Daughter of Thunder

Or

The Land of Many Deer

(ca. 7000 BCE)

by Rose LaCroix

The morning the first wild cherries ripened, fifteen autumns ago, Half Moon, the seer who lived at the edge of our village, abandoned her hut.

The old she-wolf’s eyes were deep and uncanny, always ablaze like the fire pits we cooked our fish in. But on that day they blazed with a terror that chilled me nose to tail.

Her steps were quick for someone so old. I tried to keep pace with her a while and asked “Half Moon, where are you going?”

“Away, Starling,” she said, trying to get ahead of me.

“Away? Where?” I said, my young legs nearly running to keep up with her.

“The Land of Many Deer! Didn’t I tell you?”

She had, in fact. Four moons before, we had killed a deer and saved Half Moon the bones for her broth. But before she boiled them, she cast the bones and read their signs by the light of our fire.

The bones told her the Great River would flood and sweep our village away forever, after the first wild cherries had ripened.

None of us had taken her seriously. Our village of horse skin huts had been there since Half Moon’s grandmother’s grandmother’s grandmother’s time, and our village was on a rise a birch tree’s height higher than the river, high above the highest floodwaters anyone had ever seen.

“Supposing you are right,” I said, frustrated with the old seer. “What good are you doing us by running away?”

Half Moon stopped in her tracks. “Child, you must understand, the Land of Lakes and Rivers will be swept away. Our home will be lost beneath the sea for all time. Only the Land of Wild Boars to the east and the Land of Many Deer to the west will be left.”

I clung to her waist. “Half moon! You can’t go! We need you!” I begged.

She reached with spindly arms of remarkable strength and pried me off of her. “If you all get your wits about you, you can join me by the Ancestor Oaks in the Land of Many Deer. That’s where I’ll be. Go tell your stupid father!”

She flung me away none too gently and carried on, almost running, until she was far out of sight beyond the aspen wood.

I ran back to my village to tell my father, Raven. He was with my younger brother, Bright Star, knapping flint outside our hut.

What’s the matter? My father asked, setting his work aside a moment.

“It’s Half-Moon. She’s left in an awful hurry. She says a great flood is coming. The sea will swallow up the Land of Lakes and Rivers,” I explained.

“Good grief,” Storm said, rolling his eyes.

“When has she ever been wrong?” I challenged him, baring my fangs a little.

“Don’t you bare your fangs at your brother like that!”

I jumped. My mother, Marigold, spun me around and handed me a wad of grass. “I need you to help me with these fishing nets,” she said. “Come on, stop bothering your father and brother!”

“She’s not bothering us,” Father chuckled.

“Well she’s got work to do too. Everyone does their part for the big hunt! Come on,” she chided, grabbing me by the wrist and dragging me back to the hut.

We sat cross-legged, on deer skins across from each other, the hearth in the middle of the hut between us burning in warm glowing embers. “Half Moon is leaving,” I said as I took a handful of grass from a corner of the room and began splitting the blades into ever finer strands with my claws.

“Why?” Mother asked, picking up a half-made cord and braiding the fine strands one by one.

“She said the Land of Lakes and Rivers will be swallowed up by the sea soon,” I told her. “Remember? She said the same thing four moons ago.”

My mother stopped braiding. Her eyes went wide. “Starling… last night I dreamed about this. I’d forgotten all about Half Moon’s divination! I thought maybe she was starting to lose her mind. But last night I saw the river rise and rise until there was no more land, and I saw our village swept away. I saw wolf folk and fox folk and badger folk all running for higher ground. But the waters kept coming and coming… it was such a horrible dream! It felt so real!”

My chest tightened. “We have to leave,” I said.

“We can’t. Your father and brother are leaving for the Big Hunt tomorrow.”

Every year, near the start of autumn, our village and the neighboring villages would all go to the east side of the Great River for a Great Hunt, catching fish and hunting horse and deer and gathering together for a feast. Meat-eating folk from all the clans, from the tiniest stoat to the biggest wolf, would all come and share what we’d caught and gathered. There’d be gifts and songs and stories, with the hunters acting out the hunt in deer skins and antlered headdresses. And at the end of the feast we would all honor the land together by dancing until we could dance no more.

To interrupt the Great Hunt? No. Never. The Great Hunt was a time for joy, not fear!

Mother didn’t say another word after that. She put all her attention into braiding, her fingers moving fast, nervous, fumbling at times but never stopping, never lifting her eyes to meet mine. I forced myself to do my part, splitting grasses until the day was done.

We had a supper that night of rabbit flavored with summer raspberries we’d dried and stored in pots some moons before.

“I’m proud of you, going on your first Great Hunt!” Mother said.

Storm grinned. “Father says he’s happy to have me along!”

“Well, I’m getting old, son!” he said. “I need someone to help me.”

“You’re not that old,” my mother said. “And you’ve got my brother to help you. And your friends.”

“Starling, you’re being awful quiet. What’s the matter?” Father said.

What could I say? It was no use. Half Moon had warned them. If they wouldn’t listen to Half Moon why would they listen to me?

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I’m just tired.”

I finished my food and wandered down to the river, sitting on the wooden planks my father and uncle had laid by the riverside to slide their boats in and out. They’d worked hard on this, working for days to make great axes from flint and cutting each tree down to size with the help of the whole village. Everything here had our mark on it, signs of who we were and what we’d done. Would it really all be gone forever, lost beneath the sea?

