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On the River's Surface

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On the River's Surface

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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The Hunt

They calm him, the animals of the woods. All around him they live and breathe and die. Butterflies land on puffballs taller than him, short as he is. Always the one to be bullied and overpowered, skinny as he is. Steller's Jays and hawks fly up, dive down to rip into ground squirrels, chipmunks, and pika who have no time to hide in their homes. But he has nowhere to hide from the claws as they do. Marmots flop on rocks, comfortable in their own skin. They know who they are. Bees, picking little bits from wildflowers, make him happy. But the deer most of all.

The mule deer doe hops from hoof to hoof alongside the rivers in the grassy meadows of the Rockies at the end of summer. Strong animals with large necks and ears, white hindquarters, and black beaded eyes. Thick legs and short whipping tails, their hides smooth beneath his fingers. They tiptoe through the shadows of waving aspen leaves, blue Colorado spruces, and lodgepole pines overrun with beetles. The tenderness of a doe and her fawn.

Yes, you like them most of all. Don't you, Ed?

He nods his head as he walks.

And no people. Sure, he passed three hikers that morning. Girls, one trailing behind, on the path all the way through to Durango. But he hasn't seen them since, not even heard a peep. No mountain bikers or fishermen. No one on horseback or taking pictures. It is just him and the animals and the woods. He likes it that way; people make him anxious. At times, even the animals trouble him.

Slipping past the trees and boulders of the woods, he listens to the cicadas, waiting for the sound of a branch to break or antlers to rub against a tree. He sees their paths leading uphill but

stays on the main trail. Orange and green lichens grow on rocks around him, spoiling their wholeness, draining.

He frowns. He likes to sit on those rocks, feeling the carpet like in his den at home. But no, he can't sit on those rocks.

Ski runs break up the woods into slices. Bald spots on the mountains opposite like the middle of his head. He looks up at the sky through the leaves. So few clouds up there he could count them on one hand: one, two, three, four—

His boot slips in the muddy bed of a river, and he sees what he's been watching for. Fresh tracks, not slipping around as he did, but perfect stamps in the mud. No doubt looking for water, but not much farther up ahead runs a river sure to have deer taking a sip in this heat. He doesn't know why it is so hot. This time last year it snowed, but today the heat feels like it will smother him.

What a funny word, Ed thinks, smother. His ma would hug him every now and then, take him into her, press him against her so hard he couldn't breathe.

Earlier that morning, Ed passed through an open spot in the woods and found the deer's bedding place. Outlines of their bodies in the strips of grass on the ground. The grass had bent and smashed beneath the sleeping animals. Imagining them still resting there, Ed laid his hand on the grass, still warm. Stroking the grass as he would their bodies, he saw them there, bloody and cut apart into bits so different from the things they once were.

You will do that. Yes, Ed, you will do that soon enough. Won't you?

"Yes, ma'am."

Thinking, he follows the tracks down the riverbed and into the woods. A body is just all these parts put together to make it what it is. A fish or a deer or even a person. All these little

parts. Bones and meat and fat and skin and hair. They could be taken apart and even put back together if somebody really tried. Somebody with an education, a doctor or a scientist. Put them back together into something different even. And if somebody educated had all these different parts from different animals, or different people, he could make anything he wanted. A pika with a Steller's Jay's wings or a chipmunk with a hawk's beak and claws. Or even make a man into a woman.

At a ponderosa pine, he stops to cut away a slice of the orangish bark with his buck knife. The sheets of bark crack or break apart under the stress; sap bleeds from the scar. He puts his nose to the syrupy cut; smells like the butterscotch cookies his ma used to make him and Hen. Ed looks around. Some of the white-bark aspens have been carved into, letting bad things in, killing them just to leave their names.

Mary loves Evan.

New bark grows back brown and ugly like a scab that won't heal against the smooth white. Ed shakes his head and moves on.

His ma made pork chops one night, always said growing boys needed to eat plenty of meat while looking straight at Ed. He sat down on the red plastic seat of the chair next to his ma's spot at the head of the table, Hen on the other side of her. The backs hard, the seats worn so your bottom hit the fake-wood underneath. Couldn't pay for the real stuff. He stared at the carved back of his pa's chair, plate empty, waiting for him to come home.

Like most of his neighbors, Ed's family didn't have a television. But his ma put the radio on the Christian station, 102.7. Some woman sang the end of "Amazing Grace" as his ma sat

down, and they all held hands. Ed's hand sweating in his ma's solid grip, she made them wait until the song was over before they could say their blessings to the Lord.

Ed dug straight into his chop, sawing away at the meat. He had already started to hold his face in a smile as he tasted it. Salty and chewy, but not burned or raw.

"It's great, Ma!" he said, thinking about his ma coming in the house with blood dried on her hands earlier that day.

Hen kicked his shin under the table and narrowed his eyes at Ed. "Yeah, Ma. Thanks for dinner."

Like you never suck up neither, Ed thought as he tried real hard to kick him back, but his legs were too short. Hen, three years older, was much bigger and almost a foot taller than Ed. And Hen never let him forget it.

"Stop playing around and eat your food, boys!" his ma said.

Ed could hear footsteps on the porch, boots loud on the buckling wood. The porch light was off. His pa opened the screen door and held it there, letting in flies. Still in his baggy coveralls, he leaned against the doorframe, his hands black with motor oil. Ed looked down at his plate, the meat juice puddling under his green beans.

"Shut the damn door, George," his ma said.

The door banged against the frame a few times before closing as he staggered into the kitchen.

"Augusta, don't you look nice," his pa said. "Smells good. What you cooking?"

"Don't you come in here. Bastards sleep outside with the.... What have you been doing?"

Ed peeked at his father. In the light, Ed could see his pa's bloodshot eyes, the shine of his sweaty forehead and greying hair.

“Ain’t none of your damn business what I do.” He stepped closer to her.

His ma wagged her finger at him. “Look here. Don’t you be coming home all drugged out expecting to be treated like the man of the house or nothing.”

“I am the man of the house, Augusta.”

She laughed. “You’re no more a man than Ed.”

His pa stomped over to his ma, lifted his hand to hit her.

“Don’t you touch Ma!” Ed pointed his shaking finger at his pa.

His pa stopped and looked at Ed. Keeping his hand in the air, he walked over to Ed and slapped him so hard across the face he fell out of his chair. Ed’s face was on fire and ached, but the cold linoleum felt good.

He could hear a chair scrape against the floor and fall over. Ed looked up to see his ma hit his pa over the head with her plate. It cracked in half and crashed to the floor. His pa fell down next to Ed, knocked out. Food all over the floor.

“Touch my son again! Go ahead!” his ma said.

The domed kitchen light was just behind her head, and the light was all around her face, looking like a holy woman straight from the Bible.

“Get up, Ed.”

If he can beat the deer to the pass, he’ll be able to catch one by the river. He only wants one.

What would you do with two deer? You can’t haul all them bodies for three miles on your back, no. No, you can’t. That’d be hard enough for a grown man, much less my little Ed.

Running through the woods, he makes a curve to the left. He knows where to go; there's a little ledge overlooking the river. It'll be a great spot to sit under, to wait, to watch.

A little rock ledge with an overhang for Ed to hide beneath. Only he could disappear in a shadow space this small. Sheets of rock break off to show the new untouched foundation. Rock, which flakes apart so easily and so exactly, there must be something wrong with it. Something deep down wrong on the inside to make the rock this weak. Rock should be hard and strong, having been forged in the earth, not so easily weathered away.

Clouds come up fast in the sky, dark and stormy. Wind hits Ed in the face. The shade of the rocks turns chilly, and his little body shivers without the sun. The mountains are so far away up there, clouded and overcome by shadows. Full and pointed, rising fast from the belly of the land, mountains soon to be wet by the milk of nature.

Pale green, leafy lichens are eating a pine down below. The branches first, the weaker parts of the thing, working their way to the stronger bits, the trunk and roots. His ma called them the resurrection plants because even if you thought they were dead, they'd come back to life when a big rain hit.

A dying fir has fallen over the river, winding; thin roots struggle to hold it upright and out of the water; the current pulls everything downriver.

Ed waits patiently on the ledge, his compound bow still hangs from his back. And in the distance, off to his right, a doe walks alongside the river. But he must wait until she is closer, with only a range of twenty to thirty feet. And after a time, she does come. Step after step, she makes her way down the side of the river. She's heaving, head hanging. The other deer must have left her behind.

He takes the bow off his back and grips it out in front of him. The bow is heavier in his hands than he remembers. He pulls out an arrow from the quiver on the bow and places it against the rest, setting nock to string.

Crossing his path, she stops at the side of the river to take a drink. Her tongue laps up the water, ears twitch from side to side. The wheels spin as he draws the bowstring back, doe in his sights. He holds it there, waiting for his shot.

