder. Either she had slept for days, or the wound had healed overnight. "How did you do that? How do you do any of the things you do?"

"It is just the way we are. I can forgive your friend. He did not hurt me badly."

Netya edged closer to the fire. "Your people must have very powerful magic."

The girl seemed amused. "We would not call it magic. And if it is, even the wisest of us do not understand it. Besides, I think you would know more of such things than I."

"Me?"

"Your hair." The girl moved closer, setting her bowl to the side as she reached out to touch the long black braid that hung over Netya's shoulder.

"Only the wisest leaders and seers have hair the colour of yours. It means you were chosen for a great destiny. I think it is why our alpha decided to bring you here."

The idea that she was wise or destined for great things seemed absurd to Netya. She knew several of her people who shared her dark hair, and none of them had ever struck her as particularly great. Still, she did not want to offend these people. If they treated her with respect, even if it was only because of the colour of her hair, it could do her no harm to embrace it. The comments about some of them wanting to kill her were still fresh in her mind.

"Why *did* he bring me here?" Netya said. "This is your home, isn't it?"

The girl nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement as the initial tension between the two of them began to ebb. "Our alpha has not taken a female for many years, not even our den mother. He spoke of finding one of your people before, but I never expected it to happen. When he saw you he must have desired you very much, you and your pretty hair."

"As a female?" Netya frowned. "You mean as his woman?"

The girl looked down suddenly, as she had done the night before when the alpha reprimanded her. "He will not take you as his mate. It would not be proper. I can't speak of what he truly desires from you."

"But can you guess?" Netya pried. This was not what she had expected at all. She'd not felt treated like a prisoner, but if not a prisoner, then why had the Moon People taken her with them?

"You must ask him yourself," the girl said, then she glanced to the tent flap and lowered her voice. "But the others say he will take you as his consort. As his concubine. They think he hopes you will give him a strong, dark-haired heir."

A strange twisting sensation grew in Netya's stomach, her heartbeat quickening. She did not know what being a consort to a great leader—or anyone, for that matter—would entail. As a man, and her elder by several months, if Layon had asked her to be his woman she would have been obliged to say yes. Then she would have gone to his bed and lived under his roof, and borne his children if the spirits were kind. It was a future she had often envisioned over the past year, and yet it had been just as fantastical and beyond her comprehension as the legends of the Moon People. The way he had touched and kissed her the night before was the clearest glimpse of that life she had ever gotten. Would it feel the same way to be touched by the alpha?

She called back the image of him from the previous evening, remembering the way his voice had sounded how his long hair stirred in the wind. Something tickled her beneath the knot of anxiety in her belly.

"I would not know how to be his consort," she said at last, her head swimming as she began to feel overwhelmed. She put a palm on the floor to steady herself as she wobbled.

The girl's smile took on a bemused quality. She picked up her wooden bowl again and handed it to Netya along with the smooth mixing stone. "Here, eat. You must be very hungry."

She was. The bowl contained a paste that tasted of mashed nuts, made palatable by a sprinkling of dried berries. There was little flavour to it, but it was not unpleasant. After swallowing down the whole bowlful and drinking from a waterskin the girl offered, Netya began to feel a little better. Her bladder was still full, and the knot in her stomach still remained, but at least she was no longer as giddy.

"Have you been with a man before? Or a woman?" the girl asked once Netya was done eating.

She shook her head.

"Why not? You are old enough. Some girls of my people are mated younger than either of us."

"No man chose me yet. I only came of age a few seasons ago."

"But you should know how to be with a mate when they do choose you. Have you not learned?"

"How would I learn without a mate to teach me?"

The girl crossed her legs and turned to face Netya properly, eyes twinkling once more as she explained. "Every year, during the celebration of the summer fires, our pack come together to share our pleasures for one night. For all those who have come of age, it is a time when we can choose freely who to lie with. Even those who are mated join in, and the ones who are not often find their partners on that night."

"My people have nothing like that," Netya said. The idea intrigued her, even though it sounded wild and bestial, just like all the other tales of the Moon People. Perhaps that was exactly why she found it so compelling.

"Then I think our alpha will show you himself. Many of the young females will be envious."

"Why would he want me over one of them?" Netya said.

The girl's eyes fell, and she bowed her head in that same gesture of

deference again. "I cannot speak for him. If you are lucky, he may tell you." She looked back at Netya suddenly, gripping her by the hand. "But do not ask him directly. It would not be proper."

The warning in the girl's eyes unnerved Netya. It was frowned upon for a woman to question her man in public, she knew that much from the customs of her own people, but it made her wonder whether the Moon People had any other expectations of her that she would need to learn. As one of their enemies, and a clear outsider, her fear crystallised her thoughts into something sharper and more practical than she was used to. If she wanted to survive among them, she would have to learn their ways. If their alpha wanted her as his concubine, she was in no position to refuse. If it was as great an honour as the girl had suggested, perhaps she had no reason to feel apprehensive at all.

"And... how long will I stay here?" she said at last.

"For as long as our alpha says you must. He has told the others to treat you as one of our own, but they will be watching closely. You will not try to leave, or hurt any of us, will you?" She added the last sheepishly, as though it was a question asked out of obligation rather than desire.

Netya shook her head. How could she hurt people who transformed into wolves and healed their wounds within hours, even if she wanted to? And the thought of making the journey back across the open plains by herself was even more frightening than staying put.

"What is your name?" the girl asked.

"Netya."

"I am Fern." She smiled. The bright and eager sparkle in the young woman's eyes did much to put Netya's fears to rest. Aside from the tone of her skin and the sound of her voice, she could almost have been a girl from back in the village.

"Come," Fern said. "I will show you where you can wash, and then he will want to see you."

"The alpha?"

"Yes."

Netya shielded her eyes from the sun as the girl lifted the flap of the tent and led her outside. She prayed to the spirits that the alpha would be as welcoming as Fern.

—4— A New World

The place the Moon People called home was not quite a village, not quite a camp. Could it be called a den? Tents of various shapes and sizes were nestled between the rocks, none of them looking as though they had been made with any particular design in mind. Some were tall and propped up by crisscrosses of long poles, others were short and squat, and some were little more than lean-tos beneath which the Moon People lounged in the evening sun. Others had built earth lodges not dissimilar to some of the dwellings in Netya's own village, but there was not a single house of logs to be seen.

The whole encampment was set atop a raised outcropping that overlooked the land for miles around. It was roughly the size of a small hill, and farther up the slope more and more rocks broke through the surface of the earth until a large stone peak capped it off, a natural monument that Netya suspected looked quite beautiful from afar. Among the rocks higher up, she could see wide crags that she suspected led to caves. If the Moon People had not made their home here, packs of wild animals surely would have. It seemed more than fitting.

Fern led her around the edge of the raised outcrop, avoiding most of the tents. A large fire burned midway down the slope in an area surrounded by a cluster of tents, and it was from there that a mixture of strange voices reached Netya's ears, all speaking in the tongue of the Moon People.

The land stretched away for miles around them. It gave Netya the same giddy feeling she'd gotten every time she looked out from the edge of the forest over the plains beyond, except this time there was no promise of safety at her back. The home of the Moon People was an island amidst a sea of endless land. To the south and west the ground finally gave way to mountains, so far away they seemed unreachable. In the north she could glimpse a few trees on the horizon, but the easterly direction from which they'd come held nothing but the sight of rolling hills and open grassland. It was almost as if the place she'd come from had been swallowed up by the horizon entirely.

Netya could have stared at the new world around her for hours, but her fascination was interrupted by the looks and voices of the people around her. While Fern did her best to take a quiet route, they still passed by a handful of

dwellings on their way. The huge, brown-furred bodies of wolves slumbered outside some of them, but more often than not they were accompanied by people tending their cooking fires as they prepared their evening meals. All of them shared the same bronzed skin, their hair coming in sandy blondes and browns, often braided and hung with beads or talismans carved from wood and animal bone.

The Moon People stared at Netya unashamedly as she walked past. She had never before felt so interesting, or so different. The colour of her hair and skin, things that had just a day ago seemed no more special than the grass and the sky, were suddenly all she could think about.

In the rare moments she chanced to lock eyes with one of the Moon People she found herself looking for signs of fear or hatred. She was, after all, their enemy.

Most regarded her with obvious discomfort, but rarely did she feel threatened. Any animosity they might have felt for her seemed restrained by a veneer of courtesy. It was far from reassuring, but some of the tension in her stomach loosened. She had been expecting snarling wolves and bared fangs, but these people were no monsters.

It only took a few minutes for Fern to lead her around the edge and down the side of the outcropping, back to ground level where the sprawling sights of the land around them were hidden by the natural slopes and hillocks in the terrain. A clear, slow-moving river trickled its way around the edge of the encampment. Further up Netya could see a small group of people bathing. Their laughing voices reminded her, with a tug of homesickness, of her own summer evenings spent bathing with the other girls of the village.

Fern knelt down and dabbled her hands in the water, gesturing for Netya to join her.

"Come down to this end of the river when you need to relieve yourself. For washing and bathing we usually stay further up." She waited patiently for a moment, but when Netya didn't join her she rose to her feet and began to help the other girl off with her clothing without being asked.

"You should make yourself clean and beautiful for our alpha. He will appreciate that," Fern continued. "If you leave me your clothes I will wash them and find fresh ones while you bathe."

Netya nodded, allowing Fern to unfasten the wooden pins that held her fur wrap in place, before bending down to do the same for her insulating leggings. The evening was warm, and she was glad to feel cool air against her

skin as she untied her girdle and slid out of the woolen shirt and undergarments she wore, finally stepping out of her boots to stand naked on the riverbank.

Fern guided her into the gently flowing water, before bundling up the pile of clothes and tucking them beneath her arm. She left Netya alone then, giving her time to see to her private needs and wash.

Even though they had only just met, Fern's absence brought an uncomfortable feeling of tension to the tranquil river. Netya's eyes flitted back to the group bathing upstream. She glanced at the rocky path she had come down, wondering whether anyone else would chance upon her while she was alone. It was unusual for her to be among so many people and yet feel so threatened. Perhaps threatened was the wrong word. They had treated her well enough so far. It was just that they were different, and different things were hard to understand. It was easy to assume the worst.

And yet, despite all of that, the sense of wonder she'd felt when riding on the back of the wolf and staring out across the foreign landscape still remained. She was in a new place. A new land with new people. Back in the village such possibilities had simply never existed.

Netya leaned back in the cool water, floating for a moment while she unfastened the wooden clasp from her braid as it lay across her breast. She untwined her hair and dipped her head below the water, closing her eyes as she floated to the surface and drifted on her back.

The consort of a powerful leader.

Back home Netya's uncle spoke for the village when there was no consensus to be reached, but he was an old man, impatient and endlessly perplexed by his duties. Nobody bowed their head in deference to him. Nobody spoke of him in hushed tones, with the kind of respect that only power and dominance could command.

A shiver rippled through her body. Was she foolish not to fear the alpha? Of what he would do with her, perhaps that very evening, when he desired to claim her as his concubine? A familiar tickle of warmth returned to her belly as she thought of him. She was afraid, yes, but her fear was not enough to overpower the possibilities opening up before her. Her future, that had once seemed so orderly, was now a burning tangle of people and places and emotions that seemed so endless it made her giddy. The part of her that had always wanted to go and see the wolf skulls on the wall felt like it was finally free.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone approaching, and she jolted upright with a splash. It was only Fern, returning with a bundle of fresh clothes and a reassuring smile. Netya relaxed and allowed herself to sink back into the water again, but the other girl's presence spurred her to continue washing and brushing the dirt from her hair. She did not feel as though she had earned the right to indulge herself yet.

Once she had bathed Fern helped her out of the river and handed her a woven blanket to dry herself with. It was rougher than the soft wool she was used to. As Netya sat on a rock drying herself off, Fern knelt behind her and brushed the tangles from her hair with a comb made from fine animal teeth.

"What happens next?" Netya asked.

"We'll let your hair dry by the fire, then make sure you are as beautiful as we can make you. Once the sun goes down, the alpha should be ready for you."

"Will he want me right away?"

"I don't know." Fern squeezed her shoulder. "Try not to be worried. It may be difficult the first time, but soon you will enjoy it. Sharing pleasures with another person is a wonderful thing."

Once Netya was dry she dressed in her new clothes. They seemed tailored for comfort rather than work, and were not practical for everyday wear. A soft animal skin gown came down to her thighs, leaving her arms and most of her legs exposed. With no undergarments she felt only half-dressed, but the gown was comfortable and fit her quite well. She tucked her clasp back into her hair and put on the pair of fur slippers Fern had brought her, then followed the other girl back up the path between the rocks.

Most of the people they had passed on their way down seemed to have retreated inside their tents or migrated to the central fire as the sun dipped beyond the horizon. Their muted voices and laughter filled the air, and Netya found herself thinking of home again. Was this place her home now? For the time being, it seemed it was.

She caught herself staring at the flames of the large fire as they licked up into the darkening sky, so enthralled that she didn't notice she was about to walk into someone until Fern put out a hand to stop her. She looked forward, and almost jumped in surprise as she stared up at a figure so striking they took her breath away.

Before her stood a woman as tall as any man, with skin the colour of ivory and a mane of raven black hair flowing from beneath a headdress made from the full pelt of a fox. Her eyes were as blue as the clearest crystal lake, and she had painted them with charcoal to make her appearance even more powerful. She was by far the most beautiful woman Netya had ever seen.

But her eyes, as striking as they were, did not sparkle like Fern's. They pierced Netya with a look so cold it paralysed her. The woman's elegant lips looked as though a smile might break them.

Fern immediately bowed her head, muttering something in the language of the Moon People. The older woman stared at Netya for a moment longer, before turning to Fern and responding with a comment that sounded as frightening as her expression.

Fern shook her head, looking in the direction of the caves above them agitatedly as she mumbled out a response.

The woman glared at her, not saying a word, then turned her attention back to Netya and took a step forward, lifting a lock of damp hair from her shoulder to examine it.

"You do not belong here," she said at last in Netya's language, then added something else in her own tongue before turning away.

Netya shivered as she watched the woman walk up the slope and disappear into one of the highest caves, a huge crag in the rock decorated with animal skulls and painted with strange markings.

"She is Adel, our den mother," Fern whispered without needing to be asked. "The senior female of our pack, second only to the alpha. You must always obey if she asks something of you, and when she speaks, you must listen. She is the wisest of our seers, and she knows the ways of the spirits better than anyone."

"She frightens me."

"I think she would frighten anyone, even the spirits themselves," Fern said, then her tone lightened, and she tugged Netya back in the direction of the tent. "But she keeps to herself most of the time. Her cave is a forbidden place for anyone but her and her seers to enter. Even the alpha stays away."

"I don't think she liked me."

Fern looked as if she was about to say something, but this time she stopped before her tongue ran away with her, biting her lip at the last second. "Come, before the fire burns down."

They returned to the tent, watching the last light of sunset fade from the sky as Netya sat with her back to the fire. Once her hair had dried Fern ran the

comb through it once more, then began to braid it back into a plait. As they sat together Netya decided to ask one of the many questions that had been on her mind since the previous evening.

"Why do your people come to attack mine? From all the stories we tell I would have thought you were vicious and barbaric, but you have been very kind to me."

"We were not coming to attack you. If you had not been there would have been no fighting."

"But our people have fought in the past, haven't they?"

Fern sighed. The topic clearly wasn't one she was comfortable discussing. "These are not questions for someone like me. You should be saving them for the alpha. He is the one who makes the decisions to venture into your lands."

"Still, I would like to hear what you know." She turned and gave the other girl a smile. "I am very grateful for everything you've done for me today. I would have been lost, and a lot more frightened without someone to treat me so well."

That seemed to coax Fern out of her shell. She was eager to talk, but her sense of duty was clearly a weight on her mind, if the way she had behaved in the presence of Adel and the alpha was anything to go by.

"The hunting has been bad recently," Fern said. "Usually this season is a time of plenty, so we have no reason to store supplies. But there has been disease in the animals we usually hunt on the plains, and the ones we do catch have not been good for eating. We came to your home because you keep animals there. We planned to take some and leave, but your friend called out too soon. There would have been no time to gather what we needed before more of your people arrived."

"Do you not keep animals of your own? My people learned long ago that it was better to raise young animals somewhere close by than to rely on hunting them in the wild."

"Our people live for the hunt," Fern said. "We keep some birds, but that is all. Most of us become hunters once we are of age. Each successful hunt is a mark of great status and respect for those who take part, especially the men. We would lose much without the hunt."

"I see," Netya said, and a grim thought suddenly occurred to her as she remembered how the men of her village boasted and told grand tales of the wolf skulls they took from the Moon People. Were animals the only things Fern's people hunted in the name of glory?

"There!" Fern said as she fastened the braid in place. "Now you look beautiful. A mate fit for an alpha."

Netya flushed. She did not feel particularly beautiful with a woman like Adel in the camp, but the compliment was nice to hear all the same.

There seemed little left for them to do but wait at that point. Netya's inevitable meeting with the alpha loomed larger than ever after everything she'd learned that evening, and without Fern's company she might have driven herself to distraction with worry. Instead she occupied her thoughts by talking with the other girl, exchanging small stories about life, coming of age, their families, and other everyday things that kept her attention off what might soon become one of the most significant nights of her life.

As preoccupied as she was, she did get a sense from Fern's conversation that the Moon People did not divide themselves clearly into families. Bonds of direct kinship still existed, but the pack viewed all of its members as brothers and sisters to one another. Had she been paying closer attention she might have learned more about the lives of the Moon People, but as the minutes passed by her gaze kept returning time and again to the tent's open flap. The evening chill was beginning to seep in, and soon she couldn't tell whether the trembling of her body was due to the cold or her mounting anxiety.

At last, after an hour or more had slipped by, a middle-aged woman appeared from between the rocks and bent down to peer in at them. Her curious gaze lingered on Netya, then she smiled a toothy grin and spoke a few words to Fern, who bobbed her head in acknowledgement.

"Come," she said softly. "It's time."

—**5**— The Alpha

It was at the entrance to the largest cave at the highest point of the outcrop that Fern left her.

"Only those who are invited can enter," she said. "Remember, this is a great honour, especially for one of your people." She gave Netya's hand a squeeze before stepping back.

Swallowing her fear, the dark-haired girl took a steadying breath, and crept forward into the alpha's den.

The cave wall was smooth beneath her fingers as she put out a palm to guide herself around the corner. Warm darkness reached out to greet her until she could barely see her own arm, feeling her way down the passage as her heart beat faster. She was stepping into yet another new mystery all over again, leaving the comforting familiarity of Fern behind her as she descended into the heart of the rock.

The passage only went on for a few yards, but her cautious steps made it seem much longer. The cavern floor gave way to the rough texture of woven mats, and she jumped as her fingers brushed a hanging drape in front of her. When she lifted it aside, she emerged into the alpha's chamber.

It was perhaps the most grand room she had ever set eyes on, and yet it was more primitive than half the dwellings in her own village. A fire pit glowed with orange coals in the centre, and all along the walls stone lamps occupied natural crags and sconces to bathe the chamber in soft, shadowy light. The only carpentered piece of furniture she had seen so far occupied the far corner of the room, a raised platform of wooden logs upon which sat a large bed piled high with furs. On the other side of the cave a pool of water stirred gently in a second, smaller natural chamber, trickling gently down some unseen channel, presumably to join the river below. A smoothed portion of a tree trunk, bigger than any Netya had ever seen, stood in for a table, with smaller logs on either side for seats. Like Fern's bedding, it was decorated with a lavish animal skin cover, painted and embroidered with trinkets around the edges. The walls were hung with so many trophies, hides, tusks, and bones of animals Netva have never even seen before, that she almost lost herself staring at them as she turned to take in the full magnificent range of decorations adorning the room.

"Has Fern made you welcome?" The deep voice of the alpha reached her ears. He was seated across the room from her, half in shadow, upon what Netya could only describe as a throne. It was adorned with the full pelt of a bear, enormous and snarling, its jaws hanging inches above the alpha's own head.

"Yes," she said, her voice sounding very quiet compared to his. "She has treated me well."

The alpha rose to his feet and stepped into the light, his broad frame looming even larger than the pelt of the bear behind him. He was dressed as he had been the evening before, bare-chested with a kilt of furs.

"Good. You are to be treated as one of our own while you are here, for however long that may be. If any of my pack mistreat you, they will be punished."

"I am thankful," Netya said, edging a little farther into the room. "Am I not to be your prisoner, then?"

"You are here by my will, not your own. But whether that remains true, we shall have to see."

Netya frowned at the cryptic answer, then forced herself to ask the question that had been drumming in her mind for the past hour. "Then why did you choose to bring me here?"

The alpha approached her, his eyes taking in her body without a hint of reserve. He took her by the lower arm, running his free hand over her pale skin from the inside of her elbow to the palm of her hand. The touch of his rough fingers against the sensitive area made her shiver, and as her heart jolted in her chest her lower body began to tingle with warmth.

"Perhaps Fern has told you. I have no mate, and so I have no heir. I will take you as my consort." His eyes met hers, and in them she saw an unspoken question, a silent expectancy as he waited to gauge her response.

Her breath shuddered as she inhaled deeply. "Why not one of your own people?"

The alpha smiled at that. "None of my pack would dare to ask me such a question."

"I'm sorry—"

"But you are not of my pack," he continued. "And that is why, when I saw you at our mercy last night, I chose to bring you with us."

"I don't think I am suited to be the consort of a great leader," she said. "What about the den mother? She is far more beautiful than I."

The alpha's expression hardened. "Do not speak to me of Adel," he said firmly. "I have no need of hearing her name voiced in here."

Netya almost wilted under his fierce gaze, but she forced herself not to look away. Perhaps bravery was foolishness, but the stirring pulse of her blood prevented her from giving in to fear. She was walking the tightrope of her curiosity into the unknown, where she had dared to venture with Layon the night before, and secretly longed to explore more of. The allure of danger was too tempting.

"You are young," the alpha said as he reached over her shoulder to admire her braid. "How many times have you lain with a man?"

"Never."

The alpha nodded. "You will come to my bed tonight. No other male will be permitted to claim you."

Netya's skin warmed. The subtle scent of his body reminded her of fur and salt water. "I do not know how to be with a man," she said.

"Your body will know the pleasures of a woman. You will learn to listen to it, and then you will know what to do." He placed his hand at the nape of her neck and shoulder, allowing his fingers to rest across her throat, then drew them slowly downwards, caressing her skin until they slipped into the cleft between her breasts. Another sensitive ripple ran through Netya's body, and the tug in her lower belly seemed to urge her toward him.

"Do you feel it?" he said.

She nodded shakily.

"Then I was not wrong in choosing you. What is your name?"

"Netya."

"Netya. Are you unwilling to be my consort?"

She hesitated, unsure of what to say, or even think. She was anxious. Perhaps even afraid. But unwilling? She had no desire to flee or plead her fate. She wanted to understand the things her body seemed to be telling her. The alpha's appearance and scent and powerful voice awakened all the feelings she had begun to notice in herself since becoming a woman, and for once she had the opportunity to explore them.

"A man who takes an unwilling female to his bed is no man at all," the alpha said when she did not respond.

"I am not... unwilling, no," she whispered, the words catching in her throat.

"Good." The alpha moved his hand back up her neck, sliding his fingers through the hair at the base of her braid.

It was strange for her to be so close to an unfamiliar man, to have him touching her in this way. It was not like being touched by anyone else. His hands slid over her body as if she were an immaculately crafted ornament, seeking out the fine details to make them more real through his touch. He tilted her head back and pulled her in with an arm around her waist, bringing his lips to hers for a kiss.

Netya expected the same soft warmth she remembered from Layon's kiss, closing her eyes and opening her mouth gently to savour the soft feeling of the alpha's mouth against her own. Instead of giving her gentle pleasure, he took her breath away.

The alpha's firm grip tightened around her hips, the hand on the back of her head steadying her as he kissed her hard and deep, his tongue plunging into her mouth and curling around hers, bearing down with passion and power. Netya's whole body tightened as she found herself crushed against his broad chest, putting up her hands to steady herself and finding only his muscular body to cling to. A low whimper sounded in the back of her throat, and she reeled with a heady rush of desire as the alpha's lips continued to work against hers, like a wolf devouring his prey.

She let herself go limp in his grasp, her trembling hands resting against his chest, but not making any attempt to push him away. The heat in her belly burned hotter than she had ever felt it before, the sensation spreading like an itch until she was pressing up against him without any need for encouragement. The feeling kept on building, going further and further beyond the brief glimpse she'd caught with Layon. It would have startled her had she not been so caught up in the moment.

Finally the alpha broke the kiss, leaving Netya's mouth full of his taste and her chest heaving as she gasped for air. She had never before experienced something so intense, and yet the alpha seemed barely fazed by it. His breathing was steady, his grip just as firm, and his brow was free of the perspiration that had begun to bead on Netya's skin.

He spoke to her again, his voice a smooth murmur, like the sound of thunder in the distance. "There will be pain at first, but afterwards comes pleasure."

Netya swallowed, the tightness in her stomach returning. "How much pain?"

"Every female is different. Perhaps much, perhaps little." He looked at her curiously, but he made no question of whether she still wanted to continue.

He read the language of her body, bending down to lift her into his arms with ease.

Netya inhaled sharply, her hands finding their way to his body again as she clung to his neck for support, allowing him to carry her to the high bed and lay her down on the furs. The soft texture tickled her bare skin, and without being prompted she kicked off her slippers to savour the sensation of the fur running between her toes, satisfying the tingles that rippled across her body.

The alpha stepped out of his boots and unfastened his kilt, allowing it to drop to the wooden planks with a heavy thud as he freed himself from its confines. Netya's eyes were drawn to his thick manhood, swelling with expectancy between his legs as he swung himself on to the bed and propped her up against the mound of furs. Before the warmth of his kiss could fade too far he was on her again, this time sliding his hand up her bare thigh and beneath the bottom of her gown, caressing slowly and steadily until she lifted her arms and allowed him to pull the garment free of her body.

She lay there naked before him, her chest rising with quick breaths as he caressed her. His hands explored all the places a man had never touched before, the broad, rough strokes of his fingertips massaging her hips, her thighs, her stomach, her breasts. She was still shaking. Her body was unable to contain the fire building within it, and she longed to feel it released.

"Do not be impatient," the alpha's voice rumbled in her ear. "Impatience will only take away from the pleasure."

Netya nodded and tried to relax, but it was an impossible task with the alpha's hands on her and his heavy breath tickling against her neck. His swollen shaft pressed against her thigh, each firm twitch revealing the strength of the alpha's own desire. She longed for it in a way she had never longed for anything else. It was as if good sense had abandoned her, and all that mattered was the world inside the alpha's den. She found herself longing to touch him in the way he touched her, but in her anxiety all she could do was clutch at the furs, her body tensing and easing like a supple branch being bent by the wind.

Eventually the alpha's palm was drawn toward the heat in her lower belly, massaging the sensitive area and working lower until his fingers brushed the folds between her legs. Her body coiled with tension all over again, a spike of sensitivity gripping her muscles as he explored that tender area. Another deep kiss distracted her long enough for the alpha to work deeper, parting her entrance and opening it for him, freeing the slick moisture that spilled from

her body and coated her folds. A cry left her lips as he drew his fingers over the sensitive bead at the hood of her sex, working it gently, then harder, until the dam within her broke and her eyes widened with shock as a surge of intensity unlike anything she had ever felt rushed through her. Her head swam, a squeal ringing in her ears that she did not recall voicing as she writhed and contorted against the furs, unable to breathe as the flood of pleasure spilled from within her.

Netya lay there in a haze, feeling the alpha's lips on hers once more as she trembled in his grasp, slowly receding from her peak until her body had calmed and the burn had dimmed to a steady smoulder. Much of the tension had finally eased from her muscles, and the alpha moved to position himself over her, parting her legs with his thighs so that his shaft rested against her stomach, palms on either side of her head as he looked down at her. She was still anxious, as anxious as any woman pinned beneath the broad frame of such a man, trapped within the grasp of the male about to claim her. She had never felt so vulnerable, and yet had never longed to give in to that vulnerability so fully. To expose that most sensitive part of herself to something wild and rugged, like a leaf dragged into a churning whirlwind. She was even ready for the discomfort it might bring.

The alpha guided himself to her entrance, spreading her outer folds wider than his fingers had taken them as he pressed the tip of his manhood inside her. Immediately she felt the tug, the tension of being opened in a way that would leave her changed, pulled into full womanhood by her joining with this man. She sucked in a breath, gripping the furs tighter. The alpha paused and placed a hand on her shoulder, simultaneously holding her in place and urging her to relax.

"Do not fight your body," he said. "Allow the pain to come, and allow it to leave."

Netya tried, her heart pounding as he slid in deeper, meeting a barrier inside her that seemed unwilling to give. He waited, kissing her, allowing the burn to leave her tender walls as they grew accustomed to his size. When he pushed again Netya whimpered with pain as the barrier gave way, and he slid in so far she could almost feel him brushing the hot centre of her pleasure deep within her belly. This time he waited longer, tending her desire with more kisses and the attention of his hands on her naked skin, making sure the discomfort did not overwhelm her desire as he remained buried between her folds, allowing her to slowly adjust to the new opening of her body.

The pain did not go away entirely, but it ebbed into a deep soreness that joined the heat between Netya's legs until she felt ready for more. Sensing that she had relaxed, the alpha withdrew himself, pushing steadily back and forth, slowly working her tender walls until his firm hips were pressed up against her thighs.

"Now you are ready for me to take you," the alpha whispered into her ear, his own desire breaking through the surface as his chest heaved. "As I will take you many more times in the days to come, for as long as you remain my concubine."

Netya's eyelids fluttered, his words bringing on an unexpected surge of pleasure as he bore down on her, working his hips harder, faster, stirring the painful, delicious burn between her legs into another wave that threatened to break through the dam.

His strength was so great that she feared she might break, her smaller frame rocking beneath his as he took her with all the strength and ferocity of the wolf within him. He tugged her body into an arch with a hand against her lower back, pressing her belly to his toned stomach and her soft breasts to his chest. She put her arms around his neck to hold on, though his iron grip needed no support. He rocked her hips against his, panting with desire, dragging her into kiss after kiss as his hungry mouth explored her neck and lips, tasting the salt of her perspiration and marking her with his scent as their slick bodies pressed together.

Within minutes Netya felt faint, every moment a mess of sensations so raw and so powerful that all she could do was moan and whimper, clinging to the alpha as he slaked his lust. A second rush of pleasure hit her even harder than the first, knocking the air from her lungs as she squealed and convulsed in the alpha's grasp, spurred on by his thrusts until he pushed the peak of her climax beyond what she was able to endure. Her thoughts pulled themselves apart as hot white pleasure burned into her mind, her vision tunnelling as the wave overwhelmed her and dragged her under.

Darkness only stole the world away for an instant, but when she opened her eyes she was lying on her back, the alpha breathing heavily as he rested on top of her. His jaw tightened in the last clutches of his own release, then he braced himself on an elbow and eased his weight off her chest.

Netya groaned as he withdrew from her, raw and aching now that the glow of pleasure had begun to fade. The alpha lay alongside her as he caught his breath, resting his hand against her breast to feel the heavy throb of her heartbeat.

"Breathe. Let the pain come, and let it go."

Despite hurting, Netya's body was aglow with more than just the discomfort of being taken by her first man. She gazed up at the cavern roof, glimpsing the twinkle of stars through one of several narrow gaps in the rocks. What she had just experienced went beyond everything she'd imagined. And perhaps it was only in coming here, being taken by the Moon People, being claimed by their alpha, that had allowed her to feel every moment so vividly. It was the unknown, the anxiety, the anticipation, the danger, that had built up to such an incredible crescendo. She had been torn away from everything familiar to her, from a world that was simple and ordered and predictable, and thrown headlong into everything that had once tantalised her just out of reach.

Though she had been of age for almost a year now, it was only in that moment, in the stirring glow of fractured emotions that surrounded her in the alpha's bed, that she truly began to feel like a woman.

"Netya?" The alpha tilted her face toward him, another question in his eyes. She took a deep breath and nodded. "I felt everything you described. I am thankful you showed me, Alpha."

"My name is Khelt. Sleep here tonight. You will find these furs warmer than those in Fern's tent." He lay back and dragged one of the heavy animal skins over to cover her, before closing his eyes with a satisfied sigh.

Netya watched him for a long time, wondering what kind of man he was, what kind of a leader he made for his people. Though her body was tired and in need of mending, she could not sleep. She relived their lovemaking over and over again in her head, not quite believing that she was now fully a woman. She knew things now that had been a mystery to her just hours before. Even her soreness couldn't distract her from the glowing feeling of fulfilment that returned every time she thought back to the way Khelt had claimed her.

It was only much later, after she lay awake for an hour or more, that her thoughts turned to home, and the familiar bed that now lay empty in her house. Where did Layon think she was now? Her mother and sisters? Her brow creased as the painful thoughts threatened to steal away her elation. She curled her knees up to her chest, staring at the coals of the fire. Despite the heavy fur wrapped around her, she still felt cold.

Khelt murmured in his sleep and rolled over, his hand encircling her waist and tugging her in against his warm body. Netya's thoughts of home drifted away as she was reminded again of his touch. She let the unwelcome worries slip away as she sank back into his embrace, remembering that she was not a simple village girl any more. She closed her eyes and finally felt the fingers of sleep reach for her.

She was consort to the alpha now.

The Desires of a Woman

Netya was roused by the sound of voices within the den.

She ached terribly, the soreness between her legs just as bad as it had been when she went to sleep, but the memory of what had caused it brought a smile to her lips.

Daylight filtered down through the openings in the roof of the cave, just enough to add some brightness to the dim chamber. She peeked out from beneath the heavy fur that lay over her and saw Khelt standing near the entrance as he conversed with two other men. He was dressed again in his kilt and boots, and his freshly washed hair dripped down his back, the long black locks giving him a distinctly different look now that he stood alongside his fellow pack members.

She remained still, blinking the sleep from her eyes as she watched, pretending to still be asleep. The idea of meeting more of the Moon People, especially in her naked and vulnerable state, still intimidated her.

One of the men Khelt was speaking to seemed to be recounting something, while the other, taller man listened in silence with his arms folded. It was to this second man that her gaze was immediately drawn once her eyes had grown accustomed to the light. He was strikingly handsome, tall and well built like Khelt, with facial hair that had been trimmed neatly short and a mane of brown hair to match. He wore the same collection of animal furs as the rest of the Moon People, but his outfit seemed less rugged somehow. The leather girdle around his waist in particular was ornamented with a wooden clasp that had been carved into a beautifully detailed impression of a wolf's head, clearly the work of a skilled craftsman.

The conversation continued for a short while, and Khelt seemed to be growing impatient. When the taller man finally spoke it was in gentle tones as he interceded between the other two. His companion immediately objected, but Khelt raised a hand to silence him, then led his quieter, more reasonable guest over to the table. When they spoke again, it was in Netya's language. Whatever they were saying was clearly not intended for the ears of the other man, who wore a grimace and a blank look while he waited for them to finish.

"He is not right, but he's only voicing what half the pack are thinking,

Khelt," the newcomer said, glancing in the direction of the bed. "You shouldn't have taken her."

"They took Cera from us. I saw her skull there next to the others. Now I have taken one of theirs in return."

"We don't have to be like them."

"Would you rather I killed the girl?"

"Perhaps you should have let them think you did. A death can be mourned, but how can they mourn if they know she is still alive, and with their enemies?"

"They would not have the courage to come looking for her."

"And what if she has a mate of her own? Men can do foolish things in the name of love." The newcomer spoke steadily, and without the emotion of his companion. He was not trying to argue with Khelt, Netya realised.

"She does not. No man had laid claim to her."

"Good. But did you consider that before you took her?"

Khelt rubbed his forehead and sighed. "You cannot always be there to be my good conscience, Caspian."

The other man smiled. "If you have finally decided to take a female, I will not question your choice. Just know that this one has brought more danger than most, and the pack would have preferred to see you return with fresh kill instead of a consort from among our enemies."

Khelt nodded, pondering for a moment. "One way or another, we have reminded her people that they should fear us. What's done is done. I cannot change my decision now."

"Nor would I want you to, but we must be ready for the worst." Caspian inclined his head in Netya's direction. "And make sure the girl does not cause problems within the pack. Adel has already—"

"Let the witch think what she wants. I am alpha, not her." Khelt glanced at the man still waiting by the door and slipped back into his own language. Netya recognised her name being said, and some of the words almost seemed close enough to her language to make sense, but the direction of the conversation quickly lost her, and she waited patiently until the men were done speaking. Khelt threw a fur cloak over his shoulders and made to leave with the others, but just as they were about to depart he caught Caspian's arm and murmured something to him, nodding toward the bed.

Caspian said a word of agreement and remained in the den while the other two left. Netya bit her lip anxiously, already unnerved by the lack of a familiar presence.

"When you are ready you may wash in the pool," he said, picking up Netya's gown from where it had fallen beside the bed and laying it next to her. "Once you've stopped being asleep, of course."

Her cheeks warmed. She thought she'd been well hidden beneath the fur. Caspian turned his back to her and gathered cooking supplies from the

alcove behind Khelt's throne, before filling a clay pot from the gently trickling pool and resting it in the coals of the fire to heat. He paid her no more attention after that, focused on the task at hand rather than the strange girl curled up in the alpha's bed.

Netya waited a few minutes before plucking up the courage to rise from the furs and gather up her gown. Still Caspian paid her no attention, though whether it was out of respect or indifference she couldn't tell. Rather than trying to engage him in conversation she slipped out of bed and hurried over to the other side of the den, where the smaller cave with the pool hid her from view.

The water was cold, but it seemed fresh and clean, and Netya was glad for the opportunity to wash herself before dressing. Crouching in the waist-deep water, she reached down tentatively to explore the aching space between her legs. Only then did she realise that she had bled the previous night, and once again she vividly recalled the pain of Khelt's entry, and the pleasure that had then followed.

She bathed the scent of the alpha and the traces of his lovemaking from her body, then realised that she had nothing to dry herself with. She stood awkwardly at the edge of the pool, wondering whether Caspian's back was still turned. Bathing in the presence of other girls was as natural to her as being naked by herself, but the men and women of her people did not often reveal their bodies to one another out in the open. She brushed the droplets from her shivering body and waited for her skin to dry a little before throwing her gown over her head, wishing that she had something more practical to wear now that she was no longer dressing to entice the alpha.

Caspian was stewing fruit in the cooking pot when she stepped back into the den, sprinkling in more of the nut meal that Fern had served her the evening prior. Netya crept over to the fire and sat down, warming her wet feet by the coals as she shivered. Caspian carved a slice of apple with the flint knife he was using and popped it into his mouth, before handing a second piece to Netya.

"I thought your people would eat more meat," she said after a moment of silence had passed.

"Hunting has been bad. Even the alpha eats poorly when there is little to go around."

"I heard you giving advice to him. Do you help lead your people too?" Caspian paused his chewing and looked at her for the first time. "Only the alpha leads our people, and I am not him."

"But he seems to listen to you."

Caspian smiled. "He does. Perhaps he finds value in some of the things I say. But the decisions are his to make."

"Is my being here going to cause problems?"

"Yes," he said plainly, "at first. Whether those problems are small enough to be forgotten in a day, or large enough to last for weeks, is up to you."

"You said you were worried my people would come looking for me?" He lifted the steaming pot out of the fire with a pair of sticks. "Will they?" "I don't know," Netya admitted.

"Then we should both hope the Sun People keep to their forest."

"Is that what you call us?"

"Of course. Is it so strange to hear?" he said as he scooped the mix of meal and fruit on to a flat stone and handed it to Netya. She accepted it gratefully. "I suppose not."

"Fear is not the best way to keep the peace," Caspian said. "But sometimes it is the only way we have."

"What do you mean?" Netya said in between mouthfuls as she scooped the food up with her fingers.

Caspian murmured something in his own language and shook his head, tossing more wood on the fire now that he was done cooking. "Nevermind. I catch myself discussing the business of men with the females far too often. Worry about showing the pack that you are one of them, and let Khelt deal with the consequences of bringing you here."

The back of Netya's neck tingled with unease. She did not want to be responsible for putting anyone in danger, but she was forced to accept it. As Caspian had said, leadership was the business of men. Her duties to the Moon People had been fulfilled the previous evening in Khelt's bed. It was clearly not her place to concern herself with anything more.

"How do I show your pack I am one of them?" she asked, turning her thoughts to more immediate matters.

"Obey those of greater status than you. The seers, the hunters, the mothers. You have the alpha's blessing, but you are still an outsider, and you have no rank among our pack. Speak plainly, be obedient, and listen to those who offer you advice. Once they see you are no threat to them, they will quickly forget about you."

Netya nodded as she ate. It was simple and practical advice. There was much she had to learn about the Moon People and their ways, and she was eager to discover it. Unlike Fern, Caspian did not seem one to talk much, and they passed the rest of the meal without speaking further.

The sun had already risen half way by the time Netya stepped out of the cave. She had wondered where she would be staying from now on, but Caspian made it clear that nobody, not even her, was allowed to remain in the alpha's den without his permission. Even those of the highest status were only welcome via invitation, and most of the pack had never even glimpsed the inside of Khelt's private chamber.

For a short while she wondered whether Caspian was to be her companion for the day, but as soon as they were outside he left her on her own and strode off to attend to his own business.

The entrance of the alpha's cave was in sight of almost every dwelling on the slope below, and a waving hand quickly caught her attention. Fern was climbing to her feet from outside her tent, and she hurried up to greet Netya. When the other girl emerged from between the rocks it was with a grin on her face, and she took Netya by the hands immediately.

"Well?" she asked. "What was it like?"

It didn't take much thought to guess what she was talking about.

"It was very..." Netya paused as she searched for the words, feeling an unbidden smile spreading across her lips.

Fern giggled. "It's like nothing else in the world, isn't it? I felt the same my first time."

"I was afraid, but it made me feel like a woman. A real woman. I think I would want to do it again, even if it still hurt."

"The pain will not be as bad, and soon it will be gone completely. Are you still feeling it?"

Netya nodded. "A little."

"Come, I will fetch you something to sooth it. And I have washed your clothes, they will be dry by now."

"Thank you." Netya held on to Fern's hand as she led her down the slope to her tent. It was a great easing of the emotions inside her to be able to share them with another woman. Better still, she hoped, a new friend.

"What kind of a lover was he?" Fern asked in an excited whisper as she sat her down outside the tent and began to boil a bowl of water to make tea.

Netya swallowed, running her tongue across the inside of her teeth as her breath quickened at just the thought of Khelt's muscular body pressed up against hers. "He was firm. Very strong. Heavy. I am not sure. Are other men different?"

Fern let out a wistful sigh. "Oh yes. Poor Netya, you are spoiled for men now. The rest of us only get the chance to lie with an alpha in our dreams!"

Netya pressed a hand to her mouth to contain a titter. "I suppose it is difficult to think of many other men I would want as much as him."

Fern gave her a coy look. "I can think of one."

Netya's brow furrowed in confusion, before following her companion's gaze over her shoulder. On the other side of the slope, just visible between the rocks, Caspian stood on a raised boulder shielding his eyes from the sun as he gazed at something out on the plains. An unbidden twinge came to her belly at Fern's insinuation. Caspian's remarkable good looks hadn't been lost on her, but she'd still been too preoccupied with memories of Khelt to think of him in that way.

"Surely he has a mate?" she said, finding herself whispering now too. It was a giddy new thrill to talk about men in this way, now that she had been exposed to the pleasures they could bring.

Fern shook her head. "He takes a female occasionally, often on nights of celebration, but it is rare he brings the same person to his bed more than once. Did you speak with him?"

"Only a little. The alpha left him to keep watch over me, I think."

"Do you think he took a liking to you?" Fern teased.

"How do I tell?"

The other girl laughed. "Oh, I will have to teach you so much about the desires of a woman! Watch a man's eyes, especially at times when they should be busy elsewhere. Does he look to the parts of your body that men's hands long to touch? Does he say things that he would not say to other women?"

"I was not paying attention. I think he looked at the food more than he looked at me."

Fern seemed a little disappointed as she crumbled a handful of dry herbs into the bowl of water. "Well, perhaps we will be lucky. Maybe when the summer nights are hot he will take an eye to one of us for an evening."

"Khelt said that no other male would lay claim to me."

"Not as a mate, no, but pleasure can be shared freely. Even he would not deny you that during times of celebration."

"Perhaps I should ask him, in case it happens." The twinge in Netya's belly tugged harder. She was unsure of how she felt about going to someone else's bed, but the prospect made her curious. Were there different kinds of pleasure to be had with different men, as Fern had suggested? She thought about the way Layon had kissed her, and how it had differed from Khelt's kiss. Both had been pleasurable, one intimate and one intense. She thought she had preferred Khelt's kiss, but she hoped one day to relive the tenderness of Layon's as well.

Again her thoughts drifted toward home, stealing away the excitement and fascination of the present. She wanted to carry on living in the moment, but was that wise?

Fern tugged at the hem of her gown, distracting her from the sinking feeling in her chest.

"You should keep an eye on the other men. See if any of them take a fancy to you. If you desire them as well, there may be a time for you to share those desires."

"Would it be safe? I know that being with a man can leave you with his child. If the alpha desires an heir from me, would he not want it to be his?"

"There are ways for women to decide when they bear a child. Has nobody taught you?"

Netya shook her head. "I do not think my people even know of such ways. If they do, the older women do not share them with the young girls."

"I have been with men many times since I came of age, but I would prefer not to join the mothers until I have a mate of my own. The best way is to wait until a few days before you bleed every month. One of the old seers told me she never felt comfortable laying with a man at any other time, and she went her whole life without bearing a child. There are also plants that will stop a man's essence from entering you when taken. We have used them for many generations."

"I cannot imagine a woman going her whole life without bearing a child. Not if she was with men often," Netya said. "It sometimes happens among our people, even without taking care. They say that long ago, before the time of our elder's elders, our people bore offspring just as readily as yours. But now there are few of us, and many of you. Perhaps that was why the alpha chose you, to ensure he never picked a female who would give him no heir." Fern dipped a wooden cup into the bubbling water, scooping up plenty of the stewing herbs before handing it to Netya. "This tea is good for the pains when you bleed, but it also soothes after a man leaves you sore from lovemaking."

Netya accepted the steaming cup gratefully, blowing on it and taking a small sip. It tasted bitter and hot, but she trusted in Fern's wisdom.

"I am learning so many things from you," she said. "I don't know how I will keep them all in my head. Being a woman is more complicated than I thought."

Fern laughed again. "You are no older than me, and soon you will know just as much! In a season or two, it will come naturally."

They sat for a while and talked further, Fern pressing her for more details about her night with Khelt, coaxing them out of Netya one by one until she had recounted almost the entire evening, with much commentary from her new friend along the way. It was approaching noon by the time the camp grew more lively, and Netya managed to feel less conscious of the looks thrown her way by the passers by this time. The Moon People seemed much less frightening now, and Fern's company made her forget completely that any of them still viewed her as one of their enemies. Instead her thoughts were occupied with the tantalising prospect of when she might next share a night with Khelt, or how she would discern when another man took interest in her. There was a fresh banquet of pleasures laid out before Netya, and only now had she learned to open her eyes and admire them.

After several reproachful looks from her pack mates, Fern finally tidied her things inside her tent and showed Netya inside to change into her more practical clothes. The day was already old, and they had done nothing but sit and talk while the rest of the pack began their daily work. It was not seemly for young people to lose track of the hours in mindless leisure, Fern explained, especially not in times of need.

Once Netya was dressed Fern led her out of the camp, picking her way down off the outcropping in the direction of the river. There was already a large hunting party out on the plains, she said, but they could still go foraging for fruit and nuts closer to home.

Netya was glad to be making use of herself. Perhaps if the others saw her as more than just a concubine to their alpha they would start looking on her with kinder eyes.

They took a woven grass basket each and made their way down the river to the south until they reached a spot where the watercourse narrowed and a series of carefully placed rocks allowed them to cross. Netya was curious to see whether Fern would take on her majestic wolf form again now that they were out in the open, but she continued talking in her normal guise as they made a leisurely pace through the overgrown land that stretched toward the distant mountains. After half an hour of wandering she realised that the excuse of foraging had probably been little more than a way to escape the disapproving eyes of the other pack members. She didn't mind. It was nice spending time with Fern, and the day was a bright and beautiful one. The blue sky seemed endless here, with no trees or hills to block it out for miles around. The air was sweet, still, and carried the gentle humming of nature all around them.

It had been a long time since Netya felt so free.

—7— A Hunter's Prize

Fern led them on a long meandering walk to the south before their path finally arced back around and crossed the river again farther downstream. Their small baskets were filled with nuts and berries within a few hours, but Netya was content to carry on wandering as she savoured the sights and sounds of the new place. It was easy to get herself lost in the adventure, worrying of nothing as she enjoyed the sun on her skin and talked with Fern. How could a person think of their troubles on a day like this? Netya's home and people were far away, along with her responsibilities to them. Here everything was new, and she glowed with the satisfaction of her newfound womanhood.

If left to her own devices she could easily have let the whole day slip away, and even in Fern's company she very nearly did. But Netya had always possessed a knack for noticing when something was amiss with the people around her. It was not something she always acted on, and, as youthful as she was, not a talent she yet understood fully, but it was there nonetheless. As the day wore on she became increasingly aware of something strange in Fern's behaviour. At first it was a mild sense of discomfort at certain points in their conversation, then she began to realise that the other girl was intentionally changing the subject, or allowing their discussion to drop off before hastily pointing out some new plant or landmark to Netya.

By the middle of the afternoon, she finally realised what it was.

"Why are we talking only of your people and not mine? I have already forgotten half the names you've told me."

Fern looked sheepish for a moment, and immediately Netya knew she had hit on the source of her unease.

"You have much to learn of us," the other girl said. "I thought you were eager to hear all you could?"

"I am, but you were not so quick to change the subject before."

Fern paused, her brows furrowing. She worked her jaw back and forth, searching for an explanation that refused to come. Netya couldn't help but smile. Fern was clearly not accustomed to dishonesty.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This morning, before he left, the alpha asked me not to speak with you too much of your home. He would prefer you kept your

thoughts on the present, I think."

"My thoughts are already on the present. I can barely think of anything else."

Fern gave her a curious look. "I would be missing my home if someone took me away from it."

Netya shrugged, and impatiently pushed the swell of guilt that rose inside her to the back of her mind. "I think my mother was always eager for me to leave the house as soon as possible. She raised me and my sisters for many years by herself. I knew she was weary of it, and of me. We did not often see eye to eye."

"But your friends?"

"They thought I was a witch."

"Because of your hair." Fern nodded, as though it all made perfect sense. "I heard it was the same for Adel, when she was young. It is often true of those with great destinies, for those who see the world differently."

"I think it was more that I made friends with a boy and wasn't afraid of the things that scared the rest of them. I'm sure I see the same world as everyone else."

"You saw that I was trying to avoid speaking of your home just now," Fern pointed out.

"Well, yes, but that was obvious."

"To you it was, but would it seem so clear to anyone else?"

Netya opened her mouth to speak, then pondered it for a moment. She'd never really given the matter much thought before. Always assuming that everyone picked up on such things, she'd made a habit of trying to tell the truth unless she was convinced she could get away with it.

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps. But I am certainly not destined for anything great."

"Besides being consort to the alpha."

It was Netya's turn to furrow her brows at Fern. "Are you mocking me?"

The other girl looked at her for a moment before a smile began to creep into her expression. A moment later it burst into a laugh, and then Netya was giggling too, putting out a hand to steady her new friend as she threatened to drop the basket of food they'd just spent hours collecting.

"I don't know whether your destiny is great or not, Netya," Fern said once she had regained her composure enough to speak. "But you seem brave, pretty, sharp-minded, and I have enjoyed meeting you very much." Netya took Fern's basket and set it down on the ground alongside hers, then gave the other girl a hug. "I might not have been so brave without someone to make me feel so welcome. Thank you, Fern."

"Welcome is how you should feel. You are one of our pack now, to me if no one else."

By the time they returned to the camp it was nearing evening. The long shadow of the outcrop crept its way across the grass to greet them as they approached, and the air carried the sweet smell of roasting food.

"No meat," Fern observed glumly. "The hunters can't have come back with anything."

"Are you worried?"

"The land is rich enough for us to survive on plants, but they will not be enough to last the winter, and wolves need meat. Without more successful hunts everyone will be unhappy. Hungry winters are when the most fights happen."

"Will the alpha try to take livestock from my people again?" Netya asked.

"I do not think so. The more often we venture into your lands the more dangerous it becomes."

"Perhaps my people would help freely if they knew you were not the monsters they think."

"I have heard Caspian say the same," Fern said. "But even he seems to believe that it can never truly happen. It is the alpha's business, anyway. He can give you a better answer than me."

They made their way to the foot of the outcropping and climbed the path between the rocks until they were back in the camp. Fern took them to the central area for the first time, where Netya found herself the subject of many curious looks from the assorted people and wolves nearby.

"Let them see your basket," Fern whispered in her ear. "It will make a good impression."

Netya did her best to subtly shift the basket so that it was resting against her hip in full view of the people around her. She still felt as if she was an oddity on display to them, but she hoped Fern's advice would work.

They crossed to a large open-fronted tent hung with heavy fur drapes and stepped inside, where Netya realised the interior led to the dark opening of an earth lodge concealed within the bank behind it. A toothless old woman shuffled out and scowled at them, before grabbing Fern's basket from her and

squinting at the contents. She said something in her own language and gave Netya a stern look, before taking her basket as well and rummaging through the assorted berries on top. After a moment she snorted, seemingly satisfied, then said something that Netya did understand.

"Pale little girl, bring more baskets. Good for you, and for me."

Her words were broken and inelegant in their pronunciation, but Netya had the good sense to smile and nod in response. The woman grunted and shuffled back inside, taking the baskets with her.

"She appreciates hard work," Fern said. "She'd welcome the spirits themselves into her tent if they brought enough food with them."

The old woman appeared a moment later with a much smaller bowl of nut meal and berries, which she promptly shoved into Fern's hands before disappearing again.

They sat around the central fire to eat this time. It was a far less comfortable experience for Netya than the relative privacy of Fern's tent, but at the same time she was curious to see the rest of the pack going about their daily business. At first she barely felt able to look anywhere without finding a pair of curious eyes pointed in her direction, but after a while the attention of the Moon People returned to their own business, and the murmur of conversation resumed its natural buzz around them.

The sleek and powerful bodies of the few wolves nearby would have frightened Netya were she alone with them, but they formed such a natural part of the group that she soon had trouble remembering her anxieties. Many lounged on the warm rocks or sat curled up around their partners or mates, some prowling back and forth across the area occasionally, but for the most part it seemed as though a wolf pack and a settlement of people had simply been dropped on top of one another without anyone noticing. It was a surreal and tantalising experience, and Netya found herself enjoying it. Who else from her village could ever claim to have been at ease among a group of such savage beasts?

Not beasts, she reminded herself. *People. And they are no more savage than my own*.

Some of the others who Fern seemed to regard as friends made attempts to introduce themselves to Netya as she ate. She appreciated the effort, but there was little conversation to be had other than an exchange of names and a few uncertain words, with Fern doing her best to translate. It was true that those among them who spoke Netya's language seemed to be in the minority, and it

disappointed her that she was unable to speak properly with them.

Caspian arrived at the central fire a little later, and she took the opportunity to try and engage him in conversation. He responded politely to her, but it was clear that his mind was elsewhere, and it was with a strange feeling of disappointment that she left him to his meal and returned to her place beside Fern.

"I must learn to speak as you do," she said. "Or I will have only myself to talk to when you are not around."

"Are you sure? It may take some time. I spent many summers journeying to meet the North People before I could speak as well as them."

"Your words do not sound so different to mine. You call a fire a fire and a tree a tree, don't you? And I have heard you say many other things that I recognise as well."

"I told you were sharp-minded." Fern grinned. "Alright, perhaps you will learn far faster than I did. And you will have more time than a few weeks every summer to pick it up, too."

Netya wondered, vaguely, whether long ago the Moon People might have spoken the same language as her own. She remembered her grandmother's mother, a woman who had lived far longer than most, sometimes using words that she did not understand. Perhaps after a great many years people simply forgot some words, just as they made up new ones when they discovered things that no words existed to describe. Metal, the material of tools that had allowed her people to build a great many new things, had not existed in her village in the time of her grandmother's mother. When the travellers from the far east had first begun to trade it with them, a new word had been born to describe it. In a hundred years, a hundred new words might be born. How many words did the Moon People have? More than a hundred, certainly. Into numbers beyond counting.

A sudden cry rang out from the other side of the camp. Whatever it was, it seemed important, stirring even the lounging wolves to their feet as the entire group hurried in the direction of the call, meals forgotten and conversations abandoned as each person jostled to find a space on the northern edge of the outcrop.

"What is happening?" Netya asked as Fern urged her to her feet and tugged her in the direction of the others.

"The hunters are back, and the news sounds good!"

Caught up in the infectious atmosphere, Netya found herself standing on

tiptoes to try and peer over the shoulders of those in front of her.

"You shouldn't miss the sight of your first successful hunt," Caspian's voice sounded behind her. "Here, climb up." He made a step for her foot with his hands, and she eagerly gripped his shoulders and hoisted herself up, balancing against him as he held her weight with ease.

On the plains below a column of people approached, flanked by three wolves on either side. Those in the middle carried something between them, while a single figure strode out ahead to lead the way. For a moment Netya thought it might be Khelt, but he was nowhere to be seen, neither with the hunters or the rest of the pack.

A resounding cheer went up from the group around her, and the hunters in the distance responded with howls of their own. Everyone was talking excitedly, and Netya could understand not a word of it. But even without language, the relief and elation of the pack was obvious. For the first time she found herself completely forgotten as the returning hunters stole away the attention of the Moon People.

Caspian shifted to brace her weight more securely against his hip, and she felt the firm motion of his muscles working beneath her fingers. A warm flush lit her body as she imagined how those muscles might feel without the barrier of clothing covering them. How Caspian's strong grip might feel when applied to other parts of her body. She took a deep breath and pried her thoughts away from such cravings, returning her attention to the procession of hunters as they made their way to the base of the outcrop and up the path.

Caspian let her down as the group broke apart and rushed to meet their returning brethren, and before she could even thank him he had disappeared again into the crowd. Amidst the clamour of raucous voices and cheers of victory she found her way back to Fern's side, and was finally able to get a good look at the hunters as the group parted to allow them through.

Even she was impressed by the spoils. The slain beasts the group had returned with were so large Netya was amazed that the thick wooden poles they were lashed to —and the men carrying them—did not buckle under their weight. She did not recognise the animals, but they reminded her a little of oversized goats, and each one alone would certainly provide enough meat to feed the entire pack.

She turned her attention to the hunter leading the procession, and was surprised to see that it was not a man as she had first assumed, but a woman. This was no mother or seer. The girl seemed tall and wiry enough to

challenge any man's strength, and she wore a look of such satisfaction and confidence that Netya felt humbled just by being in her presence. In her ears she wore sharp spikes of bone, and she had cut her hair almost to the scalp on one side of her head while the other half remained long and braided. Netya felt fortunate that it was Fern she and Layon had run into two nights ago and not this woman.

The congratulations continued as the hunters passed through, but the group moved back and kept at a respectful distance as the spoils were borne to the central fire. It seemed that some tradition had to be observed before the hunters could rest and the meat be butchered.

"Vaya was not leading the hunt when they set out," Fern said to her. "She must have been the one to track down the animals and make the first kill."

"Vaya is the woman in front?" Netya replied.

Fern nodded. "Women rarely claim the hunter's prize, but this is not the first time Vaya has done it. Tal, the hunt leader, cannot be very happy. This should have been his glory."

Netya watched in fascination as the hunters stopped next to the fire and their escort of wolves moved back. The men set down two of the large animals on the ground, leaving only Vaya standing beside the bearers that carried the third. She raised her hands to the sky and barked something that drew more shouts of elation from the pack, before clapping a palm against the flank of the slain best. It had not been killed with spears or knives. Instead several claw marks lined its hide, and the killing wound in the back of its neck looked to have been inflicted by long fangs.

The wrinkled elder who had taken Fern and Netya's baskets stepped forward, examining the kill for a moment before giving a grunt of approval. She then bent and brought a flint knife to the beast's throat, slitting it wide open and allowing the blood to spill freely on to the ground. Before the animal had bled out completely she filled a bowl with its draining life essence and presented it to Vaya. The voices of the pack subsided as all eyes turned to the victorious young woman, who accepted the bowl with a slight bow, before bringing it to her lips and drinking until it was empty.

That seemed to signal an end to the formalities. A final cheer went up from the crowd before they all rushed forward to congratulate the hunters, several people moving to begin the work of skinning and butchering the animals immediately. Vaya, Netya noticed, was being presented with gifts from the other pack members. Handfuls of food, small trinkets, and articles of

clothing, all of which she accepted with great satisfaction.

"They seem very thankful to her," Netya said.

"We have had no successful hunts for many weeks now. She succeeded where others have failed, and now the whole pack will eat well again."

"People do not usually give gifts to the hunters in my village."

"Ah," Fern said, "but your people do not value the hunt as we do. This night is Vaya's. That is the hunter's prize. Until the sun rises tomorrow, she will be treated with the honour of the alpha himself. Those who give gifts seek to earn her favour for hunts she leads in the future. They hope to also share in her next glory, or perhaps even claim it for themselves."

Once the gifts had stopped coming and only congratulations were left, Vaya's eyes began roaming the area, and several knowing chuckles sounded from those nearby. Even Fern seemed amused.

"And of course, there is one other prize she also has the right to claim."

Vaya's gaze finally settled on one of the hunters who had come in with her, and she smiled with almost predatory satisfaction.

"Of course it would be Tal," Fern said. "The other men will not soon forget him losing favour to a woman, especially not after this."

The hunt leader Tal kept a steady expression as Vaya approached him, but his discomfort was obvious. One of the other men gave him a teasing shove, laughing with the others at some joke that had been made, presumably at Tal's expense. This seemed to please Vaya even more. She put an arm around the hunt leader's waist and said something to him, then tugged him away to come sit with her by the fire.

Netya had a vague idea of what was happening, but she was still confused. "That," Fern said, sharing in the men's mirth, "is one of the few times you will ever see a woman lay claim to a man."

"She will lie with him tonight?"

"Tal would lose face if he refused. He has already lost much by letting Vaya claim his prize, and she knows it. After tonight, I do not think he will be leading many more hunts in place of her."

"Can the hunters take anyone they desire after such a victory?"

"It would depend on the victory," Fern explained. "This one is particularly special. Of course, it would be improper to try and lay claim to the alpha or those of high status, but the other pack members are theirs to choose from." She smiled and led them back to their seats to finish the meal they'd abandoned. "You know, Vaya chose me the second time she claimed the

hunter's prize."

"Over a man?"

Fern nodded. "She values power over pleasure, and we were both apprentice hunters of equal status at the time. She is among the high hunters now."

Netya's thoughts tingled with curiosity. "What was it like?"

"Most men are gentle sheep compared to Vaya." Fern rolled her eyes. "I was glad to indulge her, but she made her point. I was no rival to her status after that night."

"That seems a strange thing to do in the name of power," Netya said as she watched Vaya curiously.

"It has everything to do with power," Fern replied, "even between close friends or lovers. One must always give, and one must always take. Even if the dominant lover switches, there are always moments of powerlessness on one person's part. Surely you felt it with the alpha last night?"

Netya pondered the question before responding. "It seems more frightening when you describe it that way. I was completely in his power. I don't know if I could have resisted him even if I'd wanted. He seemed in control the whole time."

"Sometimes you will be with a man and find the opposite to be true," Fern said. "He will be unsure, or apprehensive, and you will find yourself guiding his pleasure rather than allowing him to slake it as you submit."

"I cannot imagine someone like the alpha ever being unsure."

Fern chuckled. "He would not be, no. Few men are. That is why the others mock Tal. They know Vaya will not allow him to take her in the way he would want."

Netya thought about it a little more as she watched the pack heat flat cooking stones in the fire and butcher the fresh game. Before long the smell of sizzling meat was rich in the air, and she found herself growing hungry again despite having just eaten.

"I think I enjoyed the power the alpha had over me," she said at last. "It made him feel... I do not know, greater, somehow. And the pleasure he gave me was greater because of it. I would not have felt the same way with someone else."

"You will have to enjoy a great many more men before you make that decision," Fern said. "But yes, that is why the other women will envy you. Many of them desire to be taken by a man who embodies such power."

The tales of the hunt continued for a good hour as an impromptu banquet seemed to break out, the rationing of the food forgotten in light of the successful hunt. Fresh meat was cooked and shared freely, and before long the whole pack seemed to have gathered to eat and hear Vaya and her hunters recount their success. Netya understood only what Fern translated for her, but she enjoyed the jovial atmosphere and the warmth of the fire as night gradually fell upon the camp.

It took some time, but eventually she became aware of her name being mentioned once more. Once the buzz of the hunt had ebbed, the Moon People returned to discussing the second most interesting topic in their camp. The only one who seemed not to care was Vaya, who still wore the same prideful grin of victory she had sported since claiming her prize. Netya could hardly blame her. The night was hers, after all.

But Vaya's grin began to falter as the topic of conversation around her diverged time and again from the words Netya had come to associate with "hunt" and "hunter", to be replaced with increasingly frequent utterances of her own name and Khelt's. She began to grow uncomfortable, and when she next looked across the fire it was to see Vaya's unsmiling eyes staring back at her.

The huntress curled her lip, then rose to her feet and spat out a harshsounding comment. She turned her back on the fire and dragged Tal after her, disappearing into one of the tents.

It had been a long day, but a good one. Even Vaya's unsettling look wasn't enough to dampen the excitement Netya now felt by being in the presence of such fascinating people. For the first time in her life she was free from everything, learning the ways of a woman and experiencing things that had seemed forever beyond her reach back in the village. She was hungry for more.

Fern took them back to her tent, but explained that she would be joining some of the other young hunters for the rest of the night. The night was the time of a wolf, and she had been invited to follow Vaya's trail back to where her kills had been made so that they might continue tracking the herd she had stumbled across. One successful hunt was no reason to become complacent in times of need, and there was much glory to be had in building upon Vaya's success rather than letting it slip through their fingers.

Fern rekindled the inside fire and allowed Netya to curl up in the bed of

warm furs, before wishing her a good night and slipping out through the flap of the tent.

It was strange to be on her own. Ever since meeting the Moon People she had never been left alone for long, and now at last she finally had time to let her thoughts wander as she lay there staring up at the stars through the open smoke flap. She wondered where Khelt had been that evening. Part of her had been excited to see whether he would call her back to his bed again, despite still hurting a little from the last time. She wanted to experience more of the pleasures shared between women and men. Pleasures that these people seemed to embrace so freely, without any of the mystery or reserve that surrounded the topic in her own home.

Her body tingled as she imagined firm, masculine hands running over it, massaging the soft and sensitive places that longed to be touched. She thought of Khelt's broad form looming over her, the perspiration beading on his chest and his hot breath rushing passionately against her ear.

Most of all she remembered the hot, piercing intrusion of his manhood opening up her body, and how much she now longed to experience that feeling of fullness once again. Her hand began to stray downwards until it found the tender bud between her legs that Khelt had elicited so much pleasure from. She touched it gently, and a gasp left her lips as the spot brought back the sensations of the previous night more vividly than any memory.

Her fingers moved slowly, shivers rippling over her skin as she allowed her thoughts to stray to other men, Layon, Caspian, the powerful hunters who had walked in with Vaya...

An unexpected cry left her lips, and she was forced to bury her face in the furs as she convulsed with a surge of pleasure; the same intense climax Khelt had given her in his bed. It was less heady, and did not carry her through the same peaks and ebbs that the alpha's lovemaking had accomplished, but it left her trembling and gasping all the same, her head buried in the crook of an arm as she reeled from the sensation.

A smile lit Netya's lips as she caught her breath. If these were the pleasures of a woman, she was glad to have been introduced to them.

—**8**— Among Wolves

Khelt was gone for almost another two days. The pack seemed to defer to Caspian in his absence, though little leadership seemed necessary as the group formed new hunting plans and set about the business of preserving much of their fresh kill for the winter. It was a strange time for Netya as she became acclimated to daily life among the Moon People. They slept late, many of them spending the night hours out on the plains as wolves before returning home to sleep during the day, dozing in their tents until noon. This left Netya with the camp practically to herself in the mornings. The elders who lacked the energy to spend all night out with the others were her only company, along with an occasional mother woken early by her infant. They did not engage much with Netya, though she could tell by their reactions that a few of the elders understood at least some of her language.

It was frustrating to feel so intentionally isolated, and it was during those quiet mornings that she found herself thinking most about home. More than once she wondered how far she might get across the plains before the Moon People caught up with her. Certainly not far enough. The land stretched out endlessly around them, and the knowledge that the wolves could run faster, harder, and for longer than her kept Netya prisoner far more effectively than the bars of any cage.

Still, she did not like to think of her position in those terms. She did not feel like a captive, more a guest, and she had already experienced things among the Moon People that would have compelled her to stay even without the implicit threat. In her youthful optimism, she never truly considered the possibility that she might never see her home again.

While the quiet mornings allowed Netya's mind to wander, the afternoons left her no such time for introspection. Fern was keen to take her out foraging, spending hours chattering away about old topics that became fresh and new in the company of a stranger. Netya, too, found herself responding in kind, enjoying the rare opportunity to recount the stories of her people to someone who had never heard them before. She also became aware that Fern seemed somewhat distanced from the other members of the pack her age. It was nothing compared to the isolation Netya was subjected to, but during meal times she noticed that, while many of the other pack members might

occasionally come over to talk with Fern, they rarely sat with her for the whole meal.

Vaya seemed to command a lot of respect among the young men and women of the pack, especially in the wake of her successful hunt, and it was around her that the others often gathered. The imposing huntress made Netya nervous whenever she was around, but the only member of the pack that filled her with genuine unease was the den mother, Adel. It was rare that she appeared outside her cave, but when she did conversations dimmed and anxious eyes followed her wherever she went. It was subtle, perhaps not something the pack even realised they were doing, but Netya saw it clear as day. Adel commanded a level of respect and fear that seemed to outstrip that of the alpha himself. Even without asking why, she could sense the power that radiated from the tall, dark-haired woman. She walked among the Moon People as though she was striding through another world, watching them like a lofty spirit traversing their mortal landscape. Netya might have been called a witch by the other girls in jest, but Adel was a woman truly deserving of the title. Her dark eyes held an understanding of the secrets that others had glimpsed only briefly in the land of dreams and nightmares.

Thankfully the den mother did not take it upon herself to speak to Netya again, all but ignoring her presence every time she appeared to bathe or collect food that would always be eaten in private. Netya was glad. If there was one person who could have convinced her to act on her thoughts of escape, it was Adel.

At sunset on Netya's fourth day among the Moon People, Khelt returned. He strode back into camp along with the man he had been speaking to in his den, the pair both looking weary, but satisfied. Keen to cement her good first impression—with the others as much as the alpha—Netya stood up and hurried to greet him.

Immediately she regretted the decision. Out of the corner of her eye she saw people rising to their feet in alarm. Khelt's companion stared at her incredulously, clearly shocked that she would approach the alpha in such a fashion.

Netya froze, her chest tightening as she realised her error. These were a people of customs and tradition, and while she had yet to understand much of their way of life, she did know that anything involving the alpha was steeped in a heavy sense of humility and respect. Someone with no real rank among

the pack approaching him so readily clearly seemed to be a violation.

She stood there for a moment, the burning sensation at the back of her neck growing as she felt a dozen pairs of eyes watching her. Her first thought was to bow her head in deference as she had seen Fern do after being chastised, but instead she found herself looking to the alpha, wanting to see his judgement for herself.

Rather than anger, it was surprise that registered on Khelt's face. He hesitated, looking at her curiously, then before anyone could say a word he stepped forward and scooped her up in his arms, letting out a bark of laughter as he strode into the middle of the camp. He bellowed a few words in his own language, a grin on his face as he carried Netya to a seat by the fire and set her down in his lap.

"A fine greeting for a weary alpha," he said in Netya's tongue. "I told them I was glad to be reminded of what would welcome me back to my bed this night."

Netya looked around, her cheeks colouring as the momentary tension began to dissipate. The others were smiling and sharing in their alpha's mirth, clearly surprised, but reassured by their leader's good humour. Khelt leaned closer and murmured into her ear.

"Any member of my pack would not approach me so boldly. Your eagerness may get you into trouble yet."

She could only think to nod. Her heart was still beating fast, but for quite another reason now. The alpha's bare chest was warm beneath her palms, the scent of the day clinging to him as it had when she lay with him in his den. She would be his again that evening, and at last she would relive all the things she had fantasised about since his departure.

"You have made yourself at home among my pack?" Khelt questioned her.

"I have tried. Your ways are still very strange to me, but I am doing my best to learn."

"And you are content? You are not unhappy here?"

"No. Fern has been a friend to me, and your land is beautiful."

The alpha nodded, satisfied by her simple answer. He did not question her about how she was adapting to pack life again.

"Sit with me here tonight, I would enjoy spending the evening with a female by my side. Our journey was long, but tonight I will rest and enjoy the simple pleasures."

"Where did you go?" Netya asked. "Was your journey important?"

Khelt dismissed her question with a wave of his hand. "It is nothing for you to concern yourself with. Just know that our pack is safe, as are you." From his tone it was clear that he had no desire to speak further about his business of the last two days. He groaned and stretched, allowing Netya to unfasten his cloak and work the tension from his shoulders with her fingers.

A strange sense of duty came over her in Khelt's company. She imagined it was similar to how the others felt around him, but she couldn't be sure whether it was due to the alpha's natural presence or because of the role she had been given to serve him. She had spent the last few days collecting berries and helping to prepare some of the food, yes, but those were small chores compared to the work of the hunters, the mothers, the craftspeople who made clothes and tools, or the seers who spent their time in Adel's cave communing with the spirits. Netya could do none of those things, but sitting there on the alpha's broad lap, entrusted with his personal comfort and satisfaction, she finally felt that she was fulfilling a role unique to her.

She had been brought here to be the alpha's consort, and a consort she would be.

After a time Khelt eased Netya off his lap, but he kept her close by his side, an arm resting around her shoulders or waist more often than not. He was brought food and water, and Netya found herself enjoying her time spent beside him, made all the more eager by the way his palm sometimes roamed to stroke up and down the curve of her hip. Not a tender or lustful touch; that would come later, she suspected, but a pleasant reminder that he could and would lay his hands on her in a way no other man was permitted.

Once Khelt had eaten he congratulated his pack on the successful hunt in his absence, and called Vaya over to speak with him personally. For all her fire and confidence, even she seemed humbled in the presence of her alpha. Netya understood nothing but a few stray words of their conversation, but she did notice the way Vaya's eyes flicked in her direction impatiently. The huntress was uncomfortable. Could it be that she envied Netya's position? Or was it something else?

Netya watched her carefully, made confident by Khelt's presence, but she failed to grasp exactly what it was that Vaya seemed to dislike about her. She was a strange, intimidating woman, and by the time Khelt dismissed her Netya still felt that she was no closer to understanding the huntress.

"She would try to rise above even the men, that one," Khelt said once Vaya had departed. "And if her victories continue, one day she will. A pack needs

strong wolves like her."

"Would she become den mother? That is the highest rank of a female, is it not?"

Khelt snorted in amusement. "The den mother is a seer of wisdom and insight; the great powers of a woman. She embodies that which allows all women to thrive and stand as equals among their pack, just as the alpha must possess the greatest strength and cunning of all men. Vaya may be a woman, but she does not bear the power of a den mother."

"Instead she bears the power of a man?"

Khelt nodded. "I see the way you watch her, and the way you watch the others. I think you see much, Netya."

"Fern told me something similar."

Khelt chuckled. "That," he said, "is the power a den mother must hold." He picked up her dark braid of hair, massaging it between his thumb and forefinger. "Had you been born of our people, perhaps that would have been your destiny one day."

Netya expected them to retreat to the privacy of the alpha's den once night fell, but Khelt seemed to enjoy the time spent in the company of his people. Though they all treated him with great respect, he was not at all aloof or detached like Adel. Once he had eaten and addressed the important matters that required his attention he called the others over readily to share his place by the fire. Most of his company seemed to be the senior males, but he excluded no one else who also wished to join. When the hunters spoke of Vaya claiming her prize Khelt roared with laughter, tossing Tal his fur cloak with a bawdy comment that stirred even more amusement from those around him. Not to be outdone, Tal threw the cloak back with a retort that included Netya's name, and more bellowing laughs filled the air as Khelt feigned offence, clapping a hand to his chest as he rebuked the comment.

"Tal asks whether you are even more of a beast than Vaya!" he said in words Netya could understand. "They wonder whether their alpha has been humbled by a fierce little female."

She grinned, glad to be included in the joke. She had never been welcome when Layon and the other young men enjoyed such evening banter back home.

As the night wore on the high spirits around the alpha's fire gave way to yet another celebration of sorts. Netya got the feeling that these things happened

often among the Moon People. More meat was brought out to be roasted, and the men began passing around a strange-smelling bowl of drink that Netya could manage no more than a sip of before it burned her tongue and made her choke, much to their amusement.

For the first time since her arrival she began to feel truly welcome. The conversation and laughter that surrounded the fire was warming to her soul, and in her place by the alpha's side she no longer felt like an awkward guest to be regarded with suspicion and discomfort. She would have sought out Fern if not for Khelt's arm around her, but before too long she spotted the other girl on the far side of the fire, giggling as one of the young males she had introduced Netya to on her first day nuzzled into her neck and put his hands on her body. The pair of them seemed in playfully good humour, and when Netya caught Fern's eye she grinned, wondering whether her new friend would have some exciting tales of her own to share the next morning.

Taking her lead from several of the other adventurous couples around the fire, Netya rested her chin on Khelt's shoulder, letting her hands creep across his chest and back as her heart beat quicker with excitement. She did not feel clumsy or nervous, only eager to share in the things the other young women were enjoying.

When he noticed her teasing fingers Khelt turned to her with a knowing look, yanking her suddenly closer by the hip and claiming her mouth with his own. Heat rushed through her body as a smile spread across her lips, the pressure of the alpha's kiss forcing her head back until he was leaning over her, his tongue eagerly exploring her depths until she was left gasping. It was a clear show of dominance, not just to her, but to any who might be watching, and Netya found herself happy to submit. When Khelt withdrew she lay there panting in his arms, curling her toes into the grass as she giggled breathlessly.

"I am glad you have taken well to this," he said, smiling, but with sincerity in his eyes. "I wondered whether you would still be willing when I returned. That you might long to return to your own people by now."

Netya shook her head, keen to change the subject. "There are many things for me to enjoy here," she said simply.

Khelt kissed her again, running a hand down over her tingling belly to cup the space between her legs. "Then I will make sure you enjoy all of them, my concubine."

The alpha began to rise to his feet, but the sound of raised voices nearby caused him to stop. Netya sat back up, leaning in close to him as she tried to

make out the source of the commotion. At one of the smaller fires two young men, barely of age, were on their feet, glaring at one another with fire in their eyes as they argued. They seemed oblivious to the voices of the friends who tried to calm them, standing toe to toe as they pointed and yelled, growing louder by the second.

Khelt curled his lip in annoyance, glaring at the two. By now most of the pack was looking their way.

"What's going on?" Netya whispered.

"They are arguing again. Erech and Nathar. I had hoped the two of them would be beyond this by now."

"What are they arguing about?"

Khelt gave her an impatient look. "You ask many questions of me."

"I am curious," she responded, refusing to wilt under his gaze. "It is difficult when I do not understand the words of your people."

"They are arguing about you. They disagree on whether they would allow you to stay in our camp if the decision was theirs to make."

Immediately Netya's warm feelings began to dissipate. Perhaps her ignorance of the language of the Moon People had been shielding her from their true thoughts.

"I would not worry yourself over it," Caspian said from his seat nearby. "Those two would argue the colour of the sky if it meant avoiding an agreement on something."

"And yet they are men now, not children," Khelt growled. "They say these things even in the hearing of their alpha."

"They are young," an old man with a single lick of white hair on his forehead joined in. "Their anger makes the world small until they can think of nothing else. Give them a moment, and they will realise."

It suddenly occurred to Netya that her language was not being used solely out of courtesy to her, but as a way for the senior members of the pack to converse in relative privacy. She grew quiet then, keen not to intrude on something that had clearly become a matter of concern.

"I have already given them many more years of patience than were granted to me at their age. They cannot continue this way," Khelt said.

"You are not so much older than them yourself," the old man observed, with a hint of a smile.

"Next to you every man is young," Caspian said. "But I agree with Khelt. This anger of theirs has been given time enough to burn itself out. We cannot

keep placing them apart on hunts when they should be working together."

Khelt grunted. "They are of age. They will settle their differences like men for once. Perhaps then they will understand that this bickering of theirs is the refuge of fools and children." He moved his hand off Netya's waist and rose to his feet, bellowing a single, sharp command that silenced the entire gathering. The two young men froze, staring at their alpha like startled animals.

Khelt picked his way through the group and strode toward them, gesturing in Netya's direction and then yelling something that sounded like a question. The pair remained silent, paling before their alpha's anger. Khelt folded his arms, staring at them one at a time, then said something else. One of the young men tried to respond, but the alpha silenced him curtly, his tone calm and controlled now. He had lain down an ultimatum for the two, and with the eyes of the pack on them it seemed they had no choice but to comply with it.

"Your people do not have this custom, do they?" Caspian said to Netya. "What custom?"

"We must learn respect for one another. Not just for those of higher rank, but for every member of our pack. If we are to lose control of our emotions in anger, we must understand the consequences of doing so. Holding our feelings in check is a small price to pay for what might happen if we submit to the beasts inside us."

An uneasy prickle crept up Netya's spine. "What does that mean for them?" "If Erech and Nathar continue to howl at one another like wild animals, then they will settle their differences in the same way. Once they are done, at least one of them will realise the value of keeping a good temper."

"And the stronger wolf will have his way," the old man said, glancing at Netya. "You saw Vaya's victory in the hunt, yes? That is but one way for a wolf to demonstrate their power."

"A better way." Caspian grimaced. "But there is power in violence too." It chilled Netya to hear the whoops of excitement that filled the air the next time Khelt spoke. Unlike Caspian, they seemed just as excited as they had been when Vaya returned from the hunt. Whatever violent contest was about to settle the dispute between the two young males, it had awakened some primal urge in the others that had them jumping to their feet and cheering in anticipation as Khelt lit a torch and led the pair away from the central fire.

Even Fern, her arm entwined with that of her male companion, seemed excited as she joined the procession filing after their alpha.

Caspian said something in his own language and rose to leave, heading back toward the tents. Netya was left sitting alone with the old man, apprehension twisting in her stomach. Part of her wanted to return to Fern's tent, go to sleep, and wake up tomorrow none the wiser about what had transpired. The Moon People were not monsters. They were welcoming, fascinating, enthralling creatures. She did not want to be given reason to think otherwise.

"You are eager to learn the ways of our people?" the old man said. "Of course."

"Ignorance sees only what it wants. Half-truths." He nodded in the direction of the group. "Go, if you truly wish to learn. Or stay, and do not."

Curiosity and fear fought in Netya's mind, but she found herself rising slowly to her feet and following after the group, shielded by the darkness, beyond the reach of the torches they carried.

The procession continued all the way down the broad path that split the front of the outcropping, heading out on to the plains where the long grass drifted in the breeze and the warming lights of the fires were no more. Seemingly forgotten, Netya kept her distance, wrapping her arms across her chest against the cold. The pack found an open area and set their torches in the ground at the edges, lighting a broad circle around their alpha and the two young men.

Netya crouched down in the grass, letting it hide her as she watched. She could have joined them, but she was afraid to. She was afraid of seeing something terrible. Fern's smile and Khelt's arm around her waist would not bring her any comfort if she did. Quite the opposite. And yet she watched with morbid fascination as the alpha spoke to the two young men in turn, waiting for them to nod in understanding, before retreating to the edge of the circle and folding his arms once again. The voices of the pack grew louder, whooping and jeering as they called out the names of the pair, working themselves into a frenzy of excitement.

Erech and Nathar stared at one another, fear and anger and anticipation clear to see in their expressions. Did they fear submission? Dishonour? Injury? Or something even worse. Netya recalled again the bleached skulls on the farm wall.

The bodies of the two young men contorted, shifting almost simultaneously into the shapes of hulking wolves. Even in the light of the torches the transition took place so quickly that Netya could make no sense of how it

happened. One moment they were men, the next their features were a blur, their fur clothing peeling like frayed skin as it melded with their bodies, and within the blink of an eye two beasts stood facing one another.

A cry went up from the group as one of them lunged, both wolves rearing up as claws flailed and teeth snapped, wisps of fur torn into the air. It was sudden and vicious and desperate. When the men of Netya's village fought for sport it was a slow and measured practice, more of a game than a fight. This was nothing like that. She clutched at the stalks of grass between her fingers, watching with wide eyes as the two wolves scrabbled and thrashed, knocking over one of the torches as they rolled into the edge of the crowd.

The group pulled back to make room, but the cheers of encouragement only increased in volume. As Netya grew tenser by the moment, the Moon People became more and more elated. Only Khelt was silent as he watched, but he wore a satisfied smile, as if the bloodsport pleased him just as much as it did his pack.

The noises they made were horrible. Heavy, growling breath. Barks and yelps and howls, the sounds made by animals when they were either killing or dying. This was no game. Erech and Nathar were trying to kill one another, and their pack was cheering for it. Netya glimpsed Fern's smiling face in the crowd, and immediately began to feel nauseous. Dark blood spattered into the grass as one of the wolves howled in pain.