I cried, my eyes blurring like the moon’s reflection on the rippling waters. No. No, it couldn’t be. It couldn’t be over, my world, everything I knew! I didn’t want to leave!

But I knew where to find Half Moon… and as much as I loved my family I didn’t want to die. Even for the Great Hunt. I would watch the river, wait for it to rise… and if the water rose one day, I would be ready, and I would run to the Land of Many Deer to join Half Moon in the grove where our ancestors grew into mighty oaks.

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On the day of the Great Hunt, we gathered at the water’s edge. Mother held pots of yellow and red ochre dampened with river water and, with a brush made from a boar’s bristles, she closed her eyes and waited for the shapes to show themselves. After a moment she opened her eyes and dipped the brush into the ochre and painted those shapes on my father. “A successful hunt and no harm to you,” she sang over and over in that ancient plaintive melody I’d heard fifteen autumns in a row.

I smiled, thinking of the day when I would have a husband to bless before the hunt. Perhaps my husband might be like Kingfisher, the gold-furred hunter one year and a summer older than me who was born with a mother’s body but became a hunter, just like I was born with a father’s body but became a fire-keeper. Kingfisher was handsome too. Perhaps soon I would take him for a husband. But for now he had a mother to bless him and I would have to wait.

The leader of the hunt, Bright Horns of the Moon, blew a blast on an aurochs horn and the hunters walked to their boats, sliding them into the water as we cheered and beat drums. We watched them all the way to the edge of the wood at the far side of the river, where whole groups of them became tiny dots, and one by one we stepped back from the river.

“Let’s go forage,” my mother said. “I want to see if we can add something to the feast.” Of course. It was my brother’s first hunt and if he couldn’t provide enough to the feast on his own our family could keep our dignity by foraging the best late fruits, nuts, and mushrooms.

We went back to our hut and fetched our baskets, walking to the higher ground beyond the river valley. A wood, rich with many kinds of trees and bushes, stood at the top of those hills. It was our favorite foraging ground; most families liked to search the stands of trees closer to the river so the hills beyond were all ours.

It took a little while to get there. They looked so close from our bluff by the river but by the time we arrived the sun had already passed the highest point of His journey and he was headed down the hill of the sky into the seas beyond sight.

“Will we have enough daylight left?” I asked as I looked back on our village, now small as my basket.

“Our trip is already worth the bother,” Mother said with a smile, shaking a low-lying branch from a hazel tree and watching the nuts pile inside her basket.

A moment later I spotted a large circle of morels, almost as big as our hut. I gathered fistfuls of them.

We were filling our baskets with wild cherries when we felt the earth tremble and heard an unearthly sound, a mighty roar.

“What’s that?” I asked, running to the slope of the hill and scrambling up a beech tree for a better look.

Along the Great River there surged a wall of water, spreading out far beyond its banks.

“What is it?” Mother called from the ground below.

The great surge moved so fast it went from the horizon to our village before I could say anything. It carried trees and bushes and the destroyed remains of huts from further down the valley as it churned along, horrible and brown. Our slipway was destroyed immediately but our village hadn’t been touched. But the waters rose, and they kept rising in a roiling mess of mud and debris. As the village was swallowed, I screamed. The loudest I had ever screamed in my life. The only time I have ever screamed from sheer mortal terror.

I clambered down and threw my arms around my mother. “Half moon was right!” I sobbed, shaking with dread. “The village! The village is gone!”

Mother grabbed my hand, dragging me away from the river. “Where did you say Half Moon was going?” she asked.

“To the Land of Many Deer, by the Ancestors’ Grove,” I said.

Mother stopped in her tracks. “That’s a very long way,” she said. “At least a day’s walk, and it’s getting dark.”

I pushed forward, brushing past her. “Then we’ll walk in the dark! I know the stars. Let’s go.”

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The sun was low in the sky when we heard a voice behind us. “Wait! Wait for us!”

It was Kingfisher and his mother, Swan. Their fur was caked in mud and they were panting hard. In the dark, a few yards behind them, I saw the glow from the eyes of about half our village.

“Are these all the survivors?” My mother asked, scanning for my father and brother.

“I don’t know,” Swan sobbed.

“We ran, but the river kept rising” said Turtle, a brown wolf who would have been on his third hunt. He was Bright Horns of the Moon’s nephew, spindly and lean and a bit awkward, but not a terrible hunter.

“Raven? Storm? Are you here!?” my mother called, frantic.

“The last time I saw them they were in their boat,” Kingfisher said. “But that was a while ago.”

“My uncle didn’t make it,” Turtle whimpered. “None of my family did. I’m alone.”

“Is it safe to stand in one place?” I asked.

“Go and look,” said mother.

I ran to the top of a nearby hill, the highest one with trees on it, and climbed up the tallest tree I could get my claws into.

In the blood red sunset I could see the river that once ran through the middle of our land was now a vast sea, with only a handful of islands. But it didn’t seem to be rising. At least, not very fast.

I watched it a moment, my eyes on a stand of trees cast long in shadow and hard to observe. I squinted, trying to make out the movements of the water.

Yes. The water was still rising. It was rising knee-high every minute or so, alarmingly fast.

I scrambled down the tree and down the hill and ran back to what was left of my village.

“The water’s still rising fast,” I said. “We have to keep walking till we reach the Land of Many Deer.”