The first time he killed a deer, he didn't have a good shot, hit the thing through the thigh. She kept on hobbling through the woods, and he had to chase her down and cut her throat. There was blood everywhere, stained the hide, had to wash what was left of it, with the hole and all.

The doe looks up and turns her head from side to side. She begins quartering away as she walks farther down the river. For all the chill in the air, a drop of sweat, tickling his skin, runs down from the side of Ed's face, but he can't wipe it away. He follows her in his sights and releases the arrow, hitting the doe behind the shoulder and straight through the heart. It sticks in her other shoulder, and she tries to run, twenty, thirty yards. Her body jerks for a moment before crumpling to the ground.

Ed was sitting in the room he shared with his brother, reading the detective stories his ma thought were written by the devil himself, when he heard the crying. It was soft at first, but it got louder and louder, and he knew it was Hen, but he didn't care. Not until he heard his ma's deep voice.

Creeping down the hall, he went just far enough to see his ma and Hen sitting on the flowery couch in the den. His ma weighed the cushions down so flat, Ed couldn't see them under her and her big old skirt.

“Henry, girls’ll come and go, but I’ll always be your ma.”

The kitchen timer began to ding, and his ma said, “Come on. I’ll let you have the first cookie. A real big one. Won’t even tell Ed.”

Hen followed her into the kitchen. Ed crawled farther down the hall and into the den. He peeked from a corner to see his ma hand Hen a butterscotch cookie. He smiled, and she leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. Her full lips touching his sweaty skin.

Ed could taste the salt. He began to breathe heavily; throat closing, head light, he just couldn’t get enough air into him. Digging his fingernails into the carpet, he ripped at the strands. Hands fists, he stood up, ran to his room and slammed the door behind him.

He could hear her stomps down the hall as he rocked himself on his bed, nails cutting into his hands as he clenched his fists.

His ma threw open the door. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing? Get up!”

Eyes blurry with tears, Ed could see the belt in her hand. Must have ripped it off the rack before coming down the hall. She spun him around and whipped him. Whip, sting. Whip, sting. Ed couldn’t stop crying.

“Stop being such a titty baby! And don’t you go slamming my doors ever again!” His ma turned and left the room.

Ed stared at the wood-paneled wall of the bedroom. Tears ran down his cheeks. The black lines in between each board. He could see the wood beginning to split.

Laying the doe on her back, Ed takes his buck knife from his belt. His knees holding the hind legs apart, he cuts only the hide from legs to ribcage, careful not to hit the wall of the belly.

Oh no, that would smell too bad for Ed. He's done it before, with his first deer. Didn't know just how deep he was cutting and hit the belly, opened it, freed a smell like sick and manure.

Ed stops.

The guts stare at him from their red sack of heat. He bares his teeth and begins to cut out the guts. The slimy, thin bits that hold them all where they belong must be cut too. Warm blood coats his hands, sliding in between fingernails and skin. Slick, it makes his hands slippery, and he drops the knife a few times into the guts and has to fish it back out.

You always did have butterfingers, Ed.

He smiles at his clumsiness.

Tossing the guts into the water, he watches them get pulled away and sees for a moment the gentle power of the river, calming, comforting, a source of life. Yet it wipes away earth and rock, wears down anything that gets in its way. Thick, heavy iron ore coats the rocks at the bottom, a sheet over everything. Hiding what's really beneath, what really lies underneath the red.

He walks back to the bloody doe. Taking his buck knife, Ed cuts her hide away from the ankle tendons on her hind legs, careful so he doesn't cut the tendons themselves. Then he'd be in trouble. No, don't want that.

He looks at his work. The hide, jagged, fallen to the ground, the white tendons stick out.

That'll be good.

No, Ed, there's too much blood.

"Yes, ma'am, too much blood." He drags the deer to the river and washes off the blood on her hide and inside her.

As he tugs her back out of the river, a bit of light catches his eye. Her eyes. They're still open. He squats and steps on over.

"You won't want to see this." He pinches her top lashes and pulls her lids down over her drying eyes.

He looks for something to slip in between those ankle tendons and finds a stick. He tests it, slides it through her ankles. You'll do mighty fine. He nods, stands, and begins to drag the deer back through the woods the way he came.

Ed twisted the ends, knotted them, pulled them through loops, but he couldn't get his tie right that Monday morning. Normally, he'd be in school this time on a weekday. Math class right about, but not this Monday. Instead, he'd be at the church. His ma usually held her own services at the house on Sundays. But not for this.

Dressed in black, he walked down the chilly, unlit hall to his ma's bedroom. He stopped at the half-open door. His ma was standing in front of her mirrored closet, lifting her black dress over her head.

Her backside was exposed, and he could see her skin beginning to sag. Her thick legs still stood strong though, her back still straight. She was a tall woman, sturdy. A size Ed never would be. Her skin was tanned and spotted with freckles and bruises and want.

As she pulled the dress over her head, covering her body, she turned around to see Ed. She just stared at him, tears falling from her eyes.

"I can't"—his voice cracked—"I can't tie my tie, Ma."

* * *

Dragging the body past the haystack filled with arrows and the firewood stacked by the side of his house, Ed brings the doe into his shed. The large singletree that he made himself hangs from the rafters of the ceiling, and he hauls the body up with a rope tied around the stick in her hind legs. After slipping her ankles into the hooked metal bars of the singletree, he takes out the stick and unties the rope. Her front legs dangle.

The hooked bars pull apart her hind legs, and he takes a few moments to look at the body. Blood drips onto the cement floor, but there are so many stains already, no one will notice when it dries. And the sound is so soft, he can't hear it. But it must be making a sound.

Cans and shoeboxes filled with tools are stacked up on the tables. The shelf holds paint cans and boxes of nails and screws. Ed hangs his bow on a hook by the door and drags over an ice chest from the corner.

Cutting around the hind legs and then down to the middle, he hacks away the hide from the muscles. The thin, white tissue under the hide isn't too hard to cut through, and he has to be careful not to mess up the hide. Such a nice hide.

"I'll be able to wear this one." He smiles.

He does the front legs the same and then cuts from between the hind legs to the base of the skull, lining up his knife with the cut he already made in the belly. Her body is still warm, and the hide will come off pretty easy. Peeling it away from the body, he rips the last bit off the deer and holds it in the air.

Now the meat.

Hammers, screwdrivers, and saws hang from the pegboard on the wall above one of the tables. He takes a saw off the wall and carries it back to the doe. He holds her head steady with one hand, while sawing her neck with the other. Then the front shoulders come off to be deboned

for sausage. He drops the bloody parts in the ice chest and then cuts off both front legs. Guts fall to the floor. He debones the neck, cuts off the backstrap and hindquarters.

Ribs are good and fat too.

He debones the rest of the meat in the ice chest.

“Ma, what does a boy do when he likes a girl?” Ed stood in the kitchen, holding a basket of yard eggs for his ma.

“You talking about that hussy Jeanne?” She took the eggs from the basket and put them in cartons.

“Aw, Ma, she ain’t a hussy.” Ed furrowed his brow.

“Ed, think about what happens in nature. Two deer, antlers locked, attacking each other for the doe. And who always wins? The bigger and stronger one. And that’ll never be you, Ed. Your brother would of been, but not you. Best you stay with your ma, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He looked down at the floor. “But what if a girl likes a girl?”

“What you talking about, boy? Girls don’t like girls.” His ma began to wipe the counter down with a rag. Fast circles over and over.

“But what if one did?”

His ma stopped and grabbed Ed’s chin in her hand, squeezing his cheeks against his teeth. “Girls don’t like girls, Ed. You hear? That’s the devil’s work.”

He answered a muffled, “Yes, ma’am.”

Leaving what’s left of the body to hang, Ed hauls the ice chest into the house to wrap, date, and freeze the meat. Some of it he leaves out on the counter, the backstrap to be sliced thin,

breaded, and fried. He wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a trail of blood behind.

The house filled up with the smell of fried meat and grease, he eats his dinner. Tender, fatty meat, rare. He smiles as juice slides down his chin.

On the way to his bedroom, he stops at a picture of his ma on the wall. It was taken just before she passed, only a few years back. There are no pictures of his pa or Hen. But his ma is still everywhere.

The rain begins outside in the night. It's not pouring, but neither is it drizzling, and Ed decides to go out anyway. Standing in a clearing by his house in the woods, Ed, eager for the rain, strips off his clothes and wraps himself in his newest hide.

In the Shallow

“All forward,” Dicky says.

\$96.50. Ninety-six dollars and fifty cents to drown in the fucking Ocoee. Another \$50 to Craig for gas. Not to mention the price of food. But of course, the funeral will be thousands.... What was I thinking? Why did I agree to this? Sure, I’m a good swimmer... but whitewater rafting in Class V rapids....

Craig smiles back at me from the first row. My boyfriend. We grew up in the same town. Different schools, until high school when he became my first art partner. His Mohawk and constant singing of metal music scared me... *suffocation, no breathing. Don’t give a fuck if I cut my arm bleeding... this is my last resort.* Every afternoon, last class of the day.