She could not watch any longer. She felt her stomach would turn if she witnessed the fight play out to its bloody conclusion. All the thoughts of home she had been suppressing since her arrival flooded back to her, and in an instant she wanted nothing more than to be back there. Her urge to turn and run across the plains was so strong she feared she might actually do it.

These were not the people she'd thought they were. They might look and act like her own kind, but they were different. This kind of violence was the sport of barbarians. Monsters.

Hot tears stung Netya's eyes as her will broke. She turned to run.

She did not get far. Behind her, raven hair swirling from beneath her headdress in the night's breeze, the den mother stood.

"Do you see why you do not belong with us now?" she whispered, gazing into Netya's soul with her dark eyes. "You are a sheep among wolves, lost from her flock."

With a sob Netya made to run past her, but Adel caught her wrist and yanked her back, hard fingers digging into her skin with a grip every bit as

strong as Khelt's.

"You don't run, sheep, you watch." Adel twisted Netya's struggling body to face the circle of torches again, moving behind her and gripping her by the chin. "This is what these people are like," she hissed in her ear. "Savages who fight and take. Did you forgive them so quickly for what they did to you?"

Netya found it hard to breathe. Her throat was tight and painful, her cheeks wet with tears. She was trapped in more ways than she had ever felt trapped before. She had no power over these people, and no strength to fight back against Adel's grip. Her panicked thoughts could settle on only one thing that Fern had mentioned. The power she held through the colour of her dark hair.

She didn't know what she expected, whether Adel would fear her, or respect her, or empathise somehow, but she clutched her braid in both hands and prayed that something, anything, would happen to release her from this moment.

"Spirits help me," she whispered.

"The spirits did not help me when I was taken from my pack," Adel said. "No more than my own kin. They gave me up as though my black hair was a prize they could trade away for their own happiness. Look at them!" She shook Netya sharply, fingers digging into the girl's cheeks as she forced her to watch. "These are the Moon People. Barbarians who would play with lives. Yours and their own. Do you see now?"

Netya saw more blood on the grass. The cheers of the pack rang in her ears. Khelt's face was a blur through her watery eyes.

"I see," she sobbed.

Adel murmured something. Whether the sound was satisfied, amused, or bitter, Netya could not tell.

"Then tell me," the den mother said. "Will you run home, little sheep? Or will the wolves have their meal?"

Fight or Flight

Adel's question tore at Netya, dragging her between the pull of one fear and another. If she left, they would catch her. But what if they didn't? What if Khelt let her go? She could scavenge food from the undergrowth like Fern had shown her. If she kept going east, surely she would find her way back to the forest eventually.

If she stayed, what then? Could she sleep comfortably knowing the violent customs the Moon People indulged in? If she crossed some unknown boundary, would she be the one whose blood was spilled on the plains next time?

The growls of the wolves intermingled with the cheers of the pack as Erech and Nathar fought. Netya's impulse was to run, to get away from the horrible sights and sounds and put as much distance between her and them as she could.

"Let go of me!" she cried out, twisting in Adel's grip. To her surprise, the den mother released her. Netya spun around, glaring at the older woman through tearful eyes. "Do you really hate me so, to torment me like this?!"

"Only as much as the moon hates the sun," Adel said, fixing Netya with her powerful eyes. "The two do not belong together."

Perhaps it was only the stubbornness of her youth, but had it not been for Adel's interference Netya might have made a very different decision that night. She was afraid, but the cruel way the den mother had made her watch the fight also made her angry, and that anger bound her in place.

"I will not run only because you wish it," she said.

Adel pressed her lips together tightly, gazing down at Netya with a look as hard as glass. "I tried to show you the truth here tonight," she said.

"Remember that." Then, without another word, she turned and disappeared into the night.

It took Netya a long time to stop shaking. Her fingers were curled tight into her palms, nails digging painful impressions into her skin. When she closed her eyes she felt faint. Whether her decision to stay put had been correct or not, she had made an enemy of the den mother in making it. The fresh smell of coppery blood in the air made her realise just how fragile her life might now be. She was surprised to find that the fear made her reckless. Anger felt

better than fear, and she fed it until her tears burned hotter, her heart beat faster, furious at everyone who had brought her this far against her will.

She heard people talking nearby, and realised that the fight must be over. If she turned her anger on the others, would she be made to pay for it? At that moment, she did not care.

A hand gripped her arm, and she turned to see Khelt standing in front of her. In an instant he had brought his hand to her chin, tilting it so that he could see her tears.

"What has upset you?" he said with a frown.

Netya glared at him. "You are barbarians."

"The fight was not to your liking?"

"Who could ever like such a thing?! Watching your own tear each other apart like beasts!"

"You will be silent," Khelt said sharply as her raised voice threatened to attract the attention of the others, then his tone grew softer. "And you will speak to me of this in private, where I will not be forced to discipline you for addressing your alpha so."

Netya forced her trembling body to remain still, biting back the urge to retort. The alpha's words reached through her fog of anger, reminding her of the fear. A fear she would be wise to listen to at that moment. The time to run had passed, and from Khelt's expression she had no doubt that he would follow through on his threat.

She worked her jaw back and forth and kept her mouth shut, but she refused to look away from him until he turned and tugged her along by the arm. He dismissed the questions of his pack with a wave of his hand and some light comments, behaving for all the world as though nothing was amiss.

The group were filing back toward the camp now. Netya was not sure whether to be relieved or further aghast when she saw the two combatants, Erech and Nathar. One of them had blood on his face and was limping, but a group of excited friends bore him up, matching his laughter with their own as they walked on ahead of the others.

The other male, clearly the loser of the fight, was in far poorer shape. He sat on the grass at the edge of the ring of torches being tended by several of the others, Fern included. Her male companion from earlier seemed quite unhappy that her attention was now focused on someone else. The loser's hair was soaked with blood, the cuts of claw marks lining his scalp all the way

down to his ear, which was torn and ragged. The injury was bleeding profusely, painting a cascade of red down the young man's shoulder and across his chest.

"Will he live?" Netya said, her feelings forgotten for a brief moment as her heart went out to the wounded man.

Khelt stopped them out of earshot of the others and gave her an impatient look. "Nathar will not suffer long from a few cuts. Erech may be a fool, but he would not kill one of his own brothers."

"That injury will leave him marked."

"Yes, it will," Khelt said. "And when he is an old man, settling the disputes of other foolish youngsters, his scars will be proof of his wisdom. He will not forget this, Netya. He and Erech will understand now the consequences they must be willing to face when a man gives in to his anger."

"What if it had been more than a scar?"

Khelt looked as though he was about to lose patience with her, but he paused, exercising his restraint, and when he addressed her again it was in calmer tones. "Your people fear violence, this I understand. For you, Nathar's wounds could lead to sickness, even death. But he will rise tomorrow as strong as he was today. You must trust me when I say he was never in any danger."

Netya hesitated, her anger faltering. "Nobody has ever died from these contests?"

"Not in my pack."

"Does that mean they have in others?"

"Other packs are the business of other alphas. We are as different to them as you are from us."

Netya took a deep breath, heat rising in her cheeks. She felt nauseous still, but also a little foolish now that she realised just how far she had gotten caught up in her own anger.

Anger makes the world small, until they can think of nothing else.

She covered her face with her palms as fresh tears fell. How true the old man's words had been. Khelt drew her forwards into his arms, and she hadn't the strength to resist.

"I must remind myself of these things while you grow accustomed to our ways," he sighed. "If I had thought, I would have made sure you understood what was happening."

"It is — it is so..." Netya sobbed.

"I will not ask you to approve of what happened," Khelt soothed her. "But it is our way, and there is a wisdom to be found in it."

"The others cheered."

"Rather they cheer for a contest between their brothers than when they take the life of a real enemy. The wolves within us all long for their taste of blood, but we have learned to control those urges. Whatever you think of us, we are not barbarians."

Netya sniffed, longing to believe him. His deep voice was comforting. The way his arms held her made her feel safe from fear.

"Adel would have had me believe you were."

Khelt curled his lip, glaring into the night. "Whatever poison she puts in your ear, you must not pay any heed to it. You are not the first one she has tried to turn against me."

Netya had more questions. The things Adel had said were still raw in her mind. Now more than ever she wanted to know why there was so much bad blood between the alpha and his den mother, but she hadn't the energy to ask further. She was exhausted, wanting more than anything to forget this night and let the refuge of sleep piece her broken thoughts back together.

"I am glad you spoke to me of this," Khelt said. "To hide your feelings would be to foster the same anger that drove Erech and Nathar to fight."

Netya nodded, and allowed him to guide her back toward the camp. She tried not to look at Nathar as they passed by, but out of the corner of her eye she saw that he was smiling. Even in defeat he seemed to have gathered almost as much attention as Erech.

"Go to your own bed tonight," Khelt said. "I am more weary than I thought. I fear sleep is all I can rise to this evening."

Netya could tell he was not being honest, but the gesture warmed her all the same. She was no longer in any mood for lovemaking.

Once they were back on the outcrop he took her to Fern's tent and left her to sleep, returning to join the others as the celebration continued on until the moon was high in the sky.

The Concubine

It did not occur to Netya until later just how hasty she had been to consider running that night. Khelt himself had asked her, on more than one occasion, whether she was happy with her position and duties to him. If she had simply spoken to him first before letting her emotions run away with her, perhaps he would have allowed her to leave with his blessing, maybe even granted her safe passage back to the village. She did not forget his kindness, but she also worried what it would mean if her request was denied. Then she really would be a prisoner, and any illusion of kinship she might have had with the Moon People would be gone.

For the time being she contented herself with the knowledge that it was a question she did not yet need to ask. When she woke up the following morning her temper had calmed, and she remembered again all of the things that had compelled her to stay in the first place. The ways of the Moon People would take some getting used to, but she was willing to indulge her unease for a while longer yet.

Erech and Nathar were in good spirits in the days following their fight. Both young males had cooled off, and they treated one another with respectful, if curt, behaviour. Netya wondered whether there might have been great wisdom in Khelt's decision to pit them against one another after all. She did not know what traditions they had gone through when they became men, but she recalled how it was only after lying with Khelt that she had felt truly like she had become a grown woman. Perhaps for the young men their fight had held similar significance. The first marked event of their adulthood.

The only thing Netya continued to regret about that night was the way she had spoken to Adel. Now more than ever she feared catching a glimpse of the den mother, especially when she was on her own. She bathed and conducted her private activities as quickly as possible when she was alone, afraid that at any moment Adel might appear to corner her once more.

Thankfully her moments of unease were offset by the pleasures she experienced when Khelt called her to his den in the evenings. Those nights alone would have been enough to convince her to stay, and when she lay in the alpha's furs in the afterglow, her body warm and quivering, she wondered how she could ever leave.

Khelt did not call upon her every evening, but her visits to his den were both frequent enough to keep her satisfied and yet far enough apart to leave her wanting more. Just as he had said, her discomfort lessened each time until she no longer felt any pain at all once he had made her ready for him. He took her hard and often when she was in his bed, but never in a way that hurt her, at least not in the heat of the moment. She was often left sore and sometimes a little tender the following mornings, but if he was ever too rough with her in the midst of their lovemaking he would stop and allow her to recover before continuing. It seemed that in his heart he longed to ravish her with all the strength and passion his body could muster, and yet nothing dulled that passion faster than the knowledge that it was causing her discomfort. He read it in her expression and the cadence of her cries before she could even give voice to it, and then he would stop, his heavy frame heaving atop hers as he rekindled his desire, exploring her body with his hands and mouth until she was ready again.

After he had finished he would often fall asleep with an arm around her, a hand stroking her belly as she felt his essence lingering there. She wondered how long it would take before his seed took root and she began carrying his child. It was another thought so strange to Netya that she did not yet know how to feel about it. She had assumed she would become a mother some day, but that day had existed in a distant future along with all the other mysteries of womanhood. It still did, she reminded herself. It would be many more months, perhaps years according to Fern, before the alpha succeeded in siring an heir with her. It was believed that Netya's kind bore children more readily than the females of the Moon People, but those beliefs seemed to be drawn from old tales of long-dead ancestors, or whispers passed from pack to pack until nobody could remember exactly where or when they had first been told.

Netya did not concern herself with it for the time being. There were many more things she was eager to busy herself with, and each passing day drew them a little closer to fruition.

Learning the language of the Moon People was first among her concerns. Before Fern and the others rose in the early day she made a habit of always listening to the conversations going on around her, paying attention to everything the elders and mothers who shared the morning hours with her said.

It seemed a hopeless task at first, but with Fern's help she began to add a few new words to the list of things she understood, keeping her ears open for

the sounds she recognised. Before long she could understand more clearly when a topic was focused on cooking, or hunting, or a specific member of the pack. The details of each discussion were still a mystery to her, but it brought Netya a reassuring feeling of accomplishment every time she picked up on a word she had not recognised the day before.

When she was not in Khelt's bed or warming his lap by the fire she tried her best to be useful to the pack in other ways. It was difficult, especially when most of them could not understand her. She suspected the elders who woke early understood far more of her words than most, but they purposefully ignored her whenever she attempted to help them with their cooking or mending of clothes.

The only person who seemed genuinely grateful for her help was one of the men in charge of tending the few birds the pack kept. It was clear the Moon People had little to no experience in animal husbandry. Even the enclosure for the birds was nothing more than a cave with a row of poorly made wooden stakes hammered into the ground across the entrance, which the animals routinely found their way out of.

Netya showed the animal keeper how to handle his flock so that they would not be agitated by his grasp, and how to bind the wooden barrier more securely in place in a way that would leave the twine less open to being picked at by stray beaks and claws.

It was a small gesture that took no more than a morning, but the man was so thankful that Netya had learned several new words for gratitude by the time he had finished singing her praises. She went away that afternoon with a bowl full of fresh eggs, and it took her a great deal of effort to keep from smiling when she saw the elders staring enviously at her gift.

The small chores here and there helped her to feel at least a little useful in some way, but it was her duties to Khelt that filled Netya with the greatest satisfaction. She began to appreciate just how much of an honour it was to be so highly favoured by him. The wistful glances of the other females followed her every time she headed up the slope to his den, and, though she was still not treated with much warmth and good cheer, a place was always made for her when she came to eat with the others, and she was provided with food and fresh clothing without even having to ask for it.

In return, she made sure she lived to please the alpha. She had never imagined she could derive so much satisfaction from serving a person. It was a strange combination of his natural authority and presence combined with

the knowledge of what he had given her, and continued to give her, that no other person ever had. As long as he desired her as his concubine, she felt that a purpose in life had finally been made clear to her.

It was with these thoughts, and in a state of great concern, that she went to speak with Fern when it finally came time for her to bleed that month. No sooner had she found a soft binding of wool to slip into place between her legs than she realised what it would mean for her role as the alpha's consort.

"Why does it worry you?" the other girl said as she wrung out her drying hair on the opposite side of the tent. "You cannot have expected to be carrying his child already."

"I know, Fern, but what will I do when he next calls me to his bed? Must I deny him until I am ready again? I will feel useless!"

"There is more than one way to please a male, you know."

Netya squinted at her. "How?"

Fern grinned, as she was apt to when preparing to tease Netya's innocence. "Can you think of nothing at all?"

"Oh, will you please just tell me?! The alpha may send for me at any moment, and I do not want to disappoint him."

"It is early in the day still, relax. You have plenty of time. Think of what the alpha does to please you and himself before you make love."

Netya sat down on the furs and tried to think, imagining what she might do if she were Fern. "He likes to touch me, and kiss my body." Her cheeks warmed. She was still unused to discussing these things as openly as the Moon People did. "Should I do the same for him?"

"You are learning!" Fern nodded and sat down with a smile. "But that is not enough to satisfy most men. They long to feel the warmth of entering you, so you must give it to him in other ways. Take him inside your body in the other places he can reach, and allow him to find his pleasure there."

"Will that work? Will he still be able to sire his heir that way?"

Fern shook her head. "There is only one way for his essence to find that place inside you. But I do not think he will mind once you offer him the alternatives."

"Are you sure? His only reason for bringing me here was that I might bear him a child."

"Oh, I am sure." Fern's grin broadened. "He may be the alpha, but he is still a man, and most men are not thinking of children when they take women to their beds. Many pack leaders keep concubines for pleasure alone."

When Netya thought about it, it made sense, and she felt foolish for assuming Khelt's interest in her lay solely in her ability to bear him a child. He clearly felt pleasure just as intense as hers during their nights together.

"Was he without the company of a female for long, before he chose me?" she asked.

Fern hesitated, almost slipping into her evasive manner again, but she had become comfortable enough with Netya over the past few weeks not to let it stifle her too much. "It has been several years, yes," she said. "When Khelt was younger he took many females to his bed. I was not yet of age then, but the older girls vied for his attention often. That was before he became alpha, when his father still lived."

"Why did he stop?"

This time Fern really did seem uncomfortable. She chewed her lip, lowering her voice, as if afraid that someone might have their ear to the tent wall outside. "You must never speak to him of this. The alpha is better than most men at keeping his temper, but there is one thing that angers him greatly. He will not ever speak of it to the pack."

"What is it?" Netya pried, her curiosity prickling along with a mounting sense of unease. "I would not want to bring such a matter up unintentionally."

"He stopped when he learned he was to be mated to a female from a rival pack. They said she was young, but wise beyond her years, and greatly gifted in the ways of the spirits. She was to be our den mother, and it has long been tradition for the alpha and den mother to mate."

Netya recalled the night Erech and Nathar had fought, and a chill went through her. "She was Adel?"

"Yes," Fern whispered. "Her pack had fought ours for many years, but they started to grow weak, losing many of their warriors in battle with your people. They offered Adel to us as the greatest gift they could give, hoping to bond our packs together as allies rather than enemies. She and Khelt would have been mated, but she refused to submit to him as her superior. Something happened between them. I do not know what, but it was a disagreement that left three of our brothers and sisters dead after a confrontation with your people. From that day on, the two have hated one another."

"I remember," Netya said, fascinated. She recalled that day, too, but from quite a different perspective. It must have been almost eight years past, when she was still a girl. The men had returned home boasting of three new skulls to line their wall, the most they had ever taken, and the entire village had

celebrated the victory for several days thereafter. It had been a further two years before anyone caught a glimpse of the Moon People again. Netya now felt ashamed that she had cheered for the victorious warriors along with the other girls, happy in the knowledge that more of the monsters had been slain.

"Had the alpha taken a different mate at that point it would have gone against all of our traditions," Fern continued. "He would have greatly shamed Adel and her pack, and called his own authority into question. So instead he refused to claim any female, and he has not taken another woman to his bed ever since."

Netya nodded slowly. "And this is why he chose me, because he has no obligation to make me his mate?"

"I think so, yes. Even a consort from our own pack would cause upset. He would be seen to favour someone else over the den mother. But as an outsider, you are not in competition with any of the other females. In truth, I think his choice to take you was very wise. None of our customs account for what the alpha has done, and so there is no offence to be taken. He will have his heir without making enemies of Adel's old pack again in the process."

"I would not be so sure of that," Netya said. "Adel has not looked kindly on me once since I arrived."

"It is strange." Fern frowned. "She cares as little for the alpha as he does for her. I would not have thought she would be offended by him choosing someone else."

"I will try my best to stay out of her way, all the same. And thank you for telling me of this, Fern. I think I understand the alpha a little better now."

Fern smiled. "It is often wise for those of our rank to stay out of the affairs of those in power. We have our place, as do they."

Netya brightened up, glad to leave such complicated matters where they belonged. "Now explain to me again," she said. "What are these other ways in which I might please the alpha?"

In the days following his decision to take Netya from her village, Khelt had feared he'd made a grave mistake. Caspian's counsel left him feeling a blind fool, as it so often did, and the two days he had spent anxiously patrolling the edge of the Sun People's territory for any sign of pursuit had left him ragged and exhausted. Only after fearing he might collapse from exertion had he returned to his pack. Taking such matters upon himself and driving his body to the brink of endurance always had a way of calming the alpha. He often thought that, should he one day die in battle, he would gladly accept such a fate if only he could meet it knowing he had fought until his last shred of energy left him.

It was in the moments of doubt that he felt truly uncomfortable. Doubt was not prey that could be hunted down and trapped, nor a foe that could be slain through speed and strength. It threatened everything he had to be to his pack. He was their leader, their guide, their monolith who would weather every storm and bear the weight of a hundred burdens on their behalf. Through him they were strong, and if he were to falter, so would they.

He missed the simple pleasures of life. The days of his youth when he would run for miles trying to reach the mountains in the distance, always getting close, but never managing to climb them for himself. The nights when he would seek out a pretty girl and feel her writhe beneath him in the furs as he slaked his desire.

The days of my youth, he thought with a snort of amusement as he leaned back against his throne, cracking another nut between his fingers and dropping the shell back into the bowl. He was in his prime. Older men than he had yet to even find mates and settle into their roles within the pack. He was not a man to lament his position. The pack came before all else, and their strength and happiness was his own.

At first he had been concerned, fearing the Sun People might finally brave the open plains to reclaim their lost daughter. Their tracking skills were poor, and they could not follow scents like wolves, but they were resourceful in other ways.

Still, as the days passed his worries diminished. The Sun People had never come before, and they would not come this time. He regretted the brashness

of his decision, but it seemed he had not been punished for it this time.

Perhaps he had even done the girl Netya a kindness. Her outburst the night he returned had been worrying, but since then she seemed to have taken to pack life readily. It was possible her life among her own people had been unhappy, or perhaps she was simply still infatuated with him, as young females were apt to be with the first man to claim their womanhood.

He was fond of her. Netya's keen spirit and honesty were admirable traits in a female, and he wondered whether she might have the makings of more than just a simple concubine as she grew older. Besides which, she was pretty and eager, and he took great pleasure in claiming her long and hard to ease the tensions of the day. Like a lost keepsake found again after many years, he had not realised how much he missed having the company of a female until he had taken one to his bed again.

He was already stirring in anticipation, a subtle tension building in his lower body as he waited for his concubine to arrive. He might enjoy her more than once this evening. He was not weary, and the night was young, with little else to occupy his attention. He smiled at the thought of leaving her panting and limp with exhaustion, her body glossed with perspiration after he was finished. It felt good to leave a female so thoroughly satisfied. Yet another of his duties as alpha well done.

When Netya peeked in through the hanging drape he beckoned her over without a word, smiling as he allowed the girl to straddle his lap and twine her hands around the back of his neck. For one who had been untouched mere weeks before, she was taking to the ways of seduction well. That would be Fern's doing, no doubt. Putting the two of them together had been a good decision.

He lifted a nut to her mouth and allowed her to take it between her teeth, brushing his thumb across her soft lips gently, his gaze transfixed by them. "You are eager tonight," he said.

"I am always eager to please you, my alpha." She shifted a little in his lap, pressing against the growing swell beneath his kilt.

"You recite those words like a pup learning her first manners." Khelt smiled. "But it would be a lie to say I do not still enjoy hearing them." He pulled her into a kiss suddenly, dragging her smaller body up against his chest as he sighed with pleasure, losing himself in the blissful taste of her.

Netya's scent sometimes clung in his wolf's nostrils when he made the change shortly after coupling with the girl, and it gave rise to a feral hunger in his chest that left him longing to rush straight back to the den and mount her all over again. Had he been a lesser man, the sort of barbarian Netya had first taken him for, like the alphas of the wild cave packs, his wolf might have gathered half a dozen concubines to him and spent every evening rutting in the heat of a warm den. It was certainly a thought that appealed to his wilder side. Pleasure, comfort, and females with which to satiate his every desire. The longings of wolves.

When he broke the kiss Netya was already gasping for breath. His manhood twitched with pleasure. He exhausted the girl so easily.

"I hope I do not tire you too soon," he said. "Because I do not intend to let you sleep until this night is old."

Netya grinned, letting her palms slip from the back of his neck to rub up and down the alpha's bare chest. "I will try my best, my alpha, but Fern has told me I must please you in different ways this evening."

"She presumes to know how her alpha desires his pleasure now?"

"She did not mean any disrespect by it. The next days will be my woman's time, so I cannot lie with you as normal."

Khelt noted the anxiety creeping into her voice as she spoke, and the nervous look in her eyes. As much as she tried to embrace her new duties as his concubine, there was still much of the nervous young girl about her. His heart sank a little, but the steely restraint of his alpha returned to quash the desire that had built in his loins.

"Of course," he said. "I should have known it was coming by your scent. You may return to your own tent, then. I will not call on you until you are ready once more."

"I am still willing," Netya replied. "But as I said, I would please you in other ways."

There was something about her response that stirred the desire in Khelt back to life. The way she had said it was not exactly impertinent, but most other respectful females would have obeyed his order easily without trying to persuade him otherwise. Fern's influence again, no doubt. Or perhaps just another natural difference between the etiquette of her people and his. Still, whether she realised she had been provocative or not, it nudged Khelt's desire to assert his male dominance once again.

"Will you now?" he said. "Has my concubine become so talented already?" "I know only what Fern has taught me this afternoon." Netya flushed and averted her eyes from him. "But I am eager to try."

Khelt looked at her for a moment longer, then allowed his desire to take hold in full. He pulled Netya into another tight kiss, before dragging her gown off her shoulders to leave the girl naked save for her moccasins. He cupped and squeezed her breasts, drawing each nub to a hard point with his teeth and tongue as he breathed in her scent, relishing his concubine's small noises of pleasure as he explored the softness of her bare skin.

The girl was usually so passive, allowing him to take charge and guide their lovemaking, which suited him perfectly, but this time he felt her hands caressing him back in response. To Khelt's surprise it only spurred him on more, his pulse quickening as her fingers moved lower toward his hips. When she began to leave small, tentative kisses on his chest that strayed gradually downwards, he eased her back and unfastened his kilt, allowing the tension between his legs to spring free.

"To your knees," he growled as he leaned forward to tug at her earlobe with his teeth. "And show me what you have learned."

Netya slid out of his lap, nervous fingers finding their way to his manhood as she knelt at the foot of his throne. He longed to take her as he wished, but for now he would restrain himself to a slower pleasure. The girl's inexperience showed, but he was patient, and when the warmth of her mouth engulfed him he leaned back with a groan of satisfaction, twining her braid around his hand as he cupped the top of her head. His shaft twitched and strained in her mouth, letting her know when her tongue did the things that pleased him most.

If anything Netya was too eager, or Fern had instructed her too well, and several times she ended up short of breath and coughing as she attempted to take more of him than she was yet able. Still, it made Khelt's body stir with craving to imagine the pleasures the girl might bring him once she had gathered more experience.

He fought the building urge to drive himself as deep as he desired, encouraging Netya instead to please him with her hands while her mouth caressed that most sensitive point of his manhood. Perhaps he would not be able to take his concubine many times in the way he had first envisioned that evening, but the night could be spent in other pleasurable ways. He was no longer even thinking of his intent to sire an heir with her by the time his lower body surged with pleasure, his hand tightening in her hair as he reined in the throes of pleasure that gripped his muscles. He grit his teeth with a heavy groan, perspiration beading on his forehead as Netya took his essence

into her mouth, fighting the urge to buck as he allowed the girl to take her time.

With his initial lust satiated, but his energy far from spent, Khelt took her to his bed, allowing the last of the light to fade outside as minute after minute slipped by. He lost himself in the pleasure of discovering everything his concubine had begun to learn, testing her body's limits and easing them further as he explored all but the one entrance that was forbidden to him. The hours of slow, gentle pacing intermingled with her cries and his own growls of release, driving all other concerns from his mind. He was bothered by not a single unwelcome doubt until at long last, with the fire burning low, he and Netya collapsed against the furs in a tangle of damp skin and soaked hair.

She fell asleep immediately, her body cupped into the curve of his own as he looked down at the exhausted girl with a smile. He did not even bother to clean the oils they had used and the remnants of their lovemaking from the bed before joining her in unconsciousness, wondering how he had ever managed to sleep soundly without such a willing young female to drive the toils of leadership from his mind.

Khelt awoke to rays of morning sunlight creeping across the walls of his den, filtering in through the gaps in the cave roof to bring a warm brightness to the chamber. He enjoyed these summer months when he could leave the openings uncovered. Winter was a dark and lonely time, and he would have gladly slept huddled with the others in their communal shelters when it came time for the pack to retreat from the harsh weather. Propriety, however, kept the alpha isolated to face the long winter nights on his own.

But this season he might have a warm body to share his furs for the first time in years. He watched Netya as she slept, bringing his lips to within an inch of her shoulder, then hesitating. He would allow her to sleep a while longer yet.

Climbing over his concubine as gingerly as he could, he slipped out of the bed and went to wash, bathing the scent of her from his body reluctantly. He longed to breathe it in again when he took the shape of his wolf and opened his senses to their full breadth, but that was a distraction unbecoming of an alpha. Netya would still be here when he returned. A well-earned reward for the duties of the day.

He stepped out of the pool and wrung out his mane of long hair, flicking it back out of his eyes as he blew the dim coals of the fire back to life and fed

them fresh kindling. The sound of footsteps approached from the cave's entrance, and a moment later the drapes parted.

Khelt waved a hand over his shoulder in greeting. There was only one person who would walk into his den at this hour without invitation.

"What news this morning?" he said as Caspian sauntered into the den, a bowl of nut meal cupped in one hand as he picked at it with a flat piece of wood for an eating utensil.

"Brae claims she saw omens of Vaya's herd moving into the forests in her dreams last night. Vaya says it will not happen, but the others trust the word of a seer over hers. She is preparing for a hunt now, though she is not pleased about it."

"Then perhaps she is not as confident in her tracking as she claims," Khelt said, rising to his feet to dress as Caspian perched on the edge of the table. "If she knows where the herd are moving she should stay put and prove Brae wrong. Then she will have a seer to add to the list of rivals she has bested."

Caspian gave him a wry look. "You joke, but you know that is how she will see it."

"As long as she keeps bringing back fresh kill she may see the whole world as her rival for all I care. I worry more over half my young hunters rushing off at the whims of a seer."

"Brae is right more often than she is not."

Khelt growled under his breath as he put on his kilt and fastened the leather tie to tighten it around his waist. "Let me trust what I can touch and scent with my own body over what the spirits whisper into my dreams."

Caspian glanced over at Netya as she stirred, his expression thoughtful. "Like your new favourite princess?"

"You haven't called a girl that in years," Khelt snorted.

"Not since you had a fresh female to catch your attention every other week."

Khelt looked to his friend and smiled, then returned his gaze to Netya. They were conversing in their own tongue, but he hoped she was still asleep regardless. "I think she has taken to our pack well," he said, fishing for affirmation. He had not told Caspian of the girl's emotional state the night Erech and Nathar fought.

"Better than I could have hoped, for sure."

Khelt sighed. There was that unspoken *but* in Caspian's tone, one he was all too familiar with. "I know bringing her here was unwise, but it has all been

for the better, has it not?"

"Will you forbid her from leaving?"

"She does not wish to leave. She is content here. I have asked her often."

"And I believe that," Caspian said, "but have you not listened to the way she speaks of her home with Fern? It does not sound to me like she views it as a place she will never return to."

"You dwell too much on these things. What does it matter how she talks if she is content? If she wishes to return one day, then I will —" He hesitated.

"Will you let her go?"

Khelt's brow knotted in contemplation. The bestial part of him deep inside cursed Caspian's wisdom. "Yes," he muttered at last. It was not something he would have admitted to any other man. "She is a sweet girl, regardless of the people she comes from. I would not keep her captive against her will."

"Then you should tell her. Better she know now than spend all her days wondering. It may even make her all the more willing to stay."

"Why do you think that?"

Caspian shrugged. "Some things lose their hold over us once they are no longer forbidden. Perhaps simply knowing that she may leave will be enough for her."

Khelt sighed and sat down at the table, resting his chin atop his knuckles as he watched Netya. "You should have been alpha," he said, only in half-jest. "I have no head for these things."

"Just as I have no stomach to hold your title. It was never my path to lead our people."

"And yet the ancestors gifted you with the wisdom for it." He clapped a hand on Caspian's shoulder. "I will tell Netya she is free to leave. Then will you take her to help with Vaya's preparations? I would like for her to start learning the ways of the hunt."

"Of course." Caspian smiled. There was no further lecture this time. He knew when to leave Khelt to figure the rest out by himself, and there was certainly much for the alpha to puzzle over. The deep tug in his soul longed for nothing more than pleasurable comfort from the female in his bed, content in the knowledge that she was happy and willing. That she might wish to leave one day was a distant and pointless thought, or so the more primal part of him believed, but a strong leader had to face unsettling truths.

If he allowed Netya to leave, he would be handing the location of his pack directly to his enemies. He wanted to believe the girl would keep it a secret,

but how could he ever be sure it would not slip out some day, or be forced from her against her will? The Sun People could be ruthless, and perhaps, with the location of a wolf pack's den in their hands, they could muster enough warriors to finally brave the journey across the open plains.

Worse, if his pack ever learned that Netya was to go free, they might kill her themselves. How could he defend such a decision to the people he was entrusted to protect?

He pressed a palm to his forehead, already tired. Caspian had been more right than he knew. Bringing the girl here had been a grave mistake.

It had surprised Netya to be woken with such news from the alpha. She thought she would have been pleased to hear that he had no intention of keeping her prisoner, but instead she left his den that morning with a strange hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"But know this, Netya," he had said, his expression grave, a sadness in his eyes that she had never before seen. "If the day does come that you choose to leave our pack, you may never again return. And you may speak of this to no one, not even Fern. For your own sake as much as mine."

She had only nodded in response, Khelt's strange manner putting her on edge. She'd not considered that returning to her village might mean she never saw the Moon People again. It was not a decision she wanted to make. Living here with the pack, never seeing Layon or her sisters again... Her heart ached terribly to think of it; the endless future stretching out before her, devoid of anything she had come to know and hold dear.

And yet, the alternative seemed a quiet, grey life. If she returned to the village she would never again wake to the beautiful sight of the sun spilling across the plains for miles around. She would not ride on the backs of wolves, or lie with an alpha, or learn the rest of the mysteries the Moon People held. She would become Layon's woman, bear his children, and live the simple, contented life that had always been expected of her. A fine life, surely. But a life that denied the part of her that had been awoken the moment she touched the skull on the farm wall.

"At least the choice is yours now," Caspian said, as if reading her thoughts. "I think I preferred it when it was not," she replied.

"You may think differently in time, and time is something you have plenty of. Make your choice when you are ready." He lowered his voice as they approached the middle of the camp, where a small gathering had risen early to prepare for the coming hunt. "And as Khelt said, keep it to yourself." "I will."

"Good. Vaya is gathering her hunters to track the herd again. I am sure they would appreciate your help."

Caspian left her among the others, retreating further up the outcrop to see to his own business. Netya wondered what exactly the intriguing male busied

himself with all day. Though he was clearly as strong and capable as any man, he did not seem to hold rank as a hunter. She suspected he had the wits of a seer, but they were all women, and Caspian's intelligence seemed more practical than the mysterious spiritual understandings of Adel's caste.

One of the hunters took notice of her, pausing as he walked by, and asked a question in his own language. Netya gave him an uncertain smile and said the word she thought meant "help". The hunter looked her up and down, and she repeated the word again. He nodded, hefting a stack of freshly cut wooden javelins off his shoulder and handing three of them to her.

"Help," he said, and pointed in the direction of another man who was whittling down more of the throwing spears to sharp points.

Netya was thankful for the work. It made her forget her worries as she sunk once again into the satisfying buzz of pack life. She had as long as she needed to make her decision. Who knew, perhaps one day it would not be as permanent as Khelt thought. For now she was excited to be assisting in the preparations for the hunt.

Distantly, it occurred to her that this would never have been the work of a woman back among her own people.

* * *

Brae was a fool. She had known the others would listen to her, hadn't she? And the sleepless nights Vaya had spent stalking the new herd, shepherding it back into their territory, orchestrating kill after kill, they meant nothing in the eyes of a *seer*, did they? Curse the spirits and their ways.

Even the tickle of apprehension Vaya felt at such blasphemous thoughts was not enough to still her temper. She had earned more than this. If she had been born a man the others would not have been so quick to heed Brae's vision, she considered bitterly. How many times did she have to prove herself? Even her last victory, when she had finally squashed Tal's arrogant attitude for good, had been soured by the arrival of the girl from the Sun People. Why was a woman who existed to be the alpha's plaything more interesting than a hunter who brought such glory to her pack?

Vaya glowered as she tested one of the freshly fire-hardened javelins, hefting it in her hand. She was not fond of these weapons either, but she understood that they could sometimes secure a kill where claws and fangs would fail. She would dirty her hunt with the weapons of the Sun People if it meant a greater chance at victory.

"What good will this one do? It is less straight than the last," she said, driving the javelin into the ground and snapping it in half. The whittler glared at her, but she held his gaze, daring him to disagree.

The burn in her muscles from the sudden exertion felt good. She yanked the broken javelin out of the dirt and tossed both parts into the fire, reaching for the next one.

Preparations that would normally have stirred excitement in Vaya only frustrated her further that morning. She had been woken early by the others, and every little mishap vexed her twice as much as usual. Someone had left one of the carrying poles in the mud down by the river. Several of the javelins had not been cleaned. The runners out watching the herd were late. And now — now the concubine girl was bumbling about among her hunters, barely even able to carry the stack of javelins she held.

"What is she doing?" Vaya growled.

"I think she wants to help," Tal said from beside her. "It looks like Caspian sent her down. You want to argue with him about it?"

"We don't have time for that girl to be getting in our way."

"Not if Brae's right, no," Tal mused, and Vaya shot him a warning look, cuffing her former superior across the back of the head. She heard the others chuckling. They thought it was funny.

"She isn't, and the sooner we get out there to prove it the sooner we can be back. Then we can plan a proper hunt, and you'll watch your tongue if you want to be included in it." Vaya turned to the others. "That goes for all of you! From now on my hunts only take the best. Wolves I can rely on. My eyes will be on those of you who don't carry your weight today."

That silenced most of them, but the amused mutterings that lingered on in the background did nothing to improve Vaya's temper. She went back to checking over the supplies, trying to focus on something practical. While the bulk of the pack hunted as wolves, they still required a handful of bearers to carry the tools they needed. Poles for carrying fresh kill, weapons for when fangs would not suffice, knives and packs in case they brought down a beast that required butchering in the field, and sometimes extra food and water if the hunt was expected to last for many days.

She began organising the supplies into bundles for each of her bearers. They would go to the stronger, stockier men, those who lacked the speed of her wolf runners but made up for it in endurance. Those lightest on their feet would play the role of scouts and chasers, seeking out their prey and

shepherding it in for them, but rarely committing to the kill themselves. It was the high hunters, those like Vaya herself, who matched strength, speed, stamina, and cunning, who held the honour of claiming kills.

All three roles were equally important in the hunt, but there was only one that claimed the greatest prize at the end of it. When Vaya was younger than most she had been a fast chaser, and for several years she had stood by enviously as the high hunters made their kills, sharing in their glory with the other men while she and the rest of the apprentices watched from the sidelines. Running was what she had been good at, but she wanted more. She ran every day until her wolf was ready to collapse from exhaustion, pushing herself beyond what was required of a chaser. Day by day she forced her body to grow strong, until she began to realise that her strength had surpassed that of any other female her age, matching even that of some males.

After a hunt failed, the chasers were expected to return to the hunt leader while a new plan was devised, either to try again or to cut their losses and return home empty handed. One day, though, Vaya had ignored the call to come back. They had been hunting horses. Fast and dangerous beasts. They were always a risky hunt, and this particular drove had outpaced the pack easily as soon as they caught wind of the wolves stalking them, streaming down the valley past Vaya and her fellow chasers. It was then that she had seen her opportunity. The valley hemmed the drove in on both sides, leaving them only two ways to run, one of which was blocked off by the other hunters.

Taking her chance, she had darted directly into the flank of the group of animals, pouncing on the nearest one and forcing it to the ground in a tangle of kicking legs. It was a move that could very easily have left her trampled, but she had judged her target carefully. The colt she brought down was far enough ahead of the back stragglers that they had time to see what was happening, their stampede faltering and becoming confused as they seemed to face predators on both sides.

The minute of hesitation left several of the animals lagging behind their main group, giving Vaya time to get out of the way before they barrelled on past her, but not before the rest of the hunters caught up. They had brought down several of the horses that day, and a failed hunt was transformed into a great victory within the blink of an eye. That night she sat with the high hunters around their fire as they camped out in the wilderness, sharing in their meal and their tales of victory. That night she was no longer an

apprentice, no longer a female, only a victorious hunter. One of the men. Her place had never before felt so right in the world.

"You should give her some guidance," Tal said, distracting Vaya from her work as he gestured at Netya. "She will break those javelins if she is not careful."

The concubine girl was trying her best to follow the lead of the others, lining up the javelins point-down in the ground to await her inspection. Except the stupid girl was doing it with the ones that were still freshly whittled, their tips not yet hardened to sharp points in the fire.

"You!" Vaya exclaimed, rising to her feet suddenly as she snatched the javelin Netya had been about to stab into the ground out of her hands. "These aren't ready! You will break the tips before they even have a chance to pierce an animal's hide." She glared at the girl, shoving the point of the javelin under her nose.

Netya only stared back like a startled hare frozen in panic. Vaya growled under her breath, cursing the stupid female's lack of understanding.

"If you break any of these," she continued, tapping the point of the javelin irritably, "then I will break something of yours as well." She threw the unfinished javelin back into the pile, turning back to her own work and realising that she had completely lost track of which bundles she had set aside for which bearer.

She almost lashed out at Tal when he tapped her on the shoulder again, flashing the male a look that dared him to waste any more of her time. Tal only gestured in Netya's direction, and Vaya watched incredulously as the girl picked up yet another unfinished javelin and shoved it into the dirt alongside the others.

The sheer insolence was enough to make her boiling anger spill over. The stupid girl was defying her and threatening to sabotage her hunt in the process.

She did not even pause to take the javelin from her this time. In an instant Vaya was on her feet, heels thudding into the dirt as she crossed the distance between them, spinning Netya around by the shoulder and drawing back her hand to strike the girl across the face with the back of her knuckles, putting as much force into the blow as she could muster.

A vicious sense of satisfaction filled Vaya as she felt the girl's nose crack beneath her fist, blood streaming down her pretty face as she fell to the ground with a cry of agony. She wanted to hit her again, but she allowed the

red haze of anger to simmer, releasing it in a long breath as she gazed down at Netya with a look of contempt. Perhaps that would knock some sense into her. A well-earned punishment. She had given the alpha's plaything no more than she was due.

The assembled hunters grew quiet. Only Fern reacted to what had happened, hurrying to Netya's side and crouching down to try and pry the wide-eyed girl's hands away from her bloodied face.

"Leave her," Vaya said. "I want her to know I make no idle threats."

"You are a fool, Vaya!" Fern exclaimed, glaring up at her. "She knows as little of our tongue as you do of hers! Did you think to make her understand what she did wrong before hitting her?!"

Vaya curled her lip. "Enough from you, Fern. She should not be trying to help us if she understands so little. Let her learn her lesson, and be thankful it was not worse."

Fern rose to her feet, and the indignation in her eyes rekindled the warrior's fire in Vaya's chest. She would be all too glad to assert her authority again.

"She is not like us," Fern said. "The Sun People do not heal their wounds in a day."

"Good. Then perhaps she will have a long reminder to stay in the alpha's den where she belongs." Vaya took a step forward, baring her teeth as she loomed over the smaller female. "Go back to tending your own duties, Fern," she said, then lowered her voice to a hiss. "Or are you so desperate now that you'd make a family out of runts like her?"

Vaya's barbed words had exactly the effect she'd been fishing for. Fern's eyes widened for a split second, then flashed with the predatory sheen of her wolf rising to the surface.

"Fern." Caspian's gentle voice was so soft Vaya barely heard it, but in an instant it stilled the anger within her, and her opponent's eyes dimmed, the wolf vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

Caspian strode toward them, taking in everything he needed to see in the time it took him to reach Netya's side. He helped the shaking girl to her feet and said a few words in the Sun People's tongue, before fixing his eyes on Vaya.

"Enough of this," he said. "You have a hunt to lead."

"I have a fool chaser to discipline for her insolence," Vaya growled, clinging on to her anger, though it was tinged with apprehension now.

Caspian's expression darkened, his innocuous tone taking on a more

threatening note as he stepped forward. "Is that so?" He stared her down, standing eye to eye with the huntress.

The wolf within her began to rise to his challenge, then it glimpsed what she had always feared in Caspian. The glint of power in his eyes that mirrored that of the alpha. Something so subtle it was invisible enough to be forgotten, overlooked in just the way Caspian wanted it to be. And just like that, Vaya was reminded that a man who could hide such power was not a foe she could best.

The wolf inside her curled up and hid, and she averted her eyes in submission, staring down at the ground as she backed off. The show of humility would cost her, especially with so many of her hunters watching, but at that moment her anger was subordinate to the relief she felt at no longer having to match Caspian's unblinking gaze.

"Back to the hunt?" he said, as mildly as if the question had been asked as nothing more than a passing curiosity.

"We should leave soon," Vaya replied, directing it more to her hunters than the man standing before her. "We have wasted enough time already." She swallowed her pride, forcing it down into the dark place where her wolf dwelt.

As she packed up the last of the bundles, Vaya looked up as Caspian and Fern led the concubine girl away from the fire. A lick of the anger she had crushed down flickered back to life as she watched Netya's dark braid disappear between the rocks.

Friends and Enemies

Shock, more than anything, dominated Netya's thoughts as Fern and Caspian helped her up the slope, the male and female taking charge of one of her arms each. Her face throbbed with a hot ache, her nose and right eye already swelling up where Vaya had hit her.

Growing up under a protective mother who had already lost much, Netya had never been exposed to the rough and tumble play that had occasionally left the other youngsters with cracked bones and deep bruises, and she was having trouble dealing with the pain that now gripped her. She swayed giddily every few steps, her head dipping forward as if dragged down by the weight of her swelling face. Blood dripped freely from her nose, and every time she winced it only made the discomfort worse.

"Why would she do that?" Netya said numbly, her words slurred by the intense weight that seemed to press down on her nose. "What... What did I do?"

Fern looked to Caspian anxiously, and he sighed.

"I am sure she had a reason," the male said. "I gather your people are much less vicious with their reprimands?"

"Nobody ever hit me," Netya replied.

"How quickly will you heal from this?" Fern said, sounding by far the most concerned of the three. "Will you heal from this?"

Netya bobbed her head gingerly. "I should. Maybe it will take a few days? A week? I do not know." She winced again, and resolved to try and move her head as little as possible.

"A week," Fern fretted, looking again to Caspian. "We should have the seers look at her. Her people are so fragile."

"I am not sure how much they would help," he replied. "They are not used to healing bodies that take so long to heal themselves."

"But what if she becomes worse? Can the Sun People not lie for weeks with a wound before it kills them?"

"It's not that bad," Netya tried to reassure her friend, warmed by her concern. "But it hurts. Perhaps there is something for the pain?"

"Of course! Wait with Caspian, I will go to the seers and ask for their strongest herbs."

Before Netya could respond Fern had dashed off, leaving her with the male as he walked her to one of the small tents nestled out of the way on the side of the outcrop, and sat her down inside. She did not think it was Caspian's own dwelling, but it was quiet and comfortable, and she was glad to be off her shaky feet.

"Here, let me look," he said, tilting her head toward him gently. She closed her eyes, wondering how much of a mess she looked through the dried blood and tears. She would have preferred Caspian not to see her in such a light, but at that moment she cared little. The comfort of having people nearby who were concerned for her helped to dispel the state of shock Vaya's outburst had left her in.

Her companion filled a bowl from a waterskin and used a corner of his fur cloak to dab the blood from her lips and chin, being careful not to touch the tender areas.

"I will spoil your cloak," she slurred.

"It will wash. The bleeding is starting to slow at least, that is good."

Netya opened her eyes a crack to watch him as he bathed her face clean. As always seemed the case with Caspian, he attended to the task studiously and without comment. For a moment she was saddened not to see Fern's concern mirrored in the male's expression, before she realised that his actions spoke for themselves. He had not often made her feel welcome with grand words and emotions, but Caspian's attitude took simple kindness in its step, as though it was so natural a thing to him that he did not even recognise it.

At least, that was what Netya believed. Perhaps he was simply taking care of his alpha's concubine as he had been instructed, loyally and thoroughly, without any need to express his genuine feelings. But in her heart, she believed he was kind. Distant, perhaps, but a good man through and through.

"Why do your people hate mine so?" she said at last, after several minutes of silence had gone by. She expected an answer similar to the ones she had gotten from her own people when she asked them the same question, but instead Caspian only looked at her sadly.

"Because they are our enemies, just as we are yours. Are we not the monsters who come to steal and kill in the night?"

"Not to me."

"And to me your people are not the wicked tribe who hunt and trap our brethren, fighting them without honour and taking their bones for trophies. And yet, that is how most of us see you. The Sun People of the east forests have been our foes for as long as we can remember."

"But why, if it is not the whole truth?"

Caspian gazed at her, and a flicker of something deeper than stoic compassion appeared in his eyes for an instant. "It is so rare that anyone asks me that question."

"I do not wish to be impertinent."

"At times I wish more females were."

Another moment of silence followed, but this time Netya felt the tension in it keenly. It was another sensation that she had not experienced before, and it confused her greatly. In her mind she thought of invisible sparks popping from a fire, the prickle of the air as thunder neared.

"If I thought we could reach an accord with your people, I would do everything in my power to make it happen," Caspian said eventually.

"What makes you so sure you cannot?"

"There must always be a retribution for each wrong we do to each other. Our sister Cera was killed last winter, and now you have been taken to answer for it. Will your people see us as even? Or must another of us die to avenge your loss?"

"I would rather mourn a loss than seek revenge for it," Netya said.

"But that is not the way of men who lead and fight for their people. Can you tell me, Netya, what your people would do if we were to offer our hand to them in friendship? Would they accept it? Or would they see that we had become desperate? That we were weak, ready to finally bow to them, and ripe for a band of warriors to track down our home and put an end to us once and for all?"

Netya thought of all the times she had heard the men of her village talk about how they would one day slay the last of the Moon People, the fruitless plans that had been made time and again to brave the plains, only to be diffused days later by fear before they could come to fruition. Was it ever worth risking so much on such a quest?

"I do not know," she admitted.

"Nor do I," Caspian said, his voice distant. "And it is an answer we can never risk getting wrong. A death every few years is the price our people have agreed to pay to avoid chancing something far worse. It is a sad truth that many do not see."

It made Netya's heart sink to realise the wisdom in his words. How many small evils people would be willing to tolerate out of fear. Sacrificial lambs to appease a looming threat, a battle that would leave many more dead on both sides were it ever to happen. The kind of fear that could make two clans enemies for generations beyond count. She found herself wishing she had kept her thoughts on matters more fitting of her status.

Caspian looked away and dipped the corner of his cloak back into the bowl of crimsoning water. "And once again I speak of things that should be saved for the ears of precious few. Do not worry yourself, Netya. I did not wish to burden you."

She did not feel burdened. A weight had been placed on her mind, yes, but it had also opened her thoughts to things she had not considered before. A question that had gone unanswered all her life had finally been made clear, and the truth was now so obvious that the world seemed more real because of it. She appreciated the clarity he had given her.

Before she could reassure Caspian, however, Fern returned, and behind her followed Adel.

Netya immediately tensed at the sight of the den mother, fighting the urge to scramble away as the raven-haired seer ducked into the tent and eyed her with a cold gaze.

"The other seers were occupied," Fern said as she sat down and took Netya's arm. "But the den mother was gracious enough to agree to see you."

"Fern told me this was serious," Adel said, clearly unconvinced. "I hope for her sake she has not wasted my time."

Netya averted her eyes, itching with discomfort already. She thought she would rather take another blow from Vaya than spend another minute in the den mother's presence. The memory of the night Erech and Nathar fought was one she had tried her best to forget.

"You are here now, Adel, will you not at least look at the girl?" Caspian said.

The den mother gave him a dark look, but it did not hold Adel's customary amount of contempt. "I will assure you she is not dying, if that news will please the alpha."

"I am sure it will." Caspian nodded, then moved aside as the seer knelt down to examine Netya.

"Stay still, girl. Your nose is broken. If you flinch it will make it worse." Adel gripped her chin with one hand while the other began to pry and prod at the tender area.

Netya grit her teeth, fighting through the pain it caused her, determined not

to let out the sob that was building in her chest. She had already shown enough weakness in the den mother's presence.

"You are fortunate," Adel continued, though she did not seem particularly pleased by Netya's good luck. "The bone does not need correcting. You will still be pretty for the alpha when it heals."

"She will be alright, then?" Fern asked.

"Not if her presence continues inviting such punishments, no." Adel glared at Fern. "But this time? She will recover, yes. Until she draws the ire of another brash hunter."

"Thank you, den mother," Caspian cut in, moving the conversation swiftly on. "We appreciate your wisdom."

That seemed to placate Adel a little. "Her people take some weeks to heal injuries like this fully," she said. "Be gentle with it, and boil these with your food for the pain." From within her gown she took a bundle of dried plant stalks with shrivelled bulbs at the ends and tossed them into Netya's lap. "No more than one each day."

Adel stood and waited, and it took a nudge from Fern to remind Netya that she was being addressed by the most senior member of the pack besides Khelt.

"Thank you, den mother," she mumbled out, though it would take much more than a handful of herbs to make her truly thankful for Adel's presence.

"You must improve that attitude if you do not wish to find yourself on the receiving end of more fists."

"I will try my best," Netya replied.

"Do more than try," Adel said, then she gathered up her gown and swept out of the tent.

"I fear I am beginning to make more enemies than friends here," Netya mused as Fern continued to fret over her.

"It is not your fault," the other girl said. "Vaya has a quick temper, but this was too much."

"It was no more than she would have given anyone else," Caspian observed.

"But Netya is not like us. Oh, I would almost have challenged Vaya myself if you hadn't stepped in!"

"You would not have gained anything by trying to match that temper of hers, and I fear you will have a hard time convincing anyone that she acted out of accord. They already see Netya as different enough. If exceptions are made it will only make it more difficult for people to accept her."
"But—"

"Please, do not cause any more trouble over me," Netya cut in, her head starting to ache from the raised voices as much as the throbbing of her swollen nose.

"Leave Vaya to her own business for now," Caspian said. "I will speak with the alpha about this, but I would hope for all our sakes that nothing comes of it. You do not want to make an enemy of Vaya, either of you."

Fern still looked frustrated, but she bowed her head in deference, and Caspian rose to leave. Netya's eyes strayed after him as he departed, hoping to see him turn back with a reassuring smile or a warm comment. She did not know why it disappointed her so much when he did not.

"Come back to our tent and lie down," Fern said. "You must rest and get well. I will brew these herbs and fetch something for you to eat with them."

Netya tried to protest her friend's kindness, but when she began to wobble again after finding her feet she was glad to have someone there supporting her. She leaned on Fern's arm as they made their way back to the other side of the outcrop, unsure whether to feel warmed or even more unsettled by everything that had transpired that morning.

—14—

Punishment

It took much of Khelt's willpower to keep from dragging Vaya straight back home to face his wrath. When Caspian told him of the incident with Netya he had been concerned, but it was not uncommon for senior pack members to discipline those beneath them. He reminded himself that it was only his place to step in when disputes refused to resolve themselves, and the altercation between his hunter and concubine seemed to have ended as quickly as it began. But his discomfort lingered, and a day of deep consideration about how to tackle the problem of Netya's future instead became one of ongoing worry about the poor girl.

By noon he had given up on trying to still his thoughts. The wolf inside him was restless, and he knew calm solitude would do nothing to quiet it. Against his better judgement, he decided to look in on Netya.

He had expected to find her shaken, perhaps with a fading bruise and a wounded sense of pride, as would have been the case with any other member of his pack. But the sight of her propped up inside Fern's tent, half-unconscious from the mind-fogging effects of Adel's medicine, her face swollen and still trickling drying blood, stirred an anger in his chest that he had not felt in a long time.

Perhaps it was simply his shock at being reminded how poorly her people took to injury, or his natural instinct to protect a wounded young female in need, but no sooner had Fern risen to her feet in surprise than he turned heel and walked straight back out of the tent, taking his wolf form and running to the north edge of the outcrop without stopping to consider what he would do if he caught Vaya's troupe still within eyesight on the plains below.

He let his wolf's hot breath snort from his nostrils as he glared across the landscape, grinding his teeth together as feral thoughts wrestled in his head. The urge to fight, to avenge what was precious to him, boiled beneath Khelt's fur, urging him to take action. But he had not given in to that part of himself for many years, and he was not about to start now, over a female of all things. His strength of will was what set him apart from other males, and as he breathed in the scents of the plains he turned his anger elsewhere.

Ignoring the trail left by Vaya and her hunters, he picked a different direction and leaped down from his perch, ignoring the danger of his path as

he sprang from rock to rock, the descent leaving his muscles warm with strain by the time he reached the grass below. He ran then, heading toward the mountains in the distance. He set his eyes on a snow-capped peak, and said to himself *I will go there*.

It was a promise Khelt had made a hundred times before, and every time he had truly meant it. He would go there. This time. That was his goal, and as a wolf he would cling to it doggedly, unconcerned with pacing himself as the anger beneath his fur lent a reckless energy to his strides.

There were times in his youth when the sun had fallen by the time he finally realised he was never going to reach the peak. Within a few short hours the furious energy pumping through his veins ebbed. When he looked back the outcrop was a tiny black mark in the distance, and yet the mountains seemed just as far away as ever.

He reverted to his human shape then, breathing heavily as he pressed a palm to his brow, perspiration rolling off his chest. He could not reach the peak. There were responsibilities waiting for him.

Now more than ever, the mountains remained firmly beyond his reach.

With his animal impulses burning themselves out inside him, Khelt turned and began walking back in the direction he had come, his head clearing itself enough to make way for the return of reason. He had a long time to think as he made the journey back home on two legs.

The alpha sighed, resigning himself to the worries of how to deal with Vaya when she returned. And deal with her he would, he thought grimly. It was not a simple matter of one pack member disciplining another, and it was his duty to resolve these disputes so that people like Netya did not have to.

Still, he mused, as he ran his fingers through the tall grass around him, he sometimes wished he could run until he finally discovered what lay atop those mountain peaks.

* * *

Vaya decided it was time to return home the very morning after their departure. They had tracked down the herd and the scouts who had been sent to watch it before sunset, miles away from where Brae's vision had told her they would be. It would have been an easy hunt to bring down a few of the beasts during the night, but a pointless and unworthy one. There was no glory to be found in picking off a few tired animals when the camp stores were already well-stocked. The herd was in no danger of straying beyond their

reach any time soon, and instead seemed to be moving even further into the open plains, where tracking them would become easier than ever.

The apprentices were disappointed as always, but she justified her decision by reminding them that it did no good to thin out a fresh herd too quickly and without need. They would continue tracking the animals and return again a week from now, when she had time to organise a hunt on her own terms.

Rolan, a boy on the cusp of manhood, and one of her long-term chasers, approached her the next morning to ask whether he would be included when they returned to hunt properly. Vaya cared little for children, and certainly had no intention of mothering any of her own, but she had warmed to Rolan in the years he had been hunting with her. He was not the fastest chaser, and he was too small to ever become an especially powerful warrior, but she admired the boy's dogged determination regardless of his handicaps. She saw something of herself in him, and he had always treated her with the same respect he showed to the male hunters.

"I was hoping to make my first kill," he confided to her as the others said their farewells to the scouts who would remain behind. "The other hunt leaders will not allow me to try. They think I lack the strength."

"Not all kills are secured through strength," Vaya said. "You have always been a reliable hunter, Rolan. I will make sure you are given your chance next time." The boy beamed at her, and she snorted in amusement, turning him back in the direction of the camp. "Few men make their first kill before coming of age. Once you do, every hunter will want you in their party."

It was not in Vaya's character to make false assurances, and she meant every word. The boy really would become an asset to the high hunters, who were always on the lookout for fresh young apprentices to take under their wing, forging early alliances with the young wolves who might one day take their place. If, of course, Rolan could succeed in proving his worthiness.

She would give him his chance. Succeed or fail, he would bear it on his own shoulders.

They returned to the camp in the afternoon, Vaya along with several of the others arriving first after running ahead as their wolves. The bearers would catch up later that evening, but there was no need to wait for the slower members of the hunt when there was no ceremony to be observed. It would have been easy to bring at least a single animal home to sweeten their arrival, but it satisfied Vaya more not to dignify Brae's visions with a kill. She was

confident enough in her tracking of the herd that she did not need to exert unnecessary effort based on Brae's hunches, and she wanted the rest of the pack to know it.

The focus of the hunt had taken her mind off the incident with Netya, and so it was with surprise that she looked up to see the alpha approaching her shortly after she had sat down at the fire with the others.

"Vaya," he barked, eyeing her with a look that held even more weight than his heavy tone. "To your feet when your alpha addresses you."

She dipped her head in deference, standing up as instructed. "There was no need for us to bring back fresh kill, alpha. The herd is safe and w —"

"This is not about your hunt, though it does not please me to hear you spilled a fellow pack member's blood over a fruitless endeavour."

"I did not."

Khelt took a step closer to her. "Netya is a member of my pack. You will show her the same respect due to any of your sisters."

"She is one of the Sun People," Vaya replied, indignity swelling within her. She feared the alpha's judgement, and rightfully so, but she refused to believe she had acted out of accord.

"Where she came from does not matter. She is one of us now, and you have hurt her badly," Khelt growled.

"I gave her no more than I would have given any disobedient apprentice! None of my hunters would disagree." She was pleased to hear murmurs of assent from those who had been present at the time. The huntress stood firm, lifting her chin as she matched the alpha's gaze. Khelt could be a hard man, but he was fair, and she was clearly in the right.

"You will lead no more hunts for the rest of the season. Tal will have first pick in your place once more."

Vaya stared at him, fists clenching by her sides as her jaw opened in incredulity. "I have earned the right—!"

"Vaya!" he barked, her name snapping from his throat like a crack of thunder. "Know your place. You may begin leading again once the summer ends. I will not stand for this behaviour again. You may have thought you acted justly, but Netya comes from a fragile people. The seers say she will take many weeks to heal from what you did to her."

Vaya could not believe the alpha would side with one of their enemies over her. Must she suffer now because the Sun girl was as weak as a leaf in the breeze? Her chest heaved with anger. It was only Khelt's uncompromising glare that forced her to remain silent. She knew anything she said now would only make her position worse, regardless of how many curses she wanted to scream at the girl who had brought this upon her. She dropped her eyes to the ground, staring at a rock as she quivered with frustration.

A growl rumbled in Khelt's throat, and she quickly remembered her place, cowed by the dominant wolf's primal power over her. She shrank away from him in submission, muttering a quiet "yes alpha" under her breath. He left her to face the silence of her fellow hunters alone.

As she stared into the fire, imagining each crackling stick was another bone in the Sun girl's body, she caught sight of Rolan watching her anxiously from the other side of the blaze.

His coming of age would have been and gone by the time she was permitted to lead a hunt again.

—15— The Summer Fires

Netya's broken nose took longer to heal than she would have liked, and she quickly grew restless. Adel's herbs were very strong, and they turned her waking moments into a hazy experience that left her tired and confused. After a few days she stopped taking them, finding that the pain and swelling had subsided enough for her to cope with it on her own. Once her woman's time had ended for the month she was eager to return to her duties in the alpha's bed, but much to her disappointment he insisted that she rest and recover properly.

"Is it my face?" she asked Fern as they bathed together one morning, touching her bruised eye gingerly as she examined her reflection in the water. "I cannot look very pleasing to him right now."

"You will heal soon. The alpha is only worried about you, I am sure. He must have been, to punish Vaya as he did."

Netya cringed. "I did not want to cause such trouble."

"Oh, Vaya deserved it! She is too proud for her own good."

"I suppose so," Netya conceded. She had to admit, it did bring her a pinch of satisfaction to know that the huntress had been disciplined for hitting her, but at the same time she had not failed to notice the venomous glances Vaya sent her way every time she was within spitting distance.

Thankfully she did not have long to wait before Khelt began calling her back to his den in the evenings. He was far gentler with her, making sure she was never in any discomfort while her injury continued to heal, but she was glad just to be sharing such pleasures with him again.

Fern continued to fret over her like a mother hen, frequently staying close by and deigning to remain in the tent rather than joining the others at night, but Netya did not mind her company. It gave her ample time to continue learning the language of the Moon People, sometimes sitting awake for hours with her friend as they practiced small, simple conversations in the exotic tongue.

Netya liked the way she had to change the cadence of her voice to make the words sound out correctly. At first she often attempted to replicate Fern's examples in her natural manner of speaking, only to be scolded that her enunciation conveyed quite the wrong tone she was aiming for. As the weeks

passed she became more adept in changing her voice to match the language of the Moon People, often practicing their accent alone as she held one-sided conversations with herself while she bathed or went out to forage. She still had a long way to go before she became as adept at understanding the language as she needed to be, but the pieces gradually came together until she was confident in making simple requests or greetings to the other pack members, often accompanied by a heavy amount of hand gesturing to convey the details.

By all accounts the hunting was still not as good as the Moon People were used to at this time of year, but thanks to the restless tracking of Vaya's herd they were able to bring back enough meat to keep the pack well fed, and the preserved stocks of food were soon ample enough that there was little worry of going hungry that winter.

The weeks of summer crept by, reached their peak, and then trailed off as cooler weather and the rumble of distant thunderstorms arrived. Netya had been with the pack for almost an entire season, and still her fascination with them had yet to ebb. Everything about their way of life spoke to her in a way she had never felt living back in the village. Even her altercation with Vaya could not dampen her spirits, and she had started to notice that, while she was unlikely to ever be on good terms with Adel, the den mother was at least absent enough from daily pack life that their paths did not cross often. She could endure the handful of enemies she had made as long as she had the days with Fern and the nights with Khelt to look forward to.

Even some of the other young people began to engage with her once she started using their language. They would invite her and Fern to sit with them at meal times or social gatherings, and while Netya was still unable to engage in their conversations properly, she at least began to feel less like an outsider among the pack. She even noticed some of the males looking at her in the way Fern had described, and their attention never failed to bring a flush to her cheeks.

It was nice to feel desired, and she did not begrudge the young men for it, particularly now that she had started allowing her eyes to wander in the same way. But their looks did not stir the same excitement in her that she felt whenever Caspian or Khelt were nearby. The alpha's gaze always held a spark of the side of him he revealed in private, both gentler and yet more wild than the one he showed to the pack. Caspian, by comparison, seemed no more enthralled by her than he had been the day they met. His lack of

attention was almost frustrating, until Netya realised she did not even know what she had to feel frustrated about. She tried to catch his eye, hoping to recapture another hint of the moment they'd shared together in the tent, but it stubbornly refused to come.

Once it became clear that the final weeks of summer were approaching, Oke, the old man with the single lick of white hair, announced that the time for the celebration of the summer fires had come. Netya could not guess how he kept track of it, but he seemed certain of the precise time, down to the very day, that it would fall each year. It was an important celebration for the Moon People, and was all the more popular among the young wolves for the opportunity it gave them to seek out their future mates, or at the very least to indulge in their youthful cravings freely for one evening.

For the next few days the camp was abuzz with nothing but talk of the coming celebration. The preparations took precedence over everything else. The pack gathered wood to build a ring of large fires around the edge of the outcrop, each one carefully constructed in the shape of a conical pyre and shored up with heavy stones around the edge. Netya was tasked to assist the seer Brae in collecting the fronds of a specific type of bush that would be burned on each individual fire, releasing a sweet fragrance that would blanket the entire camp when the time of celebration came.

It was much more difficult work than foraging, given the scarcity of the special bushes, and Netya had to learn how to gently cut them with her flint knife in a way that would allow the leaves to grow back again in time for the next celebration. Brae was patient with her, though, and after two days combing the undergrowth together they had brought back a substantial heap of fronds ready to be burned. It brought Netya a hint of pride to look at the stack of foliage whenever she passed by, knowing that she had contributed just as much to the festival as those who had built the fires or gone out to hunt.

"Who do you hope will pick you?" Fern teased as they helped to unearth a cooking pit the day before the celebration.

Netya looked up, letting her eyes stray curiously over a group of young men who were making a contest out of hacking apart the last of the firewood nearby. "I have not thought about it," she lied, even as a tingle of excitement built in her belly. "Will the alpha be present?"

"You must be more adventurous than that, Netya! This is the one night you

will be free to lie with whoever you wish." Fern pursed her lips. "Thankfully the alpha does not attend. It is tradition for him and the den mother to lie together in a private joining that night."

"And Khelt would rather mount a termite hive than that witch," one of the elders cackled.

Fern pressed a hand to her mouth to suppress a titter, but she frowned at the old woman. "You cannot say such things!"

"Nobody understands the Sun girl's tongue anyway." The elder waved a hand in dismissal. "I can curse in it all I like."

"You are terrible," Fern scolded, but all three of them were smiling. It was hard not to get caught up in the atmosphere of excitement that pervaded the camp.

"Will you be joining in with the festivities, Mother?" Netya asked respectfully.

"The summer fires is a time for young people, though perhaps my mate's spirit will send me sweet dreams while I sleep. He was always an impatient one."

"So?" Fern nudged Netya, refusing to let her be. "Is there nobody who has caught your eye at all? If not, I will force you to pick."

"She wants who all the young girls want," the elder said. "She's been batting her eyes at Caspian trying to make him notice her for weeks."

"I have not!" Netya protested, but her rising flush told a different story.

"If he picks you, even *I* will be jealous," Fern said. "Stealing the two most handsome males in the pack for yourself."

Netya put her face in her hands with a groan. "You make me feel like a lost pup so often. Am I really that obvious?"

"You may have the alpha's eye, girl," the elder said, "but you still have much to learn about the ways of love."

Fern squeezed her arm. "Well, I hope Caspian picks you all the same. So long as you promise not to be upset if he chooses me."

"And if he chooses neither of us we may be disappointed together," Netya said.

"I think we will forget our disappointment soon enough. It is hard to be upset on the night of the summer fires for long."

On the next day the final preparations were finished well in advance, and only those in charge of the food remained busy as they waited to unearth the banquet of vegetables and meats that had been sealed in the cooking pit overnight. The men went down to the plains to bathe and prepare themselves in private, while the women did the same further up the slope near the caves at the summit of the outcrop. When they came back together around the central fire that evening, it would be with an eye for partnership.

Fern and Netya donned their loose gowns of soft animal skin and each took turns making sure the other looked as appealing as possible. Netya was not certain how to best make her friend seem more attractive, so she settled for braiding and ornamenting her hair in a way that made use of its fullness, securing Fern's thick locks atop her head with several pretty pins made of smoothed bone, and then braiding in half a dozen strings of wooden beads that hung down almost to her shoulders. She thought it made her friend's hair look like a pretty crown, and Fern seemed even more pleased by the elegant, striking look she had ended up with.

Netya's appearance, by comparison, was almost the exact opposite. While she had tried to tidy Fern's hair into something more neat and luxurious, Fern quickly did away with her friend's modest single plait and combed her hair out until it was loose and wispy. Netya thought it made her look quite like Adel, though rather than being put off she was instead awed at the thought of commanding an appearance anywhere near as striking as that of the den mother.

Fern kept Netya's hair loose, giving it only a single thin braid near the front that hung against her cheek, while the rest spilled freely over her shoulders and down her back.

"If only I had been blessed with dark hair like yours," the other girl sighed as she passed Netya a handful of woven bracelets for her arms and wrists. "They say the spirits gather all the wisdom of the night when they pour its blackness into the hair of a newborn child."

"You make it sound very mysterious," Netya replied. "And a little frightening."

"It is, and that is why it holds such power. Some have the spirits of the earth bless their hair with its colour, so that they may live well and always find their place in the world. Then on bright days the spirits of the sun put their golden light in the hair of others, bringing vigour and happiness to their lives."

Netya smiled at her. "You have a little of both."

"My mother always said the spirits could not decide what to do with me."

Fern looked sad for a moment, and Netya realised that she had not once come across anyone her friend regarded as family during her time with the pack.

"Have you ever seen those with red hair?" she asked, before the good mood could be spoiled.

"Oh yes." Fern nodded. "There are some of them with the North People. They are born from the spirits of blood and fire, so that they may feel more keenly the heartbeat of the world around them. Many of them are great shamans, in the same way our most gifted seers draw their power from the wisdom of the night."

"I wonder if it was this night's wisdom that led me to where I am now," Netya pondered.

"Or perhaps it was a lustful alpha and an excitable girl." Fern grinned, tickling Netya from behind. "The colour of our hair tells only of what the spirits gift us, we may choose for ourselves what we do with it."

"Then I choose not to believe that my hair has any great destiny in store for me."

"Good! Then you will not mind running us an errand to fetch the herbs we need from the seers' cave. Ask for the burnt leaf ones, they should have plenty prepared for the women tonight."

Netya hurried up the slope, glancing back across the camp as she went and feeling another quiver of excitement as the conical pyres around the edge of the outcrop began to flicker to life one by one. As dusk fell the home of the Moon People transformed itself into a giant altar of fire, blazing up into the night sky as one final farewell to the months of summer.

Netya looked to the entrance to Khelt's den as she walked by, but it was not even lit with so much as a single torch. The cave seemed quiet and lonely, and she wondered what the alpha would be doing on this night while many of the other pack members his age indulged in the passions of their youth. He was a strong man. Perhaps stronger than any man. But surely even someone as resolute as Khelt felt the troubles of a lonely spirit once in a while?

There was nobody at the entrance to the seers' cave, so Netya waited patiently outside, making sure she remained a respectful distance from the opening. The urge to peer inside was strong, but she knew what lay within was forbidden to her. Worse still, somewhere inside was Adel's lair.

One of the seers came out after a short while, and she used the words she had learned from Fern to ask for the burnt leaf herbs. The woman nodded and

disappeared back inside, leaving Netya to wait on one of the rocks while she kicked her legs and watched dusk fall, humming a tune to herself as the fires started to contrast more and more with the darkening sky.

She was caught off guard when the den mother herself returned with a sizeable bag in her hands and held it out to her.

"Are these the herbs I asked for, den mother?" she asked tentatively. "You are generous, but Fern and I will only need enough for tonight."

"Will you?" Adel said, voice laden with scorn. "Perhaps I should not be surprised. If you hadn't the sense to run when you had the chance, perhaps you care not for whatever child the alpha saddles you with."

Netya swallowed, but held her ground. "I do not need these herbs for my time with the alpha."

"You think yourself very wise, Sun girl. But once you have a son or daughter of the Moon People, where do you suppose your fate will lead? To stay with your child, or to abandon it when you return to the family who raised you? Even Khelt must know you can never have both."

"Den mother," Netya said, "whatever you would deny from Khelt, please do not deny it through me." She thought Adel might hit her then, wincing in anticipation as she braced herself for a repeat of her confrontation with Vaya. Instead, the older woman only glared, and Netya saw for the first time the tiny lines of strain that marked the den mother's otherwise pristine face.

"Is denying him what he wants all I care about in your eyes?" she said softly.

"I know you sought to turn me against him," Netya said, finding it hard to meet the den mother's gaze, but growing in confidence a little now that she did not feel a swift punishment coming. "I do not need this many herbs."

"Take them anyway," Adel said, and pressed the bundle into Netya's hands before she could protest. "You may come to me if you require more." The seer tugged her fur shawl tighter around her shoulders and turned back into the cave, leaving Netya clutching the bag on her own.

She felt hot and uncomfortable. She had stood up to the den mother, had she not? And yet somehow it still seemed as if Adel had played another trick at her expense, planting a seed of doubt in her mind that niggled beneath the surface. Unlike Vaya, the den mother's power was not in her physical strength. Having her nose broken had hurt, but Netya found herself almost wishing it had happened again when she realised what Adel had done.

She was half way back to the tent when she paused, looking down at the

bag clutched in her hand. It contained enough of the herbs to keep her from bearing a child for months. If she were to ask for this many doses again, the seers would wonder why. She could dispose of them, or ask Fern to return the rest tomorrow.

The thought Adel had seeded returned unbidden. In her ignorance, she had not considered what mothering a child of the Moon People would mean for her in the years to come. Glancing around anxiously, Netya hurried past the tent and clambered down the steep edge of the outcrop until she found a crack in one of the protruding stones. She took a handful of herbs from the bag, then stuffed it inside, wedging in a small rock to hide it from view.

She did not need to use the herbs. She did not want to. It would be a long time before any of the problems Adel had mentioned might happen. And yet, she could not bring herself to throw the bag away. It would be there if she needed it. If she ever changed her mind. A reassurance, and nothing more.

Only she would know. Her, and Adel.

The Celebration

Netya pushed all thoughts of the bag to the back of her mind as she returned to the tent, refusing to let worries over what Adel might or might not have persuaded her to do spoil the evening. She took a deep breath and let the sweet smells of the fires fill her lungs, smiling as she remembered what the night had in store for her. Excitement quickened her pulse once again, and she ducked inside to find Fern already heating water over the fire. Her handful of herbs had already been prepared by the seers and did not need stewing, but mixing them with warm water made the medicine more palatable and easy to swallow.

It was another couple of hours before the celebration began properly, and Netya found herself pacing back and forth within the tent's narrow confines as the minutes crept by.

"You are like a restless fly when you become nervous," Fern said from her seat. "If you had a wolf within you I would say she was clawing to get out."

"I do not know what to expect," Netya replied. "Will the other males be different from the alpha? What if none of them pick me?"

"Then pick one for yourself, though I doubt you will need to. Two pretty girls like us? We shall be spoiled for choice this evening!"

"Can we go out and see the fires?"

Fern shook her head. "It will be more special if we wait. This is a spiritual time. Under the light of the fires you will feel like a different person, and you will remember it for the rest of your life."

"But I do not like waiting. It is agony when things are left to hang on my mind."

"A good kind of agony though, yes?" Fern rose to her feet and caught Netya by the waist, halting her restless pacing. Once she had stilled, she kissed her on the lips. "There, will that satisfy you for a few minutes?" Fern grinned.

"You always tease," Netya said, trying to extricate herself from her friend's grip. "As pretty as you are, I would rather have those kisses from a male."

"Are you sure? You may never know if you do not try."

Netya could tell her uncomfortable expression would only provoke Fern further, but she was caught off guard when the other girl kissed her again,

and this time held her lips in place, putting out her tongue to add a sudden intimacy to the gesture.

She did not feel the same heat that a man's kiss stirred within her. Fern's breath was warm and sweet, and her lips were playful. The kiss made no demands of Netya, and so she allowed it to continue. After a moment she responded tentatively, out of curiosity more than anything else.

If her friend had been trying to take her mind off things, she had certainly succeeded. After a short while they parted, and Fern cocked her head to the side with a smile.

"There. That was not so bad, was it?"

Netya wrinkled the space between her eyebrows. "I still prefer the kiss of a man."

"But it was not unpleasant?"

"No," she admitted.

"You see! Tonight is a time for exploring these things. You will have plenty of time to discover all sorts of new pleasures before the sun rises. There is no need to be impatient."

Thankfully Netya did not have long to wait. Within a few minutes the long howl of a wolf sounded from the heart of the camp, signalling that it was time for the celebration to begin. A chorus of eager yowls and barks rose from further in the distance, where the men had gathered on the plains, and Netya wondered what private rituals drew out their wolves on this night.

Fern led them outside and down the path to the central fire, the other females joining them a few at a time until they had formed a procession. The pyres surrounding the outcrop seemed even larger than before, roaring up into the darkness to paint the entire camp in yellow-orange light that flickered with a hundred different shadows. It was just as Fern had said. Walking down to the gathering area, Netya felt as though this night was something different, something special. The sweet fronds burning in the fires filled the air with their scent. The dull roar and heat of the flames pressed in from all around. The orange light illuminated their small peak like the wick of a lamp.

It was as if the home of the Moon People had been stolen away from the real world, sealed in a bubble of warmth and light that drifted through the dark realm of the spirits, absorbing every wisp of tantalising mystery that swirled through the air around it. Netya trembled with anticipation, and she took Fern's hand as they approached the central fire and stopped just beyond the reach of its light.

"We go to meet the men in as pleasing a form as we can," Fern said as she reached down to slide her gown off, just as the rest of the females were doing. Netya followed suit, only a little uncomfortable in her nakedness as she joined the others in their ritual.

The men and women of the pack came together in unison, both groups arriving at the gathering spot at the same time. No longer in their animal shapes, the males stood naked as well, and Netya began to feel a little breathless as her eyes roamed across the full display of firelit bodies before her.

Rather than waiting on any further ceremony, the Moon People mingled with excitement. The older, more experienced men and women stepped forward first, calling out in siren song to one another as familiar partners and mates came together, hands settling on bare skin as conversation mingled with kisses. In many ways it reminded Netya of the evening celebrations she had attended before, but this time an undercurrent of intensity ran through the gathering, a tug toward the pleasures that were usually shared in private.

Like many of the younger men and women she hung back at first, glancing nervously around the group as she wondered how she would know when to approach, or be approached, by a potential partner. It turned out not to be as complicated as she imagined. Fern led them to a group of her friends near the fire, and rather than being captured immediately by a pair of eager males they instead sat down as they would have done on any other evening, greeting one another warmly as bowls of food and the bitter-tasting drink were passed around.

Netya allowed herself to relax. Several of the others had taken to the celebration eagerly, and already she saw couples entwined in one another's arms all around the clearing, but most of the Moon People seemed to be taking the night at a slower pace.

Erech, who had grown into a far more confident, decisive man since his victory over Nathar, sat across from Netya on the other side of the group, and a smile lingered on his lips as he watched her, seemingly just as oblivious to the conversation going on around them as she was. The roaring heat of the fire had already warmed her skin, but she suspected it would have begun to glow anyway under the attention of the young male.

After giving him a few shy glances from beneath her curtain of hair he moved over to sit beside her, and his hand immediately found its way to her thigh as he leaned in close.

"Very beautiful," he said in a thickly accented approximation of her own tongue.

The effort made her smile, and her heart beat a little quicker as his fingers played across her skin curiously, teasing little circles up and down her leg.

"He made me teach him how to say that this morning," Fern whispered to her with a giggle, before turning back to the partner Netya recalled having seen her with on the night Erech and Nathar fought.

She turned back to Erech, her gaze lingering on his body. He was not as broad and masculine as Khelt, but smooth and enticing all the same. His blue eyes twinkled with confidence, and when she did not protest he moved in closed, caressing her body with both hands as he tilted his head to breath in the scent of her hair.

The young male's touch quickly became more eager, sliding his palms across the pleasing contours of her body as if there was too much for him to explore and too little time. As the excited tingle grew in her belly, Netya found herself responding in kind, allowing her hands to feel the ways in which he was both similar and pleasingly different to Khelt. His eager manhood soon brushed her leg, and a hungry kiss found her lips moments after.

She lay back in the grass, the heat and sweet scents in the air sending a heady ripple through her body as Erech followed her down, soon relinquishing his claim on her mouth as he resumed kissing and burying his face in her flowing black hair. Khelt made her feel desired, but not quite like this. To Erech she seemed an exotic treasure, a forbidden fruit that he knew he might never have the chance to sample again. The almost reckless desire of the male quickened Netya's readiness for him. It was flattering in a way she had never felt before. She was well aware that her time with Khelt was a topic of jealousy among the other young females, but she had never stopped to consider that she, too, might be seen as a tantalising prize fit only for an alpha's claiming by the males of the pack.

"You desire me so?" she said breathlessly as his hands found her breasts, squeezing hard.

"Very beautiful," he repeated, murmuring the words into her ear distractedly before kissing her again. He seemed far more concerned with lovemaking than talking. It made Netya smile as she was reminded of how Fern often described men: hot-blooded and single-minded once they were caught by a female's allure. He meant to claim her and make her his, even if it

was only for a few brief moments on this one summer night. Netya was happy to be claimed, and she allowed herself to relinquish control as Erech hefted her legs up to rest over his shoulders, then pinned her wrists to the ground beneath his palms.

He held her there beneath him for a moment, a wolfish grin crossing his face. No doubt he was savouring the conquest, relishing the victory, filling his thoughts with all of the things that make young men proud and strong.

Despite the thud of her pulse in her chest, Netya squirmed enticingly beneath him, pressing herself up against the hardness between his legs. She looked her partner in the eyes and smiled.

"I am yours, my alpha," she whispered. The word alpha was the same in both their tongues, and she felt the way it made him twitch when she said it. "Alpha," she repeated.

As if the surge of pleasure building within him was about to burst, Erech pressed himself between her folds and bore down fervently, a groan leaving his lips as her warmth enveloped him. His hips drove against hers rapidly, filling her body fast, but not so deep as to be uncomfortable.

Netya gave voice to a squeal of her own, having no time to relax or savour the intimate moment. Intimate was not the word to describe it. This was passionate. Hot and vigorous and impatient, and she found herself caring little for the discomfort of her body being bent almost double beneath Erech as he took her with hurried thrusts and hungry kisses.

He did not drive her toward the kind of climax that loomed like a cresting wave, building in weight and intensity until it shattered her mind apart with a crash of pleasure, but rather he stirred a churning spring in her belly. The grip of ecstasy squeezed and softened in her lower body in time with his thrusts, never quite peaking, but filling her with more than enough desire and enjoyment regardless.

Erech buried his face in the side of her neck, nuzzling at her flushed skin as his mouth suckled and his teeth nipped, the young male's scalding breath huffing against her rapidly as his hips met hers with clap after clap of flesh on skin. He clutched her wrists tightly, a sudden shudder gripping his body. His weight bore down on her hard, and then the cry of release rumbled up from deep within his chest, his teeth tightening against her shoulder as his manhood strained and surged within her.