There were groans of protest and howls of despair. My heart twisted. What could I possibly do for them all? What, except keep going up trees, urging them on. But we weren’t far from the Land of Many Deer, where high cliffs rose above the plain. And from there we would be another day from the Ancestors’ Grove where our seer would be waiting for us.

She would know what to do. Until then, I would urge my village on to safety.

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By morning we had reached the White Cliffs, but we were too tired to go on. We made camp there, with a clear view of our valley, or what was left of it, and slept together, piled on top of each other to keep warm.

There were other folk escaped from the valley there too. Some fox folk had a camp not far away, and a band of otter folk had a camp further west. They huddled much the same way we did, miserable and hungry and fewer in number. In the glistening morning sun I could see, here and there, bodies floating in the water. But I couldn’t tell what sort of bodies they were, let alone whether they were any of our village. But I begged Moon and Sun that Father and Storm weren’t among them.

We woke near sunset a few hours later, still tired, and gathered round a fire to share what little we had with us. Mother and I had some of the berries and nuts we had gathered and the foraging wasn’t bad near the white cliffs, but we were too tired to gather too much.

“I think we should wait here, in case anyone else from the village shows up,” mother said.

“I’m out of ideas,” said a voice so hoarse and strained I couldn’t recognize them in the gloom of the late evening.

“Fine, fine! As long as we find some food while we’re here!” Kingfisher complained.

“Enough whining! I know what we had wasn’t much, but we shared it all and it’s enough to keep us alive another day. That’s all that matters right now,” his mother scolded him.

That was when I became aware of what was different about the sound I heard in the night. The usual night creatures were there, and the wind, and the spirits that cried from far away. But there was something else I had never heard at the white cliffs: waves. I had seen waves before, when I was very young and father took me by boat to the sea. But to hear them here was chilling; this wasn’t the Great River risen out of its banks; this was the sea swallowing up the land I once called home.

I burst into tears, shaking and sobbing. “Starling! Are you alright?” Kingfisher said, resting a hand on my shoulder. Not thinking, I threw my arms around him and buried my face in his fur, crying for all we’d lost. He caressed me and I knew so much turmoil; was I sad because of what I had lost, or feeling things for Kingfisher I wasn’t ready for?

I pulled back from his embrace, leaving Kingfisher stunned and a few of my village in nervous giggles. Kingfisher’s mother cast us a knowing look. “Not yet,” she said with a wink. My ears pinned back and went hot with embarrassment. Now Kingfisher was joining in the nervous giggling.

We stayed awake until the fire guttered, then one by one we nodded off, sleeping away the last little while before dawn. My sleep was a dreamless void, full of only feelings. Terrible feelings. Sorrow, longing, and the dreaded understanding that I would not live forever, that I would die one day too even though the flood would not kill me. One day I would leave the earth, the same as everyone else. And if I was virtuous my body would become a tree and my soul would live a thousand years in the Ancestor Grove; and if I was selfish and harmful I would live like the Ancestors, a wolf on all fours to hunt the ancestors of deer and foxes, and to always be hungry and never satisfied, and to scream in the night and frighten children.

But if so, why should I do anything? Father’s slipway was swept away by the river and father himself? I had no clue if he was even alive. Nothing lasts forever. Not even souls, I imagine. And in that moment I felt as if mine was heavy and weary and couldn’t hold on much longer.

I survived, but now Death would stalk me closely all the rest of my life.

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Nobody from our village came, from dawn til the time the sun was a little less than a quarter of the way through the sky, and with mutters of agreement we shambled north to the Ancestor Grove to try to find Half Moon.

The way to the Ancestor Grove had once followed cliffs and ridges above our land but now, there was only a series of high cliffs and desolate shores and bogs… so many bogs! The ground was so sodden in places we were afraid we’d be mired there when the tides came in, but we carried on, helping each other out of the mud.

The sun was three-quarters through its course when we heard panting and footsteps. “Hey! Hey! Wait! Wait!” a voice called.

We turned to see a wolf, about my father’s age, running toward us. His gray-brown fur was matted with mud and he seemed to be favoring his right leg a bit. The pain must have been too much for him, he broke stride and hobbled the rest of the way toward us.

“Hello friend,” my mother said. “Do we know each other?”

The lone wolf paused and folded his ears back. “No, I don’t think so…”

“What’s your name?” Mother asked him.

“Dragonfly,” the exhausted wolf said. “I lost my pack. I… I don’t know if anyone’s alive. I’m hungry and scared. Can I come with you? Please?”

Mother looked over the wolves in our diminished pack. “Should we let the newcomer join us?” she asked.

There were nods and murmurs of approval.

“We’re going to a grove where our ancestors live to set up a new camp,” my mother said.

“You’re going to live in your pack’s sacred grove?” the young wolf tilted his head at the thought of it.

“Our ancestors spoke to our seer in a dream and said we must go there,” my mother explained. “You can come with us and stay as long as you need to. But once we get there, we will expect you to work hard with us as soon as your leg is healed.”

“I’m an excellent fisher. I’m strong and I’m quick with my hands and… it doesn’t hurt too bad to stand I guess,” the wolf said, flashing a friendly smile, his tail betraying a slow, submissive wag.

“Do you need any help walking?” I volunteered, seeing how much pain the wolf was trying to hide from that leg. Sprained, most likely or he wouldn’t have been able to run on it for any distance.

“Thank you kindly,” he said. He was a bit taller than me and his arm rested comfortably on my shoulder. “I’m glad I found you all.”