“Stop; Hero route or Chicken?”

Dicky’s skinny. He lives in a van parked up the mountain. Half the year he spends guiding tourists down the Ocoee, and the other half he’s in New Zealand down a river with a ten-foot drop. He’s hairy too.

“Hero!” the crowd in the raft replies.

“Chicken,” I say, but no one listens.

Craig has gone down the Ocoee before with his family. It was fun, he said. Come on, we can invite all our (my) friends. It’ll be awesome.

He’s also gone skydiving.

“This is Hell’s Hole,” Dicky says. “It’s a hydraulic; the water goes over the rock and back down under.”

Hell’s Hole? I’d say that’s about right.

We had to sign a waiver saying that Ocoee Rafting is not liable. You know, in case we die. If you are under eighteen, you can't even go without a parent's signature. Craig thought it was "cool."

This is the same guy who pointed to a Degas ballerina in an art book during class and said, "Vagina!"

"Hero, it is." Dicky smiles.

I frown.

The water is warm now... only because it started raining an hour ago. The rain is ice hitting my cheeks, my legs. This morning, we left the tent flaps open. Just forgot them, not thinking of the weather. Who thinks about the weather on vacation?

"All hard forward!" Dicky says.

What kind of name is Dicky? That has to be a nickname... right?

My arms burn from the constant digging in of the paddle into the water, with the current, with the rhythm of Craig in front of me. In, pull back, lift, forward, in... row, row, row. I feel it in my stomach. My sides. My back. My teeth chatter in the cold rain.

My butt slides on the slick round seat. If you can call it a seat. It's more like a tube that you aren't actually supposed to sit on. One cheek should be on the outer vertical tube and the other on the inner horizontal tube 'seat.' But I kept sliding off so I just gave up.

I see Hell's Hole. Is it too late to jump ship?

"Harder!" Dicky says, but I can barely hear him over the roar of the water.

The water white from harassment, constantly being forced over the rocks, forward, down, around. The water doesn't want this. It just wants to go on its merry way, flowing down the river,

but no. Some asshole rocks just had to come along, probably falling down the mountainside, and got in the water's way. Now, the water has no choice. How is that even fair?

The water turns the raft left, and we're about to go over the rapid sideways.

But Dicky's got our back. "All left!"

Wait, shouldn't he be saying, all down? But it's too late.

And everything happens so much faster in the water.

I see the white water rising over us like a wall to the left, and we're going straight down into the hydraulic. He's flipping us on purpose, that's my last thought before the water sucks me in.

I didn't get a last breath. I didn't even think to take one. The freezing rain turns into warm river water.

Up, up, up, I have to get up. But the water, I am covered. My skin has taken a new form. I am water. It's pulling me down to the rocks, back to the rocks, forward to the rocks. Every way but up. To the sky. To air. My lungs ache; my body is depleted. My arms and legs flail through the violent current.

These aren't lifejackets; they aren't meant to prevent drowning. What are they even for? I hear nothing but water. So loud. The water is so loud. Deep, deep water. Up, up, up. My helmet hits something hard above me. The raft? The raft. I'm inside the raft, the floor above me. But my helmet's too big. The space is too small. My eyes break the surface, but my nose can't. Just enough to taunt.

I can't even tilt my body; it's taken all my strength to stay here. I can't hold my breath any longer. The water invades me like fire, churning up under the raft into my lungs, burning my

nose, my mouth, my throat. It just keeps coming. The water walls me in under the raft, and I am filled.

Someone grabs my forearm. Pulling me, pulling me out of the raft and into the air. I break the surface. I don't know where I am, who grabbed me. I cough up water, water, more water. I'm choking. I can't even breathe yet. The water has to leave first. My throat has closed, and I can't get air. Someone holds onto me, pressing me against the outside of the raft. I am hyperventilating, trying to breathe.

And I feel it. Air. God, sweet air. But I'm still coughing, all the water won't come out, but at least air is going in.

"You okay, Brooke?"

I can't talk. I can't even try to make words. I'm being brought over to the shallow edge of the river. It's calmer here. Wherever we are.

"Brooke?"

I look and see Dicky. Dicky pulled me out, held onto me, brought me to the edge. I could cry, but no, no crying. I just nod and look away, standing in the shallow, holding back tears, breath unsteady.

I glance around and see that no one else seems to even notice what just happened. Not even Craig. He and his friends are all just floating around in the calm water, talking to each other.

"You sure?" Dicky asks.

I just nod some more.

Dicky flips the raft back right side up and begins collecting paddles.

Craig glances at me and finally gets the message that something is wrong. He swims over and asks, “Are you all right?”

A weak scratchy “yeah” comes out of my mouth. It burns. I rub my throat.

Dicky gets back into the raft and pulls Craig and then me in behind him. It’s amazingly easy. Just grab the shoulder straps and fall back. Even the tiniest people can pull the largest into the raft. I grab my paddle from Dicky, who starts telling a story about an old couple on the river in New Zealand. Apparently the wife almost had a heart attack while falling down the ten-foot drop. Craig laughs and looks at me, but I don’t say anything.

I don’t tell him how scared I was and that I thought I would die.

I don’t tell him I’m glad I don’t owe him anything.

And I don’t tell him that I want to come back next year, alone.

woman, you are

Chapter 1

Raising her eyes to the sky, Kwa ignores the ones around her. Her clan. Their sickness killing everyone. Her father, her brothers, her mother. The whole clan is dying. Like the beautiful Kila flower—tiny fragile bright white in the sun, five petals curve and meet in the green heart—murdered in the night by a winter freeze, found in the morning wilted, withered, and touched by death.

The winter red berries that hung from the branches in bunches lie on the snow like drops of blood staining the land. Her mother's body—with skin as fine as the bark of a river birch tree binding bones as brittle as the black glass stone, waiting to wear, shorten, and break—lying wrapped in mountain goatskin in a body-sized hole in the orange clay. Her mother with the swollen joints, the hair down to her waist, the bent back. She had lived a full life, mother of five, now dead, all dead. But the only daughter.

Kwa wraps her deerskin tighter around her shoulders as a wind blows by, bearing flakes of snow.

“Kwa,” Tig says.

She does not want to look at him. His bulging brow, thick curly beard of coal, eyes the color of pine bark, and a broad nose. The sun has tanned his muscular frame, yellowed his eyes. He leads the clan. Sjeba, his mate, stands behind him cowering like a pup. Eyes, nose, lips too large for her face, still plump belly, thighs, and hips from her not long past pregnancy, but her breasts as dry as a drought. She tightens her grip on the infant, Kauko, at the sound of Kwa's name leaving her mate's wide firm lips. Her eyes, like the summer grassy plains, focus on Kwa.

Kwa steps up to Tig as he points to the pile of clay on the ground. Family covers their own graves. The members of the clan follow Tig back to the cave, some women with tears still falling down their cheeks. The frozen air stings Kwa's insides as she takes a deep breath and watches them trudge away, crunching as they go.

Kneeling into the wet snow, she flings her deerskin to the left. Cupping her hands, hurling clay into the hole, scratching, clawing at the icy orange ground, she must cover the wound. It will heal sooner, leaving only a faint scar of loosely-packed clay. A lone faint scar. Like herself.

They cannot endure much more death, having lost half of the clan already. She stands back to see the orange of the land, white of the snow, and red of the berries mixed onto her mother's grave. In Kwa's childhood, she would have admired the colors, delighted in the beauty. But she is not a child anymore.

There is only one other grave next to her mother's. They leave graves behind like buried reminders of where they have been. A trail of death has followed them to the warm place, but her clan has been sick for over a year. As the sun heads downward and the moon rises, she wanders through the snow back to their cave. Smoke floats out from the opening.

They share everything. Everything. Even their bodies are not their own.

Sjeba waits for her, Kauko in her arms. Kwa steps over to where she stands at the mouth of the cave. It has touched Sjeba. The sickness like a thick fog in the air covers everything that gets close enough. Kwa wonders how long Sjeba will last. Will Sjeba ever see Kauko walk? Will she ever see him grow? Will she ever see him become a man?

Kwa stretches out her arms to hold the infant, but Sjeba stalls.

Sjeba bites her lips together and puts Kauko into Kwa's arms as if Kwa will drop him the moment Sjeba frees her grasp from his little body. Sjeba points up at the moon and then back down to the ground. Be back soon. Kwa does not answer, only nods. Kwa turns away, leaving Sjeba alone, holding her lion pelt tightly around her frame, wind tugging her long wild hair across her face.

Kwa imagines herself as a wound on Sjeba's chest. An opening revealing Sjeba's insides. Her hidden self. And just when she thinks the wound is almost healed, it becomes worse than ever. A lasting trait marring her skin for all the world to see inside of her. Her flaw. Her shame.

But she took from Kwa, and Kwa takes from her. A clan that shares everything.