She joined him in his groans of pleasure, writhing beneath him in the way Khelt always enjoyed in his moment of climax. Erech spent himself within her, then relaxed, his groans becoming satisfied chuckles of pleasure as he let her ankles slip from his shoulders and fall to the ground, pulling her on top of him as he rolled on to his back.

Netya grinned, laughing with him as she tossed back her hair and placed her palms on his chest, pretending as though she was now the one holding him down as she leaned in to kiss him again. Erech murmured something in his own tongue as he caught his breath, eyes closed and a smile on his lips. He beckoned Netya down and savoured the taste of her tongue one last time before getting back up, and the pair of them stumbled clumsily back to where they had been seated, still both giddy in the afterglow.

Her apprehension completely gone, Netya seemed unable to remove the smile from her lips as she gazed around the gathering through newly initiated eyes. How had her own people ever been coy about something so joyous and free? The summer fires had ignited their own fresh blaze within Netya's soul, taking her to a place she had only ever glimpsed in fantasies. She had felt it calling to her when she gazed into the eyes of the wolf skull for the first time. She had lived it when she rode across the plains with the pack. Now she was there again. The girl who had always hidden behind Netya's veneer of good sense and reserve was awake at last, and she was glowing.

Erech put his arm around her waist and kissed her cheek once more, whispering something into her ear. She smiled at him, and he leaned back with a laugh, turning to the young male sitting to his other side and trying to attract his attention with a caress that seemed every bit as intimate as the ones he had lavished on Netya.

She sighed and leaned back, tilting her chin up to the sky as she watched the sparks of the fire swirl up toward the stars. The night was only just beginning, and she had much more to enjoy. All around the camp the music of lovers filled the air. Bodies twined together as couples met couples, some not even seeming to care whether it was a man or a woman they joined with as they indulged with an openness Netya had rarely experienced. She felt a kinship with these people, even if it was only for this one night. She was not an outsider, only one of many lovers, just like the rest of them.

On the other side of the fire Vaya had another girl's hair curled around her fist, the pair of them making more noise than most of the camp combined. Netya could not quite tell whether they were fighting or making love, but neither seemed to care either way.

Nearer by, Fern and her partner knelt in the grass like two wild wolves,

their passionate cries joining the chorus as the male mounted her from behind. Netya watched them for a while, feeling no more reserve as she simply enjoyed the sights and sounds of the celebration, making Fern's pleasure her own. The tug in her lower belly intensified, longing for consummation.

Fern and her partner finally collapsed into a panting, purring heap, their passionate kisses continuing even as the climax of their shared pleasure drained away. Teeth tugged at lips and ears, and they seemed to lose themselves in the moment until Fern finally noticed Netya watching them, and beckoned her over.

"You must enjoy Jale too, while you still have the energy for him," she said breathlessly. "Or I will not be able to get him off me all night."

Though her partner did not understand what she said, he seemed intent on proving Fern's point regardless, nuzzling into her neck again impatiently until she was forced to drive him away with a playful shove.

Netya knelt down beside them, and Fern took the opportunity to draw her into a kiss, distracting Jale's attention for a brief moment. This time Netya felt more heat in the act, and she kissed her friend back with greater passion than she had been able to muster in the tent. A moment later Jale's hands embraced the pair of them, drawing both females close to his chest as he kissed one, then the other, his impatient lips lingering on Netya's mouth a little longer than Fern's as he savoured her new taste.

Suddenly the free joining of males with males and females with females no longer seemed so strange to Netya. She soon began to lose track of which hands on her body were Fern's and which were Jale's. Their shared kisses and caresses shared the same passion, carrying with them the same promise of pleasure. The three of them sank into a tangle on the grass.

It was not the fervent, lust-driven coupling that the two females had shared with their initial partners, but a slower, more inquisitive act. Before long a new pair of hands settled on Netya's shoulders, and the familiar feeling of Erech's breath tickled across her cheek. The young male he had been with also joined them, and soon all five had melded wordlessly into one. Hands caressed their way from one body to the next, stroking the firm manhood of one male before sliding to the shoulder of another, lips finding a breast, a navel, or tasting the sweet flavour of lovemaking as they strayed to more intimate places.

Netya lost track of the minutes passing, letting the concerns that worried

her in the waking world drift off as though she really had stepped into a place of dreams. It was not even the pleasure—though she experienced much of it as she lay pressed between the chests of two of the panting males—but the exotic, otherworldly quality of the evening, and the feeling that she had stepped into the body of a different girl. She was no longer Netya of the Village, but Netya of the Moon People. She could not help but grin when she thought of it. She almost believed that she, too, might harbour an inner wolf like them, joining in with the feral growls of pleasure that spilled from her partners' lungs every time they convulsed in a moment of climax.

So relaxed and undemanding was the pace of the evening that Netya did not grow exhausted or tender as she often did with Khelt. She was not sure how much time had passed once the passions of their small group stilled, but she and Fern took the opportunity to extract themselves, doing their best to correct their tangled hair as they joined some of the others to eat and drink.

The lavish feast that had been prepared over the preceding days was almost as enticing as the carnal delights of the celebration, and some of the pack members seemed even more preoccupied with the food than the lovemaking. Netya enjoyed the brief respite, even managing to take pleasure in a small amount of the Moon People's fiery and bitter drink once she had mixed it with a cup of berry-flavoured water.

"Once we have found our partners we often break apart from the main gathering," Fern explained as they ate. "Then we go to the smaller fires, and claim one for the rest of the night."

"If we are not exhausted before then," Netya laughed.

"Oh, but if you make it to the morning's light you shall be blessed with a year of good fortune! The spirits of new life that surround us tonight will linger close to your body, making it ready for motherhood until the time of the next celebration. I am sure the alpha would want you to try your best to see the sun rise."

Netya's brow furrowed. The thought of bearing children was an uncomfortable reminder of her earlier conversation with Adel. She was not at all sure whether she wanted to receive such a blessing.

"Will we claim a fire with Erech and the others, then?" she asked, distracting herself from the unwanted thoughts.

But Fern did not reply, her response hovering on her lips as she clutched the other girl's arm and stared past her. Netya turned to look, and she too tensed in expectation at the sight of Caspian striding across the clearing. "Perhaps we will not need to," Fern whispered, her excitement plain to hear as she adjusted the beads in her hair and straightened up, putting her food aside as the handsome male drew near.

It seemed Caspian had not been intending to join the festivities that evening, as he was still half-dressed in his leggings, with a loose stole of animal skin hanging from his shoulders. Clothed or not, he was still striking enough to make Netya a little giddy at the prospect of sharing the rest of the evening with him.

He smiled at the pair of females as he passed by, collecting a cup of water to sip as he cast his eyes over the gathering.

"I am glad you decided to join us, Caspian," Fern slipped in quickly, and for the first time in her life Netya cursed herself for not being so forward in attracting a male's attention. It was clear just by glancing around that they were not the only ones who had taken notice of the most desirable male in the pack.

"The mood took me," he replied, before sitting down on the opposite side of their log seat. "Have you been enjoying your first summer fires, Netya?"

"Yes," she said, a little more quietly than she'd intended as the confidence of the glowing girl seemed to desert her. "It has been very... very enlightening. None of my people's celebrations are anything like this."

Caspian nodded. "That's good to hear. Will you be taking her to one of the fires soon, Fern?"

"Not yet," the other girl replied in a hurry. "The night is still fresh, after all. What about you? Have your eyes happened upon anything they fancy?"

Her teasing tone made Netya envious once again, and she wished she had the guile to know how to entice men so effortlessly. But despite Fern's provocative words Caspian only smiled, looking down into his drink as though the flattery made him uncomfortable.

"Many things," he said. "But one will be enough for me this evening."

Netya wrestled with herself, searching for a way she might simultaneously pry into whether she was one of the things he desired while also making her words as alluring as Fern's. The response seemed on the tip of her tongue, but just as it began to take shape Caspian rose to his feet and strode away through the gathering, his attention wandering to new potential partners.

The pair of them watched the male as he made a slow circuit of the area around the central fire. He did not appear to speak to many of the others, taking his time as he watched them one by one, his eyes taking in each

female with a short, intense gaze. It was nothing like the hungry, lust-filled looks Erech and the others had given Netya. It reminded her of the spark that had passed between them before, and it made her shiver all over again. He did not seem to be seeking out anything anywhere near as simple as what the other males craved that evening.

After completing his agonisingly long circuit, he finally paused and approached a timid-looking girl whose pale golden hair was almost the colour of snow. He beckoned her aside, retreating to one of the log seats almost out of sight, and took the girl into his lap. He brought his lips close to her ear, head bowed as he spoke in whispers.

A long sigh left Fern's lips as she rested her chin on Netya's shoulder. "I suppose neither of us will get our wish this year."

Netya's heart sank a little. As much as she reminded herself that it was a small thing to be concerned over, she couldn't help but feel disappointed that Caspian had not chosen her. She wanted to stare into those eyes again. Hear him speak to her in a way he spoke to no one else. Slide past his reserved exterior and feel the intensity of what lay within.

"But you are lucky," Fern continued. "Now Liyanthe will be the one to attract every other woman's jealousy."

"Why do you suppose he chose her?" Netya asked.

"Who can say!" Fern flung her arms in the air and slumped off the log, landing on her back as she sprawled across the grass. "I think he could have the den mother himself if he desired, so it must not be beauty that enthrals him. He makes odd choices."

The girl on Caspian's lap seemed entranced. She had been shaking when he first took her aside, but now her hands were still, and she hung on every word that was whispered into her ear.

"And she is very timid," Netya mused.

"As timid as a female can be. Liyanthe was too afraid to accept any partner at all last year. The first man she was with did not claim her womanhood gently."

"Would Caspian be gentle?"

Fern sat back up, looking over as the handsome male slipped away quietly with his chosen partner, leading her by the hand in the direction of his tent. "Perhaps she will tell us tomorrow."

Netya gave voice to a sigh of her own, and Fern shot her a wry smile.

"Now we have become the jealous ones," she said, then jumped to her feet

with a laugh and tugged at Netya's arm. "Next year! We already have our own men to return to this evening, do we not?"

The rest of the night burned by in the orange blaze of the fires, their heat reflecting the warmth of Netya's soul as the pyres were left to burn slowly down hour by hour. She and Fern joined their three male partners and retreated to one of the small fires at the back of the outcrop, a secluded spot overhung by the rocky caves above. While their desires still burned hot they piled together in a passionate tangle once again, each of them enjoying all four others at the same time until their lust was spent and they rolled away in exhaustion.

It was not just a night of lovemaking, though, and while the five of them rested Netya tried to teach the males a few words of her own language, while they in turn coaxed her into saying things that brought them great mirth, and which Fern teasingly refused to translate for her. She was glad to make them laugh. It had been many weeks since she enjoyed sitting up with a group of companions her age as she lost herself in silly, pointless talk. All other thoughts were forgotten as the night passed by, good humour and companionship interspersed with deeply satisfying pleasure as she slipped in and out of intimate embraces. Even when her body finally began to protest and the space within her ached, she still allowed herself to be taken by her partners several more times before the sun peeked over the horizon. After all, it was only for one night.

Her exhaustion became a heavy tingle that weighed upon her body in all of the most satisfying ways, and it was a bittersweet ending to the celebration when their fire finally collapsed into coals and the first chilly brush of morning wind caressed her skin. The night spirits that had seemed thick in the air drifted away along with the sweet scent of the fires, and at the light of dawn the camp returned from its otherworldly journey back to its place of origin on the earthen plains.

Tired and spent, Netya curled up beside the dying fire as Fern wrapped a warm bearskin around them. Though she was sad to see them go, she returned from the embrace of the summer fires with their warmth still burning within her.

The girl hiding beneath Netya's skin had awoken, and that girl belonged with the Moon People.

—**17**— The Storm

So preoccupied was Netya with her newfound sense of self among the pack that she spared little thought for the future in the weeks that followed. It had been a long, exhilarating summer, full of discovery and the kind of adventure she had never truly believed she would experience back home in the village. Even the word *home* seemed strange to her now. When she was out in the wilderness she thought of home as the tent she shared with Fern. It was the warmth and safety of the outcrop, and the strong pack who lived there.

She did not worry herself over the things that might happen months or years from now, instead enjoying the freedom of her youth as she blossomed into the woman she felt she had always been destined to be. The more she learned of the Moon People's language the closer she became with them, and before long she considered the small group she had spent the night of the summer fires with her friends. Erech in particular seemed very fond of her, and despite barely being able to communicate with Netya he often spent long afternoons by her side, teaching her how to snare fish in the river or allowing her to ride on his wolf's back as he showed her the more remote and dangerous paths through the surrounding land. The young man respected that she was his alpha's female, however, and not once did he try to entice her into his bed, though the desire in his eyes was sometimes plain to see.

The day after the celebration Netya and Fern had attempted to coax Liyanthe into sharing the details of her night with Caspian, but the girl was so shy all she could do was blush and smile. The longing looks she sent his way spoke volumes on their own, but Netya was still desperately curious, and more than a little jealous every time she and the other girl crossed paths.

But she had no reason to be jealous, she reminded herself often. Khelt still took her to his bed and left her exhaustingly satisfied every few nights, and sometimes even during the days when his time was unoccupied. And yet, he was still the alpha. As the weeks passed she could not shake the feeling that the man whose bed she shared was a leader first and a lover second. It was not that their couplings lacked intimacy. Khelt was as wild and free as the wolf within him during their lovemaking, and when they spoke before and afterwards he always seemed honest and direct with her. In many ways he was the only person besides Fern that she felt able to speak with about almost

anything. She would wake some mornings to see him watching her with a wistful look on his face, only for it to vanish a moment later as the steel of the alpha returned to his eyes. He was happy to have her in his bed or on his lap by the fire, but he had never spent an afternoon teaching her how to fish, or wandering the meadows at her side without point or purpose.

Netya reminded herself to be happy she had been claimed by such a man. In many ways it was as much and more than she had ever wanted, and yet still something seemed beyond her reach. She did not understand what it was, but in those brief moments she caught him watching her in the mornings, it almost felt close enough for her to reach out and grasp it.

She tried her best to forget about the bag of herbs Adel had given her, preferring to pretend that it had never happened. Without the temptation she had nothing to feel guilty about, and her worries about bearing the alpha's child were something she could push away into the distant future. It had not happened yet, and that was enough to keep her content.

The bag stashed in its hiding place had almost slipped her mind completely by the time the rains came. She and Fern spent all day rearranging their tent in preparation for the wet season, chipping fresh logs from the northern forests into pointed stakes that could be driven into the ground to suspend hammocks from. The hammocks themselves were something Netya had never seen before, and she watched in fascination as Fern showed her how they laced long, sturdy strips of animal hide together in a cross-hatched pattern that could be unfastened and stored away again once the rainy season passed.

They banked their fire up on a platform of stones and tied together new racks of sticks to keep their belongings off the ground in the case of water seeping in. If the weather became too bad they would retreat to one of the earth lodges or the communal winter caves, Fern said, but she and Netya were in agreement that they would rather keep their private space if they could. Sharing a dwelling with someone like Vaya and her snide hunting companions for weeks on end was not a prospect Netya relished.

"Will you take these back to the seers for me?" Fern said as she took a pair of pouches from one of her racks and handed them to the other girl. "We do not use them often, and they will only spoil in the damp."

Netya accepted the bags of dried medicine and stepped out of the tent, pausing as she was finally reminded of the other precious bag in her possession. She glanced over in the direction of the rocks where she had stashed it, curling her toes into the grass as she worked her jaw back and forth in contemplation. If she left it there it would likely spoil too in the damp weather. But what did that matter? She had not used any of the herbs. She would rather forget they existed entirely. Surely it would be better to leave them there so that the temptation was gone for good? It was already far too late for her to give the bag back to the seers without questions being asked. And yet...

She took a step toward the hiding place, then paused as she remembered where the herbs had come from. This was what Adel wanted her to do. There was poison buried in the temptation somewhere. Whether it was simply that she wanted to deny Khelt an heir, or something more sinister Netya had yet to comprehend, she did not want to play into the den mother's schemes.

Shoring up her resolve, she turned her back on the rocks and walked away.

Despite all of their preparations, the rains came on so hard and so suddenly that Fern and Netya did not even have time to return to their tent before the sudden deluge had swept across the camp and extinguished the central fire. Those who had dwellings nearby scurried back to their own abodes, while those who lived further up the outcrop were ushered into the earth lodges big enough to accommodate them. Netya and Fern ended up packed in with the food stores and the wrinkled old woman who rationed them, listening to her mutter and curse under her breath as she squinted out at the downpour.

"The others will be soaked," Fern said, referring to the men who had been out checking the edges of the outcrop for signs of wear, where exposed earth parched by the summer sun might be washed away in the wet season.

Netya's thoughts could not be distracted by the thought of a few sodden wolves, however. As she sat in the lodge's entrance chewing her lip, all she could think about was the bag of herbs jammed into the crack in the rock. If they were not soaked through already, they would be by the time the rain passed.

A crack of lightning split the air, and the old woman yelped in alarm, leaping into the shape of her wolf with more agility than her age should have allowed, before scurrying to the back of the lodge and curling into a ball.

"And the sky is restless tonight," Fern said anxiously.

Netya rocked back and forth in agitation, no less unnerved by the storm, but even more concerned about the hidden bag than she had been before.

Lightning was rarely a good omen. For a crazed moment she wondered whether perhaps Adel herself had called the storm to test her resolve. That was foolish. No shaman or witch could do such things.

But whether or not she intended to use the herbs, once more she found herself unwilling to let the choice slip through her fingers. She did not want to wait passively, as she had done her entire life in the village, waiting for fate to carry her in whatever direction it pleased. Even if it meant playing into Adel's hands, at least she would be doing it of her own accord.

"Wait for me, I will be back soon," she said, and before Fern could question her or protest Netya jumped to her feet and ran out into the deluge. Her friend's calls were swallowed up by the rushing sound of the rain a moment later as she hurried as fast as she could up the muddying path to their tent.

The wet season in the forests had been bad, but here it seemed a truly wild force of nature. Sharp droplets stung her face as the wind whipped sheets of rain across the exposed outcrop. Within moments the dark clouds had transformed early dusk into blue midnight, and another flash of lightning blinded her before its distant echo rumbled across the plains a few seconds later.

Netya's clothes had almost soaked through already. Her braid tugged heavily at her scalp as water weighed it down. If she was not careful, she might easily lose her footing on the steep slope where she had hidden the herbs.

But Netya's mind was set, and even the frightening crash of thunder could not dissuade her as she clambered around the rocks and hurried past her tent. She squinted through the rain, trying to place where she had hidden the bag. The edge of the outcrop looked even more treacherous as water rushed through the grass in miniature torrents, running off the slick rocks and dribbling down from the overhang where the ground ended.

Netya's eyes widened. There had been no overhang the last time she passed this way. A piece of the ground had already peeled away under the weight of the sudden rain seeping into it, exposing more of the raw stone beneath the soil. Even as she watched another muddy sliver of earth detached itself from the edge, the cracked ground splitting off piece by piece like twigs of kindling under an axe.

She crept toward the rock where she had hidden the bag with renewed care, testing the ground gingerly with each step before twining her bare toes into the grass for support. If her feet went out from under her she would go

straight off the edge, and it was a steep, rocky descent to the bottom.

The smaller stone she had jammed in to conceal the bag was still lodged firmly in its crack, and with a little tugging it slipped free and tumbled down the slope, clacking off the exposed stone as it fell. She thought she heard something else, a distant groan on the wind, as if the storm itself was howling at her. Stuffing her hand into the opening, her fingers closed around the dry bulge of animal hide, and she breathed a sigh of relief. Only a small trickle of water had reached it so far, and the contents were likely unspoilt.

Netya tucked the bag into her clothing, making sure it rested in the driest spot possible close to her stomach, then began edging her way back up the unstable slope. The lightning flashed again, and before the sound of its arrival drowned out everything else another howling voice filled Netya's ears for a fraction of a second. She paused, peering at the edge of the overhang. Was it the spirits of nature howling at her, or had the voice belonged to a person? She did not want to stay out in the downpour a moment longer than she had to, but her curiosity got the better of her. Was she becoming too reckless these days?

Edging back to the overhang, she dropped to her hands and knees and found a stable spot from which to peer over. She saw the marks where fingers had clawed at the earth before anything else. A desperate hand had flailed for something sturdy to grip in this spot, and found only mud and loose turf to hang on to. Then she saw Erech's body sprawled half way down the slope below her. He was half-buried in soil and stone, and the puddle of water he lay in was clouded with blood.

"Erech!" she called, frozen in shock. She could not tell whether he heard her over the rain, or if he was even still alive. In her mind she pictured everything that had happened in an instant. Erech was not the type to patiently circle the outcrop to get out of the rain when he could quickly scale the side in half the time, regardless of how dangerous it might be by comparison.

His body moved, and another faint groan reached her ears on the wind. The glimmer of life snapped Netya out of her fear. Swinging a leg over the edge, she scrabbled her way down the slope as fast as she could, slipping and stumbling as a cascade of mud followed in the wake of her descent. A heavy lump of it spattered into her hair, sending her reeling off balance. Her knees hit the ground hard, sending a shock of pain through her lower body as she flailed for something to grab on to, tumbling over and over down the steep

slope in a flurry of mud and water.

The same jutting rock that had caught Erech broke her fall, bringing her to a painful halt as she collapsed atop the wounded male. The cry of pain that left his lips quickly became a groan of relief, and he gripped her arm so hard that she had no time to fret over her own bruises.

"Erech!" she exclaimed again, finding her way to her knees beside him. Her brow creased in desperation as she searched for the words she needed.

"Pain?" she said in his tongue. "Hurt? Very bad?"

The male looked up at her through lidded eyes, repeating her name under his breath as if seeing her through a daze. Panic quickened her heartbeat. Pain had to be very great indeed to drive sense and speech from a person's mind.

Allowing him to retain his grip on her arm, she turned her attention to his lower body, brushing off as much mud and grit as she could. He had been half-buried in the landslide that sent him falling, and not just by soil, but several heavy rocks as well. More and more blood coated her hands as she cleared away the debris until, with a lurching of her stomach, she felt Erech's leg twisting at an unnatural angle beneath the mud. A huge slab of stone had slid loose along with the earth, and the young male's lower leg had been crushed and twisted beneath it. She did not even need to try moving him to know it was impossible.

"Oh, Erech," she choked out as tears filled her eyes. She had never known a person to survive an injury so severe.

Netya might have remained there holding Erech's hand until his life left him had Fern's voice not reached her ears from the top of the outcrop. She filled her lungs and called back in response, yelling as loud as she could over the downpour until her friend's face finally peeked over the edge of the overhang. Fern took in the scene in a glance, and to her credit wasted no time indulging the obvious shock that registered on her face before slipping into the shape of her wolf and hurrying back to fetch the others.

"Your pack will be here soon," Netya soothed, propping the young man's head up in her lap as he squeezed her hand with rapidly ebbing strength. She knew he could not understand her, but she carried on with her gentle words, almost as much for her own benefit as his. The sickening sensation in the pit of her stomach had her feeling faint, and she could not bear to look at Erech's twisted leg and the steady stream of blood seeping out of him. Every few moments she caught a coppery tang in the air over the smell of the rain, and

her dizziness threatened to overwhelm her. She had never been this close to a person so seriously injured before. Never this close to a friend who was about to die.

It was only a matter of minutes before the others arrived, but Netya felt she had been cradling Erech's broken body in her lap for hours. Khelt bounded down the side of the outcrop first, the paws of his wolf springing from rock to rock until he splashed into the pool of crimson water at her side. He reverted to his normal shape a moment later, barking something urgently in his own tongue before remembering that Netya could not understand him.

"How long has he been here? Can he move?"

Netya gave him a tearful shake of her head, then pointed at Erech's trapped leg.

The alpha swallowed and set his jaw firmly, but even his stoic resolve could not hide the pain in his expression.

"It's very bad, isn't it?" she said.

"We must get him free," Khelt replied, jumping to his feet and bracing himself to grip the rock that had fallen on Erech's leg. He dug his feet into the muddy ground, ignoring the pieces of soil that continued to tumble down from above, and braced his hands beneath the edges of the slab.

Netya had never seen him so driven before. The alpha's brow knotted with strain, and a deep growl built in his chest as he heaved with all his might.

The rock did not move an inch.

"Khelt—" she began, but he silenced her with a feral bark.

The alpha repositioned himself and threw his weight against the slab again, groaning with exertion as he pushed, refusing to back down. His moccasins ground themselves backwards through the mud, digging up small furrows of earth as Khelt's body shook, tendons rising to the surface of his skin as his breath stuttered through clenched teeth. For agonising moments he forced every bit of his considerable strength up against the rock, but it refused to yield. When at last Khelt finally admitted defeat it was with a roar of pain as he shifted position at the wrong moment and something within his body gave.

Netya called out his name again in concern, but she could not leave Erech to rush to his side. The alpha slumped against the slab, features contorted in pain as he clutched his shoulder.

"Get more of the others," he growled through his teeth. "The strongest hunters, find all of them."

Fern had been watching anxiously from half way up the slope, and she

bobbed her lupine head in acquiescence before dashing off again to carry out the alpha's command. The pack members who had followed after them were peering down from the overhang, some picking their way gingerly down the treacherous incline to offer whatever help they could.

"We need the seers, for Erech and for you," Netya said, trying to focus on what she could do to help rather than everything she could not.

"For him, not me," Khelt huffed, pacing back and forth despite the intense torment he was clearly in. His right arm hung limply by his side, hand clutched to his shoulder as he closed his eyes and fought through the pain of his torn muscles.

Two of the seers arrived before any of the hunters Khelt had sent for, but when they tried to usher Netya out of the way Erech cried out in alarm and clung to her hand tighter.

"Here, Erech, Netya here," she said clumsily in words he could understand. She thought his breathing had already grown shallower, though amidst the heavy rain it was difficult to tell. He groaned and squeezed at her hand again, trying to move and crying out in pain as his leg shifted.

"Here!" Netya squeezed back desperately, then leant down so that her lips were close to his ear. "Alpha Erech. Netya here," she whispered, repeating the simple words again as he stilled, his breathing becoming less agitated.

After that the seers seemed to agree that her presence was necessary after all, but after a brief examination it became apparent that there was little they could do. They slipped one of their dried pain-dulling plant bulbs into the young man's mouth for him to chew, then after a few solemn words with Khelt the alpha sent them aside to wait with the others.

Netya had never seen Adel's wolf before, but when a graceful, dark-furred female with streaks of white running through her black coat hopped down to join them she knew it could be no one else. Even in her animal shape the den mother was a creature of elegance and beauty, gliding down the slippery slope like a dancer in the rain. Netya could not even spare a thought for how much Adel's presence unnerved her in the face of her despair. A few short months ago she had gazed with fascination on the remains of these people, and now she could not bear the thought of death visiting the pack who had taken her in.

"Can you do anything more to ease his pain?" Netya asked softly. "I do not think he has much blood left to lose."

"Where is Fern with the hunters?" Khelt growled.

Adel ignored the pair of them as she left the guise of her wolf behind and crouched down over Erech, examining his crushed leg with prying fingers that elicited more cries of pain from the young man.

"You're hurting him!" Netya exclaimed, but Adel silenced her with a curt response.

"Shut up girl, I am saving his life."

Khelt glowered at her. "Your seers said nothing could be done."

"I have experience they do not."

"You are half their age."

Adel finally returned his glare, hatred burning in her eyes. "And when I was still a child I was helping my pack's seers heal the warriors your clan sent home maimed. I know these wounds."

The pair stared each other down, their battle of wills undercut only by the sound of the rain and the distant rumble of thunder.

"How?" Khelt said at last.

Adel turned back to her patient. "Bring me a sharp knife and an axe. I will remove his leg."

"He will die!" Netya exclaimed, cradling Erech's head closer.

"Your people may, ours will not. If I can get to the wound and close it he may heal before his blood runs out, but I can do nothing for him like this."

"You may as well send him to his death," Khelt snarled. "If you cared to grow close with your pack you would know Erech as we do. A life as a cripple is no life for a man like him."

Netya thought she saw tears in Khelt's eyes, but once again the rain cast a veil over the truth.

"All he dreams of is his future," the alpha continued. "The days when he will lead the hunters. Grow stronger, run faster, become a man among all men. What will he have left if all he longs for is taken away?"

"His life," Adel said. "And freedom from juvenile dreams."

"Of course you would not understand," Khelt snorted, turning away. "We wait for the others. With their help we can move the rock."

"Even if you move it he will still be a cripple," Adel said. "The bone and flesh will not mend the way it once was."

"But he will still walk."

Adel rose to her feet, and the look Netya glimpsed on her face brought back all the girl's fears of the den mother tenfold. She looked furious, a storm brewing behind her dark eyes as she approached Khelt as if she was every bit

the male—every bit the alpha—he was. She stood not an inch shorter than her opponent.

"Every minute you waste more of his blood washes away with the rain. You will let him die for the sake of pride." Her words were steady, but the power in her voice simmered like fire. A controlled blaze, but one that could still sear flesh from bone.

Khelt's injured arm tensed, forming a tight fist at his side. He gave not an inch. "And you would deny him the chance at taking back his life. I dare to hope, witch, while you run and cower from it like a scared child." He hissed the last words so softly Netya barely heard them.

She was terrified now, not just for Erech, but for Khelt. More than that, even, she was terrified for the whole pack. The alpha and den mother looked as if they were about to let loose the beasts within them and tear out each other's throats.

Netya averted her eyes, the girl's tears falling on Erech's face as she rocked him gently, afraid that anything she said to intervene might only provoke the two others further. She returned to mumbling her soothing words to the young man under her breath again, closing her eyes and begging the spirits to bring an end to this horrible moment.

And bring an end to it they did. Whether it was the earth itself heeding her plea, or the weight of the collected pack members peering out from the overhang, the ground above them suddenly shifted with an audible tearing of soil and grass. A collective cry went up from the group as they stumbled backwards, tugging those closest to the edge away as a huge piece of the outcrop began to detach itself.

The landslide happened within moments, but in the brief instant before the earth came down on top of them Adel took the shape of her wolf and darted to the side, while Khelt threw himself over Netya and knocked her to the ground, shielding her and Erech with his body as the falling mass of earth split in two and rattled down through the rocks all around them. A crack almost as loud as the lightning itself split the air as a second huge slab came free and plummeted edge-first into the piece that had pinned Erech's leg, sending an explosion of sharp chips through the air that stung Netya's legs and cut open her skin.

Then, almost as soon as it had started, the patter of falling earth gave way to the sound of rain again. Khelt rose to his knees, lifting first Netya then Erech's upper body free of the cascade of mud that had fallen just short of

burying them. The voices of the others reached her ears, and amidst the cries of alarm and concern she heard Fern calling her name. She lifted a hand, waving weakly to signal that she was alive, but could not bring herself to speak. Erech was no longer moving, and his grip had loosened on her hand.

Khelt called out a series of commands in his own tongue, and as Fern hurried down the slope to embrace Netya the hunters she had been sent to gather followed. The slab pinning Erech had been shattered into pieces by the impact of the second falling rock. He was still trapped, and Netya feared that his maimed leg might have been crushed even further beyond hope of healing, but with three strong men on either side of the broken slab they were able to lift it just enough for Netya, Fern, and Khelt to drag the unconscious man free.

Adel and her seers descended on him a moment later, ushering everyone else aside as they attempted to clean Erech's mangled leg and bind it in place against a straight branch. Netya was too shaken to do anything but watch. The Moon People had resumed talking in their own language, and she could not even begin to try and pick apart what they were saying.

"They will take him into the seers' cave," Fern said as she held her friend in her arms. "If he is to live, they will need to keep watch over him all night."

"And his leg?" Netya forced out through quivering lips. She had not noticed, but her whole body was freezing. The weight of the bag inside her clothing pressed against her stomach, but she could not bring herself to care about whether it had been ruined by the rain.

"They do not seem hopeful, but Adel says she will not have to remove it. Was she really going to do that?"

Netya nodded, allowing Fern to guide her after the others as they bore Erech up on an improvised stretcher of clothing and carried him carefully down to the base of the outcrop, where they could more safely skirt around to the camp's main entrance.

Even with Erech's life hanging by a thread, what frightened Netya more was the confrontation she had witnessed between Khelt and Adel. None of the others had been close enough to see or hear what passed between them, but she now understood why the rivalry between the alpha and den mother was only ever spoken of in nervous whispers, or not at all. If fate had not intervened when it did, what would have happened? Whatever had sparked the conflict between them could not have been animosity over an unwanted mating. It was clear from what Netya had seen that it ran far deeper than that.

The two were like fire and ice, and their fierce pride would not falter an inch when they came up against one another.

More worrying still, Netya did not know whether it was Khelt or Adel who had been in the right.

The rains continued, the warmth of summer faded, and Erech drifted between life and death as he lay within the seers' cave. Netya braved the weather to ask after him every morning and evening, and the lack of news worried her. It was not common for the Moon People to take so long to recover. Even with the severity of Erech's wounds, Fern said he should have come back from the brink within a day or two. Sickness and infection were so rare as to be almost unheard of among the pack, but they were not impossible.

The seers said little. Adel often sent Netya away before she could hear news of Erech's condition one way or another, but it seemed clear that the young man was battling more than just broken bones and torn flesh.

Khelt remained withdrawn in the privacy of his own den while his wounded shoulder healed. He did not call on Netya once while Erech's life still hung by a thread, and besides Caspian the only visitors he accepted were the seers.

Fern seemed even more convinced of Netya's great destiny following the events of the storm, and it made her cringe with guilt every time the other girl boasted of how her friend had run out into the rain, as if called by the spirits themselves, to save Erech's life. The true reason for her actions that evening remained an uncomfortable secret, and she turned down as many of the compliments and gifts she received afterwards as she could. For months she had longed for the pack to embrace her as one of their own, and, now that she finally seemed to be gaining their respect, it was based on a half-truth. She had found Erech, yes, but it was no divine wisdom that had led her to him.

When she tried to explain to Erech's mother, the ample woman refused to hear a single word of Netya's self-deprecation, drawing her into a crushing hug and holding her there as she professed that, no matter where she had come from, the Sun girl was now as much of a daughter to her as any of the other young females, and that she would always have a place by her family's hearth should she want it.

Dishonesty did not sit well with Netya, but with no way to explain why she had been out in the storm that evening, the Moon People were quick to settle for their own conclusions. She sat up several nights in her hammock when

Fern was asleep, staring at the bag of herbs in her hands as she listened to the patter of the rain. With the bundle tucked into her bedding for safekeeping, it was never far from her thoughts for long, and in Khelt's absence she had much time to ponder over her future. Erech's brush with death had sobered her, and she now realised that her impending motherhood was not a decision she should leave up to chance. Bearing Khelt's child would shape her life from that moment on, and she could not afford to take the wrong path. There could be a place for her here among the pack. She knew that now. But there was also a place waiting for her back in the village, with a family whose affections and loyalty she would not need to earn.

She wished she had someone to talk to about it, but who could she share such troubles with? Khelt might send her away if she revealed that she was having second thoughts about giving him his heir. Fern would listen to her, and she wanted to believe that the other girl would support any decision she made, but her friend was still fiercely loyal to the pack. If she suspected Netya was about to make the wrong choice, would she be able to sit by and let it happen? Fern would never betray her confidence maliciously, but she might do so out of concern.

Who did that leave? She and Erech did not speak enough of the same language to discuss such a complex problem. Caspian might understand, but did he even care for her enough for it to matter? She suspected his loyalty to Khelt took precedence over any fondness he might have for a young female.

Only one person remained, and it was the last person in the world Netya wanted to share such an intimate conversation with. Adel was the only one who knew her secret, but what compassion could she possibly harbour for a girl she seemed to regard with such great contempt? Any advice Netya hoped to get from the seer would be coloured with deceit, and yet it was perhaps the only advice she felt safe in accepting at that moment.

As heavy as Netya's burden of decision was, it was still not great enough to make her seek an audience with Adel.

Erech lived, but he did not walk again until the wet season had ended and winter was almost upon them. Netya and Fern took him down to the edge of the river, where he practiced putting weight on his crippled leg with the aid of a crutch. The two of them gave him eager encouragement with each step he managed, but even Erech seemed to know that his best efforts would never return his body to the way it once was. His leg was horribly scarred, the flesh

misshapen where it had healed, and even his best efforts were not enough to coax more than a twitch of movement from his toes.

They took him down to the river every day, and gradually the young male grew strong enough to walk short distances by himself, but the effort and pain it caused him made Netya's chest hurt every time she watched. She knew the reason he allowed her and Fern to come with him was because he could not stand to let the other young men see him like this. His blue eyes had hollowed of the pride and vigour they once held, and he spent much of his time away from the group rather than joining them around their fires.

"Erech will hunt again," Netya said to him one morning as they sat huddled together in a pair of warm cloaks, watching the first flakes of snow fall. "Many years, much strength, but Erech will hunt again. Then, honour greater than ever." She smiled at him, desperately hoping that the meaning of her inelegant words came through. The cold had been causing his leg more pain than ever, and she worried that winter would take an even greater toll on the young man's spirit.

He looked at her, and a tiny glimmer of warmth reappeared in his expression. It was not the exuberance of the old Erech, but it was a spark of life all the same.

"You have been a good friend to me," he said, and took her mittened hand in his. "Wise seer Netya."

She flushed and looked away. She was no seer, and there was little wisdom in being kind. But she stayed by his side, and they watched the snow fall together until the cold began to pain Erech's leg, and she helped him back inside his mother's earth lodge where a warm fire waited.

As the plains froze around them the pack retreated one by one into the larger, warmer dwellings, until at last most of them abandoned the main camp to congregate in the winter caves near the rear of the outcrop, beneath the higher dens of the seers and alpha. Food stores, bedding, firewood, and crafting supplies were all transported down, and a heavy screen of branches and animal hides was dusted off and refurbished to cover the entrance and seal in the warmth. Over the course of a week the damp and lonely caves were transformed into a cosy winter refuge, with families and friends building hearths together and each staking claim to their own corner.

Erech's family invited Netya and Fern to join their fire, and they were happy to be welcomed into the loud, but otherwise very friendly group. Netya

had hoped to snag one of the smaller caves linked to the sides of the main chamber, but those were quickly claimed by the high hunters and their kin. Vaya and Tal's group secured their own spot first, marking the entrance with a line of bones from their final hunt of the year, as if daring anyone of low status to cross into their territory.

Old Oke, who had long since lost the hunting status of his youth, but had replaced it with equally strong bonds of loyalty and respect from the middle-aged hunters he had trained, took another of the chambers with his entourage. The rest of the warmest, most private spots became a source of competition among the others, and several bloody fights broke out between the boisterous young hunters who each felt their claim was more worthy than those of their peers.

Netya tried her best to turn a blind eye to the proceedings, but Fern and Erech reminded her that fights would only become more common as the winter dragged on and the pack's stifled aggressions sought an outlet. Try as she might, she could not muster the same enthusiasm for the violent sport as the rest of the Moon People. It was a reminder of how, in many ways, she was still very different from them.

It was with these thoughts that she found herself lying in Khelt's furs one evening, glad for the respite from the hubbub of the caves and the space to think it brought her. She gazed into the fire as the alpha lay on his arm behind her, toying with her hair between his fingers.

"Has this really become my home?" she said, shivering as a cold draft found its way in from outside. "My own people seem so distant now. Sometimes I go days without even thinking about them."

"Where does your heart belong?" Khelt murmured.

"I do not know. It is somewhere out there on the plains, searching for a direction to turn."

"Then I hope it turns toward us," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder where her skin had prickled from the cold. "I meant it when I said you were free to leave, Netya. But, spirits help me, for months I have worried myself trying to decide how to break it to my pack if that day ever does come. It would upset me greatly to see you go."

She rolled over to face him, searching out his eyes in the dark and catching a glimpse of the intimacy she so often longed for. "You mean much to me too, my alpha."

"Please, use my name when we are alone together. The alpha is the man

who lives outside of this cave."

"If I were not to bear you an heir..." Netya began. "Would you still desire me?"

"You have many years left to become a mother. It will happen, in time." "But would you still desire me?" she asked again.

Khelt paused, then kissed her lips gently. "Any man would desire such a kind, beautiful, attentive young female. I may never be able to take you as my mate, but that is not through lack of wanting. I do care for you."

He said the words with sincerity, but Netya did not accept them blindly as she might have done a few months ago. She believed that Khelt meant what he said. He truly did care for her, in his own way. But, as they both well knew, she could never be his mate. They would not sit out on the outcrop together watching the snow fall, or lie together in the warmth of the summer fires, or share a winter in the caves with their children like Erech's mother and father did. Without a mate to call his own, Khelt would always be an alpha first and a lover second.

"What if you were to take me as your mate?" she asked.

The question clearly took Khelt off guard. She rarely asked him of such personal matters. Just as the frown had begun to creep into his expression and a stern dismissal threatened, Netya put a hand on his chest gave him an imploring look.

"You said the alpha was the man outside this cave. Will you not leave him there, just this once?"

Khelt's expression softened a little. "You can never become my mate, Netya."

"But if I did?"

"Many in the pack would be unsettled. They would question my wisdom. Perhaps some might even challenge me for leadership. Dissent is an alpha's greatest enemy." He looked away for a moment, a look of distaste crossing his features at what he said next. "You have heard the tale of how Adel came to be our den mother by now, yes?"

She nodded.

"Her old pack do not have the strength to challenge us, but they are not our friends. I already dishonoured them when I refused to take Adel as my mate, and if I were to choose another in her place they would be provoked even further. I have no wish to return to those old bloody days of rivalry."

"How would they ever know? Do they not live far to the south?"

Khelt snorted and sat up, throwing back the warm furs. "Adel would find a way to send word. She is wily enough to slip anything by me."

"Would she really go so far?"

"What do you think? You saw her the night Erech was hurt. She would have maimed him just to try and prove me wrong."

Netya bit her tongue, stifling the response she wanted to give. As little as she cared for the den mother, she did not believe Adel had been trying to score petty points against Khelt in saving Erech. She had simply taken a different, perhaps more drastic, but perhaps more necessary, route to freeing him. If the second landslide had not shattered the rock pinning the young man, Adel's way might have been his only chance at survival.

"I hate to spend these evenings talking of her," Khelt muttered.

Netya sat up, pulling the furs to her chest as she put a hand on his arm. "Khelt," she said gently, "will you tell me what happened between the two of you? It frightens me to see the way you look at her sometimes." She felt him tense, and when he spoke again his voice had hardened into the gravelly tones of the alpha.

"It is nothing you need to hear."

"It would help me to understand. Perhaps it would help you also?"

"There is nothing to understand! Mind your place, Netya, I am still your alpha." He threw the furs off and swung his legs over the side of the bed, bristling as he paced to the far wall of the chamber.

His anger frightened Netya, but she swallowed her misgivings and crept to the edge of the bed. She'd glimpsed the tender part of him that for months she had longed to reach, and she would not let it go now. "It must be painful for you. I know some of your pack died—"

"Is this what I bring you to my bed for?!" Khelt exclaimed, rounding on her. "To hound me with these insolent questions? Take your clothes and return to the cave with the others. I have no more use for you tonight."

Tears came to Netya's eyes. Khelt had never spoken to her in such a way before, and his scorn hurt more than any physical blow he could have dealt. In an instant she no longer felt like his lover. His words had reduced her to the alpha's plaything, something to be enjoyed and cast aside once its lustre was spent.

"It is freezing outside," she said.

"Then wear your cloak." He gathered up her clothing and dropped it on the bed before turning his back again.

Netya dressed in silence, trying not to cry. She found her anger and clung on to it, choosing fury over despair. How could he be so callous? She had been trying to reach out to him, to touch a part of the alpha that he could share with no one else, and he had thrown it back in her face. Was he even capable of being the man she wanted?

Khelt's back remained turned, refusing to look at her. Netya wanted to confront him further, but she remembered the last time she had made a fool of herself by allowing her anger to run wild. It was not that she feared his response, but that, deep down, she realised it would be a pointless effort. He had closed his heart off to her, and once his mind was made up Khelt's will was stronger than stone. She may as well have beaten her fists against the rocks of the cave wall.

Tugging her cloak tight around her shoulders, Netya wiped the moisture from her eyes and stepped out through the drapes into the biting cold. It was not a long walk down to the caves, but it was far enough for the chill to seep into her clothing and pierce her sensitive skin. She had become comfortable in Khelt's bed as her tender body relaxed in the afterglow of lovemaking, and the sharp contrast of being thrust out into the winter air made her discomfort all the worse.

By the time she crept into the cave and returned to her empty spot she was shaking, and even Fern's questions could not rouse a response from her as she pulled the furs over her head and curled into a ball.

Caspian

He knew something was wrong when he saw Netya hurrying out of the alpha's den in the middle of the night. He called her name, but the wind stole his voice away before it could reach her, and a moment later the girl had been swallowed up by the darkness. What brash decision had Khelt made now?

Caspian thought about following her, but it was late, and if the alpha had just thrown her out of his den into the cold he doubted he would find either of them in good tempers. Already the bitter air was numbing his fingers, and he resolved to look into whatever had happened the next morning rather than worrying about it now.

He stepped down from the entrance to the seers' cave and relieved himself in the snow, before wrapping his furs back up tight and hurrying inside. By all accounts someone who was neither a seer nor a woman should have been forbidden from such a place, but Caspian had never cared much for tradition. As a child he had spent half a winter in here with his mother and her fellow seers as he fought through a sickness they did not know how to cure. Within a few months he was healthy again, but the women had become so used to his presence that they were more inclined to tolerate his comings and goings, and after it became apparent that no amount of scolding would keep him out they finally seemed to accept that he was the exception to the rule.

Even as a grown man he still sought out the seers' cave for the same reasons he had as a child. It was a quiet, spiritual place, filled with the gentle fragrances of herbs and the eerie light of the strange oils the women burned in their stone lamps. He enjoyed the tranquillity. It was a space for his thoughts to free themselves.

Everyone else had gone to their beds, but Adel still sat awake on the opposite side of the fire near the cave's entrance. Caspian heaved the heavy screen across the opening behind him and settled back into his place opposite her, looking to the game of coloured stones they had been playing in the dirt, his light pebbles against her dark ones.

"I saw Netya outside," he said, watching as the den mother's eyes lit up from within the small mound of furs wrapped about her body. He was disappointed to see her smile.

"Has she finally had enough of him?"

"I would hope not, for all our sakes. I was starting to believe she might be ready to settle here," he said.

"She is little more than a slave to him." Adel grimaced. "She can settle without needing to warm her captor's bed every night."

He gave her a patient look, and the woman huffed, fixing her glower back on the game as she planned her next move. Even after all these years, he could not truly tell whether Adel liked him or not. But like or dislike, the den mother certainly held a respect for him that extended to precious few others. Her willingness to let the topic slide was the result of a dozen such discussions between them that had led nowhere. She could not persuade him that his childhood friend was the barbarian she thought, and he could not convince her that he was a good man who made hard choices in the best way he knew how.

"Well, she has an eye for you, anyhow," Adel muttered, knocking one of Caspian's pebbles aside and replacing it with two of her own.

"And fortunately I have no intention of claiming what isn't mine."

The den mother glanced at him, concern marking her features for a moment. "It almost escaped me, did you take good care of Liyanthe last summer?"

He smiled. "She was very eager once I showed her there was nothing to be afraid of. She seems much more willing to court the other young men now."

Adel nodded, looking relieved. "Good. It took all night to calm her after her first summer fires. Hopefully she can put it behind her now."

"You could have asked her yourself."

She waved a hand impatiently. "What does it matter? You have told me now. I take it she is not the female for you, though?"

He shook his head. "She is a sweet girl, but I would not have sought her out if not for your suggestion. If I managed to help her, that is enough for me."

"Hmh," Adel grunted. "And you have no interest in the Sun girl, either?"

"What is your concern with her, den mother? It is not Netya's fault that Khelt favours her."

"It was a foolish mistake to take her from her people."

"You do not need to tell me again," Caspian replied. "But she has settled better than any of us could have hoped. You said it yourself, she may well have saved Erech's life by staying at his side the way she did."

Adel paused, watching him intently for a moment before speaking again. "I tried to scare her into leaving not long after she arrived, you know."

"Why? She would not have gotten far. Did you want to get her killed? Because if anyone but Khelt had caught her, you know what would have happened."

"I would have carried her back to her own people myself if it had worked," Adel said. "But the stubborn girl refused. She can't even see what will happen if she stays here and has Khelt's child."

"Perhaps not, but it is her choice to make. She may be young, but she is not as foolish as you think."

The den mother's scowl remained firmly etched into her face. Caspian sighed inwardly, wondering if he would ever find some way to reconcile Adel with the rest of the pack. She was barely a few years older than himself and Khelt, and yet he had seen her heal wounds and divine meaning from the spirits with skill beyond that of the wisest and most ancient of seers. If ever there had been a woman destined for great things, it was Adel. But there was ice in the den mother's heart. A bitterness buried beneath years of stubborn anger, and every day it worried him to see the same darkness growing in Khelt. He had tried so many times to reach it and dig out the root of their discord, but at times it seemed an impossible task.

"You see something of yourself in her, do you not?" he said at last.

"I had twice the wits at her age. She may have my hair, but that is all we share in common."

"You saw the way she was with Erech. I recall a similar kindness in you when you watched over our wounded many years ago."

"I never wept over the people who took me from my home." She took Caspian's final pebble from the patch of dirt they had been playing on, then rose to her feet. "Perhaps you will have better luck next evening."

He gave her a disappointed look, but he cared little over losing the game. "Well, we have all winter."

Adel turned and dragged her furs after her without wishing him good night. He collected the playing stones and secured them back in their pouch before sitting up a while longer to watch the fire. The alpha and den mother were the ones with the power, and yet he felt like the balance point struggling to keep both in check. How could he spare time to think of making Liyanthe, Netya, or any of the other females his mate when he had to constantly mediate between two such wilful leaders?

He closed his eyes and lay back, allowing his worries to leave him for a few precious moments before sleep came. How would the night of the summer fires have ended had he allowed his attentions to roam free, without thought or consideration to what the next morning might bring?

He smiled to himself as the world of dreams claimed him. He could think of a few ways.

It took half the morning to track down Khelt on the snowswept outcrop after Caspian found the alpha's den empty the next day. He was perched on the rocks at the edge of the camp, his cloak already white with powdery snow as he stared out across the plains. Just like Khelt. Even against the elements, he would refuse to break his vigil until the weather threatened to freeze him in place.

"I almost mistook you for a boulder," Caspian said as he crouched down beside his friend, brushing away some of the snow that had collected on his cloak. "Did you break her heart?"

Khelt grunted. "Has news of it gotten around the pack already?"

"No, but I saw her leaving your den last night. What happened?"

"She asked me questions I did not wish to answer, and then I acted rashly. I should not have lost my temper with her."

"Did she leave of her own accord?" Caspian said.

Khelt hung his head a little, in the way he always did when feeling ashamed. It was a charmingly wolf-like gesture that carried over from his feral side. "I sent her away. What a worthy male I am, sending my woman out into the cold while I stay warm by the fire."

"Even the alpha has to have his faults."

Khelt sighed, rubbing the back of a hand across his stubble. "She may want me to take her as my mate."

That surprised Caspian. He knew Netya was attentive, but nothing he had seen led him to believe she was truly in love with the alpha. "And... You are afraid she will become unhappy if you deny her?"

"What else can I do? As long as Adel's clan still remember our broken promise, my hands are bound. I want Netya to always be a friend to us, even if she does go back to her own people one day, but how can I keep her happy if she wants the one thing I cannot give?"

Caspian pondered for a moment, collecting flakes of snow on his palm and watching them melt. "If she wants a mate, there is nothing to stop her from finding one. It just cannot be you."

Khelt threw his hands in the air in exasperation. "And who would want to

share a female with the alpha, much less a girl of the Sun People with no status of her own?"

"Perhaps you will have your heir before long, then she will be free to mate whoever she wishes. In the meantime, you can work on letting her find the status she needs."

Khelt gave him a curious look. "I know what you say makes sense, but I am not so sure."

"Because you care for her also?"

"Perhaps I do. Ah, but how can I! Preventing her from being someone else's mate makes her no more mine. I feel I do nothing but toy with the poor girl's life."

"Then give her the means to choose for herself," Caspian said. "Let her find a place among the pack to call her own. Even if it is not a mate she desires, it will make her happy knowing she is more than just your consort."

"Somehow I do not think Netya is cut out to be a huntress or craftswoman." "Apprentice her to the seers, then."

"No," Khelt said sharply. "I will not have her near Adel night and day. She is already afraid of her."

"Then either she learns to hunt, or she will have to wait until she becomes one of the mothers."

Khelt muttered to himself, making a show of knocking the snow from his clothing before he finally responded. "I will allow her to hunt if she wishes, then. Once the snows end she may join the others."

Caspian nodded, satisfied. He did not know how severe the disagreement between the alpha and his concubine had been, but it always helped Khelt to have a plan of action in mind. Then, at least, he would stop sitting out in the cold freezing himself to death.

"And of course, there is one more thing you must do to make this right with her," he said, putting a hand on the alpha's shoulder as he stood up.

"What is that?"

"The next time you see her, apologise."

The following day Netya began taking Adel's herbs with her morning meals. At first it began in spite. She was still angry at Khelt, and denying him his heir, even if it was just for a short time, was the only power she had over the alpha. But her frustrations were short-lived, and once the hurt of Khelt's rejection had faded she was able to put her negative feelings to rest. He even took her aside a few days later, giving her what she assumed was an attempt at an apology. It was clearly hard for the man to admit when he was wrong, but it was endearing to hear him try.

"Winter is a hard time for all of us, even me," he said. "And I may have let my wolf's temper take control for a moment. It will not happen again, but remember—there are matters I would prefer not to share with you. I will leave the alpha outside my den for as long as you agree not to invite him back in. Let the time we share together be pleasant for both of us."

She had accepted his apology, even though it contained the clear message that he had no intention of baring his soul to her in the way she wanted. It was hard for her to justify raising the topic again after that, even though she was more curious than ever to find out what had driven the wedge between him and Adel.

She still preferred passing the weeks of winter in Khelt's bed rather than in the noisy cave with the rest of the group, where several times she was forced to bear intimate witness to the confrontations between agitated pack members. Every time a pair of snarling wolves faced off she tried to muster the same enthusiasm as her companions, but once teeth had broken skin and blood was spilling across the cave floor her discomfort returned. All the reassurance in the world was not enough to stop her thinking about how such vicious injuries would feel if she was on the receiving end of them. Perhaps she needed a wolf inside her to tap into the primal spirit that joined the rest of the pack together in a throng when every confrontation began.

If there was one good thing that came of the violent challenges, it was that Netya overcame her nausea at the sight and smell of blood. By the time the third fight broke out—an altercation between Vaya and Tal, who seemed to have grown tired of asserting their dominance between the furs that evening —Netya found herself able to watch from start to finish without experiencing

the familiar turning of her stomach. It did little to improve her enjoyment of the fight, but at least she no longer had to look away half way through to prevent herself from vomiting.

Even as she sought refuge in Khelt's bed, however, she became more aware of the distance between herself and the alpha. A strange distance. A distance of the soul rather than the body. It was something she would have consulted the seers over if not for her aversion to setting foot anywhere near Adel's lair. While every day she found herself growing closer and more attached to Fern, Erech, and the rest of the group who shared their fire, she still felt like nothing more than a consort to Khelt. She longed to know what lay within his heart. Caspian seemed to know, but he spent so much of his time in the seers' cave that she barely had the chance to speak with him all season.

And so, as the months of winter passed, Netya continued to take Adel's herbs. She kept the bag bundled up with the assortment of belongings she'd left in her snow-covered tent, returning every few days to collect a small handful and stash them safely in a pouch she kept tied inside her clothing close to her stomach. The more she thought of becoming a mother, the more the idea of being bound to Khelt concerned her.

Seeing the way the other mothers and fathers were together, she wanted the same for herself and the father of her children. If it was to be Khelt, she did not know how they could ever be so intimate when he was still her alpha and she his concubine. Besides which, the morning sickness of one of the other girls who had fallen pregnant earlier in the season was an uncomfortable reminder that motherhood was no free and easy undertaking.

If and when Khelt finally opened up to her and claimed her as his mate in everything but name, she resolved to stop taking the herbs. But until then, she did not wish to be bound to the promise of motherhood.

Spring came not a day too soon, and Netya was ecstatic when the weather allowed her to go out into the wilderness again, where she could ride on the back of Fern's wolf and explore all of the new plants the melting winter snow had unearthed. Even Erech managed to join them when they did not stray too far. The cold weather had been hard on his leg, but in the shape of his wolf he was able to limp along with more ease than two legs allowed, and rather than training for the hunt with the other men he instead spent most of his time in the company of his female friends.

"My place will be open for another hunter to claim this year," he said one

afternoon as they returned home, him riding on the back of Fern's wolf as Netya walked alongside them. "I would rather you take it than anyone else. Nathar has not stopped hounding me over it since the season began."

"I do want to learn how you hunt," she replied, "but the last time I tried to help Vaya left me with a broken nose. What if I make a mistake again?"

"You have the alpha's blessing to hunt, and you speak our language as well as Fern speaks yours now. I think you are ready."

"But you have spent your whole lives hunting. Back in my village, only the men learned those skills."

"Every apprentice has to start somewhere. You must find one of the older hunters to be your mentor, then everything will start falling into place."

Fern barked and stopped for a moment as she put out a paw to prod at one of the other girl's skinny arms, shaking her head and making an exasperated whine at Erech.

Netya smiled. "I think Fern is right. I do not have the body of a man to help me with those skills."

Erech shrugged. "Then practice. I cannot run every morning as I used to, but I still keep the rest of my body strong by using it every day. You could be strong enough to throw a spear in time for your first hunt."

Netya had noticed at the end of the summer that her slender form had taken on a slightly more toned, wiry quality, like Fern's. Just through the daily tasks of foraging and walking for several miles at a time, she had become stronger and healthier, even if it was not to the extent of the rest of the pack. Her skin had even taken on a hint of the darker complexion her companions shared from being out under the sun so regularly. The winter months spent inside had dulled that, of course, but now that warmer weather was on its way she felt hopeful about regaining the physique of a more powerful woman.

She admired the hunters and their prowess, even though she had yet to witness it first hand. The stories they told made it seem like a masterful game that tested both strength and wits to their limit; how Khelt had once gone toe to toe with a giant mountain cat and come back without a single scratch to show for it, or how many years ago Oke managed to encircle a herd five times the size of his hunting band and corral it for miles out of a rival pack's territory.

She was even a little in awe of Vaya, despite the huntress's clear and ongoing distaste for her. Even with her abrasive attitude, she could match the strength of half the men in the pack with ease, and her wolf could run rings

around the others when they tussled in training for the hunt. If Netya could not find kinship with the woman, at the very least she could respect her skills and physical prowess.

"The Sun girl will not be allowed on any of my hunts," Vaya proclaimed loudly one morning in the winter cave, as most of the pack were making preparations to move back to their outside lodgings. "I would rather take an infant over her. She cannot even lift a javelin, let alone keep up with the pack."

There were times when Netya found herself wishing she had not become so fluent in the Moon People's language, and this was one of them. She tried to ignore the comments, focusing on bundling up her belongings as the huntress continued to speak.

"Perhaps the alpha is trying to make an example of her. I have heard he sends her scuttling out of his den when he is done with her these days."

This time Netya was sure Vaya's barbed words were aimed her way, but she took a deep breath and continued to ignore them. There was little she could hope to gain from trying to confront the other woman.

"Be careful, Vaya," Tal said from his seat at the hunters' fire. "Don't let the alpha catch you pushing your luck again."

"Hm. As long as he knows I have no intention of including his pet in my hunting parties."

"Then it's a good thing you won't be leading the first hunt of the season," Tal replied.

"Won't I?" Vaya said, her voice taking on a prideful note now that she was sure everyone in the cave was listening. "This year I have as good a chance as any. It was my herd and my hunts that kept us fed last summer. The alpha is wise. He knows a masterful huntress when he sees one."

"Even after your punishment?" Tal smirked. "Your dreams are the only place you'll be leading the great hunt, Vaya."

Their conversation turned mercifully away from the topic of the Sun girl as the pair descended into bickering and posturing again, and Netya took the opportunity to slip away and carry her belongings back out to her tent. She was glad to have her privacy again, especially if it meant getting away from Vaya. The huntress could gossip as much as she wanted for all Netya cared, so long as she did it out of sight and earshot. Most of the pack—at least, most whose opinions Netya valued—knew that Vaya's words could be brash and thoughtless, but it still hurt to hear them said out loud.

Rather than letting herself become upset, she resolved to prove the hunters wrong about her. The great hunt would come soon, once the preserved winter supplies had been finished and their scouts tracked down a suitable herd nearby. It was the only time of year when all of the pack's hunting groups joined together as one large party and set out to bring home a bounty of fresh kill. It was a time for apprentices to distinguish themselves, and many of the alliances forged in the great hunt would go on to shape the structure of the hunting groups that formed in the coming year.

That very morning, Netya began to practice. She could not take the form of a wolf like her companions, and she lacked the strength to carry hunting supplies with the bearers, but her own people had managed to hunt just as well without relying on teeth and claws.

She practiced throwing javelins first, but her aim was poor, and her lack of strength sent her first few throws flopping into the grass uselessly after barely travelling a few yards. It seemed hopeless that her feeble attempts would be enough to skewer an animal in the few short weeks she had to train. But Netya refused to admit defeat, and she spent all day at the foot of the outcrop throwing javelin after javelin at the small circle of twine she had made as a target, until her muscles burned and her limbs trembled from the effort. On her final throw she managed to make the tip of her javelin pierce the earth, but it still landed to the side of her target, and the angle she had thrown at caused the shaft to flop to the ground with a crack as the tip broke off in the soil.

Netya groaned with frustration, raking damp strands of hair back from the perspiration that coated her face.

"Perhaps the javelin isn't for you," a voice called from behind her.

She turned around in a huff, shielding her eyes from the setting sun, and saw Caspian sitting on the rocks watching her.

"Then what is for me?" she said. "Standing back and watching while the real hunters do what I cannot?"

Caspian shook his head, rising to his feet as he approached her. "You need someone to instruct you. You hold your javelin like it is a spear."

"I am holding it in the same way the men from my village did. And I tried finding a mentor. Those who do not laugh at me say they already have other apprentices to train this season." She stuck out her lower lip, folding her arms as Caspian picked up another javelin and offered it to her.

"Your people often hunt with the spear. Here, let me show you."

Reluctantly, she allowed him to press the javelin into her hands again, forgetting her frustration for a moment as Caspian stood behind her and adjusted her posture. He guided her with firm hands on her bare arms, before moving to her shoulders, then her hips.

"Keep one hand back, farther down the shaft," he said. "The other must have a tight grip. A spear is not for throwing. Once it pierces an animal's hide you must not allow the beast to drag it out of your hands."

Netya set her legs a little farther apart, gripping the javelin as he instructed. Her pulse quickened as his chest brushed up against her back, and she tried not to become distracted from the advice he was giving. "Like this?"

"Almost. A spear is heavier than a javelin, especially near the tip if it is made with a proper head. Keep the tip up, and always between you and your prey. If they slip past it, you will be defenceless."

Netya recalled how Fern had darted past Layon's spear the night at the farmlands. She hoped she would never find herself in the same position, with nothing but a small flint point between her and a snarling wolf.

Caspian showed her a few simple ways in which to hold a spear and move with it, but despite her exhaustion his guidance still ended far earlier than she would have liked. Rather than taxing her aching muscles further, his touch relaxed and soothed her, and his hands seemed to move with the grace and fluidity of a wolf themselves. The brief touches he used to correct her posture were too satisfying to be over with so quickly.

"We must find you a proper spear to practice with," Caspian said as he gathered up the javelins. "There is still time for you to learn before the great hunt."

"Will you show me more tomorrow?" she asked hopefully.

Caspian shook his head. "I am afraid Khelt needs me to check the borders of our territory with him. Other packs become inquisitive when there is fresh hunting to be done after winter, and we want to make sure they have not strayed beyond their boundaries."

Netya watched her companion leave after they reached the top of the outcrop, her wistful gaze lingering on his back as he disappeared up the slope that led to his own private dwelling. Every time they were together she felt something tugging at her deep inside, and yet it felt hopelessly futile when he turned away from her without a backwards glance. Perhaps nothing about her intrigued him in the way he intrigued her. They shared these brief moments, these glimpses of kindness and companionship, and then for weeks she would

barely see him. She felt like a drifting spirit, occasionally catching his notice for a few curious moments, only to fade away back into her own invisible world, beyond his sight.

At least there was someone to stir her dreams when she slept, even if dreams were all she had. It was nice to dream.

Two days later Khelt called her to his den in the middle of the day, though it was not to perform her usual duties to him. He claimed he had a gift for her, and her mind raced with the possibilities as she crept down the dark passage to his den and stepped through the drapes. He had never offered her gifts before, and certainly nothing that warranted being given in private.

The alpha led her over to his table and picked up something that lay on the seat beside it, keeping his back turned for a moment before offering it to her.

"Caspian says you are learning the spear. One will need to be made for you, but perhaps this will serve as a good head."

Netya's eyes widened as he handed her the broken tip of her father's spear. She had last seen the decorated weapon in Khelt's hand the night he took it from Layon, but since then it had completely slipped her mind.

"You brought it with you," she said, running her fingers over the familiar flint tip as she accepted the gift.

"A trophy, perhaps, but I thought it might mean more to you than me. From the look of it, it belonged to a warrior of your people."

Netya nodded. "It was my father's."

"A great warrior, was he?"

"I do not know," she replied. "He fought your people, and took one of the trophies for our wall, but he was killed before I was old enough to remember much of him."

Khelt nodded, an expression of sombre respect on his face. "Then you will honour him by taking his weapon into the hunt."

"I am not sure I would want to honour a man who killed your people."

"Enemy or not, he stood up to protect his home and family. It sounds like he was a man who fought and died in battle, rather than fleeing in fear like the one we took this weapon from."

Netya frowned, taking her attention off the spearhead for a moment. "His name is Layon. He was my friend, and I am happy that he ran while he had the chance. You would have killed him if he stayed to fight."

"Maybe better to die protecting your people than to abandon them in a time

of need. That may not be the way of women, but for men it is key to our honour."

"What would his honour have mattered if he died for nothing?" Netya said. Khelt laughed, putting a hand on her shoulder as he guided her back out of the den. "You sound like Caspian. He thinks of these things in such ways too. No matter, the spear is yours; you may honour your father with it in whatever way you see fit."

As Netya cradled the broken spear in her hands it evoked mixed emotions from her. Part of it was sadness at having been away from her people for so long. Part was shame that she was the daughter of a man who had killed the people she now considered kin. But there was also reassurance, and a welcoming sense of pride. Her father had been a brave warrior, regardless of who his enemies were. Perhaps in wielding his spear, she could recapture the part of his bravery that lived on in her. Khelt's gift was the only real reminder she had of where she'd come from, and she resolved to treasure it. Though she felt she had left Netya of the Village behind her, she did not want to forget the person she had once been. One day, no matter how long it took, she would return to her people.

That very afternoon she sought out the pack's craftsmen. They were already busy making fresh javelins and tools for the great hunt, but the man in charge of keeping the birds, who she had helped last summer, was also a skilled flint knapper, and he was eager to make time for her. Netya watched anxiously as he retouched the edges of the spearhead, applying pressure with the tip of an antler until tiny flakes broke off. He worked his way carefully down each side of the piece of flint, leaving it slightly smaller and more uneven in places, but razor sharp once more. Netya thanked him profusely, offering to assist with the birds again any time he wanted, before taking her newly sharpened spear off to find a suitable shaft.

Her second task proved harder. Sturdy wood was difficult to come by for the pack with the open plains on one side of their camp and miles of bushes and undergrowth on the other. There were a few plentiful sources of scrub woodland nearby, but the quality of the timber from those was so poor that it was fit only for keeping their fires fed all year.

Still, Netya tracked down one craftsman who had a stack of long, sturdy poles he had cut the previous summer ready to be whittled into javelins. He dismissed her impatiently all afternoon, insisting that the weapons he had to

make for the high hunters were more important than her spear. But she waited nearby as hunter after hunter came, and when the sun was going down the whittler finally looked to Netya with a frown, before tossing her one of the three poles left over in his pile.

Her new shaft matched the width of the broken end of her father's spear quite well, but it was far too long and heavy for her, designed for a man rather than a young woman. She found some tools of her own and cut the pole down, lining up her spearhead alongside it, before whittling out a groove for the broken end to sit in. Once the top section of the old spear was tucked firmly in against its new shaft, she tied the two together with a generous length of cord made from tough animal sinew, binding the pieces together over and over, and cutting a few tiny diagonal notches into the wood at intervals to hitch the cord in place so that it would not slip.

The light had almost faded completely by the time she finished putting the final touches on her new spear. The old section had a small wooden cross beneath the head, from which trailed the ragged remnants of some red-dyed wool. A similar pattern of crimson stripes had been daubed down the shaft, but had long since faded with age. The only wool the Moon People had was what they traded with the villagers in the north, so Netya settled for a collection of feathers to decorate the cross segment instead. The seers were gracious enough to gift her with a small pot of red berries, and she ground them down to their pigment before using it to stain the feathers and retouch the old pattern, continuing it down across the old shaft to the new.

Netya's spear was not elegant, nor as sturdy as if it had been made afresh, but it still resembled the weapon that had hung above her mother's hearth since she was a child. It was part of her father, and part of her. Even with the clumsy binding a third of the way down the shaft, and the uneven, mismatched joining of the wood, it still felt good in her hands. It would take practice for her to learn how to use it, and strength to be able to wield it properly, but, if nothing else, the weapon was hers.

She went to sleep proud that night. The great hunt loomed, and she was starting to feel like a hunter.

—**21**— The Hunt

It was not long before the scouts reported back with news of horses and deer in the north, and with a firm target set Khelt wasted no time in announcing his choice of hunt leader. It was to be a man named Hawk, a grizzled veteran with years of experience and a dozen scars that spoke testament to it. He was an unexciting choice, but a solid one. There would be no radical changes to the structure and status of the hunting packs with Hawk in charge this year, but everyone was confident that he would lead a tight and successful inaugural hunt.

Netya trained with her new spear every day, practicing the poise and posture Caspian had shown her in the mornings, before heading out to run in the afternoons. She carried her weapon with her always, allowing her body to become accustomed to its weight as her muscles grew gradually stronger. The others told her that her spear was crude and improperly balanced, with the awkward binding between the two segments of the shaft making it clumsy to use. Vaya and her hunters frequently laughed out loud when they saw her training with it, but Netya tried her best to ignore them. Her spear may have been clumsy to those who were used to more traditionally made weapons, but with no experience of her own she learned to work naturally with what she had.

"See how worthless that thing is?" Vaya said one day as Netya headed past the hunters down to the plains. "The head will pull loose of those bindings the moment she makes a kill with it."

"I am glad to hear you are confident in me making a kill," Netya responded courteously. "I did not think it likely, but the faith of a hunter with your skill means much, Vaya."

A series of raucous chuckles erupted from the other hunters as Netya hurried on past, trying to resist the smile that spread across her lips as Vaya fumed. The huntress was not quick with words, and before she could think of a rebuttal to save face Netya was out of earshot.

The pack departed two days later, leaving barely a third of its members behind on the outcrop. Khelt remained at home with a few others to watch over the young, the elderly, and those incapable of hunting like Erech. He claimed that he was still concerned about the possibility of rival packs sniffing around while the great hunt was in progress, but Netya secretly suspected that he was more worried about leaving Adel in charge. Caspian indirectly confirmed this for her later, commenting that he and Khelt often took it in turns to stay behind during the great hunt. He would not spell it out for her, but his knowing smile was hard to misinterpret.

Erech approached her before they left, limping down to the base of the outcrop with his crutch. Netya could tell it was difficult for him to stand before the entire pack, hobbled and stumbling, while many of the young hunters he had once competed with were already racing and tussling as their wolves.

"I cannot join the hunt this year, so you must make a kill in my place," he said, then took a pouch from beneath the crook of his arm and handed it to her. "I made these for you and had the seers bless them. They will lend you a keen eye and good fortune out on the plains."

Netya accepted the small hide bag and untied it. Within she found a string of rough wooden beads, the last of which had been intricately carved to resemble the skull of a bird. The talisman was decorated with feathers, the beads stained red and orange to match her spear.

"It is beautiful," she said, then smiled and embraced her friend. "Thank you, Erech. I cannot promise you a kill, but if fortune smiles on me I will make one in your name."

"Be careful," he said as they drew apart. "You do not have the speed and the senses of our wolves, but Fern does. Stay close to her, and listen to Hawk's instruction."

"I will. Remember to keep using your leg while we are away if you want to join us on the hunt next year."

Erech returned her smile, even if the prospect of him ever hunting again was a distant one. She wanted him to hold on to the hope, however slim.

Netya began braiding the talisman into her hair before they had even set off, and soon it was hanging proudly against her shoulder from a plaited lock. It had been a long time since she wore her hair in its old single plait, and with Erech's talisman to adorn it she doubted she would return to her more modest look. She liked to feel her hair catch in the wind, keeping it long and her braids small. Her body had grown stronger already, and once the summer came her skin would darken to the same tone as that of her pack mates. Even though she had no wolf living within her, she felt just as much a hunter as the men and women walking alongside her as they began their march into the

north.

The large hunting party was only able to move as fast as its slowest members, and with so many supplies to carry their progress was limited to walking speed. Small groups of wolves broke off to run farther afield every day, but they always returned before long, bringing back news of any potential prey they had found and the occasional small morsel to share with the others. But according to the scouts running ahead, the horses and deer to the north were still their best hope for a successful hunt, and the group maintained its course without faltering.

By the third day they had almost reached the trees visible on the horizon, but they stayed clear of the encroaching forest and steered further west, where the plains became increasingly craggy as the mountains drew nearer. This part of the forest was the southern territory of the North People, and the pack did not hunt in their lands out of respect for their mutual allies.

It was strange for Netya to think that she might be just a day's travel away from seeing her own kind again, even if the North People were as unfamiliar to her as the Moon People had once been. Perhaps she would visit them one day with Khelt. Perhaps she would visit many places, now that she knew the world was far bigger than the village she had grown up in.

After they made camp on the third night Hawk gathered the entire group around him to discuss their plans for the morrow. Only the high hunters were permitted to contribute to the discussion, but everyone else was expected to pay attention so that they understood their role once the hunt began.

A large drove of horses had been sighted nearby, and, while horses were certainly the more dangerous prey to go after, the deer herds were not great enough in number to make for a glorious hunt. Their quarry would need to be encircled and driven into one of the rocky valleys, Hawk said, or else it would be too easy for them to scatter and disperse across open ground. He wanted a swift and decisive victory rather than spending days picking off lone animals one by one.

It seemed a bold plan, but as Netya listened from her position at the back of the group she began to realise why Hawk was respected as a masterful hunter. His plan was risky, but it was not reckless. He had no intention of charging after difficult prey just for the sake of proving his bravery. Using the tip of a javelin, he outlined in the dirt a rough sketch of the terrain ahead of them, assigning each of the high hunters to lead their own small group.

The chasers would flank the drove, finding the gaps through which their prey might escape and blocking them up, making sure the horses were driven deep into the valley ahead of them.

Netya suspected the plan after that would be as simple as chasing down their quarry, but Hawk had a more intricate scheme in mind. Rather than picking off kills from the back of the drove, he instead selected the strongest of his hunters to run ahead of even the chasers, circling around to the other side of the valley ahead of time so that the horses would run straight into them. It was a task for only the bravest and most skilled, and soon many were volunteering, knowing that those who succeeded would secure great status and respect for playing the most dangerous role in the hunt.

Hawk's plan did not end there. He knew full well that the drove would likely turn and attempt to escape through the ranks of weaker hunters chasing them. It had the potential to end in disaster if those bringing up the rear were unprepared, so instead of ordering them to stand and fight, he outlined quite a different role for the rest of the group. The weaker hunters, bearers included, would conceal themselves out of harm's way if the horses began to wheel around. Then, armed with javelins, they would bring down as many of the animals as they could from a safe distance before they escaped, making effective use of their weapons without putting themselves at risk.

It was a solid plan that almost ensured a great number of kills regardless of what happened. So long as each hunter stood firm and fulfilled their role, Hawk said, they would soon be returning home with a great bounty for the pack.

Netya and Fern were to be among those bringing up the rear, and Caspian was quick to accept them into his own small group along with a handful of others. The air buzzed with anticipation that evening, and the excited yips of several dozen wolves filled the night as each hunter prepared to play their part the following morning. The nervousness in Netya's stomach was drowned out by her mounting excitement, and she could barely sleep as she lay with her head against the flank of Fern's wolf, cradling her spear in her arms as she imagined hunting alongside these majestic beasts on the morrow. Whether she managed to make a kill or not, she would soon have her first taste of what it truly meant to be a wolf.

She had not felt such exhilaration since the night she left the village. Her hair streamed out behind her as she rode across the open plains, legs clamped

tightly about the midsection of Fern's wolf, spear tucked into the crook of her arm, eyes fixed on the horses running ahead of them. The chase had begun the moment they heard Vaya's distant howl, the signal that the forward group were ready.

The packs of chasers streamed ahead on either side as the hunters broke into a run, disappearing into the distance as they moved around to flank the drove. By the time the animals realised the were in danger the main hunting pack was bearing down on them. Some of them attempted to scatter, but the barks of the chasers corralled the panicked horses back together, keeping them moving as one in the direction of the ravine.

The first time Netya had ridden a wolf she'd clung on for dear life. This time her fingers barely even tightened in Fern's fur as the ground streaked by faster than her eyes could make sense of it. The weight of the spear tugging on her arm seemed not to matter. All she could feel was the thrum of her heartbeat and the thrill of hot blood rushing through her veins. No man or woman of her village had ever hunted like this. Perhaps she was the first of all her people to ride a wolf into the hunt, spear in hand and howls of elation in her ears.

She began to realise just how primal this manner of hunting was to the pack. There were no words to be called, no orders to be heeded save for what one wolf could bark to those nearest to them. Once they had their plan in mind they became a single living entity, streaming around their prey like water as they relied on their instincts to guide them in unison.

Everything occurred exactly as Hawk said it would. The pack drove the horses into the ravine, and the chasers split off to hop up the rocks on either side, relying on their speed and agility to navigate the dangerous terrain as they searched for any overlooked pathways through which their prey might escape. The rest of the pack would be waiting up ahead, blocking the far end of the ravine, ready to meet the stampede head on.

At a howl from Hawk the pursuing group slowed their pace, allowing the horses to disappear through the cloud of dust they had kicked up. Those closest to the edges of the ravine began breaking off, the bearers who carried armfuls of javelins slipping from the backs of their lupine brethren and clambering up to the safety of higher ground. The smoothness of the chase faltered for a moment as the wolves were forced to rein in their predatory instincts, milling about for a short time as they snarled and snapped impatiently.

Even with the momentary delay, there should have been ample time for all of the hunters to find safe spots in the ravine before the drove turned back. But before even a quarter of Netya's group had reverted to their two-legged shapes, the snarls and yowls of battle reached her ears. Caspian was already crouching on a boulder in the middle of the ravine up ahead, and she called out to him in alarm.

"What is happening? Have the others attacked already?"

"They cannot have," he yelled back over the rumble of noise around them. "We are barely half way down the ravine!"

The roar of a mountain cat rent the air, and Fern's anxious growl reverberated through Netya's lower body. Caspian gripped his javelin tight, eyes scanning the haze of dust in front of them. The sound of hooves on rock and panicked whinnying was headed back in their direction.

"Get somewhere safe, all of you!" Caspian shouted. "They will trample us!"

The formerly graceful pack of hunters disintegrated into a panicked mob within seconds. Something had gone wrong, and the instinctive accord between the wolves shattered as each hunter's thoughts turned instantly to survival. Netya almost fell from Fern's back as her friend reared up and made a leap for a low-hanging shelf in the rocks to their right. The cracked stone crumbled away beneath her paws, but Netya had the foresight to clamber up the wolf's back and make a grab of her own, tossing her spear ahead of her as she scrabbled to drag the top half of her body on to the shelf. Her feet kicked in mid air for a second before Fern butted her head upwards, giving Netya something to push against and swing her legs over the edge.

"Use your hands!" she cried as Fern made yet another unsuccessful attempt to follow her up. The horses were charging back out of the dust. They would be on top of them in seconds.

Fern must have known how dire her predicament was without even having to look. The clack of a hundred hooves on stone filled the air until there was no space for any other sound to be heard. Fern reverted from the shape of her wolf and made another leap for the ledge, but without the spring of her animal's hind legs she could not reach high enough.

With no time to think, Netya grabbed her spear and thrust the blunt end of the shaft in her friend's direction, leaning over and shooting out her free hand for Fern to grab. Their fingers met, and Netya felt her belly sliding across the rock as Fern's weight threatened to pull her over. She began to lose her grip on the spear as the other girl clutched it, but a moment of leverage was all Fern needed before she had hoisted herself high enough to let go and get a firm grip on the ledge. Netya dragged her up the rest of the way, and seconds later the first of the horses barrelled past just inches from where they had stood a moment before.

The animals streamed past in a flood of brown bodies, turning the ravine into a river of movement from which the Moon People hid on any raised surface they could find. Netya's eyes already stung from the fresh dust being kicked up, and through the clamour she called out to Caspian in a panic. There was too much noise for him to hear, but he remained crouched atop his large rock several yards away, the sea of horses streaming past him on either side.

It was impossible to tell whether all of the hunters had managed to get to safety or not, and Netya could make out precious few of them from where she was perched with Fern. Caspian, however, was not looking back at the others. His eyes were turned grimly forward, staring up at the high edges of the ravine. When Netya followed his gaze she caught the shapes of several large mountain cats picking their way down through the rocks, teeth bared and hackles raised.

In the same way she had put the pieces together in her mind when she found Erech on the night of the storm, Netya's confusion began to clear. Fear sharpened her thoughts, and in an instant she guessed what must have happened. Hawk's plan had been an excellent one, but it had not accounted for anything unexpected. If the scouts had only observed the ravine from a distance, they could easily have missed mountain cat dens hidden among the rocks. Even if they had ventured closer, a few prowling wolves could easily have gone unnoticed without alerting the creatures who dwelt here.

A large drove of horses charging straight down the ravine, however, would have woken the spirits themselves.

As suddenly as they had appeared, the drove of horses was gone, leaving only a few terrified stragglers in its wake. Once the sound of hooves receded, the noises of fighting returned once again. The howls of wolves and the roars of cats echoed off the sides of the ravine, and as the dust began to clear Netya saw more of the wild beasts prowling toward them.

"Back to the others!" Caspian called, and, as if to cement his command, Hawk's howl of retreat sounded from somewhere behind them.

Netya was suddenly unsettlingly aware of how far ahead of the others they had gotten. Now *they* were the stragglers in the pack's retreat, easy prey for

the mountain cats who seemed intent on defending their territory. Fern took the shape of her wolf again and leaped down from the ledge. Netya followed a moment after, just as the sound of Caspian's javelin clacked off the rocks behind them, followed by the startled growl of a cat. She turned her head in time to see another of the beasts leap at the male, only for him to take the form of his wolf in the blink of an eye and meet his attacker's snarling jaws with his own, grabbing the beast by the shoulder and sending it sprawling on its back at the foot of his perch.

Indecision rooted Netya to the spot for a moment, not wanting to leave Caspian, yet realising there was little she could do without putting herself in even greater danger. But it seemed Caspian had no intention of allowing himself to be caught in such a dangerous position, and no sooner had he seen off his first attacker than he turned and sprang down from the boulder, his sleek brown-furred wolf quickly catching up to the two women.

Netya swung herself on to Fern's back, clutching her spear tight as they raced away from the mountain cats. They had not gone deep into the ravine, but the fresh dust kicked up by the horses was still hazy in the air, making it difficult to see where the others had gone. All they had to guide them was the sound of Hawk howling every few moments, calling his scattered hunting party back to him. It sounded like he had retreated somewhere up the side of the ravine, out of the way of the stampeding horses. They began picking their way up through the uneven rocks and undergrowth toward the sound of his calls.

Before long the dust had cleared enough for them to see clearly, but the rest of the hunting band had already disappeared beyond the summit of the ridge above them. They were so close, barely a few moments away from scaling the final rock face, when Fern stumbled and fell, her wolf's legs going out from beneath her with a whimper of pain. Netya waited for her friend to get back up, but she seemed unable, whining under her breath as she panted and pawed at the ground weakly.

Netya tumbled off Fern's back and knelt beside her, scanning the wolf's body for a moment before noticing that one of her hind paws was swollen and bleeding.

"Oh, why did you let me ride you!" Netya exclaimed, stroking Fern's neck with a shaking hand as Caspian turned back and reverted from his animal shape.

"She must have hurt it when she jumped down," he said, feeling the tender

area gently, much to Fern's vocal discomfort. "I think it's sprained, badly. She'll need help walking."

"I'll help her, the others can't be far."

"She needs carrying, and you don't have the strength," Caspian said. "Hold on to that spear and take a look behind us. Fern, leave your wolf behind."

As Fern changed shape Netya glanced back the way they had come. Three mountain cats were scaling the slope below them, one of which was only a few dozen yards away. Caspian hefted Fern into his arms and broke into a run, and Netya wasted no time in hurrying after him. She could hear the breathless growls of the beast gaining on them, but the summit of the ridge was just ahead. Only a short climb up one last sheer rock face stood between them and the rest of the pack.

She almost realised too late that the cat would be upon them before they were even half way up the final climb. Caspian pushed Fern ahead of him, supporting her with one arm as she struggled to drag herself up without the use of her leg. Netya turned at the last second, her hair whipping about her as the cat roared and made to pounce. There was no time for her to be afraid. She remembered what Caspian had taught her, and her body shifted to brace her feet and raise the point of her spear.