“It’s bad times,” I said. “We have to take care of each other.”

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We made camp and foraged by the Ancestors’ River. The foraging there was better, and Dragonfly helped us catch a few fish for our meal. We stuffed the fish with some herbs and wrapped them in long grasses from the riverside, placing them by the fire to cook.

It was the first proper meal most of us had eaten in two days, and it did our spirits good to have something to eat again.

Refreshed and our bellies full, we sat warming ourselves, huddled around our fires.

“So, where do you come from?” Mother asked Dragonfly.

“My village was on a low down near the North Shore,” Dragonfly said, helping himself to another handful of salmon and gobbling it up. “But most of them were down in the plains below, foraging or hunting. I was alone at the top of the down, knapping some new blades for my father. But there was an enormous wave from the sea and it came up the Great River and spilled out across the land. The waters pushed me to the highest point of the down I could reach. They swept away my village and everyone in it. After a while I decided I would grab whatever could float and paddle my way toward the setting sun. I found a small but study tree drifting by and I grabbed onto it, and I kicked and I paddled it all the way.

My heart leapt. “You mean there are still islands above water out there?”

Dragonfly nodded. “Quite a few. Some of them had creatures on them. Some of them were clinging to the tops of trees just above the surface of the water. They begged me for help but… I couldn’t. I couldn’t save them.”

Dragonfly bust into tears and almost out of instinct, I put my arms around him to comfort him. “I don’t know where my father is either. Or my brother. I’ll probably never see them again. But we’ll be your pack. We’ll look after you.”

“Thank you,” Dragonfly sobbed.

We laid next to each other, staring at the stars as our fire guttered.

The night sky is a terrible and mysterious thing. There are so many strange objects out there, fires that burn in the far-away. Gods perhaps. Or put there by gods. Every pack, it seems, has their own story told from generation to generation.

“Do you think my father’s alive?” I asked, staring into the Great White Path across the sky.

Dragonfly sighed. “I can’t say. Maybe he is, maybe he isn’t. But I hope he is. I hope mine is.”

I felt the weight of our shared sadness in that moment, like my heart was caught in a snare.

“I hope so too,” I whispered.

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We walked along the river, westward into the hills from the first red glow of dawn over the horizon until the sun was high in the sky when we came to the edge of the sacred grove where our ancestors live. Those who died easy and with no worries became tall oak trees and those who died fearful or in despair became the wild sort of wolves who go on four legs and cannot speak, but they can sing. And those who had a gift that pleased the gods, like Half Moon, were allowed to return to live among us. A hundred generations of my pack came to the same sacred clearing where the tallest of the old ancestors stood, all by herself. The Old One was the mother of the first wolf born in our land, when we came from the east many long ages ago. Half Moon was the Old One’s daughter reborn, and when the Old One fell it was said that she would be reborn among us.

Every year we came to the edge of the Sacred Grove to honor the ancestors with offerings of the first spring flowers, but we only held our ceremonies around the Old One every twenty years and the last time had been the year before I was born.

“Where is Half Moon?” Kingfisher asked.

“She must be camped further in,” my mother said. “But we mustn’t go in without her.”

I sang out a call for her, a long howl to say “I am here.” But my howl was lost in the dense trees where no sounds echo. Would she even hear me?

A faint howl in an elderly voice replied a moment later. A short howl to say “I’m coming.”

We waited, listening for the sound of her footsteps. They came, advancing slowly. Tired footsteps. Nothing like the footsteps I’d heard falling away from me a few days ago.

Half Moon came into view, haggard and weary. “Child, is that you?” she called.

I ran to her and threw my arms around her. “Half Moon! You’re alive!” Tears ran down my face.

Half moon caressed my head like I was a young pup as the rest of the pack caught up with us. “Yes, yes… My years aren’t over quite yet,” she murmured. “I’m so happy to see you, Starling! I thought I had lost all of you!”

“We lost about half the pack,” Mother said.

“I lost all of my pack,” said Dragonfly.

“Oh, Half Moon, this is Dragonfly,” I said. “He’s joined our pack.”

That was when I first noticed a look of jealousy in Kingfisher’s eye. Kingfisher had always been my friend but I had never known him to be jealous of anyone for spending time with me. Maybe I was reading too much into things? Maybe he was thinking of the ones he lost too?

“The spirits told me about you,” Half Moon said. “They told me you had some important news about the flood, yes?”

“You mean about the islands that are still left?” I asked.

Half Moon’s eyes grew wide. “There are still islands out there!?”

“Many,” Dragonfly said. “And there are creatures trapped on some of them.”

“Child, follow me,” said Half Moon, leading us deep into the grove. “Don’t be shy! This is important, come on!” she ordered, the spring in her step once again.

We came to the sacred clearing where the Old One stood… or had stood. For laying on its side, its withered brown leaves now snared in the branches of the trees at the edge of the clearing many paces away, was The Old One.

“Lighting must have struck her,” Half moon murmured, pointing out to a channel as long as I was tall, charred into the bough. “Probably happened years ago.”

“Oh no,” my mother sobbed.

“Don’t weep for her. The Old One told me in a dream that she has been reborn. She said ‘I will make a boat of this old husk and sail to the island where the son of my pack waits for rescue.’ And I did not know the meaning of this. I Couldn’t see a single island from the shore. Starling, my child, you’re fourteen summers old, are you not?”

“I am.”