Kwa wanders through the snowy woods around their cave. There flows a small river, edges frozen, bordered by large rocks. She sits down on one and stares at the water glazing the ice and rock, so smooth and steadfast. It has somewhere to be and will not be stopped by the freezing weather. It will reach its end.

Kauko whines at her neglect. She gazes down into his eyes, two little holes cut from the snowy white ice, revealing the life deep within blue waters, into the darkness the light hides. Opening her furs, uncovering her heavier, fuller, left breast, she lifts Kauko to one of her dark nipples. His gums latch on, suctioning the milk from her sagging breast. The familiar tingling rushing toward her nipple stops as the milk begins to flow. She covers him underneath her furs and rubs the lumps to lessen the strain.

Less than a year ago she would have been sitting next to a river nursing her own child. She remembers how natural feeding her own little one had been. But the baby did not live past half a year before the harsh winter took her from Kwa. Saswun. Her thin hair lighter than Kwa's, her soft skin warmer.

The sickness had already been affecting the clan since the summer moons, leaving babies without fathers and mothers. Not having a choice, Kwa became the wet nurse of the clan.

Whether the lack of choice came from the elders or the babies, she does not know.

Kauko is the only baby now. The only one left of the next age. The son of the clan leader. And Sjeba.

Using her finger to push toward her breast from inside the corner of Kauko's mouth, Kwa releases the suction. The milk keeps flowing, and she presses her forearm firmly over the nipple. Placing Kauko on her shoulder, she pats his back lightly until his murmurs stop. She moves him over to her right breast. Suction, tingling, flow; the same every few hours. But no longer a natural act her body wants to fulfill. No longer for her own flesh and blood. Almost wrong. Almost painful.

The first time she breastfed Saswun, right after giving birth, Kwa felt so happy. Not milk, but a thick kind of water flowed from her breasts. She had seen the women of the clan breastfeeding all her life and knew already what to do and how to do it. But actually feeding her own child was more than words can say. She recalls the tightening of her belly as Saswun fed, the slight burning, but no pain. Not sore, cracked, and bloody nipples. Only beauty.

Kwa thinks her body knows Kauko is not hers. That this is not meant to be. Half of him part of Saswun, but tainted by Sjeba. The wrong mother.

The slow sucking stops fully. Kauko has fallen asleep, nipple in mouth. She releases her breast with her finger, staunches the flow with her palm, and rests his little body on her shoulder. Slowly, softly she pats his back, letting him release the strain in his bloated belly.

Her leather-wrapped feet numb to the cold, she steps down onto the snowy ground. Steadily, she returns to the cave. The moon leads her through the trees, streaks of light touching

the snow, casting back light to make the night as bright as dawn. But when she reaches the cave, Sjeba is waiting. Mouth turned down at Kwa's slow steps.

Sjeba stands pointing at the moon. Dark skin crinkles around eyes squinting.

"Kauko was hungry," Kwa says.

But Sjeba is not happy with Kwa's answer. She breathes heavily and snatches the infant from Kwa's grasp, rousing him, making him cry. Without calming him, she stalks off into the cave. His cries bounce off the walls.

The snow flutters from the sky as Kwa steps into the cave. Each family shares a fire, like separate rooms in one house. Only one man knows how to make fire, and before he dies, he will pass on the duty of keeping the clan warm and safe. Women are not allowed to make fire or even to see the man make fire. Without a family, Kwa has one to herself. For now.

And she knows it will not be much longer.

Tig does not let little ones sleep near him, so they might not wake him. Every night Sjeba grudgingly leaves Kauko with Kwa until the sun rises. With the first light Sjeba rushes over to retrieve the infant, fearful for his life. Perhaps she should be.

Kwa glances up as Sjeba, without looking at her, hands over Kauko and walks back to Tig. Every night she chooses Tig over her infant. Kwa never chose him over Saswun.

Kauko's eyes focus on Kwa's, and she smiles at him. She imagines he would speak back to her if he could. That he would not hate her like his mother does. Kwa lies on her mat of furs and sets Kauko against her as she pulls up another set of furs to ward off the cold night air. He will hate her one day, like his mother does. For something Kwa could not control, had no power over.

Wrapping her arms around his soft warm body, she tries to keep her eyes open, eventually giving in to sleep.

Gazing down at the cave from somewhere higher, up in the sky, Kwa feels a shadow stretching across the night above her. She glances upward to catch a glimpse only to become overwhelmed by the shadow. But it slides right through her skin and downward to the cave. A tug from her chest wrenches her toward the shadow. Little by little, the shadow molds into a familiar shape. A man. She follows him.

They float swiftly to the cave, never touching foot to the new-fallen snow. They enter. She watches as he touches the sleeping people. One by one.

A finger at the forehead, dragging along the curves of flesh: nose, lips, chin, neck, chest, and belly. Then he halts, one hand on the belly, and takes the other, shoving it through the flesh. The body spasms upward, arms tremble at the sides. The skin peels back like a sweet thick-skinned fruit. The belly opens wide. One hand stops the flaps of skin from surging closed while the other thrusts toward the head. He stretches his forearm inward, reaching; he has it, tightening, strangling, shattering; the eyes flash wide, mouth gapes, a silent screaming. The body slackens. One by one.

Fire by fire the shadow glides, clutches, kills. And she watches as one by one her clan gives into the night air, into death. She does not even try to stop him. She does not even want to. Until he reaches her fire.

She sees herself sleeping alone. But she is not alone. Kauko is tucked under her arm, against her side, sleeping softly. The shadow reaches for the infant, stops, then changes his mind and reaches for Kwa's silent body. She feels no regret at the sight of her body undone. She gazes

into the hole. Like gazing into the body of a dead animal. How amazingly they favor each other. She wants to touch the bloody innards of herself. To know the heat unfettering from life. Her life. Yet, she cannot move. Frozen by the cold of the shadow man, she watches her eyes stare back at her, mouth in a silent scream. She knows she is to blame.

But the shadow is not done yet. He knocks over her body to get to Kauko. Only, she is wrong. It is not Kauko tucked under her arm. It is Saswun. Kwa must stop the shadow. He will not lay a finger on her daughter. She reaches for his arm, but shadow instantly envelops her hand. It creeps up her arm like hot water that tickles and burns her skin, stretching up to her shoulder.

Cringing, she stares as the shadow splits Saswun's plump belly and plunges his hand up into the baby's chest. Her tiny body swells with the shadow inside of her. He has found it too fast; Kwa does not have time.

The water erupts all over her body, and she falls to her knees with searing pain. She opens her mouth wide to scream, but she cannot speak, caught between the blistering water and saving Saswun. Yet Kwa knows she will merely be a witness to her daughter's death, unable to prevent the life leaking from her frame. Once more.

But Saswun wails high-pitched. Stout arms and legs thrashing in the air.

She is alive and loud.

The water dries instantly. The shadow man fades into the darkness, and Kwa floats into the air, landing back into her body.

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Kwa opens her eyes, and she glances around her. A baby cries cuddled next to her. Saswun. Throwing the furs to the side, Kwa realizes it is Kauko shrieking. Coals are all that is left of her fire. The cool air has begun to invade the cave. It seems as though no one has woken.

And instantly, she knows what she must do. She breastfeeds Kauko, then wraps every fur she can around both of them. She gathers all the dried meat, berries, and leaves onto a piece of leather and ties the ends together. Into the bright snowy night, she runs away, taking Kauko with her.

Chapter 2

After three days in the cold wilderness alone, she has grasped her full guilt—because of her choice to leave the clan, both she and Kauko will die. But it is too late. The sun streaks through the frostbitten trees. The air is dry, Kwa's lips cracked. She staggers through the snowy woods hunting for berries, for water, for anything.

Nothing. No life. No food.

Kwa snatches a handful of snow piled on a branch and places it into her mouth. Sucking on the ice makes her colder, but she needs water. Her stomach tightens and moans like an animal, a predator hiding in the leafless bushes waiting for easy prey to stumble past.

She is weak, too weak to even make enough milk. Kauko fusses with her, reminding her of her failure. She did not think; she just acted. Even if she wanted to go home, she has lost the way, weaving through trees for days. She imagines sometimes she has accidentally been heading back without even knowing it.

They would kill her. If she went back. Beat her with sticks until she bled to death. Hold her underwater until she lost her last breath. Tie her to a tree without food or water until her ribs

poked through her chest and she saw the great light. At least here she stands a chance. But does Kauko? Did she condemn him to death?

Her legs force her to sit when she finds a dry rock. She sways Kauko in her arms to hush his whines.

She moves on. If she sits too long she fears she will never stand up again. In the distance she sees fewer trees, an opening. Quickening her step, she reaches the field.

Mammoths.

Kwa is at the very edge of their pack. She has never been this near to a mammoth before. The closest one to her has light brown eyes, with the whites a tinged red like the berries around her mother's grave. But the skin around the trunk's tip is much darker than her own, black and dry like ashes. Cracked and ground with wear. The fur, more like hair it is so long, the color she would imagine burnt clay to be. Soaring above her, she cannot say just how far they reach into the sky.