The cat froze at the last second, stopping just short of throwing itself straight on to the piece of sharpened flint hovering just a short distance from its muzzle. Netya didn't blink, hearing only the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears as she kept her eyes fixed on the animal, matching its movements with the tip of her spear. Remembering again how Fern had slipped past the same spear when Layon held it, she backed off as quickly as she could.

The cat snarled at her, prowling from side to side as it advanced. The weapon gripped in Netya's hands was the only thing standing between her and a swift death. Where were the other cats now? Had Fern and Caspian climbed to safety?

She could hear other animals fighting somewhere nearby, both wolves and cats, and realised that she was not the only one facing down a vicious opponent. The cat sidestepped suddenly, and Netya cried out as she jerked her spear to try and intercept it, sending the animal scuttling backward with a yowl of pain as sharp flint nicked its muzzle.

"Vaya, help her!" Caspian called out, and in a moment of panic Netya snapped her head around to look behind her. Vaya's wolf had a wounded cat cornered up against the rocks, and the huntress looked poised to go in for the kill. She glanced back when Caspian called, taking in Netya's predicament, then snarled and turned straight back to her prey.

Netya did not even have time to be shocked at the other woman's dismissal of her plight. Taking her eyes off the cat in front of her had been a mistake, and it seized the opportunity to lunge past her spear, claws unsheathed and teeth bared. She span away at the last moment, the shaft of her spear striking the creature's skull as she toppled off balance and fell to her knees.

"VAYA!" Caspian barked again, the command so loud and so chilling that even the cat bearing down on Netya froze for a moment. It gave her the chance to find her footing again, but as soon as she raised her spear and began to back off a lump of rock struck her heels, and she tripped again. The cat lunged. She jabbed her spear at it one-handed, and the tip caught in the flesh at the nape of the animal's neck. But it was a weak thrust, and the blade pulled loose as quickly as it had bitten in, only slowing down the cat for a fraction of an instant.

Vaya's wolf butted into Netya's attacker from the side, the force of the impact sending the cat rolling away from her in a screeching tangle of fur and claws. The huntress growled at her, and Netya wasted no time in clambering to her feet and hurrying back to where Caspian was shoving Fern up over the ledge above them. Once she was safe he climbed half way back down, taking Netya's spear from her and tossing it up before offering her his hand. With his added strength she reached the ledge in seconds, imagining the jaws of the mountain cat snapping at her heels at any moment.

But Vaya's intervention had sent the last of the predators running. When Netya swung herself over the top of the ridge and looked down the huntress almost seemed as if she was about to give chase, howling at the wounded cat she had cornered as it limped away with the rest of its brethren.

Only then did Netya let herself start thinking again, and her whole body began to shake as she realised how close she had come to death.

Caspian put a hand on the back of her neck and made her look at him. "Fern would not have made it up the ridge without you keeping that cat at bay."

"Or without you to help me," Fern said to him, embracing both of them as she buried her face in Netya's shoulder.

The rest of the hunters arrived a moment later, helping them up and calling for one of the seers to attend to Fern. Though Netya had not been injured, she found it difficult to walk without the aid of her spear propping her up. She was still wide-eyed and trembling. Her body felt like it was still trapped in the fight, heart racing and muscles tense, her senses so sharp she jumped every time someone brushed past her.

When Vaya clambered back up the ridge with the help of the others Netya opened her mouth to thank the huntress, but before she could say anything the other woman silenced her with a vicious scowl, growling something under her breath as she shoved past the hunters who had helped her up and disappeared among the pack.

Netya caught Caspian watching Vaya with a grim look of his own before she disappeared. The pair of them shared a look, and a shiver went down Netya's spine as a moment of understanding passed between her and the male. Even though Vaya had come to her aid in the end, for an instant she had been willing to let Netya die. If not for Caspian's command, almost that of an alpha himself, the huntress would have left her to her fate.

Several people had been wounded in the ill-fated hunt, but much to everyone's relief the entire party was eventually accounted for once the last few stragglers found their way back. The chasers had run straight into the mountain cats before anyone else as they ran up the sides of the ravine, and in the ensuing chaos the group that had been sent ahead with Vaya turned back to help, thankfully arriving in time to save the stranded chasers and drive most of their attackers off. Nobody seemed to know whether it was the cats or the early arrival of the forward group that had turned the drove of horses around. In the panic that followed, nobody had managed to make a single kill.

The plan had failed, but despite the morose mood among the pack as they retreated down the opposite side of the ridge, Hawk reassured the others that the great hunt was far from over. When they began tracking the horses again it became apparent that they had not split and scattered, and there was a good chance of chasing them back down the following day. They were incredibly fortunate that no one had been killed in the ravine, and Hawk chose to take it as a sign that, despite everything, the spirits were still with them on this year's hunt.

Netya was shaken for several hours after her fight with the mountain cat, but once dusk fell and the group stopped to rest she began feeling a little better. There seemed to be two tales of her encounter circulating among the hunting party, and she could guess where the less flattering one had come from. Some of the group believed she had made a brave stand to protect Fern while Caspian helped her to safety, while the rest seemed to think that she had gotten herself almost killed by a mountain cat, forcing Vaya to come to her aid and abandon her own kill in the process.

It was hardly the first time Netya had been the subject of divided opinion, and after everything that had happened to her she cared little for the latest gossip. She stayed by Fern's side at their small fire, eating from her bowl of nut meal and dried meat as she slowly began to feel a little more like herself once again. She touched the talisman of beads braided into her hair, silently thanking the spirits for watching over her that morning.

"Hawk is sending me home tomorrow," Fern said glumly. "Brae said my

foot will not be better for at least another day or two, especially not if I plan on hunting. At least you still have a chance, though."

"You still think I might make a kill tomorrow?" Netya replied.

"Caspian said he will let you ride on his back. After today, bringing down a horse should be no trouble for the pair of you!"

That finally coaxed a smile out of Netya, and she edged closer to her friend beneath the cloak spread across their laps. "I suppose horses do not seem very threatening compared to mountain cats, that's true."

Fern sighed, squeezing Netya's hand. "You really must make a kill for us now. For me and Erech both. It seems I will be spending another year as a chaser again."

"Do you really want to join Vaya and the other high hunters so much?" Fern shrugged. "It would be something. Until I find a mate, I have little status."

Netya gave her a playful nudge, hoping to cheer her friend up. "But Fern values love over status, does she not? And from everything she has taught me, I think I do as well."

"I suppose you are right," Fern smiled, but there was still a hint of sadness in her eyes. "I only wish love could be found by killing a horse or two."

"You have my love," Netya said, making her mind up. "And I will prove it by making that kill for you and Erech tomorrow. I promise."

Fern put her arm around Netya and kissed her, before resting her head on her shoulder. "I am sure you will. An alpha's consort and a hunter. I told you your hair meant there was a great destiny waiting for you."

Fern went to sleep early, but Netya still found herself restless from the day's excitement, and once she had wrapped the cloak around her friend and left her curled up by the fire she decided to go for a short walk and relieve herself.

She picked her way through the circles of slumbering wolves and people alike, listening vaguely to the low murmur of conversation from those who were still awake. Some of the hunters were discussing their plans for the next day, while others continued to recount their heroics in the fight with the mountain cats.

The tongue of the Moon People had become so familiar to her that she already found herself thinking in their words from time to time. It had been months since she heard a person, even herself, speak with the same cadence

of voice that her own people used. But the thought warmed rather than saddened her. She had begun to look, behave, and even sound like the people she now lived with. In a few months it would be a whole year since she left the village. Had her existence back there really been so unhappy that she did not miss it?

No, she reflected. She missed Layon, her mother, and her sisters every day, but she would not trade away her life with the Moon People just yet. She would see her family again, but their reunion could wait. She needed time to become the woman who had always hidden within her old self, and that side of her could only flourish out here in the wilderness, where she was free.

The pack had made camp a few hours to the east of the ravine, where the craggy terrain was more overgrown and difficult to navigate. A line of trees separated them from another steep drop down into a lush valley, and it was in that direction which Netya headed once she had made her way out of the camp. She carried her spear with her, reassured by the presence of the weapon. It had saved her life that day, and proved to her that she was not some helpless girl unable to defend herself. She may not have had the body of a wolf to call on in times of need, but with her spear at her side, the night time wilderness no longer seemed so threatening.

It made her realise why her mother had kept the weapon hung over their hearth for so many years after her father died. It was more than just a tool or an ornament, it was a window through which a warrior could find their inner strength and bravery. Without it, she was prey to the mountain cats, but with it, she was their equal. Her father's spear had let him stand toe to toe with the warriors of the Moon People, and it had symbolised that inner bravery for years when it hung in her mother's house.

Netya reached the trees and looked out over the valley below, crouching down to empty her bladder as she tried to make out the features of the land before her. There was little moonlight that evening, and the dim canopy rippled like murky water as the wind dragged through it.

She did not realise that anyone had followed her until she stood back up, and froze at the sight of Vaya and three others blocking her path back to the camp. Trying to hide her shock, she inclined her head politely and made to step past, behaving as if the hunters had only come out for an innocent stroll of their own. But as soon as she made to walk by, Vaya caught her by the shoulder and pushed her back.

Fear quickened Netya's breath. Vaya's companions, one young man and

two women, moved around to encircle her, cornering her up against the trees. The huntress worked her jaw back and forth in contemplation, making a show of examining Netya's spear as she stepped forward.

"You would have been dead today without this thing, as useless as it is."

Netya gripped her weapon protectively, wondering for one panicked moment whether she might be forced to use it. Strength seemed like the only thing Vaya respected. Netya kept her chin up and responded as calmly as she could.

"I expect you would have been too, without your teeth and claws."

"Those are a part of me," Vaya said. "They are my gift from the spirits of life. What is your gift? A weak body that must flail with tools of wood and flint to survive."

Netya took a deep breath, fighting the urge to back away as the taller woman loomed over her. "I know you dislike me, Vaya, but I have never tried to make an enemy of you."

"You made me lose my kill today." The huntress glared at her. "Slaying a mountain cat would have won me the hunter's prize. This year's great hunt was mine to claim by right."

"I did not ask for your help —"

"No! Worse, you have made even Caspian and the alpha indulge your weakness. They protect you without seeing the harm they inflict on their own pack," Vaya spat.

As the huntress took another sudden step forward Netya backed away, jerking the point of her spear in front of her.

Vaya laughed, then grabbed the shaft of the weapon in one hand and twisted it out of the way. "Give me that."

Netya glared at her, refusing to release her grip. Vaya tugged again, then growled and yanked the spear hard, shoving Netya backwards as she tore the weapon from her hands.

"You insult me every moment you remain in our pack!"

Netya looked to the others in fear as she stumbled into a tree, but they only met her gaze with cold, unfeeling eyes. Whatever the three of them thought about what was happening, their loyalty to Vaya clearly mattered more.

"I am forced to endure you back at our camp," the huntress said as she brought the point of the spear to rest against Netya's chest. "But I will not tolerate you defiling our hunts."

The flint tip dug into Netya's skin, pressing sharply against the spot at the

base of her throat until she felt a trickle of blood running down her chest. Even though her hands were now trembling, she curled them into fists and forced herself to speak.

"Give me back my spear," she said.

Vaya leaned in closer, lifting the flint tip until it rested beneath Netya's chin, forcing her head back. Then she smiled, stepped away, and snapped the spear in half over her knee.

"Go and fetch it," she said, then drew back her arm and threw both parts of the broken weapon over the edge into the valley below.

Even the punch that broke Netya's nose had hurt less than the moment her spear cracked, the sight of it disappearing over the edge into the darkness, and the sound of the broken wooden pieces rattling down the slope below. It was enough to fill her with such desperation and anger that she wanted to lash out and break something of Vaya's in return, but instead she threw her energy into an act that was perhaps far more reckless, and even more surprising to the huntress.

Before Vaya could grab her, Netya turned and threw herself down the slope after her spear. The instant her feet his the ground she knew they would go out from under her within seconds. The descent was too steep, the ground too uneven, and brambles tugged at her moccasins and threatened to trip her up with every step. She was not thinking, and she cared little for her mad descent as she stared wide-eyed into the darkness, searching frantically for any sign of where her spear had fallen. It was hers. It was her father's. It was everything she had become since living among the Moon People, and she could not bear to let Vaya take it away from her.

But in the darkness, she was blind. There was nothing ahead of her but black undergrowth. A hundred places where her spear could have fallen out of sight, tangled in a bush or the branches of a tree where it would be lost forever. She fell, the momentum of her body taking over the motion of her legs. Her palms dug into the moist dirt as it forced its way up beneath her fingernails, then the weight of her legs dragged her into an unstoppable tumble head over heels down the side of the valley.

Brambles scratched at her arms and rocks bruised her hips as she rolled. She tried to grab on to something to slow her descent, but the moment her fingers closed around the branch of a bush it was whipped out of her grasp again, skinning her palm in the process. Any moment she expected a rock or tree trunk to halt her progress, but she continued to tumble, again and again,

until her body felt like it was about to break and her stomach threatened to turn.

Netya swung her leg out in one final attempt to steady her fall, and the valley slope took mercy on her as she skidded, threatened to topple, and then caught her foot in a tangle of branches that held on long enough to bring her momentum to a halt. She lifted her hair out of the dirt and looked up, but there was nothing left for her to see. Pitch blackness met her in every direction. She had fallen so far the trees had overtaken the night sky, and only the sounds of rustling leaves reached her ears. Her head swam. If her body was broken, there was nobody within reach to help her back up. Every bit of her ached or stung or throbbed. She made one desperate effort to begin lifting herself back up the slope, then collapsed.

When Netya opened her eyes she saw green leaves. The stem of a plant twitched a few inches from her nose as a beetle crawled up it. Her whole body was sore. One by one she tried moving her limbs. Everything hurt. Bruises and scrapes covered her arms, and the morning dew that had soaked into her clothing brought with it a clammy chill.

The more she moved, the less painful it became. She did not think she had broken anything. After a few minutes she lifted her cheek out of the dirt and tried to sit up, putting a hand out suddenly to prevent herself from slipping. The ground was still steep and uneven, and she risked another fall if she so much as shifted position too quickly.

Tears pricked her eyes as she remembered her lost spear, glancing around with the vain hope of catching sight of it now that it was daylight. But there was nothing to see save bushes and trees in every direction. She could make out neither the summit of the ridge above her nor the valley floor below. Her throat was parched and sore, and she doubted she could call out even if she tried.

Careful not to disturb the beetle, she picked a broad leaf from the plant in front of her and curled up the edges to create a small dip in the middle. Then, ever cautious that the slightest wrong movement might make her slip, she moved from leaf to leaf, tipping them so that the beads of dew ran off into her improvised cup. Once there was enough on her leaf for a small mouthful she sucked it up hungrily, then repeated the process. Each drink was barely enough to wet her throat, but after a few minutes she felt ready to try her voice.

Filling her lungs, she called out as loud as she could. The noise echoed off the edge of the valley, startling nearby birds from their trees. Netya waited a few moments, then tried again. Silence was her only answer. How far had she fallen? Were the others still in earshot? Had they moved on to track the horses already? If Vaya had any intention of letting them know where she was they would likely have found her by now. Fern would have noticed her absence, but if Hawk had sent her home early she might not even have had time to realise her friend was missing among the bustle of the oversized hunting pack.

Once more her fear returned, and she called out again, louder. By herself, could she even find her way out of this valley, let alone back across the plains to the safety of the outcrop? There were mountain cats in this territory, and likely other wild animals too. Without her spear, she was defenceless.

The necessity of survival spurred Netya into action. She knew the seers used the leaves of these plants to treat cuts and shallow wounds, so she took the one she had picked and pressed it over her raw palm, binding it gently in place with a twist of long grass. It was still painful to move, but not so much so that it hindered her. She could endure the discomfort if it meant finding her way back to safety.

Once she had found her footing she began to edge carefully back up the slope, half crawling, half climbing, making sure she always kept her uninjured hand on a sturdy piece of foliage that would hold her weight if she slipped. It was a miracle she had not struck any of the trees on her way down, and she made her way from one trunk to the next, trying to retrace her fall as closely as she could.

It was not long before she came to an impassable tangle of brambles, and it took several minutes to pick her way further along the slope so that she could circumvent them. The going became more treacherous with every step, and it took Netya the better part of an hour to make her way barely a hundred yards up the slope. She constantly had to stop, find her footing, secure her grip, and spend long moments determining which route she could take that would not either send her toppling to her death, or leave her feet full of thorns.

Only the hope that she might still be able to find her way back to the hunting party kept her going. Every step of the way her sore body begged her for rest, until at last she came to a barrier that was truly uncrossable. Slippery shale covered the slope in front of her. The moment she tested it with a foot she knew the chances of her scaling the carpet of rocky fragments without falling was slim. She could see where it ended just a short distance above, but there was no way for her to reach the upper part of the slope without going over it.

After trying for several minutes to find a way around, Netya discovered that the path to one side led to an impassable crag, and in the other direction the band of shale seemed to stretch on as far as she could see. Her throat ached with desperation as she gazed at the trees above her. She tried once more to balance herself as she crept across the loose rocks, but within seconds her knee slipped and she very nearly lost her balance. She had been

fortunate on her way down, but if she took a second similar fall she knew she might never get up from it.

"Fern!" she called out. "Caspian! Hawk!"

Only the echo of her own voice called back. The ache of her bruises set back in as despair filled her, but she resisted the urge to weep. She held out little hope of finding her way back to the others if the path above was blocked. She did not know how to follow tracks or scents, or use the night sky to navigate like the hunters did. Why had she not spent more time learning these things from Erech rather than dedicating every day to training with her spear?

It was hard to give up the painstaking progress she had made, but Netya finally turned around and began to shuffle her way miserably back down the slope. Maybe there were plants and berries she could scavenge in the valley below. Perhaps the others would find her eventually. She preferred not to think about what would happen if there were predatory animals nearby.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, something red caught her attention. It stood out among the tangle of green and brown, and it took several moments of squinting for Netya to realise that it was a feather. Her breath caught in her throat as she gasped. Could fate really have been so kind? She shuffled her way across the slope toward it, realising that the object had become lodged in a bush in such a way as to be invisible from further down the slope. The red feathers adorning the head of her spear stirred in the breeze, and as she made her way closer she saw the broken lower part of the shaft lying nearby.

The well of despair that had been filling up inside her gave way to merciful relief. A laugh burst from her lips as she pulled her broken weapon out of the bushes and clutched it to her chest. A broken spear did not save her, but it seemed like a sign. Her impulsive dash down the valley slope had not been for nothing, and neither had the last hour of trying to climb back up.

I will show this to you, Vaya, she thought, smiling at her weapon with furious pride. *I will walk back into our camp, and you will see how helpless this little Sun girl really is.*

Netya clutched the top half of the spear in her injured hand, despite the discomfort it caused her. Vaya had broken it off near the bindings that held the uneven join together, and she spent a moment looping the trailing strands of twine around her wrist for safety. She would not lose her weapon again.

The lower part of the shaft she tucked securely into her waist wrap. There was little hope of repairing it using the same pieces, but the broken pole was

more useful to her as a tool than anything else she was likely to find nearby.

"Thank you, spirits," she whispered, closing her eyes in a silent prayer to the forces watching over her.

She edged her way steadily down the slope until it began to even out, determined to reach the valley floor as soon as possible. Before long the ground had flattened enough for her to stand without fear of falling. It was hard to gauge the position of the sun through the canopy overhead, but she judged it was approaching midday by the time she felt confident in stopping her progress and turning in the direction she believed to be south. As long as she kept the slope on her right, she reasoned, she would eventually reach the point where the valley opened back out on to the plains.

Netya had never thought of herself as a particularly capable young woman, but over the course of the last few months that had begun to change. A year ago she would not have had a clue how to mend a broken spear, but as soon as Khelt presented her with her father's weapon she had immediately set her mind to repairing it, and in trying, she had succeeded.

Even yesterday, she had come face to face with an animal that should have made easy prey of her even in her most optimistic fantasies. And yet, she had fought it. It did not even matter that she had almost lost her life in the process. Part of her almost wanted to face down the cat again, and this time mind the mistakes of her previous encounter.

If the Moon People had taught her anything, it was that, in trying, a woman could succeed in things that would have been denied to her back among her own kind. Vaya could become a great huntress. Adel could heal wounds and commune with the spirits better than any shaman. A woman could even claim her own choice of man as her lover if she wished.

Despite the dirt covering her body, the ache of her bruises, and the hopelessness of the task ahead of her, she reminded herself that she was no longer just a pretty prize the alpha had plucked to warm his bed. She focused on the thought of seeing Vaya's face when she strode back into camp with her spear, and it spurred her tired muscles to keep working.

Netya walked well into the afternoon, dragging her legs doggedly until her parched throat and rumbling stomach finally forced her to consider what she would do for food and water. She could not survive off morning dew, and the leaves of the plants here, while good for wounds, would turn her stomach if she tried eating them. It was unlikely she would find any ripe berries beneath

the shade of the trees, and she did not fancy her chances at catching any live prey, especially without the means to make a fire for cooking.

Relying on what she had learned from foraging with Fern, she made her way a short distance back up the side of the valley to where the trees thinned out and the brambles grew more densely. It felt good to tilt her head back and feel the sun on her skin again, taking away the lingering morning chill from her damp clothes. She climbed up to a small shelf at the edge of the valley and found herself presented with a glorious view of the land surrounding her. In the light of day the lavish green slopes seemed like an endless natural carpet unfurling across the land, inviting her to stay a while longer and explore the tantalising crannies and groves she spied on the horizon. In the distance she could see glittering water spilling down the far side of the valley, trickling from the back of a giant overhanging crag that almost seemed like the body of a great animal leaning down to take a drink. Had her situation been less dire, Netya would have gladly spent all day wandering this place.

Many of the bushes she found were still recovering from the chill of winter, but after a short while she came across one that was in full bloom, studded with juicy red berries that would both slake some of her thirst and quiet her stomach. Netya resisted the urge to eat, forming a pouch with her clothing which she filled to the brim before sitting down to savour her meal. The fruit was still bitter, but moist and refreshing, and she felt a great deal better after taking the time to rest and fill her stomach.

Once she was done she stripped the bush of the rest of its berries, bundling them up in leaves before taking off her fur cloak and using it to wrap the package more securely. With the cloak safely tucked beneath her arm she set off once again for the end of the valley, her steps lightened by how close she was getting to the stretch that would lead her back to the plains.

Though Netya was sad to leave the beautiful valley behind, it was a welcome transition to see the trees thinning out and the undergrowth giving way to rugged patches of grass. The uphill trek across the final stretch almost sapped her of her remaining strength, but piece by piece the horizon and the distant mountains crept back into view, until, with her lungs aching and her limbs crying out for rest, she stepped back out on to the plains.

She sat down to catch her breath, another smile reaching her lips as she made out what she thought was the line of trees marking the pack's camp site from the night before. It was another half day's walk back around the edge of the valley, but from there she could either attempt to follow the hunting party,

or retrace their steps back to the outcrop. She had not been paying close attention to the landmarks they passed on their way, but now that her survival depended on it every rock formation and cluster of trees in the distance seemed familiar.

A bank of heavy cloud was sweeping in from the east. She would need to find shelter once the rain arrived, but that also meant a fresh source of water, and perhaps even a night free from the worry of wild animals tracking her down in her sleep. Already she was thinking of every detail of the world in terms of what it might mean for her survival. It helped her focus, taking away fears that might have paralysed her with anxiety and turning them into problems she was forced to overcome.

It would have been easy for her to sit there a while longer, perhaps even curl up in the grass and fall asleep now that the challenge of the valley had been overcome, but Netya had an urgency spurring her that she had never felt before. Nobody would wake her from her nap, nobody would find her a shelter while she slept, and the sooner she pressed on, the sooner she could rest.

It was almost with disappointment that, as the sun was setting a few hours later, Netya caught sight of a wolf running in the distance. At first she did not know what the creature was, and she crouched down in the grass, clutching her spear, heart beginning to race as she held stock still. But soon she recognised the smooth, flowing stride of the beast and the light brown fur of the Moon People.

She jumped to her feet, calling out and waving her spear in the air. The wolf turned, ears pricking up, then tilted its head back in a low howl and bounded toward her. Netya ran to meet it, and was almost knocked off her feet as Caspian's animal half pounced and put his paws up on her shoulders, licking her face as he ruffed and growled excitedly. A laugh burst from her lips as she tried to push him away, stumbling under the weight of the huge beast that loomed over her.

A moment later Caspian reverted to his more familiar form, the playful excitement of his wolf fading as he stepped back. She instantly missed the outburst of emotion that had spurred him to give her his wolf's equivalent of a tender embrace, but the smile still lingered in Caspian's eyes as he put a hand on her arm and looked her up and down.

"We've been looking for you all day since Fern noticed you were gone.

Nobody could find your scent anywhere. It was like the spirits had swept you away in the night."

"Perhaps they did. I took a fall down into the valley."

He frowned, examining the scratches on her arms and the broken spear in her hand. "Were you badly hurt?"

She shook her head, realising that she must look a mess. Her skin was still caked in dirt, her hair was tangled and full of bits of twigs and leaves, and her arms were bruised and stained with dried blood from her scratches. "I was very fortunate, but I am glad to see you. I hope I did not worry everyone too much."

"A lot of us have been out searching. Fern would have come too if not for her ankle. She refused to go home till we found you." He let out a sigh of relief, gazing into Netya's eyes as he tilted her chin toward him. "How did you fall?"

She paused, the truth sticking in her throat. She had been thinking about what she would do when she arrived back all day. At first she had been eager to expose Vaya as the bully she was, but the hours of walking had cooled her temper. What had the huntress done, really? Thrown her spear away? It was a mean-spirited thing to do, but hardly a grave crime. It was her own reckless impulse that had sent her tumbling down the valley slope.

"Netya?" Caspian said, and his brow furrowed, that curious gaze of his searching her soul for the source of her hesitation.

For a moment the same compulsion she had felt the last time he looked at her in such a way returned. She tried to edge forward an inch, but his hand slipped back down her neck and stopped her. Why did she feel these moments of intimacy with him? Why did they call out to her in a way that he seemed unwilling to acknowledge? She could see it there in his eyes. The same attraction. The same tug of two spirits meeting for the briefest of moments.

"It was Vaya," she said, unable to hide it from him. "She broke my spear and threw it down the slope. I couldn't just let it go."

He nodded slowly. "That perhaps wasn't a wise thing for either of you to do."

"But I got it back." She held up the head of her spear, a simmer of pride rising in her chest.

"You are very like Adel sometimes," Caspian said, touching a lock of her hair deliberately. "Maybe it is in the way the spirits favour women like you

and her. You turn what seems like madness to your advantage somehow. Though I will say, throwing yourself into a valley to save a spear reminds me of Khelt just as much."

"You compare me too favourably to them," Netya replied, a little uncomfortable at being told that she was in any way similar to the den mother. "I did something very foolish, and was fortunate enough that fate chose not to punish me for it."

Caspian's expression turned serious, and he dropped his hand from her shoulder. "Fate will not punish Vaya for her part in it. But I could."

Netya's eyes fell. "If you think it right."

"But what do you think?"

She looked back up at him, and was surprised to see genuine curiosity in his expression. Khelt, or any senior pack member for that matter, had never consulted her on such decisions before. It was not her place to decide such things. She shrugged her shoulders. "I fear it would only make her resent me more. She had others with her. It would be my word against theirs."

"If they knew what happened to you and kept it from us there would be reason for severe punishment."

"I do not think Vaya is the sort of woman who learns from punishments." Caspian smiled. Rather than being disappointed at her lack of willingness, he seemed proud. "A very wise observation. Then we will keep this between ourselves, if that is what you wish. Vaya will have her comeuppance another day."

"I do have one request, though," she said hesitantly. "Will you let me walk back into the camp by myself when we get there? I would prefer it if Vaya did not think you had to rescue me."

"Since you needed no rescuing, I would be glad to. But ride on my back for now. I am sure Fern would like to know you are safe before she falls asleep this evening."

Netya almost asked that they walk. She wanted to speak with Caspian more. Having hours alone with him, where he could not disappear or evade her presence, was something she had secretly longed for every time they talked like this. However, she could not leave her friend worrying. Putting Fern's fears to rest was more important than trying to indulge a selfish fantasy.

"Of course," she said, unrolling the bundle in her cloak. "Just give me a few moments. I will have trouble carrying these on your back, and it would be a

shame to waste them." She smiled at Caspian as she unwrapped the berries. "You must be hungry after searching for me all day."

It was not the hours of company she had hoped for, but sitting down to share the fruit with her handsome companion was a moment of indulgence she could justify. And, after the way his wolf had greeted her, perhaps Caspian was no longer just a companion, but another friend.

—**24**— Another Calling

They joined back up with the hunting party shortly after nightfall. The group was still encamped in the same spot near the edge of the valley, but once the orange sparks of campfires began to glow in the distance Netya noticed there were far fewer of them than there had been before.

Caspian's wolf came to a halt while they were still hidden by the darkness and allowed Netya to dismount. She made the final approach on foot while he ran off to hunt, giving her time to make the entrance she wanted. It was already going to be difficult admitting she had gotten herself lost for a day by taking a foolish tumble, and she was determined to salvage as much of her pride as she could. Who knew, perhaps Vaya might even gain some measure of respect for her after all this. Netya wasn't sure whether she particularly wanted the huntress's respect after last night, but it was preferable to more punches and threats.

She walked back into the camp sore and weary, but with her spear clutched firmly in one hand and her chin held high. A call quickly went up once she stepped into the firelight, and soon everyone was descending on her at once. Hawk hurried over first, the relief on his face half hidden behind a scowl, but Fern quickly overtook him as she called out Netya's name and limped forward, throwing her arms around her friend's neck as she all but collapsed against her.

"I was so worried! And I had to sit here all day, waiting for the others to find you! Whatever happened?" Fern looked at her with concern as she ran her hands over Netya's scratched arms and dirty brow. "You look terrible."

Netya laughed, letting her smile linger deliberately when she noticed Vaya glowering in her direction from one of the fires. "I am fine. I took a fall down into the valley last night, and there was no way back up."

"I told them that was where your scent ended!" Fern said. "But they said it was too dangerous to go down. How did you manage a fall like that?"

"I was just careless. I am sorry I worried you all." She lowered her voice to a whisper, then leaned in close so that only Fern could hear. "I will tell you what happened later."

The other girl looked concerned, but their reunion was soon interrupted by Hawk, who tugged Fern away and fixed Netya with a severe look.

"Are you sure you aren't hurt?" he said.

Netya nodded, her air of confidence shrinking a little in the hunt leader's presence.

"Good," Hawk continued. "I'm relieved to have you back safe. There is no greater tragedy than losing a fresh apprentice on their first hunt." He did seem genuinely pleased to see her, but it was clear that she was in trouble. His stern tone was that of a father ready to reprimand a disobedient child. "Still, you have caused us a great deal of worry. I was forced to keep nearly a third of our hunters back to look for you today."

Netya averted her eyes, cheeks warming. "I apologise. I did not intend to hold back the hunt."

"I do not care for apologies. Accidents are not made by intention, and by the look of you I am sure you have suffered enough for your carelessness already."

"Thank you." Netya bowed her head respectfully. "Your patience with me is very kind."

"You understand, though, that I have no place in my hunts for an apprentice who makes such mistakes. We have been delayed a full day, and may have lost many kills already."

"I will gladly make up for it!" Netya said. "I can hunt again tomorrow, and there will be no more accidents."

"Covered in bruises and with a broken weapon?" Hawk shook his head. "You will only be a burden on the rest of the pack."

"Please!" Fern exclaimed. "Netya has to make a kill of her own."

"Fern, I know you are disappointed, but I have tolerated your stubbornness all day. There will be another great hunt for you next year."

"I can mend my spear tonight," Netya said. "And it is only a few scratches and bruises, they will be better in no time."

Hawk frowned, and for a moment he seemed to be contemplating, but then Vaya stepped forward.

"Remember, this is not the first time the Sun girl has hindered us this hunt," she said. "I lost my kill yesterday because of her, and who knows how many more have slipped through our fingers since. She will only be a burden. Her kind hunting with ours makes for a poor mix."

The huntress's smug expression drew a glare from Netya. *No*, *Vaya*, she thought. *The only one I don't mix with is you*.

"I'm afraid I must agree with Vaya," Hawk said. "You have been given as

fair a chance as any apprentice, but every member of a hunt must work in unison for us to claim victory. I am sending you home with Fern tomorrow morning, and you will not be chosen for any more of my hunts this year."

"Nor mine," Vaya said with a curl of her lip.

Netya's fingers tightened around her spear, and she felt her eyes burning. This was unfair. She had accomplished more in the last two days than she had ever thought herself capable of, and yet, because of Vaya's interference, she was to be punished for it.

"None of the hunters will ever take Netya on as an apprentice if both of you snub her like this!" Fern said.

"Good," Vaya replied. "Then they will be spared from her incompetence as well."

Hawk silenced the huntress with a reprimanding look, then stepped forward and put a hand on Netya's shoulder. "It is always hard to accept disappointment, but not everyone is destined to become a hunter. Perhaps your calling lies elsewhere."

"I want to hunt," Netya said stubbornly, swallowing a lump in her throat. "I have only just begun to learn."

"And perhaps in a few years you may have learned enough to warrant consideration as an apprentice once again. I am sorry, but for now there is no place for you among my hunters. I must think first of what is best for the pack, and what is best for you. The alpha would agree."

Netya opened her mouth to speak, but she could feel her emotions welling up inside her. What would she do? Beg? Lash out and spill the truth about Vaya? Every time she had let her reckless impulses guide her actions it had ended badly for her. No matter how hard it was, she had little choice but to hold her tongue. When she protested no further Hawk nodded, looking relieved that he was done dealing with the matter.

As she and Fern made their way back to their fire Netya fixed her eyes on the ground to keep from looking at Vaya. She knew the huntress was smiling at her, arms folded in satisfaction, as if excluding her from the hunts had been the easiest victory she had ever won.

Getting her spear back no longer seemed like much of a consolation, and she had clearly not garnered any respect from her rival in doing so. Shame and anger burned within Netya, and she had no way to let it out. She did not even want to tell Fern the truth before they were safely away from the hunting pack in case the more hotheaded girl confronted Vaya and made

things worse.

She tried not to think about arriving back at the outcrop tomorrow, seeing Erech's hopeful face fall in disappointment, explaining to the others what had happened, and waiting for Khelt to give her tender reassurances that would never come. Oh, the alpha would comfort her, yes. She might even lose herself in the pleasure of his embrace for a short while and forget about what had happened. But when she tried to talk to him after, to open her heart and seek the intimacy she needed, his brow would crease in contemplation as it always did, and he would start treating her like yet another problem to be solved by the alpha, not a mate who needed the warmth and tenderness of his soul.

Just as she had begun learning the ways of the hunt, her apprenticeship had come to a swift and bitter end.

Hawk sent them on their way at first light the following morning before he and the rest of the group broke camp to catch up with the main hunt. They were joined by three others who had been wounded in the ravine, along with five of the bearers to speed them home on the backs of their wolves. There had been many more injuries during the first failed hunting attempt, but most of them were of the sort the Moon People could heal overnight. None of their travelling companions were hurt much more severely than Fern, but two deep gashes and a badly strained shoulder were enough to keep them from hunting as their wolves.

All the way home Netya stared dejectedly at the back of the wolf carrying her, wondering what she would do now that a future as a hunter had been denied to her. Even the endless landscape, still so beautiful and foreign to her after a life lived in the forests, could not capture her attention that day. She felt like she had failed, despite telling herself that it was Vaya who had ruined her chances. Perhaps if she had managed to fight off the mountain cat she would not have incurred the huntress's anger. If she had let her spear go, the pack would not have had to waste a day looking for her. She would have at least had a second chance to prove herself when they caught up to the horses again. But then, she thought, how would she have been able to hunt without her weapon? She was hopeless with the javelin, and everybody else had their teeth and claws to rely on.

What would she do now? Go back to existing for the sole purpose of being Khelt's concubine? Stop taking Adel's herbs so that she could have his child

and join the mothers? The idea of status had held little value to her when she first came to the Moon People, but she had since learned that it was through excelling at their skills—the things they were most passionate about—that her fellow pack mates achieved such status. It was not so much the recognition she desired, but the same fulfilment of taking on a role and learning to master it. She wanted to live her life with the same enthusiasm as the hunters who stayed up all night debating how best to ensnare tomorrow's prey, or the craftspeople who worked a shard of flint or a piece of wood single-mindedly until it was honed into a perfect tool.

Only one thing had given her that sense of identity these past few months, and she had very nearly lost it. She ran her fingers over the decorated crosspiece of her spearhead, now tied securely to her waist wrap by a piece of twine. Even if she was not a hunter, she still had this. Her father's spear, part old, part new, was a symbol of the woman she wanted to become. She did not know what it took to make a talisman of true power, but she felt that her spear was something more than just a piece of decorated wood and flint now. She would mend it, and keep it close, vowing never to let anyone take it away from her again.

By the time they arrived back at the outcrop it was almost evening, and Netya pretended her aching body was troubling her so that she could escape back to her tent and lie down. The Moon People thought her so fragile that they did not question it, and one of the seers even stopped by later to offer her tea for the pain.

Netya was happy to let the others explain what had happened as she curled up and tried to sleep, and she managed to doze for a few hours before Fern roused her, equal parts concerned for her wellbeing and curious to hear the truth about what had happened two nights ago.

Netya sipped the cold tea the seer had brought as she explained everything, from being cornered by Vaya to meeting up with Caspian, even including how she had asked him to let her make the return by herself.

"I cannot believe her!" Fern fumed. "If you had told me I might have thrown her down the side of that valley myself."

"That was why I did not tell you. It would only have made things worse. Vaya is smarter than I thought, and now she has made sure I will never become a hunter."

"She may have succeeded in that, but Vaya is no wise woman," Fern

snorted. "I have known her all my life. She acts without thinking, and sometimes she is fortunate enough to wrestle victory from the consequences. She was only trying to intimidate you that night."

Netya sighed. "You did not speak of her so harshly when I first arrived. I have made a rift in your pack just by being here."

"Vaya has done that all on her own. Do you want me to speak to the alpha with you? He disciplined her last time."

Netya shook her head wearily. "Caspian already asked me the same. I only hope Vaya will leave me alone now that I am not there to intrude on her hunts."

"You should not let her get away with this."

"I do not want to, but I cannot see any other way." Netya shrugged.
"Perhaps if I was cunning like Adel I could think of some plan to shame her."
She shivered as soon as she had said it, regretting voicing such a thought.

Fern seemed to be contemplating something for a moment, but she allowed the matter to drop soon after, and she and Netya curled up together beneath their warmest fur blanket to let sleep soothe their healing injuries.

It was another five days before the hunters returned home. Netya spent the time mending her spear and trying to avoid discussing what had happened with the others. Erech and some of the mothers were kind, reassuring her, as Hawk had done, that perhaps she was simply not destined to be a hunter. It all sounded to her like a gentle way of saying she had failed. Still, she thanked Erech for the talisman he had given her, promising to wear it in her hair always. Even though her first—and perhaps last—hunt had ended badly, had it not been for a little good fortune it might have gone far worse.

She mended her spear diligently, finding a new shaft and remaking the bindings and decorations that trailed down the handle. This time she managed to make it a little sturdier, using a dark glue one of the craftsmen made from heating tree bark in a sealed clay pot. With a little whittling she was able to fit both pieces of her spear together more elegantly, and with the addition of the glue and new bindings it felt a lot sturdier than before. But the weight was different, and she found herself having to practice using her weapon all over again to adjust to the change.

Khelt called her to his bed again the night before the hunters returned, and despite the alpha acting exactly as she had expected, Netya still found some contentment in his embrace. It had been several days since she last made

love, and the release helped to soothe some of the feelings that had been trapped inside her, reminding Netya that there was more to life than the things she had become preoccupied with recently.

When the hunters returned the next day every man, woman, and wolf was heavily laden with the spoils of their victory. The empty sacks the bearers had carried on the way out were now stuffed with meat, most preserved for the journey, but some still fresh, and many others carried trophies of bone and horse hair. The procession was met with even greater ceremony than the hunts of last summer, with the alpha himself stepping forward to conduct the greeting ritual. It seemed that no single hunter had distinguished themselves above and beyond what was expected, so the hunter's prize was Hawk's to claim for leading a successful expedition. Having butchered much of their kill so far from home, there was no fresh blood for Hawk to symbolise his victory with, so he drank instead from a bowl of the pack's fiery drink when Khelt offered it to him.

With his victory secured, the seasoned hunt leader could have claimed any man or woman he desired for his prize, but as soon as the ceremony was finished he set his eyes firmly on his mate and went to embrace her, whispering something into her ear before the two of them kissed.

"You are the only prize for me," Fern mused with a wistful note in her voice as she watched them. "That's what I think he said."

"I hope so," Netya replied. "They are very fortunate to have one another." The rest of the day was spent in celebration, and thankfully the topic of Netya's early dismissal was lost among far more exciting tales of the confrontation with the mountain cats in the ravine, and the tracking of the drove that had followed, culminating in the hunters securing several kills near the edge of the forest after an exhausting chase that forced the horses into the shallows of a river.

Netya kept mostly to herself as the others celebrated, only attempting to seek out Caspian later on. She finally tracked him down at the edge of the gathering, but immediately stopped when she saw who shared his fire. Adel had deigned to make one of her rare appearances outside of the seers' cave, and she and Caspian were discussing something intently under their breath.

Before she could be noticed, Netya swallowed her disappointment and turned around, heading back to Khelt's side, whereupon he eagerly tugged her into his lap. She spent the rest of the night there until the alpha grew tired of the festivities and carried her back to his den, where he took her hard for

almost an hour until the pair of them passed out, sore and tender in each other's arms.

The weeks of spring passed and the weather grew warmer, but despite the return to regular pack life Netya found herself growing restless. After her first hunt she longed to take on a more significant role among the group, but instead she only returned to the same old routines as before. By now she spoke the language of the Moon People so well that there was little left for her to learn, and all of the initial mistakes she had made in her acclimation to the pack had been smoothed out. The task of fitting in and learning the ways of her new tribe seemed all but accomplished, and it left behind a frustrating void that she did not know how to fill. Every time Fern joined the others on a hunt Netya watched them leave with a painful tugging in her chest, wishing she was once again riding on the back of a wolf, ready to test herself against the wilds.

Passing the time with Erech helped occupy her a little, but it was more to his benefit than hers. His leg showed some improvement once he began to use it properly after months spent stranded in the winter cave, but he soon hit a barrier that put a stop to his progress. Every day of walking helped him regain some of his lost stamina, and soon he could manage short journeys without the aid of his crutch, but every time he attempted to increase his pace beyond a slow limp he was gripped with crippling pain. None of the seers save for Adel seemed able to tell him much, and the den mother suspected Erech's leg had healed in a way that left it with no strength for running.

To the young man's credit, he never gave up trying, but any progress he made from that point on was so small as to be almost unnoticeable. After several weeks he seemed to accept that, even if he did one day hunt again, it would not be for a great many years, and in the meantime he would have to pursue some other skill.

Thankfully Erech possessed an interest in toolmaking, and after sitting with the other craftspeople for a time he began trying to perfect his knapping into something more than just a functional hobby. Flint had been used less often in Netya's village in the years since they had begun trading for metal tools, but with no knowledge of how to work metal for themselves, and with natural rocks being far more readily available, knapping was still a skill Netya's people held in high regard.

She spent many of her afternoons alongside Erech practicing with him, and

after a few weeks she too had become competent enough to fashion basic knives, razors, and axes, though they often varied wildly in size and shape compared to those made by the other craftsmen and women. She could not tell how their technique in striking the brittle stones differed significantly from hers, but after working down a platform on one side of their flint cores they seemed able to detach flakes suited to any purpose with just a few effortless blows.

Netya reasoned that they had worked to perfect this craft of theirs for years, but beyond mastering the basics she found she had little patience for it. It frustrated her every time a core shattered off into useless splinters, or a tool she had been working cracked in half as she tried to take off a small flake too carelessly. While Erech worked diligently, she often found herself abandoning her efforts mid way through the afternoon, running off to practice with her spear or forage on the other side of the river. Those things, at least, made her feel as if her efforts were being rewarded.

Khelt approached her one afternoon when she was sitting on the rocks off to the side of the crafting area, sucking her thumb where a sharp flake had left her with a painful cut.

"Erech tells me you are not taking well to crafting," he said.

"It seems I am not suited to anything here." She flung her arms in the air. "When anyone else takes a cut it will be gone within a few hours, but I must wait a day or more for mine to heal. I have no wolf to hunt with, and no child to be a mother to." Her cheeks coloured slightly at those last words, well aware that it was in large part due to her own efforts that she had not yet borne Khelt an heir. She had taken the herbs regularly all winter, and the bag stashed beneath her bedding was almost empty.

"Some of us take many years to find our true calling. Perhaps with patience you will make a fine craftswoman yet."

"Patience is not something I have! I do not mind practicing, but every time I break a tool or cut myself I have no choice but to wait and start over again. It feels nothing like the hunt did."

Khelt sat down beside her, rubbing a hand over his chin. He seemed unusually anxious about something, as if torn on a decision that had been weighing on him for a long time. "If I could allow you to join the hunt again I would, but the hunters are all in agreement that you are not suited to it. It would do no good to force them."

"I know," Netya sighed. "They say it is rarely a woman's calling anyway."

Khelt nodded. "Most females stop hunting regularly once they are mated. You would have had no choice but to give it up once you bore my child in any case." He turned to her then, hesitating as the problem he seemed to be struggling with lingered on his lips.

"What is it?" she said.

"I have seen you still practicing with your spear. I do not think it is good to keep clinging to these hopes of hunting."

"If I had something else to cling to I would," she replied.

Khelt might have reprimanded her for being short with him, but the alpha seemed too preoccupied to notice. Finally, he gave voice to what he had been thinking. "Then there is one other role you might try. It is the last place I desire to put you, but it seems everyone believes it makes the most sense. Fern suggested it to me the day after you returned from the great hunt, and Caspian has talked of little else. He even managed to persuade the den mother to agree."

Netya raised her eyebrows, a tingle of apprehension creeping up her spine. This was not something she had seriously considered, but there was only one possibility Khelt could be hinting at.

"The seers have agreed to take you on as an apprentice, if you desire it," he said.

"Adel agreed to this? But she..." Netya trailed off, not sure what to think. Was this another of the den mother's schemes?

"It pains me to put you under her watch, but you will not have to deal with her often. Even among the seers I am told she keeps mostly to herself. One of the others would be your mentor. Perhaps Brae. She spoke well of you when you helped her in the preparations for the summer fires."

Netya was unsure what to think. She knew nothing of healing or the ways of the spirits. But becoming a seer would afford her with status beyond that of even the hunters. Behind Adel, she might become one of the most senior females in the pack.

"It is beyond me to learn the skills of a seer," she said.

Khelt let out a long breath. He seemed to want nothing more than to dissuade her from such a path, but the alpha's heart and mind were clearly divided. In the end, honesty won out. "Everything Fern and Caspian tell me suggests you have the spark of a seer within you. I have seen your compassion, your sharpness of mind. It is a path few can take, but many wise seers start out as you are now. Adel will try to twist you to her own designs,

but if you can endure her, you may find your calling."

Netya nodded slowly. She still feared the den mother, but the fear reminded her of how she had felt approaching the ravine, charging into the hunt, with victory and danger looming just out of sight. It kindled in her the same excitement that had made her want to become a hunter. It was a journey into the unknown, a journey into fear and mystery, and a promise of the kind of power she had only ever glimpsed in others.

"If I can endure Vaya, perhaps I can endure Adel," she said, with more confidence than she felt. Adel was the kind of woman who would not spare someone like Vaya a second glance. She was no simple bully.

Khelt's smile was bittersweet as he took her hand and squeezed it. "I hope the wisdom of this decision does not prove to be misplaced. I will have Caspian tell Adel. She will decide when you are to begin your apprenticeship, and assign you a mentor."

—**25—** Khelt and Adel's Tale

Despite her concerns, Netya was eager to begin her apprenticeship, and once the news spread among the pack she became a popular topic of conversation again. Several of those who had shown reservations in accepting her questioned the wisdom of allowing an outsider to train as a seer, but for the most part she was greeted with congratulations, and sometimes even a hint of respect.

Netya thanked Fern profusely for her efforts in convincing the alpha to let it happen, but Caspian once again proved elusive, and despite her best efforts it seemed impossible to track him down for more than a few moments outside of meal times.

The customs of admitting a new apprentice into the ranks of the seers seemed lengthy and complex, apparently requiring much deliberation and communion with the spirits to determine when it would happen, and to whom Netya would be apprenticed. Several weeks passed as she waited anxiously, but with the promise of such a great undertaking on her horizon the days no longer felt quite so restless.

As the weather improved Khelt announced that he planned on taking an expedition to visit the North People, bringing hides and furs to trade with their allies who relied more on farming than hunting to sustain themselves. It was to be a long trip, lasting at least a month, and anyone who wished to learn the language and ways of the Sun People was invited.

As curious as Netya was to visit her own kind again, and to witness how those from other villages lived, her impending apprenticeship was too important to delay for so long. The last thing she wanted was to give Adel more reasons to dislike her, especially now. Her dismissal from the great hunt was still fresh in her memory, and she refused to let a second such opportunity slip through her fingers.

The expedition said their goodbyes, and Khelt drew Netya into his arms before he left, telling her quietly how he would miss her company every night they were apart. His affection stirred a gentle warmness in her heart, and she clung on to him a little longer when he made to back away. He may not have treated her with the love she had witnessed between Hawk and his mate, but there were small moments like this that came close.

Now that summer was on the horizon the pack often strayed farther afield in groups, and at any given time it was unlikely for more than half the pack to be at home. The quiet days meant that the absence of Khelt and his expedition did not leave the camp feeling much more empty than usual. Caspian dealt with any serious matters that required a leader's intervention, but, having vented their winter tensions a few months prior, the pack was mostly able to govern itself without issue.

Life continued so routinely that, entirely by accident, Netya found herself walking into Khelt's den one evening without thinking. She expected the alpha would desire her, as he often did on warm, quiet nights, and it was not until she stepped through the drapes that she remembered he was gone.

Instead she found Caspian sitting at the table near the fire, burning patterns into a flat piece of wood using a thin metal tool. He looked up in surprise as she entered, and Netya's skin immediately flushed as she realised her thoughtless mistake.

"It isn't prudent to enter the alpha's den uninvited," he said, but his tone was playful rather than stern.

"I am sorry," Netya replied, struggling to think of some way to save face. She did not want to appear empty-headed to Caspian. "The alpha often desires me on evenings like this. I thought..." What did she think? What was she implying she had come here to do?

Caspian smiled and looked back to his wood burning. "Thankfully I have no need of a consort myself, though you flatter me. Do not worry about continuing with those duties while Khelt is away."

"Of course," Netya said, lingering uncomfortably near the cave entrance. Now that she was here, she was reluctant to leave, and when Caspian made no move to dismiss her she crept over to look at what he was doing.

The tool in his hand was a short, uneven metal rod set into a piece of wood to protect his skin from the heat when he warmed it in the fire. Using the tip, he was scorching dark burn lines into a flat piece of wood that was covered in rows of similar markings. Netya squinted at them curiously. What he was doing reminded her a little of the patterns people sometimes used to decorate walls or ornaments, but none of the marks Caspian was making looked like shapes she was familiar with. They were too small and simple to be animals or people, and they did not seem to flow in any particular pattern.

"What are these?" she said after a moment as Caspian leaned over to reheat his metal stylus in the fire.

"These are the hunters of our pack," he said, gesturing to the marks one by one.

"They do not look like hunters to me."

"If I tried to make them all look like people or wolves, how would I tell them apart?" He pointed to one symbol at the end of a row that was slightly larger than the others, resembling four lines scored across one another. "This one is Hawk, and the rest next to him are all those who joined him on his first hunt last year. By putting their markings on this wood, I can look back and see who was on every past hunt."

Netya smiled at the strange wood burning, a little amused by the idea. "You could just ask Hawk who he took."

"I could, but do you remember every person who was on the hunt you joined?"

"I suppose I do not. So you use these marks to remember?"

Caspian nodded. "There is a man among the North People who does the same. He showed me this a few years ago, though he used dyes on a stretched animal hide to record which plants he had sown and where, and how well they grew."

Netya settled herself tentatively on the second log seat next to Caspian, and leaned over to get a better look at his work. "Do you have a mark for every one of the hunters?"

"I do. I try to make them in a way that reminds me of the person. I think you can recognise this one." He tapped his finger against a particularly jagged and uneven looking symbol that sat at the head of several rows.

Netya smiled. "Vaya."

"You can see she appears more as time goes on. This year she will be at the head of even more hunts."

"Do I have a mark?"

Caspian gave her a teasing look, and she felt her skin warm under his gaze. "Not yet, but I am marking down the great hunt tonight. I suppose we shall have to make you one."

"What will it be?"

Caspian gazed at the piece of wood in contemplation, then reached over for his tool and began carefully scoring a line at the end of the current row he was working on. It curved around in a crescent, eventually taking the shape of a semicircle tilted half way on its side. Then, Caspian pressed the tip of his tool down in the centre, rotating it back and forth in the smoking wood until he created a dot being cupped by the crescent.

She leaned in eagerly as he moved the piece of hot metal away, eyeing the mark that now meant *Netya*. "This is me?"

Caspian ran his finger around the edge of the crescent. "The moon." He tapped the small circle in the middle. "And the sun, both coming together in one person."

Netya grinned as she admired the small symbol, fascinated that such a simple mark could be used to encompass an entire person. "I like it. It looks beautiful."

"As it should. I only wish I would get more chances to use it."

She caught him staring at her for a moment, his gaze lingering as a familiar distant look crept into his eyes, as if he was seeing something beyond just the girl sat beside him.

"Perhaps I will use it myself, then," she said. "If I am to be a seer, I may have need of recording things in this way."

"You are taking hold of clever new ideas already. I tried to share this with Adel, but she insists it is a waste of time when she already remembers everything she needs to know."

Netya edged a little closer to the man seated beside her, growing more confident. For once Caspian was not preoccupied, with no other business to distract him from her.

"Are you a friend to the den mother?" she asked carefully, keenly aware of how Khelt might react to such a line of questioning. But Caspian did not even blink as he continued marking down his next symbol.

"I do not know if Adel has considered anyone a friend in her life," he said. "I suppose she tolerates me more than most."

"No wonder she is so unkind."

Caspian looked at her. "You think her unkind?"

Netya shrugged. "She has never treated me well. And she does not seem to respect Khelt at all."

"Yes, those two will never see eye to eye," he sighed. "And Adel is apt to behave cruelly if she thinks it will serve her purposes. Khelt is the opposite. It hurts him every time he is forced to be hard on his pack. I sometimes think his decision to take you from your people was a kindness on his part."

"I do not regret it, but it did not seem kind to me at the time," Netya said, strangely aware that this was not the kind of conversation she could have had with any other member of the pack. "He was treating me as a spoil of his

victory."

"But what was his alternative?" Caspian said. "He allowed the man they found with you to escape, but our pack expected justice for the death of Cera. Most of them wanted a kill for a kill, and they would not have accepted it if Khelt took mercy on two of their enemies in one night. He had to make a choice between killing you and taking you as a trophy."

"And what would you have done?" Netya said.

Caspian shook his head with a smile, not deigning to answer. All he said was, "That is why I am not alpha."

His response puzzled Netya. He seemed to lead the pack just as well as Khelt, even if he was less direct about it. He was strong, wise, and perhaps more unique than anyone else in the pack, besides Adel. Who else would have thought to make markings on wood to remember every single hunt of the year?

But perhaps, she thought, that was exactly the answer to her question. Was Caspian *too* different from the others to lead them? From the way he spoke about the conflict between her people and his, she doubted he would be willing to take the kind of vengeance his pack expected.

She held her breath and reached out to touch his hand, and a quiver of excitement ran through her as he took it, squeezing her fingers as if the gesture was the most natural exchange in the world.

"Will you tell me something Khelt would not?" she asked quietly.

Caspian propped his free elbow on the table and turned to her, his wood burning forgotten. "If I can, I will."

"What happened between him and Adel to make them hate one another so? Nobody speaks of it, and it upsets him in a way I have never seen."

A sadness entered Caspian's eyes, but he did not withdraw as Khelt would have done. "You know better than to repeat any of this to him, yes? I have tried also, and it does not end well."

Netya nodded, tingling with apprehension.

"It upsets him because it makes him doubt himself. He still believes the choice he made was the right one, but a part of him questions it. Our pack very nearly splintered apart because of what he and Adel did that night."

Netya resisted the urge to ask questions, hanging on Caspian's every word as he revealed the truth to her. For months she had wondered what could have driven the wedge between the alpha and den mother, and she listened with rapt attention as Caspian spoke.

"Adel sought to take charge from the moment she came to our pack. It was clear she resented everyone at first, both our people and hers. I am not sure which pack she blamed more for using her as a peace offering the way she was. But a woman like Adel would never have been broken down by such strife; it only made her fight back harder. So instead of falling obediently in line, she tried every day to wrest as much control away from Khelt as she could. He had not been alpha for long back then, and he thought it all something of a game. Adel was intended to be his mate, so he indulged her, thinking she would tire of it eventually and settle down."

"She cannot have been fond of that," Netya said.

"It was certainly her first reason to begin disliking Khelt. She saw him as a brash young man who had barely come of age, without the wisdom to lead properly, and every day she tried to convince the others of it. Some of the seers agreed, and Khelt did not realise how many of the pack were questioning him before it was too late."

"Did she try to challenge his leadership?"

"No, she could never have done that. Whatever you may think of her, Adel detests conflict and violence. She would not have driven the pack to infighting."

Netya thought back to the way Adel had spoken the night Erech and Nathar fought. She had to admit, it had sounded as if the den mother truly did abhor the barbaric tendencies of her people.

"That year the hunting was very poor," Caspian continued, "far worse than what you saw last summer. There was no prey to be found for months on end, and eventually Khelt was forced to lead almost the entire pack afield to search for new hunting grounds. The search took us closer and closer to the edge of the forest, and soon we were sending hunting parties deep into the territory of the Sun People. Khelt and Adel were leading a group one night, each surrounded by their most loyal followers, when they came across a pen of several dozen sheep. There was enough meat there to feed the entire pack, and it was ripe for the taking."

"But the men of my village would have come to protect their animals," Netya gasped.

Caspian nodded. "And so they did. They must have been tracking us, because there were more of them than usual, and they were well armed. By the time our scouts reported the location of the sheep back to Khelt, the Sun People had arrived to protect their flock, but they had not yet gathered their

full strength. Perhaps it was fate that he and Adel were both together on that hunt, because things would have ended very differently had they been apart.

"Khelt had a dozen loyal wolves with him at the time, Adel a dozen more, and we planned to make straight for the animals before any more of your people could arrive. Fear is often more powerful than our teeth and claws, and Khelt was convinced that a show of force would be enough to make the enemy back down. Even if he was forced to fight, the numbers were on his side, and our people would starve without fresh kill. But Adel disagreed. She had seen the way her old pack had suffered at the hands of the Sun People's warriors, and she believed a fight would only leave more dead on both sides. She wanted to retreat and search for prey elsewhere."

Netya held her breath, eyes wide as she listened. She was beginning to piece together this side of the tale with the version she had heard from the men of her village, and it made her stomach squirm as if she had been there on that night herself.

"That was when Khelt realised Adel was not just an unruly female playing games with him. He commanded her to follow, and she refused. If he wanted to prove he truly cared about his people, Adel said, he would call off his hunters and follow her back to safety. Khelt refused to back down. His pride did not help, of course, but he believed far more lives might be lost if he did not return to the pack with fresh kill soon. He called Adel a coward, and threatened that she would be the one leaving others to die if she did not join him in challenging the Sun People.

"So both of them departed and took those who were loyal with them. Khelt believed Adel's disobedience would be short-lived, and that she would hurry back to join him soon, while Adel thought the alpha's nerve would falter once he saw the Sun People waiting for them."

Netya's heart sank as she realised the inevitable conclusion. "Neither of them gave in, did they?"

"No. By the time Khelt realised nobody was coming to his aid, the Sun People had already encircled us. They had nets and spears, and three of us were dead within moments. Khelt called the retreat, and the rest managed to escape before any more lives were lost."

"How terrible it must have been."

"Terrible for all of us, but none more so than the alpha and den mother. One of those killed was a seer, and the moment we regrouped with the rest of the pack I thought Khelt and Adel were about to tear each other apart. They were both furious that the other had been so stubborn. If not for their respect for the pack's grief, that night might have ended with even more blood spilled.

"Khelt talked with me often about exiling Adel back to her old pack in the months that followed, but we both knew it would only lead to another bitter feud with her people. He refused to even consider taking her as his mate after that, and it has coloured everything between the two of them since."

Netya bit her lip, angry at the way Adel had abandoned her people in a time of need, but also frustrated that the outcome had not been entirely of the den mother's making. She wanted to be able to side with Khelt, but she understood now why he had reason to doubt himself.

"Did the pack find good hunting in time that year?" she said.

"Thankfully yes, though it was a hard winter with little to go around, and two of the elders slipped away in the cold months. We tried to keep them well fed when they became weak, but it is impossible to say whether a few mouthfuls of food might have made a difference." Caspian took a deep breath as he came to the end of the tale, running a hand through his light brown hair. Recounting it seemed to have exhausted him, and he took a long drink from his cup of water before looking at Netya again. "You have one more thing left to ask me, don't you?"

Netya gave him a bittersweet smile. He could read her well.

A Meeting of Hearts

"Which one of them do you think was right?" she said.

"That is the tragedy of it," Caspian replied. "They were both right. Had Adel given in, Khelt would have had the numbers to easily defeat the Sun People, perhaps even without any bloodshed, and the pack would have been well fed. But if Khelt had backed down, not a single life would have been risked, and the hunt could have continued safely."

"I would have been brave and sided with Khelt," Netya said.

"Just as I did," Caspian replied. "Because that is where our loyalties lie. Still, just because Khelt is my friend and your alpha, that makes him no more right than Adel was that night. A seer must understand these things." He smiled, shaking off the melancholy his story had brought on. "I think you realised that already, though."

"I cannot blame Adel entirely, even though I want to."

"And that is what sets you apart from most others. It has been so long since I've talked with another person who sees things in the same way."

Netya dropped her eyes to the floor, realising that her hand was still cupped in Caspian's. His thumb stroked absently up and down the surface of her palm, and she felt in his touch the sudden connection they had shared before. She had spoken so openly this evening, asking things that she dared not pose to anyone else, and not once had she felt threatened or judged for it. The time had passed in the blink of an eye, and she did not want to leave.

"It is late," Caspian said.

Netya did not reply, watching his thumb as it continued to brush her palm. The air almost seemed to hum in her ears as the moments crept by, the urges within her strengthening.

"The night of the summer fires," she said at last, her throat feeling dry and husky. "I hoped you would pick me."

She looked up at him, and he stared at her, blinking his blue eyes just once.

"Someone else needed me more that night," he said.

"And now?"

"Now..." Caspian gave her a sad smile and shook his head. "You are Khelt's, and hearts are dangerous things to toy with."

"I did not ask you for your heart." Netya swallowed, realising she was

trembling. The two of them were very close together now.

"Perhaps you would have it, whether you asked or not."

Netya closed her eyes and leaned forward, allowing her forehead to press gently against his chin. Her free hand moved to his shoulder. "You speak to me like no other man ever has," she said. "It makes me feel as though I am more than just a woman, and yet when I am with you I can think of nothing else."

"You are not just a woman, you are Netya. I see you as who you are."

She opened her eyes and looked to the piece of wood on the table, seeking out the symbol he had made for her. "You are too wise to take a foolish girl like me, aren't you?"

Caspian's heavy breath tickled her hair. He ran his finger beneath her chin, then tilted it up to face him. "No, I am not."

His kiss was slow and passionate, claiming her lips one at a time as he savoured every moment of it. Netya's fingers tightened around his hand, drawn to his warmth as a wave of lightheadedness swept over her. It reminded her of the feelings that had surged through her body when she shared her first kiss with Layon, only this time they were much, much stronger. She pressed herself up against Caspian, wanting him to take her and hold her, claim her and join with her in ways no other man yet had.

Fern had been right when she told her all those months ago that it would be different with every partner. Khelt was like the powerful bear whose pelt was draped over his throne, overwhelming and insurmountable in his passion, making Netya feel small and delicate beneath him. Erech had reminded her more of the mountain cats in the ravine, quick and eager and lithe in his movements.

Caspian, though, was the one who truly felt like a wolf. The way he kissed her was both effortlessly confident, and yet curious and inquiring. The brush of his teeth against her tongue and lips added a sharpness to it, a lingering danger, and his hands settled around her hips in a light grasp that told her she was going nowhere, like the prey that knows it has already been caught.

She climbed into his lap, legs encircling his waist as he bore her up. The shortly trimmed bristles on his chin scratched her with a pleasant roughness as the soft embrace of their lips continued, and Netya felt as if she could linger there for hours despite the growing need in her lower belly. Caspian's long kisses questioned her, seeking out the responses of her body and rewarding them in turn. He was clearly taking the lead, but she was no

passive partner in their exchange. He wanted to draw out the desires from inside her and feel them just as keenly as she longed to experience his own passions.

In much the same way as she had desired to please Khelt, Netya was overcome with the urge to do the same for Caspian, except this time it was no sense of duty or obligation to her alpha that drove her. Her talents in the ways of pleasure had grown considerably over the past year, and she longed to lavish them on the man who now held her, doing things for him that perhaps no other woman could.

Netya's hair drifted down in wisps around her shoulders as she pulled her gown over her head and let it fall to the floor behind them, twining her naked body closer around Caspian's as the roughness of his clothes dragged against her sensitive nipples, tightening them to hard points as the growing bulge between his legs pressed against the part of her that desired it most.

He combed her hair back with his fingers, toying with the small braid of wooden beads as he looked at her. "Lie with me where we can feel the fire on our skin," he said, letting his hand drift across her cheek as he slowly pulled away, leaving her to kiss the tips of his fingers when they finally left her. He strode over to the bed and pulled off several heavy furs, draping them across the floor next to the fire.

Netya curled her toes against the rough stone as she approached him, reaching for his fingers and helping them unfasten the wooden clasp of his belt as he too shed his clothing. He seemed to know what she wanted, giving her a moment of patience as she drew close and rested her cheek against his chest, letting her hands roam across his masculine body, caressing the muscles of his stomach and waist, the smooth plane of his back, the firmness of his manhood.

They sank down together on the furs, the soft tickle greeting Netya's bare skin along with the heat of the fire. Her mouth sought its way across his chest, savouring the taste of him as she made her way lower, before finally taking him into her mouth. A surge of desire gripped her, the longing to please Caspian taking hold again as his potent male scent flooded across her tongue. She worked to take him as deeply as she could, letting him enjoy the tight warmth of her body as her fingers massaged his stomach.

He twitched with pleasure, but before she could coax him to his peak he eased her gently off, kissing her again as he pressed her back against the furs.

"No need to be hasty," he said as he slipped his fingers between her legs,

sliding them up and down the length of her cleft until they brushed the sensitive nub at its hood.

"I want to please you as many times as I can," Netya gasped, gripping his wrist as he spread her open and toyed with her moistening folds.

"The pleasure you wait for is greater than the pleasure you don't. I will show you." He knelt over her and kissed her navel, slowly, deliberately, forcing her to wait as his fingertips teased the edges of her stomach. She was breathing heavily by the time his lips reached the space between her legs, and for the first time she experienced the same kind of pleasure she had just given Caspian.

It was softer, more teasing, and not as intense as she had expected, but the sensation of his tongue running over the sensitive pearl at the peak of her folds sent a shudder up her spine that tightened her muscles and forced her to curl her fingers into the fur beneath them. Her chest rose and fell as she squirmed, biting back her noises of pleasure until Caspian forced them out of her regardless. The intense skill of his pacing brought her again and again to the point where she almost felt her climax brimming, then he would back off, leaving her to savour the desperate, yet strangely pleasurable sense of her tension draining away.

At first it almost frustrated her, before she realised that the sensations she felt were growing stronger each time, building the liquid pleasure within her to a simmer, then a boil, until her cheeks were flushed and her skin hot with perspiration, grinding her back into the fur as the brush of each hair felt like it was lighting a thousand sparks inside her body.

With Khelt and Erech, Netya has always taken her pleasure from the feeling of being claimed in the most physical way possible by a male. Their strength and eagerness to slake their lust had been exciting, effortlessly awakening the primal urges of a woman within her.

If not for the way Caspian was treating her at that moment, she might never have realised there was a very different side to the pleasures she could experience at the hands of a man. There was strength and power, yes, and she relished the gentle dig of Caspian's thumbs pressing against her stomach, but his true hold over her came from the way he played on her urges, binding her to him with an invisible leash of desire. Every time he slowed or paused, the hot place within her belly squirmed in desperation. She felt that she would do anything for him if only he would let her recapture that pleasure once again. She needed it. She needed him to give it to her, and the knowledge that he

could exert such a hold without the need to so much as say a single word excited her more than anything she had experienced in her life.

"Please take me," she begged him breathlessly as he paused, kissing his way back up her stomach. "I cannot bear it any longer."

Caspian smiled, sliding his arms beneath her as he rose to his knees, dragging her up with him. "Will you bear it a little longer, just for me?" he said, brushing the back of his finger up and down the side of her neck so agonisingly gently that it made Netya shudder. He gazed into her eyes, smile fading as pure passion crept into his voice. "Seeing you like this, feeling how it makes you move in my arms, that is my pleasure."

Netya kissed him desperately, pressing her hips up against his manhood, wanting nothing more than to feel him inside her. "How do you make me feel this way?" she whispered, trying to guide him between her folds, but he denied her.

"Turn around," he instructed. "You understand that lovemaking is more that just a slaking of urges, don't you?"

Netya nodded, quivering with need, but growing ever more excited as she obeyed his command. She knelt upright on the furs in front of Caspian, and he settled easily into place behind her, encircling her with his arms.

"Let your body be patient," he said, reaching down to slide his manhood between her legs, the crown pressing insistently against her entrance. She felt him twitch, the surge of his shaft straining to enter her, but she fought the urge to push back.

Caspian rested his chin on her shoulder, hands sliding up and down her body until they crossed over her breasts. He took her nipples between his fingers, rolling them gently, then harder, until Netya bit her lip and whimpered. He squeezed hard enough that it hurt, but he had brought her to a place where pain became pleasure, and she craved more of it. Her body was something else in his arms. Every sensation was bliss.

The pressure between Netya's legs built, and with a gentle parting the tip of his shaft slid inside her. It was slow, excruciatingly so, but she allowed the shudders of desperation to grip her body as she held still in his arms, clinging on to his wrists as he caressed her. Caspian filled her completely, stretching her satisfyingly tight by the time their hips met. She settled her weight back against him, savouring the dull tug in her belly as he pressed just slightly deeper. Then, just as she thought she could endure no more, he finally took her in the way she wanted.

There were no wild thrusts, no sharp bucks of desire that threatened to hurt her, no reckless surge to the finish. He moved his hips in motion with hers, practically rocking her in his lap as he remained buried almost to the hilt. The friction was small, simmering, but had it been any greater Netya knew she would have been driven to her climax within moments.

She writhed in his grip, squeezing the fur between her toes as her fingernails dug into Caspian's arms. His own hold tightened in response, one hand pinning her hips in place while the other encircled her chest, keeping their bodies deliciously close at all times.

Netya craned her neck to kiss him, though she barely had the breath for it any more. His rough cheek scratched her chin with every motion, and her inner muscles rippled and squeezed tighter and more uncontrollably with each shallow thrust.

He was building her to a moment so intense that Netya's mind went blank when she thought of it, believing that she had never needed anything so much in her life. Nothing outside the furs and the fire seemed to matter. Just like on the night of the summer fires, she felt trapped in a place beyond the world she knew, where the moment swallowed her until everything else was gone and only the wild girl within remained.

Her hand shot to the back of Caspian's neck, tightening in his hair as she screwed her eyes shut, brow creasing with pleasure. He seemed to sense the change in her, the breaking of the final shackles within her body and mind, and within moments the sharp panting of his breath had matched her own. The strong, gentle pace ceased, but he did not lose himself in furious abandon. Even as they reached the crest of their lovemaking, he remained in control, moving his hips just fast enough, just hard enough, to push her to the peak she needed.

It was not when her body convulsed in the first moment of climax that Netya realised just how far Caspian had driven her, but when that summit ebbed, only to be taken over by another, even stronger surge moments later. She was unable to breathe, losing control of her muscles as she twitched and strained in ways that she was unable to keep up with. High-pitched sounds of ecstasy left her lips, though whether they were words, whimpers, or cries she could not tell. Caspian pushed her on, holding her there in the moment, never going too fast or too slow to let it burn out prematurely. For the first time since the night Khelt had claimed her womanhood, she was overwhelmed with sensations too extreme for her spirit to endure.

Blackness took her for a moment, but she felt Caspian's arms bearing her up the whole way through, even when her limp body regained its strength and the world swam back into colour on the tail of one final climax. Her loss of control seemed too much for the male, and he buried his face in the side of her neck, groaning as his hot breath rushed against her. A moment later she was empty, the warmth of Caspian's climax spilling against her lower back as he ground himself against her, chest heaving as he nuzzled and nipped at her ear.

Netya felt as if she had just held her breath for longer than she was capable, unable to do anything but gasp, filling her lungs with aching breaths as she and her lover leaned up against each other. Her only disappointment was that he had withdrawn at the last moment, and as sense returned to her she flushed when realising why. If only she could have told him about the herbs.

"No man has ever taken me like that," she panted at last, once she had slid half way down Caspian's lap and regained enough of her breath to talk.

"Few women are able to let me," he replied, massaging Netya's glistening chest with one hand while the other stroked her hair. "But you are wise to the things your body tells you. It has been a long time since I have taken a female so far."

"It felt as if my spirit had come loose from me." She turned her head to kiss his arm, squirming against the furs as she glowed with satisfaction. "You are the one who is wise and skilled in the ways of pleasure."

Caspian let out a long breath, lying back on the furs and allowing Netya to crawl atop him. "There is something in that spirit of yours, Netya. I cannot tell what it is, but there is a spark there. I did not see it for a long time, but it has grown into a fire during your time with us."

She rested her cheek against his chest, smiling. It pleased her like nothing else to hear such words from Caspian. "I still do not believe my spirit is a special one."

"It is different, though. Often that is enough."

Netya closed her eyes for a moment, content to feel the gentle pulse of Caspian's heart and the slow movement of his body beneath her. "Will you do this again with me?" she asked.

He paused before answering. "I told you, hearts are dangerous things to toy with."

"I did not ask you to be my mate."

"Would you feel the same after the next time we made love? Or the time

after?" He ran a hand through his hair. "It is not easy to forget how fond the spirit grows on nights like these. We are free to take our pleasures with whomever we desire, but once Khelt returns he will expect you to be his again. I would never put myself between you and him."

"I care for you both."

Caspian's hand crept down to tousle her own hair. "That is why it would be better for us not to lie with one another again. When two wolves vie for the affection of a single female, it rarely ends well."

Netya's heart sank, and she clung to him tighter. "Why must hearts be so difficult to understand?"

"If they were simple, they would not be special." He cupped her cheek and sat up to kiss her one more time. "Much like you."

—**27**— Netya's Mentor

Netya awoke in her own tent the following morning. Caspian must have carried her back after she fell asleep curled up next to him. She stretched contentedly, squirming in her furs as she recalled their night together. Of the men she had been with over the past year, he was the first one to have elevated their lovemaking to something beyond what she understood of it so far. Were there peaks of intimacy that rose even higher than those Caspian had shared with her? If she found a mate some day, a person she truly loved, would they take her to further places still?

Netya rolled over, propping an arm beneath her cheek. Had she even experienced love yet? Was it the sense of duty she felt to Khelt, and the longing she had to make him open his heart to her? If he would only share that part of himself, and claim her as his mate properly, she might be able to love him.

But Caspian had been so honest with her since the moment they met. He saw her as she truly was, not a concubine or a girl from a rival tribe, but simply as Netya. It filled her with joy to picture the small symbol he had made that meant her name. Such a tiny gesture, but one that touched her heart more than any grand gift. Was the way she felt about Caspian love? And if it was, how would she ever allow it to grow? She was bound to Khelt, at least until she bore him an heir, and that was unlikely to happen for as long as she continued taking Adel's herbs. Perhaps once her dwindling supply ran out she should simply stop and allow nature to take its course, have Khelt's child, and then allow her heart to roam where it wished.

She sighed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She did not especially want to become a mother, she knew that now. There was too much she longed to do and experience in her life before raising children. She wanted to travel and see the North People, visit the distant mountains, attend one of the great gatherings of packs the Moon People spoke of. Most of all she desired a role she could call her own, whether it was as a hunter, seer, or something else.

How did it seem that love was a delicate thread lost within an impossible tangle of pathways spreading out before her? She could see glimpses of it, touch and tug at it, but following it would lead her into the wilderness, where all other paths collapsed and nothing was certain.

If Fern had been there Netya would have talked it over with her friend, but the other girl was absent from their tent that morning. Either she had been out all night as her wolf, or had found her way to the bed of one of their friends.

Netya got up and rekindled the fire with some borrowed embers from the central hearth, then made her way down to the river to bathe while it was still quiet. The weather was still too cold for most of the pack to take to the river directly, but Netya liked the way the icy water woke her up, along with the feeling of wrapping herself in a warm fur as she dried off by the fire afterwards.

One of the seers must have been keeping watch for her outside their cave, for no sooner had Netya shed her clothes and slipped into the river than an elder woman hurried down the slope after her, clearly with the intention of delivering a message.

"Your apprenticeship will begin today," the seer announced as Netya blinked up at her from the water. "Come to the cave at sundown, and Adel will select your mentor." With her piece said the woman departed, leaving Netya shivering, as much with anticipation as from the cold.

"It is no surprise it happened now," Fern said when she reappeared at midday. "With Khelt gone, Adel will see it as a good opportunity to bring you into her fold without him interfering."

"You make it sound so sinister," Netya replied.

"With the den mother it often is. She rarely makes any decision without ensuring it will serve her purposes in some way."

"I do not know whether to feel afraid or excited to be part of her order." Fern gave her a reassuring look. "As long as you stay out of her way and mind the words of your mentor I think you will have little to worry about. Adel is intimidating, but all the seers agree that she is as wise and talented a den mother as they have ever known. They have done well under her, and you shall too."

Fern's words helped to sooth Netya's worries a little. Brae and most of the other seers had always treated her kindly, if a little distantly at times. Their ways seemed strange, but if they could thrive in spite of Adel, perhaps she could too. Certainly, if she became a seer, she would no longer need to worry about the likes of Vaya picking on her. She decided to focus on the positives, resolving that she would not allow her feelings toward the den mother to interfere with her apprenticeship.

The sudden announcement had the fortunate effect of taking Netya's mind off matters of love and companionship for a short while, but as the hours before sunset dragged by her thoughts couldn't help but creep back to the previous night.

"Does Caspian speak of himself much?" she asked Fern as they spent the afternoon smoothing down freshly made bone needles that had been crafted from the spoils of the last hunt.

"He tends to speak of anything if you ask him, but you know him well enough by now. He keeps his thoughts inside most of the time. Why do you ask?"

"I realised I do not know him as well as I should. Does he have family in the pack?"

Fern shook her head, keeping her eyes on the rough stone she was smoothing her needle against with a piece of leather. "I think his father came from another clan. Several of our parents were lost during the time we fought your people and Adel's most viciously. Caspian's mother was one of those who died on the hunt that drove the alpha and den mother apart."

That made Netya pause. "She was the seer who was killed?"

Fern nodded. "Caspian and Khelt were already close, but they became like brothers after that. The alpha's mother died shortly after he was born, and his father was already old. Khelt lost his father and inherited the title of alpha just a few months before Caspian lost the last of his family too."

"He did not tell me that part," Netya mused.

Fern looked up from her work. "You spoke to him about this?"

"Yes, last night." Netya flushed, unsure of how much to share with her friend. She knew Fern was not the sort to become genuinely jealous, but the events of the previous evening still felt private somehow.

"Netya." Fern tutted, a smile spreading across her lips. "There are some things you are even worse at hiding than me."

Netya squirmed for a moment, before relenting. There was no point in trying to keep it hidden now. "Promise you will not tell anyone?"

"He took you to his bed last night?"

Netya bobbed her head. "I do not mean to keep it a secret. It just... felt special, in some way."

"If I am to keep it to myself, I must know every detail! That is my price for staying silent." Fern seemed to have perked up immediately once the sombre topic turned to matters of love, and Netya found it difficult to refuse her once

her interest had been piqued.

"I did not mean for it to happen," Netya began, fumbling her way awkwardly through the events that had ended with her lying in the furs with Caspian. Soon they were talking in hushed whispers, and the dark-haired girl recounted everything she could remember. Fern's expression creased with emotion as the truth of Khelt and Adel's tale came out, and for a short while she seemed worryingly preoccupied with the revelation. It awoke a glimmer of concern in Netya's heart when her friend swept whatever had been bothering her aside and, almost disingenuously, pushed for more details about Caspian.

There seemed a hidden well of emotion within Fern that longed to escape, but whenever it did, it hurt her, and she hurried to bury it in her eagerness to pursue the more pleasurable things in life. It was rare that Netya touched upon this closed-off side of her friend, but it had happened enough times now for her to become aware of it. The only time Fern had let it slip out uncontrollably had been when she confronted Vaya all those months ago. Netya wished she had understood, or could remember, what the huntress had said to provoke such a powerful reaction, but whatever it was it had clearly pierced deep into the heart of whatever burden Fern carried.

These were all distant thoughts, and Netya had not the first clue how or why she might bring them up with her friend, but they sat at the back of her mind like a lingering ghost, intangible and unsettling.

Fern was an expert in regaining her upbeat mood, however, and before long she had tugged Netya back into the exciting gossip of love and lovemaking, sharing a tale of her own about how she and Nathar had spent the early hours of that morning. The things Fern described soon had Netya blushing again, and by the time the sun had begun to set her thoughts were leagues away from the vague sense of unease that had threatened to encroach on them.

The two young women were smoothing down their last pair of needles when Erech limped over to the spot outside their tent, excitement in his eyes.

"I just came from the seers' cave, Netya," he said. "They are ready for you now."

She was greeted not by one of the elders as she had expected, but a young seer named Selo, who had just recently finished her own apprenticeship. Netya had glimpsed the inner part of the cave many times as she walked past, but only the small circular chamber at the entrance was ever visible. It was

where the seers would often sit when they were grinding herbs, sewing leather, or going about their other practical daily tasks. There was usually someone there to attend to the needs of the pack members who stopped by, but on the far side of that first chamber a thick curtain of darkly stained hides hung from a wooden frame, concealing the inner cave from view. In that private sanctum the seers performed all of their rituals, communing with the spirits and seeking out the wisdom that came from a place beyond the physical world. It was also where they stored all of their most potent herbs and medicines, the ones that were powerful or dangerous when administered incorrectly.

The seers' cave was a haven of dark mystery that held secrets even the Moon People themselves barely knew, and now it was Netya's turn to have them revealed to her. She felt terribly inadequate standing there in her simple gown and moccasins next to Selo, who was dressed in an extravagant shawl of fur and a deer-pelt headdress. There was no fire burning in the small antechamber, and the cool air immediately crept its way up Netya's back as Selo instructed her to wait and slipped behind the hide curtains.

She rubbed her arms, gazing at the cave walls around her. Now that her presence here was permitted, she no longer felt so guilty about staring at the fascinating murals that covered the inner walls. Most of them were aged and faded, but the daubs of red and dark-blue pigment formed patterns that were very unlike any she had seen before. Some clearly depicted the outlines of wolves and men, but they had been drawn in such a way as to appear jagged and wild, every shape covered in uneven edges that made it seem more like a spirit made of fog or smoke. The murals reminded Netya of the way her mind had made the Moon People into otherworldly monsters the first time she saw them, and she wondered whether the shapes before her were supposed to represent not what the eye saw, but what the spirit sensed in the world around it.

Selo returned a few moments later and gestured for her to step forward. The seer's expression was solemn, but when she saw how nervous Netya was she gave her a small smile of understanding.

"I was afraid too," she said quietly. "Fear is something you will learn to understand soon, as every seer must."

Netya took a deep breath and tried to still her quaking heart. A dozen anxious thoughts rushed through her head as she approached the curtain. What if she lacked the wisdom to become a seer? What if the ways of the

spirits proved too dark and terrifying for her? Would her mentor be someone kind like Brae, or one of the elders who seemed more like Adel?

She slipped her hand past the first curtain, feeling her way through several more until she was forced to leave the light of the outside world behind her and fumble through near-darkness, pushing aside half a dozen drapes until she stepped out into the place where she would learn to become a seer.

The cave was far larger than the antechamber, and Netya stumbled as the ground sloped sharply beneath her feet the moment she entered. The earthen floor had been excavated down to the bare stone beneath, creating a roughly circular chamber that quickly narrowed as it stretched deeper into the heart of the outcrop. In the dim light Netya could make out more frames and curtains that separated off other areas. The coals of a fire marked the centre of the cave, but from the heavy herbal scents in the air Netya suspected there were few natural vents for smoke to escape through. Most of the illumination came from shallow clay lamps scattered about the area, and the fats and oils they burned gave off strange colours of light that seemed less warm than usual.