Half moon took my hand. “And the last time our pack came to this grove was fifteen springs ago! My child, I believe you are the Old One reborn! And you will be the one to rescue Raven and Storm!”

“No...” The Old One? I couldn’t be her. I didn’t feel old. I didn’t look old. I didn’t know what anyone would expect of the Old One but it wasn’t me.

“I believe you are,” Half Moon said. “I may be wrong but… I’ve always been right before, haven’t I?”

There was no sense arguing with her. It was already decided I would lose. The pack wanted me to be the Old One reborn and even if they were out of their minds to think it was me, I had to honor that. Somehow.

“Then what should I do?” I asked.

“This wood is pretty far gone on the ends, but this bit here right where it’s been burned… you see, it’s exactly the right size and shape to make a boat, isn’t it? I think the wood around it might be in better shape. You need to build a boat out of The Old One and you need to go and find your father and brother,” Half Moon explained.

“All by myself?” I asked, ears back and tail between my legs.

Half Moon shook her head. “You can have some help building the boat. But when you set out to sea, you must be all alone.”

“But I don’t know how…”

“You do… and you will,” Half moon said. “Our lost sons are in danger. Start building!”

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Between us we had just enough flint to make the tools to cut and gouge the wood from the trunk. Half Moon prayed and burned sweet herbs, wafting the smoke over us with a whisk of feathers and willow branches as we carved apart the body of the Old One.

We worked all throughout the rest of the day and into the night, a bonfire lighting our work as we hacked away a great sturdy boat, broad and flat so it would stay upright on the waves.

When we were finally too tired and the bonfire began to gutter, we sat around its remaining embers and took a supper of rabbit stew cooked in skins.

Kingfisher sat beside me. “You seem… awfully friendly with Dragonfly,” he said. “Are you… do you have feelings for him, Starling?”

I snorted. “I just met him,” I said.

“You seemed fine with him,” Kingfisher pressed on. “You were with him all day, introducing him like he was your mate!”

“Why do you care?” I snapped. “You never once showed any interest in me!”

“I was… I…” Kingfisher fidgeted, ears back.

“You what?” I dared him.

“I… think you’re nice, that’s all,” he murmured.

I sighed. “I’m tired. I’d like to get some sleep if that’s alright.”

He nodded- bowed, almost- slow and resigned. “Good night, Starling.”

I stood to walk away but I saw how he looked, gazing into the last embers of our fire, so lost…

“Hey Kingfisher?”

He perked up, the neat triangles of his ears swiveling my direction. “Yeah?”

I turned back to him and gave him a kiss between the ears. “I think you’re nice too.”

That was all. I turned in and let him sleep on that.

We were up again and the first light of dawn to finish the boat and by the time the sun was halfway down, we had carved away all the rot and fire damage from the wood and were left with a fine sturdy boat.

The whole pack admired our work. “The finest boat ever built!” said Bull Roarer, one of the few hunters to make it to the grove with us.

“You’ve honored your ancestors,” Half Moon declared. “This will be big enough to carry you and your father and your brother… perhaps even two or three others!”

“I guess this means I’m leaving soon,” I said, running my hand along the sides of the boat.

“You must leave at dawn,” Half Moon said. “We can’t wait any longer. You have to save our sons!”

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Together, eight of us carried the heavy wooden boat to the river. As we carried we sang the song our pack had sung for a thousand years each time they would leave the Old One at the heart of the Sacred Grove:

Goodbye, Old One, mother of our kin

Goodbye, Old One, we will remember

Goodbye Old One, we will return

Goodbye, Old One, you will be here to greet us

Twenty winters come and go

Twenty springs come and go

Twenty summers come and go

Twenty autumns come and go

Goodbye Old One, we will return

Goodbye Old One, you will be here to greet us.

I sang to the tree… but my pack was singing to me.

We came to a shallow inlet of the river with a nice flat shore to slide the boat in. Mother gave me a deer skin full of whatever food they could forage for me, and Kingfisher handed me a paddle, also carved from the Old One.

“Please come back safe, Starling,” he begged me, his soft brown eyes heavy with sadness and his ears splayed. He took my hand and squeezed it. “I… I want you to come back, so we can see if… if…”

I kissed him between those splayed ears and held him to me. “I’ll be back,” I said with all the confidence I could muster. “Half moon has yet to be wrong.”

With that I climbed into the boat. Half moon hobbled up to me, looking very old again, and whispered in my ear:

“Child, listen well… If you don’t succeed, it means you were not the Old One reborn. This means nothing bad about you! If anything it means I’m a failed seer. If you die on this quest, don’t let your soul be fearful. You will not become a wild beast. You will become a great tree, like the Old One and we will honor you as our hero all the same. But if you succeed, then one day you will lead your pack and you will become both our chieftain and our seer. I see something great and honorable in you, Starling. I know you’ll make me proud no matter what.”

With that she walked round to the back of the boat and pushed with all her might. The heavy wooden hull slid just a little in the soft mud. Then the whole pack gathered round and pushed, and I was adrift, moving out to sea with the current and waving goodbye to my pack, wondering if I would ever see them again.

I paddled along, the current helping me glide fast down the narrow river. I saw deer grazing on the riverbank, trees and fields, and the burial grounds of the dead of other packs and their sacred places all along the river, some marked by tall carved poles or ceremonial buildings.