The snow disappears beneath feet larger than tree trunks as the pack slowly trudges to her right. They thrust their tusks into the icy ground as though they are looking for something. A calf, with tusks not yet grown, stands waiting underneath its mother's sagging belly for food.

Calm, until they break out in a savage charge. Deep wails, broken, painful, fading in and out, louder and softer. Their footsteps shake the earth as they pound through the snow. So strong and powerful, yet fleeing.

Kwa snaps her head to her left. Short, thin spears fly past the trees that hide her. A smaller mammoth crumples to the snowy land. Kwa treads backward as hunters race toward the fallen mammoth.

The hunters' movements exact and smooth. She has never before seen anything less animal-like. They do not lumber like the mammoth, but step swiftly and lightly. Strange from her own people, they are taller and less broad. Less muscular and straighter backs. Less drastic features and curves, smaller hips and breasts. Longer, thinner fingers and legs, arms and necks. Less hair covering smaller heads and bodies. They are not of her clan, yet Kwa has never seen a better likeness.

In Kwa's childhood, her grandmother had sung the children stories about a people like this over fires late into the night. The songs told them that they would know these people by their beauty, their smooth build, the shells and bones adorning their bodies. So luring. Scaring them with a beast so similar to their own people that they might not even be able to set themselves apart from the others. Beasts who can talk with a being called a god. They can harness a god's great power and wield it like lightning.

With cries of war they continue to stab the dying mammoth with larger bone-tipped spears than the ones they threw. One man strikes the animal with a branch in the shape of a club. The mammoth lies still. Wasting no time admiring their kill, the four hunters, three men and one woman, quickly skin the mammoth. Kwa stares as they slice the meat from bone, tear apart bone from bone, and gather the spare bits in separate piles. They do not speak. A young man and an older woman with pallets of bone and leather join the group, loading the piled parts on allotted pallets. Then they walk away, leaving nothing behind other than footsteps and blood.

Kauko begins fussing again, hungry. Little whines slip from his open lips. But the group is not far enough away yet. They hear him. Turning, they each skim the tree line for signs of life. A large man squints against the sun, shading his eyes with his hand. Kwa rips the furs from her body, letting them fall to the ground, and thrusts Kauko to her breast. He latches his mouth to her

nipple; sucking, tingling, flowing what little is left. She glances back up to the hunters. They are talking and pointing in her direction and at the pallets of mammoth, but she is too far away to hear them. The older woman begins stomping in Kwa's direction, while another man yells after her, pointing at the ground. But the woman keeps walking, then stops, and raises her hands into the air. Her white hair shining in the sunlight, she cries out incoherently. Then she kneels onto the ground, the other hunters following her lead. They each bend their heads to the ground then slowly stand back up in the snow.

The woman turns around, points at the larger man and back at her pallet. He picks it up for her and begins to drag it. They start walking again, away. All except for one man, the youngest, who waits a few moments longer, staring into the shadows of the trees and scouring. As he turns to follow the others, Kwa sighs with relief, until she remembers they have food, meat. Behind the shelter of the tree line, she begins to stalk them back to their camp.

The land begins to rise and fall as she tracks them. It does not take long, only a few steps of the sun across the sky, and they lead her to a small grove next to a large river. She peeks from the shadow of a thick pine tree and studies them. Their behaviors mild and unfamiliar, their interactions with each other knowing and intricate.

Kwa stands pressing her side against the rough bark. As she pats Kauko's back, she stares at the young woman who took part in the hunt, slicing the meat and cutting away the bone, and two men scraping the meat from the hide with sharp stones. They wear long fur that hangs down past their hips, tied at the waist with strips of leather. Seams trace the tops of their arms like the sides of mountains meeting at ridges. Leather fits to their legs, the same puckering bordering the sides, in and out and up to their crotches. Leather even covers their feet, laced down the middle

with a thin piece of hide. Their faces are covered in red and white, cracked colors that cloud their true skin. One of these men is the one who yelled at the older woman, yet she did not listen.

The older woman has fur on her head and wears a necklace of animal teeth around her neck. She cuts apart the mammoth's insides, separating the pieces into piles. Taking the snake-like insides of the mammoth, she squeezes and pulls again and again, emptying them of the mud within. When satisfied, she carries them over to the river and washes away what is left of the mud and blood. The water rushes through the hollowness. Then she stretches the insides and lays them down on a piece of leather to dry. She continues to clean each of the other parts but not as thoroughly, not as carefully, and lays them out to dry as well.

Two men work to rid the bones of meat and flesh. They scrape and wash and wipe until every bone is stripped of the animal. One of them is the larger man; the other is the younger man who hunted for Kwa long after the others had turned to leave.

The sun begins to go down as their work comes to an end. The leather is clean of meat and blood; the meat is sliced and wrapped in hide; the insides are clean and drying.

One of the men grabs a small straight stick and positions it into a notch on a wooden base. He spits on his hands, rubs them together, and starts spinning the stick between his hands onto the base. His hands move down as they spin, and he has to quickly reach for the top again to keep the twisting steady. A small trail of smoke drifts from the notch.

Kwa stands mouth open and eyes wide as they watch him. Maybe, Kwa thinks, it is not just he, but all of them make fire. Even women.

After a little longer, he pinches some shredded bark from a pile and touches them to the notch, letting them catch. The bark burns slowly, and he blows on it to make sure the flame will not fade. He adds dried pine needles to the blend and keeps blowing while adding more. He sets

the bundle of fire onto some ashes adding small sticks. With time, he adds bigger pieces of wood until he has a fire burning, lighting, warming.

The large man drives a straight sharpened mammoth bone into a few smaller chunks of meat. He carefully sets the bone across two split posts standing on opposite sides of the fire. This man holds the bone in place while the first man grabs the other end. Together they slowly spin the leg bone, burning the hanging chunks of meat.

When Kwa was little, she stumbled upon a trail of ants. She had never seen ants before and had no idea what they were and if they were dangerous. But they were so efficient. So small yet hauling berries and leaves so large that she did not know how they kept from being crushed. She followed the trail to a tiny dirt mound. The ants crawled into the mound through a hole at the top, bearing their loads along with them. They knew exactly where to go and what to do, yet she could not grasp how. She sat, watching them crawl in and out of the tunnel to drop off berries and leaves and heading out to get more.

Her feet began to sting, and she looked down to see the ants overwhelming her flesh. She could not see her own skin. Fire erupted from her feet as she bolted for the river at the edge of camp. Splashing into the icy water, she clawed the ants from her skin. Rubbing and rubbing and rubbing, but neither the burning nor the need to scratch would stop. She hobbled back to the cave on swollen feet. Her mother was feeding her little brother. She glanced up at Kwa, skimming down her body, eyes widening when they reached her feet.

“What?” her mother said.

“Littles burn skin.”

Her mother thought about this as she set the baby down and walked into the woods. Kwa's brother began to crawl away, and she herded him toward the cave until her mother came back with long, spiky leaves.

Her mother pointed to the ground, sat, and waited.

Kwa sat next to her and propped her feet on her mother's legs. Breaking the leaves freed a strong bitter sap. Her mother rubbed the sap into Kwa's sore flesh.

"Ants," she said.

Kwa has never gone near ants again, and something is telling her to stay away from these people. But she can smell the meat over the fire, the scent of burning wood, coals, blood. She sits and waits for them to talk, eat, lie down on their mats of fur, slowly close their eyes and let themselves drift off into dreams, hoping she will not get bitten.

She crouches in the shadows as she treads closer and closer to the store of meat wrapped in old leather, maybe deer. The people stay still, lost in sleep, while she creeps into their camp. Clutching the silent Kauko, she snatches one of the leather-bound rolls of mammoth and turns back toward the woods.

A shadow falls across the ground in front of her, then something roughly clenches onto her shoulder, throwing her to the ground. She rolls onto her back, covering Kauko with her furs, and comes face to face with the large man looming over her. She wants to scream, but that would only wake up the other members of his clan. She bites her lips together tightly, trying not to tremble, waiting for him to kill her.

Instead, he speaks to her. But it is like listening to birds calling each other from the branches of trees, beautiful yet incoherent. She only catches a few words.

“Who... you...? What... you...?”

Before she can say anything, he realizes she cannot understand him. He frowns and furrows his brows while seizing the arm not clutching Kauko. As he drags her in the snow, her shoulder feels like it will separate from her body. She grinds her teeth with the pain.

He ties some sort of twine around her wrists, but sees that she is holding an infant. Instead, he yanks her against a pine, sits her up straight, and wraps the twine around her body, leaving her arms free. Trunk to trunk, he fastens her waist to the tree. Then he ties her ankles together. She wants to cry, but she will not cry. She will take her death justly. It is her own fault after all.

The thickset man trudges away from her and back over to the others.

“Taw-nin.” He shakes a man awake.