Netya had suspected some grand ritual or ceremony to await her, but she was met with nothing more than a small circle of seers standing in the middle of the chamber. Several faces were missing, and it was with great relief that Netya realised Adel's was among them. The den mother's absence did much to ease her anxiety, and she bowed her head in respect before stepping forward, wondering which of these women had been tasked with her instruction.

Brae greeted her first with no more formality than she ever did, letting out a sigh of pleasure as she cupped the air a few inches from Netya's cheeks. "I praised the den mother's wisdom in choosing you. Those who begin young often go on to become the greatest of seers."

"Thank you, Mother," Netya responded politely. "Will you be the one to instruct me?"

"As much as I would like to, no, that task has been appointed to another." Netya glanced around the group, waiting for her mentor to reveal herself. Several moments passed, and no one stepped forward.

Brae pressed her fingers to her mouth, drumming the balls of her feet against the ground. "The den mother should have sent your mentor here to greet you."

"Do you not know who it is?" Netya asked.

"No, it is often a private matter until the apprentice arrives." Brae paused,

the agitated patter of her moccasins increasing. "Of course, every mentor does have the right to deny an apprentice."

Netya's chest tightened as the uncomfortable silence continued.

"Well, Adel never asked me," one of the elder seers grumbled. "I don't mean to cause offence, Netya, but many of us have concerns about sharing the ways of the seerhood with one of your kind."

A few of the others murmured in agreement, and Netya had to clench her fists to keep from joining Brae in her bout of anxious fiddling. She had never stopped to think that there might be those among the seers who cared just as little for her joining their order as Vaya had cared for letting a Sun girl join the hunt. Under the inquisitive eyes of the group of wise women, her skin began to burn. She could not be humiliated like this before her apprenticeship had even begun, not after she had set her hopes so firmly on this one last opportunity.

The seers began to talk among themselves. Netya's mentor, whoever it was, showed no signs of breaking her silence.

"Adel has done this," Netya whispered under her breath, struggling to control the angry heat swelling in her throat and pressing at her eyes.

"What?" Brae placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Was this the den mother's doing?" Netya said, more loudly. "Did she let me believe I was to become a seer all this time only so that I could come here and be humiliated like a fool?!"

The seers fell quiet, fixing their disapproving stares on the girl in their midst. The shame squeezing at Netya's throat threatened to spill out at any moment, but when she looked to the faces of the seers one by one, seeking out the woman who had spurned her, she saw no contempt or malice in any of their expressions, only confusion that mirrored her own.

"I did not." Adel's voice sounded from the far end of the cave. All heads turned as the den mother strode forward, soon looming over every other woman in the chamber as she approached Netya. The group moved apart to let her through, and even Brae backed off a few steps.

Adel looked down at Netya, the den mother's icy blue eyes glinting from within the dark charcoal markings that framed them. Here, in the light of her own lair, she was terrifying.

"None of them are to mentor you, girl," she said, "because I am. You will be my apprentice."

Netya had little choice but to follow. Adel led her deeper into the cave, beyond the eerie light of the lamps and through another dark curtain, then up a steep incline in the rock as the passage narrowed. She was still too stunned by what had happened to make sense of it. After almost believing that her apprenticeship had been a cruel trick, the realisation that she was to be taught by the den mother herself sent her thoughts spiralling into confusion.

Why would Adel, of all people, desire to instruct her? And did Netya even want a woman who had shown her little but scorn as a mentor? It seemed she had little choice in the matter now. Netya was no expert on the nuances of pack culture, but even she knew that learning directly from the den mother was an honour few could ever dream of, and to snub it would be a tremendous insult. Even without the consideration of what it would do to her standing within the pack, Netya feared that incurring Adel's wrath would leave her with far worse problems than the scorn of her peers. All of her expectations, all the things she had imagined herself doing over the coming months of her apprenticeship, had been pulled out from under her the moment Adel made her announcement.

They passed through one final curtain, and Netya found herself blinking a sudden brightness from her eyes as she stepped into the den mother's lair. It was not a secret chamber buried within the caves as she had expected, but a deep, open vault at the top of the outcrop. Evening sunlight streamed in through the space above, where an elaborately crafted cover of logs and animal hides had been opened up, much like the coverings Khelt used to keep the inside of his den sheltered from the elements. It was at least three times Netya's height from the floor to the roof, but her keen eyes quickly picked out the natural footholds in the rock that would allow a person to climb up. If there was a way down from the top of the outcrop, Adel might easily be able to come and go as she pleased without anyone ever knowing.

The den mother's chamber was striking in how simultaneously different and yet similar it was to Khelt's. The alpha's den was lavish and imposing, from his throne to the large bed platform and the trophies that were mounted in every suitable crack and cranny in the rocks.

Adel's chamber had been furnished to impress no one, but every inch of it

seemed to have a use. The full animal pelts that hung from the racks around the walls stared at Netya through their long-dead eye sockets, foxes, wolves, deer, cats, and even bears. Some of them were fashioned into clothing, but many more had been stitched to make bags and pouches. It would have been easy for the collection of dead animals to seem majestic or beautiful, but Adel had made no attempt to present them as trophies. Some of the pelts had warped and shrivelled with age, twisting the features of the creatures they had once resembled into disturbing masks. The head flap of a fox skin bag leered at Netya from across the chamber, listing to one side at a disturbing angle.

All around were bags and bowls, unlit lamps and worn-down tools. A series of flint knives on a slab near the fire were stained with the dark colours of whatever they had recently been cutting.

Netya was glad she was seeing the den mother's chamber for the first time under the light of day, before the nighttime spirits crept in to make every shadow a dozen times more unsettling.

"Sit," Adel instructed as she swept to the far side of the room, where the light shone brightest. Netya began to sink down on the opposite side of the fire, but a sharp look from the den mother halted her. She forced down the lump in her throat and crept closer, until she and Adel were less than a yard apart. Then she sat, crossing her legs on a dusty woven rug as she came face to face with her mentor. The silence was almost painful.

"You have been taking the herbs I gave you." Adel said.

Netya raised her eyebrows. "How did you know?"

"I did not, but I do now. At least you finally came to your senses. There are more of them in the fox hide bag near the entrance. Now that you are a seer, you may take them whenever you wish."

Netya's face warmed. She still felt like the den mother was toying with her, and she did not like it one bit. "I am taking them for my own sake, not for yours," she replied, perhaps a little more hotly than she should have. "And it has pained me to do it behind Khelt's back every day."

The den mother snorted. "A small burden, I'm sure. Why did you think I gave you that bag if not for your own wellbeing?"

Netya hesitated. Speaking of these things with Khelt or Adel felt like treading over razor shards of flint. She had to mind her step. "I know you do not want Khelt to have an heir," she said carefully.

"Then you know very little, girl. What do I care whether he has a child or not? You think my issue with him is one of petty spite?"

"I do not mean to presume." Netya backed off quickly, struggling to find the sharpness of mind she would need to match wits with Adel. Letting herself become flustered by her emotions would only make her clay in the den mother's dexterous hands. "I would think... I would think you might object to another heir like him taking over his leadership one day."

If Adel had been testing her in some way, she seemed to have given the right answer. The den mother's icy expression softened, and Netya caught her first glimpse of the wise leader within her.

"Children are not their fathers. You think very little of me, if you believe I would deny a life out of spite. Having a son or daughter may even help open the alpha's eyes to his flaws."

"Then..." Netya squinted, trying to understand. "Why give me those herbs?" Adel hissed out an impatient breath through her teeth. "They told me you had a quick mind. Why do you think? You were straying down a foolish path, and none of the others would have dared go behind the alpha's back to steer you off it."

"But you have hated me since the day I arrived!" Netya blurted out. Adel leaned forward. The faint lines on her face stood out to Netya once again now that they were so close. The den mother's beauty was near-perfection, but those tiny lines, the only hints of her mortality, lent it a deep sadness.

"I hate men who behave like the beasts within them. I hate seeing people destroyed through pride, or fear, or ignorance. What reason have you ever given me to hate you?"

Netya opened her mouth, but she could find nothing to say. *Jealousy?* she thought, but that now seemed the most foolish reason of all. What was the den mother trying to do with her? "Because I am one of the Sun People?" she tried at last. "When I first came here, you said I did not belong."

"I only told you what was true," Adel replied. "You did not belong. You were a child thrown to the mercy of a beast and his pack. I hoped for your own sake you would run that night, when I made you watch those two males fighting."

"So I have proven to you now that I am not as helpless as you thought?" Adel regarded her for a long moment before speaking. "There are many women who would have been broken like a twig in the wind by such an upheaval. As soon as I learned the alpha had taken you, I saw it happening. A frightened girl staying by his side out of fear. Afraid to ever challenge the

warriors who had taken her from her home. Dutifully bearing a child she never asked for, bound to it as she grew older, living a quiet life of service. Content after a time, perhaps, but never truly happy. But you did not break like I expected. You changed. Many years ago, I was taken from my people as well, and I did not break either."

Netya did not know whether to feel flattered or unnerved by the den mother's appraisal. She did not even know whether to completely believe what she was being told. "Then, I suppose I am glad to have earned your respect."

Adel snorted. "You have a long way to go before you earn that. There is potential in you to become something more than Khelt's bed warmer, but potential on its own means little. You would not have made it this far without my help."

"It was my choice to stay, and my choice to take those herbs."

"Was it? Or did you need a hand to guide you?"

Netya bit back her response and forced herself to breathe and think again. It was painful to admit that everything Adel was saying might be true. When she was angry at Khelt she could at least cling on to her own sense of self-righteousness, but what did she have now? In her heart she knew that Adel had been cruel to her, disingenuous at the very least, but all she had to fall back on were her wounded feelings. Had the den mother's cruelty really been born of some twisted kindness? And, more worryingly, would Netya's time with the pack have been worse without it?

If not for Adel's offer of the herbs, would she have spent long nights awake agonising over whether to use them or not? Would the possibility of being in control of her future in such a way even have occurred to her? The den mother's gift, regardless of whether she chose to use it or not, had forced her to think about things she had previously never considered.

Her perplexity must have registered on her face, for it drew a look of cold satisfaction from Adel.

"The most important skill of a seer is to question these things, and open her mind to possibilities that are not seen by others. It does not matter whether you believe I guided you down the right path or not, only that you consider why I did it. The world is a complicated thing that few see for what it truly is, and the realm of the spirits even more so. These are all things you will learn as my apprentice."

"I still do not know why you chose me," Netya said. "The others say you

have never taken an apprentice before. Why am I the first?"

Adel looked at her, studying the dark-haired girl with the eyes of a master craftsman appraising the stone that might one day be chipped into a tool unlike any other. "I considered taking an apprentice many times," the den mother said, "but these women are not of my pack. They have all grown to think of the spirits in their own way, and I cannot unmake a lifetime of learning. You have heard the visions Brae and the others pronounce as if they were proof of the future, glimpses into things far beyond the knowing of any person."

"I have, but many visions do not come to pass," Netya said. "Everyone understands this."

"No," Adel said sharply. "That is the way of thinking you must abandon if you are to learn from me. The wisdom of the spirits does not come from premonitions of the future. I will never convince the other seers of this, but you have been raised apart from their way of thinking. If you are willing to listen, I will teach you."

It was with much scepticism that Netya tentatively bowed her head. The den mother's own unique teachings, whatever they turned out to be, were certainly not what she had expected to be made privy to over the course of her apprenticeship. "Am I not to learn how to seek out visions, then?" she said.

"Any fool can witness a vision. You see them in your dreams every night, but it takes a seer to understand the wisdom that can be drawn from them. When you are ready, I will guide you to a place where you can listen to the whispers of the spirits more keenly."

"When will that be?"

"When I say so." Adel rose to her feet and walked to a rack of pouches, unhooking several of them before returning to her spot in front of Netya and hefting a flat stone slab between them. One by one, she emptied the contents of the small bags, berries and herbs and leaves. Some were familiar to Netya already, but many were not.

"First, you must learn your herbs," Adel said. "Even the simplest of minds can manage this with enough practice. Once you can tell all of them by sight and smell, I will teach you their uses, and then how to administer them. Until then you will not take any of these for yourself without permission. Many of our most powerful medicines can become poison in the hands of a clumsy apprentice."

Netya was not permitted to ask any more questions for the rest of the evening. Adel brought out her collection of plants a few at a time, making her new apprentice memorise their names before moving on to the next batch. There was little further discussion between the two of them, and every time Netya attempted to make conversation the den mother silenced her with a few sharp words, insisting that she focus on the task at hand.

Adel's strict manner was aggravating, but as the evening wore on Netya found little space to indulge her frustration as the list of plants she was expected to memorise grew longer and longer. There were so many of them, and most seemed so alike that she did not have the first clue how she was supposed to tell them apart.

Before long, Netya was so overwhelmed by the task that she could have focused on little else even if she tried. She repeated the list of plants over and over in her head, trying to remember what made each one distinct as Adel emptied the contents of more and more bags on the stone in front of her.

When it became too dark to see, she was given a brief respite to light the lamps and kindle the fire, trying not to allow the unsettling animal pelts to distract her as she repeated the list over and over under her breath.

It seemed like hours before they came to the final bag, and even then Adel claimed there were more plants she would have to learn in the days to come. When the den mother took a handful of leaves from one of the pouches and told Netya to identify it, she found herself unable. They tried again, with a different kind of plant, and once again the answer refused to come.

Each time she failed, Netya felt her cheeks burn hotter, realising that she had focused so hard on remembering the names that she had forgotten which plants they were linked to. Adel reprimanded her for every mistake, but it was the den mother's unspoken judgement that bothered Netya more. She wanted to prove she was capable of becoming a seer. Not just to her new mentor, but to everyone, herself included. Each failure, each contemptuous look from Adel, made her feel like a foolish child, an outsider, a girl suited only to warming the alpha's furs.

After a time, she managed to identify a few plants correctly, but those were mostly the ones she had already grown accustomed to gathering with Fern. By the time they finished, the night was old, and Netya was exhausted.

"Climb up and close the coverings," Adel instructed. "It may rain soon." Careful not to slip, Netya gingerly used the natural footholds in the cave wall to make her way up until she reached the opening in the roof, peering

out across the top of the outcrop until she found the section of the heavy, hide-covered frame that had been moved aside to let the light in. She almost fell as she heaved it back into place over her head. At Adel's instruction, she spent another few moments making sure the pieces of hide trailing from the edges were tucked and arranged properly, so as not to let any rain in.

Netya clambered back down, her mind feeling like stretched wool. She longed for the comfort of her furs.

"You will return tomorrow morning," Adel said. "And we will try this again until you learn."

Netya bowed her head wearily and shuffled out through the drapes, edging back through the pitch blackness of the tunnel until she found her way to the central cave. The other seers had all returned to their own private dwellings, though Netya knew only the most senior of them slept in the cave itself. A single elder dozed in the antechamber on the way out, propped up against the wall in a pile of furs in case anyone had need of the seers' services in the middle of the night.

Netya dragged herself back to her tent, finding Fern already asleep, and tucked herself into her bedding. She tried to keep running over the names of the plants in her head, but sleep soon eroded any attempt at memorising them.

Her first day of apprenticeship had not been as dangerous as fighting mountain cats, or surviving on her own in the wilderness, but it had certainly been no less exhausting.

—**29**— The Apprentice

The second day was just as taxing as the first. This time, Adel prepared a larger stone slab in the corner of her chamber for Netya to use, with many of the plants already laid out for her. As the day went on the den mother left her alone while she attended to her other duties, but every time Netya began to relax her mentor would appear again a moment later, demanding that she list off her herbs once more.

Despite how much there was to remember, Adel had been right when she said that even the simplest of minds could grasp it given enough time. All Netya had to do was fill her head with the names of all the plants over and over again until they stuck, and then connect those names to the contents of the bags around her. It was not so different from learning the language of the Moon People, and after a time she felt a familiar comfort in the routine.

Adel kept her at the task all day, allowing only two brief breaks for Netya to eat and relieve herself. By the time she was allowed to return to her tent it was well past sunset, and she had little energy to do anything but recount the first two days of her apprenticeship to Fern before curling up to sleep.

As the days went on, Netya gradually learned to recognise all of the herbs Adel had prepared for her, and when she hit a stumbling point where she could not tell one plant from another, the den mother showed her the various hidden ways in which she might identify them. Two leaves or roots that looked identical might have distinctly different smells or tastes, or subtle patterns in their size or way of growing that could be picked out by a keen eye. Certain plants, of course, were not safe to try and identify by taste, as Adel purposefully allowed Netya to learn when she began to chew on a small piece of freshly cut stem, only to spit it out a moment later when her mouth began to burn as if she had just tasted fire.

She had to endure the rest of the day with her tongue and part of her cheek swollen and stinging, but she could not deny the effectiveness of the lesson, regardless of how little it did to improve her attitude toward Adel.

After Netya's unpleasant encounter with the piece of stalk, the den mother showed her how she could peel back the outer part of that particular plant to see how it differed on the inside from its less harmful cousins.

Hour after hour, Netya's knowledge of herbs and medicine was drummed

into her head. It was a relentless process, and Adel had no patience for how weary or distracted her apprentice became. One morning, when Netya slept longer than she had intended, the den mother arrived to drag her out of her furs in person, denying her even the chance to wash or eat before she was marched into the seers' cave and sat down in front of her plants again.

Only the focus of her work and her stubborn desire to prove herself kept Netya from objecting. If nothing else, her apprenticeship kept her from worrying over the problems that had hounded her for the past few months. With most of her days spent in the cave, she almost forgot that Vaya existed, and Khelt's continued absence meant that she barely spared a thought for the topics of love and motherhood.

More than a week had passed before Netya was finally allowed a day of partial rest. She entered Adel's chamber that morning to find her mentor engaged in an intent conversation with Hawk's mate, Essie, and when the two women looked up at her in surprise she could tell she had intruded on a serious matter. Before she could excuse herself, Netya recognised the distinct smell of the plants Adel was boiling over her fire, and her brow furrowed with concern.

"Do not worry," the den mother said to her guest, squeezing the woman's hand in reassurance. "Let me speak to my apprentice for a moment." She took Netya's arm and led her a short way down the passage outside, lowering her voice. "What happens within our cave is not for the ears of the rest of the pack. Do you understand?"

Netya nodded, but she was still agitated by what she had witnessed. "You were boiling the poison out of those sparrow roots."

"Yes," Adel said quietly, and her grip on Netya's arm became more gentle as she fixed her with a sombre look. "You remember what I told you it could be used for?"

"I do, but why? Hawk would—"

"He does not know his mate is carrying another child, nor shall he ever. I told him after Essie gave birth to their daughter that she might not survive a second pregnancy, but he still believes the spirits will be kind enough to give him a son before his mate grows too old."

Netya shivered. "You are going to help her lose the child?"

"It is too dangerous to let her keep it. She is very frightened, and it hurts her more than anything to deceive her mate, but it has to be done. I must stay with her all day to make sure the poison does its work."

Netya swallowed and looked to the drapes, her heart going out to the poor woman seated on the other side. It was a dark kind of magic that took away life before it even blossomed. These were the secrets the seers could never share with the rest of the pack. "I could stay to help," she said, but Adel shook her head.

"This is not something you should have to learn yet. Essie will be safe with me. Go about your own business today, and we will carry on your training tomorrow."

Netya did not need to be told twice that she could never speak of what she had witnessed to anyone. It bore a weight far greater than simple trust. Even voicing such things aloud gave her the sense that dark spirits were lingering nearby. When people murmured of witches and black magic, it was to these things that they referred. Netya hoped that she would never find herself in Adel's position, where she would be forced to practice such arts herself.

She began to realise, as she left the cave that morning, that the skills of a seer reached far further than knowledge of plants and visions. What she had just witnessed unsettled her deeply, and she could not imagine how the others coped with carrying such burdens of responsibility. The women who became seers required a strength of spirit equally as strong as the bravery of the hunters. It was a strength she would have to cultivate within herself as well, if she was to join their order.

Netya spent the morning in quiet reflection, letting the wind whip through her hair and rattle the beads of her talisman as she sat on the rocks gazing out across the plains. Perhaps it was through doing such things that Adel had earned the respect of the other seers. How many burdens had the den mother taken on her own soul to ease the suffering of others? Was that why she sometimes seemed so cold and heartless? Netya tried to imagine such a life, wondering whether it was a path she too would have to take one day if she hoped to achieve the wisdom of her mentor.

She was chilly and numb by the time she noticed Caspian sitting down next to her. He did not speak, but merely joined her in her silent vigil as the pair of them sought out the solitude of their own thoughts.

"I wonder," she said at last, "whether there will be any room left in my life for pleasure, if I am to become a seer."

"There is a reason few women are suited to that calling," Caspian replied. "Is it troubling you?"

"I do not know. I imagined seeking out visions, learning how to speak with the spirits, but now I think Adel has shown me the truth of it." She sighed. "This is the first time in days I have been free to enjoy myself, and now I can do nothing but sit here. I miss the simpler things. I did not have so many thoughts to fill my head before I became an apprentice."

"Would you give up the things you have learned to go back to that time?"

"I suppose not. I would only become restless again. I just wish there was something to lighten the burden."

"You will find your own way," Caspian said. "Take it as a compliment that Adel is pushing you so hard. It only means she had faith that you will succeed."

"Or that she is waiting to see whether I break or not." Netya looked over at him, then leaned to the side and rested her cheek against his shoulder, allowing herself a brief moment of contentment. How much she missed something so simple as warmth and closeness to another person. Another man.

Caspian allowed her to rest there, putting an arm around her waist. Even though he was not a seer, she felt that he understood somehow. He was the kind of man who would.

"Would you kiss me?" she asked quietly.

Caspian shifted position to look at her. "Only a kiss?"

She nodded. "Only a kiss. I need something to warm my day."

There was no further lecture about the perils that lay in matters the heart. Caspian seemed to know that it was not love, but intimacy she needed at that moment. Still, as his lips touched hers and warmth rushed through Netya's body, she knew that the kiss would have meant far less coming from anyone else.

She closed her eyes and sank into him, letting her exhaustion of mind and spirit slip away as she shared her burdens with the man who held her. What blissful pleasure there was to be found in such a simple act. More than ever, Netya longed for a mate to share these moments with her. She could have spent all day working tirelessly under Adel's guidance, if only she knew there was a loving partner waiting to welcome her into his furs at the end of it all.

The kiss was a long one, but still not long enough for Netya. She rested her head back on Caspian's shoulder and sat there with him for a while, enjoying his closeness as he enjoyed hers.

"It is wrong for me to feel so burdened, when others have suffered far

greater troubles," she said, thinking of poor Essie back in the seers' cave.

"We all have our own troubles," Caspian replied. "There is no shame in wanting to make them better. It still surprises me that you had the strength to make a place for yourself here, so far from your own people."

"But I will see my family again one day," Netya said, putting a hand on his chest. "You will not see yours."

Caspian smiled, the corners of his eyes creasing with melancholy. "Khelt is my brother now. The rest of the pack is my family."

"You never mentioned your mother when you told me Khelt and Adel's tale. You must have been there when it happened."

"I was spared seeing it with my own eyes. I only heard after, when I realised she was not with the rest of the group."

"And still you do not blame my people for it?" Netya said.

"Perhaps I did, for a time. I blamed Khelt too, and Adel, and many others, until I realised I was only hurting myself in doing so. Had I tried for revenge, I might have left someone else without a mother or father. I never wanted that."

"I wish you had told me."

Caspian shook his head. "Some things are difficult to share, even if we want another person to know them somehow." He rubbed his hand up and down her side for a moment, warding off the chill of the wind. "Did you learn who else was lost that night along with my mother?"

"No, Fern only told me of her when I asked about you."

"Ah, of course." He drew in a long breath. "Eloway and Sirocco were the other two. They loved each other so fiercely, there was nothing any of us could do to keep them apart. Eloway ran back to protect her mate when he was caught in one of the Sun People's nets, even though she must have known there was no chance of saving him. They died together, but they left their daughter Fern behind."

A painful weight settled in Netya's chest. She had expected to hear something like this one day, but it had been a vague concern. She understood now the sombre flashes she sometimes glimpsed in her friend. Poor Fern, always so cheerful and kind to others, so much so that it sometimes felt like a mask. How old must she have been when it happened? Close to the changes that would have taken her from being a girl to a woman. A time when the guidance and support of parents was needed more than ever.

Netya sniffed back her sadness. "I have no right to feel burdened by

anything, do I?"

"That was not what I meant to say," Caspian replied. "But, when your spirit is troubled, sometimes it can do us good to be reminded of worse, and better, times."

They sat for a while longer. Netya would gladly have shivered in the wind next to Caspian all day, but when he noticed how cold she was becoming he insisted she go back inside to warm up.

She wondered how to let Fern know that she knew about her parents, but any attempt to broach the topic seemed like it would only lead to her friend shrugging it off, insisting it was not worth talking about, as she often did.

Caspian's words followed Netya around all afternoon.

Some things are difficult to share, even if we want another person to know them somehow.

That evening, when she returned to find Fern curled up in the furs, she slipped in beside her friend and put her arms around her. Without saying a word, she rested her forehead on the other girl's shoulder, and held her. The stiffness in Fern's muscles softened after a time, and she gave in to the embrace. Netya cradled her there until they both fell asleep. Whether or not Fern realised what had spurred the show of affection, Netya felt that a part of her friend understood.

Perhaps it was a simple gift, or a token of encouragement, or maybe something even more intimate. Whatever it was, Netya awoke to find a talisman hanging outside the tent, and the discovery warmed her heart.

On a leather cord looped around the end of one of their cooking sticks, a small, six-sided piece of wood waited for her. Just like Caspian's carved buckle, it had been worked and polished with great care. The design etched into the front had been carved out first, before being darkened with fire, making it seem even more precise and striking than the first time Netya had seen it. The wooden pendant bore the sun and moon mark that meant her name.

She unlooped the leather and ran her fingers over the design, smiling as she looked around for the person she knew had left it for her. It was not another kiss, or a mate waiting for her at the end of the day, but it was a symbol of who she was, and a reminder that there were those who cared for her. She put the cord around her neck and made sure the design faced outwards, running her fingers over the shallow carving until they became familiar with it.

Despite her weariness of body and spirit the previous day, she returned to the seers' cave determined that, no matter what her apprenticeship demanded of her in the months to come, she would try her very best to rise to it.

She found Essie dozing in the central chamber, being tended by one of the elder seers. The woman's skin was pale, her features drawn, but she was breathing steadily. The elder glanced up as Netya approached and gave her a look of concern, but neither of them spoke of what had happened. Some things were best left forgotten.

Adel's chamber was still dark that morning, the roof coverings not having been opened. Only a single lamp and the embers of the fire provided any illumination.

Netya crept in quietly, eyes darting around to try and find her mentor in the gloom. Adel was sat against the wall, a piece of absorbent animal hide curled between her fingers, stained with what looked like blood. She was staring into a bowl in front of her, but its contents were hidden by the shadows.

"Den Mother?" Netya said. The back of her neck prickled when the other woman did not respond. She was used to receiving prompt instructions the second she set foot in her mentor's den. "Shall I open the covers? It is already morning."

Adel inclined her head slightly. It was not much of a response, but Netya was too uncomfortable to stand there doing nothing. She climbed up to the roof and heaved the moveable section of it aside, flooding the chamber below with daylight. Adel squinted and shielded her eyes with a hand, seeming almost to shrink further into the wall. She had not painted her eyes with their customary markings recently, but they had darkened nonetheless. It seemed she had been awake all night.

The den mother finally took notice of her apprentice once Netya climbed down, quickly taking the piece of hide she had been clutching and draping it over the top of the wooden bowl, obscuring its contents from view.

"Did everything go as intended?" Netya asked as she edged closer.

"Yes," Adel said, her voice dry and husky. She sounded as though she had forgone food and water as well as sleep. "I followed the seer's path to help give life, not take it away."

"I could have stayed to help you."

The den mother closed her eyes and shook her head. She could not have been more than ten years Netya's senior, but in that moment she seemed terribly old. "I will never teach you of what I did. It is more than enough for one person to bear." She picked up the bowl and held it out to Netya, eyes averted from the bloody rag draped over the top. "Take this far down the river and empty it for me. Do not look under the covering."

Netya nodded, clutching the edges of the bowl tightly. All she could feel was a small amount of water moving around inside, but her stomach turned at the thought of what else there might be. "Will Essie be okay?" she said.

"If she does not fall pregnant again, yes."

"You could give her the burnt leaf herbs, like you did for me."

"I have persuaded her to start taking them, but they are never a guarantee." Adel rubbed her eyes and gestured for her apprentice to go, struggling to get to her feet. "We will continue your studies when you return."

Netya hurried as fast as she could without threatening to spill the bowl's contents. She kept her eyes fixed on the ground in front of her, ignoring the other seers as she exited the cave. When she passed by Essie's spot, she made sure to tilt her body away, hiding what she was carrying from view.

The camp was as silent as usual in the mornings, and Netya was thankful she could avoid the few early risers clustered around the main fire as she made her way down to the river. Once she was beyond the outcrop, she bent down and peeled back the edge of the bloodied piece of hide. As hard as she tried not to look, she couldn't help but glimpse the contents of the bowl as she emptied it into the river. All she saw was watery, clotted blood.

Once the bowl was rinsed she left it on the rocks to dry, but the stained rag she allowed to drift away down the river, along with the sickly mixture that had resulted from Adel's grim task. It was difficult to swallow her nausea, but she cleaned her hands and filled her lungs with fresh air, trying not to let her mind wonder at what had happened in the den mother's chamber the previous day.

By the time she returned, Adel had washed and painted her eyes afresh, and there was no hint in her appearance of the disturbed woman Netya had walked in on earlier. No further words were spoken about what had happened, and they returned to their studies of plants as if it were any other day.

Once Netya began settling back into the familiar routine, she realised that a glimmer of respect had awoken in her for the den mother.

The Spirit World

When Adel was satisfied that her apprentice could reliably identify all of the herbs the seers used on a regular basis, she allowed Netya to begin running errands for the others. She was still not permitted to take on any of a seer's duties by herself, but at the very least the new stage of her training kept her outside of Adel's chamber more often than not. She continued learning her herbs, moving on to their varied uses along with where and how to gather them, and several times the den mother took her out foraging specifically to search for the plants she had spent the last few weeks learning about.

The rest of her time was spent gathering and preparing things for the other seers when they needed them. Her duties were mainly to the elders, who preferred to stay in their comfortable dwellings within the cave while Netya scurried off to fetch them everything from measures of dried herbs, to warm meals and coals for their fires. It did not leave her feeling especially important, and her superiors were quick to let her know every time she made a mistake or took too long in getting them what they needed, but it was something.

Still, Netya realised, she was learning. In helping the others, she found herself naturally observing the ways in which they prepared certain remedies and mixtures that allowed them to commune more closely with the spirits. When the hunters came back with injuries that needed treating, she learned which needles and animal sinews were best for sewing up different types of wounds, and how the type and quantity of medicine used to dull the pain of a small woman differed from that required by a large man. Wolves too, she learned, took differently to most treatments than people did. It was rare that the seers sought to sooth the ailments of their brethren while they were in their animal forms, but there were a few specific remedies that required it.

All of the small examples she noticed during the course of her errands helped reinforce what Adel was teaching her, and Netya found that she picked up on the practical uses of plants more quickly than learning how to name and identify them.

Her apprenticeship was still exhausting, especially when she had to run up and down from the river fetching water for her impatient superiors several times a day, but seeing how her knowledge might one day be put into practice helped spur her on.

She looked at the necklace Caspian had made for her often, tracing her fingers over the symbol carved into the front as she thought of him. He never mentioned it to her, but, the first time he saw her wearing it, the smile it brought to his lips warmed Netya's thoughts all day. When the others asked her what the symbol on the necklace was, some thought it silly, as she had at first, but to her it would always be a source of pride, just like her spear.

Unfortunately, there was little time for her to enjoy herself with her friends. Even her relaxing walks with Fern and Erech became few and far between, and she had little energy left to do anything but eat and sleep in the evenings once she was permitted to leave the seers' cave. The taxing extent of her duties was not lost on the others, and she was frequently reminded — particularly by those who disliked Adel—that she was being pushed far harder than was usual for most apprentices.

The kindly elders she used to sit with in the mornings often encouraged her to rest more, to eat, to stay a while and talk with them, while Vaya and her ilk shook their heads in contempt, bemused at how she could allow herself to be made such a slave to the den mother.

Had it not been for the way she found Adel the morning after she helped Essie, Netya might have objected to the relentless chores too. Stubbornness and a desire to prove herself could only go so far, but a small part of her was starting to believe that there was more to Adel than the harsh exterior she presented to the world. She wanted to believe that her training would bear fruit, and the tiny glimmer of faith she had in her mentor's wisdom was enough to keep her going.

A few days before Khelt was due to arrive back with the group that had gone to the North People, Adel told Netya that the time had come for her to begin learning the ways of the spirits. Healing and medicine were only one half of a seer's duties, and they could be learned by most who had the dedication and sharpness of mind. Communing with the spirits, however, was a secret wisdom destined only for a select few. It was this, the other seers told her, that would truly test whether she was suited to their calling or not.

Adel instructed her to rest well, giving her until noon to prepare herself before they embarked upon the next pivotal moment in her training. Netya was unsure of how she was supposed to ready herself for something she had so little understanding of. The spirits were as much of a mystery to her as

they had ever been, and from the moment she woke shortly after dawn the mounting sense of apprehension in her stomach refused to let go. She lay in her furs for a long time, watching the light grow brighter through the tent walls, until as last her restless thoughts became too much, and she went down to the river to bathe.

Netya's nervous energy hummed beneath her skin all day, and despite Adel's instructions she took her spear down to the plains to practice for several hours, allowing the familiar burn of exertion to calm her down. Once the sun was nearly at its zenith, she returned to the seers' cave, steadied herself with a few long breaths, and made her way to the den mother's chamber.

Adel was waiting for her in the dim light of her sanctuary, the overhead covers closed and only the eerie glow of a few lamps to illuminate her. She greeted Netya with her customary coldness, and motioned for her to sit.

"Today you will make your first journey into the spirit world," she said. "I will be here to help guide you, but I cannot follow once your mind slips away from your body. Every seer must learn to face the spirits on her own."

Netya knelt down on a woven mat in front of the den mother. Today, the slab between them was occupied by only a small bowl of nut meal, a knife, and a wooden jar sealed with wax.

"Will it be like what I see in my dreams?" she asked.

"No. When you sleep, your spirit comes loose from your mind and drifts through the world from which it was born. Nothing in your dreams seems amiss, because your spirit knows that place, and it is content there. When you journey into the spirit world of your own accord, you will be taking your waking mind to a place where only spirits were meant to walk."

"What must I do there?"

Adel picked up the knife and began cutting the wax away from the jar. "Endure, and pay heed to what the spirits show you. I told you when you began your apprenticeship that only seers can draw meaning from visions. It will be many years before you master such a skill, but you will begin learning today. Remember what I told you. Visions are not premonitions of the future. At least, not in the way the other seers describe them."

"I still do not understand what you mean by this," Netya said. "How am I to use my visions if not to glimpse things only the spirits can see?"

Adel paused half way through her cutting, as if the answer to Netya's question was more complex than she felt able to explain. "Try to think of

visions not as flashes of wisdom, but as remedies to help those around you, like the plants we use. Their meaning may not always be clear, and many will prove useless, but the time will come when a person approaches you in need of aid, and you will be able to use what you have seen in the spirit world to help them."

Netya's brow knotted in confusion. "How can visions be like medicine?"

"They are medicine of the mind and spirit, not of the body. I cannot expect you to understand yet, but you will learn in time. There are many ailments that only the reassurance of the spirits can heal." She resumed her cutting, peeling back the wax a small piece at a time. "You remember when Erech was injured? He is your friend, is he not?"

Netya bobbed her head.

"He came to speak with me not long after he recovered," Adel continued. "His body was mending, but his spirit was still broken. I am sure you noticed it too."

"It was very hard for him," Netya said.

"He begged for me to seek out a vision for him. He needed to know whether he would ever hunt again, and I could see how desperate he was for the spirits to sooth his fears."

Netya perked up, her own curiosity aroused. "Did the spirits tell you his leg would heal?"

Adel gave her a long, hard look. Her icy eyes held a sincerity that compelled Netya to consider what the den mother said next carefully. "If they had not, do you think it would have done Erech any good for me to tell him?"

Netya frowned again. "But if the spirits revealed his future to you, you should have told him the truth."

"And what is the truth, Netya? How many visions have you heard told that never come to pass? There is no more truth in visions than what we make of them. If I had seen Erech as a crippled old man in my dreams, would it have helped him for me to speak of it, knowing it might never come to pass?"

The den mother's words clawed at Netya uncomfortably. This was not how the other seers interpreted visions at all. "Are you saying you did not tell Erech the truth?"

"No. I have never lied about what the spirits have shown me. A few weeks before Erech came to me, I saw a vision of a young man running, so that was the vision I chose to recount to him."

"So the spirits did show you he would recover!"

Adel shook her head with a sigh of impatience. "Listen to my words. I saw a vision of a young man running. I do not know who he was. I do not know whether it was a glimpse of the past, the future, or of someone far, far away. But I described it to Erech, and it was enough to give him hope. Whether my vision was meant for him or not, it helped to mend the part of him that was ready to give in to despair. That is the true power a seer is able to wield, Netya. We can give hope where none exists. We can guide people to make the choices that lead them to peace and happiness. We must not boast of our premonitions without thought of what they might mean. We must keep them a secret, and know which visions to gift to those who need them most."

The implications of what Adel was saying weighed heavily on Netya. More than ever, she felt the duties of a seer bearing down on her, and they seemed almost enough to make her buckle. "How will I know which visions to share? What if I share one that ends up hurting the person I recount it to?"

"These are the things you must learn in the years to come. The alpha thinks I care so little for the people of this pack, but I have been watching them for years. When they confide in me and my seers, I listen to all the things they say, and all the things they do not. I think long and hard on what they need, and I search the spirit world for the best answers I can find. It is a great burden that takes much courage to bear, but it is through learning this wisdom that a woman may become a great seer. Greater than any of those born into this pack and their way of thinking."

"I do not know if I can," Netya said quietly.

"Then leave my cave and go back to the alpha's bed, if that is the only role you feel suited for."

Netya glared at her mentor, and a rare smile lit Adel's lips in response. She finished cutting away the wax and tilted the jar on its side, tapping it against the slab until a few small berries rolled out. They were not a fruit that was familiar to Netya from her recent studies, but she recognised them all the same, and her heart beat a little faster.

"These are nightwood berries," Adel said. "The hunters gather them for me from the edges of your forest. Perhaps you know what they are used for?"

"I was told never to touch them," Netya replied. They were not called nightwood berries in her tongue, but she knew how dangerous they could be. She remembered vividly the time a young boy from her village had eaten some, and how it had taken a dose of an equally powerful poison to burn the sickness from his body. "More than a few can kill a person," Adel said. "I suspect for your kind it takes even less. If they are handled carefully, however, they are the most potent way we know of glimpsing the spirit world." She took a single berry and placed it into the bowl, grinding it to pulp with the heel of her knife, until its poison had mixed with the nut meal and stained it dark. "Eat slowly, and stop once you feel your visions approaching." She handed her apprentice the bowl, then moved the slab aside and set the knife down far out of reach.

Netya put a trembling finger into the meal and scooped a tiny amount into her mouth. It tasted horribly bitter, but it did not make her mouth burn as she had feared. Adel turned her around so that she was facing the cave's entrance, then sat behind her and placed her hands on Netya's shoulders.

"When you slip into the spirit world, remember that nothing you experience there can hurt you. You may see things that are terrifying, and they will seem so real that they drive reason from your mind. Allow the fear to come, and accept it. There is no point in trying to fight the spirits or run from them. I will be here with you, and I will ensure no harm comes to your body, but your mind must be prepared for the rest."

"What will I see?" Netya whispered, forcing herself to bring another mouthful of the nut meal to her lips.

"I cannot say for certain, but the spirits of the animals who once wore the pelts in this chamber will likely try to speak with you. They come to me often, and that is why I keep them close."

Netya's eyes flitted about the cave, glancing from one twisted animal pelt to the next. They were eerie enough as they were, and she did not relish the idea of meeting the spirits that had once inhabited them. She was riding down the ravine again, chasing the drove of horses into the unknown. Whatever awaited her in the spirit world, she was as curious as she was terrified to meet it. Of all the journeys she had made over the past year, this one was the first to truly stray beyond the boundaries of everything she knew. But somewhere in the spirit world, deeper than the waking senses could reach, perhaps she would at last find her calling.

The poison seemed to take a very long time to begin working, but Adel insisted she keep eating the nut meal slowly. Too much, and she might not realise until it was too late. The den mother sat patiently with her hands on her apprentice's shoulders, saying little, and moving even less. Her tense grip only heightened Netya's unease, as if her mentor was expecting a demon to burst from her body at any moment.

Gradually, the edges of the world began to soften. The flames of the lamps grew brighter and more keen, but rather than driving back the darkness, they instead seemed to be absorbing what little light remained in the room. They grew bigger, whiter, until they were curling and dancing in the air like the tails of snakes. Awed, Netya reached out to try and touch one, but her fingers were unable to grasp it.

"Is this the spirit world?" she whispered. A noise rumbled from behind her that no longer sounded like Adel's voice. Forgetting why she had asked her question, she stared into the dancing flames again, becoming lost in the light as the cave walls rolled past until she was staring up at the roof, then the opposite wall, and then herself as her spirit came loose from her body and drifted away into the flames.

Netya gazed in wonder as she watched herself sitting cross-legged against a great tree that had sprouted from the middle of the chamber. Its branches were curled about her shoulders like claws, and she could feel the dry twigs pricking at her skin. The woven grasses in the mat beneath her were growing again, and they writhed against her legs as they spread across the rocks like spilt water.

For a time she drifted, floating across the cave walls until, without knowing exactly how, she found herself looking through her own eyes again. The branches of the tree were still curled about her shoulders, but she was able to stand despite their tight grip. She was not sure whether the body she inhabited was her own any more, but it seemed willing to move with her.

When she tried to leave through the cave's entrance, the drapes swallowed the shadows until they turned into pure night, an endless pit of black that held neither moon nor stars. She tried to touch it, but something warned her away. The twigs wrapping her shoulders crackled, and the rocks beneath her feet became like mud, clinging and dragging at her ankles as she crawled back to the safety of the tree. But the tree was gone. In its place was a bowl covered by a bloody piece of animal hide. Had she not emptied it into the river already?

Netya peeled the covering away. Blood spilled from the edges of the bowl until it covered the cave floor, rising up around her legs as she backed away in shock, a terrible sadness coming over her. She clutched her knees and wept, tears turning to ice on her cheeks.

When she finally opened her eyes it felt like a long time had passed, but the blood around her ankles was still there. Was she still in the cave? Something

about the tightness on her shoulders made her think she was, but all around her the shallow lake of crimson stretched for miles around, ancient trees breaking the surface and clawing their way up into the misty sky.

She was lost. She had gone too far. How would she ever find her way back home to her mother? The spirit world was very large, and it had been hours, days, months since she came here. The pelt of a long-dead bear drifted past, and it reminded Netya of something someone had once told her.

"Will you help me?" she asked, but the pelt only rolled over listlessly as it floated to the base of a nearby tree, climbed half way up, and then hung itself in the branches as if it were an ornament. All around she began to notice the skins of more animals draped in the trees, foxes and deer and wolves, stoats and bears and great cats...

The horizon darkened and closed in until she was sitting once again in blackness, the pelts of the animals hanging around her in a circle as they watched the girl who had strayed into their realm. The dark sockets that had once held their eyes stared at her, flickering with the flames of the lamps as shrivelled lips pulled back from empty jaws.

They cannot hurt me, Netya reminded herself, but she could not remember how she knew such a thing. Had her mother told her, before she left the village? A sickening growl sounded from behind her, and the world spun dizzyingly as she whipped her head around. She did not know what she was kneeling on, but the darkness suddenly rushed up around her as she lost her balance, engulfing her like a blanket as her stomach lurched with the sensation of falling.

Her skin was damp with sweat. Her heart was beating too fast, pounding in her ears like the blows of a hammerstone. Nothing but blackness surrounded her. In a panic, her eyes darted back and forth, searching for some chink of light, but she was afraid to turn her head in case she lost her balance again and tumbled even deeper into the dark.

Low, wet, and echoing, the growl sounded once more. Netya froze, but her shivering body betrayed her, the hammering of her heart drawing the beast out of the shadows. A white wolf, his snowy fur brushed through with streaks of black and grey, appeared before her. The flames of the lamps burned where his dead eyes had once been, but rather than white, they were now crimson. His lower jaw was gone, and black poison dripped from the monster's fangs as he prowled closer, the unearthly sounds coming from his throat increasing in volume as he locked eyes with Netya.

The terror she felt was like nothing she had ever known. This wolf was no phantom, he was real. She could smell the musty scent of his dead fur, taste the tang of the poison in the air. The branches around her shoulders turned into talons, piercing her flesh as she screamed and writhed to escape. She could not be here any more! There had to be a way out. This place was not meant for her. It was too far, too deep. Where was the light? Where was her mother? Why had she ever left home?

Netya's thoughts abandoned her as she covered her eyes and curled into a ball, sobbing hysterically. She did not know how long she hung there in the darkness with the growls of the monstrous wolf in her ears. It seemed like years. All the while she fell deeper, sinking into the place beyond the stars where even the spirits fell silent. The wolf faded too, and so did the darkness, the talons, the terror. When she landed, it was in the arms of a soothing presence, and she crawled closer to its warmth, clinging on desperately to the only thing that felt safe in such emptiness.

Someone had found her. They had come to save her from the darkness she was lost in, and they were bringing her back.

"Mama," she wept as she buried herself in the woman's bosom. "Take me home."

Her mother embraced her, stroking her hair gently as she murmured soothing lullabies. She spoke in a strange tongue, but the sound of her voice was calming and filled with love. Netya hugged her tighter, letting her mother chase away all of the nightmares until the lights of the cave came back. She slept, knowing she was home.

It was hard to remember what had happened. She had been somewhere far away. The images in her mind were vivid, but they made no sense to her. Netya's mouth was dry, and her head ached terribly. She felt like she was waking from a long sickness, before the last traces of fever had completely left her.

Adel cradled her in her arms. At some point Netya had fallen to the ground, and her head now rested in the den mother's lap. When she moved, her mentor blinked, the distant look in her eyes snapping back from wherever her thoughts had been, replaced by the cold severity Netya was used to.

"Are you back with me?" Adel said.

Netya nodded, wincing at the way it made her head pound.

"Sit up, and drink this water. Your head will start to clear soon, but you will

feel unwell until your body cleanses the last of the poison." Adel helped her to her knees and handed her a waterskin, from which she drank gratefully until it was empty.

Netya stared at the woven mat beneath her for a long time, feeling nauseous every time she tried to move. Her experience in the spirit world had shaken her more than anything in her entire life. It had seemed so real, and yet parts of it were as foggy and surreal as the wildest of her dreams. When she thought of the wolf, she wanted to curl into a ball all over again.

Now that she had experienced her first real vision, she finally understood the gravity of what it meant to be a seer, and the bravery that would be required of her if she continued on her path. To return to the spirit world willingly, to seek out the things she had seen all over again, seemed beyond her will to endure.

"How do you go back there?" she said, the words coming out of her throat like dry treebark.

"With experience, and with discipline," Adel replied. "Whether you can learn it will determine whether you are ready to be a seer or not. I told you, the spirit world can be a terrifying place. If you go there again you may see worse things yet, or you may witness blissful wonders that make you wish you could never leave."

Netya sipped from another waterskin when the den mother offered it to her, taking deep breaths until her stomach began to settle. Seemingly satisfied that her apprentice was no longer about to faint, Adel stood up and tidied away the bowl of nut meal that had spilled over the floor. As she moved away, Netya found herself staring past where the den mother had been sitting, directly into the eyes of the white wolf.

A small cry left her lips, and a wave of dizziness made her stomach lurch as she jolted away. Adel looked from the girl to the animal pelt she was staring at in terror, then lifted it from its wooden frame and carried it over.

Netya inched back, still trembling from the memory of her vision. Even though the red flames no longer burned in the wolf's eyes, even though its upper jaw did not drip with poison, it still had the same musty smell she remembered as keenly as ever.

"This wolf's spirit spoke to you?" Adel said.

"No, but he was there in my vision," Netya stammered out.

"The spirits do not always speak to us in words. Did any of the other animals here seek you out?"

Netya shook her head. "I remember them being there. It was as if they were watching me, but only this wolf came to me alone." She swallowed the unpleasantness in her throat and forced herself to look at the white wolf's pelt. Even though it was a harmless thing back in the world of the living, she knew she would never be able to look at it in the same way again, having seen the face of the spirit that clung to it.

Adel stroked the pelt's ears, brushing it down as she unfolded it in her lap. It was not as old as most of the animal hides in her chamber, and it still seemed soft and warm. At some point, someone had fashioned it into a carefully stitched article of clothing, with small loops of hide to allow the forelegs to sit over the wearer's arms, and a tie to secure it about their shoulders. The rest of the pelt formed a large cloak, and the jaws had been designed to sit over the wearer's scalp in the customary animal headdress of a seer.

"You are still frightened of this wolf," Adel observed.

"He is what makes me afraid to go back."

"Then allow him to be your guide. The next time you go into the spirit world, take him with you." Adel held out the pelt to Netya. She hesitated to accept it, but the den mother's expression made it clear that refusal would not be wise. Trying not to remember the monster she had met in her vision, Netya took the white wolf and laid him across her lap.

"If he is what you fear, make him your strength," Adel said. "Wear his pelt with pride, and his spirit will give you power. A seer has no room to be timid."

Netya ran her fingers through the wolf's fur, closing her eyes and trying to imagine it as her protector rather than predator. His pelt was soft and majestic, nothing like the spirit creature she had seen. But the monster had been powerful. Perhaps there were worse spirits still waiting for her in future visions. She would need a strong guardian at her side if she were to brave the same journey again.

"I saw myself," she said, "and a forest, and a lake of blood. What did it mean?"

"Likely nothing," Adel replied. "As I told you, our visions are not premonitions. It will be a long time before you fully understand how the things you see in the spirit world can be used to help others. Until then, you must watch, listen, and learn to explore that place. We will not use the nightwood berries again. Even in small amounts, they can sometimes detach

a person's mind from their body permanently if taken too often."

Netya was relieved to hear it. She preferred the version of the spirit world she saw in her dreams over the disturbingly vivid place the nightwood berries had taken her to.

After allowing her a while longer to recover, Adel permitted Netya to leave without any further duties that day. When she stepped out of the cave, she realised that night had already fallen. Adel must have sat with her for hours while she was lost in the spirit world.

She made her way groggily back to her tent, finding it empty, and sat staring at her wolf pelt cloak for a time before trying to sleep. With it so close by, she was afraid the monster might return again to haunt her dreams. At last, swallowing her fear, she slipped her arms beneath the forepaws of the garment and fastened it about her shoulders, letting the wolf's head sit atop hers. Despite her unease, the pelt was warm and comfortable, and she felt a hint of pride in wearing the headdress of a seer. When she eventually drifted off to sleep, no wolves appeared to torment her.

—**31**— A Pack Divided

The weeks away from home had been a curious time for Khelt. He knew that Caspian would keep things in order back at the camp, and the hunters largely took care of themselves at this time of year, but still he worried over what might transpire in his absence. As he loped toward the tiny black dot of the outcrop on the horizon, his wolf's back laden with supplies from the North People, he could not help but feel relief at returning home.

Every day he'd been away he had thought of Netya, and the path she was embarking upon. He could not have picked a simple, obedient female, could he? Instead he had ended up with a girl who seemed to want more than he was able to give. She would have begun her apprenticeship as a seer by now, no doubt. The witch would have leapt at the opportunity to snatch her away from him the moment he left. He only hoped Netya had ended up with a wise mentor. Someone loyal to the alpha, who would be able to shield her from Adel's influence.

The thought of his consort being driven away from him had been first and foremost among his thoughts over the past few weeks, and, after a time, he had realised that he was at least in part to blame for his worries. Caspian had been hinting at it for months, he realised, but it had taken this long for Khelt to get it through his thick head. He regretted the way he had behaved when Netya asked him of his conflict with the den mother. She was not a girl who would fall obediently quiet when told. Well, perhaps she was, but her heart would never follow suit, as she had proven in her continued efforts to hunt, craft, and join the seerhood. Netya's spirit knew what it wanted, even if her mind did not. She had pressed him to take her as his mate, and he realised now that those desires would never fade just because he willed it.

It bothered him to have so many conflicting thoughts fighting for his attention and no clear plan to resolve them. He missed Caspian's counsel. Rather than finding the stay with the North People relaxing this year, he had instead been preoccupied the entire time, agitated and itching to return home. The primal side of him, the wolf that prowled beneath his skin, had become frustrated without a female to bed for so long. After the years of abstinence from such intimate company he had sunk his teeth into his new concubine and slaked his desires like a starving man at a banquet, and having to go

without her for week after week had been a painful reminder of a time he had no intention of returning to.

Out of propriety, he and his pack mates had not allowed their wolves loose while they were guests in the village of the North People, and reining in his animal side had only made matters worse. Several times he had been driven to slip away in the night to go hunting by himself, sleeping away the days while his companions grew to know the North People and understand their language.

The furs, leather, herbs, and bone tools they had brought to trade had been exchanged mostly for clay pots and strong timber, and every able-bodied wolf now carried as much as they could bear slung across their backs in heavy bags. Their cumbersome bounty made the return journey a long and arduous one, but the sight of the outcrop in the distance spurred them along the final stretch with the promise of comfort and companionship that evening.

What Khelt would do with Netya in the long term, he did not know. For the time being he only wanted to take her to his bed again and fall asleep with her body close to his, warm in the comfort of his own den.

When they arrived home late in the afternoon he hunched down and allowed the clamour of welcomers to lift the supplies from his back, before stretching with a satisfied growl and returning to his two-legged shape. Everyone was eager to hear tales of the North People and rifle through the handful of exotic gifts they had brought back, but Khelt made sure all of their practical trade supplies were put in their proper place, before anyone got it in mind to snatch up a new pot or tent pole while no one was looking.

He searched through his own load for a bag of rare seeds that only the North People's farming talents could cultivate, and sought out one of the seers to deliver it to.

"Take these to the cave, I'm sure your mistress will be thankful to have them," he said as he passed the bag to one of the women wearing an unfamiliar white wolf headdress. He looked back impatiently when she took his arm, and paused in surprise when he saw her face. Dressed as she was, he had not even recognised the young seer.

"Netya." He breathed a sigh of bemusement. "You wear the garb of a seer already."

The girl smiled and bowed her head respectfully, presenting the fierce-looking features of her headdress to him. Even without the striking change of appearance that lent both size and majesty to her stature, she seemed different

somehow.

"The den mother presented him as a gift to me," she said. "He is my guardian in the spirit world."

"A gift from her, was he?" Khelt said with a grimace. "I hope she has not been interfering in your training too much."

Netya looked down, shrinking into the protection of her wolfskin garb a little. "I wanted to tell you myself, before you heard the news from someone with a less careful tongue. Adel has taken me as her own apprentice. She is the one conducting my training."

Khelt stared at her, his brow twisting in frustration as her words sunk in. He knew he should never have left. Allowing Adel a hand in Netya's fate had been a dangerous decision to make, but he had never expected her to go this far just to spite him. What was she thinking, involving Netya in this? How long had it been going on? What lies had she filled the poor girl's head with already?

"Where is she?" Khelt growled, pushing past the group as Netya trailed after him.

"She has been a good mentor to me! Please, do not be upset. I was against it at first too, but I have learned a great many things under her guidance."

"And some strange ideas about visions," one of the elder seers chimed in from her seat by the fire, scowling past her toothless gums. "The den mother is talented in her own ways, but until now she has always kept them to herself, where they belong." The old woman looked to the alpha. "And she runs Netya ragged. The girl barely has a moment to herself. I never pushed any of my apprentices so hard."

"You see?" Khelt fumed, glaring at Netya. "The witch is filling your head with her own poison and making you suffer for it." He took a step closer to her, lifting back her headdress and studying her face. There were dark circles beneath her eyes. Had she grown even more skinny in his absence? His hand tightened on her shoulder in anger. Adel would not be allowed to get away with this.

"I have not suffered any more than I am willing to for the sake of my training," she said. "Please, I do not want to cause any more upset for the pack."

"These are her words coming out of your mouth, not your own," Khelt said. "This is Adel's way, Netya. You are even willing to blame yourself for what she has wrought. I will not forgive her for toying with you like this." He

rounded on the elder. "Go and fetch your den mother. Bring her up from her pit and let her know the alpha demands her presence."

The old woman gave him a sour look, clearly unhappy that her gossip had resulted in more work for her, but she bowed her head obediently and hobbled up the path toward the seers' cave.

"If you must argue this with her, do it away from the others," Netya said quietly. "It will only upset them."

"I will not argue anything. I will remind her of her place, and put an end to this game of hers," he replied with a hint of annoyance, perplexed for a moment at being told what to do by the girl. He was ashamed at himself for directing his anger toward her. It was not Netya's fault, it was his for leaving the pack unattended. Where had Caspian been in all of this? Why had he not put a stop to it?

Khelt closed his eyes and forced himself to calm down. Caspian would have some reason, as he always did. Some wise, level-headed reason that made Khelt feel a fool when he paused to think about it. In his moment of clarity, he realised that Netya's suggestion had been a sensible one also. It was exactly the sort of thing Caspian would have suggested had he been there.

With a grunt of frustration, he walked away from the group without another word, overtaking the elder on his way to the seers' cave and waiting outside with his arms folded, glaring into the antechamber. The old woman grumbled something on her way past, but a low growl from him sent her scurrying off into the cave at twice her previous pace.

Adel made him wait, like she always did. It was a small, petty thing on top of everything else the den mother had done, but it never failed to stir his temper. It was her way of saying that she was beholden to no alpha. An act of defiance that conveyed so much through so little.

He was vaguely aware of Netya following behind him, but she remained quiet as she sat down on a rock off to the side. Good. Let her hear Adel when she was caught in her lies. As much as he wanted to shield Netya from such matters of leadership, his desire to win back her loyalty was greater.

Adel swept through the darkened drapes with her usual air of detachment, the den mother's fur gown flowing about her as she came out to meet him with as little urgency as she could muster. She was the only woman in the pack who matched his height, and even though they stood eye to eye, Khelt could not help but feel like she was looking down on him. She held her chin

high, head tilted slightly back, eyes half-narrowed, as if he was undeserving of her full attention.

Not to be outdone, he bared his teeth, tensing his shoulders as he strode forward to meet her.

"What?" she said bluntly.

"Don't push me, Witch. I may have allowed Netya to join the seers, but I never agreed to you training her. Did you think I would roll over and let you do with her as you wished?"

Adel's lips tightened, and she lowered her head to direct every bit of ice in her blue eyes at the alpha. "It is no concern of mine whether you approve of my choice or not. You may control the pack, but the leadership of the seers is my business. The alpha has no say in it."

"The seers are part of my pack, too," he growled. "As are you, Den Mother. I forbid you to continue training Netya. She is to be given a different mentor, someone of my choosing."

"No."

The air seemed to grow colder as a light breeze stirred Adel's hair. Her response echoed in the silence that followed, a plain challenge to his leadership.

"I am your alpha," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Adel gave a brief shake of her head. "To the others, perhaps. Never to me. Netya has it in her to become more than just your plaything, and I shall ensure she follows that path, with or without your approval."

"You are using her to spite me. You care nothing for her wellbeing!"

"So says the man who stole her away from her own home. If there is any part of you that respects her, you will allow Netya to make her own choices." Adel looked to where the girl sat, but she averted her eyes with an anxious flush.

"It is not my place to decide such things," Netya said.

"You see?" Khelt said. "She at least has respect for her alpha. You will not twist her into playing your wicked game."

Adel's lip curled, and she gave him a look of such venomous disgust that even Khelt felt a tremor run through his body.

"You think a young woman's life is a game? You are the one she needs to be protected from, not me."

"If you do not obey your alpha, I will have you driven from my pack!" Khelt said.

Adel did not flinch. "Then I will take half of my seers with me. They are loyal to their den mother, not you. How well will the pack fare with only the stubborn elders left to tend its wounds and seek the wisdom of the spirits?"

"You would not dare."

"You know I would. Now allow Netya to make her choice, unless you are afraid to let a female speak her mind for once."

It took all Khelt's years of restraint to keep from letting his wolf rise up and take control. Challenging a woman in anger was the dishonourable refuge of men who had not the strength of will to assert themselves, and he refused to give in to the urge. Adel wanted it, he could tell. She would relish nothing more than to make him disgrace himself in such as way. That she had used Netya to push him this far made it even worse.

"Very well," he said. "I will allow her to prove you wrong, if that is what it takes to put an end to this." He beckoned Netya over to his side, noting her reluctance, and put an arm around her shoulders. She did not deserve to be put in such a situation, but Adel had left him with little choice. He would find some way to make amends for it later.

"I do not wish to come between you," Netya mumbled.

Her response drew a glare from Adel. "You have wits, girl, use them. You are a seer now."

Netya looked up at him. "I have no desire to stop being your consort," she said, "but Adel has taught me things I wish to learn more of. I promise you, she is not trying to turn me against anyone."

"I will not be able to teach you properly if you are still at his beck and call," the den mother said.

"Then lighten her duties," Khelt replied, seeing his opportunity. If he could not wrest Netya away from her immediately, he could at least set it in motion. "Look at her. She is exhausted. Even your loyal seers agree you are pushing her too hard." He added the last with a hint of satisfaction, smiling as he saw how his minor embellishment of the truth struck home. He had no way of knowing whether the others seers agreed with what the elder had told him, but it seemed that Adel did not know either. Perhaps she was not as certain of their loyalty as she claimed.

The den mother tilted her head back, making a show of consideration, but Khelt knew he had put her in a difficult spot. By showing a willingness to compromise, he had challenged her to do the same, or risk losing face. It was a technique he was glad to have learned from Caspian. "Her training must take priority over your personal needs," Adel said. "But I will permit her to leave the cave by sundown each day, if that is what she desires."

"I do, if it makes the alpha and den mother content," Netya said.

Another look of annoyance crossed Adel's features, and Khelt took the opportunity to embrace the girl, drawing her away from the other woman.

"I am sorry to have put you in such a position, Netya," he said, then fixed Adel with a look that told her the matter was far from over. "You may leave now, Den Mother."

Her eyes fell for a moment, but he felt no pity for her. He was glad to see the back of the witch as she turned and swept back through the drapes, disappearing into the depths of her lair.

Khelt let out a long breath and allowed his anger to fade, clutching Netya to his chest tightly. He could feel her trembling. "I missed you so. This was not the reunion I desired."

"I missed you also," she said.

He ran his hand through the fur of the thick wolf pelt she wore. "Take this thing off, and come to my den later. I will have food and drink brought, and we can forget about this together."

"I would like that." Netya lifted her head up and gave him a smile.

Khelt's brow creased as he gazed into her pretty eyes, a painful tightness clutching at his throat. He would take care of her, and protect her from whatever cruel thoughts Adel filled her head with. It was not fair on the poor girl to have such burdens placed upon her. It was his duty to shoulder them in her stead, as her alpha, and as the man to whom she belonged.

He kissed her with furious passion, wanting nothing more than to still the shivers of her body and calm the sadness in her eyes.

* * *

The conversation between Netya and Khelt had not escaped Vaya's notice when the alpha made his return. In fact, her attention was never long in being aroused whenever talk of the Sun girl was within hearing distance. She listened to the exchange carefully as she made a show of examining a bundle of heavy carrying poles. Once Khelt left, she waited patiently for a few moments before slipping away, taking the form of her wolf and making as if to head down to the river. The path led her away from the seers' cave before she was within earshot, but, after checking that nobody else was nearby, she

leaped off the path and followed the rocks around until she had skirted to a spot a short distance below where Khelt and Netya stood.

Vaya knew every inch of the outcrop like the back of her hand, and she had found many secret places where she could sit and listen unobserved over the years. Lying down against the sun-warm rocks, she closed her eyes and pretended to be dozing, but her wolf's sensitive ears remained pricked and alert.

The conversation going on above carried down easily, and, despite her pretence of lounging in the last of the evening sun, her tail began to wag in agitation as the exchange grew more and more heated. Even though Vaya was driven by her desire for power and status, she was no alpha, and like all of her people she became worried when Khelt's authority was called into question. He was the one they had put their faith in to lead them. They relied on him, for better or worse, to be the hand that held them all in check. Without an alpha, wolves could be wild and savage creatures. If he could not command the respect required of him, in what other ways might he falter?

She had followed in the hopes of witnessing Netya's dismissal from the seerhood first-hand, but instead she had stumbled upon a brewing conflict between the alpha and den mother that left her deeply concerned.

Why could none of them see what she saw? The Sun girl did not belong. In all of her time here, she had brought nothing but conflict to the pack, and now she was coming between the two people who were supposed to be mother and father to them all.

When Netya spoke of her willingness to compromise, Vaya had to stifle a growl as her lips pulled back from her muzzle.

If you really cared, you would leave and go back where you belong.

For as long as Netya had been around, it was as if a curse had been placed on Vaya. After her glorious hunt the previous summer, every attempt she had made to build upon that success had been thwarted. She had felt the status she had desired all her life almost within her grasp, and month by month it had slipped through her fingers a piece at a time.

First she had been forbidden from hunting for striking Netya, preventing her from securing her position. Then, as she had been about to claim victory in the great hunt, the girl had appeared again to distract her from her prey. She had thought driving her out of the hunt would be the end of it, but Vaya had led two expeditions in the months since that had returned home with barely enough meat to have been worthwhile.

There was nothing more shameful than a pitiful hunt. Even returning home empty-handed was better. Meagre spoils suggested that the pack had found prey, but the hunters lacked the skill or inclination to bring back more than enough to feed themselves.

A shroud of failure had surrounded Vaya, and day after day she felt the respect of her pack dwindling. Already she was having more difficulty than Tal in finding hunters willing to join her, and if she did not secure a victory soon she would have no choice but to make herself subordinate to the other hunter once again. Something had to change, but what could she do if the prey would not come? More and more often her thoughts returned to the continued presence of the Sun girl, until she was too distracted to focus on even her own hunting plans.

Perhaps Netya really had placed a curse on her, as revenge for what had happened during the great hunt. She was learning the ways of the seers now. Who knew what dark magic Adel had shared with her? It was offensive enough that one of their enemies was allowed to partake in such wisdom, but now that even the alpha himself seemed unable to stop it, Vaya found herself gripped with worry alongside her anger.

Netya had clouded the sight of all of them. Khelt, Caspian, Fern, and now maybe even the den mother. Why did they not understand that the only solution was to excise the problem from their midst?

She continued pawing at the rocks in agitation long after the voices above fell silent, pacing back and forth as she struggled to think of what she could do. One thing was certain to her now —the pack would never be the same until Netya was gone. It was not enough to keep her away from the hunt, or hope that her training as a seer would come to an end. She would always find some other way to intrude on their way of life. If things were to return to the way they had once been, it was Vaya's duty to make it happen.

The only question was how.

Caspian lay back in the crook of his favourite rock, the waters of the river trickling past around him as he watched the twine of his fishing pole drift back and forth in the current. A fish darted close to the bone hook, nibbling inquisitively at the strip of meat trailing from the end, then streaked away downstream.

The splash of Khelt's spear piercing the water sounded in his ears a moment later. He looked up, then smiled as his friend cursed and withdrew his weapon from the shallows, returning to his perch on the line of stepping stones, body tense as he eyed the riverbed for another target.

"The line catches them more often than the spear," Caspian said.

"But where is the challenge in holding a line?" Khelt replied, shifting the spear in his grasp to get a better grip. "They say my father could spear a fish the second he saw it. He never needed to wait for his prey to bite."

"If you spent less time feasting and more time fishing you might be able to as well."

Khelt glared at him, then grinned and tossed the spear in his direction, splashing Caspian with droplets as it landed harmlessly in the water off to his side. Khelt hopped into the shallows and waded over, sitting down on the bank after he retrieved his weapon.

Caspian enjoyed fishing with his friend. It was one of the few things that had barely changed in all the years they'd spent together. Khelt had always been better at it than him, back when they used to snatch up fish in the jaws of their wolves, but once Caspian learned the patience of using the hooked line the competition had become much more even.

Khelt had clearly been waiting for him to say something ever since his return the previous day, and at last the alpha threw his hands in the air and gave in. "Tell me then. Why did you let it happen?"

Caspian shrugged. "Did I have a choice? If Adel wants something, she will ensure she has it. If you could not make her change her mind, I doubt she would have listened to me."

"She does listen to you, though. I know you could have stopped her somehow if you wanted to."

Caspian paused for a moment to think, twirling his fishing pole back and

forth between his palms. "The reason I can get through to Adel is because I am similar to her in some ways."

"Yes, you have her wisdom, but not her wicked heart."

"I think Netya is the same. The longer she stays with us, the more she reminds me of Adel when she was younger."

"That does not reassure me," Khelt grunted. "If that is true, we should be doing everything we can to stop her going down the same path."

It saddened Caspian to hear Khelt speak like this. Perhaps it really would have been better if he'd exiled Adel all those years ago, if only so that his resentment for her could not have been given the chance to grow.

"Think of it in the opposite way," he said. "Netya is not just spending time with Adel, Adel is spending time with Netya. Perhaps she can remind the den mother of some of the things she has forgotten."

"The only thing she needs reminding of is her place in this pack. I will not have her turn Netya against me."

"If that is what worries you, then turn your attention to Netya, not her mentor. Give her reasons to care for you, rather than to resent others." Caspian's chest twinged, his words reminding him of the pendant he had made for Netya. He had only meant it as an encouragement, but how many hours had he spent painstakingly carving that pattern to perfection? It was not easy to admit how much pleasure it brought him to see her wearing it. And why had he made her such a gift in the first place, if not for just such a reason?

Deep in his gut, his wolf tempted him to let Khelt drive her away, and he hated himself for admitting to such thoughts. He would never go against his brother like that. Some things were more important than a single person's desires.

They talked for a while about what had happened in Khelt's absence, but the conversation kept returning to Netya. She was clearly on both of their minds, and it was not long before the inevitable question was asked.

"Was she with anyone else while I was away?" Khelt said.

"Only me. I think she forgot your absence and came to your den one night. I happened to be there."

Khelt looked at him in surprise. "When have you ever taken a female on such a whim?"

"At least once, I suppose. We have become good friends since the great hunt."

"Do you care for her?" Khelt said, his tone amicable enough, but a slight twitch of his brow betrayed his anxiety.

Caspian shook his head. "Not in that way. As I said, she reminds me of Adel when she was younger. She understands things that few others do."

Khelt's pensive expression broke into a smile. "Well, at least now you know why I find her company so pleasurable. I know she is not my mate, but I am still glad to hear she did not stray too far in my absence. Having to go without her made me realise I would not be comfortable letting her join with someone else."

"Every male in the pack understands she is not theirs to claim."

"Nor is she anyone's," Khelt sighed. "She grows more wilful by the day. I doubt any man could claim her unless she wanted it."

"You see now why I liken her to Adel."

"Yes, and that is why I worry," Khelt growled. "She does not need to become any more like her. Adel puts ideas into the heads of women that they should not be burdened with. It is the place of men to take responsibility for such things."

"What about females like Vaya? She has the spirit of a man, and the strength to support it."

Khelt waved a hand impatiently. "Yes, but Netya is not like that. I want her to settle into a role that will make her happy, not worry over things that should be my duty to bear for her." He drummed his fingers on the shaft of his spear, deep in thought. "And it is not just Netya. Before Adel came here, the females knew their duties, and they were content in them. They are the gentle core of our pack that holds the strength of the men together. When they try to be both..." He shook his head. "I do not know. Life was just never meant to be that way."

"Adel thinks it foolish to put any faith in old customs," Caspian said. "She only believes in the truth of the world around her, and I fear tradition has been responsible for little else but pain in her life."

Khelt curled his lip. "You agree with her, don't you?"

"I think there are more ways for women to be happy than you think. And men too, for that matter."

"So do you agree with her or not?"

"All I am saying is that you should not be afraid of letting Netya learn from her. Trust in her wisdom to make her own choices. If you want her to be with you, give her good reason to be."

Khelt thought it over for a time, tapping the surface of the water with the tip of his spear. Caspian's own attention had long since been dragged away from his fishing line, preoccupied instead by the painful weight in his stomach. Ever since his night with Netya, he had been fighting the urge to follow the exact same advice he had just given Khelt.

What the alpha saw as troublesome, Caspian found intriguing. When Adel first came to the pack, he had wondered, for a time, whether he might harbour feelings for the new den mother. Many of the young men his age had been enthralled by her beauty, but it was the qualities of her character that had called out to Caspian. She was different from the other females, embodying the things he only glimpsed shades of in most women. But she had been distant, even then. He soon realised that her heart was too hard, her spirit too volatile, to be the woman for him. The attraction had grown cold, and Caspian had all but forgotten it until Netya arrived.

Netya. Why did she hound his thoughts? Why did he now purposefully avoid looking at the symbol he had marked down for her in the wood, despite longing to look at nothing else?

He knew why, of course. In a way, he almost hoped she would grow to become more like Adel or Khelt, so that his feelings could cool once more. If she did not, the months to come would be hard on him indeed.

"What if I take her as my mate?" Khelt said eventually.

The announcement startled Caspian more than he had expected, so much so that his composure cracked and he growled out his next words with incredulity. "You can never do that!"

"I know, I know." Khelt put out a hand to calm his friend. "I would never risk the pack's safety by allowing Adel's clan to learn of it. It would not be a true mating, but she and I would feel it in our hearts. If I tell her I desire her as my woman, and we perform the ceremony alone, together, she will understand how much I care for her. Our spirits will know they are joined, even if no one else does."

Caspian looked away, fixing his gaze back on his fishing hook. He stared at the sharp bone point until he could almost feel it boring into his eyes. All of the enjoyment of sharing the pastime with his friend had gone.

"What do you think?" Khelt said, when he received no response.

"Yes," Caspian replied, his voice dry. "I expect that would be a fine idea."

Khelt was not the only one for whom things had changed since his return. Everything seemed subtly different, despite much returning to the way it had once been.

Netya was happy to enjoy the alpha's pleasurable company in the evenings again, and the lightening of her duties as an apprentice allowed her to spend more time with Fern, Erech, and the other young people. Whenever she was called to Khelt's den she was eager to share with him the things she had been learning, whether it was fascinating new uses for a plant, or the insight she had been reading into her dreams.

Despite Adel telling her not to put any stock in her glimpses into the spirit world just yet, Netya still found it exciting to ponder her visions, wondering where they came from and who they might be meant for. The others were always curious to hear about them too. She was forbidden from sharing many of the seers' secrets, of course, but that did not stop her from talking for hours with her friends about what their dreams might mean. It was little more than indulgent gossip, but her newfound status lent the conversations a hint of sincerity that made her companions hang on her every word.

She adored having a calling she could truly consider her own, one that fascinated others and lent both weight and confidence to the things she spoke of. Equally, she became more interested in hearing from others about the skills they were pursuing, now that she no longer felt like an outsider looking in. The hint of youthful longing and jealousy she had always felt toward those in positions of status was gone, and more than ever she realised that she had finally crossed over the boundary that separated the girl she had once been from the woman she had become.

And yet, when she came to Khelt's chamber in the evenings, full of eagerness and passion, he seemed interested in none of it. Netya was unsure at first what her conversations with the alpha were lacking, but after a few days it became clear. She forced herself to question what was making her feel uncomfortable—a skill that Adel had encouraged her to develop more thoroughly—and realised that, while Khelt would listen patiently to her for a short while every evening, he never questioned her further about her apprenticeship. When he responded, it was often with the intent to change the subject, and he never seemed truly at ease with her until they moved on to other topics, or abandoned talk entirely and retreated to the furs.

He still begrudged her training as a seer. He did not want to be reminded that she was spending time with Adel instead of him, and it hurt Netya to feel that she was unable to share her experiences with the alpha. It was a stark contrast to the passion and tenderness he showed her, which had only grown more intense since his return. Khelt was not a man of great words, but he communicated his feelings in other ways. It was clear he cared for her deeply, but the path she had taken left an invisible barrier between them. It was as if they were two people embracing through a veil, never close enough to be content.

To her equal dismay, Caspian seemed to have abandoned her entirely. There were many times when she found herself longing to sit with him on the rocks again, to share the things she felt unable to with Khelt. But days would go by without her so much as catching a glimpse of the man who had made her the pendant she now treasured. He was always just out of reach. When she caught sight of him bathing upstream from her in the spot used by the men, she would begin swimming in his direction, only for him to have finished and climbed back up the bank by the time she arrived. During meals, he was always on the other side of the camp, if he even put in an appearance at all. It frustrated Netya, so much so that she stopped even trying to track him down. If he did not want to spend time with her, perhaps she no longer wanted to spend time with him.

She tried to share the things she would have told Caspian with Erech, joining him at the edge of the crafting area to watch him knap some evenings, but it was not the same. Caspian had the ability to take a thought and explore it, to stretch something simple into a conversation that left Netya with just as many new questions as it did answers. Erech saw things in a simpler light, with straightforward, practical solutions. If there was something he did not understand, he would dismiss it with a shrug, or recite the advice he had been given by his father or uncles on such things.

It was difficult for Netya to relate. Many of the Moon People were of a stoic, accepting nature. Their animal instincts tended to make the world a small place, where even new questions could always be answered with the wisdom of the past. She wondered whether perhaps, if she were more like them, she might not be so bothered by the strange new changes in her life. If she had a wolf of her own, would things be easier?

Unable to talk it over with Caspian, she turned instead to Adel. One afternoon, as they sat side by side stripping down dry tree bark for the soft pieces that worked best in medicine, she finally asked her mentor a question that had been in the back of her mind for many months.

"My people sometimes told stories about how it was best to kill those wounded by your kind, in case they became infected with the Moon People's curse. I always wondered whether it was true."

Adel turned her apprentice's attention back to the task at hand with a nudge and a frown, but once Netya had gone back to stripping bark she answered.

"Our curse, as they call it, is our animal side, and yes, it has been known for your people to become like us."

"Does that mean there could be a way for me to call on a wolf of my own some day?"

"Why would you want such a thing? I thought you of anyone would understand how violent and impulsive it can make us."

Netya shook her head quickly. "It is not that I desire it, but such magic does make me curious. As a seer, should I not know of such things?"

"I suppose you should, in case you are ever forced to do what your people only spoke of. It is true, when we take on the shapes of wolves our bodies contain a poison that is harmful to your kind. Through savage wounds or the mingling of blood, it can be passed from one person to another, and it grows like an infection. When I was a girl, my pack wounded one of the Sun People's warriors and took him captive. The seers tried to tend to him, but the poison of the wolf who mauled him was already deep inside his body. There is no cure for such a thing. We listened to his cries of agony for days before he died. My pack took no more prisoners after that."

"But if the infection had not killed him?" Netya said.

"I have never seen it for myself," Adel warned. "It seems those who resist the sickness and survive are left with newborn wolves inside them. There are a few of them to be seen at the gatherings when packs come together. Their scent is strange, and the others are always wary of them. Most die, or are killed before they can settle. Both my people and yours fear what they do not understand."

Netya grimaced. "I think you have convinced me to remain myself."

"Good. You are learning well." Adel smiled. "I may make a seer of you yet."

The Cave of Alphas

It was a long time before Adel permitted Netya to venture into the spirit world again, and when her training finally returned to the subject of spirits and visions she was glad to have her white wolf draped about her. She had met him only a few times in her dreams since. The memories of his presence were vague and disconnected, but they had not been frightening. In the dream she remembered most clearly, she had been wearing his pelt at first, only to become one with it as time went on, staring out through his eyes as she walked on four legs and felt the wind rushing through her fur. The monster had become her guardian, and she hoped he would be there to protect her when she finally took her waking mind into the spirit world once more.

She need not have worried. As Adel had explained, she had no intention of using the nightwood berries again until Netya was more prepared, and the visions she experienced without them were likely to be less vivid. Once every few days, they mixed new leaves, berries, or other stewed plants into the nut meal, and Netya would eat until she felt the touch of the spirit world taking her away.

It was almost with disappointment that she discovered most of her induced visions did not even take her outside of the chamber she was sitting in. The spirits could be reached in many ways, Adel said, and it was not always through direct visions that Netya would commune with them.

Some of the plants she sampled took her thoughts to strange places. Unfamiliar sounds whispered through her ears, colours blossomed from the stone walls that she had never seen before, and her senses took on new keenness that made the mundane fascinating. One afternoon she spent hours working her way around the edge of Adel's chamber, running her hands over the walls and the fur of the various animal pelts, amazed by the appreciation the spirits gave her for the ways in which nature crafted such wonders.

She slipped into some visions where her wolf pelt seemed to be moving on her body, his distant growls echoing in her ears, but they never took her as deep into the spirit world as the nightwood berries had. The spirits of the animals in Adel's chamber spoke to her too, but if their words held any profound wisdom, it was lost on Netya.

One day she felt the grass mat beneath her come to life and burrow its

fronds into her thighs, burning like fire as Adel's soothing touch became a grip of iron that crushed the air from her lungs until she feared she was about to die. When she came to her senses again, she realised it had only been the work of the spirits playing tricks on her, but Adel made sure they avoided the berries that had brought on that particular vision in the future.

The weeks passed until summer was upon them again, and with the turning of the seasons Netya was permitted even more time to herself away from her duties. The warm weather lightened inhibitions and made for good hunting, meaning that many of the seers, Adel included, had to spend more time tending to the needs of the pack than usual. With the celebration of the summer fires once again on the horizon, passions and romantic rivalries came into sharper focus. If a day went by when a young woman did not come to the seers' cave searching for guidance on matters of the heart, there would almost always be a male in her place who required healing. Posturing and acts of heroism to impress potential partners often led to recklessness, and frequent, if minor, fights broke out between friends and enemies alike. They were far less vicious and bloody than those Netya had witnessed in the winter, but even mild wounds still needed a healer's touch to soothe pain and safeguard against infection. Even with their resilient bodies, the Moon People left nothing to chance.

She tried to follow Brae's example when the older seer reprimanded two laughing young males as they sat together in the antechamber waiting to be tended, but it was hard for Netya to hide her smile. The bruised and bleeding pair had been fighting just moments earlier, and yet now they had their arms around each other's shoulders, cracking jokes about which one of them had impressed their favourite female more.

It was hard not to be warmed by the carefree nature of her pack mates, where frustrations could be vented and forgotten in the blink of an eye. While she might never have understood how friends could go from fighting one moment to laughing about it the next, it was hard for her to deny that the ways of the Moon People served them well.

Netya was allowed to assist in treating simple wounds, but the other seers were much more adept than her, and it often felt like they wanted her out of the way during the weeks of summer. The experience was invaluable in developing her skills as a healer—so much so that the sight of blood no longer bothered her in the slightest—but she was still glad to have more time to herself during the days when the others did not want her under their feet.

It was during one of her lazy mornings away from the cave that Khelt found her down by the river, and he beckoned her over with a smile. His sudden appearance puzzled Netya. She was not used to him approaching her during the day all that often, and recently he had been just as busy as the seers dealing with the hot tempers the summer season had brought on.

"Come with me," he said. "I want to show you something."

"What is it?" Netya replied, but Khelt had already taken the shape of his wolf and was lowering his body to the ground for her to climb on. With a bemused grin, she swung her leg over the alpha's back and curled her fingers into his fur, feeling the soft tickle of his dark coat brushing up against her thighs as she straddled him.

Khelt barked up at the sky, wiggling beneath Netya to make sure she had a firm grip, then broke into a run. He took her south down the river, into the overgrown land where the plains gave way to nature, before breaking off from the familiar route to head east. The journey took less than an hour on Khelt's quick legs, but their path led them through places Netya rarely saw on her own wanderings. They moved beyond the lush foraging territory into the more bleak area of hills and scrubland that she remembered coming through on the way from her village to the outcrop.

The natural beauty of the land was more subdued here. Gone were the colours of petals and leaves, replaced instead by long, majestic valleys and ridges, with carpets of wild grass that rustled quietly in the gentle wind. There was little birdsong to be heard, but rather than feeling lonely, the silence lent the hills an air of reverence, as if the ancient land was a place where even the animals kept their voices low. It was not good hunting ground, nor did there seem to be much of anything worth gathering here. Perhaps that was what made it feel so different. It was a corner of the world that had no purpose save to exist for itself. It was simple, and it was calming.

Khelt brought her to the base of a small hill before coming to a halt. At first Netya could not tell why he had chosen such a spot. It looked completely unremarkable at first glance, but the alpha seemed confident that they had reached their destination. He crouched down for Netya to get off, then returned to his two-legged shape and led her to a pile of boulders midway up the grassy slope.

"Will you tell me now why we are here?" she said.

"You will see soon. My father took me to this place when I was a boy. As far as I know, I am the only one who can find it." He turned to look at her for

a moment. "Perhaps it will help show you some of the things that I cannot."

No more enlightened by his cryptic remark, Netya waited while Khelt stepped forward and ran his hands over the rocks until he found the boulder he was looking for. It was huge, to the point where Netya was sure no man would have been able to move it. When Khelt braced his hands against the underside she almost reached out to stop him, remembering what had happened the last time he tried to shift such an immovable object.

She need not have worried. As Khelt heaved his muscular body against the boulder, she realised that the underside was rounded, allowing it to roll smoothly to one side. It still took all of the alpha's strength to shift it, but after just a few seconds of straining against the rock it tipped, thudding heavily into a natural dip in the ground that seemed perfectly suited to holding it.

Khelt held out his hand to her, leading the way into the narrow earthen passage that had been exposed.