It was a little after noon when I arrived at the sea, at the wide mouth of the river where the current propelled me into treacherous waves that tossed my boat every which way but would not capsize me. Further out there were great swells that I rode, up and down, feeling sick to my stomach after a little while. I was not made for this! Why couldn’t I have been otterfolk? I struggled to keep my stomach from heaving as I grew used to this sensation, this lack of a clear, straight horizon. I had only a general sense of up and down and it was miserable.

But by and by the heavy swells subsided and the sea was calm again. Small swells, maybe as tall as my ankle, now rocked my boat gently in the late afternoon sun.

Then I spied it. The first island I had seen. What had once been the top of a high down was now a small island surrounded by dead trees and debris that still floated around it.

There were bodies. Bloated, discolored, shedding their fur, and stinking hideously. Could I even stay here?

Well, the ground I could see looked dry enough. I turned my boat toward the tiny island.

All at once a mighty swell, maybe as tall as my boat was long, rose up from the sea beneath me and crashed into the island. I was hurled into the treetops where I clung for dear life only to see my boat washed out to sea along with much of the debris around the island.

I was trapped here, no food, no warmth, and no escape.

\* \* \*

I felt myself grow tired as the sun slipped below the horizon, and I wedged myself into a crook in the tree just tight enough to stay put should I fall asleep.

I lay staring into the blackness, my eyes on the shimmering fires of the far heavens as they danced and sang of old days, of the courage of our hunters, of the wisdom of our seers. And the tree rocked me in her arms and sang a lullaby like my mother sang when I was young.

I woke refreshed to find no more swells had reached the island. Some of the debris that had been around the island the previous day had returned to the island, once again tangled in the boughs of submerged trees, a twisted mass of broken trees and bodies and things I scarcely recognized, things from the depths of the rivers and seas. But my boat was nowhere to be found.

I clambered down from the trees cautiously, watching the waves, careful for any sign of another swell. I reasoned they must not hit this island often, as I scanned through the debris left among the trees and on the ground. Enough wood I could probably build a fire, if there was time for one. But if another wave came? I couldn’t risk staying down from the trees past sunset, let alone for very long at all.

One wave, slightly larger than the ones that had lapped the shore most of the night and day, crashed hard into the shore, and I jumped. No… that wouldn’t work.

What was I to do? Wait for a boat that might not return when I was surrounded by wood?

But I had no flints with me. They were in the boat, in a sack that might be beneath the waves now.

I climbed back into the trees, waiting for my boat, my throat now horribly dry. I needed water. My water skin was in the boat too, and the water around me was briny and brown and full of death.

Rain. I needed rain. I was so thirsty. So cold…

From beyond the seas, Thunder stirred and sent his fire down to earth. The sky grew dark, and the wind, sharp and cold, whipped the waves to white crests as the treetops I clung to swayed perilously. The frothy white waves became heavy, foamy swells taller by half than me, churning the dense, foul soup of debris around the island, removing some, adding some, macerating bodies and splintering boughs.

The wind cried as Thunder struck his fury across the sky in sharp, jagged bolts of fire. What had I done to anger Him? Wasn’t Thunder the Courageous One? Wasn’t I courageous enough?

“Thunder!” I cried in the growing dark as the storm raged on. “What do you want of me!?”

The wind died suddenly and all was deathly silent. Rain fell, sparse, gentle, and silent. Far to the north the sky was too dark to see very far. A distant rumble and a bright flash lit up the horizon and I saw the most enormous wave headed right for my little island.

I held tight to the tree, bracing for the impact.

The wave loomed, slow, more enormous than it seemed, many lengths of my boat in height. It picked up speed as it grew nearer, towering almost as tall as the tree I clung to. And no sooner had I judged its true height when it crashed into the island and my tree uprooted with it.

I was thrown from the tree into the water, and struggled in the water a moment before I found a piece of another tree’s trunk to cling to. Now in the light of Thunder’s fire I could see my island, far away.

But much closer by was my boat. If I dared swim toward it.

Thunder challenged me with a great fork of fire above me lighting the dome of the sky with a mighty crash. This was it. This was my chance to prove to Thunder that my courage hadn’t failed me.

I let go of the tree and swam as hard as I could across the water. I have never been a strong swimmer and the boat was further away than it seemed, but I did not relent and by and by, my hand rested on its wooden side.

I climbed inside my boat to find my water skin and my sack of food and tools secured in place by rope just as they had been. I drank from my water skin, careful to save some for later.

“Thank you,” I whispered to Thunder. “Thank you. I will make you proud!”

That was when I noticed there was no paddle. I was all adrift on the cold, indifferent seas.

\* \* \*

Two days passed and my food stores were looking bare. My water skin had been replenished with a little rain water that had fallen in the boat but even that wouldn’t last me long. I hadn’t seen land since leaving the Drowning Island. Perhaps now I was far out to sea, far away from any land that wasn’t swallowed up by water long before I was born. Perhaps I would die out here, in horrible pain, and never see my family again.

But I still had a little food, a little water, and a little hope and I still had my strength. If I was going to die, it wouldn’t be for a while yet. And I kept my eyes open for any sign of land, or anything I could use as a paddle.

It was difficult to tell where I was. It felt as if I was heading eastward, or perhaps southward. But I had no way to know. There was nothing to tell my direction of travel here, only the general direction of the setting and rising sun and even that was difficult to tell when mischievous water spirits kept making false suns on the horizon.