They speak, pointing at her, but Kwa cannot hear them. This is what she imagined the return to her own clan as. Being caught, being discussed, and then during daybreak, her coming torture and death.

The second man sits up, rubs his eyes with heavy fists, stands, and treads through the snow to Kwa. He stares and squints, then speaks to the first man who fetches a half-burned branch from the fire and hands it to the second man.

Taking the blazing timber and shoving it almost in her face, he scours her body. He may be seeing her clearly for the first time, but she is seeing him clearly for the first time as well. She realizes that he is the man who cut flesh from the hide, who yelled at the older woman, the man who wielded the club.

His tall, solid frame is nothing like the brawn of her men. His thick legs are wrapped in horsehide, but it splits in the middle, fitting tightly to his body. His rumpled mud-colored hair

matches his deep eyes bordered by thick eyebrows. A necklace of shells and bones hangs from his straight muscular neck. Black stains stretch across his chest like the claw marks of a beast. He gazes into her eyes. His face is so much smoother than hers. So less broad and animal-like.

She thinks about her dirty, scarred skin. Her strong brow shadows pine-needle-green eyes, leading down to a wide-bridged nose and thick lips. Her short, stubby frame made for birthing, his for killing.

He reaches into her furs, and she does not realize what he is doing until it is too late. His eyes spot Kauko and a smile wraps around his face. He starts talking to her. She listens carefully, but cannot understand.

“...is... child? A...? Where... you...?”

The first man nudges him and says, “She... not...”

The second man examines Kwa while the first speaks. When the first finishes, the second places his hand against his chest and says, “Taw-nin.” Then he places his hand against her chest and waits.

She stalls. “Kwa.”

“Kwa.” He tests the word with his lips and tongue.

Again he turns to face the other man and spits. “What? ...you... her to...? ...her... the...!” Then Taw-nin walks back to his mat and to his dreams.

The large man trudges to where Kwa dropped the meat and sets it back onto the pile. He grabs something else wrapped in leather and throws it at her feet. She reaches down and picks up the leather pack. She sets Kauko on her lap and unwraps the leather. It is a piece of the burned meat from tonight’s meal.

Her mouth waters with hunger. She snatches the meat and shovels it into her mouth, eating so quickly that she starts to choke from the dryness. It tastes of smoke and pine, not like the bloody meat to which she is used. But she does not stop until every scrap is eaten, her belly warm and swollen. Then setting the leather to the side in the snow, she picks up Kauko and breastfeeds him. He will once again be able to eat his fill.

They will not kill her. Yet.

After feeding and patting Kauko, she rests her back against the tree and closes her heavy eyes. She lets sleep overcome her with dreams of better times. Childhood. Swimming in the river with her brothers. Picking flowers in the summertime and tying them into circles to place on her head. Her mother teaching her the uses of different leaves and flowers. Sticking her head in between her mother's legs, waiting with the other clan members for the men to come back from the hunt. Her father's smile as he kissed her mother. So long ago.

Chapter 3

Kwa wakes just before the sun rises. The birds caw in the trees above, and the snow has dampened her leather as she slept. Lying against the rough bark has stiffened her back, and even if she were not tied to the tree, she is not sure if she could stand.

What will they do with her now? What end do they have for her?

Kauko murmurs in his sleep. A loud caw from above lifts Kwa's head. She stares at the large black beast. Feathers shine in the dawn, a sharp white against burnt black, circling. He must think she is dead, his next meal. The cawing grows louder and louder as the bird swoops down and lands lightly on the snow. Black glass stones for eyes and a sharp beak. Cocking his head to the side, he stares at her. The bird knows; he must know.

“What?” she asks.

But he only caws in answer. He will not tell her fate. He will not brighten the unknown to her. She must wait in the darkness. As though she were slowly creeping around, reaching hands out for something, anything to touch, to grasp onto, to give her understanding. A point around which all else will center.

Kauko’s wiggling startles the bird, who now sweeps his muscular wings outward and flaps into the air wakening Kwa from her thinking. Feeling each breast’s fullness, she lifts him from her lap up to her left breast. He clings onto her chest like a root in hard clay.

But Kwa feels the burn in her movement, the grating of the twine strapping her waist to the pine tree. Has it gotten tighter? And hotter. Why is it so hot this morning? No breeze touches the branches, and the sun has already started melting the snow.

She unwraps her deerskin as best as she can and watches the clan wake. The woman who cleaned the insides begins her day first. She stands, stretches, and glares right at Kwa. Only Taw-nin and the large man saw Kwa last night. She had been very careful not to scream, not to wake the others. The fewer people who know she is here, the safer she feels.

Disregarding her duties, the woman stomps straight for Kwa. Her leather-wrapped feet punching holes in the stiff snow. The woman does not speak, only runs her eyes along every inch of Kwa’s body. Carefully, the woman pulls back the thin layer of leather covering Kauko. At once, her eyes snap back to Kwa’s. She knows. This woman knows why Kwa is being kept. She wants to ask, to ask the woman why.

Kwa sees the woman’s eyes, thick with clouds. Her skin is like an old hide dried out in the sun, sagging from the carcass’s bones. Thin white hair shoots out from her scalp in all directions like weeds in a dead field.

Her sunken lips slide over wet toothless gums as she says, “Pah-ge,” tapping two fingers against her boney chest. She reaches out, tapping the same fingers against Kwa’s fleshy chest.

“Kwa.”

“Kwa,” Pah-ge says in a scratchy voice, reminding Kwa of the bird. She smiles, her gums dripping with spit. Then she squawks like a bird, laughing, stands and walks away.

Kauko drains one breast. Kwa pats his back and switches him to the other. Staunching one flow and setting free another.

After Pah-ge has woken, the rest of the clan follows. One by one the clan members wake and stare at Kwa as they pack their mats of fur onto another pallet. But none of them go near her, carefully avoiding her tree like a deadly snake.

Taw-nin is last to wake and first to eat. The fire has gone out, but there is plenty of burned meat left over from last night. He walks over to the wrapped meat resting on one of the pallets and grabs the largest bundle. Only after he sits down and begins to eat does everyone else walk over to the pallet and grab his or her own. And although Kwa was the first thing the others’ eyes set on, Taw-nin does not so much as glance in her direction.

After he has eaten, he gathers the others.

He speaks too fast for Kwa to pick out the few words she might know, but as he points at Kwa, all their eyes shift to her. Pah-ge smiles harshly. But the young man, arms folded and head high, squints at Kwa.

Taw-nin begins to speak a little slower. “She... a child, and she... my...”

His? Kwa thinks. His what? Her throat tightens.

Pah-ge waves her arms wildly in the air, stressing her words. “She is a... the...!”

But the young man stands and thrusts his finger at Kwa. “Her clan... for her—”

Taw-nin only waits a second before slapping the young man across the face. “Sele!”

The young man’s head whips to the side, and he sags to his knees in the snow. Laying his hands and head on the ground, he speaks quickly. Pah-ge cannot be heard over Sele’s shouting.

“Her clan...!”

Taw-nin kicks snow at him. “...not... me...!”

Sele’s matted hair flows down into the snow, and he lifts his head. Taw-nin does not look at him. But Sele turns to Kwa, pain in his eyes. She holds his gaze.

They all stand, ready to leave. But Sele does not stand, does not move. Only stares at Kwa.

Was he trying to help her?

The bones, insides, meat, hide, and mats are already waiting on the three pallets. A man and a woman walk over to two of the pallets and stand in front of the bone handles, waiting to haul them. Taw-nin says something to the large man, pointing at her. While the man trudges over to Kwa, Taw-nin speaks to Sele who has regained control of himself.

Sele is still sitting on his heels in the snow by the burnt-out fire, no longer staring at Kwa but at the ground instead. He looks up as Taw-nin nears, casting a long shadow over him. Taw-nin meets Sele’s gaze, points at him, and then points back at one of the pallets. A grim look crosses over his face as his eyes follow Taw-nin’s finger. He stands slowly, unsteadily and trudges to the last pallet, taking his place in front of it.

The large man reaches Kwa. He squats and smiles unkindly, revealing yellowed and blackened teeth hiding behind a dirty tanned face.

“Gwun.” He points to himself.

His shoulders are incredibly broad, neck as thick as a tree, eyes tiny. His large hands untie the rough twine from Kwa's sore ankles, then from around her waist. He takes the twine and begins to wrap it around the wrist not holding Kauko. But Kwa understands what he is doing.

"Kauko," Kwa says.

He stops and stares back at her looking bewildered. She lifts the infant higher, forcing his awareness toward Kauko.

"Kauko!" she says.

He freezes, then spins his head around to Taw-nin. "What... the child?"

But before Gwun even finishes, Pah-ge steps over and takes the infant from Kwa's grasp.

"No!" Kwa reaches out for the child, stepping forward.

But Gwun shoves his palm against her chest, pushing her back, away. Pah-ge only laughs.