All of the caves Netya had set foot in back at the outcrop had been skilfully adapted from their natural state into cosy dwellings, but they were all imperfect in some way. Unlike houses and earth lodges, they could not be shaped into anything too different from how nature had crafted them. This cave, however, was perfect. It was as if the spirits themselves had carved it out to fulfil the one sacred duty it was intended for, and it took her breath away.

The centre of the hill held an enormous hollow chamber, perfectly circular save for a few surviving stalactites, and domed like the shape of an upturned bowl. It looked as though a giant bubble had risen from deep beneath the earth and settled near the surface, creating walls that were smooth rather than craggy, and a floor that felt as flat as river-polished rock beneath Netya's feet. A circular opening at the apex of the dome illuminated the chamber, casting its brightest shaft of light on a platform of stone that had clearly been made by hand, one broad, flat boulder propped up by a series of smaller ones to create what looked like an altar. It was blanketed with grass and dust that had fallen from the opening above, and a small pool of rainwater had collected around the base, but it was still an impressive sight to behold.

All of this was nothing compared to what lined the walls, however. Netya had never seen such an intricate and fascinating pattern in her life. From a distance it was hard to tell what the shapes were, but as she drew closer she realised that almost two thirds of the entire chamber had been painted with a continuous mural that stretched around the inner wall, one pattern flowing

into the next over and over again. The colours and outlines varied, some simple, some extravagant, but whoever had painted them must have spent years creating such a mesmerising stream of shapes. From the moment she looked at them, she knew she would remember the sight for the rest of her life.

"Did your father paint these?" she said in awe, stepping away from Khelt to examine the wall closest to her where the mural began.

"My father and his father are only a small part of what this is," he replied.

"As I will be too, when the next alpha succeeds me. Every one of us, every leader of our pack, for as long as time can remember us, has come here to add his own story to the walls. If there is a place our spirits linger after we are gone, I think it is here."

As Netya's eyes grew accustomed to the dim light beneath the sheltered cave walls, she began to make out even fainter patterns next to the ones she had been looking at, so old that time had worn them away to almost nothing. She made her way around the edge of the cave, tracing one painting to the next. Many of them depicted familiar sights. Herds of beasts, wolves, hunters, battles. She could see clearly where the life of one alpha ended and the next began. The colour of the paint would change, the character of the shapes would differ, and a new chapter in the history of the pack would unfold.

Some of the alphas seemed to have made no more than a begrudging addition to the mural, a short series of simple marks that depicted what she took to be themselves and the members of their pack. Others were more extravagant. One mural in particular stretched so far up the curved roof that Netya did not know how the painter had ever managed to climb so high, depicting a flourishing series of people, places, and objects that were so abstract they were difficult to make sense of.

Some of the alphas had painted only plants and trees. Others made patterns that seemed to mean nothing at all. One was smaller than the span of two hands, while the largest took Netya many long strides to walk past.

At the far end of the mural, an unfinished pattern sat daubed in red paint. "Is this yours?" Netya said as she put out her hand to touch the painting. She heard Khelt's heavy breath in the stillness of the cave behind her. His hands settled on her shoulders. He said nothing, but his closeness seemed answer enough.

"What is your painting going to be?" she asked. The red smears of paint

curled from the end of the last mural into the beginnings of shapes, but they had yet to take any form Netya could recognise.

"I do not know," Khelt said at last. The sincerity in his voice made Netya's heart jolt. "I have sat here all day sometimes, waiting for the spirits to tell me. I made those marks on the wall hoping my hands would know where to take them, but they never became anything." He squeezed her shoulders. "Since you have been at my side, I have started to see where they might lead."

Netya turned around and looked up at him. His expression was strained, as if something inside him was struggling to find its way out. She took his hand and clasped it to her breast. The was a chink of light shining through the veil that separated them.

"I care for you, Khelt, but—"

"But your heart longs for more, I know," he said. "At first I thought it was because you were uncomfortable being my consort. But it goes beyond that, doesn't it?"

Netya bit her lower lip. "I understand little of love," she began, "but I believe it should be a joining of spirits, where two become one. I want to understand all of you, and for you to understand all of me. You know I am happy to perform my duties for you, but I do not know if what we have is love. Not yet."

"I wish I could join my soul to yours as you say," Khelt replied. "Your spirit is beautiful and pure, and perhaps it deserves a partner just as innocent. It is not that I wish to hide myself from you, Netya, but there are things I wish to protect you from. Things I would forget myself if I could."

Netya opened her mouth to speak, but Khelt hushed her. "I must say this. It has been on my mind for longer than you know. I brought you here to show you how much I am willing to share. This cave is a secret to all save you and I. Perhaps the spirits of my forebears are angry that I have brought a woman of the Sun People so such a sacred place, but I have done it all the same. There are some things, like this, that make me happy to share with you, but there are others that will bring only sadness." He cupped the back of her neck with his hand, looking into her eyes with longing. "I cannot take you as my mate in the presence of my pack, but I can do it out here. If you can accept what I am able to offer, I promise to give you nothing but happiness. There is no other female I desire more."

Netya studied the face of her lover, not with the wide-eyed awe of the girl he had taken from the village, but with the regard of an older, wiser woman. It had only been a year, but she had learned more in that short time than a lifetime among her own people might have taught her. She was learning to see things through the eyes of a seer, and she turned that gaze toward what lay in her own heart, along with what she saw in Khelt's expression.

"You would have me as your mate," she said, "but you make it sound like an agreement. The parts of yourself, of your past, that you want to shelter me from are the very things I long to hear most. I do not care if they bring nothing but pain. Perhaps that is what makes me feel they are so important." She wanted to tell him she knew about what had happened between him and Adel. That she understood. That he should not blame himself, or the den mother, for things neither of them could change.

In that moment, she wondered whether she might be struggling with emotions that were hopelessly futile. She wanted Khelt to be different, to change somehow into the intimate lover she wanted him to be. Was it foolish to try and change a man who would rather break his body against an immovable boulder than accept defeat? Was she the one who had been creating this veil between them, through wanting more than Khelt was able to give?

He had been trying to tell her something in taking her to this place. Perhaps, if she learned to listen to the things he did share, rather than fixating on those he did not, she might find the spark of love she had been searching for.

In a rare moment of insight, Khelt seemed to understand what she was puzzling over. "I have said all I can," he murmured, kissing her hand. "You know how I feel for you. This is not a choice I will make on your behalf as alpha." He stepped back and led her gently to the stone altar in the centre of the cave. "Think over whatever you must. I will be here when you have an answer for me, whether it is an hour, or a month from now."

He brushed the altar clean of debris and allowed her to sit. Without another word, he returned to his mural, leaving Netya to stare at his back as both of them struggled with their own private thoughts. She tilted her chin up, letting the sunlight fall upon her face, and wondered.

It felt as if a turning point in her life was near. The world of spirits had been opened to her. Love was tugging her heart in different directions, demanding that it be given an answer. Her home was in two places at once, and she no longer knew to which one she belonged. She wanted more time. Khelt's proposal filled her with hope, but as one path opened to her, another

was closed off. As she thought of pledging herself to Khelt, a steady ache grew inside her where her feelings for Caspian dwelt.

She watched as the alpha took an old wooden bowl and pestle from an alcove near the cave's entrance, adding water and dried berries to it, before grinding them to their pigment. With his back still turned, he sat down before his mural and began to paint.

He reminded Netya of the seers when their trances took them to the spirit world. Khelt dipped his fingers into the bowl, rested them against the cave wall, and waited. When he finally moved, it did not seem to be with any direction or purpose. He allowed the red lines to trail listlessly from his fingertips until they faded and dried. He stared at them, then repeated the motion again, just as slowly and patiently as before.

She watched him paint for a long time, almost falling into a trance herself as she rested back on the altar. Her fingers played with the pendant around her neck. How strange it was that something as simple as the markings made upon a cave wall or a piece of wood could be so full of meaning.

She did not need to hear the voices of the spirits that lingered in the cave to understand its significance. The patterns on the walls said everything in their place. Each painting was a spirit, a life, a responsibility. A weight built upon a weight, all resting on the shoulders of the one tasked with continuing the great mural.

Khelt might not have fully understood why he brought her here, but the message of the cave had gotten through to Netya. Perhaps, if this was what it meant for a man to be alpha, she could never expect of him what she might desire in others. By the very nature of his duty, he was bound in ways that she was not. Could she ever understand what it was like to live the life of a man destined to lead his people?

Netya closed her eyes and breathed deeply, brow twisting in contemplation. She was beginning to understand Khelt, but what did that mean if she could not understand her own desires still? The path to such wisdom was a long one, and she had barely taken her first steps.

"Will you talk with me again?" she said, when Khelt returned to the altar to mix more water with his pigment.

"You have the mind of a seer, always filled with thoughts that must get out," he replied, putting the bowl down beside her. "I cannot answer them in the ways you want. When you are with me, you need not be a seer. Let others answer those questions of yours, and let me tend the woman who is left once all of her questions are spent."

Netya's skin warmed as he ran his hand up her hip. "Is that enough for you?"

Khelt nodded, her gown bunching up beneath his hand. "When you decide whether it is enough for you also, you must tell me. Until then, let me bring out that woman I seek." He kissed her, drawing Netya in with his lips.

It was difficult not to give in. Losing herself in the handsome alpha's arms was a pleasure that allowed her to release all other thoughts and worries, and it would have been a lie to pretend she did not relish the unburdening of her mind through the ecstasy of her body. Khelt tugged the gown over her shoulders and let it drop to the altar behind her, his hands leaving streaks of crimson paint across her sides as he caressed her.

Perhaps she was overthinking something that was simpler than she believed. Khelt was a man who cared for her. The sort of man most women could only dream of having. He would care for her all her life, give her children, and be a dutiful father to them. Her mother would have all but forced her into such a perfect pairing, if only the partner in question had not been a man who could take the form of a wolf.

The stone of the altar was hard but smooth beneath her back, pleasantly warmed by the sun. She pressed herself against it as Khelt kissed his way down her body, his long hair falling across her bare skin like the brush of silken grass. The warmth of the alpha's lips moved back up her delicate throat, their intermingled breath quickening as he eased himself on top of her, parting her legs with his knees and unfastening his kilt so that his manhood could swing free.

Netya's hands found their way to his shoulders, her fingernails seeking purchase on his muscular body as he pressed into her, and her lips parted with a cry. It was not long before complex thoughts abandoned her completely, replaced with the sound of her voice echoing off the walls as pleasure claimed her.

A Mother's Guidance

"Do you know much of love, Den Mother?"

Adel look up from the pollen she was scraping from the stamen of a wild flower, gesturing for her apprentice to bring over their bag. "I know enough to have guided a dozen young women like you through these years of their lives."

"Will you consult your visions for me?" Netya asked as she unlooped the carrying strap from her spear and handed the bag to Adel. "There are so many things I am unsure of. If only there was someone who could give me reassurance, perhaps it might help to make my path more clear."

"Your path is with me, as a seer. You will have time for romance once your training is complete."

Netya's expression fell. "Is that what your visions have told you?"

"It does not matter what I have seen," Adel sighed. "You understand my ways now. I would only be telling you what I believed would help you most, and you would know it. Those who commune with the spirits as we do give up the privilege of believing they hold all the answers."

"It is just that the alpha—" Netya began, but Adel cut her off.

"I took you as my apprentice to help free you from him. If you are having thoughts of love, make sure they are not intended for that man."

"He is not the brute you think. What if I could be happy with him? What if I could help soothe his temper toward you?"

Adel huffed, taking the pouch she needed from within the bag and turning to find another flower. "A man like that will never be changed. If it were possible, I would have done it long ago, and without spreading my legs for him."

"You hurt me when you say such things, Den Mother," Netya said. It was true. Months ago, before she had known Adel, the scornful remarks had made her angry, and more than a little fearful of the woman. It had been easy to put those feelings where they belonged when she believed Adel to be nothing more than a cruel and bitter person, but now it was much more difficult. The den mother's words made her feel ashamed, foolish, useless... And alongside all of that, they evoked a hint of pity for her mentor.

"As if I would say them for any other reason," Adel replied. A moment of

silence passed between them as the den mother squinted at the stamen between her fingers, then she paused, and let out another weary breath. "But, I suppose if you could be shamed into staying away from him then you would not be the apprentice I took you for. Do not believe for a moment that I approve of what he does with you, but I will hold my tongue if it upsets that timid heart of yours."

Netya smiled. To a less familiar ear, the den mother's words might have sounded condescending, but she could hear the underlying apology in Adel's voice. After spending so much time with her over the past months, she had begun to realise many things about her mentor. On a different day she might have known to hold her tongue, but, despite the prickly attitude that followed Adel around like a second shadow, she was at least willing to talk this morning.

"Why must I keep my heart closed to the alpha, then?" Netya said. "Help me understand what wisdom you see in it. There must be some, for you to have tried to keep me apart from him all this time."

Adel paused her work, tapping the pollen from the edge of her knife into the pouch. She straightened up and looked at Netya, running her hand up the side of the wolf's muzzle headdress her apprentice wore. "You have it in you to be a woman of significance, Netya."

"As a seer?"

"No. You have still yet to master your herbs, and you remain as clueless as ever about what I am trying to teach you of your visions. Yes, you may make an adequate seer one day, but that is not what I mean. It is not the colour of your hair that destines you to stand out among others, it is the strength of your spirit."

"I do not feel as if my spirit is stronger than anyone else's."

"Perhaps it is not," Adel said. "There are many women born like you and I. But how many of them ever rise as high as they are able? This pack is lenient. It allows its females to hunt, to craft, to stand alongside the males, but it does so as an indulgence, not because it truly believes we are equal to the men in such things." Her lip curled. "I have seen many girls with your potential, Netya, and one after another they are bound to men who seek to shoulder their burdens, to bless them with the gift of motherhood, and to protect them from all the harms of the world."

Netya gave her mentor a look of bemusement. "What more could a woman want? Is that not the happiness we all strive for?"

"Have you been so busy making eyes at Caspian that you have not listened to a word that man says? He at least is wise enough to understand that there is a difference between what a person is told all their life, and what they know to be true in their heart of hearts. You would know it too, if you learned to listen. If you believe a woman's happiness is so simple, why did you start taking the herbs I gave you, hmm? Why did you want to be something more than a man's concubine in the first place?"

"I think—" Netya began falteringly. "There is a difference between settling with a man when you are ready, and doing so because you feel you have no other choice."

"And yet that distinction is unclear for so many," Adel said. "You at least are sharp enough to see it, but even now you are unsure which side of it you fall on. In some other packs, women are forced to mate with whichever male stakes the strongest claim to them. This pack sees things differently, but they have not strayed as far from the old ways as they like to think. Khelt would take you as his woman, and I believe the fool might even think he was doing you a kindness. He would shelter you from the things that have made you stronger. Vaya would never dare to strike you again if you were his mate. If you ventured out on a hunt, you would have a dozen protectors by your side at all times. He would do these things to keep you safe, and you might thank him for it, but safety and comfort do not make great women. What would you be now, had a man from your village kept you safe the night Khelt and his hunters came?"

Netya looked down with a flush. She would be a girl still, not in body, but in spirit. She would be no hunter, no seer, and she would be no wiser about many of the truths she had come to realise since.

Still, it was hard for her to accept Adel's way of thinking. "I do not believe the men seek to hobble us through their protection. We are the mothers, and they are the warriors. That is the way it has always been."

"The world is not so simple. Think. See it through your seer's eyes. Many women are born to be mothers, and many men to be warriors. More still are pushed to be what is expected of them, whether they realise it or not. Mark my words, Netya, if you give your heart to Khelt, you may trick yourself into believing you are happy, but if there is even a shred of wit within that head of yours, you will always wonder what you could have been without him."

"You make it sound like men are nothing but a weight to drag us down," Netya said dejectedly.

Adel gave her a withering look. "Not all men. Only the wrong men. The alpha is not a man of deep thoughts. He cares nothing for the ways of the seers. All he understands is the barking of the wolf inside his head. Love should strengthen us, but his love would only make you weaker. Think on that before you consider who your heart belongs to."

Netya nodded in compliance, but Adel's advice had only left her more torn than ever. It was no wonder she needed time to wrap her thoughts around such matters. Rather than making things clear to her, the year spent with the Moon People had only muddied the waters of her future even further. Every night she hoped the spirits would deliver some sign to lead her in one direction or the other, but their intrusions into her dreams remained as vague as always.

She watched her mentor scraping the pollen from a few more plants before she was allowed to assist her, using the edge of her knife to delicately mirror the den mother's actions without causing damage to the flowers. She mastered the simple task quickly, much to Adel's approval, and the pair of them continued with their work for the rest of the morning, seeking out the flowers they needed as they walked through the meadows south of the outcrop.

Adel was comfortable to carry out most of their work together in silence, speaking only to guide and advise Netya. She conveyed little through conversation, but her actions were slightly less guarded. As the den mother walked, Netya noticed her absently picking small blue flowers one at a time whenever they passed by a patch, piercing their stems with a fingernail and weaving them together into a chain that she curled around her wrist. When she noticed her apprentice looking, Adel scowled and dashed the chain from her arm, letting it fall to the ground in pieces.

Even though it incurred another impatient reprisal from her mentor, Netya stopped to gather up the flowers where they had fallen, weaving them back together as she caught up, and offered the chain back to Adel.

"It looked pretty on you," she said.

Adel's scowl lingered for a moment, then she pushed Netya's hand away, curling the girl's fingers closed around the chain. "Keep it. You would wear it better than I."

Netya was about to respond when the den mother suddenly hushed her, raising a palm and gesturing urgently with her eyes. Following the den mother's gaze, Netya tensed as she made out the source of her agitation

hunched over in the grass, barely a few yards from where they stood. A skinny wolf was watching them, teeth bared, its yellow eyes glinting with aggression.

At first Netya's heart raced, believing it to be a scout from a rival pack, one of the ones Khelt had been concerned about months ago. But the bodies of the Moon People did not fit into such skinny forms. When they changed shape, their clothing peeled away into thick, luscious fur, nothing like the scraggly coat of this animal. This time it was simply a wolf. Just another wild animal.

Nevertheless, the creature was clearly agitated and skittish. Netya slowly put down her bag and took hold of her spear with both hands, raising the point in front of her. The wolf's low growl grew louder, and Adel put out a hand to hold her apprentice back.

"Wait. She is more afraid than us."

"Frightened animals are still dangerous."

"Yes, especially if they have something worth protecting nearby," Adel said softly, moving past her to approach the creature.

Netya expected her to take the shape of her own wolf to face the beast down, but Adel only dipped a hand into her bag as she crept forward, her long shawl snagging against the grass as she moved. All Netya could think about was how clumsy her mentor would be if it came to a fight with the growling animal. Without a weapon to protect herself, Adel would need her wolf's claws before long.

She gripped her spear tighter, the balls of her feet tensing against the ground as her agitation grew. The wolf had backed off a few paces, but its body was still coiled and ready to pounce. It was not going to be scared off without a fight.

Still Adel kept moving forward, until she was almost close enough for the wolf to be at her throat in a single bound. Then, just as Netya was about to dart forward with her spear, the den mother's arm flashed out, a cloud of yellow dust streaming from between her fingers as she threw a handful of pollen into the wolf's snarling muzzle.

Even more surprised than Netya, the animal stumbled backwards with a snorting, sneezing series of whines, jerking her head from side to side as she sought to escape the dusty cloud. Still spluttering, the female turned tail and darted away into the undergrowth, the rustling sounds of her retreat fading into the distance until she was gone.

Netya allowed her spear to drop, letting out a relieved breath as she returned to Adel's side. "You could have fought her off with the aid of your wolf. We spent all morning collecting that pollen."

"A small price to pay for a life, don't you think? I did not want to provoke her into a fight."

"I did not know you cared so much for wolves. You seem to avoid your own as often as you can," Netya said with a smile.

"Mind your tongue, and help me find some more flowers," Adel replied, brushing a thin layer of pollen from her clothing, the yellow mist puffing into the air in small clouds. "Let the wolf live to see another day, and let us finish gathering what we came for."

Netya's back ached from bending over to scrape down flowers by the time they got back to the outcrop that afternoon. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and rest for a short while, but Adel insisted they had more work to do. The pollen was used in several rituals by the seers, some of it for painting, some to be burned with incense, some added to food or drink. It was a valuable ingredient, and it had to be prepared and stored carefully.

At first Adel began leading them back to the seers' cave, where they could continue their work undisturbed. But it was a bright and beautiful day, and the den mother so rarely ventured out of her chamber. After a little persuading, Netya convinced her that working outdoors would be a better idea while they still had the light. There was no wind to risk blowing their pollen away, and it would not fill the den mother's cave with its musty, irritating odour if they prepared it outdoors.

They sat together in a quiet corner of the crafting area, just off to the side of the central meeting space, where several other pack members were lounging. Netya and her mentor attracted several curious looks and whispered conversations, but Adel ignored the gossip entirely, forgoing her slightly more relaxed demeanour from earlier as she imparted Netya with curt, direct instructions.

While the den mother portioned out half of the pollen to prepare for use in rituals, she left her apprentice with the simpler task of making sure the rest was stored safely in wooden jars. Adel showed her how much to measure into each container, then left Netya to scoop up the amounts she needed on the blade of her knife.

She filled the jars one at a time, tapped the contents down until they were

level, then placed small wooden caps over the tops that had been whittled to fit somewhat firmly into place. Once that was done, she set a pot over the fire to heat, then hurried back to the seers' cave and found a bag filled with broken fragments of beeswax among their stores.

She dropped the wax into her pot a piece at a time, stirring it carefully until it was evenly melted, then dipped the tops of her jars in one by one, creating a tight seal to protect the contents from air and moisture. By the time she dipped the last jar, the wax on the first had cooled and hardened, and she repeated the process again until there was a firm coating several layers thick on each one.

As they worked, more people began to trickle into the camp, and the smell of cooking food filled the air as the promise of a hearty evening meal approached. The hunters reappeared up the slope leading down to the plains a handful at a time, and for the most part Netya paid them little attention. It was only when she was finishing up her work—taking inspiration from Caspian to mark the wax on each jar with a circle she decided meant "pollen"—that she noticed one of the young men returning to camp with the body of an animal slung over his shoulder. There had been no hunts recently, and the surprise of the others was matched by their curiosity over what had happened.

Netya recognised the young hunter as Rolan, a man whose coming of age celebration she remembered from the previous year. He had a habit of tailing Vaya wherever she went, and so Netya had rarely taken the time to speak with him. She rose to her feet when she saw he was bleeding from several scratches across his face, wondering whether he needed aid, but Adel stopped her with a hand around her wrist. The den mother's grasp was uncomfortably tight, and a moment later, Netya realised why.

The wolf draped over Rolan's shoulder was the same scrawny female they had run into earlier that day. It should not have bothered her to see the animal dead, especially not after having been willing to fight it herself just a few hours prior. But, after the way Adel had deftly handled the beast without a drop of blood needing to be spilled, she could not help but feel a lump come to her throat.

"I am sure he had a good reason," she began as the den mother rose to her feet, cold eyes blazing as they fixed on the young man being congratulated by his companions. Netya's words fell on deaf ears. The den mother stormed past her without hesitating, making straight for Rolan through the small crowd that had begun to form.

Cheerful conversations turned to frightened whispers as the group parted for her, men and woman stepping back and bowing their heads in respect as Adel approached the hunter. He turned several shades paler when he saw her coming, and for a moment Netya thought he might drop his freshly killed prize and scurry right back out of camp again. He was quaking by the time Adel came face to face with him. Not being a tall man, the den mother towered over him.

Her eyes flicked from the wolf to his face, and then she spoke.

"Why did you kill this animal, boy?"

"I caught it in our territory, to the south," he answered, his voice thin with anxiety.

"I did not know it was forbidden for wild animals to set foot in our lands."

A few nervous laughs followed Adel's words, but they fell quickly silent when the den mother's chilling expression turned even more severe.

"It... It was a fine kill," the young man stammered.

"A skinny female. Even for a runt like you, she must have been half your size. Does it make you proud to kill weak animals, with barely enough meat on their bones to satisfy a single meal?"

"I will give her pelt to you, as— as—"

"As a gift?" Adel's tone dripped with scorn.

Even Netya could not help but feel sympathetic to Rolan. Perhaps he deserved to be reprimanded, but he was clearly lost for words. His mouth formed silent shapes that made no sounds as he shook his head, pawing desperately at the animal slung over his shoulder with quivering fingers. Before Adel could admonish the young man further, Vaya stepped up and placed herself between them.

"I have seen this animal in the meadows myself. It may have been a danger to those out foraging. Rolan was right to kill it," the huntress said.

"You believe our people are not capable of defending themselves against a single lone wolf?" Adel replied, glaring down at Vaya. The sudden intercession seemed only to have angered her further.

"My only concern is for you and your seers, Den Mother," Vaya said, allowing her eyes to fall in deference to the senior female. "We would not want you burdened by having to deal with wild beasts."

"Such a burden it is, to allow innocent creatures to continue living," Adel all but snarled. She looked from Rolan to Vaya again, then pushed the huntress aside and gripped the young man's chin in her hand, forcing him to

look up at her. "You will take this animal back to where you killed her, and you will leave her body for the earth to reclaim. Ask her spirit for forgiveness, and perhaps it will bless you with the forethought to consider the value of life the next time you feel the urge to take it needlessly."

"Yes, Den Mother," Rolan whispered, the relief in his voice almost palpable. Clearly he had been expecting a far more severe punishment to befall him.

Adel released her grip and allowed the young man to leave, eyes following him all the way down the slope until he had disappeared around the side of the outcrop. She turned her gaze on Vaya, who still stood to one side with a glower on her face. "Do you have something more to say, huntress?"

Vaya shook her head, staring down at the ground.

"Then return to your meal. And do not allow me to overhear you defending the mistakes of those who look up to you again." Adel turned and swept her way back through the crowd, allowing the subdued murmur of conversation to resume behind her as she returned to where she had been working. In the fading light, it shocked Netya to see the first traces of tears in her mentor's eyes.

"It saddened me to see the wolf dead too," she said softly, trying to put a hand on the other woman's arm.

Adel brushed her off with a shake of her head. "It was only a wolf," she said stiffly. "Will you gather our things and return them to the cave? I am feeling out of sorts."

"Of course, Den Mother," Netya said gently. "Shall I make you your tea and bring it to your chamber?"

"Yes, thank you. That would be very kind." Adel made as if to place her hand on Netya's shoulder, but her fingers curled closed at the last moment. She stepped back uncomfortably, the faint lines around her eyes showing for a moment before she turned away.

Netya watched her go with a deep sadness in her heart. It was only a wild wolf. A small thing, really. But, after hearing Adel speak that day, perhaps it was the small things that bothered her the most. The things that were easily avoided. The things that reminded her how easy it was for a single decision to change the course of a life.

Adel was quiet when Netya brought the tea to her chamber. The den mother sat wrapped in her sleeping furs, watching the fire as she sipped her drink. It seemed she was in need of more comfort than a cup of hot tea could provide, but Netya had not the first idea how to give it. Not to a woman like Adel. Instead, she settled for tidying the chamber and making sure her mentor had everything she needed. Adel did not speak a word until she set her cup down and unfastened her headdress, slipping out of her furs.

"I am going to bathe," she said. "Your duties are done for the day. We will carry on tomorrow."

Netya nodded, but she continued to linger in the seers' cave after Adel had departed. The den mother was so similar to Khelt in some ways, and yet the two of them could not have been more different. It was no wonder they refused to agree on anything.

Netya made her way to a small side chamber which the seers used for most of their cooking, one of the few with natural vents in the roof to let smoke out. Several of the others were gathered there, and a pot of thick stew bubbled over the coals, filling the cave with its delicious aroma. The herbs the seers had access to meant their food was always rich and filled with flavour, and it was one of the benefits of being an apprentice that Netya certainly did not begrudge.

"Are you alright, girl?" one of the elders said as she filled a bowl and handed it to Netya.

"Why? Do I look troubled?" she replied.

"You do a poor job of hiding how much your face reveals," Brae said from across the fire. "Is the den mother pushing you too hard again?"

"No, of course not."

Brae shared a concerned look with the others. "If you are troubled by something, you should tell us. We worry over the amount of time you spend in there with her."

"There is no need, really. The den mother is a fine mentor." Netya did not think Adel would take kindly to such gossip behind her back, especially not if she told the others how upset the den mother had seemed.

"Well, if you are sure," Brae said, plainly unconvinced.

Netya ate quickly, the concern of her fellow seers making her uncomfortable. It was difficult to explain what was on her mind, and she did her best to avoid the questions of the others until she was finished. Before leaving, she filled another bowl with stew and carried it up to Adel's chamber, leaving it next to the fire to stay warm before going to brew another cup of tea.

The eyes of the others followed her on her way out, but she found a quiet corner to herself in the central chamber as she waited for her pot of water to boil. It had been a tiring day, and it felt good to have a moment of peace. She rested back against the cave wall, drawing her wolf pelt around her as she watched the fire. In the back of her mind she was vaguely aware that she needed to pay attention to her pot, but the thought slipped away gradually until her eyelids drooped and she lost track of time.

A sudden pop from the fire jolted Netya awake. Her white wolf had been there in her dreams. He had fought with the spirit of the scrawny female, the pair of them locking jaws in a grim dance as Netya clung on to her guardian's back and tried not to fall. The thought that the wild wolf's spirit was haunting her already was unnerving, and the dream had left her stiff and anxious.

She rubbed her eyes and stumbled to her feet, wondering how long she had napped for. Someone had taken her pot off the fire, and the central chamber was empty save for two of the elders sitting on the opposite side. The absence of everyone else suggested night had fallen.

Despite her worries that she had left Khelt waiting for her, she decided to check in on Adel once more before taking her leave. She crept up the dark passage and pushed the drapes half way open, calling the den mother's name softly. A low grunt answered her, and she stepped on through.

The fire had burned down low, and Adel was curled up in her furs near the wall. Her bowl of stew sat empty by the fire, and the bags of pollen Netya had left there earlier had still not been prepared. With a weary smile, she tiptoed in and picked up the bowl, then added a few more logs to the fire as a chilly draft rushed down her back. Adel had left the roof cover half way open for some reason, and through the gap Netya could see that the stars had come out.

"You cannot sleep in the cold all night, Den Mother," she said, making her way past Adel as carefully as she could, preparing to climb up to the roof. But as she stepped over the dozing woman, Adel grunted again. She was not

dozing, she was shivering. Why had she not closed the cover if she was so cold?

"Are you unwell, Den Mother?" Netya said, a frown crossing her face as she crouched beside her mentor. When she received no response, she put a hand on Adel's shoulder and tried to roll her over, the apprehension from her dream returning stronger than ever. When she saw Adel's face, it was damp with perspiration. Her eyes were wide open, but they stared through Netya as if she was a ghost, wide black pupils darting back and forth in agitation.

The den mother was in a spirit trance, but this was no controlled journey she was undertaking. Her brow burned like fire, and her body twitched with unnatural movements that seemed beyond her control. When her breath came, it was in shrill, shallow gasps, and her pulse drummed against Netya's fingers like the patter of rain.

There were few sicknesses she had learned to identify in the course of her training, but the symptoms Adel was displaying were keenly familiar to her. Netya had experienced them herself after she took the nightwood berries, but that time their effects had been much milder. The state Adel was in now reminded her of how the boy from her village had been after eating the berries by accident, when it had taken the administering of more poison to save him from death.

Panic gripped Netya as she shook the older woman by the shoulders, cupping her face and trying to draw her back into the physical world. She seemed lost beyond all hope, her mind buried so deep in the realm of spirits that it might never find its way back.

"Den Mother! Listen to my voice, come back! What must I do to help you?!" Netya shook her again, but it did no good. How could this have happened? Did Adel make a mistake? She would never. "Wait for me," Netya said, squeezing her mentor's hand. "I will fetch the others, they will know what to do."

She hurried through the drapes, almost tripping in the dark passage on her way back to the main chamber, before rousing the two dozing elders.

"The den mother is unwell! I do not know what to do, but I fear she may die!"

After much reassurance from the other women to calm her down, Netya followed them back to the den mother's chamber, explaining what had happened. She wrung her hands impatiently as the pair examined Adel, exchanging grave glances as they muttered beneath their breath.

"What can be done for her?" Netya said at last, when she could endure no longer. "Do you have the medicine to bring her back?"

One of the elders rose to her feet and gave Netya a hard look. "It is as you thought. She has been poisoned with nightwood berries, and for those, there is no cure. We must speak with the other seers immediately. Our den mother is dying."

Netya felt the colour drain from her face, a sickly feeling rushing into her stomach as she looked to Adel's twitching form. "Shall I fetch them?" she said numbly.

The elders exchanged another strange look, then the closer one nodded. "Yes, tell them to gather in the central chamber. Do not stray far."

Netya stumbled out through the drapes, quivering as if she was suffering the effects of the poison herself. Had she not paused to brace herself against the wall as a wave of nausea swept over her, she would not have overheard what the elders whispered next.

"Do you really think she did it?"

"You have seen the way Adel treats her," the other hissed. "She was never one of us to begin with. Who else could it have been?"

"She was coming and going while the den mother was absent earlier. I even saw her bring food in."

"Did anyone else enter this chamber?"

"Not a soul."

The lurching of Netya's stomach threatened to overwhelm her as she realised what they were implying. How could they think she was responsible?

"Go, tell the alpha," the first elder said. "If you see any of the hunters on your way, tell them to find the girl and bring her back here."

Before she could overhear any more, Netya forced her legs to move. She hurried blindly into the darkness, pushing through the drapes until she was stumbling across the antechamber and out into the cool night air.

What could she do? How could she prove it had not been her? Tears ran down her cheeks as she struggled to control her panicked breathing. In the space of a few short moments, the comforting presence of the outcrop had become unsettling and alien to her once more. The shapes of the people gathered around the central fire below no longer reminded her of family.

Hurrying back to her tent, she ignored Fern's words of concern as she burst in on her friend, grabbing her spear and waterskin before hurrying back out. In her panic, there was only one thing she could think to do, and only one * * *

Vaya wiped the sweat from her brow, crouching in the darkness as she watched the entrance to the seers' cave. Had she gone too far? It had seemed like such a fine plan to her at the time, when she was fuelled with anger at the den mother for the way she had treated Rolan. If she had only thought longer on it, if she had not allowed recklessness to guide her, she might have considered the consequences of her actions.

For all the anger and frustration in her heart, Vaya was not a murderer. The last time she had been sent to collect berries for the seers it had sickened her to keep a handful for herself, indulging in fantasies of how she might slip a lethal dose into Netya's food. After pushing aside the darkest of her thoughts, she had then planned to make the girl seem weak and sickly with the berries, but that idea was foolish. The seers knew poison when they saw it, and their suspicion would only have fallen back on her eventually.

The berries had sat in their pouch buried beneath Vaya's bedroll for many weeks, until now. It had seemed like a flash of brilliance, so perfect she wondered how she had not thought of it before. Not everyone knew of the hidden entrances to some of the caves atop the outcrop, but Vaya had spent more time exploring her home than most. Once she saw the den mother leaving to bathe, it had been the work of moments to scale the rocks and climb down into her chamber. There had even been a steaming pot of stew waiting for her, as if fate had aligned perfectly to ensure the success of her plan.

A plan, of course, that had not accounted for how many berries she slipped into the den mother's food. She knew they were poisonous, but Vaya was no seer. What if Adel died, as the rumours spreading like wildfire through the camp seemed to suggest? What if the Sun girl persuaded the alpha of her innocence? No one seemed to know where she had gone, and already several of the hunters had been sent out looking for her.

Running will only convince them of her guilt, Vaya reassured herself, taking deep breaths as she plucked at her itching clothing. Foolish or not, it was done now. She could not take it back.

Before long the alpha arrived outside the seers' cave, joining the anxious crowd that had gathered around the antechamber. Vaya could not hear what was being said from her perch between the rocks, but his voice soon raised in

anger.

I did this for you, Alpha. For all of our pack. None of you can see the trouble she brings.

Vaya desperately hoped the spirits were still on her side. If the den mother was destined to die so that their pack could finally be free of that girl...

A flicker of movement caught Vaya's notice, and, with the eyes of a hunter, her gaze immediately snapped to the source of the disturbance. A short way around the side of the outcrop, the drapes covering the entrance to Caspian's small earth lodge were swaying. There was no wind that night, and she had seen Caspian depart for one of his long nighttime walks several hours earlier.

Hackles rising, Vaya took the shape of her wolf and crept silently down the rocks, sticking to the shadows. She found a path lower down the slope where she could slip past Caspian's dwelling unseen, then climbed back up on the far side. Her nostrils twitched, picking up the unnaturally sweet scent of the Sun girl, tinged with the herbal smells of the seers' cave and the musky odour of the wolf pelt she wore. The drapes had not stirred again, but the scent was still fresh.

Vaya's paws pressed into the ground without the faintest footfall, body held low as she stalked to the side of the entrance. She sniffed again, picking up the scent stronger than ever. That was enough for Vaya. Without so much as a growl of warning, she batted the drapes aside with a paw and lunged. The look of terror on Netya's face drew a snarl of satisfaction from the huntress in the brief moment before her paws hit the girl's shoulders, and she drove her to the ground.

To her credit, she did not scream. She only pleaded like a coward, squirming feebly as the wolf's claws pressed through her clothing, drawing the scent of blood that flooded Vaya's muzzle and made her mouth water. She bared her teeth at Netya, letting her know just how easy it would be.

How weak and feeble her kind were, when it came down to the one thing that truly mattered. Seeing her quarry quaking and pleading beneath her almost drove all other concerns from Vaya's mind, so enraptured was her wolf in the victory of the moment.

"Please, Vaya, please, listen, it was not me!" the girl begged through her tears. "I can prove it! Please let me!"

Her words gave Vaya a moment of hesitation. The anxious thoughts of her two-legged self returned, and she lifted her paws from the girl's shoulders. Wrestling back control from her wolf, she reverted to her normal shape and

stood blocking the exit, fists clenched at her sides as she stared down at Netya.

"How can you prove it?" she said. Her plan of dragging the girl back to the others in disgrace would be for nothing if she still had a way to squirm out of this.

"There is a medicine, my people have known of it for years, it may be able to save her!" Netya implored her, almost stumbling over her words in her hurry to get them out. "If I bring the seers the cure, they will know it was not me!"

Vaya looked around the dark chamber slowly, weighing her options. "You needed Caspian for this?"

"I know you have never cared for me, Vaya, but please, for the sake of the den mother, please believe me. The others will only think I am trying to flee from them. If you know where Caspian is, I promise I will do all I can to save Adel with his help."

Vaya glared at her, torn on what to do. She had no desire to see the den mother die, but her hatred for Netya burned stronger. "Caspian is gone," she said carefully. "Tell me what you intend to do. Where can you find this cure?"

"My people always kept some in their stores of herbs. They will still have the medicine Adel needs, I am sure of it, but I cannot make the journey back to my village alone. I need the legs of a wolf to take me there."

It occurred to Vaya that this was probably a lie. A cure that even the seers did not know of? One that conveniently required Netya to return to her village, the one place she would be safe from the retribution of the pack? It incensed Vaya so much that she was tempted to drag the girl before the alpha then and there, but she stayed her hand, forcing herself to think.

"It will take almost a day to run there and back," she said.

"It may be enough!" Netya pleaded. "But every moment that passes brings Adel closer to death. I will do whatever you ask, if only you believe me. I need your help."

Vaya took a moment to consider, her heartbeat quickening as realisation dawned. Fate was with her still. The impulsiveness of her decision had led to a more elegant solution than she could ever have hoped for.

"I ask nothing of you." Vaya fixed her with the most sincere look she could muster. "If it means saving the den mother, I will do everything I can to lend you my aid."

Netya remained a few paces behind Vaya, as the huntress had instructed, heart still pounding after the confrontation in Caspian's lodge. She did not know if what she was doing was wise, or reasonable, or desperate. All she knew was that Adel was dying, and that she could not afford to waste a moment convincing the others of her innocence. Even with a wolf to speed her home, it might still be too late for the den mother by the time she returned.

How strange it was that Vaya, of all people, had been the one to come to her aid. Perhaps, for all her flaws, there was goodness in the woman's heart after all. But Netya had little time to dwell on such things. She could hear the voices of the others as they searched for her, and it was only a matter of time before one of their wolves picked up her scent. On her own, she stood no chance of crossing the plains without being caught, but with Vaya's help, it might just be possible.

They crept down the side of the outcrop using a narrow and precarious path between the rocks that Netya had never seen before, sticking to the shadows as they made their way around the far side of the natural monument. When they reached the ground, Vaya made her wait, and the pair of them sat shivering in the bushes for several long moments until they were sure the coast was clear.

"Hold tight, and do not fall," Vaya muttered. "We will be at the edge of the Sun People's territory by dawn."

Netya nodded her understanding as the huntress took the shape of her wolf. She barely had time to climb on and tuck in her legs before Vaya broke into a run, streaking through the undergrowth with barely a sound as they disappeared into the darkness.

There was no moon that night, and without the eyes of a wolf Netya was forced to put her faith in Vaya's sense of direction. The dim glow of the fires atop the outcrop disappeared before long, and the bushes thinned out as they left the cover of the scrubland behind and set out across the open plains.

Netya's shoulders were sore and aching from the marks left by Vaya's claws, but she ignored the pain and held on tight. The shaft of her spear bounced against her spine where it hung from the leather strap looped across her chest. Cold air whipped at her eyes. Vaya was fast, faster than any wolf she had ridden before, but the urgency of her speed left little room for the

comfort of her rider.

Netya did not care. She endured until her body throbbed and her muscles were stiff, searching the horizon hour after hour for the dark patch of trees that marked the edge of the forest. It was not until the focus of her adrenaline ebbed and exhaustion began to take hold that she realised she was returning home. Back to a place she had not seen in over a year. This was not the manner in which she had hoped to return, but it was happening now regardless. What would she do? How would she explain her situation?

She tried to calm herself and think. For Adel's sake, she had to be wise, as her mentor had taught her. She could not tell the truth. No one from her village would ever lend their aid to one of the Moon People willingly. But even if she could sneak her way in without anyone noticing, she did not know where the medicine she required would be kept, or even how to identify it. For all the plants she had spent the past months studying, she was still as clueless as ever about those native to her homeland.

It brought an agonising weight to her chest to think that she might be forced to return home without so much as laying eyes on her mother and sisters. It had been easy to put them out of mind while she was caught up in the excitement of everything that had happened to her since leaving, but now that she was on her way home, the memories of her previous life began flooding back all at once.

How could she explain where she had been? Would she have time? For Adel to have any chance at living, Netya would need to be there and gone as quickly as possible. As much as it hurt her, she crushed her feelings of sentiment aside and tried to focus on what mattered. She needed to embody her mentor's stoic courage. This was not a reunion, it was a task. Just as Adel had not hesitated in her conviction to remove Erech's leg to save his life, Netya could not allow the things that tugged at her heart to compromise her goal.

She had never before seen the death of a loved one with her own eyes, but she felt she could almost glimpse it that night, and it terrified her. If only she could be more like Adel.

The stars rolled across the sky as they ran, the land changing shape around them from one mass of black to the next. Hour after hour dragged by, each feeling more desperate than the last. Tense focus kept Netya awake, and by the time the shape of the forest appeared in the distance, she knew what she intended to do.

Vaya slowed her pace, panting with exertion as they slipped beneath the dark canopy of the trees. The familiar musty smell of the forest enveloped them. A short while later, Netya made out the shape of a dry stone wall through the undergrowth.

She was home.

—**36**— The Sun People

The village nestled within a small natural dip in the land, a high bank on the western side separating it from the stretch of forest that eventually gave way to the plains. It was to this western bank that Netya guided Vaya. The narrow river that provided the village's water bordered the southern side, and to the north and east the ground was open, the trees much thinner, providing little cover for anyone who wished to approach unseen.

"Wait for me here," Netya said as she slipped from Vaya's back, putting a hand against the wolf's flank for a moment as she swayed with dizziness. The night was still dark, but dawn had been tugging at the horizon when they left the plains. The hard ride and lack of sleep had taken more of a toll on Netya than she'd thought.

Vaya growled and lay down in the grass, catching her own breath while she had the opportunity. Even with the incredible stamina of her wolf, it seemed miraculous that she had been able to maintain her pace the entire way.

Reminding herself of how little time could afford to be wasted, Netya unslung her spear from its strap, using the shaft for balance as she edged her way carefully down the steep slope. Even under the cover of night, the village that had once been her whole world seemed different and strange to her. There was a new house of logs close to the river that had not been there a year ago, and several tents had been set up nearby. The soft glow of firelight cast shadows between the collection of mismatched dwellings, painting their walls with inviting tones of orange that made Netya's throat tighten with longing.

She avoided the new house, waiting until she was parallel to the centre of the village before moving closer. All was silent save for the low crackle of flames. The smell of woodsmoke was sweet in her nostrils, so much more familiar than the scent of the fires back at the outcrop. Her fingers brushed against the rough logs of the house to her right, tracing a path across the back wall that they had traced many times before. Somewhere, on the other side of that wall, her mother and sisters slept.

Sniffing away the tears that threatened to come to her eyes, she moved her hand away and hurried on past. As much as she longed to go inside, she could not. If only she had more time.

A long earth lodge separated her mother's house from the next wooden building, and it was to this final dwelling at the edge of the village that Netya hurried. With no way to enter save for the doorway on the opposite side, she straightened up and strode at a brisk pace into the central area between the houses. Fires, blankets, and the remnants of the last day's meal were strewn all around, and Netya counted the shapes of three slumbering bodies outside the tents nearby. If she caught anyone's eye, she could only hope her white wolf pelt would not draw too much attention to her.

Taking a deep breath, she turned her back on the open area and faced the doorway, resisting the impulse to duck past the blanket that covered it. She rapped her knuckles quietly against the wall three times, in the same *tap tap-tap* rhythm she had always used to call her friend. She thought she heard a small noise coming from inside, but only silence thereafter.

With the back of her neck prickling, she repeated the knock twice more. After the third try, the sounds of movement returned. When Layon drew back the blanket covering the doorway, the hopeful expression on his face was too much for Netya to bear. He had remembered her knock.

Without a word, she threw herself into his arms, all but sobbing as the drape fell closed behind them.

"I knew you still lived," he gasped, crushing the breath from her lungs as he squeezed her fiercely. It startled Netya to hear him speaking in the language of the Sun People, with a cadence of voice that now sounded strange to her ears. Rearranging her thoughts to adjust back to her own tongue took Netya a moment, and in the meantime Layon let go of her and took a step back, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I barely recognised you," he said. "What happened that night? Where have you been?" Layon's eyes flicked in the direction of another set of drapes to his right, the ones Netya knew cordoned off the sleeping area of his house from the living space. He was speaking in hushed tones, and, while she was thankful for his discretion, he could not have known that she was here in secret.

Glancing through the gap in the drapes, Netya saw a dark-haired woman sleeping on a broad bedroll that was large enough for two. Layon's space was empty beside her, and one of her hands was cupped around her swollen stomach. By the look of her, she had been with child for some months.

"It was difficult for all of us after the night you disappeared," Layon said, an almost apologetic note in his voice. "Derith was very kind to me during

that time."

A strange sensation wormed its way through Netya's body. She recognised Derith now, but even without her enlarged stomach, she seemed somehow different. It was not a pang of jealousy Netya felt. Jealousy, perhaps, would have been better. Instead, a heavy sadness settled upon her. How much else had changed in her absence? How much had she missed? Having never spent so long away from home before, she had simply expected everything to be much the same when she returned. But life had continued on without her. Had she waited too long?

"What ever happened to you?" Layon whispered, tugging the drapes closed. "Did you escape the Moon People?"

Struggling to piece her weary, scattered thoughts back together, Netya shook her head. "I am sorry, Layon, but I cannot stay and tell you everything. I must be gone again by morning. Just know that I have been well, and living among good people who have cared for me."

"Gone? Why? What has happened? Oh, Netya, you must tell me!"

"I cannot! Listen, someone I care for is close to death. I risked much to come here, because I know our people have medicine that can help her. Will you get it for me?"

She could not help but feel for poor Layon as he looked at her in bewilderment.

"You cannot stay?" he said after a brief pause.

"I will come back to see you again soon, I promise. I will see all of you again. But please, right now every moment is important. Do you still help Seymon with his herbs?"

"Yes. He is barely able to organise them himself these days."

Netya let out a relieved breath. "I need the medicine that purges the poison of the nightwood berries. I mean —" She shook her head, searching for the name her people used. She realised she must have heard it fewer times than the Moon People's version. "The bitterthorn berries. Do you know the one?"

Layon gave her a hesitant nod. She took his hands and clutched them to her chest, hoping he understood the desperate pounding of her heart for what it was. "Please Layon. It must be fast, and I cannot stay. No one must know I was here until after I am gone. They would only try to stop me from leaving."

"If I find what you need," he said falteringly. "You must at least tell your mother. She believes you are dead."

Netya shook her head. "There will be no time—!"

"You do not know what it has been like for her, Netya!" Layon exclaimed, jerking his head suddenly in the direction of the sleeping area as Derith murmured, before lowering his voice again. "I will do as you say, because you are my friend. I will not ask you of the things I long to know. But in return, you must put that poor woman's heart to rest. At least speak to her before you leave."

There was no response Netya could think of to argue with. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

"The seeds you need are almost as dangerous as the bitterthorn berries themselves. I will have to wake Seymon to find them, and think of some lie to explain why I have disturbed him in the middle of the night. It may take some time. Go to your mother while I am gone. I will meet you behind your house, near the bank." His expression softened a little. "You remember, our old place?"

"I could not forget in just a year," Netya said, refusing to give in to more tears. She suspected they would come of their own accord soon enough, whether she fought them or not.

"It feels like you have been gone so much longer." Layon squeezed her hands, then lifted up her headdress so that he could look into her eyes. She need not have hurried him along. After taking in the sight of her for only a brief moment, he lifted his cloak from where it lay crumpled on the ground, and hurried out into the darkness.

Her wolf pelt was more than enough to ward off the mild chill of the summer nights, but before Netya left she pulled back her headdress and wrapped another of Layon's spare cloaks around her shoulders. Nobody would think anything of a girl wrapped in a plain cloak. Creeping silently out of the house, she caught sight of Layon disappearing around the side of the great hall, a large wooden lodge from which her uncle and some of the other elders organised the business of the village. How different it was from the alpha's den.

The handful of outside sleepers had still not stirred, but Netya stuck to the shadows near the houses all the same. She hurried back in the direction she had come, not knowing what she was about to do, but unable to break her promise to Layon. She owed him this much. She owed all of them.

Running her hand down her breast, she felt the wooden pendant hanging in its place. The weight of the beads in her hair had become so familiar she

barely even noticed them any more. Even in the dim light of the village fires, she could see the way the skin on the back of her hand had darkened from weeks spent out under the sun, studying plants with Adel or wandering with Fern.

Had she been gone too long? She felt almost like a different person entirely compared to the girl who had lived here a year ago. Even the thought of going to sleep on a straw-padded cot behind walls of timber seemed strange to her.

When she reached her mother's house, she did not pause to knock. She had never knocked before. Out of habit, more than anything, she tugged the doorway drape aside and ducked beneath it without thinking. The comforting smell of leather and woodsmoke and oil assailed her senses, and her moccasins scuffed against the old, near worn-through hide that covered the floor. To the left and right, wooden walls and more drapes separated off the storage and sleeping areas.

Directly ahead of her, a woman with strands of grey in her thick black hair sat beside the glowing hearth. She had dozed off again while darning a pair of leather leggings for one of the hunters. A smile came unbidden to Netya's lips, and she stood there in the darkness for several moments, watching her mother sleep. She remembered fantasising for months about what it would be like to finally get away from this woman and her house. Now that she saw her again, Netya wanted nothing more than to stay.

"Mother," she called gently, trying not to wake the girls she could hear sleeping behind the curtain to her right. She wanted to see her sisters too, but there would be no time to explain anything to them.

Her mother snorted and blinked herself awake, hands tightening around her darning needle as she squinted in the direction of the doorway.

"Mother, it's me," she said again, taking a step forward.

"Who are you?" the older woman replied, drawing back. There was a sharp, accusatory look in her eyes, and Netya found herself hesitating.

"It is me, Netya. Do you not recognise me?"

Her mother shook her head slowly. "My eldest daughter is dead. I do not know who you are."

"Look on my face," Netya said, stepping forward so that the firelight fell upon her features. She crouched down beside her mother. "I am not dead, though it pains me more than anything to have let you think so." She could not let go of her smile, and the tears she had held back for Layon were fast approaching. "Do you see now?"

The look of confusion on her mother's face only made Netya want to throw her arms around her more, but she knew the reserved woman was not one for such outbursts. Netya's mother took her daughter's hands, then ran her fingers up her arms, across the thick wolf fur she wore, touching her braid of beads, her necklace, the contours of her face. But her look of confusion remained, and Netya's happiness became tinged with desperation.

"It is me, Mother," she pleaded. "I came back to tell you I was happy and well. I must go soon, but I will return again, and we will talk of all the things that have happened since I left."

Her mother blinked, and shook her head. "You wear my daughter's face, but you are not her. Your voice is strange to me. These clothes, these trinkets, they are not ours. And those eyes you look on me with are not the eyes of my Netya."

"I have changed much, but I am still me!" Netya clutched her mother's hand. "I love you and my sisters as I always have. When I return, I will prove it to you!"

The look of confusion faded from her mother's face, giving way to anger. "You will stay away from us. They changed you, didn't they? They put their curse into your body and let it eat away at my daughter until only one of their monsters remained." She noticed the spear slung across Netya's back, and her glare turned furious. "The man who wielded that weapon would sooner have driven it through your heart than see you become one of them."

"I am not one of them! The Moon People are not the monsters you think, they are like us, if you knew them you would see!"

Her mother pushed her away, clutching her long bone needle and rising to her feet. "Leave my house! Scurry back into the darkness that birthed you. My daughter is dead, and you, beast—you and all your kind are the ones that killed her! How much more must you take from me?!"

Netya backed away, tears of joy turning to those of despair as they rolled down her cheeks. She had been gone too long. Whatever her mother now believed had been easier for her than clinging on to hope. She could not see her daughter standing before her, only the shell the Moon People had left behind.

A grief greater than any Netya had ever known washed over her, breaking a piece of her heart away and carrying it into the darkness as she struggled in vain to hold on. The pack, Adel, the medicine—they no longer seemed

important. The dream that she might one day return to the life she had known was gone, dashed in an instant like ice against the rocks. She had left, but life had moved on. She had changed, and so had the village. It was her home no longer.

Unable to let go, she struggled to her knees, sobbing out her words like a broken child. "But— but I love y—"

"Leave!" her mother screamed, jabbing the needle toward her. "Leave! Leave my house!"

The words pierced Netya's chest like a knife, leaving the space inside her numb. Only the realisation that her mother's shriek must have awakened half the village forced her to move. She did not want to move. She wanted to curl into a ball and cry, and wait for her mother to realise that she was still her daughter.

Scurrying for the door on deadened feet, she caught a flash of her youngest sister's face staring out at her from behind one of the curtains. She did not even have time to commit it to memory before she had ducked out beneath the drape, leaving her mother's house for the last time.

Layon's cloak had fallen from her shoulders somewhere between the house and the bank. She pulled her headdress back up, clutching the wolf pelt close around her as she huddled in the darkness, barely able to stifle her sobs.

She could hear them. Her mother, her uncle, the voices of a dozen men and women she had once called her own. They were looking for her. The lights of their torches flickered between the dwellings as they walked back and forth. The hafts of spears clacked together as someone passed out weapons. They were searching for one of the Moon People. For a new skull to add to their wall. When they found her, she did not know whether she would be able to muster the strength to run. Was there any point, any more?

A branch cracked close by, and she buried her head deeper in her arms, not wanting to look. A moment later strong arms were dragging her up, shaking her by the shoulders, and she was looking into Layon's eyes.

"You have to go," he hissed. "I do not care if you are one of the Moon People as they say. You will always be Netya to me. Run back to your own kind, but you must go now!"

"Why?" she wept. "My mother... My mother..."

Layon shook her again, then pressed a small woolen bag into her palm. "You cared enough for someone to risk yourself for this medicine. Take it,

and return to whatever life you have. Never think back on this place again."

She realised that her friend was almost on the verge of tears too. She curled her fingers around the bag, feeling the small seeds inside. Adel was still waiting for her.

"I will think back on you, Layon," she whispered, clinging on to him tight. "Make sure my mother is happy for me. Be a good father to your child."

He answered her with a kiss. His warm lips pressed against hers, bringing back all the memories of their night together by the wall. Her first kiss. She remembered the warmth, the happiness, and the touch of other kisses, too. Even if it was only a flicker, it was enough to drive the numbness from Netya's legs.

Without another word, she pulled away, turned, and ran. Somewhere behind her, a voice called out to Layon, but he did not reply. She did not need to look back to know he was watching her go. In her visions, she would always look for him.

She was panting by the time she reached the top of the slope, her aching eyes struggling to keep focus as the first light of dawn crept through the forest leaves. There was little left in Netya, neither physically nor emotionally, but she kept on going until she approached the spot where Vaya had left her. Realising that she still had the pouch of seeds clutched tight in her palm, she stuffed it into her clothing and secured it safely within the small bag she kept tied inside. If Adel could fight the poison for just a few hours longer, she might yet be saved.

What would come after that? Netya did not know. The comforting presence in the back of her mind was gone. All of the things that had brought her hope and joy that very morning had become dull and grey. Something kept her going, and perhaps it would need to continue doing so for many days to come. Perhaps it was the same dull drive that had pushed Adel forward, when all else in her life had been taken from her.

She could hear the sounds of the villagers drawing closer again, but it would not matter once she had Vaya's legs to speed her away. The short walk through the trees felt like the longest in Netya's life, and the angry voices of the people she had once loved hounded her all the way. By the time she reached Vaya's hiding spot, she could barely stand.

The spot was empty. Two lines of wolf tracks stood out in the soft earth, one coming from the plains, and one leading straight back toward them. Vaya

had abandoned her.

The realisation almost brought a hysterical laugh from Netya's lips. It all settled into place in an instant, with a cold clarity that she had been blind to in her haste to save Adel. Without medicine, the den mother would die. Without Vaya's help, Netya could not make the journey back across the plains.

The pack would believe the Sun girl had poisoned Adel, then fled back to her people before anyone could catch her. Vaya could even tell whatever tale she wanted about how she had tracked Netya for hours before losing her in the wilderness.

Perhaps her friends would question it, but they would never know for sure. The evidence would speak for itself. Even if she somehow found her way back now, Adel would still die. She would never again be one of them.

Her last light of hope blinked out, and she knew she was truly alone. A monster to the people who raised her, a murderer to those who had taken her in. Vaya had tricked her, and in one terrible night she had lost everything.

Netya felt for the pendant around her neck, rubbing the smooth wood between trembling fingers, and fell to her knees.

The voices in the distance grew louder.

Death greeted her with a smile, like a patient mother spreading her arms to welcome a wayward daughter home. There had been some days, long ago now, when she would almost have greeted it gladly. But not any more. The girl who had wallowed in such self-pity was a vague memory, just another one of the phantom spirits tugging at her as she drifted deeper into the sea of death, feeling the bony fingers of her ancestors plucking at her, inviting her down into the darkness, where the pain would end and her soul could finally be free.

She did not want to be free. There was too much for her to do still. What was it? What had she left behind? Adel could not remember. Had there been a girl somewhere? Or was she only remembering another shade of herself? And there was someone she hated. Hated with a passion like no other.

The blaze of anger that sprang to life in her chest buoyed her up, quieting the voices of the dead for a moment as she clawed her way through the murky depths. There was a light somewhere nearby. It shone through the fog of her dying mind like sunlight through a tent wall. Where was she? Had she been here before?

Somewhere nearby voices murmured. They sounded familiar, but she could put no faces to them. Her memories were like shadows on water, abstract and forever in motion. Some carried strong feelings along with them. Fear, hatred, panic. Things she would rather forget. One even reminded her of love. The dark figure within almost took shape before her eyes, but she pushed it away before she could be reminded of such bittersweet happiness. It would only hurt her more to remember.

Adel tossed and turned, seeing the light appear, then disappear. Sometimes the shapes around her seemed to be people, but more often than not they felt like ghosts. She was slipping deeper. How had she come to this place? It did not matter any more. This was the land of the dead, and she was trapped here now. Perhaps if she allowed herself to be claimed by the whispering depths, the phantoms would finally fall silent.

The sound of pattering paws echoed through her mind, like a beast scampering down an empty passageway. Through her haze of consciousness, it seemed the crispest, clearest thing she had ever heard. A fox took shape before her, watching the den mother with anxious eyes.

Her brow furrowed, and she struggled to remember. A pinprick of clarity pierced the murky veil.

"I am in the spirit world," she breathed, following after the fox as it hurried away from her. She remembered little else, but she would never forget the fox. She had trained herself for years to recognise it. Every time she came to this place, it was her guide. Her signal to remind herself where she was, and that nothing here was ever as it seemed.

But this was not the spirit world as she knew it. She was dying here, and this time it was no trick. There was something inside her still working its deadly magic. She grappled with her broken thoughts, trying to piece together the memories that would tell her what had happened, but it was like trying to catch smoke on a foggy day.

The fox threatened to disappear into the darkness, yet Adel refused to let it go. She kept the animal in sight, knowing that she might forget again at any moment if she lost her way. She was running, and yet she was not on her feet. The hard ground pressed into her side, and it shifted as she twisted her body back and forth. Something tickled her cheek. She could smell the scent of her furs.

In an instant of understanding, she snatched a handful of her bedding, fingernails digging into her palm as her eyes widened. The firelight danced off the cave wall in front of her. People were speaking nearby. They were her seers.

The clutches of the spirit world dragged her back down, but she clung on to her furs for dear life. If she let go now, she might never escape that dark realm. She refused to give in.

It was no use. The spirit world sucked her down, dulling the cave wall into blackness, turning the strands of fur between her fingers into writhing tendrils. The light was still there. The light of the fire.

Focusing on the one thing she could remember, Adel let go and rolled over, her mind reeling as the world spun around her. She felt that her eyes were spilling from their sockets, her body turning to water as she fell apart. Hands clutched at her, the screeching voices of demons growing loud in her ears. They tried to hold her back, but she kept the last of her consciousness fixed on the light. The white-hot blaze of the fire. It was inches in front of her now.

Without hesitating, Adel thrust her hand into the flames.

Searing pain shot up her arm, drawing a horrendous scream from her lungs

as the smell of burning skin filled the air. Her mind might have been lost, but her body still understood pain. The wolf inside her still understood survival.

The sensation of her flesh blistering shocked Adel back into the physical world. Perspiration rolled down her face. Sounds rang too loudly in her ears, colours bled across her vision more vividly than they should have, but she could make out the cave around her once more. She did not have long. The poison was already pulling her under again.

Nightwood berries.

There was no time to think on how it had happened, but she recognised her symptoms in an instant.

"Lie down, Den Mother, your hand —!" an elderly voice bellowed in her ear like thunder. The seer tried to tug Adel away, but she shoved her aside with a snarl.

The stinging, throbbing pain shooting up her arm was incredible, but she clung on to it, clutching her injured hand to her side as her fingers twitched and trembled unresponsively. She staggered to her feet and pushed past the small crowd that had gathered in her chamber, the world spinning with every step. Her seers tried to pull her back again, and once more she threw them off with all the strength she could muster.

"Leave me, you fools! Get me— Get me..." her thoughts trailed off before she could recall the name of the medicine. It did not matter. She knew what she needed. Relying on instinct and the memory of a task her body had carried out a hundred times before, she made her way to the pouches of herbs, struggling to unfasten the bundles one by one with clumsy fingers. She cried out again as the pain of applying pressure to her burned hand shot back up her arm, but it tightened her focus, giving her precious moments of concentration.

The others had stopped trying to hold her back, but she paid no attention to what they were saying. There was no time for her to do anything but prepare what she needed. The berries were still inside her body, still seeping their poison into her veins.

The contents of pouch after pouch spilled across the cave floor as the world darkened around her. Refusing to give in to panic, she searched on until she found the one containing the precious white crystals she needed. Pouring them out into her palm, she scraped up several small brown seeds she had spilled a moment earlier and added them to the handful. Her mixing bowl was still by the fire, and, if she was fortunate, her seers would have boiled

water by now.

She was running out of time. The salt and seeds rattled in her hand, and her vision swayed and drifted, threatening to detach from her body. The figures around her became shadows again, and old spirits returned to join them.

Adel grit her teeth, fighting through the pain spreading from the heel of her palm as she gripped her knife and ground the ingredients together with the dull flint handle. As the seeds split open their bitter scent made her shudder, her eyes watering as she reached for a bowl someone had left heating in the fire. Half the contents spilled as the hot edges burned her fingers again, but she managed to drag it in front of her with a gasp of exertion.

The cave was gone now. Dark spirits whispered to her, threatening to make her forget the world she knew. Worse than the spirits, the memories returned with fresh clarity. Hope drained from Adel as the bowls slipped from her hands. She looked for her fox again, but it was nowhere to be found.

The dark figure, the one who awoke all of her bittersweet longings, appeared to her once again. If she had never known love, the world might have made a very different person of her. Life had burned Adel, blackening her on the outside, but there was a part of her it had never reached. That part awoke at the memory of the man standing before her in the shadows. For the first time in many years, she allowed the tears in her eyes to fall.

"Stay with me," she croaked, her voice like ash in her throat. She held out a hand to the shadowy figure, but he turned his back on her, melting away again into the land of the dead. Was that where he dwelt now? She would never know.

Collapsing to the ground, Adel heaved out an anguished sob, beating her burned palm against the stone until the pain forced her back to her knees. Another man towered over her now, but this presence evoked no feelings of longing. She glared up at him, not wanting to remember his face. In her whole life, he was the only person she had ever wished dead.

Alpha.

The grey in his beard billowed like smoke. Did his spirit now dwell among the dead too? If it did, she had no desire to join him. Many years ago, she had been afraid of this man. Now, she only hated him.

Father.

She did not wish to believe that her spirit had in any way been born of his own. He had no right to haunt her in death. The apparition smiled down at her. She imagined the pain in her palm spreading, turning to fire, engulfing

him and charring his bones to ash. She willed every dark spirit she knew of to consume him.

Adel's hands tightened around the bowls she held. They were still there. She would not follow this spirit back into the land of the dead. She poured the salt and crushed seeds into the water, swirled the contents together with her burned hand, then lifted the bowl to her lips and swallowed as much as she could.

The purging mixture hit her body within moments. Adel doubled over on the cave floor, retched, and vomited the lingering poison from her stomach. Caspian only managed a few fitful hours of sleep after sunrise. When he returned to the outcrop at dawn, he had been greeted with the news that the den mother was hovering between life and death, poisoned by Netya, who had been missing for hours. He refused to believe it. Had Khelt not insisted on him resting, he would have headed straight back out to search for her, despite his exhaustion. He even fancied he could smell her sweet scent lingering there in his lodge as he tossed and turned, and it tormented him until he could stand it no longer.

Rising from his furs, he fastened his belt and slid his arms into a loose hide jerkin, then strode outside to look in on the den mother. The breaking of any serious news would have awoken him already, but he checked with the others to see if there had been any word of Netya. There was still no sign of her, and none of the hunters sent out to search had returned.

When he made his way to the seers' cave, however, he was relieved to learn that Adel had survived the night. Whether she considered him a friend or not, he was still fond of the den mother, perhaps more than he had realised. The prospect of losing the only two people he felt able to share his innermost thoughts with in one night had been a dreadful one.

The elders minding the antechamber seemed reluctant to share more, but Caspian was used to their stubbornness. Much to their protest, he pushed his way past the drapes and stepped into the inner chamber. He needed to see Adel with his own eyes. He was done with waiting.

Half a dozen seers were clustered around the fire, and in their midst sat a very pale, haggard-looking den mother. Relief rushed through Caspian at the sight of her. She looked terrible, with her long black hair tangled and limp, and a sickly pallor to her skin. Her left hand shook as she sipped from a steaming cup, and her right was clutched tight against her side, bound from palm to elbow with a dressing of plant leaves.

Caspian might have believed she was still on the verge of death, had her blue eyes not darted up to accost him the moment he walked in. Her gaze was as fierce as ever, burning with the life that her body had yet to regain.

The young seer Selo seemed to be tending Adel directly, and she hurried forward to try and usher Caspian back out.

"The den mother is still very sick, she needs rest and quiet."

"If I was going to die I would have done so by now," Adel called, her thin voice still holding a note of command. "Let him come. And the rest of you, leave us in peace for a moment. I am tired of you all fussing over me."

Selo's lips pursed in concern, but she bowed her head and sat back down at the den mother's side as the others dispersed. Caspian stepped forward and took a seat beside the fire, but he stopped short of reaching out to take Adel's hand. Had there been fewer eyes present, he might have.

"Sit still," she said, closing her eyes for a moment and taking a long sip of her tea. "The spirit world still lingers in my head. It is difficult for me to focus."

"Tell me what happened," Caspian urged, trying not to let his concern for Netya overcome him.

"I was poisoned. Whoever did it used enough nightwood berries to kill me. I may have been dead by now had I not prepared the purging medicine I needed for myself."

"We tried to make her take some," Selo said, "but in her spirit trance she would not swallow more than a few drops, and it did no good anyway."

"Then your medicine was not strong enough," Adel snapped. "You should have pried open my jaws and forced it down my throat."

"But the elders thought it best to—"

"Nevermind, it is done now." Adel gestured with her injured hand impatiently, her features contorting with pain at the effort. She looked back to Caspian and lowered her voice. "Selo and the others I have helped to train are loyal, but I question whether some of the elders did all they could to save me."

"Do you suspect it was one of them?" Caspian said, in equally hushed tones.

Adel shook her head. "No. Those who cling to the old ways may not be fond of me, but each and every one of them respects their den mother." She grimaced. "And they all know of deadlier and less obvious poisons than nightwood berries."

"Everyone thinks it was Netya," Selo said.

"That isn't true," Caspian responded in an instant, the conviction in his voice plain to hear. "The pack are letting their fears get the best of them. I know Netya, and she would never do something like this."

"He is right," Adel said. "I do not believe for a moment that she was

responsible."

"She was the only one who visited your chamber. She even brought food," Selo said.

"Anyone who has been in my chamber knows there is another way in from the top of the outcrop."

"Has anyone else been absent since last night?" Caspian asked.

Adel shook her head and gestured to Selo.

"Everyone comes and goes at this time of year," the girl sighed. "Half the pack are away from home right now."

Caspian fixed the den mother with a sincere look. "I need to find her." Already he was envisioning what might happen if someone else tracked Netya down first. The alpha had given instructions for her to be brought back alive, but wolves could be unpredictable when passions were running hot. It was not difficult to imagine an overzealous young hunter exacting some personal vengeance on a traitor before dragging her back home to face the alpha's judgement.

His fists clenched at his side. Caspian was not a violent man, but he could permit his wolf's savage impulses to take control in the name of justice. If any of them harmed Netya, he would make sure they thought twice about doing so again.

Even in her debilitated state, Adel did not miss a beat. "Selo, brew me more tea, will you?" she said, handing the girl her cup. Once they were alone Adel leaned forward, her fingers tightening around Caspian's arm. "The others are searching all over, but you and I know there is only one place Netya would go if she thought the pack had turned against her. Take people you trust. Do not wait to ask the alpha's permission."

"I will want Khelt's help, especially if we are heading toward the territory of the Sun People. He will listen to me."

Adel pressed her lips together. "If you love that girl, you cannot share her with him forever."

Her words struck a tender chord in Caspian's chest, and he was forced to grit his teeth to fight through the unwanted feelings it provoked. "Let us find her safe and well first before worrying over matters of love."

"She was never meant for a man like Khelt."

"Enough of this." He pried her fingers from his arm. "Stay here and regain your strength, Adel. I will find your apprentice for you."

The den mother curled her lip in disappointment, but she did not say

another word as Caspian rose to his feet and hurried out of the seers' cave.

"I am as worried as you," Khelt said, his right heel drumming in agitation against one of the log seats as he sat perched on the edge of his table. "I thought you of all people would approve of me being patient. The hunters will find her."

"You do not sound convinced. She has slipped past them somehow. We need more people looking for her," Caspian replied.

"And if there is still a murderer in the midst of our pack?" Khelt growled, shaking his head. "I need to be here. The alpha's place is with his people at a time like this, not searching for his lost love."

His words triggered another painful rush of emotion in Caspian. How would the pair of them ever resolve this? No matter what happened, someone would end up suffering for it. He shook his head, fighting past the worries. He could not allow himself to be preoccupied with thoughts of love. Right now, Netya's safety was what mattered most.

"This is not the day for you to be a reserved alpha. Adel is recovering. She and Oke can take care of the pack in our absence. I need your speed and strength out on the plains."

"Some part of me still wonders whether this is all just one of the den mother's schemes," Khelt murmured, glaring at the cave floor.

"That is a foolish thought and you know it!"

"Do I?" Khelt turned his angry gaze on his friend. "What makes you so sure you understand the wickedness inside that woman's head? She has tried her hardest to keep Netya away from me, and now the girl may be gone for good! If I find out Adel is responsible..." He trailed off, slamming a fist into the table beside him.

Caspian's heart sank. "Do you really hate her more than you care for Netya?"

Khelt averted his eyes, saying nothing. His jaw was clenched stubbornly, his shoulders tense and unmoving. There was no reasoning with him when he was like this.

"I am going east to look for her," Caspian said. "I cannot waste time arguing over it." He gave Khelt one last chance to respond, but the silence sat heavy on the alpha's lips. True to his word, Caspian wasted no more time attempting to convince him.

As he left, he was almost thankful for his worry over Netya. It prevented

him from dwelling on whether his friend had finally passed a point from which there was no coming back.

Few of the hunters were lacking in eagerness to join the search for Netya, but eagerness was no good to Caspian. He needed level heads around him, those who had experience venturing into the lands of the Sun People. More than that, he needed wolves he could trust with restraint.

"What do you think the alpha will do with her?" he overheard someone say as he hurried through the centre of the camp.

"I know what I'd do. Vaya was right, her kind were never meant to mix with ours."

"I would be more concerned about the den mother when she gets her hands on her," another voice chimed in. "I heard Adel's pack burned those who wronged their seers alive."

Caspian grimaced, resisting the urge to waste time silencing the unsavoury gossip. It did not take him long to gather his group, but their numbers were smaller than he had hoped, especially with Khelt being absent.

Fern had been an obvious choice. She had been just as worried as Caspian ever since her friend went missing, and it took no more than a few words to convince her to come along. If not for his leg, Erech would have been another great help, but even with a wolf to bear him he would only slow them down. Many of the slightly older, more reliable pack members were away with Tal chasing down a herd of aurochs, but a quiet conversation with Hawk persuaded the seasoned hunter to lend his aid as well. He had always spoken respectfully of Netya, and despite having dismissed her from the great hunt, Caspian knew it had been a difficult decision for him to make. In some ways, it seemed as if he wanted to make amends for denying the girl her chance at joining the ranks of the hunters.

To Caspian's surprise, Hawk's mate Essie also insisted that she join them. It had been a long time since she hunted, but years of motherhood had certainly not softened the woman. Much like her male, she was a focused, practical sort, and she had joined the pack on many forays into the Sun People's territory in her youth. She said little about her reasons for joining them, only that the seers had always been kind to her. Whatever debt Essie felt she had to repay, it was her own secret to keep.

The four of them gathered at the base of the outcrop before noon. Little explanation was needed. They all knew what they intended to do, and the

danger they might face. Netya could not have made it all the way back to the village on her own, but the longer they took to find her, the closer she might get.

With a tireless energy lending strength to his strides, Caspian led the way out into the plains, his wolf's soft brown fur rippling in the wind as he searched the air for any trace of Netya's scent. He set a hard pace, but his three companions kept up doggedly. Perhaps they all desired to see Netya safe just as much as him, or perhaps they sensed the passionate urgency driving their leader. He did not care to pretend otherwise. It was difficult for wolves to hide the silent language of their emotions from one another. His actions spoke of more than concerned friendship. The force pushing him forward could have kept him running for days.

It was only later that afternoon, as they slowed their pace to spread out and begin searching, that a fifth wolf caught up with them. Neither of them said a word as Khelt bounded up through the tall grass and settled into place beside Caspian, growling under his breath as he lifted his muzzle and sought out the myriad scents in the air.

It was a bittersweet relief to have the alpha join them. Half of Caspian wanted to embrace his friend in relief, while the other almost wished he had stayed back at the outcrop. He knew he needed Khelt's help. He knew Netya was safer with the alpha out looking for her.

But he also knew that his companion cared strongly for the woman they both loved. Just as strongly as he did.

Careful not to wear themselves out, they made camp before sundown and took time to hunt and rest. Night was the natural time of their wolves, and it would be safer to search under the cover of darkness while they were so close to the Sun People's territory. The edge of the forest was already visible from the top of the small hillock they rested on. After catching a few hours of sleep, they would spread out and start searching back the way they had come.

Caspian's body still burned with energy despite his lack of rest, but he knew exhaustion would dull his senses if he did not force himself to sleep while he had the chance. Fern was impatient to carry on searching as well, but Khelt reminded her of the danger they were in. The Sun People would be eager to take a tired wolf's skull for their wall if given the chance. All of them needed to stay safe and alert.

Caspian was thankful for Hawk's presence. Between the three males, the

practical talk of their plans helped mask the lingering sense of discomfort between him and Khelt. On some instinctive level, they both understood far more than they were willing to give voice to. Neither of them had ever wanted a female to come between them, and yet they had been forced into a situation where concealing their true feelings was no longer possible.

Once their wolves had tracked down a few small critters to satiate their hunger, they slept in shifts until the stars were out and night had blackened the plains. The others allowed Caspian to sleep without standing watch, and despite knowing that he had probably needed the rest most of all, he still could not shake the feeling of guilt at having lain idle for so long while Netya was still out there.

They split up three ways to begin searching. Hawk and Essie headed south, Fern and Khelt north, and Caspian in the middle, where both pairs could quickly come to his aid if he ran into danger. It was a painstaking search, requiring much patience when all his wolf wanted to do was latch on to a scent and chase it down until he found Netya. The running during the day had felt like progress, but now the challenge of patience began.

Forcing himself to push aside his wolf's reckless impulses and focus on its calm cunning, he began combing the plains for fresh scents. His ears pricked up as he tasted the smell of the Sun People on the wind, but his heart soon sank when he realised it did not carry Netya's unique flavour. The scents on the breeze were just traces of hunting parties who had passed through here recently, and he ignored them as soon as he realised what they were.

As the night wore on, however, he began to question what he was smelling. The scents were fresh, and they carried the distinction of many different bodies. What was more, they seemed to have been moving in a meandering, searching pattern, just like him. How often did the Sun People venture into the plains to hunt, anyway? The more he thought on it, the more it began to concern him, not least due to the freshness of the trail indicating that they were still out here somewhere. They would know better than to light a fire that would betray their position to the beasts roaming the plains (beasts like him, Caspian reflected grimly), and that could mean stumbling upon them at any moment if he was not careful. He would have to keep track of the scents to make sure.

His agitation flared up again every time he stumbled over the Sun People's trail. Perhaps it was only the instincts of his wolf, but he felt in competition somehow with their hunting party. Two opposed hunters could not share the

same territory. Despite his best efforts, he was unable to shake their scent. They had been everywhere, doubling back on themselves and combing every inch of the plains, searching every tangle of undergrowth and every spur of rock that broke the flat landscape. Their paths even extended all the way to the craggier land in the south close to the river, where Hawk and Essie were searching.

Dawn had almost crossed the horizon by the time Caspian caught sight of a small wisp of white fur caught on a blade of grass. The Sun People's trail was so easy to follow that he could have tracked it without relying on his nose any more, but the little white wisp stirring in the breeze made him pause. It reminded him of a white wolf, and he doubted there were many of those nearby.

Without disturbing the piece of fur, he brought his muzzle close and sniffed. Instantly, Netya's warm scent flooded through him, bringing back so many fond memories. He closed his eyes, almost forgetting where he was for a moment. He smelled the seers' cave, herbal tea, smoke, grass, sweet meadow plants, and that fragrant core that was distinctly Netya, tinged with the gentle flavour of the Sun People. Latching on to it, he followed his muzzle until, with growing unease, he realised that Netya's trail was now indistinguishable from that of the phantom hunting party. It was hard to tell whether she had been travelling with them or not, but it was a bad omen.

Lifting his muzzle to the sky, he let out a low howl. The Sun People would hear it, wherever they were, but he could not worry about that now. After a painstaking wait, he finally caught sight of Hawk and Essie bounding through the long grass from the south, and Khelt and Fern appeared shortly after, just as day was breaking.

Caspian told them what he had found. Hawk and Essie recounted a similar tale, having tracked a second band of the Sun People heading west near the river. They too seemed to have been searching for something.

"It cannot be Netya they were looking for," Fern said. "She could not have made it back to the village already, could she?"

"Perhaps they were looking for something else and stumbled across her," Hawk replied. "Or perhaps they have seers of their own who foresaw her return. Either way, they are out here, and so is she."

"If she is with them, we must try and talk," Caspian said, looking to Khelt. "She would not want blood to be spilled on her account."

"Will it do any good if she is?" Khelt grunted. "Perhaps she is glad to be

back with her own kind. When has their tribe ever proven willing to talk?"

"Perhaps now, if Netya is with them. What other choice do we have? They are greater in number than us."

Khelt ran a hand over his chin in agitation. Even out here, he was still alpha, and it was his word they waited on. "Try and find Netya. The three of you follow this trail. Fern and I will run ahead and try to overtake the Sun People. We must find out where all of them are, and whether Netya is with them, before we do anything."

"Take care," Caspian said, clapping a hand on his friend's arm. "Call for us if you run into trouble."

Khelt's frown softened, and after a moment he gripped Caspian's wrist and gave him a faint smile. "You too, brother."

Fern had already taken the shape of her wolf and run ahead by the time Khelt stepped away. A silent moment of understanding passed between the alpha and his friend as their eyes met.

Whatever we have to settle will be settled later, it said.

Caspian let out a long breath as he watched them go, before turning back to Hawk and Essie. "Let us hurry. If the Sun People made camp out here last night, they may not yet have risen."

It was not long before Netya's trail veered off to the south, back in the direction of the river. They made their way forward cautiously, ever aware that the increasingly uneven land provided many spots in which their enemies might linger unseen. As the ground softened, the tracks of the Sun People grew more clear. They had been running. Fleeing something, or chasing down their quarry?

Caspian almost pierced his paw on the broken fragments of a discarded stone axe, slipping on the rocks near the river as he struggled to keep track of Netya's scent through the shallows. It became difficult to follow her path as the land rose up in rocky spurs around them, the churning noise of the river muffling their sensitive ears as the watercourse widened and rumbled its way through the rough terrain.

The three of them were forced to split up, combing different areas of the bank so as not to lose any of the disparate trails they were following. The scents were stronger than before, but still several hours old. Caspian did not expect to stumble across anyone just yet.

Unfortunately, his instincts proved to be wrong. A sky white with clouds

cast its stark light through the leaves as he prowled away from the river, heading down a slope into a thinly wooded area, where shrubs and trees encircled a number of clearings. The foliage masked the strong scents lingering in the air. Caspian did not realise anyone else was nearby until a young man pushed his way through the bushes in front of him, and froze. His eyes widened with fear at the sight of the huge wolf standing a few yards away, fingers tightening around the shaft of the spear he held.

Caspian's quick eyes registered everything that was about to happen within an instant, and his choices flashed through his mind faster than he could weigh them. Before the boy opened his mouth to yell, Caspian left his wolf behind him and rose up on two legs, reaching out with open palms.

"Wait!" he said in the language of the Sun People. "We are not here to fight ___"

He got no further before the young man's spear pierced his side, and pain stole his breath away.

Netya ran. She did not know why, but she ran anyway. It seemed all the world had turned against her. Her mother, her village, her pack—even fate itself. What a cruel trick had been played upon her, for her last ray of hope to have been snatched away just as she was beginning to overcome despair. There was nothing for her now. The medicine in her pouch was useless. Adel would be dead long before Netya could reach her.

As she fled across the plains that first morning, her legs refused to keep her up for more than a few dozen paces at a time. She stumbled and tripped, and each time she fell she wondered whether it was worth getting back up. Though she did not realise it at the time, it was likely this that saved her life. Her first instinct had been to dash across open ground, trying to outpace the hunters of her village until... She did not know what. All she knew was that some insolent spark of life still clung to her soul.

Had she remained on her feet, the hunting party would have caught sight of her within the first hour after dawn. With exhaustion crushing the strength from her body one pace at a time, it was not long before she collapsed in the tall grass and began crawling. It was too difficult to get back on her feet. Too pointless. The villagers would be upon her soon, and then it would all be over. She must have crawled numbly for another hour before she felt the ground growing damp beneath her palms, and realised she had meandered all the way to the bank of the river.

Netya's waterskin still hung against her chest, but she had not thought to drink from it for hours. Tears and exertion had drained the moisture from her body, and it was only the dampness of the river that kicked her thoughts back into motion. Struggling with the wooden stopper, she finally managed to bring the waterskin to her lips, spilling half its contents on the ground before swallowing the rest greedily.

She lay there for several moments, waiting for the inevitable to come, before realising that the voices of the hunters had grown distant. In fact, the longer she listened, the quieter they became. Her features contorted in frustration. Why were they taking so long to find her? Why could it not be over?

After a short time had passed, she unslung her spear from her back and

used it to lever herself back to her feet. Peering over the long grass, she made out two dark groups of bodies in the distance, both moving away from her, headed deeper into the plains. At first she was confused, until a dim connection registered in the back of her mind, and she remembered Vaya's pawprints in the dirt.