But Thunder had given me back my boat, for my courage. And I knew Thunder was watching me still, that He never abandoned those He favored. And I felt my last reserve of hope grow just a little on those forbidding swells in the middle of nowhere.

And just as the sun was setting on my third day out to sea, my food and water nearly gone, I saw a tree branch floating near my boat that had just the right shape, long and straight with an end that widened into a flat, broad surface.

A paddle made by the hands of the gods.

And with that paddle, I turned my boat eastward, keeping the setting sun to my back and the bright star the elders call the True Light of the North to my left by night until finally, exhaustion from lack of food, water, or rest overcame me and I collapsed in the back of my boat, face up to the pink glow of dawn.

CRASH

I woke to heavy rain on my face. Rain so heavy I filled my water skin and the boat was still filling with water, riding low, threatening to sink though I scooped it out as much as I could.

But in the gray mist I could see the land. A large amount of land, in fact. And by and by I recognized it. This was one of the ridges on the far side of the Great River!

Getting closer I saw that the high water mark on the plants, trees, and rocks was much higher than the water level now. At least some of the waters had receded.

I bailed and paddled the best I could at one time. But once I got close enough to the island I paddled for all I was worth and felt the boat come to rest on the gentle slope of the ridge. I pulled it up above the level of the surf, and rested it between two stout trees.

A good portion of land had remained above water here. In fact, I couldn’t see the other side. This wouldn’t be like the Island of Drowning. This would be an Island of Safety because I knew this land and I knew there would be food and water here. I would live another day.

I set up camp immediately, in a spot that was nice and dry. I built a fire and warmed myself by it. I had only been at sea… was it five or six days now? But the fire felt like the first I’d had in twenty years. With my tools still in my sack, I made a very basic shelter of sticks and leaves and fell blissfully asleep as the day drew to a close, still warm from the dying embers of the fire.

I woke to a strong hand reaching from behind me and clamping my muzzle shut. “Don’t move!” a gruff voice from in front of me said, and I felt the tip of an antler spear point at my throat.

Then a familiar scent hit my nose, and I heard my attackers sniff in disbelief too and I knew it wasn’t just my imagination.

“STARLING!?” said a younger voice behind me, and in an instant he let go of my muzzle.

“Raven!” I cried, throwing my arms around my brother.

“Starling! What are you doing here?” asked my father, the one who’d been holding the spear to my throat only a moment earlier.

“I came to save you,” I said. “There’s a lot I need to tell you.”

“And there’s a lot we need to tell you,” Raven said. “Come on, let’s go to our camp. We’ll tell you more.”

\* \* \*

We hid in a cave where, in happier times, our tribe had taken shelter during the hunt. It was near the top of the ridge, but hidden by dense thickets and used as a breeding den from time to time by wild foxes whose pungent scent masked ours. We hunkered down amid the bones of voles and squirrels and piles of orange and white fur, only a dwindling supply of animal fat in a dim stone lamp for light.

“Some wolves from the West River pack made it here and they’ve decided to kill us,” Father explained. “They’ve decided the good will of the hunt no longer applies.”

“Why?” I asked.

Raven folded his ears back. “Game is scarce out here. Even the fish have been disturbed. They can’t breathe in this water, it’s too salty, too murky, too full of dead things. And the Deerfolk would kill us all if we tried to eat them.”

“How did you get here, Starling?” Father asked. “Were you on one of the islands nearby?”

“No father, we made it to the Land of Many Deer,” I said. “About half of us did. And we went to the Sacred Grove. Half Moon was there. She was with the Old One. The Old One was taken home by Thunder around the time I was born.”

Father gasped. “Then you’re…”

“...Here to save you,” I interrupted. I didn’t want him to say it. I didn’t want to think about that. I only wanted to get away from here as fast as I could. “I have a boat. It’s by the shore.”

“Did you hide it?” Father asked, his eyes wide with alarm.

I shook my head. “No, I didn’t know…”

“We have to leave tonight,” Father said, gathering up his and Raven’s few remaining belongings. He and Raven grabbed their spears and hurried out of the cave.

“Show us where it is before the others get it,” Raven said in a hushed whisper.

“Wait, is anyone else here from our pack?” I asked.

“There were,” whispered Father, stopping in his tracks a moment. He sighed. “Gift of the River was here with us, and Carp and Cormorant and Wasp.”

“The West River pack got them, one by one,” said Raven. “We couldn’t save them.”

Another storm was brewing in the north as we hurried down the hill toward my boat. We were just past the camp I had set up when we heard heavy footsteps and a voice shouting “There they are!” and the war cries of maybe six or seven large males.

“We have to hurry!” Father cried. “They’ve seen us!”

We hurried to the thicket where my boat lay and discovered the water level had gone down a fair bid. Was it the tide? Was the water receding? I couldn’t say.

“I’ll push it down to the water. Starling, take my spear. You’re strong as your brother. I believe in you.”

Father handed me his spear and Raven and I stood guard, backing toward the water as father grunted and groaned.

“Starling… how… GRRRFFF! How… did… you… get… this… thing… up… here?” Father growled as he strained at the heavy boat.

“I… I don’t know,” I said as I watched in horror. The West River Pack was close now, within throwing distance.

I felt water on my ankles and my father’s arm grabbed mine. “Get in!” he cried, grabbing my one oar and paddling hard as he could.

With a whoop and cry the West River Pack lobbed their spears at us. Most of the spears hit the water but one kept going, headed straight for us. My heart sank. Time moved in slow motion and I was keenly aware of a cold wind at my back like an omen of something unspeakable.