"Kauko," Pah-ge says.

Kwa tries to stop from crying as Kauko's little arms flail around, eyes seeking her. Pah-ge shushes him and strides away.

Gwun smiles again and wraps her wrists one at a time and ties them together in the middle. He clenches the end in his large fist and yanks at the twine, tugging Kwa forward, toward him.

Taw-nin looks back, nods, and faces the flow of the river, beginning the long way through the snow. Pah-ge follows right after with Kauko in her arms. Behind her, Gwun with Kwa as his captive. Then one woman and one man each with a pallet, and lastly Sele hauling the third.

Gwun has tied the twine too tightly around Kwa's wrists. She feels the burn from the coarse weave. He jerks again, causing Kwa to stumble in the snow.

The river flows slowly over the pebbles and sand at the bottom. Very quietly it murmurs like a baby. Water so clear that Kwa can see the scales of the fish casting back the sun, bursts of light twisted in the flow. The fish are swimming downriver, dragged along by the current. Trapped by something they cannot even see, only feel, only know. They have streaks of fire along their sides, but they are mostly a sky and ash color. Kwa watches them, thinking as much as she can about the fish instead of her fate.

It begins to snow about midday, but they do not stop. Not to eat, not to rest, not to drink from the river, not for anything. Kwa looks back at the people hauling the pallets. Sele has begun to fall behind, but she does not say anything, and no one worries. He trails after them, following their footsteps. Maybe the tracks will fill with the falling snow, and he will lose his way, she thinks. But she does not lose sight of him farther and farther behind the group.

As Kauko whines for milk throughout the day, Gwun releases enough slack in the twine for Kwa to hold the infant. Pah-ge walks slower, meeting her pace, and hands her Kauko. Kwa feeds Kauko while Gwun stomps behind her, tightly holding the twine, watching her like a predator. He will not let her flee so easily. And as soon as Kauko has had his fill, Pah-ge snatches him back, and Gwun jerks once again on the twine.

Kwa does not think they will reach their end by the sun's fall. And as the moon rises into the sky, taking the place of the sun, she cringes at the thought of more walking. At least when she walked alone, she could stop when she pleased. But they settle for the night by the river, under a dead pine tree.

Gwun ties Kwa to the dead pine, and Pah-ge brings Kauko back to her while speaking words that Kwa disregards for lack of understanding. Taw-nin does not look or speak to Kwa.

The fire is high and the meat has been eaten by the time Sele reaches them. Kwa does not know how he will keep up the next day. Or the next. How much further is their end?

The group continues on for two days as the weather grows a little warmer and the land changes. Trees Kwa has never seen before replace the familiar pines. They are very tall, but wider than any tree Kwa has ever seen. Their thin limbs swoop down and around oddly. The growing leaves are so thick and glazed that they barely let any light through. The bark is old and cracked like the white and red streaks on their faces after the hunt. Roots come out and back into the ground like worms. The trees become more and more scarce until the woods are gone. Only a few lone trees remain until more and more of them appear from the snowy white.

The only constant is the river. Always to the left of the group, always flowing back the way they came. Kwa's clan has never come this far, staying in the eastern regions. But now she is headed toward the setting sun. How far west can one go without falling off the edge?

Kauko must be used to Pah-ge because by the middle of the second day, he calms down and rests in her arms, drifting into sleep. But Kwa cannot be calm, cannot rest. Her wrists are cut and bleeding, fingertips tinted blue and stinging. Her feet are sore and aching, numb from the cold. The leather covering her feet has worn thin and cannot keep out the water from the melting snow.

They have to be close; surely they have to be close. But what awaits her? They must want to keep her alive or they would have killed her when they found her. Unless they are the man-eaters that her grandmother warned her about, another of her tales sung by the fire at night, who hid in the woods waiting to snatch children and haul them home. They roasted them whole over

fires in the deepest, darkest caves. Then they ate the children bit by bit, sucking the marrow from their bones with bloody lips. Maybe these are the ones her grandmother warned her about.

Chapter 4

On the evening of the third day, Sele nowhere in sight, they reach their stopping place. The river has led them to a small creek falling from a cliff. The water cuts through the rock, carving it, and then splashes into the river, down to the bottom and back up flowing along the way they came.

There are very large, many-sided huts starting wider at the bottom and reaching up to the sky with timber, closing inward at a point. They are covered mostly with mammoth hides. But Kwa notices some other larger animals mixed in with the mammoth. There are many of these huts on one side of the river and many more spread out around the mouth of a very large cave in the side of the cliff. The mouth of the cave is at least the size of three of the huts, but goes deeper into darkness. A cave like the ones in her grandmother's tales.

Fires burn from all over the site, at least three or four inside huts and the largest in front of the cave with the smoke meeting in the center of the settlement as it reaches for the little suns in the night sky. Cries come from the people, elders and children, as they realize their hunters have come home. They rush from the firesides and out of the huts to greet the hunters. Hugging and kissing, children jumping for their kin. Everyone greets Taw-nin and Pah-ge, and no one seems to care that Sele was left behind, but they all stare once they realize the hunters brought home a captive and an infant.

No one goes near Kauko, hugging Pah-ge while carefully keeping away from the touch of the infant. But Kwa. She is an animal. Their eyes burn into her, hurting her skin. They prod her

and whisper things Kwa cannot understand. They laugh, pointing at her. A child begins to cry from somewhere in the crowd. Kwa holds their thoughts until Taw-nin steps in and seizes her arm tightly in his fist. He lifts her arm into the air, hauling the tied arm with it. He talks to the crowd, turning her around to face everyone.

“...Kwa! She... my.... A... the.... ...we... her what it... us.”

They only stare at him silently until he finishes. Then everyone shouts and hits their hands together. A slapping of skin to skin rings through the crowd.

Taw-nin drops her arm and walks farther into the settlement. He sits on one of the tree trunks lining a circle around the largest fire outside the mouth of the cave. Everyone not helping to sort through the mammoth remains follows him like pups following their mother. Sitting on other logs, they join him. Pah-ge sits to his left, and Gwun to his right. Everyone talks loudly. People wave their hands as if they are dancing.

There are so many of these people. The men wear deerskin covering their legs. On their feet, they wear mammoth pelts inside out so the fur rests on the inside. The pelts are each wrapped with some sort of leather strip in the front or around the whole leg. Some of the clan have furs of deer, mountain goat, cave bear, and lion draped over their arms and chests, but none of the furs are as striking as the saber-tooth tiger pelt being lain over the shoulders of Taw-nin by a little boy.

These people have feathers, flowers, bones, teeth, shells, and stones twisted into their long matted hair and on their necks, arms, leathers, and furs. Some of the stones are colors Kwa has never even seen before: a blue like the sky mixed with green like the grass with dark lightening shooting through. They shine in the firelight like the whites of their eyes. They hang

down, jumping with the people's movements. They knock against each other making their own song. Enthralled by the people, Kwa barely notices the man standing next to her.

She turns just in time to be jerked ahead by Gwun. He hauls her between the members of the clan, through the crowd and around the fire to the mouth of the cave behind Taw-nin. Gwun guides her into the cave, but not far. The back of the mouth splits into two tunnels, left and right, leading into darkness. Between the tunnel openings are very high tree-like stones without branches or leaves. He ties each of Kwa's wrists to a stone tree as she stands between them. But when he finishes and she tries to sit, tired from the long days, she finds the twine is too tight around the stone and does not reach low enough. She must sit back on her heels, arms raised in opposite directions, unable to lower them.

He smirks, realizing what he has done, and walks away back out the mouth and to the fire. Kwa struggles against the coarse twine. Her wrists burn as the skin opens to drip blood down her arms. The blood tickles her skin as it falls to the ground like little raindrops erupting onto the sandy ground. She will not be able to feed Kauko like this; they will have to untie her. Will they not?

Kwa slumps onto her heels and watches the people, knowing that fighting will be useless against so many men. But where are all the women? For every ten men there is maybe one woman. And the children? There are only a few of them in this clan, mostly older, but some are younger. One young woman is with child, but Kwa has yet to see an infant besides Kauko. What has happened to these people? Do they hurt as her clan does? Why then does it seem the men are unaffected? Kwa lays her head against her arm, hands hanging from the bloody twine, accepting defeat.

Two men haul the pallets from the hunt into the cave. One of the men fetches a burning branch from the fire outside for light. Other men and women enter the cave behind him and help them by lugging armloads of the meat into the tunnel on Kwa's right. The pallets will not fit, so the people must work by hand. The man with the burning branch guides them into the darkness. More men step inside the cave heaving large bundles of snow over their shoulders in leather sacks. They too follow the others into the tunnel.

Kwa can hear the echoes in the darkness to her side. Their steps and voices bounce off the walls like a spiritual chant. It reminds her of home. The chants to the animals after a good hunt, to the land after a birth, and to the sun and moon after a mating. The song of her people. Kwa wonders if she will ever hear their song again.