She ran a hand across her face, once again wondering whether she should laugh or cry. Vaya had left her at the mercy of the Sun People, but in her haste to leave she had not bothered to be inconspicuous. The villagers were looking for a wolf, not a person, and Vaya had left much clearer tracks than Netya.

Vaya.

The name burned on Netya's tongue like a metal brand. She knew why she had not given up now. The huntress had taken everything from her. Could it have been Vaya that poisoned Adel too? In that moment, Netya was willing to believe her adversary capable of anything. There was no life for her back with her own kind, and within a few hours the Moon People would think her a murderer. The wilderness held nothing but loneliness and despair as she waited for nature to claim her. Perhaps she could try to find the North People, but she had not the first idea where their village lay. She might wander for months without stumbling across it, if she could even survive that long by herself.

She had nothing. Nothing but the urge to take vengeance on the one who had done this to her. It was a wicked feeling, one that was such a small part of Netya that she barely even recognised it. But when everything else she cared for had drained away to near insignificance, it glinted with dark lustre.

It seemed an impossible task to find her way back to the outcrop alone, and to evade the hunting parties in the process, but she had felt the same way the last time Vaya's actions left her alone and helpless in the valley. Revenge did not count for much, but it was a reason to keep going. Small hopes still lingered in the bottom of Netya's heart, but they were stray threads in a tangle of darkness.

The sun rose higher, and she drifted in and out of consciousness until the voices of the hunters returned. Rubbing her eyes, she pulled herself up again and squinted through the grass. One of the groups had disappeared into the distance, but the other had doubled back and turned south, making directly for the river. Had they found her trail? Glancing back the way she had come, she saw the grass had been crushed and bent where she crawled through it. If

they were not tracking her yet, they would be soon.

Netya kept her body low and her spear horizontal at her side. Creeping across the muddy ground to the edge of the river, she splashed a handful of cool water into her face, then held her waterskin below the surface until it was full. It helped to clear the hot, hazy fog of bleakness from her mind a little, but she was still exhausted. The only advantage she had was her ability to hide. If she could remain ahead of the hunters, perhaps she could lose them farther out on the plains.

Realising that she had left several clear footprints of her own in the mud near the riverbank, she waded through the shallows until she found a rocky area that would conceal her tracks. Her moccasins were soaked through, and the cloudy summer sky withheld its warmth, but she kept on going. Just as she crawled out of the water and hurried back into the grass she heard the sound of a splash behind her, followed by raised voices. The hunters had found her footprints already.

That day felt like the longest in Netya's life. The hours soon became a blur, fear and exhaustion bleeding together with the pain of her aching limbs to make every moment a trial unlike anything she had ever faced. There were times when she ran, fearing the hunters would be upon her at any moment. Then she would slow down, creeping as silently as a shadow through the undergrowth, afraid that the slightest noise would give her away. Every time she had to abandon the long grass and cross open ground her heart pounded in her ears, expecting to hear a cry of alarm go up behind her at any moment, or to feel a javelin pierce her vulnerable back.

She might have been less conspicuous without the white wolf's pelt wrapping her body, but the warmth of the fur was one of the few comforts she had against the dampness seeping into her clothes and the chill of the clammy breeze. More than that, her wolf might be the only thing protecting her spirit from giving in to hopelessness. She could not abandon him out here. He was the only friend she had left.

Netya's flight led her deeper into the plains, but her path had no real direction or purpose to it. Every moment was occupied searching for a new hiding place, hopping from one cranny in the exposed landscape to the next. A small hill, a swathe of long grass, a patch of brambles. No matter how far she went, the hunters never seemed to give up. They were always there, always hounding her. The only respite she had came when they momentarily

lost her trail and were forced to start searching, but they would always pick it up again before long. They were experienced hunters, and she was just a girl.

Netya closed her eyes and clutched her spear, huddling between a pair of boulders as she summoned up the courage to make another run across open ground.

I am a seer. I joined the great hunt. I am not helpless.

She forced her aching legs to move, making for a screen of bushes ahead of her. She almost turned her ankle as the rocky ground opened up into a pothole beneath her, and she collapsed into the foliage with an audible crash. Branches caught in her hair and tugged at her fur pelt, spinning her around and sending her head over heels as she toppled backwards through the undergrowth. Her back hit the ground hard, draining another precious reserve of her dwindling energy with a jolt. She only lay there for a moment before making herself get back up, not bothering to brush the leaves from her hair.

She had ended up close to the river again. The colour of the sky told her it was near evening, and she could not go another night without rest. After pausing for a moment to listen, she was relieved to hear only the sound of trickling water nearby. The land here was rough and overgrown, and spurs of rock rose out of the ground to loom over her. If she was to find a hiding place, it would have to be here.

The hunters seemed to have lost her for the time being, but she knew it was only a matter of time before they stumbled across her trail once more. There were trees nearby, but none of them tall or sturdy enough to climb. The bushes might conceal her, but for how long?

Netya made her way between two rocky monoliths and found herself at the bank of the river again. A carpet of stone and shale stretched between her and the edge of the water. She splashed her way through the shallow pools between the rocks until she was close enough to refill her waterskin from the rushing current. The tranquil waters that ran past her village gave way to a frothing stretch of rapids here, and any hope she had entertained over the past hours of crossing the river was dashed when she saw how wide and treacherous the watercourse had become.

Her hunger, as well, was a concern that grew larger by the moment. By midday she had noticed her hands trembling, and even keeping hold of her spear had grown difficult. If she did not eat something soon, her lack of energy might catch up with her before the hunters did. The trees she had glimpsed nearby were a fruit-bearing kind, but their branches had been bare.

Still, there might be others in the area that were in bloom, and foraging was her only hope at that moment. The thought of keeping her weary eyes focused on the river long enough to spot a fish in the shallows, let alone to jab her spear with the speed and accuracy necessary to catch it, seemed as impossible a feat as kindling the fire necessary to cook such a prize.

Keeping close to the river where her feet could leave no tracks on the rocks, Netya crept up the few slopes that were gentle enough for her to climb. One commanded so broad a view of the plains that she was able to make out both hunting parties from its summit. She lay on her belly between the weeds, watching them anxiously. The first group was still heading into the distance, but the one tracking her was not far from stumbling into the overgrown area that had led her to the riverbank. Farther in the distance still, another collection of dark dots moved across the horizon, heading east. A third hunting party, or just a group of animals?

Snapping herself out of her drowsy observations, Netya left the glorious view behind her and shuffled back down the slope. Sundown was approaching fast, and she was beginning to despair of happening across food or safety before night made it impossible to find either.

A short distance down the bank she caught sight of more trees, but the closer she drew the more hopeless her chances of reaching them became. A small patch of green spread across the top of an outcrop jutting up at the edge of the river. An impossibly steep overhang overlooked the plains on one side, while the other had crumbled away into the churning water. The approach from the river side looked to be the only way up, but as the ground eroded away it revealed a despairingly familiar stretch of shale, steep and slippery, and likely to send anyone attempting to climb it tumbling into the sharp rocks and rushing water below.

Netya looked up and down the river in despair. The sun was disappearing beyond the horizon. In a vain attempt to brave the slope, she dug the shaft of her spear into the ground, feeling soft chunks of shale break off around it as she struggled to force it in and gain purchase.

Much to her surprise, it worked. She tried to take a few steps forward with the aid of her spear, but she did not get far before realising she would need to tug it free and drive it in farther up the slope to make any more progress. The ground was still too uneven to keep her footing, and she dared not risk the climb yet.

Slinging her spear across her back, Netya gave one last look to her

surroundings, before hurrying back the way she had come. There was no time left to explore further, but she had seen her chance, and it was all she had. Retracing her steps to the spot between the monoliths, she began searching the expanse of scattered stones in the shallows for what she needed. It was not difficult to find a hard, round stone that had been polished smooth by the water. A serviceable hammerstone for knapping. Tracking down a piece of rock she could work with proved more difficult, but her time with Erech and the craftspeople had taught her to identify which stones could be worked into tools.

There was no flint or chert, and with the light dwindling she could not afford to search for long, so she settled for a chunk of dark basalt instead. It took several strikes for her to split a fragment off, and each ringing impact of the hammerstone made her wince. The reverberations running up her trembling arm almost made her drop the improvised tool, but within a few more strikes she had produced a flat face to work with. Squinting down through blurry eyes, she turned the piece of basalt on her knee and found a natural edge from which she could drive off a large flake. It would not make for an elegant tool, but it might be enough for her purposes.

A few more strikes detached a broad piece of rock and several smaller fragments, but the piece she had hoped to use shattered to almost half its original breadth as it came off. Netya picked up the largest remaining flake and hefted it in her hand. There was a blunt edge for her to grip on one side, and a partially sharp blade on the other. It was brittle and worthless by the standards of any craftsman, but she hoped it would be enough for her purposes.

Running back to the trees, she picked out two branches roughly the diameter of her spear, broad enough to grip and sturdy enough not to bend too much. She struggled to focus the last of her energy into her limp muscles, swinging the crude hand axe into the base of the first branch until she was able to snap it off at the trunk, before hacking away at the small tether of bark that remained. The sharp edge of her axe broke off before she was done with the second branch, but she managed to work it loose and trim off the twigs with what she had left. Without a proper blade for whittling there was only so much she could do to shape the ends of her branches, but she managed to scrape them down until they were pointed enough to be driven into the earth.

She wiped the sweat from her brow and stumbled back through the shallows to the edge of the river, pondering whether to keep her blunted axe for a moment, before tossing it aside to shatter on the rocks.

By the time she got back to the shale slope the light had faded almost entirely. She hoped the hunters had made camp for the night, but there was no way to be sure. If they were fuelled by the desire to bring down one of their enemies —and to free their poor Netya from the curse they believed she bore—they might not rest until dawn.

Taking a branch in each hand, she began to make her way up the slope. The fragmenting shale was buried in a bank of clay and mud, making for several secure spots into which she could drive the pointed ends of her improvised climbing sticks. One step after another, she fought her way up the incline. Every time the covering of stone fragments went out from beneath her feet she clung on to the branches for dear life, wobbling and skidding until her moccasins found purchase again. If she could make it to the top of the small outcrop, the hunters would be unlikely to find her that night. Whether they redoubled their efforts and scaled her hiding place the following morning, however, was another matter.

With one of her branches already cracking near the base, Netya finally collapsed at the top of the slope, throwing herself down on the soft grass that greeted her. After catching her breath for a few moments, she picked herself up and examined her hiding place in more detail. It was exposed, but if she kept away from the edges nobody was likely to see her. A spurt of undergrowth near the middle was the only shelter she had, and without a fire it was likely to be a cold night.

Upon closer inspection, Netya was relieved to find a few clusters of partially ripe berries hanging from the half dozen trees atop the outcrop. Despite their bitterness, she ate as many as she could before washing them down with a drink from her waterskin. More berries lingered higher in the branches, but she was too tired to try and climb up to get them. The next morning she would forage all she could before continuing on with her journey. She prayed to the spirits for the hunters to have given up by then.

Despite the bleakness of her situation, for the first time since daybreak she began to feel a little safer. It was strange, she thought to herself, as she untied her damp moccasins, how in the darkest of times the smallest things became so special. The warmth and comfort of her wolf pelt was not the gentle embrace of a mother, but, as the wind picked up, it felt almost as good.

Burrowing in between the bushes at the base of two trees, Netya made as comfortable of a space as she could manage for herself, then huddled up to

sleep. She tried not to think of anything. Any place her thoughts ventured would only bring pain. The chase had left her no room to focus on anything but her own survival, and as she huddled there in the growing dark, she almost wished she was still running. When she remembered that Adel was likely dead by now, she began to cry.

All the faces of her friends returned to her. She clutched her wolf pelt, imagining it was Fern. The tree trunks behind her were Khelt's strong body. The whispering of the wind was Caspian's breath on her cheek. It did not matter that many of the Moon People had been wary, even openly hostile to her. The ones that welcomed her had made her feel like she belonged. Though she had not been born to them, the pack had become a second family to her.

Thankfully it did not take long before exhaustion saved Netya from her misery. As her mind fogged, there was only one person she wished was there to comfort her. The one who was always calm, always understanding. Whose presence made her feel like nothing in the world could harm her, because he would always know what to do. He understood the world, and he understood her.

It was only now, when it was already too late, that her heart had the courage to be honest with her.

Netya jolted awake, her hands flying to the shaft of her spear as a cry of alarm split the air. She clawed her way out of the bushes in a panic, remembering the hunters, before more voices echoed the first. The sun had risen, but the top of the small outcrop was still empty. They had not found her while she slept.

Her arms shaking, she crawled to the edge overlooking the plains and peered down. The voices had come from the trees below. Something was happening, but she could not tell what. A wolf howled, and a moment later two brown-furred bodies streaked out into the open, coming from the direction of the river, before diving through a screen of bushes and vanishing again.

Netya's heart leaped. They had been too large and distinct to be wild animals. Resisting the urge to call out, she stared wide-eyed at the area of trees and foliage beneath her, trying to wrap her thoughts around what was happening. A savage warning bark sounded a moment later, followed by more howling that sent every bird in the vicinity fluttering from its perch. She caught a glimpse of several people running between the trees. By the look of them, they were the hunters that had been chasing her, and they were headed straight for the wolves.

Fear should have kept Netya safely out of harm's way. She should have waited, weighed what was happening, or maybe even taken advantage of the commotion to slip away while the hunters were preoccupied. But her only concern in that moment was for the lives of the people down below. What if those wolves, or those hunters, were people she cared for? Perhaps it was only Netya's hopeless disregard for herself that drove her, but she did not want to be responsible for any more deaths that day.

The sound of fighting reached her ears as she tugged on her moccasins and grabbed her climbing sticks from where she had dropped them. There was no time to make the descent back down the slope carefully. A scream echoed off the rocks, and Netya's blood ran cold when a sickly gurgling sound cut it short.

Ignoring the path she had taken to climb up, she dropped the pointed branches and threw her legs over the opposite side of the outcrop, not daring

to think about what might happen if she took a bad fall. The drop was not far enough to kill a person, but it was still uncomfortably long. Clinging on by her fingertips until the soft earth beneath them crumbled, she lowered herself as far as she could, then half-fell, half-slid the rest of the way.

Her body reverberated as she hit the ground, but there was no explosion of pain to signal the breaking of any bones. The bushes crashed nearby, bloodthirsty growls and the cries of panicked voices still filling the air. Netya clambered to her feet, slinging her spear off her back as she broke into a run, making directly for the sounds of battle. Her feet tripped down the slope. She saw blood on the grass. More spatters of red dripped from the leaves of the bushes.

One of the hunters burst out from the undergrowth, staring at her with wild eyes as he brandished the broken shaft of a spear. He barely paused to register the girl standing in front of him before dashing in the opposite direction, dropping his useless weapon behind him as he went.

All of a sudden, the air fell quiet. Netya held still, the point of her spear raised at the bloody bushes. Just like that, it seemed to have ended as quickly as it had begun. She crept forward, straining her ears to listen, expecting someone else to burst out at any moment. But as the silence continued, urgency overcame caution. She dreaded what she might see when she stepped through the bushes, but there was no avoiding it now. Pushing the twigs aside, she edged through into the clearing beyond.

Netya thought she had known death. The deaths of elders, the death of her father, and the deaths of those others who had fallen victim to the Moon People over the years. She understood it, but she had never seen it with her own eyes. She had never been forced to see the still body of someone who had been so strong and full of life moments before. She was not prepared for what greeted her in the clearing.

Her legs moved automatically, only because she dared not stop to take in the stark truth of what she was seeing. Up close, she recognised the two wolves she had seen dashing from the river. Hawk's body lay lifeless atop Essie's. He had been standing over her, protecting his mate from the points of the spears that pierced their bodies. Essie's eyes were closed, but Hawk's stared blankly across the ground in front of him, his teeth still bared and dripping with blood. The air was thick with the smell of it.

Still trying to come to terms with what she was seeing, Netya's gaze drifted to the two dead men sprawled on their backs a short distance away. The first

she did not recognise. Either he was new to the village, or he had been a traveller passing through when the hunters set out.

The second man was her uncle.

She let go of her spear, the weapon falling from her hand as she collapsed to her knees. Seeing a face she had known since childhood was the hammerblow that drove the strength from her body. He was too old to have been hunting. Perhaps he felt responsible for tracking her down himself. His body was still warm. The blood on Hawk's fangs had lingered there when he tore out her uncle's throat.

An angry sob burst from Netya's chest as she curled her fingernails into her palm and beat it against the ground. Why had this happened? Why did they have to fight? Why would anyone do this to another person?

"Why?!" she cried, tearing up a handful of grass in frustration, before burying her face in her palms. *Was this all my doing?* After everything she had been through, the bloody scene was more than Netya could bear. So much death and misery, and for what? Hawk and Essie's daughter would be waiting for them to return. Netya's mother and sisters would be anxious for her uncle's safety. Would the third man's loved ones ever know what became of him?

The desire for revenge had kept her going, but the world had finally beaten her. She did not know how she could make the journey across the plains after this. So lost was she in her misery that she did even look up when she heard someone approaching from behind. A familiar hand clasped her shoulder.

"Netya," Caspian said softly, before collapsing to his knees alongside her.

Like shelter in a storm, he was there. Netya threw herself into his arms, clinging on so tight it hurt. She buried her face in his neck, nuzzling into his warmth, seeking out the refuge only he could bring. She clutched at his clothing, felt the brush of his stubble against her ear. The stickiness of his blood between her fingers.

Pulling back in shock, she saw that he was pale. He was clutching one half of his jerkin to his side. Blood seeped out from beneath his hand, while yet more spilled from gashes in his arm and thigh.

"Not you," she cried, clutching at his clothing in desperation.

Caspian breathed heavily, his eyes full of sadness, but when he looked at her his gaze had the same calming effect it always did.

"Enough people have already died today," he said. "We came out here to find you."

"I wish you had not." Netya sniffed, easing his hand aside to examine the wound. It looked deep and painful. "This was not worth it. Not for my sake."

"You did not make this happen," Caspian said. He was trying to reassure her, she could tell, but despite his best attempts she could still hear the emotion in his voice. He was feeling the deaths of Hawk and Essie even more keenly than the pain of his wounds. "I tried to stop this before it happened. They did not even try to listen. None of them." He closed his eyes, squeezing Netya's hand tight with shaking fingers. "Perhaps Adel was right. It is pointless."

"Is she..?"

Caspian shook his head. "She lives. The poison was not enough to best her."

Netya would not have thought herself capable of relief in that moment, but she felt it all the same. An aching hollow in her chest closed up a little, and she silently thanked the spirits for not taking away her mentor as well. Caspian embraced her again, and the two of them clung together in silence amidst the bloody scene. With their eyes closed, it was almost possible to remember the times they had embraced one another before this bloody day.

Netya did not know how long they knelt there before Khelt arrived. When she opened her eyes, she saw his wolf standing there at the edge of the small clearing, his gaze fixed on his friend and his concubine as they held each other. Something about his expression made her tighten her grip on Caspian's shoulder for a moment. As soon as Khelt noticed her looking, he turned away.

Leaving his wolf behind him, the alpha walked to the spot where Hawk and Essie lay. He knelt beside them, placing a hand on the old hunter's flank, and bowed his head in sorrow. The three of them did not speak for a long time, each needing room for their own emotions to breath.

Fern caught up shortly after, and Netya finally released Caspian to greet her friend with more hugs and tears. Rather than suffering in silence, Fern kept her eyes averted from the bloody scene, recounting in a hurry everything that had happened over the past few days. Sensing her friend's attempts to distract herself, Netya went with her to search for any plants they might use to treat Caspian's wounds, leaving the male propped up against a tree after he insisted his injuries were not as serious as they looked.

It helped her to keep busy, to focus on something she could do to help the

situation rather than wallowing in grief. She was still afraid for Caspian. Afraid the hunters would return. Afraid of what might await her back at the outcrop. But at least she was no longer without hope. Adel was still alive, and her friends had come looking for her. The guilt of knowing that her salvation had been bought with the lives of Hawk and Essie weighed heavily upon her, but with Caspian injured and Fern distraught, there were more important people to focus on than herself at that moment.

It did not take Netya long to identify a plant whose leaves could be used as a dressing to ward off infection, and after gathering up as many as they could find, along with some long blades of grass to help bind them in place, they returned to the clearing. Caspian was still pale, but the bleeding of his wounds had slowed down. Khelt had moved the bodies aside and covered them with branches. Before Netya knelt down to tend Caspian, the alpha stopped her and handed over a small leather pouch. She recognised it before he even said a word.

"The older man was carrying it. It may have what you need."

Her eyes became dewy again as she undid the small wooden toggle and peered inside. Her uncle had always carried a small collection of practical tools with him wherever he went. A knife, a fire-making stone from which sparks could be struck, several pieces of dried meat, some rough yarn, and a length of animal sinew with a sharp needle.

"That man," Netya said thinly, clearing her throat before Khelt turned away. "He was my uncle."

Khelt nodded, his expression as sombre as his voice. "I am sorry."

"Among my people, he was like their alpha."

He paused, his jaw tightening. "Thank you for telling me this. Tend to Caspian now." Khelt stepped away and disappeared between the bushes, leaving the three of them alone. Netya did not know whether to be concerned or reassured by his stoic attitude, but there was little space left in her heart to worry over it.

Kneeling down, she instructed Fern to twist the grass they had collected and the yarn from her uncle's pouch into bindings, before taking the needle and sinew to stitch Caspian's gashes closed. She had only ever watched the other seers perform the task before, but she swallowed her discomfort, washing the wounds out with the remaining contents of her waterskin in preparation for what was to follow. She was surprised to find that her hands remained steady once she had begun, and she tried to make the stitches as

quick and painless as possible. Caspian did not utter a sound of protest, but she felt his body tense in discomfort several times. She placed a soothing hand on his chest in between stitches, drawing as much comfort from his presence as she hoped he did from hers. The throb of his heartbeat was strong and steady. He was not going to allow himself to slip away from her.

"Why did you run away?" Fern asked eventually.

"We can talk of this later," Caspian murmured. "There will be a better time for it than now."

"I wanted to get a medicine from my people that could save Adel. I was afraid to linger while the others believed me responsible for what happened. I was hasty and foolish."

"You could not have known the den mother would recover," Fern said gently, squeezing her friend's shoulder. "I think you acted very bravely."

"I thought I could make it back in time if I had a wolf to speed me across the plains," Netya continued, pausing between stitches as her fingers tightened around the needle. "But I trusted the wrong one. Vaya agreed to help me, and I was abandoned by her as soon as we reached the village." A moment of silence followed, before Netya added, "I believe she poisoned Adel."

"Vaya would never dare," Fern gasped.

"She might," Caspian said, "if she believed the blame would fall on someone she disliked." He winced as the next stitch pierced his side. "The question is whether she has the cunning for such a scheme."

"My people thought I had become one of you," Netya said. "Vaya left me at their mercy."

"The alpha must act against her this time," Fern whispered. "She has gone too far."

Caspian grimaced. "I fear it will once again be Netya's word against hers. But that is not what we should be dwelling on right now." He gestured to where Hawk and Essie's bodies lay, a short distance from the others.

Khelt reappeared from the bushes with several dry branches under one arm, then began snapping them roughly into pieces. He built the wood in a stack near the centre of the clearing, then disappeared to collect more.

"Hawk and Essie need a pyre," Caspian said. "We cannot leave them for the Sun People to claim as trophies."

"What if the hunters return?" Netya said.

"They did not look like they planned on returning when I saw them flee,"

Fern said. "But I will find somewhere nearby to keep watch."

Caspian nodded. "Help Khelt collect wood once you are done with me. We must send our brother and sister to join the spirits in the custom they deserve."

Netya finished her stitching, tying the sinew in place as best as she remembered, then made poultices from the leaves she had gathered with Fern. Once she had bound two of them in place around Caspian's leg and arm, she left him to clutch the third dressing against his side. He leant back against the tree and closed his eyes, giving his resilient body the time it needed to knit itself back together. Netya was thankful he was one of the Moon People. She would not have felt nearly so confident about a man of her own kind recovering from such wounds.

She placed a kiss on Caspian's forehead, then made her way back to the river to refill her waterskin and search for wood. Fern had run back to the open plains to keep watch, and Khelt was dealing with his grief alone as he busied himself with building the pyre. Poor Khelt. He could not share his sorrow as openly as Caspian had. It was not in his nature.

Of all the things Netya had come to realise about the alpha, first and foremost was that his status made him different from other men. Perhaps there had been a time when he was not like this, but ever since their visit to the cave of alphas it had slowly become clear how significant Khelt's duty was to him. Even if deep down he desired to share his innermost feelings with her, he had trained himself to keep such things hidden. An alpha could show no weakness, and he seemed incapable of breaking the barrier he had built to restrain his heart.

Netya respected him for the burden he bore, and yet she could not help but feel sorry for him. When the alpha saw Caspian embracing her, had he been resentful of the bond they shared?

She hoped he understood.

It took all morning to build the pyre, but there was no sign of either hunting party returning while they lingered. The fire needed to be large and burn hot, and Netya was exhausted by the time she and Khelt had hauled enough suitable wood back to the clearing. The alpha stacked the driest logs in a sturdy lattice, before surrounding it with the greener ones. They built up the pyre until it was large enough to burn for many hours, then called Fern back to say farewell to their fallen brethren.

As Khelt bore Hawk and Essie's bodies to the pyre, Netya knelt beside her uncle and placed his leather pouch back on his chest, looking upon the old man's face one last time. The pair of them had never been intimately close, but she understood now that he had always been a fair and well-intentioned leader. He had never given a lecture when it was not needed, never administered a punishment that had not been earned. He had always been a part of Netya's life, and now, much like everything from the village she had grown up in, he was lost to her.

She said goodbye to more than just the man lying before her as she wiped the blood from his face and arranged his clothing to cover the horrendous wound in his neck. The pyre's smoke would call the hunters back to find the two remaining bodies, and they would be sent along the river on rafts of flowers in the tradition of her people.

There would be many more tears for her to shed over what she had lost in the past two days. Months, years from now, her heart would still ache with the memories. There would be times when she would fall asleep crying, or wake up dreaming of the embrace of her mother, or long to know what fine young women her sisters had grown into. She did not need the visions of a seer to realise these things.

She wept only a little, but her eyes were already sore. All she wanted now was to go home. Not the home she had been born to, but a home all the same. Even if Caspian, Fern, and Khelt were the only ones who still welcomed her, she longed to return. Her body and soul felt drained of all they were able to give.

Khelt used her uncle's knife and kindling stone to drive sparks into the tinder at the base of the pyre, then stepped back with the others to watch as it took flame. Netya stood between Fern and Caspian, supporting him with one arm as they watched the flames grow and curl around the bodies of the two wolves. She remembered Hawk's strength and leadership. Essie's love for their daughter. They had been good people, undeserving of this fate. Now their souls would dance together in the spirit world.

When the greener branches began to catch, a thick plume of smoke rose from the clearing. If it did not call the hunters back within the next few hours, the glow of the flames would once night fell. They remained at the edge of the clearing for a short while longer, before Khelt turned and led them away in silence.

They made a sombre procession back to the edge of the river to drink,

before returning to the open plains. Despite Netya's concern, Caspian insisted he was well enough to travel. He could recover properly once they were safe within their own territory, he said. With Netya riding upon Fern's back and Caspian upon Khelt's, the weary group set out back in the direction of the outcrop.

As Netya watched the edge of the forest disappearing behind them, she knew her life as one of the Sun People had come to an end.

Reunion

Despite being weary, Khelt and Fern ran all afternoon and into the evening. It seemed that none of them wanted to spend another night out in the wilderness, and despite Netya's best efforts to tend Caspian's wounds, he would still need a more experienced healer to examine him sooner rather than later. The moon was out that evening, and as they approached the outcrop Khelt let out a long howl to announce their return. It was echoed a few moments later by whoever was keeping watch, signalling that they had been spotted.

By the time they reached the bottom of the slope a small crowd had gathered, but they hung back in anticipation, unsure of what was about to greet them. Netya should have been anxious. After all, the pack had thought her a traitor just a day earlier. But as she dismounted and helped Caspian down from Khelt's back, she could only respond to the spiteful looks being shot her way with a glower of her own. She had no patience for their suspicion. Lives had been lost that morning.

The ride had left Caspian weak, and the wound in his side had begun bleeding again, but he still had the presence of mind to pause when he saw Hawk and Essie's daughter, Wren, waiting at the front of the group. He motioned Fern over and leaned in close.

"Tell her gently, somewhere away from the others."

Fern's eyes widened slightly. "Me?"

"She has always been fond of you, and I fear none of us understand what she must now face better than yourself," Caspian said.

The expression of fear that crossed Fern's face mirrored that of the girl waiting for her parents. Netya wanted to insist that she break the news in her friend's stead, but she held her sympathy in check. Fern could not have been much younger than Wren when she lost her own parents. If ever there had been a time for her to share the one thing she never spoke of, it was now.

Fern hesitated, but when she looked at the worried young girl gazing past them, searching for two more figures that would never arrive, she swallowed her fear and hurried up the slope, ignoring the others as she led Wren back toward the camp.

Netya turned Caspian's chin toward her and kissed his cheek. Even when he

was barely able to stand by himself, bleeding and exhausted, his kindness and understanding shone through. She would never have thought to suggest Fern be the one to break the news to Hawk and Essie's daughter, but now she could think of no wiser choice.

Khelt approached the pack, straightening up and squaring his jaw as he prepared to deliver the news they all waited on. He made it quick and simple, his voice betraying little emotion. Two of their pack were gone, and two of the Sun People lay dead with them. He did not mention that one of them had been their leader, or that Netya had been found and brought home safely. Her presence spoke for itself, and she doubted drawing attention to it would do much to ease the pack's burden of grief. Some of them would blame her for what happened. She could see it even as Khelt spoke. Hawk and Essie had gone out to find her, and they had died for it.

Before the alpha could even finish, the crowd parted as someone pushed through from the back. She was having difficulty walking, her face still pale and her dark hair tangled, but even when she was hobbling with the aid of a tree branch to prop her up, Adel commanded a respectful silence from the crowd.

The den mother ignored those around her, walking straight past the alpha to Netya and pulling her away from Caspian into an embrace. Without fully understanding why, Netya found herself hugging her mentor back, filled with such relief that she had to struggle to keep her eyes dry.

Then she remembered the familiarity of the embrace. When she had been lost and afraid in the spirit world, it had been these arms that held her. There had been a reason Netya risked so much in her attempt to save the den mother. She may not have realised it, but a bond had formed between them in the months they had spent together. Their reunion said everything it needed to without a word being said.

Though Netya felt the sincerity in Adel's embrace, she realised it also served another purpose. In one simple action, she had demonstrated her faith in her apprentice's innocence to the pack. After witnessing such a show of affection, who would dare voice their own suspicions aloud?

"If any of this was your doing, Witch," Khelt murmured, his voice low enough that no one else would hear, "I will see my pack rid of you for it."

Netya's blood ran cold for a moment, but the alpha was already walking away, approaching his people as they clustered around their leader.

Adel scowled after him. "And he seeks to blame me again for those who

died under his leadership."

"Not now," Netya whispered. "No one is to blame, Khelt is just upset." She tugged the den mother away, and she reluctantly acquiesced. At a call from Adel, two of the seers hurried forward to take Caspian away from Netya and help him up the slope. She clung to his hand longer than she should have until their fingers parted. She would have stayed with him all night, but she knew his wounds needed proper care.

"Tell me what happened, and why you ran," Adel said.

Once more, Netya recounted the events that had occurred the night the den mother was poisoned, leaving out the painful details of the reunion with her mother. She was still not ready to speak of what had happened back in the village. The hurt was simmering in her heart, waiting to harrow her again, but she would not speak of it this night. As she talked, many more curious ears began listening in, and soon half the pack was hanging on her every word.

Before she reached the end of the tale, she fished inside her clothing for the small bag of seeds that had been paid for with so much blood.

Adel took it from her and examined the contents, nodding slowly in approval. "I may not have needed them this time, but these seeds will still be valuable to us. I shall have my seers become familiar with them. In the years to come, they may save other lives."

The only other part of the story Netya refrained from mentioning was Vaya's involvement. Her instinct was to keep it a secret for now, to tread carefully, but she quickly realised that the question of how she had travelled back home was one that would need answering. When she caught sight of Vaya's face among the crowd, the eyes of the huntress glaring at her in distaste, she no longer cared for caution.

All of Netya's righteous anger at the woman boiled to the surface. Every jibe, every taunt, the blow that had broken her nose, the memory of seeing her spear snapped in half, and the despair of realising she had been abandoned at the edge of the village. Gripping her weapon tight, she pointed the tip at Vaya.

"She is the one responsible for this! She pretended to help me, then left me at the mercy of the Sun People! She knew the den mother needed the medicine. She has hated me since the day I arrived, and now she no longer cares who she hurts in her efforts to see me gone!"

The gathering quietened. To accuse someone of Vaya's status so openly was a clear challenge, and not one that could go unanswered. All eyes fell on

the huntress. She remained still, her arms folded, refusing to speak. Had her lies and trickery finally caught up with her?

"Answer when a seer addresses you," Adel said coldly. Netya was pleased to see how it made Vaya flinch.

"It is true," the huntress responded. "It happened exactly as she claims it did. I will not argue the truth of it. My only regret is that I kept it to myself until now."

"You admit your guilt?" Netya said.

Vaya looked at her, but there was no fear in her expression. "What guilt? You have been a fool as usual and misunderstood, even after I put my dislike for you aside. I helped you because I feared for the den mother's life, as did we all. You claim I abandoned you, but did you not see the band of hunters chasing me across the plains? Once the sun began to rise, I feared it had all been a trick, that you would not return, only to find myself fleeing from the spears of your people moments later. And you think I acted unreasonably?!"

"You were gone long before that!" Netya retorted. "Those hunters came for me, not you!"

"Vaya is not lying," one of the hunters spoke up. "When we met her yesterday a band of the Sun People had tracked her far across the plains. We were fortunate they turned back when they did."

"Yes, the hunters followed her tracks, but Vaya left long before them!" Netya said. "She was not chased. She did not even wait for me!"

"Quiet the both of you," Khelt rumbled, finally abandoning his own talks to investigate the commotion. Netya held her tongue, but she could not help but feel a smug sense of satisfaction now that the alpha had intervened. He had punished Vaya before for far less. Now she would finally get her comeuppance.

This time, however, Khelt's words were cold and harsh. "I have no time to listen to two bitter females bicker like children. You say one thing, and you say the other," he gestured to both of them in turn, "who am I to believe?"

Me, Netya thought, her throat growing painfully tight, *you should believe me*. *Am I not the one you care for?* But Khelt had barely said a kind word to her all day. Perhaps the sting of seeing her with Caspian still hurt. Perhaps he was only trying to be a fair leader. Either way, her time of receiving preferential treatment from the alpha seemed to be over.

"I will need the strength of my hunters and the skills of my seers in the days to come," Khelt said. "Settle it between yourselves, or make sure this

disagreement never reaches my ears again. I have no patience for it."

"And what of my poisoner?" Adel said. "Or would you rather wait until they attempt to kill your den mother again?"

"If you think Vaya or Netya had a hand in it, then decide for yourself," Khelt snapped. "I will concern myself with fighting the enemies I can see over those I cannot."

"What do you mean?" old Oke said. "You speak as if a greater threat will be upon us soon."

Khelt pressed his lips together, turning toward the group, then announced what must have been on his mind all day. "One of the Sun People we killed was their alpha. If it was me who fell to one of our enemies, I know how my pack would retaliate."

The gathering fell silent at the gravity of the alpha's words sank in. The hatred between the Moon and Sun People had always been strong, but never strong enough to drive their rivalry to its final, bloody conclusion. Was the death of a leader enough to tip the balance?

"I do not know what may happen," Khelt said, "but the pack must be ready. No more hunts without my permission. I want scouts on the plains keeping watch night and day."

"And what will you do if the Sun People come?" Adel said. "Kill one another, as you did with my pack, until there is no blood left to be spilled?"

"I will do whatever is necessary to protect us." Khelt shook his head. "I wish I could have returned home with better news. We must all hope that nothing comes of it. For tonight, let us remember those we have lost."

The atmosphere among the pack was as tense as Netya had ever felt it. She shared in their dread for what might happen if her people decided to seek vengeance. Some of the males began boasting of how they would gladly meet their enemies in battle, but beneath even the most boisterous of claims she could still sense a hint of unease. Everyone had loved ones nearby. There were elders and children who could not fight. If the Sun People found the outcrop, it would not just be the warriors who faced one another in battle.

Khelt led the group back up the slope to the central fire, but Vaya and a handful of others remained behind. She was one of the few who seemed unfazed by the alpha's words. Her eyes remained locked on Netya, their business clearly unfinished.

"You heard the alpha," she said. "It is for the two of us to settle between ourselves now. Among our kind, only a coward backs down from a

challenge."

Netya glared at her, still gripping her spear. She would never have believed herself capable of engaging in one of the bloody fights she had witnessed between the Moon People, but for Vaya's sake, she was almost tempted. Thankfully, Adel was not about to let her apprentice's temper get the best of her.

"What a glorious challenge that would be," she said, her voice dripping with scorn. "A seasoned huntress against a girl of the Sun People. The only coward would be the one to suggest such a single-sided contest in the first place."

"She has learned to use her spear," Vaya said. "I would not deny her the weapon she needs to match my strength."

"I forbid it."

Vaya shifted uncomfortably beneath the den mother's gaze. "The alpha said ___"

"Even he would not look kindly on a huntress maiming one of his seers," Adel snapped. "Now get out of my sight." She kept her eyes fixed on Vaya as the huntress made a sullen retreat back up the slope. Once she and Netya were alone, her harsh expression faltered, giving way to a look of concern. "Something must be done about her. I fear I cannot protect you forever."

"She was the one who poisoned you," Netya whispered. "I am sure of it." Adel narrowed her eyes. "*Are* you sure? Or is it only your anger speaking?" "Who else could have been responsible?"

"It seems the alpha believes I myself am to blame," Adel said. "And he is quick to dismiss good sense at the best of times, let alone when I am involved."

Netya gave her mentor a reproachful look, but she only grunted in contempt.

"I will send someone to Vaya's tent," the den mother conceded. "If the scent of the nightwood berries lingers there, I will believe you."

Netya took a deep breath and closed her eyes, trying to calm herself. So much had changed, and greater changes might await them still. She needed to clear her thoughts and rest. "I was afraid for you," she said quietly.

Adel's expression softened. "As was I for my apprentice."

"Will you make sure the seers take good care of Caspian tonight?"

"I will tend to him myself." She brushed Netya's cheek with the back of her fingers. "I am glad you chose him."

Netya flushed, looking away as she helped her mentor back toward the camp. *Had* she chosen him? Her heart felt like it knew where it belonged, but her mind was still torn. Khelt's behaviour had worried her that day. Was it wise to risk creating such a rift between the three of them, and at a time like this? She only hoped that in the morning, things would be clearer.

When Netya returned to her tent she found Fern sitting up against a bundle of furs with a tearful Wren cradled in her arms. The young girl was not the only one who had been crying. A hasty fire had been kindled, but it was already burning down low. After building up the flames with a few more logs, Netya eased her wolf pelt off her back and draped it over the rack next to her sleeping furs. She needed to eat and bathe, but those things could wait until the morning.

Curling up beside the dozing pair, she put an arm around her friend and rested her head against her shoulder. Wren squirmed and squeezed Fern's waist tighter.

As worried as she was, Netya slept deeply that night, soothed by the simple comfort of knowing she was in a place where love still lingered, despite the pain of everything that had come to pass. Warm and in the presence of people she cared for, she tried her best not to remember the past two days.

—42— Fires in the Night

The camp bustled with activity the following day. Khelt sent out runners to bring back the members of the pack who were still abroad, and the outcrop was alight with talk of what had happened. Hawk and Essie's deaths seemed to have had a galvanising effect on the Moon People, and no one was content to relax while the lingering threat of retribution hung over them. Hunters trained down on the plains, tussling without the usual boisterous aggression as their superiors watched over them. The craftspeople worked hard on fresh new tools and javelins, despite the pack's stores already being full of perfectly serviceable ones. Many of the seers had taken to the spirit world, joining together in group trances in hopes of unclouding the tenuous future that lay before them.

Once she had bathed and made breakfast for Wren, however, there was only one person to whom Netya's thoughts turned. She hurried to Adel's chamber to ask after Caspian, finding the den mother back to her usual strikingly beautiful self, and learned that he was well, but in need of rest. Netya held herself back all day, but by nightfall she could not restrain the urge to go to him any longer.

Making her way around the edge of the outcrop to Caspian's lodge, she ran into Selo just as she was leaving. The other young seer told her that he was no longer in need of tending. His wounds had healed well while he slept, and he would be back on his feet by the following morning. Letting out her relief in an embrace, Netya squeezed Selo tight by way of a thank you, leaving the girl a little flustered by the time she let go.

When she stepped inside the dim lodge, she found Caspian lying on his back atop the furs that lined his raised sleeping alcove. The stitches she had put in the previous morning were gone, and his wounds had given way to fresh scars. He gave Netya a weary smile, and gestured for her to come over.

"I needed some brightness in my day," he said as she knelt down beside him.

She took his right hand between hers and kissed it. "I think we all do. The whole pack is upset."

"And what about you? You never spoke of what happened back at your village."

A sad smile came to Netya's lips. Caspian always had a way of seeing things others did not. "The pack is my family now. I have you and Fern, and I am sure Adel will take good care of me."

"But not Khelt." Caspian sighed. "He knew why I went out there to find you, but there was no hiding it any more. We both care for you, more deeply than I fear either of us have ever cared for another female."

"Do you think he resents us?"

Caspian shook his head. "Khelt is a good man. I was ready to give up my feelings if it meant he could be happy with you, as I am sure he would have done for me." He paused. "As he may already be doing."

"Is that why you stayed away for so long?"

"Had you not gone missing, I might have been able to keep my distance until you forgot about me."

Netya kissed his hand again. "Then a part of me is glad for what happened."

Caspian looked at her for a long moment, letting his palm glide across her cheek, his fingers caressing their way through her hair. She leaned forward and rested her cheek on his stomach, feeling the warmth of his body and the faint pulse of his heart. Caspian made her long for many things.

"The night Adel was poisoned, it was your lodge I came to," she said. "You were the one I trusted most."

"I am sorry I was not there."

"You could not have known. You came for me when I needed you."

Unable to help herself, Netya eased into the alcove, crawling atop Caspian as he sat half way up and put his arms around her. If his wounds were still giving him any pain, he did not show it. He embraced her to his chest, holding his female tight as the heat of their bodies mingled together, the brush of their skin becoming warm and comfortable. The gentle grip of his arms gave her spirit a place where it could always feel safe. Unguarded, untroubled; all the worries of the world could not touch that precious place inside her that belonged with Caspian. At long last, after a year of wondering, she believed she had started to understand the truth of love.

Without pausing to consider how she might say it, she told him everything that had happened when she returned to her village. Layon, her mother, the face of her sister peering out at her. It came naturally, and without tears. It was a tale she might have carried with her to her dying day, just as Fern had kept the loss of her own parents trapped in her heart, but with Caspian there

to hold her, it no longer needed to be a burden.

He listened to every word, never pressing her for more or offering false comfort. There was nothing he could say that would bring back her mother's love. He could not make the people who had cast her out accept their exiled daughter once again. What he did instead was to kiss her, and embrace her with such tenderness that she almost felt herself giving in to the tears the memory of her village had been unable to stir. Without words, he told her the things she needed to know.

No matter where else it may be true, you are loved here. You belong here. "I will not let you find my lodge empty again," he said. "Until the pack is safe, I will always be here for you."

Netya rested her forehead against his chin, her breath tickling the hollow of his throat. "How am I so fortunate to have earned your care?"

"There is no fortune in who you are, Netya. What you did for Adel took a warrior's bravery, and a seer's compassion. What you suffered for doing so would have overwhelmed a lesser woman. I believe the den mother is right in thinking you are destined for great things."

The compliment still sounded far too grand for Netya to believe it, but rather than dismissing his words, she allowed herself to wonder whether there might be some truth in them. Coming from Caspian, she was almost willing to consider it. He made her feel like more than she was.

She caressed his cheek, and kissed him. Their lips lingered, gently suckling and exploring, until she felt her tongue coaxed into his mouth, and a spark of something warmer burst in her belly. It was not needy lust she felt, or the exciting desire for pleasure that brought a smile of anticipation to her lips, but something deeper. She wanted to be with Caspian, more closely and more intensely than words and kisses would allow.

His desire mirrored her own, tugging her down with a hand on the back of her neck as his brow furrowed and his chest rumbled beneath her palms. She felt his manhood stirring between her thighs, and she helped him kick off his leggings until it was free. Shedding her own clothing, she pulled the furs over them to cocoon her naked body close against Caspian's.

The wooden pendant he had given her dangled from her neck, the symbol that meant her name resting against his heaving chest. She gazed down at it, a yearning heat spreading through her body as Caspian's fingertips caressed her ear, playing gently with the lobe.

"It feels different with you," she whispered. "I do not know why."

"I do," he said, pulling her down into another kiss. He parted the folds between her legs a moment later, his manhood finding its place inside her and pressing deep. He waited, making her ready for him, content to share in her kisses and the closeness of her body. There was no impatient need for release. It was not the goal either of them were pursuing that night.

Netya's hips moved naturally against him, seeking out the pleasure she could give her male, caressing him from base to tip with her internal warmth. Every subtle twitch or gasp of breath she elicited filled her with delight, just as her own signs of pleasure did for her partner. Their lovemaking dimmed the worries of the world, but not in the way she was used to. Rather than allowing mindless pleasure to blot out everything beyond the moment they shared, the feeling of being with Caspian burned like a fire in the darkness, bringing light and warmth to everything around them. It was not a refuge from the world, but rather a reminder that it still held pleasure and happiness great enough to eclipse even the most fearful of troubles.

Caspian's every attention was focused on pleasing the woman he cared for above all others, and Netya responded in kind. She did not live for the pleasure he could give her, but rather what she could give to him. She clung to his shoulders tight, the closeness of their breath and the heat beneath the furs making the air humid and their skin damp. His broad chest heaved beneath her breasts, his muscular stomach undulating beneath hers as he held her there with a palm against the small of her back. She felt him deep within her, pressing against her core, tugging at the string of satisfaction within her belly. She wanted to lie with him like this forever, without fatigue or discomfort ever dulling their urge to be joined.

Their pacing ebbed and surged, neither of them wanting to drive their lovemaking to its conclusion. Just as he had done the night in the alpha's den, Caspian tenderly stirred the climax within her, allowing it to swell and tighten, building her pleasure to such great heights that it was all she could do to contain it. She gasped and whimpered into his neck, sounds of love and longing, kissing him desperately over and over again. He held her there on the brink of ecstasy, drawing her deep into his kisses as his gentle strokes slowed, almost allowing her to fall back from the edge before pushing her on just a little further than she felt herself able to go.

When Netya's climax finally broke free, it was with a complete loss of breath and speech, her grip tightening and her muscles shuddering as whitehot pleasure burned all thoughts but those of Caspian from her mind. She was giddy and blind, the surge of intensity feeling almost like it was dragging her consciousness away into the spirit world as one peak ebbed and another crested in its place, over and over until she lost precious seconds of consciousness, only to come back a moment later, stirred to new heights by Caspian's groans of pleasure in her ear, the tightening of his grip, the surge of his manhood pulsing inside her, filling her with his own climax.

The keenness of the moment gradually faded once it was spent, but the warmth remained. Netya clung to Caspian with a smile on her lips, sprawled across his chest as their bodies heaved with breathless exertion. The yearning she felt for him had reached its culmination, but it would never truly be satisfied. Her feelings for Caspian made her want to curl up against him and sink into the furs until their spirits mingled and became one, until every part of her was his and ever part of him hers. He made the ache of everything that had been lost, the fear of what tomorrow would bring, and every uncertainty she felt for herself fade away in favour of their future together. It was too bright a star to be dulled by the weight of the world.

The pair did not sleep until long into the night. When they were not making love, they were talking of the things they would share with no one else, or savouring the closeness of one another without the need for words. To say it was the happiest night of Netya's life would have been false, for so many things had happened recently to dull true happiness.

It was, however, the most fulfilling.

Two days later, the warnings began.

At first the scouts reported one fire, then another, until every morning they were returning with word of another blaze sighted out on the plains. The Sun People knew the importance of secrecy while they were in the territory of their enemies, and it was rare to see so much as a single campfire from the hunting parties that strayed so far afield. The bonfires they were burning now had not been built in the name of secrecy.

The hunters reported one large group, sometimes two. They would travel during the day and build their fires at night, meandering back and forth along the length of the river, sometimes advancing, sometimes retreating, but gradually drawing ever closer to the outcrop.

"Perhaps they saw Hawk and Essie's pyre as a challenge," Caspian said one morning as he, Khelt, and Adel talked over a shared meal. A tenuous truce seemed to have fallen between the alpha and den mother, though it seemed

born of their shared concern for the pack rather than any genuine accord. Netya was permitted to listen in on many of their discussions due to her closeness with Caspian and Adel, and Khelt, for all of the distance that had grown between them, was too preoccupied with the wellbeing of his pack to object to her presence. He questioned her many times about how the people of her village might attack. What weapons would they use? Did they wear leather to protect themselves? How was it made? Would they be organised with no leader?

Netya was thankfully unable to answer many of his questions. She knew little of how the men of her village hunted, and even less of their dealings with the Moon People. She shared many concerned looks with Adel as the den mother warned of caution, of how best to avoid conflict rather than engage with it. One thing seemed clear, though; the Sun People's desire for vengeance had overcome their fear. They wanted a fight, and their fires were an invitation for the wolves to come.

As the weeks crept anxiously by, the fires remained. Some days they drew closer to the outcrop, others they drifted farther away, but every night the scouts reported them burning as brightly as ever.

The celebration of the summer fires did not take place that year. The ceremonial bonfires would turn the outcrop into a beacon that would be visible for miles around, and Khelt could not risk revealing the camp's location to curious eyes. The announcement left the pack sullen and agitated. The celebration was held every year, and not since the days of the conflict with Adel's pack had it been postponed. It was a bad omen, and the visions of the seers warned of even greater unrest to come.

When Netya was not at Adel's side attempting to continue her training, she found herself occupied taking care of Wren, who had become a permanent occupant of her and Fern's tent in the days following the loss of her parents. The girl was quiet, and she often spent long hours inside, speaking and eating little, but there were moments when glimpses of her old self still shone through.

It was her time with Caspian, however, that kept Netya strong. Their nights together were fewer than she would have liked, but they were as sweet and tender as ever. The only person she told of them was Fern. Some evenings when Wren was asleep, she would tell her friend quietly about the way he made her feel, about the pleasures she shared in his furs, and the hopes she had for what the future might bring. Sitting up for hours sharing their

romantic gossip, it felt almost like Netya's first months with the pack again.

Unfortunately, any sense of security she might have hoped to recapture did not last. Even Caspian's comfort could not shield her from the tension straining the pack. It was clear that many of them blamed her for what had happened, and not since her arrival had she been made to feel so unwelcome. Many of the people who had previously shared fires with her got up to leave when she approached. Vaya took every opportunity to stir the rumours that the Sun girl had been responsible for the den mother's poisoning after all.

Just as Adel had promised, she sent Selo to Vaya's tent to sniff out any lingering scent the nightwood berries might have left, but all she found was the heavy odour of a particularly potent seasoning herb smothered over the entire dwelling.

"Not enough to convince anyone of her guilt," Adel muttered as she sat with Netya in her chamber the day after. "Yet not the actions of an innocent woman either. Have you been watching her? The way she strives to convince the others of anyone's guilt but her own? As if she is desperate."

"Do you believe me, then?" Netya said.

The den mother nodded. "Had she behaved as normal I might never have suspected anything, but Vaya is not skilled in restraint." A dark look crossed Adel's face, her scarred fingers brushing at the burn that ran from the heel of her palm to the elbow. "I will see her ruined for what she did to me."

"You frighten me when you speak this way," Netya said.

"Your heart is still too soft. Those who wrong you through cowardice and jealousy are not deserving of such pity." She glared at her apprentice for a moment, then her expression softened. "I do not mean to exact the same vengeance on her as she did to me. That would make me no better than her."

"Then what is your plan?"

"I do not have the power to banish her from the pack. I could deny her many of the things she desires, but what good would that do? Her resentment would only grow stronger. She must be dealt with once and for all, before she attempts something even more reckless." She looked at Netya curiously, the way she often did when waiting for her apprentice to reach a conclusion on her own. "Tell me, what is Vaya's greatest weakness?"

Netya shrugged. "She is the last person who comes to my mind when I think of weakness. She has accomplished much compared to the other women of this pack."

"Do not be so slow," Adel said impatiently. "You know better than to cast

such shallow judgements. Tell me, what is it that makes Vaya weak? What makes her hasty, foolish, prone to making mistakes?"

Netya cast her mind back, recalling the times she had seen the huntress out of her element. The times she had been humbled by Khelt and Caspian, caught off her guard, forced to face shame in the eyes of the pack.

"Her pride," she said. "She holds on to it too tightly."

"Yes," Adel mused. "She is like the alpha in this way. Challenge her pride, and she will throw herself on the very spears of her enemies to prove you wrong."

"It seems dangerous to bait Vaya."

"Are you afraid of her?"

"No," Netya responded in an instant.

Adel smiled. "Because you know you are wiser, more cunning than her. Keep your eyes and ears open, and when the opportunity arrives you will see it, while she remains blind. Catch her in her pride. Turn it against her, and let the pack see her for what she is."

Netya did not hold the same confidence in herself that the den mother seemed to. She almost thought to question why Adel seemed so intent on leaving the task to her apprentice, but she had known her mentor long enough by now to realise for herself. Adel wanted her apprentice to become more like her. A wise, cunning, powerful seer. One who was able to undo her enemies by herself.

They did not speak of the matter further after that day, but Netya minded the den mother's words. She kept her eyes and ears open, watching and listening to her rival, searching for the weakness that would allow her to put an end to all the hurt Vaya had been responsible for.

—**43**— A Final Choice

"It will only be a few weeks before the heavy rains come," Khelt said. "The Sun People will be forced to abandon the plains by then."

"And if they do not?" Adel retorted. "The weather has not dampened their spirits so far. They will not leave until they have the blood they seek."

"What would you have me do about it? If they come, they come. I did not ask for this fight, but I will defend my pack with my life if they force my hand."

"Your foolish mind sees only one path, the path of misery and death."

"I would not expect a female to understand," Khelt growled. "Least of all you. What do you know of strength and honour? Of the things a man must do to protect those who look to him for guidance?"

Netya listened anxiously from her place across the fire. She had hoped for Adel and Khelt's arguments to come to an end, but with no sign of the Sun People abandoning their camps on the plains, the animosity between the two of them had reared its head once more. It did not help that they were once again raising their voices in the centre of the outcrop, for all the pack to hear.

"Wolves do not know the difference between honour and bloodlust!" Adel said. "You and I have both seen it, but it seems only one of us has had the wisdom to learn. If you valued the lives of your pack above your own pride, you would steer them away from this madness."

"Then I ask you again, Witch, what would you have me do?"

"Leave the plains. Guide your pack away to safety, beyond the reach of the Sun People. They would not venture past the mountains."

Khelt let out a bark of contempt. "You mean run, like cowards. Give up our home, the place our pack has dwelt for generations beyond count? I may as well hand the Sun People their victory."

"Time will dull their need for revenge," Adel said, a chill in her voice.
"Leave a few behind to watch this place. If the Sun People do not return after winter's end, your home will still be here waiting for you. Can you say the same for the lives that will be lost if you stay and fight them?"

"You ask me to uproot my pack. Our hunters do not know the lands beyond the mountains. What of the young and the elders? Will they survive a winter of hard travelling?" "If we leave now, we will have time to find safety before the first snows fall," Adel said. "But if you wait, the chance will be gone. There will be no alternative but to stay and fight."

For a moment Khelt almost seemed to be considering her proposal, but the dark glint of suspicion in his eye was not easily undone. "This is not the first time you have cautioned such action," he said, lowering his voice to a rumble. "You left three of our brothers and sisters to die the last time you fled when we should have stayed and fought. Now is the time for a show of strength, not more cowardice."

"I will not leave my seers to die for your pride," Adel hissed. "If bloodshed is what you desire, you will face it alone once more." She raised her voice, making sure everyone nearby would hear what she said next. "If the Sun People do not leave by the first rains, I will lead all those who are willing to the safety of the mountains. Let the alpha stay and throw away the lives of his pack, if that is what he desires."

Khelt bared his teeth at her, his anger spilling over. "This is no time for your games! I need the full strength of my pack behind me. I forbid anyone from leaving!"

"You do not command me. I will do as I wish."

"Will you, when I have my hunters drag you back here by their jaws?!"

Adel's eyes widened slightly. If there had been any shred of sympathy left for the alpha in her heart, it seemed to burn out in that moment. "Just like an alpha," she all but spat. "Violence is all you know. You speak of courage, but it is you who are the coward. I will leave when the first rains come, and you may do with me as you desire."

"Have you no loyalty to your pack?!" Khelt roared after her as she strode away. "I am the alpha, and you are my den mother! You will do as I say!"

Netya felt herself trembling. The gathering area was silent. She had never seen Khelt so furious. The alpha turned around, fists clenched, and ran his gaze over those watching him.

"The Sun People will leave," he said, taking a deep breath. "And I will lay down my life before I see them do harm to any of you." His words hung in the air as he sat back down. It was a long time before anyone dared speak up again. Khelt stared into the fire, snapping sticks of kindling viciously between his hands until he had reduced his stack of firewood to a pile of twigs.

Netya could see history repeating itself. Khelt and Adel could not look past

their hatred for one another, and soon it would pull the pack apart. If neither of them could compromise, what would become of those caught in the middle? Whichever course of action proved right, whether it was to fight or to flee, the strength of the entire pack would be needed to see it through. Splitting them apart at a time like this could prove ruinous.

Worst of all, Netya felt powerless to do anything to stop it.

Wren crept over to her side once the alpha had departed later that morning. The girl was doing a little better than before, but Khelt's outburst had clearly upset her. Netya suspected Wren would have been one of those tempted by Adel's plan. After losing her parents, it was unlikely she had any desire to see more death.

"The alpha and den mother are only worried for all of us," Netya said, making a space for the girl beside her. Of the two young women who had taken her in, Wren was much closer to Fern, having known her all her life, and it was rare she confided in Netya. That morning, though, she seemed willing to overcome her shyness.

"My father always told me what to do when times were hard," she said. "Now no one does. I'm afraid, Netya."

"Your father's spirit is watching over us, I am sure. The alpha and den mother are wise. They will reach an accord sooner or later." Netya did not believe it herself, but the cold truth was not what Wren needed right now. The girl fidgeted for a moment. Something else was bothering her, but she seemed unable to put it into words.

"Have you spoken with my father's spirit?" she said at last, so quietly Netya barely heard her.

"I—" Netya began, caught off guard by the question. "I am just an apprentice. Such things are beyond my power."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I should have known better. It is not my place to ask such things of the seers."

"You may ask me, Wren."

The girl looked up at her with a hesitant smile, and Netya took the opportunity to draw her in with an arm around her waist. She had consoled her younger sisters in much the same way many times.

"It is not proper for children to request visions of the seers," Wren said.

"You will be beginning the path to womanhood soon. Perhaps it is fine for a girl who is not yet a woman to ask a woman who is not yet a seer?"

Wren looked down and bit her lip. "I just want to know if my parents have spoken to you from the spirit world. I want to know they are waiting for me there."

It was difficult for Netya to know what to say. Sadness and sympathy threatened to steal away the reassurance from her voice. She could give the girl none of the answers she desired. Hawk and Essie's spirits had never appeared to her in her dreams, and she had not ventured into the spirit world properly since her return. What could she tell Wren that would not leave her more upset than she already was? She struggled to remember anything from her dreams that might help, but every memory was vague and indistinct.

Just as she was about to break the sombre truth to Wren, an image sparked in her mind. It was a dream she'd had weeks ago, almost forgotten. It had not been about Hawk, Essie, or their daughter, but something made her recall it all the same. A child had been walking through the meadows, and with her there had been an older man and a woman. At the time she had thought the girl to be herself, but did it really matter who it was? She recalled what Adel had tried to teach her about the nature of visions. Perhaps the details were not as important as the ways in which they could help people.

"There was one vision," she began, picking her words carefully. She had not expected to impart the wisdom of the spirit world to anyone so early in her training. "I saw a girl with her parents. They were in a meadow together, and they seemed very happy. It was a good vision, filled with love."

Wren rubbed her eyes, then wrapped her arms around Netya and hugged her. "Tell them I miss them," she said, her voice quavering with emotion.

"The next time they appear in my visions," Netya replied, kissing the top of the girl's head. "I promise."

She did not know how to feel as Wren embraced her. Had it been right to tell her of the dream? The girl's gratitude spoke for itself, but it still left Netya uneasy. She felt she had dabbled in something that was beyond her understanding. Would the other seers approve?

When Wren let go of her and got up to leave, however, the smile on her face warmed Netya's soul.

Turning around, her heart leaped as she saw Adel standing a few paces away. The den mother had returned without her realising. A warm flush rose to her cheeks, expecting an angry reprimand at any moment. It did not come. Rather than judgement, Adel was looking on her with pride.

"You see?" the den mother said. "That is the power of hope you are able to

give people like her."

"What if I was wrong?" Netya replied softly. "What if my vision was not meant for her?"

Adel shook her head. "If she was helped by it, then it was hers. It does not matter from where our visions are born, only what they can do to help those who need them most. Wren needed your vision, and she will sleep more soundly tonight because of it."

The approval of the den mother meant more to Netya than any instruction she had been given or any lesson she had learned. She knew that Adel cared for her, in her own way, but it was not through compliments and encouragement that she shared her affection. After months of curt, often harsh guidance, making her mentor proud left Netya with a greater sense of accomplishment than she had ever known. At last, she began to believe the path of the seer was one she truly belonged on.

"Thank you, Den Mother," she said.

Adel offered one of her rare smiles. "It is good to see my instruction finally taking root. But remember, your visions are not to be imparted lightly. You are still just an apprentice."

Netya nodded, but in truth she felt a new realisation creeping up on her. Just earlier that morning she had felt powerless to affect anything in the tumultuous pack. Perhaps she still was, but she had given Wren the reassurance she needed. If some people, even if they were only children, were willing to turn to her, perhaps others might be ready to listen to what she had to say as well.

Perhaps she was no longer as helpless as the timid young concubine who had been brought to the pack a year ago.

That evening she sat out on the plains with Caspian, the pair of them watching the sun go down as a light drizzle of warm rain pattered upon their shoulders. It was a pleasant sensation, but Netya could sense that her male's thoughts were elsewhere. He stared into the distance, saying little as the last light of day turned the clouds a coppery orange.

An unspoken question hung in the air, but Netya did not need to voice it before Caspian answered her.

"Khelt worries me," he said. "This could not have come at a worse time. He tries to hide it, but he still feels his loneliness as keenly as any man. He misses you dearly."

"He does not speak to me as he used to," Netya said. "I wish I could be with him in the way he desires, but not when my heart belongs to another."

"I have tried to talk to him as well. He dismisses it, says he does not care to let such things come between friends. He respects that you are with me, just as I did when our positions were reversed. And yet, he no longer listens to the advice I give him. His heart is still struggling with something that burdens it every day, and I do not know what I can do to help him."

"I know," Netya said, wishing she had the power to give both men what they longed for. "In time he will heal, will he not? There will be another female for him one day. One who can love him better than I am able."

"I would agree, but for the fires out on the plains," Caspian sighed. "Khelt must decide on one of the most important decisions he may ever make for his pack, and it will not wait for the pains of his heart to mend. I heard what happened with Adel this morning."

"Do you think it will be the same as before? The night your mother was lost?"

"I fear so, and I know Adel well enough to realise when she will not be swayed. I think I would caution Khelt to heed her advice, but agreeing with the den mother is too bitter a taste for him to swallow, especially now. If he was willing to listen to me, perhaps I could persuade him to see the wisdom of it."

"I do not want to see any more death either," Netya said, "but if Adel leaves, we cannot let Khelt stay to face my people alone. There must be something we can do to make them agree."

Caspian ran a hand across his face. "If there is, I cannot see it. Khelt is angry at many things he feels unable to change, so he will direct that anger at the one thing he can."

Netya stared at the sun as it dipped below the horizon. There was one thing she could do. One thing that would wrench her heart away from the place it belonged, perhaps never to return. She tried to forget it, but it burned in the back of her mind, filling her with guilt that only grew stronger the harder she pushed it away. If she had the chance to save lives, was it worth the price of her own happiness?

She thought of the selflessness Caspian had shown in putting his own feelings aside to let her be with Khelt, or how Adel had taken the burden of such dark magic upon herself when she helped Essie lose her child. Khelt, too, bore the weight of so many lives on his shoulders day after day. They

were brave, noble people. Was she not one, too?

She tucked herself in close against Caspian's chest, coaxing him down atop her with gentle kisses. She wanted to savour the evening while it was still bright. They had not been together for long, yet already she could barely stand the thought of going a day without him. Knowing that he was here for her was like knowing she had a warm place to lay her head at the end of the day. He made the worries that troubled her at night seem small and pointless. Perhaps it was only in knowing his love that she felt able to do the thing that would wrest it away from her.

But not that night. That night she wanted to feel him with her again, remember what it was like to have her spirit mingle with his, become more than she had ever been without such a caring partner to satisfy her soul. His strong body enveloped her, drawing her close to the rhythm of his heart, taking away the need for fear. They made love with the warm rain glossing their skin, its gentle patter adding to the sensation of every moment.

She remembered that night, and the memory kept her strong.

"Will you not be persuaded?" she asked Adel the following day.

The den mother shook her head. "You know as well as I do that abandoning the outcrop is our best chance now. It is only through the good grace of the spirits that our tracks have remained hidden from the Sun People as long as they have."

"Many more may die if you leave and Khelt stays."

"Then he must leave as well. I will not resign myself to only half a tragedy when I have the chance to avert it fully."

Netya's heart sank, but Adel's answer was not an unexpected one. She was as stubborn as Khelt, and she truly believed that her solution was the only way. The den mother was not a woman of timid compromise.

"Then," Netya said, "if Khelt were to leave as well, would you be able to lead the pack to safety?"

"In a few weeks we could be beyond the mountains. Other packs stake their territory in those lands, but they would not trouble us during the winter."

"And if the Sun People have not left by the time spring arrives?"

"Then we travel north and make a new den. The land there may not be as kind to us as the plains, but it will suffice," Adel said. It seemed she had thought everything through. Her plan had not been decided on lightly.

"I will trust your wisdom, Den Mother," Netya said, "and if I can, I will

leave with you when the time comes."

Adel's brow furrowed. "Do not be coy with me. What idea have you taken into your head?"

Netya explained the realisation that had come to her the night before. As she had expected, the den mother tried to persuade her away from it. It was a sacrifice she must have known all too well, and it only provoked her animosity toward Khelt further. But despite her objections, she could not dissuade Netya from her path. When she realised that her apprentice's mind was made up, it was with both sorrow and admiration that she embraced her.

"It should not be upon you to make this choice," Adel whispered into her ear.

"Perhaps it will all be for nothing," Netya replied. "Still, I must try."

She would have liked to stay with Adel longer, but she knew the strength of her will would not remain intact forever. She needed to act while she could, before thoughts of Caspian and her own happiness could get in the way.

Leaving the seers' cave, she made for the alpha's den, pausing for a moment outside the entrance. It had been weeks since she crept down the narrow passageway that opened up before her. It had always seemed so inviting then, holding such a sense of tempered excitement. Perhaps, all those weeks ago, the journey she was about to make would have seemed exciting still. It was not so bad a fate. More than she had any right to ask for, in fact. And yet, it was not the fate her heart desired.

Stepping into the darkness, she found her way to the heavy drape and pushed it aside. The subtle scent of Khelt reached her nostrils, and she tried to smile, remembering all the fond memories she associated with it. He had been good to her.

The alpha looked up with a glare as she walked in unannounced. He had been looking over the pieces of wood covered in Caspian's burned markings, lost in thought as he compared them.

"I did not send for you," he growled, but Netya glimpsed a trace of the welcoming look he saved only for his consort. Her arrival reminded him of the pleasant times they had shared together, too.

"Forgive me, Alpha," she said. "I must speak with you, if you will give me just a few moments."

Khelt worked his jaw back and forth. Had she been anyone else, her impropriety might have incurred a swift punishment. Finally, he nodded. "Say your piece, Netya."

"Many people will die if the pack stays to fight. There must be a better way."

"You mean Adel's way." He glared at her. "Did she send you here, to use your affection against me?"

"I came of my own accord. My words are my own, no one else's."

"Then they are well-meaning, but you are no leader, Netya. You can tell me nothing I have not considered already."

"I do not mean to," she said, taking a step closer. "I know how deeply you care for your pack. You are a warrior, but what of those who are not warriors? They are the ones who will suffer most."

"I will put my life before theirs. No more children will lose their mothers or fathers while I still draw breath."

Netya reached out a trembling hand, resting it on the alpha's shoulder. He blinked slowly, looking down at her wrist.

"And what of those who fear to lose you? What if you had a mate to care for?"

Khelt let out a long breath, his face creasing with strain. "You made your choice. If you had desired me as your mate, you would have let it be known long ago." His words were hard, but she could hear the hidden longing in them.

"Hearts are not simple," she whispered. "I care for you both. I will not be false—I would be sacrificing one happiness for another, no matter who I chose. But this choice, perhaps, will mean happiness for more than just myself."

"I cannot ask such a thing of you against your will."

Netya smiled, and she did not attempt to hide its bittersweetness. "I told you, I am here of my own accord. I may know little of leadership, but I can see where I am needed most. If you still desire me, I will be your mate."

Without looking at her, Khelt took Netya's hand and kissed it. He pressed his forehead against her fingers, squeezing them tight. She could almost feel the strain on his heart beginning to ebb.

"You know I desire nothing more," he said, "but the pack—"

"The alpha is part of the pack too, is he not? Does he not deserve his own happiness, rather than throwing down his life as if it were worth less than theirs?" She knelt down, seeing the turmoil in his expression, and put her arms around his neck.

"There is no honour in fleeing," he murmured.

"But there is safety. Safety with those who care for you. Is that not worth more than cold honour?"

"Women do not understand such things..."

"So you always say, and perhaps we do not." She caressed his chin, trying to make him look at her. "We feel what comes of it, though. Honour may have left the spirits of many men content while their women remain behind with nothing but their grief."

She sensed the alpha's resolve faltering. He had weathered a storm alone and isolated for weeks on end. Perhaps her words managed to reach him, or perhaps his need for someone to ease his burden was simply too great. He took her in his arms, and buried his face in her neck.

"I have missed you so dearly," he gasped, squeezing the breath from her lungs with his embrace. "Spirits curse me for my own selfish desires."

Netya closed her eyes, trying to let the relief of her decision warm her. Khelt's embrace hurt, but it was not the tightness around her body that brought her the most pain. Caspian would understand. She did what she did for the good of them all. Perhaps they could try again to push their feelings for one another aside. To let time wither them away until the ache of longing had been forgotten.

She did not believe her own reassurances this time. There would be no healing this loss to her heart. Even the fond memory of Khelt's closeness could not bring her to the same place of blissful abandon it once had. Only Caspian could do that now. Now, and never again.

<u>--44</u>

The Longest Journey

Netya walked out with the alpha that evening, his arm resting about her shoulders. He had sent word for the entire pack to assemble, and assemble they had. The central area was packed with many dozens of faces, young and old alike, and not a single pair of eyes failed to fall on her as she made her approach alongside Khelt. They could whisper their gossip about her if they wished. She doubted she would ever gain the acceptance she had once hoped for. There would always be those who blamed her for the events that had led to this, those who disapproved of her choices, or those who disliked her simply because she was different. She had been too strong a force of change in their pack to be accepted by everyone.

Looking over the crowd, there was only one face she sought out. Caspian was there, slightly apart from the rest of the group, perched near the front of the gathering on his favourite rock. He was one of the first to see her. In the moment their eyes locked, he seemed to realise. His gaze fell slightly. That it was such a tiny gesture made it hurt all the more. Only those paying close attention, only those who knew him well, would have noticed the way his lips tightened, his relaxed posture grew hard, and the calm sparkle in his eyes grew cold.

Of all the men in the pack, he was perhaps the best at keeping his emotions from clouding his vision. It was one of the things Netya had grown to love about him. The volatility of his spirit only ever came loose in moments of passion, or joy, or great determination. He knew better than to waste his energy on things that would only bring frustration and pain. But that was only the Caspian the world saw. Behind his veneer of confidence, she knew he felt things just as keenly as anyone else. Perhaps even more so.

Everything about him seemed to dull the moment he saw her with Khelt. Perhaps he had known, or at least suspected. Perhaps he had hoped for it not to come true. He swallowed, running the back of a clenched palm across his lips, then looked at her again. The corners of his eyes creased. She could feel him holding in check the same emotions that would have driven a lesser man to rage, or to tears. His silent acceptance left her only with sadness in her heart, so heavy it made her want to fall to her knees. He was not angry. He did not approve. He only understood. This was the way fate had fallen, and

there was nothing they could do to change it now. For the sake of the others, they would suffer in silence. Together, and yet never so far apart.

"I have made a decision," Khelt said, the power of the alpha instilling his voice with authority. "It is not one I make lightly, but for the good of us all. I know if I took to the plains to face our enemy, I would do so with a score of brave warriors at my back. We would fight and die for our brothers and sisters, and with the grace of the spirits we might drive the Sun People from these lands once and for all."

A smattering of approval rumbled through the ranks of the hunters. Some of the younger men bared their teeth in aggression, fists clenched as they bobbed their heads in agreement with the alpha's words.

"The hunters of our pack have ever been fine warriors," Khelt continued, his tone becoming more subdued. "I count myself proudly among them. But, as alpha, I must not turn a blind eye to the rest of my clan." He took a deep breath, eyes flicking in Adel's direction for a moment. The den mother did not interrupt. "I have faith in our victory, but perhaps victory is not enough. What would we leave behind after buying such a triumph at the cost of our own lives? What victory could soothe the grief of a pack bereft of its fathers and sons?"

"I will not lose my life to the Sun People!" the young hunter Rolan called out. "What hope do they have against our warriors?"

"They may at this very moment be saying the same of us." Khelt silenced him with a hard look. "There is glory in battle, yes, but every wolf who has tasted it knows it never comes without a cost. The Sun People are great in number. If we fight them, many of us will die. No amount of courage will change that." He paused again, but no further interruptions came. "And the price of our deaths may be more than our pack can bear. Our enemy may be defeated, but what will we leave behind? How many years will it take for such wounds to heal?" He shook his head, drawing Netya a little closer. She reached up to clutch his hand. "We do not go to battle. The burden of our blood would be borne by our loved ones for years to come. Two days from now, we make for the mountains."

"Finally, he sees sense." Adel sighed with relief, pre-empting any objection that could be voiced by the outraged hunters. "My seers are already making preparations. We will leave this madness behind us."

"Do not think I make this decision for your sake, Den Mother," Khelt growled. "I do this only out of duty to my pack."

"Out of duty to your whore," Vaya's angry voice muttered from the sidelines. Had it not been for the silence of the others, her words might have gone unnoticed.

Khelt did not hesitate, nor did he waste a single reprimanding word on the huntress. Releasing his grip on Netya's shoulder, he was on Vaya in a flash, blood spattering from the woman's mouth as he struck her with a blow that sent her reeling to the ground.

Netya cried out, and Caspian rose to his feet in alarm. The group backed away from Vaya, leaving her grovelling before the alpha.

"Our pack's future is at stake," Khelt snarled, "and you snipe at your alpha like a bitter child?"

Vaya began to pick herself up, blood running from her lips as she glowered past him at Netya. "We are being driven from our home."

"Not forever," Adel said, directing an equally vicious look of her own at the alpha. "We will return once the Sun People have lost their taste for bloodshed."

"I will need the strength of every one of my hunters in the days to come," Khelt said, hauling Vaya up by her arm. He stared the huntress in the eye. "Do I have your loyalty, Vaya?"

She looked away, running her tongue over her split lip. A reluctant nod followed a moment later.

"Good. And I expect the same from all of you!" He turned back to the group. "Make your belongings ready for travel. Food, medicine, tools for making fire. Conceal the rest in the caves and block off the entrances. Hide all traces of our camp. Perhaps, with the grace of the spirits watching over this place, it will go unnoticed until our return."

Adel took the lead, ushering the hesitant group off to carry out the alpha's instructions. Within moments she was already assigning groups to ration out food and begin gathering foliage that could be used to conceal the earth lodges. Netya looked to where Caspian had been standing, but he was already gone. What would she have said to him, anyway?

Khelt returned to her side, taking her by the shoulders and bringing his forehead close to hers. "I do this for you," he murmured. "For the hope you have given me."

"It was the right choice," she said. "Many lives will be spared because of it."

"Maybe so. Go now, make ready your own preparations. And—" he

paused. "Tell me if the witch makes any plans of her own. I will not have her thinking she has bested my will because of this."

"Do not worry yourself over her, she only desires the same thing you do." Khelt only grimaced in response. His gaze lingered on Adel as Netya slipped away. The weeks to come would be trying indeed if the two of them continued to disagree. If anything, settling on the same course of action only seemed to have made Khelt even more resentful of his den mother.

As Netya headed back up the slope, she could not help but take a path that led her directly past where Vaya was collecting tools from the craftspeople. The huntress had been waiting for her. Spitting a mouthful of blood into the dirt, Vaya stepped backwards just as Netya was walking by, forcing her to stumble as a heavy shoulder rammed into her collarbone.

"Sleep lightly on the plains," the taller woman said under her breath. "There will be no tent walls to shield you from the night out there."

Whether the threat was a hollow boast or not, it found its mark. Many weeks might pass while the pack was on the move. How long until Vaya found another clutch of poisonous berries, or something worse? It was yet another concern to add to the already vast weight on Netya's mind.

Ignoring the huntress, she walked on by without sparing her a sideways glance. She tried to think of a way to outsmart her rival in the way Adel had suggested, but it was a fruitless endeavour that evening. Her thoughts were still overwhelmed by the days she would soon be sharing with one man, while another remained distant.

Two frantic days passed before the pack departed. They were not a people who hoarded treasures and keepsakes, but years of comfortable living on the outcrop had left them with much more to conceal in the caves than Netya would have thought. No effort was wasted when it came to blocking off the entrances with boulders and elaborate screens of foliage, but it was impossible to conceal the rest of the camp so effectively. The fresh earth that had been scattered over the fire pits would be conspicuous to the keen eye, as would the outlines of the earth lodges and the paths that had been worn in the grass by years of footfalls. If the Sun People spared the outcrop more than a cursory glance, they would realise they had found the home of their enemies.

Two of the hunters remained behind along with their eldest son, camped on a small hill a short distance to the west. Their task was to watch over the outcrop while the pack was away. Khelt promised to send runners as soon as the winter snows ended, but it was still a sombre moment for the pack to say goodbye. Danger would follow all of them in the months to come, and with the loss of Hawk and Essie so fresh in their minds, everyone knew their farewells might be permanent ones.

The procession set out at midday, Khelt striding out in front as he led his pack away from their home. A handful of outrunners scouted ahead for danger using the legs of their wolves, but the bulk of the group could move no faster than walking speed. With so many supplies to bear, along with elders and children, it would be no small feat for the pack to make their journey to the mountains.

The alpha occasionally called Netya up to walk with him, but more often than not she slipped back toward the middle of the group, walking with Fern, Wren, and Erech, who spent most of his time riding on the back of Nathar's wolf.

The days were long and hard, and Netya felt her own exhaustion mirrored by those around her. The hunters, who were used to pushing themselves at far harsher paces, quickly became restless, while many of the others struggled to keep up. Khelt drove a steady pace from dawn till dusk, and often even longer into the night if the pack was still able. The journey would become much more difficult once the rains arrived, and he did not want to waste the final days of summer on slow travelling. Yet, despite the hard pace, the pack's progress was slowed to a crawl by river crossings, rough terrain, pausing for stragglers, and a dozen other small hindrances. A journey that might have taken an able-bodied wolf no more than a few days became a monumental undertaking for such a large and heavily burdened group.

Some evenings, the alpha called Netya to his fire, but they did not make love as they once had. He lay with her, drawing her close into his embrace, holding her body near his until he slept. As was always the way with Khelt, he spoke little of his inner thoughts. Netya wondered sometimes if he felt able to share his worries without words. That simply being close to her was his way of unburdening his mind, knowing that, if he were to speak, she would be there to listen to him.

It was comforting in its own way, and sleep always found Netya soon after Khelt's arms had enveloped her. She felt safe and protected by his presence, but it still lacked something. As they walked during the day, she would catch her eyes following after Caspian's wolf as he strode at the side of the group. More often than not, she caught him watching her, too. It would have been

easy for him to slip to the back of the group, or head out with the others to hunt, but he never let her out of his sight for more than a moment. He was a distant guardian, always watchful, always protective. If he could not be with her, he could at least ensure her safety, and her happiness.

Netya was always glad to see him nearby, and yet she wished it was not so. It brought as much pain as it did comfort to see him there, his wolf's solemn eyes staring ahead with determination.

Forget me, she thought. Let me see you with another girl at your fire tonight. I cannot bear another day of this.

But bear the days she did, as difficult as they were. Night after night, Caspian haunted her thoughts. At the end of each day her feet ached, and so did her heart. It was endless, the plains stretching for mile after mile until the land and the colours she knew were lost behind her. Lush grass gave way to scrubby brown tufts of weed. Trees were replaced with rocks, and the fresh water from the tributaries of the great river ran dry, leaving them only with brackish dribbles of rain to fill their waterskins.

Clouds rolled in from the west, covering the land between them and the looming mountains in a shadow that brought with it the chill of fall. Netya was tired, ragged. The pendant around her neck felt heavy. Her wolf pelt sagged across her shoulders like loose skin on old bones. The journey was taking more from her than she knew, and its end seemed no closer in sight.

"Rest for a day," Adel said as they huddled together beneath a temporary lean-to made from the remnants of one of the tents. She took her apprentice's chin in her hand, examining her with a look of concern. "You have not been eating properly. Are you still taking the burnt leaf herbs?"

Netya shook her head. "Khelt has not lain with me in that way since we left."

"That is for the best. It is not always healthy to take any medicine for too long."

A slightly sickly feeling came to Netya's stomach as she listened to the patter of rain above their heads. "My monthly bleeding became less painful when I started taking them, but these past weeks it has not come at all."

Adel's look of concern grew. "And you have not shown any other signs that you are with child?"

"No." Netya knew from her training that her symptoms were not healthy.

"You must try to rest," Adel said. "A woman your age should not be suffering such illness. Do not take those herbs again until you have

recovered."

"I will rest once we have crossed the mountains. It cannot be more than a few days now." She gave her mentor an apologetic look. "Khelt needs me. I help keep him strong."

"You give too much of yourself to him. He is not the one you should be with."

Netya shrugged. "You must have considered abandoning him too after you were sent to be his den mother. Why did you not?"

Adel said nothing.

Netya took the older woman's hand and kissed it. "It is for the same reason that I must be with Khelt now. I still care for those who cast me out, and for those who took me in. I would give my own happiness to keep them from fighting."

"It was wise of me to choose you as my apprentice," Adel said, brushing back Netya's damp hair from her forehead. "You have grown to embrace all the potential I saw in you. I only wish fate could have put it to kinder use."

"My fate is far less painful than yours was. I will endure, and I will find happiness in it eventually."

"I will not forgive that man for what he has done to you—"

Netya put a hand to the den mother's lips, quietening her. "Spare no more of your hate on him, and I promise I will rest today."

Adel scowled, but she did not mention Khelt's name again. Netya slept, dozing on the back of Fern's wolf in the morning, and Nathar's in the afternoon. She did not feel much like eating, but she made herself fill her belly with dried meat and her daily ration of nut meal, for Adel's sake.

When the next morning dawned, some of the aches and strains of her body had eased. The walk was not as tiring, but the day was as long as ever. Her eyes still sought out Caspian in their idle moments. The travelling felt like it would never end, and so did the weight on her chest. Long miles of walking had strengthened her muscles, and yet she had never felt weaker. The mountains reached up to swallow the sky in front of them, white snow painting their peaks and valleys as they became lost in the clouds.

If an ending lay somewhere beyond them, it still seemed out of her reach.

—**45**— Netya's Challenge

At the foot of the mountains, Khelt finally called a halt to their journey. The drizzling rain had abated, and in the shelter of the boulders littering the low slopes they made camp for the first time in many days. It was only to be a brief respite, but it was a welcome one. The hunters needed time to scout out a safe passage through the peaks and valleys that lay before them, and it would do no good to lead the vulnerable pack across such treacherous terrain unprepared.

Fires were built, tents were set back up, and those who were able went out to forage and hunt. Netya counted herself among them, though her body told her otherwise. She had not been sleeping well, even when Khelt was there to embrace her. Any time she was alone with her thoughts she could not help but think to the future, and all the trials that awaited her. In the past, such thoughts had been few and far between. Any events more than a few days distant had seemed a lifetime away for the girl she had once been. If only she could go back to that simpler state of being.

She set out with the other seers to forage, ignoring the trembling pains of her body as she searched. If she had learned anything from the ordeal of being hunted down across the plains, it was that she was capable of great endurance when she had a task to focus on. Collecting edible plants and roots held little urgency by comparison, but it was better than remaining in the camp by herself.