Thunder crashed, far in the distance, and in that instant I reached out my hand, grabbing the spear just as its point came inches from my father’s back.

“KEEP IT!” I screamed, standing on the stern of our boat and hurling the spear with all my might. The warriors on the shore scattered as the spear landed right where one of them had been standing a moment before.

Raven was in the bottom of the boat, shaking with fear. “You’re the Daughter of Thunder,” he whispered. “The Old One Reborn.”

“No,” I said, sitting down, watching the island slip away as the rain began to fall. “I’m only Starling.”

\* \* \*

We made shelter from the storm on a nearby island, this one smaller and with no other packs or any creature of two legs. The rain replenished our water skins, and a lone hazelnut tree filled our bellies enough to live another day. We made the best paddles we could with the tools we had and slept with our upturned boat for a shelter, the best sleep any of us had enjoyed in many a terrible night.

We set off in the morning on calm seas, singing old hunting songs as we rowed together, and by nightfall we could clearly see the white cliffs on the horizon; the seas were not so wide here, in the south. From there it was only a few days hugging the coast til we reached the river that led to the Sacred Grove, and to our home.

There was no one to greet us when we pulled our boat ashore near the Sacred Grove. We carried what was left of our provisions with us into the grove, toward the center where the Old One once stood.

In the days since I’d left, a village had sprung up around the stump of the Old One. I recognized the face of a family who hadn’t been with us when we left the old village.

“Heron! Cattail! Is Beetle with you?” I asked.

“She’s in the tent sleeping,” Heron said.

“So glad you made it,” Father said, throwing his arms around Heron and slapping his back. “Where were you?”

“We were on a small island about a day’s journey from here,” said Cattail.

“One with a large hazelnut tree right at the highest point?” Father asked.

“That’s the one,” said Heron.

“We stopped there on our way back. We were stranded on the highest ridge we could reach west of the Great River,” Father explained. “If not for Starling we might not have made it.”

“The Daughter of Thunder has returned and brought our sons home!” a voice cried behind me. It was Half Moon, her scruffy old features twisted into a big grin. “Child, you’ve done it! You are the Old One reborn!”

Soon the whole village had swarmed around us. There were hugs and tears and stories of where we’d been, and in the evening there was singing and dancing around the fire until late into the night.

As the celebrations died down, Half Moon approached me, yawning. “Now child,” she said. “You have a great responsibility to your pack. Starting tomorrow I will teach you the art of the seer. And you will become the seer for your pack when I’m gone.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I said, fidgeting.

“I know you can,” said Half Moon. “I see it in you. A wolf like you is a rare gift! Start acting like it!”

“Well…” I murmured. “...how do I act like the Old One Reborn? I don’t want to be rude and demanding.”

“Acting important doesn’t mean having your way all the time,” said Half Moon. “It means having the right balance of confidence and humility. You’ll see. I’ll teach you. I think you’ll learn fast. Don’t worry.”

With that she shuffled off to her hut, unhurried and unbothered by any of this as if it were so routine for her.

I smiled. If Half Moon couldn’t teach me anything else, she’d teach me to grow old.

\* \* \*

For three years, Half Moon taught me the secrets of the seer. Every incantation, every root and mushroom that lets one speak to the gods or heals sicknesses, how to read bones cast on the ground, how to gaze into water by fire light or by moonlight and read the future in the ripples. She taught me the language of dreams, the tales of the gods, the tales of our pack going back thousands of years.

Then one day, I came to her hut for my lesson and she was no longer waiting outside for me. I stepped inside her hut and found her lying covered in furs and skins. She looked frail, her eyes were dim, and her breathing was shallow.

A bit of the old light returned to her eyes as she saw me. “Starling,” she whispered with a serene smile. “My time has come, Child.”

I took her hand. “I still have so much to learn from you,” I said.

“Nonsense, child,” said Half Moon. “I taught you everything you need to know. This is why I’ve decided it’s time for me to rest.”

I felt tears burning in my eyes. She’d been so spry just the day before, no sign of illness or distress. She was so old she could let go any time, and she had chosen her own time to go. There was no sense in trying to convince her otherwise.

“I love you, Teacher,” I said, stroking her forehead. “I’ll miss you.”

“One day….” Half Moon paused, her eyes wandered and her breath stopped a moment before she sucked a gasp of air. “One day a child will be born in our tribe, and you will see me…” her eyes became dim. Her feeble grip on my hand relaxed completely. One final gasp, and she moved no more. I closed her eyes and said the prayer for the dead she had taught me:

“Oh worthy spirit, you have departed the body and prepare for the journey to the Land Between. There wait by the still pond until the day you are reborn. Your pack will wait for you. Your pack will sing your name by the full moon til you return. And when you are reborn we will rejoice in your coming.”

We buried the stump of the Old One, her roots now raised to the sky, a little ways from the ocean in the middle of a wood palisade. And in the hole from the roots of the Old One, we buried Half moon and laid a great stone on her grave to honor Thunder.

And that, young one, is the story of who you once were. A great and wise seer who taught me everything I know. And in these twenty years since Half Moon died the lessons she taught me have helped me guide our pack to flourish and grow here in the Land of Many Deer.

Some of those lessons, of course, you’ve already showed me you know. And what you didn’t remember, I will help you recall, and we will teach each other, lifetime after lifetime.