The sun peeked out through the patchy clouds as the day rolled by, and Netya became lost in her wanderings until she realised she was alone. She squinted back the way she had come, recognising none of the rocks and twisted trees she must have passed by just moments earlier. Rather than panic, her isolation filled her with relief. Perhaps a few hours away from the voices of the pack was what she needed. It had been a long time since she got the chance to venture out on her own, enjoying the simple beauty of the land for what it was.

The lower mountain slopes lacked the colours and softness of the meadows south of the outcrop, but there was a majesty to them all the same. The peaks above her loomed higher than anything she had ever seen, and she felt like a tiny insect before them.

The sound of approaching footfalls disturbed her, but her momentary disappointment at hearing them became something quite different when she turned to see Caspian approaching. She closed her eyes, facing back toward the mountain, and pulled her wolf pelt tighter about her shoulders. The wind tugged at her dark hair, pulling it across her face in wispy strands.

"It may be dangerous out here alone," he said.

"Yes, it may be." She expected he would have embraced her at that moment, had things been different. Yet only cold distance sat between them.

"You are thinking as I am, are you not?" Caspian said. "That it would be a merciful freedom to keep on walking, away from everything that troubles you, to find out what new adventures the world holds."

"It would be such a sad relief," she murmured. "To leave so much behind. We are not free to come and go like the birds."

"Not at a time like this, no. Next summer there will be a great gathering of the packs, far to the south of here. Perhaps there I will find another clan in need of my aid."

Netya turned around, forcing herself to look at him. The wind seemed to tug at him, calling him away, threatening to take him somewhere far beyond her reach.

"Do you really mean to leave?" she said.

"I cannot say. I try to give Khelt my counsel, but it is not as it once was. I try to think of the pack, but you are the one to whom my thoughts return. I cannot love them as I have loved you."

Netya closed her eyes again, tears falling from beneath her lashes. "There will be another pack, and another female to love. One of your own kind."

"I hope so too. And yet I cannot stand such a thought."

Netya fought the urge to run forward and embrace him. Desperate impulses flared to life in her head, only to burn out like dying embers moments later. What if they left together that very day? What if they abandoned everything they knew, living only for themselves from that moment on?

She could never betray the others in such a way, and neither could Caspian. Perhaps, if he left, she could once again remember the warmth she had shared with Khelt. She wanted to be happy again, and she wanted the same for Caspian.

"Perhaps you should go with the others to scout the mountain pass," she said, her throat feeling dry. "We might both feel better in being apart."

Caspian smiled, and shook his head. "I cannot. It would be wise, I know.

When you slipped from my sight, I could not help but follow you out here. My wolf desires nothing more than to see you safe. If you cannot have my love, you will at least have my protection. Once the pack has settled again I will try and find my own way. But until then, I fear the will of my wolf is stronger than any good sense I may have."

Caspian's words endeared him to Netya so much that she almost forgot herself and embraced him anyway. He embodied the wolf within him like no other. For all of his intelligence and understanding, the pride of the male beast lingering beneath his skin ran as deep as instinct. The animal side of so many of the Moon People made them volatile and wild, but Caspian's spirit was that of the wolf revered by seers and shamans alike. The pure symbol of strength, loyalty, protection, and wisdom. Perhaps it was not the complexity of his character that had drawn her to him, but rather than simplicity of it. He was the majestic wolf of dreams and stories.

"If I return to the camp," Netya said, "will you assist the hunters with their scouting? Then neither of us need worry over the other."

"I shall try my best."

They walked together for a short while until the rest of the foragers were back in sight. No more words passed between them on the way, but it was a pleasant silence. Even in the worst of times, his company still made her happy. It was a happiness she would have to learn to give up.

Before the sight of them together could spark any more gossip, Caspian climbed back up the slope in the opposite direction.

"Goodbye," Netya called after him.

He turned, giving her a smile to warm the rest of her day. "Goodbye."

* * *

The Sun girl had brought a curse upon their pack. Vaya was convinced of it now. Netya had them all under her spell, the alpha, the den mother, even Caspian. Had she intended for this to happen all along? For them to be driven from their home and forced to wander like nomads, so that her people could claim the plains for themselves?

All of Vaya's life she had fought for the place she desired among her pack, and Netya had worked to uproot everything she held dear day by day, until now it was all but gone. She had watched the girl closely during their journey, waiting for her chance, but there was always someone between them. Caspian watched Netya all day long, Khelt took her to his fire by night,

and when neither of them were present Fern or the den mother would always be nearby.

Cunning schemes had never been Vaya's strength. She regretted her decision to poison Adel. Just like every attempt she made to try and undo the Sun girl, it had managed to twist back against her. The den mother might have forbidden a challenge between the two of them, but she could not always be around to intercede. Vaya knew what she had to do if she wanted the pack rid of Netya. It was the last thing she *could* do.

To her luck, she found the Sun girl returning to the temporary camp alone. It was her only chance, and she seized it without hesitation.

"What do you want, Vaya?" Netya said as the huntress approached. She seemed weary, distracted, as though Vaya's very presence was almost beneath her notice. Everything about her was insulting.

"You know what I want," she shot back. "You may have little honour, but I would put it to the test anyway. I refuse to spend another day with you as part of my pack."

"Do you mean to kill me?"

"Whether you die from the wounds of a warrior's challenge is in the hands of the spirits, not mine. Though it would bring me no grief to see it happen. Should you live, by my right as victor I would have you leave our pack. I challenge you, Netya."

The Sun girl looked down at her hands. Even now she seemed a timid, cowardly creature.

"And should I win?" she said.

Vaya snorted. "That will not happen. Dream of what you will, it makes no difference to me."

Netya looked up at her, and Vaya was surprised to see that her expression held no anger, but rather an imploring look. "What did I ever do to make you hate me so?" she said.

Vaya's brow twisted into a glare, and a flash of uncomfortable anger took light in her chest. "You are our enemy! Every day you have spent with us has been a troubled one for our pack. You bring shame and failure upon me, and death to our brothers and sisters. Because of you we have been driven from our home!"

"Were those things my doing?" Netya said.

"Of course they were! Hawk and Essie lost their lives trying to save you. From the day you strode into our camp you were in the alpha's furs,

whispering into his ear, enjoying a status you did nothing to earn! You were never one of us. You do not belong."

The Sun girl nodded slowly. "I understand what it is like to feel as though I do not belong, yes."

"Of course you do. At least you admit it."

"But I am not the huntress who strives to stand shoulder to shoulder with the men."

"What does that mean?" Vaya growled, the frustrating anger burning hotter for reasons she could not explain.

"That is the truth of it, is it not?" Netya said. "I know you are a woman of pride, Vaya. It hurts you to think that a girl of the Sun People like me may have succeeded where you have struggled all your life."

"You speak with the forked tongue of a witch, just like your mentor!" Vaya fought the urge to lash out and wipe the pathetically blank look from Netya's face. Her rage boiled hotter, the girl's words echoing in her head, refusing to be forgotten like the meaningless nonsense they were. "I will have my challenge, with or without the consent of those who protect you!"

"It was not me who caused this. You were the one to poison the den mother, were you not?"

"And what if I was?! Without you, it would never have happened!" Vaya grabbed her by the front of her clothing, shaking her frail body roughly. She felt the cord of the strange pendant the girl wore snap beneath her fingers. The piece of wood clattered to the rocks between their feet. Teeth bared, she stared into Netya's eyes, finding them full of tears. What did this wisp of a child know? How weak she was, how useless. Never belonging, never understanding. It would be a mercy to see her dead.

"Very well, Vaya," she said, her voice thin and tired. "If that is what you believe will bring you happiness, I accept your challenge."

The huntress snarled in victory, letting go of her rival and shoving her back, sending her stumbling to her knees. "Before the whole pack, then. I would have them witness your failure with their own eyes. When the sun falls this evening, you will leave us, whether it be in exile or in death. Swear it to me, on your honour."

Netya bowed her head, reaching out to pick up her fallen pendant. "I swear. If it means bringing an end to this, I will challenge you this evening."

Rage still simmering within her, Vaya spat on the girl in disgust, enjoying the way it made her flinch. How easy it had been to break her will. Even her stupid flailings, her insolent words, had all been for nothing. Vaya's determination would not be swayed. Her fury would be extinguished once and for all with the ending of this feud. Finally, after so many months, she would sleep well knowing that the Sun girl had been purged from their pack.

* * *

Netya was tired of so many things. What good would more resentment toward Vaya do her? The moment she had seen how blind the huntress was to all but her own emotions, she had known it must come to this. She wanted the bitterness between them to end. Her fear of Vaya had given way to dislike, then anger, and finally a desire for vengeance stronger than any Netya had ever known. But now, when it came to it, all she felt for the other woman was a cold sense of resignation. Weariness, pity, and regret that something so small could have led to so much pain and upheaval.

As she walked to the centre of the camp that evening, she only wished for it to be over. No more ill would come of Vaya's actions after that night.

"Where are you going?" Fern called after her. Netya drifted on by as if in a trance, focusing her will on what was to come. She had not brought her spear. It seemed it would do her little good either way.

Vaya stood waiting in the middle of the camp, arms folded, feet set apart. From the gathering of hunters spread in a circle around her, it seemed she had spread boasts of her victory already. Netya was only thankful that Khelt and Caspian had not yet returned. Their presence would have made things more difficult. An alpha could defend an unwilling participant if they had no desire to take part in a challenge, but, from her understanding of it, it was dishonourable for anyone to stand in the way once both challengers had given their consent.

"Netya!" Adel caught her by the arm, dragging her back. "What is this? What have you done?"

"I intend to challenge Vaya," she said plainly.

"I already forbade this. You know better than to throw yourself into something so foolish!"

Netya leaned forward, whispering into her mentor's ear, her words quiet enough that no one else would hear them. In the eyes of the others, it might have seemed like a final, tender embrace between mentor and apprentice.

Adel let go of Netya's arm, gazing after her with a grave look as the young woman continued on toward her challenge.

"You cannot let her do this," Selo said from the den mother's side. "Vaya will kill her!"

"It is Netya's right," Adel murmured. "We must respect her decision."

More voices joined together in concern as the ripple spread throughout the pack. Netya heard Fern calling out louder than the others, and the sounds of her struggling as Adel and Selo had to restrain her.

Forgive me, Fern, she thought as she came to a halt in front of Vaya. *I* should have told you. But perhaps this way is best. Fern might only have tried to persuade her away from what she was about to do, and it was best Wren and the others did not worry. It would be over soon, anyway.

"Netya has agreed to challenge me," Vaya called out, the confidence in her voice bringing the gathering to a hush. In that moment, she almost seemed to embody the strength and authority of an alpha herself. Perhaps, in another life, she could truly have been a woman of great deeds. "I have always thought what most of us dare not say aloud," she continued, "that Netya does not belong among our kind. Should I win," she paused to give a small snort of amusement, "she will leave us, and never return."

"And should Netya win?" Selo called out.

Vaya shrugged. "Must we waste breath considering it? She has not even brought her weapon. She knows how this will end."

"There is no honour in this," Oke muttered. The hunters loyal to him had never been part of Vaya's group, and as they stood stoically at the sidelines their expressions mirrored the distaste of their elder.

"What honour is there in anything this girl has brought upon our pack?" Vaya retorted. "It will be a fitting end to her time here."

"Netya," Oke said, fixing her with a hard look. "You do not have to agree to this challenge."

An expectant silence fell. The distant moaning of the wind rolled down the mountain, threatening to steal away Netya's resolve. She could still abandon her decision if she wished.

"I swore to Vaya that she would have my challenge this evening," she said. Her voice did not sound confident or commanding like Vaya's. What pity the pack must have felt for her, standing there alone, blindly embracing what might well be her death. She had never been meant for acts of great strength or skill. Perhaps though, after that night, the others would think on the frail Sun girl differently. She had not accepted Vaya's challenge for the reasons they all thought. "We all know it would be no contest," Netya continued.

"Vaya is a great warrior, and I am not. I have no wish to fight her, knowing I would only lose."

"You gave your word," Vaya snarled. "And now you mean to go back on it?"

Netya shook her head. "I promised a challenge, and a challenge you shall have, but I will not throw my life away foolishly."

"Then name your challenge! Any contest of might you desire, and I shall best you!"

A small glimmer of satisfaction steadied Netya's nerve. Vaya's pride. Her blind, foolish pride. It was just as Adel had predicted.

"You told me earlier that you refused to spend another day with me as part of your pack," she said.

"And I meant it," Vaya replied without hesitation. "I will be rid of you by nightfall."

Netya took a deep breath, and nodded. "Then my challenge is for you to stay true to your word, Vaya. If your word is your honour, then enduring my presence must be more than you can bear. I will not fight you. I will not subject myself to any contest. You have had the power to be rid of me since the day I arrived." She looked the huntress in the eye, forgetting any fear she had ever felt toward the woman. "Leave this pack, and you will never have to suffer my presence again."

Vaya laughed. "It is my pack, not yours! Only one of us will be leaving this night."

"She will not fight you, Vaya," Adel said, stepping forward. "You agreed to her challenge. You admitted your own words. Do you have the courage to stand by them? Or are they the empty boasts of a coward?"

On its own, Netya's challenge might have been dismissed. It was not the way of the Moon People, more a trick than any kind of contest. But the den mother's words lent it credence. It was every bit a test of Vaya's honour as a fight.

Eyes flitting to Adel, a hint of panic came into the huntress's expression. "I am *always* true to my word, but this is not what I agreed!"

"The entire pack heard you agree not moments ago," Netya said. "Surely Vaya is a huntress of honour, who stands by her word, not a fool who blindly accepts such challenges without thought."

The gathering seemed confused. The hunters looked to one another in apprehension, whispering questions back and forth. It did not escape Netya's

notice that Adel allowed the hubbub to grow, until Vaya's name and the question of her honour reached their ears, before making a sharp motion with her hand to call for silence.

"Well, huntress?" Netya said. "Are you a woman of your word?"

Vaya's brow twitched. Her fingers curled. Her shoulders trembled. She stared at Netya in disbelief, as if searching desperately for an answer that would not come. Cunning had never been Vaya's strength. All she had left was her honour, and her pride. They both knew it. The silence stretched out moment by moment, and every second that slipped by took with it another shred of the huntress's integrity in the eyes of her pack. There was only one thing she could do to salvage what remained. She had been cornered by Netya's trap.

"My word is my honour," she said, all of the authority gone from her voice. Her words were dry and trembling, barely restraining the fury that brimmed beneath them. "No true warrior of our kind should stand to share a fire with one of the Sun People." She turned an accusing gaze on the hunters watching her, but it was devoid of conviction. "If our alpha and den mother are willing to endure her, then they are not fit to command my loyalty! This pack is mine no longer." She spat on the ground.

Adel still had her hand raised for silence, and silence was all that followed Vaya as she turned her back on the camp. Even those most loyal to her could only stand and watch as she walked away into the east, back down the slopes of the mountain toward the plains. Only the young hunter Rolan broke away from the group, dropping the bowl of food he had been holding in his haste to catch her. They were too far distant to hear any of the words that might have passed between them, but Vaya took the young man by the shoulders and brought her forehead close to his. She pointed back in the direction of the camp, and continued walking on her own. Rolan watched until she was gone, then slumped into a sitting position.

"Vaya," Tal sighed, glancing in Netya's direction. "To think your pride would've brought you down on this little girl's spear, rather than upon the blades of your enemies."

Netya prepared to defend herself from the accusations of the hunter. She was shocked when, rather than anger, she saw a hint of fear in his eyes. He inclined his head to her respectfully.

"We would all of us do well to be wary of such wisdom and cunning," he said, then uttered a term in the Moon People's tongue that Netya had never

heard before. It sounded like a joining of the words "little mother", but uttered with a strange cadence of voice that made them sound as one. A handful of others murmured the same phrase, offering similar deference to her. Vaya's hunting partners only graced her with looks of anger, but in them too she glimpsed traces of fear. The pack broke apart, the shocked silence still muting their conversations. Fern dashed forward, embracing Netya as she voiced her pride and her anger all at the same time, burying her face in her friend's shoulder, tearful with relief.

Netya soothed her, still not quite believing what she had just done. "What was that word they called me?" she said, looking to her mentor.

Adel smiled. "Little Mother. It is as it sounds. A name for a woman who will one day be den mother to her pack." She put a hand on Netya's shoulder, looking on her with pride. Pride, and a glimmer of something darker. "Few women could best a huntress like Vaya. You have their respect now, and their fear."

Netya shivered, preferring to cling on to Fern than to let herself be encouraged by her mentor's words. "I do not want to be feared."

"Better they fear you than believe you are helpless. The cunning to best a rival like Vaya is a powerful gift of the night, in their eyes." Adel ran a finger beneath a lock of Netya's dark hair. "Make it your strength, and fear will dissuade others like Vaya from ever challenging you again."

For many months, Netya had expected she would sleep much more soundly with Vaya gone from the pack. That night, she only felt the hollow of absence. The sort of power Adel sought to cultivate in her was not a path to happiness. If there had been any other way to bring an end to her feud, she would have taken it. Would Vaya go on to bring her troubles to another pack? Would she seek to take vengeance on others of the Sun People? Or would she die alone out there on the plains, abandoned by those who had once been her kin?

Netya did not even know if Vaya had family who cared for her among the pack. If she did, none of them had tried to stop her from leaving. What kind of a life had the huntress lived to shape her into the person she had become?

She clutched her furs to her chest, seeking out their warmth to dispel her sombre thoughts. It had been the empty clarity of losing Caspian that had allowed her to see the path to outwitting Vaya. Cold, cunning tact, bereft of the worry for herself and others that might have led to more caution. It was the life Adel had lived to make her a figure of such fear and respect. Adel,

who for all of her power and wisdom, remained distant from the embrace of love and friendship.

The Little Mother was not a person Netya wanted to be.

Lost in a Storm

For all those who respected Netya's besting of her rival, Khelt was not among them. The news reached his ears quickly after his return the following day. He seemed tired. Flecks of melting snow clung to his fur cloak, and his eyes were hollow with a lack of sleep. An impatient snarl crossed his face when he learned of what had happened, and Netya almost expected him to accost her right there in front of the pack. He held himself in check, however, waiting until she was alone before taking her aside behind one of the tents. Gripping her by the shoulders, he looked on his mate-to-be as if he was admonishing a disobedient child.

"What authority do you have to make such decisions, Netya?" he said. "Spirits help me, if we had the time I would lead scouts out to bring back Vaya myself. Every strong hunter is precious to us in times like this, and Vaya was one of my best. The result of your squabbles may end up harming our pack more than you know. It is my place to deal with such things, not yours."

"You told us to resolve it between ourselves," Netya replied, undaunted by the way Khelt loomed over her. "I only did as you suggested. If there was any other way, I would have taken it."

The alpha let out a sigh of frustration. "This is why packs follow a single alpha. You know I would have done all I could to help you, but I would not have weakened the whole for the sake of any one person, not even you. Vaya may not have been a likeable woman, but the pack would have gone hungry many times without her."

"She was the one who poisoned Adel. She all but admitted it to me." Khelt paused. "Is that true?"

"Adel and I suspected it for a long time. You do not know how much Vaya detested me. She would have risked the den mother's own life to persuade the pack of my guilt."

"So Adel had a hand in this," Khelt growled.

"No, that is not the point!" Netya put a hand on his chest. "I did what I did of my own accord. It brought me no pleasure to see the back of Vaya, but the pack is better off without her. It was the only way."

"You say you make these decisions on your own," Khelt said, "and yet they

still seem born of the witch's schemes. I have heard what the others have started calling you. She is shaping you into her own image."

"I have learned many things from the den mother, yes, but I am not her, nor do I wish to be. Surely you do not detest her so much that you would deny bringing her poisoner to justice?"

Khelt worked his jaw back and forth, glowering past her at the tent wall. "Perhaps Vaya was treacherous, perhaps not. Perhaps Adel wanted the pack rid of her and used you to make it happen. Whatever the truth may have been, it was my place to decide it, no one else's. You should have brought your worries to me."

"Perhaps so." Netya gave him a pleading look. "But would your distaste for Adel have blinded you to the truth?"

"Blind me?! Spirits give me strength, Netya." He shook her by the shoulders. "How do you know that you are not the one being blinded by the witch's lies?"

His distrust hurt. The alpha professed that he loved her, but his love was still bound to the idea of an attentive, obedient mate. That was not the woman she had become.

"I am not just your pet concubine any more," she said. "There are things I can understand for myself."

The frustration in Khelt's eyes softened slightly. He relaxed his grip on her shoulders. "Forgive me," he said. "I do not mean to treat you as a child, but you are still a woman, Netya. The leadership of the pack is the charge of men. Adel would have you think otherwise, and that is why you must be wary of her. Our people would not fare well under her guidance."

"They would fare better if the two of you combined your strength rather than fighting one another. Surely agreeing to leave the outcrop is proof of that?"

"I do not wish to have this discussion again," Khelt said, straightening up. "It is neither the time nor place. We have found a pass through the mountains, but the snows threaten to swamp it before long. I will lead the pack through at first light."

Netya pressed her lips together stubbornly. His intentions were good, but he refused to listen. He was the alpha, and she was just his female. Everything was well between them until she attempted to step outside of that role.

"Come," Khelt said, giving her a smile. "Sit with me by the fire. I have said

my piece. Let us enjoy the evening together and rest well before tomorrow. The crossing will be difficult on all of us, and I will need your strength to help those who are less able." He tugged her close to his side, guiding her back toward the middle of the camp. Netya's feet were stubborn, but she soon gave up and relented. At least she had swayed him away from fixating on Adel. That, perhaps, was the best she could hope for.

Fortune had been with the scouts in their search for a safe crossing. The path they had happened upon wound through a valley between two peaks, circumventing the treacherous slopes and crags that loomed higher up. It was safe, but that safety would not last long. Hail rattled down on the pack's tents during the night, and by midday they had trekked high enough into the mountains for it to turn to snow. The valley stretching before them was already clad in white. Sagging trees clung on desperately by the roots to the slopes on either side, becoming thicker farther on until they blocked the view ahead completely. The scouts assured them that the valley opened out on to a gentle slope that led down from the mountains on the opposite side, but from where they stood it seemed a long and unsteady trek. Snow was flurrying down from the higher slopes fast, and already the trail the scouts had left the previous day had been obscured. The wolves tried to follow their old scents, but even those seemed to have been scattered by the weather.

"We will freeze in this valley if the snows catch us," Adel said. "Perhaps there is a better way."

"What way?" Khelt growled. "The snows come to these mountains quicker than they do the plains. Every pass like this will be lost within a few days. We must push forward, while there is still time."

"If we go north we can skirt the mountains completely," the den mother replied.

"And how many weeks will that take us? The pack is already tired. We follow this route."

Adel glowered after him as he strode ahead, taking the lead down into the valley. "Again he toys with fate. The snow will not stop, no matter how hard he bares his teeth at it," she said to Netya.

"Then we must make haste, so that he does not have to."

Netya fell back to help the others as they strode through the snow around their ankles. Most of the pack, even the elders, soon took to the legs of their wolves to fight through the cold and difficult footing. Many belongings that had been tirelessly carried across the plains were abandoned as they went, a string of discarded bundles following in the pack's wake as carrying them became too cumbersome for the increasingly four-legged group.

Despite the stamina she had built up over the days of travelling, Netya was exhausted within a few hours. The snowfall became even thicker at the base of the valley, to the extent that the more able-bodied pack members were forced to clear a path ahead for the others. Netya's toes felt like they were freezing inside her fur-stuffed moccasins, and even with the aid of her spear as a walking pole she began to struggle.

Later that afternoon, her feet finally went out from under her. She tripped headlong into a drift of icy snow, the impact stinging her numb face painfully. A moment later Caspian was at her side, hauling her up and brushing the flakes from her clothing.

"Do not let the others see you fall," he said, his expression pained with sympathy. "Those lagging behind are more exhausted than any of us. It is only our strength that keeps them going."

Netya looked back, nodding as she squinted through the flurry of snowfall. It was so thick now that she could barely even make out the tail end of the group.

Caspian followed her gaze. "I will go back and make sure no one falls behind. Stay strong, Netya. I know you can."

"I will." Heat warmed her face for a moment as she squeezed his hand without thinking. She wanted him at her side, giving her the strength to keep going. He smiled at her, restraining the twitch of his fingers than threatened to squeeze back. Then he was gone, taking the shape of his wolf to wade back through the snow toward the end of the column.

Netya forced herself to go on, gripping her spear with both hands as she hauled herself ahead of the group. Khelt called a brief rest late in the afternoon when they found shelter beneath an overhang, but the few small fires the pack were able to kindle did little to rejuvenate their spirits. The snow had slowed their progress significantly. They had not even reached the thicket of trees they had glimpsed earlier in the day.

Adel shook her head with worry as the seers sat huddled around her fire. "He has underestimated this weather," she said. "We reached the mountains too late. A few able-bodied scouts may have been able to make this crossing yesterday, but the rest of the pack will not fare so well."

"We must have hope," Netya said. "Khelt will lead us through this."

"It is not too late to turn back. The snows will only get deeper the farther we go into this valley."

"Please," Netya said, tugging at her mentor's furs, "do not make this another battle between the two of you. Not at a time like this."

Adel stared into the fire, saying nothing. Netya prayed she would listen. The pack could not afford to falter when their spirits were already on the verge of breaking. They had to weather the storm.

Rather than making camp in their sheltered spot, Khelt had them back on their feet within the hour. Daylight still lingered, and the snow was only getting worse. He understood as keenly as anyone that they had to make it out of the valley as soon as possible.

Dragging herself back to her weary feet, Netya joined the procession of wolves as they shuffled out from beneath the overhang and resumed their journey. The route Khelt had chosen took them along the side of the valley, up a narrow ribbon of flat rock that served as a natural path. The snow was not so deep, and the footing more consistent, but by the time night fell the pack was walking with a sheer drop to the valley floor on their left side.

Wind tugged at Netya's furs, whipping her hair into her face until she was forced to tie it back in a knot. She tried her best to assist those who needed help, but before long she had little energy to do anything but keep her own feet moving forward. The Moon People seemed to be faring a little better with the stamina of their wolves, but even they were struggling. Adel hurried up and down the column tirelessly, making sure the strongest among them worked in shifts to carry the weakest upon their backs. In such a time of need, all of the den mother's regal mystique vanished. She did not hold herself back in her reserved, aloof manner while others were suffering. She was simply a seer that night, tending those in need of aid with sympathy and words of encouragement. It changed her. With the image of the stern den mother abandoned, Netya wondered whether she was looking upon the compassionate young woman who had become a seer all those years ago, before she had been traded away by her pack as a token of peace.

Caspian was the same, carrying Wren and several of the other youngsters on his back when their legs failed them. He stayed near the rear of the group, just as he had said, making sure that if any of the stragglers fell, he would be there to pick them up. While Adel was ceaseless in giving out her instructions, Caspian barely said a word. He was not a leader. His greatest strength lay elsewhere. While he might have stepped in to give orders in the

absence of anyone else, he preferred to give his aid directly, focusing on one person at a time. Perhaps that was why he was not alpha himself. He preferred to focus on the individuals. His attention was intimate, personal, and passionate. The detachment of guiding a group as a whole did not come naturally to him. He cared too much.

All through the night, no matter how hard the wind blew, no matter how thick and freezing the snowfall became, Khelt strode on ahead of his pack. When a fallen tree blocked their way, he heaved it aside before anyone could rush forward to help. He dug through heavy drifts of snow, checked for unstable footing with his own paws, and scouted the mountainside by himself when new pathways opened up. He led them on alone, never faltering, never hesitating. Like the bear that had crowned his throne, he bulled through the storm, carving a path for the others in his wake.

Thick clouds covered the moon, and soon even the brilliant white of the landscape around them had sunk into darkness. The clean path they had been following broke up, diverging into a less precarious, but more confusing series of slopes and crannies that stretched across the side of the valley. They were high up now, and a several times Netya thought she glimpsed the tips of trees below them.

The pack's pace began to slow. Tired wolves stumbled off the right path, slipping in heavy snowdrifts and forcing others to go back for them. The valley was becoming dangerous, and the snow had whipped itself into a blizzard. Netya lost sight of Khelt ahead of them, and the wind stole away her voice when she tried to call out. Only his tracks remained to lead them on, and the falling snow threatened to fill them almost as quickly as Netya could keep up. In her haste, she did not realise that only a few of the others remained in sight until she felt a hand shaking her shoulder.

"We must go back!" Adel yelled over the howling wind. "The others cannot keep up. Any moment I fear one of them will slip away into the storm!"

"Surely we are nearly out of the valley by now," Netya replied. "Khelt must be leading us on for a reason!"

"He is lost, even those who scouted with him do not recognise this path any more! We cannot keep going. The weather only gets worse the deeper into this valley we stray."

Netya's heart sank. After such a gruelling journey, the thought of turning back made her want to slump down in the snow and give in to her exhaustion. Adel glared at her. "Better to live with our despair than to walk out of this

valley with the elders and the children dead. Where is he? Where is the alpha?"

Reluctantly, Netya pointed at the set of tracks she was following. "Up ahead. Let me go with you, perhaps he knows we are nearing safety."

"Come if you wish. Perhaps you can make him see sense again."

Struggling up the slope together, Netya and Adel hurried arm-in-arm to try and catch up with Khelt. His long strides had led him even farther ahead than before, up a steep incline that almost felt like it was cresting the edge of the valley. Within moments they had lost sight of the pack behind them, along with any semblance of direction. Netya felt like she was fumbling blindly through the storm, clutching at hairs in the wind in her attempts to struggle on through. Khelt must know where they were going. He had to.

After a long, breathless trek, the shape of the alpha finally emerged from the snow in front of them. He had paused at a broad, but somewhat sheltered spot beneath a sheer rock face on the right. The air was clearer of the flurrying snow, and the wind had lessened. He crouched at the edge of the open area, peering down over the barely-visible tops of the trees that clung to the cliff face just below them.

"What are you doing!" Adel bellowed, letting go of Netya as she stumbled forward. "The pack is falling apart while you wait for them up here!"

Khelt looked back with a start, baring his teeth the moment he saw the den mother. "I am finding my bearings so that I can lead them to safety! I can see nothing through this blizzard."

"And you think you will see more up here? We must go back while there is still time! This valley will be the death of us."

Khelt shook his head sharply. "We push on through the night. If we find a way down to the trees, we will be sheltered."

"Has the cold addled your mind?! There is no pushing through this snow! It will swamp all but the strongest of us by the time we reach the end of the valley!"

"Leaving the plains was *your* idea, Witch!" Khelt growled at her. "And now you would have me turn back? I have had enough of your timid plans. The pack is strong, they can endure this storm."

"Khelt, please," Netya said. "Are we not close to safety yet?"

He looked to her, some of the fury draining from his eyes, then shook his head. "I do not know. I cannot tell a thing in this storm. Perhaps we are already more than half way through the valley, perhaps not. My instincts tell

me we must push on."

"Push on blindly, and become even more lost!" Adel exclaimed. "Whether we are close to the end of the valley or not, better to retread ground we already know than fumble on in the dark. This snow hides everything from us, every pitfall and patch of ice. If we keep going, someone will fall victim to this place sooner or later!"

"And how many will be lost in the weeks of hard travelling it will take to get around these mountains?!" Khelt retorted. "Take courage for once in your life, woman! We will make it through."

"You care only for the strong. You would let the weak die to have your glory at conquering these mountains."

Khelt stepped closer to her, raising his hand aggressively. Netya tried to hold him back, but he shook her off with impatience. Even she was no longer enough to soothe his anger toward Adel. The den mother held her ground, meeting his gaze without blinking, even as the snow clung to her eyelashes.

"This is my final warning, Adel," Khelt said. "You will mind your place, and you will listen to your alpha."

"Alpha," Adel hissed. "No man who has ever called himself that has done anything to earn my respect. You are savages, all of you."

Khelt lashed out, striking her across the face. A cry escaped Netya's lips, but the moment she darted forward the alpha's furious voice halted her.

"Stay back, Netya! You have no place in this."

The blow staggered Adel, but she held her ground. Clenching her jaw tight, she drew herself back up to face Khelt.

"Touch me again, and I will make sure your hand never strikes another woman."

"Please," Netya said, tears brimming in her eyes. "Stop, both of you. Think of the pack."

"I am thinking of the pack," Adel said, not looking away from Khelt for an instant. "Go on to your death out here if that is your desire. I am leading them back to safety."

Netya wished she had a wolf of her own, for in that moment the strength of a wolf was the only thing that might have stopped them. Adel turned away, taking not a single step before Khelt snatched her by the arm, dragging his den mother back. She threw him off, yanking herself free of his grasp, and this time when his hand lashed out to strike her she ducked under the blow, blue eyes burning with fury as they took on the feral glint of her wolf. Adel's

clothing peeled and erupted into white-streaked fur, her fanged muzzle sprouting from her lips as she lunged into Khelt's chest, knocking him to the ground beneath her.

Snow flurried around the two of them as they rolled over, Khelt's roar of outrage becoming a snarl as the jaws of his own wolf burst forward to meet Adel's. The two beasts snapped and kicked at one another, teeth clashing and locking as both struggled to come out on top.

Netya screamed their names, clutching at Adel's fur to try and drag her off, but she might as well have been a snowflake in the wind. The two huge wolves bulled her aside like she was nothing, sending her sprawling in the snow as their vicious snarls echoed in her ears. Bitter cold filled her mouth and stung her face. This was not a challenge. There was no honour or ceremony in the howls that filled the night air. The beasts within Khelt and Adel had finally broken loose, and they meant to kill one another.

The den mother found her footing first, taking the chance to dash away from her opponent before he could use his superior strength to his advantage. Neither wolf overshadowed the other in size, but Adel's body was sleek and slender, while Khelt's bulged with muscle. Rearing back up on his hind legs, blood dripping from his muzzle, he roared and lunged at her. Adel's reacted in an instant, swiping Khelt's right foreleg out from under him and darting under the bite that had been meant for her throat. Her jaws snatched his leg as it flailed in the air, catching him just above the paw and tightening until an audible crack split forth.

The alpha howled with pain, stumbling headlong into the snow as he wrenched himself free with a spatter of blood. Flecks of crimson and wisps of black fur painted the snow all around them. Netya could almost taste the tang of it in the air. The bitter, coppery heat of violence.

She crawled back to her knees, staggering through the snow toward them. Adel loomed over Khelt as the wounded wolf floundered in the snow, his blood still dripping from her teeth. Before she could lunge again, Netya hurled herself on to her mentor's back, twining her fingers into the wolf's fur as she threw all of her weight into pulling her away. It was enough to make Adel slip and falter, snarling with impatience as Netya's momentum sent her tumbling over the other side of the den mother's back and into the snow again, tufts of fur still clutched in her hands.

Khelt was back on his feet, his right foreleg held gingerly to his side as he fixed his vicious gaze on Adel and threw himself forward. The impact of his

weight bowled her over, sending her sprawling in the snow with a yelp as her adversary huffed and blinked through the pain of his damaged leg. A swipe of his claws opened Adel's vulnerable back from shoulder to hip, the effort drawing howls of pain from both wolves. Fresh blood poured through the den mother's fur, soaking into the snow in such great quantities that it made Netya feel sick.

She could do nothing to stop them. The wolves tearing each other apart before her would only rest once one of them was dead. In a moment of horror, her eyes flitted to where her spear had fallen in the snow. Stumbling back over to where it lay, her fingers closed around the shaft. She screwed her eyes shut, wishing for the terrible sounds behind her to end. She could not. She refused. How could she choose between the two of them? How could one die to save the other?

Forcing herself to look, she rose to her feet. Her eyes were hollows of terrified white. Her body trembled so hard she could barely keep her grip on the spear.

"Stop," she whispered as Khelt and Adel's slavering jaws locked once more. "Just stop."

They were both bleeding from half a dozen places. How long until even their resilient bodies gave out? Adel darted back to the shelter of the cliff face, using the alpha's wounded leg to put a few yards of distance between them. With a grace and mastery that Netya had never before seen in any of the Moon People, she made the transition to her two-legged form in one fluid motion, spinning around to claw a handful of grit and pebbles from the ground where the snow had not yet fallen. Before her eyes could even finish reverting from their feral appearance, she hurled the handful of grit into Khelt's muzzle and slipped into the body of her wolf once more, leaping at the alpha and clawing at the back of his neck as he blinked and spat, blinded by the tiny fragments of rock and soil clogging his senses.

All he could do was heave his body upward into Adel's, roaring as he put every bit of his strength into throwing her off. The sheer force of it caused the den mother's paws to leave the ground, kicking and struggling as she clung to Khelt's back for an instant. Then she was clawing at nothing, toppling backward through the air until she hit the rocks at the edge of the cliff face with a heavy crack.

She did not move from where she fell. Terror like Netya had never known shot through her body as she stared in disbelief at the fallen wolf, followed by

a nauseating wave of despair. She could have acted. She could have stopped this. Adel lay with blood trickling from the corner of her mouth, her eyes wide and glassy as the falling snow alighted on her fur.

Khelt hauled himself back to his feet, panting for breath as he snarled at her. Netya could not see the man she cared for any more, only a ravenous beast. The kind of animal he had always professed his kind were above. Adel had warned her the Moon People were savages. Now, at long last, she saw that side of them with her own eyes.

The den mother blinked, and a low whimper escaped her muzzle. She still lived.

Khelt growled in anger, tensing his hind legs as he made to pounce. This time, Netya did not hesitate. One of the people on this valley ledge was not yet a beast.

Dropping her spear in the snow, she threw herself between the two wolves, holding out her hands just as Khelt lunged toward her. Their eyes met for an instant. She saw the animal, the fury, and in the moment before the alpha's fangs sank into her flesh, the horror of the man who realised what he was doing.

Khelt's bite went deep, twin spikes of pain piercing her side as his teeth ripped through her clothing and into the flesh beneath. The breath left Netya's lungs, coming out in a thin gasp. His jaws loosened as quickly as they had tightened, leaving her to stagger back and collapse in the snow. Now it was her blood that painted the white ground beneath them, and she did not have the hardy body of a wolf to stem its flow.

"Netya, no." She heard Adel's dazed, tearful voice. "You fool girl, you fool!" The den mother's arms encircled her from behind, dragging her into a sitting position as she gazed down at the blood spilling from her body. It flowed fast and hot, and even the pressure of Adel's hands could not halt it.

Through the haze of pain, she saw Khelt's face, that of a man once more, staring at her in disbelief. He knelt a few paces away, shoulders trembling as he witnessed what he had done. Of all the burdens the alpha had managed to endure unflinchingly, this was not one of them. The look on his face was that of a ruined man, one who had become the cause of his own undoing.

Netya closed her eyes, lifting a hand to try and reach out to him. The pain in her side was dull and deep, and the numbness of the cold made it seem very distant.

"Now do you see?" she whispered as the alpha crawled over to grasp her

hand.

"Save your breath, girl," Adel hushed her, struggling to tear open her clothing and get at the wound. "Khelt, press your hands on her side, here!"

Netya ignored her, shivering as the throb of her injury grew even dimmer. "Both of you. This is all your hate for one another has wrought."

Khelt looked up at the den mother. The anger that had consumed them moments earlier had burned away to nothing. Instead there was only terrible, harrowing despair.

"I see," he whispered.

—**47**— The Waning Sun

Caspian was still attempting to gather the scattered pack back together when Khelt and Adel reappeared out of the darkness. The group were fearful and exhausted, and with their leaders missing they threatened to fall apart entirely. Bringing them to a halt in a broad cranny sheltered by a line of trees, Caspian did his best to make sure everyone was accounted for.

The dim worry that he had not yet counted Netya among their number grew, but it only flared to life when he saw her limp body cradled in Khelt's arms. Adel huddled by her apprentice's side, clutching her hand and muttering under her breath as she leant up against the alpha. The pair of them were ragged and bloody, barely even able to hold themselves up.

"What happened?!" Caspian exclaimed as he dashed forward to meet them, eyes fixed on Netya's pale face. A torn piece of hide bound another wad of blood-soaked clothing to her body just above the hip. Her chest rose and fell gently, but her breathing was shallow.

"Never forgive me," Khelt murmured, unable to meet his friend's gaze.
"Never forgive me for this."

Caspian looked to Adel. The den mother only shook her head, features contorted with pain, and called for her seers.

"We may have undone the very thing we desired to protect," she said. "Try to start a fire, and put up a tent covering to shelter her. She will die if her blood does not stop flowing soon."

He had taken his eyes off her. She had slipped away into the storm, and he had not been there to protect her. Caspian felt the pounding of his heart building in his ears, fear stealing away his breath as he stared at Netya's beautiful face, the soft locks of her black hair drifting in the wind, the wooden pendant still resting upon her breast.

It took the help of two seers to ease Netya out of Khelt's grasp. The arm he had been using to support her legs seemed to pain him greatly every time he tried to move it, but he refused any aid, sitting silently by himself as Adel and the others tended the wounded girl. The den mother's hands shook as she called for medicine and the tools she would need to close Netya's wound. The back of her fur gown was split open, and blood dripped from the gashed flesh beneath. It was not long before she began to sway and falter. Ignoring her

weak protests, Caspian pulled her away and made her lie down while Selo saw to her wounds.

The other seers stepped in to take care of Netya, the rest of the pack working to erect a barrier using their tent poles and hide covers that would give them a little more shelter from the wind. With the snow still building up around them, the group huddled in their cranny in the side of the valley, cold and anxious, stranded in the middle of the blizzard.

Piles of furred bodies huddled together for warmth, but Caspian could not join them. He and Fern sat up all night at Netya's side, long after the seers had finished doing all they were able. Once more, any sense of impropriety he might have felt at revealing his feelings for another man's woman vanished. He had been a fool to think they would dim with time. Whenever Netya was at risk, whenever danger threatened her, he could not stand by and watch from afar. The world would become so much darker without her in it. Losing her would mean losing too much. They would not sit up and talk again. She would not ask her curious questions for him to answer. They would make no more wood burnings together. He would never feel the warm, honest touch of her lips.

Khelt sat apart from the camp, his head bowed as he faced the storm alone. For the first time in many years, Caspian had no desire to reach out to him. No one had spoken of what had happened, but he knew. The beasts inside had come loose, and Netya had been caught in the middle. He tried to tell himself that his friend was a good man, that it had been an accident, a moment of blind impulse. The calm, balanced reasoning that Caspian prided himself on told him that Khelt was not to blame, and yet all the reasoning in the world could do nothing to still his heart that night.

You were supposed to be the one protecting her, he thought. Anger might have made him demand answers from Khelt, but he could not bring himself to leave Netya alone.

Devotion to the spirits had never been something he prided himself on, but as he squeezed his love's hand he implored them to take the essence of his own life and share it with her. If there was even a small chance they heard him, he did not want to jeopardise it by letting go.

Netya's body lived, but she did not return to the world of the living. Wounds that one of their own kind might have overcome within a few days, Adel said, might trouble one of the Sun People for weeks. Caspian carried her himself as they filed their way back down the valley, trudging through the deep snow back the way they had come. Khelt did not lead the way any more. He walked at the back of the column, refusing anyone's aid as he clutched his wounded arm to his side.

The weather refused to lighten, but Adel pushed them on just as hard as Khelt had done the previous day. Another night spent out in the cold, and Netya might not be the only one who did not live to see dawn.

Caspian's spirit felt caught in the same place as Netya's, trapped somewhere between one world and the next. Everything seemed distant to him, even the chill of the wind and the voices of those around him. He could not acknowledge the waking world until the girl cradled in his arms opened her eyes. The furs he had bundled around her body to keep her warm added an exhausting weight to his burden, but he bore it without thinking. As he forced his legs to keep moving through the snow, the sight of her face nestled beneath the hood of her wolfskin kept a thread of hope in his world, and he clung on to it. A little spark of the sun that had somehow crept into their pack. She thought differently. She acted differently. That was why he loved her.

Regathering some of the supplies they had abandoned the previous day, the pack finally emerged from the valley at nightfall. Snow had dusted even the land at the edge of the mountains, but it was not the icy blizzard that had threatened to swamp them the night before. Day by day they travelled, meandering back to the lowlands bordering the plains, before halting their progress entirely. Still Netya did not wake, and Khelt did not seem to know where to lead them next.

The nervous discord among the pack grew, but Caspian barely cared to indulge it. When Netya began crying out in her sleep, her body writhing and shivering with pain, he felt his heart was on the verge of splitting apart.

"She is getting worse," he said to Adel as she tried to soothe Netya with a few drops of strong herbal tea.

"Her wound is healing, but it is not the wound that pains her," the den mother replied. She looked at him, eyes lined with the marks of her own sleepless nights, and swallowed the grief in her throat before speaking again. "The poison of our kind has taken hold of her body. It burns strong beneath her skin, and it grows worse by the day. The pain will soon become too great, and she will die."

"You must heal her. Surely you can."

Adel shook her head. "I cannot. I am not skilled in the medicine of the Sun People. Many of the plants I would use to purge toxins from her body might kill one of her kind. I have little faith they would even work. This sickness is deep and wicked."

"Then what of her own people? If anyone would know of a cure, surely it would be them. They had an antidote to the nightwood berries when we believed there was none."

"This is no ailment born of a plant," Adel said. "From what she told me, her people are not great healers. No seers or shamans hail from her village. Besides, I fear they would sooner see her dead now than offer their aid."

Caspian raked a hand through his hair, desperation racing in circles through his mind. She could not be abandoned to the pain of such a death. Not Netya. Not such a cruel fate for her.

"The North People," he said suddenly. "They are of her kind. Their shamans would know which medicines might heal her."

"It would take days to reach them," the den mother replied. "And it is a slim hope."

"Days for the whole pack, perhaps, but not for a fast wolf. Their western village is not so far from here."

Khelt must have been listening from his seat nearby, for at the mention of the North People he rose to his feet and approached them. "I will take her," he said, his voice solemn and subdued, as it had been ever since the night in the valley. "If there is any hope of me undoing what I have wrought, I must try."

"It is not your place to take such a thing back," Caspian said, standing up to meet him. He locked eyes with his friend, the wills of both wolves struggling against one another for a moment. For a love they both shared, for a conflict that had long been held in check, and for the duty of shouldering such a responsibility rather than entrusting it to another.

Caspian placed a hand on the alpha's shoulder, and pressed him back down into a sitting position. "I would run until the life left my body, if it meant saving her," he said softly.

Khelt's eyes fell, the fingers of his injured arm clenching into a fist. After a long pause, he nodded. "You were always faster."

"And you more stubborn. The pack needs leadership. Stay, and prove to them you are still worthy of being called Alpha."

"It will be difficult carrying her when she is like this," Adel said. "Her

wound may open up again."

"The sickness will claim her life faster than an open wound. How many days do you think she has left?"

Adel shook her head. "I have only seen this once before. That man died within a week."

A sickening feeling crept into Caspian's stomach. He did not want to believe it might already be too late for Netya. "Bind her to my back, tightly. We cannot wait any longer."

He shook his head in refusal at the offer of any food or supplies as Adel and a few others rested Netya's limp body upon his wolf's back. Anything else was pointless weight to carry, and he would not be stopping along the way. He would run until he reached the North People, or until his body broke.

They bound Netya's hands around his neck and her hips to his midsection. He could feel her shallow breath against his fur. The distant pulse of her heart pattered against his back. A soft groan left her lips, and her knees tightened against his sides. If she was even dimly aware of what was happening, he hoped she knew to hold on.

The cords of grass and animal sinew were painfully tight against his body, but he did not protest or give any indication that he wanted them loosened. If Netya slipped from his back at any point, he would be unable to carry her properly the rest of the way. He waited for no farewells or talk of when he might return. As soon as the knots were in place, he ran.

It tormented him to hear Netya's soft noises of pain as his shoulders jolted and jarred beneath her, but he could not afford to take a gentler pace. He was forced to shift position constantly, making sure she never began to slip or slide. The grass tore beneath his paws, throwing up clods of loose earth as he ran. At first he sprinted as fast as his legs could go, making a tiny speck of the pack's encampment in the distance behind him. He ran as he had never run before, knowing that every tug and strain on his sore muscles was a small piece of his life he could channel into Netya's one chance at survival.

The passionate energy of his first dash took him far, but he realised he would collapse long before reaching the North People's territory if he did not pace himself. It fought against every impulse in his wolf's body to slow down. He refused to settle into the brisk trot he knew he would be able to maintain all day long. It might kill him to push himself so hard, but it was not his own life that mattered.

Easing off his pace only a little, he ran hard all day long, streaking through

the scrublands and back into the long grass of the plains. Ground that had taken the pack many days to traverse sped by him in a matter of hours, making his way north and east in the direction of the village he remembered on the borders of the great forest.

The sun was dipping below the horizon by the time he reached the rocky hunting grounds that were home to mountain cats and other hostile predators. With Netya on his back and his body already aching for rest, there was no way he could fight off any sort of attack, nor was there time for caution. He relied on his speed to carry him through the night, skirting many of the telltale crags he knew were likely to house dens of wild animals. Still, he could not avoid all of them, and before long he was traversing territory that had been freshly marked with the acrid stench of whichever nearby feline pride had claimed it.

His body had little left to give, and the midnight calls of feral hunters harried him for many leagues across the darkened land. There was no space for fear in his mind, only the burning motivation to keep his tired legs moving, kicking up stride after stride as he tore through the territory of his rival predators, hoping they had easier prey to distract themselves with that night.

Caspian's tongue lolled from his mouth as the last traces of the plains he knew disappeared behind him, giving way to grassy hills and overhanging trees that threatened to block out the sky and stifle his sense of direction. Before morning he was forced to wade across a river, hoping desperately that the footing would not give way beneath him in the middle and send him and Netya under, to be dragged away by the tug of the current. Morning birdsong reached his ears from among the trees as he hauled his dripping body out on the other side, and he paused for just a moment to catch his breath and swallow a few greedy mouthfuls of water to soothe his parched throat.

His legs trembled with the effort of carrying Netya all day and night. Her heartbeat still drummed against him, but he could have sworn it was fainter now. Was it only his tired mind imagining it, or was the rough journey taking its toll on her, too? How close was he to the North People now? Despite the patches of woodland he was now crossing, he had not yet stepped beyond the borders of the great forest. The route his people usually took led to a larger village even farther to the east, and Caspian had only ever ventured through the forest itself to reach the smaller encampment he now sought.

He would find the distinct scents of the Sun People before long, he told

himself. Those would lead him back to their home. He began to run again, breath rasping in his throat as his body seemed to crumple like dried grass with every step, only to spring forward as he grit his teeth and forced one more surge of energy into his legs. Several times he felt the fibres of the strained cords around his body popping. They had rubbed him raw through the night, and the sting of them rasping against his flesh made every movement twice as agonising as it should have been. The smell of his own blood reached his muzzle as the bindings cut into him, testing his resolve moment by moment as he strode on.

The sun was up again, chasing away the murky clouds of the wet season for a short while as it beat down on Caspian's back, making him long for the chill of the night and the shade of the trees again to cool his burning body. By midday all he could feel was pain, and Netya's soft murmurs of discomfort had fallen silent. The grip of her knees around his waist seemed looser. He no longer had the strength to keep shifting beneath her whenever she threatened to slip off balance. Her small body felt heavier than stone as it slumped to the left, dragging him relentlessly to one side as he strained to keep himself from falling over. The uneven weight worsened his burden tenfold, until he was forced to slow to a sluggish plod, finally leaving the heat of the sun behind him as he stepped beneath the boughs of the ancient forest trees.

The musk of damp, aged wood reached his muzzle, and with it came the distant hint of something that did not belong in this natural place. It was the smell of boughs that had been freshly split. Smoke that had crept through the branches day after day, until eventually it had decided to cling there. It was the smell of people, but it was so distant that Caspian could not allow himself to feel relieved. His legs felt like they had nothing left to give, and neither did the distant beating of Netya's heart.

His forepaws slipped, sending his muzzle burrowing into the loamy earth beneath him. Netya's weight lurched even more haphazardly to the side, dragging him down as he collapsed next to her. He snorted soil from his muzzle, blinking dizzily through the mottled sunlight that spilled down through the canopy above. He did not have the strength to get up. He tasted blood and earth, and the tang of terrible despair that dug its claws tighter into his body with each passing moment.

His side rose and fell heavily. He closed his eyes as Netya's warm body nestled against him. He was here with her, at least. Her spirit would never stray far from his. A whimper of pain left her lips, and her fingers tightened in his fur. Opening his eyes, Caspian clenched his teeth, and he forced himself to move. His body felt like it was tearing as he howled at the trees above, dragging himself back to his feet and pulling Netya up with him. Neither of them were dead yet.

* * *

Wooden walls, and the creak of a wooden cot beneath her. Familiar words spoken in a language she had not heard in many weeks. Was she home in her bed again, after all this time? A snag of distraction tugged at the back of her mind, one that she could not remember being there before. It was like a niggling pair of teeth gnawing at the nape of her neck, urging her toward something she did not understand. Her body felt like it was recovering from a long fever. Dull aches and stiffness lingered deep in her bones, but already they seemed dim and meaningless. A sudden urge to run gripped her, as if it was a way to shake off the remnants of her discomfort for good.

She reached down beneath the warms furs that covered her, touching the spot to the right of her navel that she remembered being pierced by a wolf's fangs. There was a scar, but no wound. It did not even hurt at all. A spindly spider danced up its strand of web, scaling the wall of logs to her left. She turned her head in the opposite direction, and found a familiar face waiting to greet her.

"Caspian," she whispered, reaching out to touch him. He took her hand and held it to his cheek, kissing her wrist as though she was the sweetest fruit he had ever tasted.

"You are back with me," he said.

Netya's brow furrowed as she tried to remember. She had been with him before, when her dreams had been troubled with pain. Her guardian wolf had been there also, making it difficult to tell the two of them apart. They had seemed one and the same.

Caspian did not press her to speak. He only held her hand tight, drinking in her closeness and letting her share in his. She recalled the valley, and the chill of the snow. The fight between Khelt and Adel came back to her, and she sat up with a start. Caspian put a palm against her shoulder, easing her back down as her head swam and her vision exploded with bursts of colour. Her body might have been ready to move, but something else still fogged her mind.

"Do not worry yourself," he said. "The pack is well. Your life was the only one we feared losing."

Netya rested her head back against the soft fleecy bundle beneath it. "What is this place?"

"We are with the North People." Caspian straightened up, and gestured behind him. A large man with hair the colour of fire rose from where he sat on the earthen floor, his thick braids swaying around his lined face as he looked down on Netya with a smile. It was only then that she realised she had been speaking with Caspian in her native tongue.

"Your wolf-kind friend was half dead himself when he arrived with you. He is fortunate we recognised him as one of our friends from the plains."

"Shaman Lutek's medicine was able to keep you with us," Caspian said. "He put you into a deep sleep for two days while your body fought the sickness."

"The wolves from the west are not always as agreeable as your pack," Lutek said. "I have had to heal the work of their bites many times in years gone by. You will feel unwell from the herbs I gave you, but your body will cleanse them fast. To survive the curse of the wolf-kind is to be blessed with their strength from that day on."

The niggle at the back of Netya's mind tugged a little harder at the shaman's words. Unable to pull her right hand away from Caspian's grip, she reached out with her left to grasp Lutek's broad palm in thanks. "I have little to give but my gratitude. If there is anything else I can do to repay your kindness, you need only ask."

"Your man tells me you are a seer. I would be curious to learn the ways of the wolf-kind witches."

Netya smiled at him. "I am only an apprentice, but I would be happy to share with you all I can."

The shaman bowed his head, then left the two of them alone as he ducked out through the drape covering the doorway.

Netya and Caspian gazed at one another for a long time. She curled her fingers gently through the hair at the back of his head, never wanting to let go. He did not look to have moved from his place by her side in days. Despite the tiredness in his expression, his eyes sparkled with relief.

"Khelt's bite—" she said at last. "Adel once told me what its sickness did to those of my kind. How long has it been since it happened?"

"Little more than a week."

Netya reached beneath the furs to touch her wound again. It could not have healed so thoroughly in such a short time. She looked back up at Caspian. "I am like you now, aren't I?"

He pressed his lips together, and nodded. "I fear so."

"I feel something that was not there before. In my thoughts. Like a voice without words."

"A newborn wolf, given life in the body of a fully grown woman," Caspian said. "I do not know what it will mean for you. Our kind have many years to become accustomed to our wolves before they rise up inside us."

"I am not afraid," Netya said, cupping his cheek again. "Not with you and the others to guide me."

Caspian smiled, the corners of his eyes glistening as he knelt beside her cot and drew her into his arms. "Everything about you is beautiful, Netya." He kissed her neck. "I could never have let you go."

She closed her eyes, clinging on to him tight. "You have always had my love."

"And you mine. I will not let it slip away again."

They embraced until Netya felt herself becoming lightheaded, and Caspian allowed her to lie back down against the bedding.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"Coming north to meet us. Fern arrived a day before you awoke. Once Lutek became certain you had overcome the infection, she hurried back to tell the others."

"What will happen when they arrive?"

Caspian paused, combing her hair back from her forehead with his fingertips. "I do not know. Khelt had not been the same since the night in the valley."

"I think he realised the truth of what he had done. Him and Adel both. Their hearts are good, but their tempers toward one another blinded them to it."

"I hope you are right. The pack may not survive another rift between them." Netya brought his hand to her lips and kissed it. The fogginess in her head was making her weary, and she felt sleep calling again. "Even if the pack does not survive," she said softly. "I will always stay with you."

* * *

In the days that passed after the mountains, Khelt began to realise that his

pack could no longer remain as it had once been. He desired a great many things, most of them for the people whose safety he was tasked with, but some for his own sake also. He wanted the pack to be safe and settled once again. He wanted Adel to finally admit her fault and listen to him. Most of all, he desired Netya's forgiveness.

As bitter a realisation as it was, it was not difficult for the alpha to accept that many of the things he desired could no longer come to pass. Too much had been risked, too much had been changed, and things had been done that could no longer be taken back. The burdens upon him were many, and it was his task to shoulder their weight once more. It was his duty as alpha.

For the first time in many years, he took counsel with Adel, and the two of them talked. It was not a long conversation, nor was it an amicable one. There was little to say that they had not each come to realise on their own. They had crossed a breaking point, and their wolves had tried to kill one another. Neither of them retained any illusions of continuing to coexist peacefully.

Their conversation was not pleasant, but it was devoid of anger. Bitter, cold truths were voiced, and the alpha and den mother listened to one another until they both came to the same inevitable conclusion.

Leaving the pack in Adel's charge, Khelt left with Fern and a handful of others to travel north when word of Netya's safety arrived. There were important questions to pose to the pack still, but first he needed to face the shame that tormented him night and day. He and Adel both understood the responsibility they shared for what had happened, but it had been Khelt's bite that pierced Netya's side. He would always remember it, and so would she.

They arrived at the outskirts of the North People's village early one morning. Rather than intruding on the hospitality of their allies, Khelt insisted they make camp a short distance away from the collection of log houses that nestled between the old trees. It was a tradition he had long held when visiting the North People, but this time he observed it for his own reasons. He did not want to walk among them with his shame. He did not want them to look upon him and see the beast who had mauled the girl they were tending.

Fern went on to announce their arrival, but she did not return right away. In her stead, Caspian came.

Khelt rose to his feet as soon as he saw his friend approaching through the trees, hurrying to meet him before any of the others had the opportunity to accost him with questions.

"Come, speak with me alone," he said. "There are things I must say." He held his breath, waiting for the anger to come. He had more than earned Caspian's ire, and he was ready to endure it. Khelt had fought with many of his male companions when he was younger, but never Caspian. Perhaps now was finally the time.

"Yes, I think that is wise," the other man replied.

In an instant Khelt saw the understanding smile on his lips, and he felt a fool. Even more an impulsive child than if they had ended up scrapping together in the undergrowth. Was it worse, enduring his patience over his rage? Caspian would never give in to violence when words would suffice. That was the difference between the two of them, and Khelt now realised it without a shadow of a doubt.

They walked together for a long while, straying out of earshot of the others, and farther still. It was not until many years later that Khelt would realise exactly why. A long walk in silence, just the two of them, without the need for any reason or purpose. Their wolves had taken many such journeys together in the past.

"The pack cannot survive as it is," he said eventually. "I spoke with Adel. The two of us both agreed."

Caspian came to a halt. He nodded in understanding, as if he had suspected as much. "If nothing else, I am glad the pair of you finally talked."

"I should have listened to you. Both of us should. You and Netya saw this coming as clearly as the morning sun." He sat down on a fallen log, his throat and chest leaden with remorse.

"Do not dwell on what you cannot change," Caspian said. "You realised the truth of it in the end."

"And almost at great cost. Netya had to make us see our anger destroying the very thing it was trying to protect. I am a fool—" Khelt caught himself, growling with distaste at his own self-loathing. He had not come here to wallow in his failure. He was a stronger man than that. "As you say, I should not dwell on what I cannot change. The truth of it is clear to me now."

Caspian nodded. "Of what did you and Adel speak?"

"The pack cannot stay whole while both of us remain part of it. I will not tolerate her interference, and she will not accept my authority. We must either fight, or we must reach an accord."

"I imagine neither of you have any taste left for fighting."

"No," Khelt sighed. "I detest the woman. If she were to fall dead tomorrow,

I would shed no tears over her passing. But an alpha must rise above such things, as I failed to the night we crossed the valley. I refuse to let the anger she stirs in me rule my thoughts. We reached an accord, and it must be as we have decided. There is no other way." He laced his fingers together, resting the middle of his forehead against his pressed thumbs. He longed for an alternative, but there was none. Once he said it aloud, there would be no going back. He reminded himself of the price Netya had paid for his failure, and grit his teeth. "The pack will divide. Adel will take those willing to follow her, and the rest shall remain with me. She goes north, I go south. We will be kin no longer."

Caspian remained silent, gazing off into the trees.

"Netya will go with her," Khelt said, the alpha's authority leaving his voice as he revealed to his friend what pained him most. "I cannot offer her what she wants. I have known it for so long, but I refused to believe. In her heart she is too much like Adel."

Caspian looked at him then, and the strain on his face mirrored Khelt's own. He could not maintain his calm composure knowing what had to come next. "Wherever Netya goes, so must I."

"I know." Khelt closed his eyes. "She pledged herself to me, and I failed her. I relinquished any claim on her heart the moment my teeth pierced her body."

"You did not mean for it to happen," Caspian said, stepping forward to place a hand on his friend's shoulder.

Khelt felt his eyes prickling at the comforting touch, his jaw tightening once more. They had not been born of the same blood, but Caspian was more brother to him than any man he had ever known. Even now, when such unforgivable things had been done, when such a terrible divide had been driven between them, all his friend had to offer in that moment was his reassurance.

"Do not excuse my actions," Khelt said, his voice shaking. "I knew what I was doing. Even if it was only for an instant, I was ready to hurt her if it meant getting at Adel. I gave in to the violence of my wolf. I went against all of our ways, and I proved myself unworthy of her. No woman deserves a man capable of such things."

"I never desired such an end to this."

"I know." Khelt forced himself to smile, looking up to meet his friend's gaze. "I will never think badly of you, Caspian. You are the man she belongs

with, not I. Keep her safe. Let her become the woman she wishes to be." He rose to his feet, and Caspian pulled him into a fierce embrace. Khelt's brow creased with emotion, and he gripped his brother back with equal force. Though fate was cruel, it could not undo the strength they had drawn from one another so many times over the years.

"How will I lead my pack without your guidance?" Khelt said softly.

"You will find your way. I told you, you were always the leader, not I. Few would have had the courage, or the wisdom to make the decision you did. I have always been proud to call you my alpha."

A snort of pained laughter left Khelt's lips, and he clutched Caspian tighter. "When the pack gatherings come, we will sit up together by the fire. You will leave me with enough wisdom to guide my pack until the years pass by and we sit together once again."

"And you will tell me the tales of all the pretty young females you ensnare until you find your mate. With Adel gone, you need not worry over capturing girls of the Sun People to share your furs."

Khelt smiled. "I fear it may be many years before the last one leaves my mind. But I will do my best to give you the stories you desire."

They broke apart, having said all they needed to. Khelt had always feared their shared love for Netya would come between them, and in many ways it had. But as they walked back through the forest that morning, there was no taint of hatred or jealousy to darken their companionship. When they parted ways, they would do so as friends.

As they talked of lighter things on their long walk back, the alpha felt a small part of his burden easing. He wondered, as they strolled, how things might have been different had he never made the decision to take a pretty young Sun girl as his concubine.

* * *

In other circumstances, Netya would gladly have stayed many weeks longer with the North People. Their stories were new and their skills unique, and the few fleeting days she spent with them sped by like feathers on the wind. She wanted to learn how their shamans divined the turning of the weather, and how their farmers cultivated such rich crops year after year in the same earth. No more than the briefest glimpse into their way of life was afforded to her before it came time to leave, and she said her goodbyes to Lutek and his people with the promise that she would one day return. Now

that she had seen the ways other tribes lived, Moon and Sun people alike, she wanted to visit all of them. Every village from here until the end of the world, wherever that was. She was beginning to believe that the world had no end. Beyond the forests she had found the plains, beyond the plains the mountains, and beyond the mountains there were broader lands still. There existed more things in the world than she had ever imagined.

It was with a heavy heart that she made the journey south with the others, knowing what was to come. Khelt had told her of his accord with Adel, but besides that they had spoken little. It seemed that he could no longer look on her without being reminded of what he had done, despite her efforts to reassure him. She forgave the alpha for his actions, but it was not just her forgiveness that he needed. It would be a long time before he overcame his own doubts. Perhaps it was for the best that she would not be around to remind him.

"You do not have to go with Adel if you do not wish," Caspian said one morning as they walked together across the plains, making the final stretch of the journey on foot. "There are others who could instruct you in the ways of the seers, and you have the wits to learn much on your own."

"But there are no teachers quite like Adel," she replied. "That is not why I must go with her, though. Khelt is strong, even now. I have faith that he will weather whatever trials the pack face in the years to come."

"And you believe Adel will not?"

Netya smiled and shook her head. "I think it is a different kind of strength that Adel needs. I have seen the kindness in her. She terrified me when I first came to the pack, but I have grown to care for her like family. She was not always so cold and bitter."

Caspian encircled her waist with his arm, drawing her in close. A year ago, Netya had been a hopeful young girl desperate to catch his eye. Now, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to be walking alongside him, cradled in his grasp.

"You helped awaken the woman she used to be," he said. "I tried to do the same, but it was never enough. Without Khelt, perhaps she will be able to thrive once again."

"And I want to be there to help keep her on that path. As much as I need Adel, perhaps she is the one who needs me more."

"My wise seer." Caspian grinned, kissing her forehead. "I always thought Adel a great woman, but perhaps now I have come to know one even greater."

Netya's cheeks warmed, and she rested her cheek against his broad shoulder, their meandering pace soon leaving them trailing behind the rest of the group. When they were out of earshot, she felt for his hand on her hip and twined her fingers between his.

"I still feel it growing in the back of my mind," she said quietly. "It gets stronger every day. In my dreams, sometimes I am the wolf now."

"Do not fear it," Caspian murmured. "When it rises up and takes hold, I will be there. Your wolf may be young and confused, but it is neither friend nor enemy. It is only another side of you."

"What if that side is not a pleasant one?"

"Then we will learn to tame it. The days ahead will be hard, but we have already endured worse."

Netya closed her eyes and stopped, pausing to embrace him as the gentle wind rustled the grass around them. The path opening up before her seemed hard indeed. Rougher and more uncertain than ever. Terrifying, even, but for the trials she had already faced in coming so far. Caspian was right. She would meet whatever came next, but not as a helpless young girl this time. From the wolf pelt adorning her shoulders to the spear slung across her back, the beads braided into her hair and the mended pendant resting upon her breast, she was a woman of the Moon People. She belonged to the sun no more.

With tears in her eyes, she embraced Erech as the two sides of the pack said their farewells. They had been given a few days to decide where their loyalties lay, but the time had come for them to take their separate paths. Winter loomed, and they could not afford to delay any longer.

"I will walk every day until my leg is strong enough to carry me to the pack gathering once more," Erech said. "I will make it there to see you and Fern again, I swear."

"We will be waiting for you." She smiled at him, blinking back the moisture that threatened to escape her eyes as she caressed his cheek with a palm. "Alpha Erech."

Swallowing down his emotions before they could crack his composure in front of the other young males, he embraced her tightly, lifting her off the ground for a moment with a groan as he braced himself with his crippled leg. Once he had done the same with Fern, Netya made her farewells to the few

others who had looked kindly on her during her time with the pack. Oke, Brae, Nathar, the craftspeople who had helped her make her spear, and her fellow seers who had elected to remain with Khelt. It was clear that many of the others were more than happy to see the back of her, but she had no eyes for them that morning. She would remember the ones who had been good to her, not those that made her feel like an outsider.

All in all, Adel's group made for a sorry gathering compared to Khelt's. Barely a quarter of the pack stood at her side, most of them young seers, totalling just twenty in number. Among them there was not a single distinguished hunter, and only three males. Caspian and the mates of two of the seers were all they had. One craftswoman, one elder, Fern, and Wren made up the remainder. With no family left on Khelt's side of the pack, Hawk and Essie's daughter had chosen to remain with the surrogate sisters who had taken her in.

Before they gathered their belongings to leave, there was one final farewell left for Netya to say. She suspected the alpha would have left without a word had she let him, but they would both regret it if they did. Seeking him out amidst the others, she tugged at his wrist, and met him with a smile.

"You have one last goodbye left to say, Alpha."

For a moment he seemed reluctant, but his face softened with relief when he met her eyes. "Netya. Of course."

"I do not recall thanking you for all you did for me. Even if I have, let me say it one more time. Thank you."

Khelt shook his head. "I did little for you that was worthy of thanks. You have lost everything you once held dear because of me."

"But perhaps I have gained more than that life could ever have offered. Perhaps it was fate, or the will of the spirits. These last months have left me with so much sorrow, but every day I tell myself not to regret it. Things are as they are, and we are still strong despite it all."

"Then I will not ask again for your forgiveness, as much as I may want to." "There is no need. You already know you have it."

The alpha sighed, looking on her with a fondness that made Netya's heart ache for all the things they had shared, and all the things they had been unable to.

"Be mindful of Adel, and be a good mate to Caspian," he said. "No matter which alpha you follow, you will always be welcome in my pack." The alpha remained still until Netya embraced him, then wrapped his arms around her

and held her tight.

"Thank you for the nights that made me a woman," she whispered.

Khelt's broad chest rumbled beneath her with a deep chuckle. "I shall not soon forget them. I only wish I could have given you more."

They pulled apart, and Netya bowed her head respectfully before him. "Alpha."

He tilted her chin up with a crooked finger, blinking back tears of his own. "You need call me that no longer. Goodbye, Netya."

Adel's gathering watched as the rest of the pack filed away into the distance, Netya standing between Caspian and Fern with her arms wrapped around Wren's shoulders. It was many hours before the group disappeared into the tall grasses on the horizon, but barely a word passed between Netya and her companions until their former brethren were gone. Many silent tears were shed, but no ill words were spoken. Those who remained with the den mother understood why it had to be this way. They had all come to their decisions on their own.

"Where will they go now?" Wren asked eventually.

"The snows are lighter in the south," Adel replied. "They may find an easier crossing through the mountains there."

"And what of us?" Netya said, looking to her mentor.

The den mother regarded her small group of followers one by one, making sure each of them met her gaze. "Without hunters and males, we are weaker than any of the clans whose territory we must skirt. We must be cautious, and we must be cunning. When the packs come together next summer, we must gather new strength, and pick our allies carefully. Until then, we head north. We can find shelter from the winter in the lands beyond the mountains, and perhaps a den to call our own."

"Who will be our alpha?" Wren said. "Will it be you, Caspian?"

"Do you think we need one?" he replied.

"A pack always has an alpha."

"If there is one thing I would have you all learn," Adel said, "it is that traditions will be our guiding light no longer. I am your leader. Alpha, Den Mother, call me what you wish. As long as I have your loyalty, I will do everything in my power to ensure the safety and happiness of my pack."

Netya bowed her head slightly, but she did not make it the traditionally submissive gesture she would have presented to Khelt. "Then lead us on, Den

Mother. We are all your daughters and sons now."
A thin smile lit Adel's lips, and a hint of the youthful glimmer came back into her eyes.

— Epilogue—

At the end of that year, when the first frosts of winter covered the northern grass, Netya awoke to a stirring sensation in the back of her mind. She lay there beneath the warm furs, clutching Caspian's arm around her chest as her heart beat faster. A low murmur left his lips, and he tugged her in closer against his body.

"What is wrong?" he said, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

"It's there. I can feel it again."

"Is it troubling you?"

Netya shook her head. "It is— I do not know. It feels different this time." She squirmed in the darkness, shivering slightly as a lurching feeling dragged like a hook at the nape of her neck. The first light of dawn was visible through the hide coverings of their makeshift tent, but she could not hear the voices of the others yet. Fern and Wren still slumbered peacefully alongside them.

"Come," Caspian whispered urgently, sitting up and throwing his cloak about his shoulders. He led her out of the tent and around the coals of last night's cooking fire, down the patchy slope at the base of the mountains and toward the hills beyond. Countless specks of frost dusting the grass around them caught the light of the sun, turning the northlands into a rolling sea of silver.

Netya breathed in the crisp air, closing her eyes as the urge to run grew. She was struggling to hold the niggle in check, but it was a niggle no longer. It was a writhing force inside her, ever questioning and calling, demanding she acknowledge it. It frightened her, but only in its strangeness. The growing voice of her wolf was unlike anything she had ever known before. That morning, it refused to go back to sleep.

"I think it is time," Caspian said, bringing them to a stop at the crest of the first hill. Leagues of empty land surrounded them, free of any and all distraction.

"I am afraid," Netya said, clinging to the front of her male's clothing. "I feel as if... As if I am a bowl of water, ready to tip. And once I do, something will come out that can never go back in."

"I know the feeling well." He took her face between his palms, kissing her gently. "It will seem very strange, but it is nothing to fear. You will not be the

same again, that much is true, but you will still be Netya. Let it come, gently, and see the world through your wolf's eyes."

She nodded, swallowing desperately, as if the sensation growing inside her was a bout of nausea that could be forced back down. Her senses prickled, the sights and sounds around her suddenly becoming much more keen. Caspian turned her away from him, guiding her by the shoulders as the first splinter of something unknowable broke loose from her mind.

"Try not to think. Instinct will guide you at first. Once you become used to the shape of your wolf, your thoughts will follow along soon after. Oh, and as you feel it taking hold, imagine your body clinging to your clothing like a coat of fur." He smiled. "Otherwise, you may end up very cold after you change back."

Netya nodded, her skin tingling so sharply she almost believed she was clad in fur already. The impending tug surged, flooding through her body like a hard buffet of wind, pressing outward from the spot at the nape of her neck until it had forced itself all the way to the tips of her fingers and the balls of her feet. Caspian stepped away. She stumbled, losing all sense of balance as the writhing knot broke loose and took hold, clamping around her mind like a set of iron jaws. The splinter became sharp, and for an instant the pain gripping her seemed so intense it was maddening, but as soon as it had flared it was gone, leaving Netya to wonder whether it had even been there at all.

Her body changed, the pressure inside pushing outward, beyond the limits of her small frame. She felt a splitting sensation, and remembered at the last moment to cast out the hooks of her shifting body to snag the clothing that clung to it. She dragged the wolf pelt she wore along with her, mingling with the spirit of the white beast who had become her guardian. Long fangs filled her mouth. The balance of her legs shifted backward. An overwhelming clarity came into the air she breathed, as if the scents she smelled before had been a murky fog, and now they were an intricate weaving. Within moments, the idea of *she* became something very different. *She* was no longer the girl who walked upon two legs. She was someone different. Someone new. Similar, yet distinct. Her thoughts were no less her own, but they had transformed along with her body.

Gazing down at the grass, she saw black fur cladding her paws, tinged with wisps of white, just like Adel's coat. The urge that had been building within her for weeks, the urge to run, finally broke free. Strength and energy like she had never known coursed through her limbs. She tore the ground beneath her

claws as she dashed down the slope of the hill. A cry of elation left her lungs, taking shape in a feral howl that echoed across the land.

Caspian's brown-furred wolf appeared alongside her, barking with excitement as he darted ahead, encouraging her to chase him. She no longer needed words to understand him. Her new senses read the simple motions of his body and the sounds he made without having to even think about them. The message was simple, but it was clear.

Bounding up the next hill alongside him, the world sped by so fast it made her giddy. The two of them ran together until the sun was high and their fur was damp with freshly melted dew. When they finally stopped, looking back over the ground they had covered with pride, Netya felt the tingle of her thoughts returning to clarity.

She sat alongside Caspian, nuzzling into his fur, and gazed up at the sun. As welcoming as it was, she longed to see the land bathed in a different light. The moon beckoned her, calling to its new daughter, and she answered willingly.

She awaited the night, for it was her time now.

Netya's story continues in <u>Daughter of the Moon: The Moon People, Book</u> <u>Two.</u>

Read on for a sneak preview!

In a flash of realisation—and not for the first time in her life—Netya realised that people were about to die if she stood back and did nothing. The white fur of the wolf pelt she wore twitched in the breeze, blending in with the snow-speckled brambles around her as she crouched there in silence. Fern, her pack-sister and closest friend, shifted in agitation beside her, eyes fixed on the scene that was about to unfold before them. Their younger sister, Wren, huddled in on Netya's opposite side. She hadn't moved since they first caught sight of the white hunters.

"Will those weapons of theirs pierce a wolf's hide?" Netya whispered.
"I do not know," Fern replied. "Perhaps, if they have sharpened the tips."

It was not the white hunters to whom Fern referred, but the group of Sun People gathered a short distance ahead of them, unaware of their predicament. Netya and her companions had come out to hunt for the third day in a row, knowing that birds gathered in large flocks upon the open ground in the mornings. They were easy prey for the jaws of a silent wolf, but this morning it was more than wolves that stalked them. The Sun People were not like Netya and her kind. They lacked the ability to take the shapes of wolves, and their bodies were weak and easily hurt by comparison.

Netya knew all too well the differences between the Sun People and her. She had been born one of them, after all. This particular group was not familiar to her, however. They hunted with ingenious tools that she had never before seen. Each one of them carried a long, curved piece of wood, with a tight cord strung between both ends. She had watched in fascination as they hunted the birds by knocking long wooden darts flighted with feathers into their strings, drawing them back and launching them with greater force than even the mightiest of spear throws. All morning they had struck bird after bird from the sky, bringing down several before wringing their necks and collecting up their fallen darts, then moving on to another area as the flock settled once again.

At first Netya and her companions had kept themselves hidden, waiting for the Sun People to move on and leave the hunting grounds unoccupied. Not all of the Sun People were hostile to Netya's kind, but they were in unfamiliar territory, and Adel had instructed them to avoid strangers at all costs.

Then the white hunters had appeared. They were wolves of the Moon

People, Netya and Fern's kin, but they did not belong to the same pack. That, if anything, made them even more dangerous than the others. A ridge stood between the white hunters—half a dozen wolves in total—and the five Sun People bringing down their birds. Netya and her companions had spotted both groups easily from their hiding spot, and it had not been long before the white hunters also caught the scent of strangers nearby. Though their fur was the usual light brown shared by most of the Moon People, they had streaked it with what looked like ash or paint, giving them a mottled white appearance that allowed them to blend in with the patchy snow around them. They were cunning, and they moved with the grace of seasoned predators, prowling ever closer to the group of unsuspecting Sun People on the opposite side of the ridge.

"We must do something," Netya whispered. "This will not end well if we stand by and watch."

Fern gave her a pained look, clearly conflicted. "It is not our fight to involve ourselves with. You know what the den mother would say."

"It does not have to be a fight unless we wait here and do nothing. We are seers. Is it not our duty to aid those in need?"

"*You* may be a seer..." Fern murmured, chewing her lower lip. "Oh, Netya. Why must you make a habit of throwing yourself into such danger?"

Before they could speak of it any further, the cries of the Sun People reached their ears. The decision made for her, Netya dashed forward. She allowed the sharp niggle of her wolf to rise up in the back of her mind, surging through her body and pressing outward from her core to the tips of her fingers, changing every part of her until she was running on four legs, the wind streaking through her dark coat as her clothing twisted itself into wisps of thick fur. She did not wait to see if Fern and Wren were following her, and immediately cursed herself for not cautioning the younger of her companions to stay back where it was safe. More and more often over the past few weeks she had been allowing the impulses of her wolf to take hold before her cautious mind was able to restrain them. She only hoped Fern had the good sense to do what she had not.

Haste was of the essence. The white hunters had moved to encircle their prey, sneaking up on the Sun People until it was too late for them to run. They were still holding back, hesitating, but Netya knew it was only a matter of time before one of the wooden darts was loosed from a tense string, and the conflict plunged into a bloody fight for survival.

She was grateful for the strength of her powerful canine legs, speeding her across the flat plain in a fraction of the time it would have taken her to cross the distance otherwise. The flock of birds took to the air in squawking droves all around her, scattering to the skies. They, at least, would be safe from the hunt for another day.

It was just as Netya had feared. The Sun People bellowed threats and warnings to the white hunters in their own tongue, but the wolves around them only growled back in anger. None of them spoke the same language.

Startled by the noisy flurry of birds, one of the Sun People swung around in her direction, pointing the tip of his strung dart at her and yelling for her to stop. She saw the fear in his eyes, the way the sharpened point of his weapon trembled. She forced the reasonable part of her mind back to the forefront. Her wolf receded, leaving her standing on two legs again with her palms outstretched, stumbling forward a few paces as she reeled from the suddenness of the shift. She was still unused to it.

"Hold your weapons, please!" She called out in the language of the Sun People, then looked to the white hunters and addressed them in their own tongue. "Stay your hunt, brothers and sisters! No blood has to be spilled needlessly!"

An uneasy pause followed, both groups equally confused by the appearance of the girl who seemed able to converse in two languages. One of the white hunters relinquished the shape of his wolf, throwing back a mane of long brown hair as he stepped toward her, keeping one anxious eye on the Sun People at all times.

"You know their tongue?" he barked.

"I do. Let me pass words between you rather than speaking with your teeth and claws."

"She is a beast like them!" one of the Sun People called out. "Do not trust what she says."

"If I am one of them then we outnumber you!" Netya snapped back impatiently, trying not to trip over her tongue as she swapped between one language and the other. "Would you rather listen to me, or fight?"

"What are you saying to them?" the white hunter growled. He seemed to be the leader of his pack, but he did not strike Netya as their alpha. Perhaps a high hunter. She hoped her intuition proved correct. A senior male would not be easily swayed by the words of a young girl, but he would be more inclined to listen than an alpha.

One of the other white hunters, a female with braids of animal teeth in her hair, relinquished her animal shape as well and clutched her leader's shoulder, eyes narrowed at Netya. "It is no wonder she wants to protect them," she said under her breath. "She is a sun wolf. I can smell it on her. She was not born of our kind."

Netya's heart beat faster, her pulse pounding in her ears as the eyes of the two hunting parties settled upon her. None of them trusted her. She had dashed into this brimming conflict on the impulses of her wolf without stopping to think of what might happen.

"I do not mean to deceive you," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "I will do only as I said. There is no need for anyone to die here."

"Kill her," the female hissed to the hunt leader. "She is one of them, stealing from our land like the rest."

"She wears the garb of a seer," the leader murmured back. "What ill omens will it bring to spill her blood upon our hunting grounds?"

The female stepped back sullenly, baring her teeth in a snarl. Netya took the opportunity to address the Sun People again, motioning for the one with his weapon trained on her to lower the strung dart.

"My kin say you are trespassing upon their hunting grounds. This is their territory."

"We know not where these beasts mark their borders," one of the less agitated men replied in a steady tone. "How are we to know which land is theirs?"

Netya turned back to the leader of the hunters. "They say they did not know this territory was yours."

"Then they are ignorant as well as reckless." The male ground his teeth, shooting a dangerous glance in the direction of the Sun People. "Their kind have stolen from our land before. They have killed our brethren. They do not deserve our mercy."

Netya felt her panic rising, but a glimmer of understanding held it in check. Much of her apprenticeship as a seer had focused around cultivating the wisdom necessary to understand other people. To understand when the words they spoke differed from what they held in their hearts. If the leader of the hunters truly believed what he was saying, he would not be hesitating to exchange words with her. She sensed the apprehension in him. It was buried beneath a warrior's courage, but he feared for the lives of his companions.

"Perhaps they do not," she soothed him. "Your woman has the right of it. I

was born of the Sun People myself, and I understand how they fear our kind. It was only by the mercy of a wise alpha that I was able to see with my own eyes the honour and bravery of the Moon People."

The leader hesitated, his lips moving silently as he considered the situation. Netya hoped her subtle temptation would work. It was difficult for most males of their kind to relinquish the glory of combat, but this one seemed a little older and wiser than most. She waited on his answer with bated breath. At long last, his chin dipped in a tiny nod.

Before he could speak, the Sun People raised their voices in alarm once more. The flutter of wings beat the air behind them. Netya snapped her head around to see Fern hurrying toward her in the shape of her wolf, the recentlysettled flock of birds scattering once again before her.

This time there was no opportunity for words to still the weapons of the Sun People. So preoccupied had she been with soothing the hunt leader, Netya had neglected to assure the other group of her good intentions.

"More of them are coming," she heard one of the Sun People call to another amidst the clamour of raised voices. Did they assume she had been stalling them? Playing a cunning trick to buy time before tightening the noose? She would never know. They loosed a volley of darts into the small band of growling wolves, bringing two of them to the ground with yips of pain as the others charged forward.

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Claudia King is a writer based in the United Kingdom, she studied Creative Arts at university and continues to maintain a passionate interest in storytelling across many forms of media. She owns a banana plant.

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