Everyone glances at her while stepping past. Some of them whisper to each other. Maybe they think Kwa knows their unfamiliar words, or maybe they just do not want the others to hear. Kwa stares at the blank spaces, dodging their gazes.

At last, the people finish. The man with the burning branch leads the others from the tunnel, and they follow him back outside by the fire to eat with the rest of the clan. Bits of the mammoth are already burning over the fire and soon everyone will eat. Will they feed Kwa?

What have they done with Kauko? Kwa has not seen him or heard him crying. She sees Pah-ge sitting next to Taw-nin by the fire, but no Kauko. He must be hungry. Kwa sighs and tries to imagine that somehow what has happened is better than staying with her own clan. But it is no use.

A young woman walks into the cave carrying a bundle. It is not Kauko, too small to be. The woman slowly steps toward Kwa and lays the bundle down in front of her knees. She unties Kwa's right arm. Kwa stares at the woman for a while, not touching the bundle. The woman

stares back, then slowly points at the bundle saying something quickly, then stops and repeats one word.

“Meal.” The woman points to the bundle on the ground then to herself. “Nlet.”

Kwa glances down at the bundle. Meal? She unwraps the leather clumsily with one hand and realizes what the word means. Mammoth meat.

Kwa looks back up at the woman and says, “Kwa,” pointing to herself.

“Kwa.” The woman points at Kwa, then herself. “Nlet.”

Nlet nods and walks back out of the cave, but she quickly comes back with another burning branch from the fire. Kwa now sees the pile of ashes and wood to the left of her. Nlet places the burning branch on top of the pile and waits for the fire to spread.

Nlet stands just taller than Kwa, and straighter, but broader and stockier than these people. Her forehead is long, her nose wide, her lips thick. Nlet seems so familiar to her.

Nlet leaves, and Kwa waits until the fire is large before she begins to eat. And when the fire has grown, she eats slower, less greedily than before, taking small bites and chewing carefully. The smoke burns her eyes, making them fill with salty water. She blinks hard to let the tears fall. Kwa can tell the meat is left over from what was burned on the first night she spent with these people; it is a little tougher, a little drier. She can taste the smoke in the cold meat.

The crowd outside has calmed and many of them have left for their huts. Pah-ge appears from the shadows like a spirit. She rocks Kauko in her arms singing something to him. He is still, watching her quietly. Kwa does not speak. Pah-ge carries the infant to her and sets him in her free arm. Pah-ge quickly turns and walks back out into the night air. Once again, Kwa waits until she is alone.

Carefully with her one free hand, she rests Kauko in her lap and slides the leather from her breast. Then she lifts him to it, hand holding up his tiny head. The tingling begins and quickly dies as the milk flows. Kwa crawls over to the stone tree fastened to her left arm, releasing the strain so she can sit down.

But Kwa is not alone for long. Not calm and settled for long at all. She thinks the people have all gone to their huts to sleep when Taw-nin steps into the cave. The light shimmers on his face, twisting his features. He wanders to the fireside and watches her feeding Kauko.

Kwa pats the infant's back and switches him carefully to her other breast. Having no free hand to staunch the flow, she allows the milk to trail down her stomach and onto her lap. She sees that Taw-nin is not looking at her, but more through her to something else, something larger of which she is in the way. She stiffens as he steps forward. But he stops right before reaching her and spins around quickly, walking out of the cave and leaving her with Kauko.

Kwa is patting Kauko's back over her shoulder when Pah-ge comes to fetch him. Pah-ge barely lets Kauko finish before snatching the infant from Kwa's grasp and leaving. Once outside, Pah-ge calls to someone.

Gwun strides into the cave. He seizes Kwa's free arm and starts to tie her once again to the stone tree, arms wide above her head. She chooses now. She struggles against his grasp, clawing and kicking him.

But he is far too strong for her fighting to be anything but hopeless. He slams her wrist into the rough stone and deeply grinds her bones against it. Blood stains the rock. Taking the twine, he wraps it tighter and tighter around her wrist until she cannot feel her fingertips. He smiles as he ties the other end of the twine to the stone tree. He laughs and pats her head like a

child. Kwa squirms under his touch and spits in his face. The man stops and wipes his large hand against his cheek, stretching his skin under the weight and removing the spit.

“You are a little....” He slaps her across the face.

Kwa’s head spins around, stinging like fire. He waits for her to turn her head back and speaks to her.

A word she does not know.

Chapter 5

The sun rises the next morning, waking Kwa as the light touches her skin, warming it from the cold night. The people are already awake and have started their morning, yet Pah-ge does not bring Kauko to her. No one brings her food or water. She is alone.

It is Taw-nin who comes to her, striding into the cave like the sun. Not with food or water, but instead he unties her from the stone trees; her wrists remain bound. Tugging on the twine, he leads her outside into the morning light. The snow crunches beneath her feet. The people stop what they are doing and stare at them. Taw-nin brings her to the side of the falling water and against the rocky cliff.

Taw-nin slowly reties the twine to two tree trunks barren of leaves, dead. Then he faces her as the people crowd around. Taw-nin slips the fur off her shoulders and drops it to the ground. He grabs the leather wrapped around her chest, pulls it from her side and unwraps it. Layer by layer, he strips her down to bare skin. The cold wind freezes her bones.

They can see her. They can see all of her. Why is he doing this? Kwa looks at his face, begging. I will freeze to death, she thinks; I will die. Taw-nin steps back, avoiding her glance. Kwa stands straight, ready for whatever they have planned.

But when she makes out the voice of the man who comes up from behind and whispers, “Little ...,” in her ear, she realizes that she is not ready. Gwun stalks around her.

What is he holding? A twisted strip of leather?

She hears a loud snap, and then she is on fire. It burns her like hot coals; it cuts through her flesh like a blade. Kwa screams and tries to struggle against the twine. But as she heaves her body forward, the twine only cuts through her scabbed wrists. Gwun laughs at her, and again he whips her with the twisted leather. Blood bubbles from the cuts and runs down her back. Again and again and again until her back is frozen from the chill and every whip feels like a stinging bite. Tears fall down her face and melt the snow.

When will this end?

“Please, please,” she says.

But no one so much as breathes. They watch in silence. Kwa lifts her head to look at each and every one of them only to find that none of them feel for her. But one. Sele.

When did he make it back? His brow furrowed, his mouth tight. He twitches with every whip, every drop of blood. Tears fall from his cheeks onto his crossed arms. His lips form words, but Kwa does not understand, only lowers her head to the ground.

The leather bites her again, and she tries to scream but her throat is too dry. Only a scratchy whine breaks from her lips, and she drops, limp. Her knees not even touching the ground, she swings from the twine with each strike.

The tip of the leather reaches new skin with every whip. It feels as though Gwun is making sure that not a scrap of her back stays untouched. She tightens her hands into fists as the leather slashes into her shoulders.

Her front numb from the cold and her back bursting into flames, her body shakes from the tightness in her muscles. She grits her teeth, grinding them together, biting her lips. She tastes blood, and her sight blurs with green and black spots.

Kwa sees something in the distance. A familiar face. Who? Who is that? But before her mind can settle, everything goes black.

When Kwa wakes she is alone again in the cave, tied to the same two stone trees but not as tightly as before. There is so much slack that she is lying on the ground, a fur draped over her broken frame. Her back, arms, and legs are stiff with caked-on blood. Flames erupt as she lifts her head. Her whole body aches like she has been trampled over. Every movement is torment.

That is when she hears it. Crying. Someone is crying. A baby? Kwa scours the room with her eyes until she at last spots the bundle wrapped at her side. Kwa shifts slowly to sit, every bit a new pain bursting.

It is Kauko. She carefully picks him up in her arms and begins to take in her setting as the infant calms.

A fire burns in the cave. There is no food or water for her. It is night. Kwa tries to take a deep breath, but chokes from the smoke clogging the cave. Her back burning with every heave. She spots a dark shape to her right, Taw-nin, stepping out into the firelight.

Why did he not kill her? Will he kill her now?

He stares into the fire, not yet glancing at her. Kwa removes the fur from her shoulders, dulled by how much better her body feels without the weight of the fur, and places the infant to her breast. He grabs the nipple greedily with his mouth, rubbing his thumb against the fatty side.

Taw-nin swiftly turns to her. He stares sharply, watching her feed Kauko. Then without warning, he rushes over and rips the silent infant from Kwa's sore arms. Kauko's tender skin slips from her grasp. Milk leaks from her breast, nipple aching from the quick tear of the suction. His eyes seem to seek in wonder for her. Then, as if he cannot find her, he begins to cry. Kwa knows to keep quiet as she watches Taw-nin squat by the fire. He sets the infant wrapped in hide on the sandy ground.

The fire dances upon the colored cave walls. Red, black, and yellow men hunting, throwing spears attached to short, hooked pieces of wood into the flesh of mammoths and deer. Shapes etched into the cold stone. Handprints mark territories.

Kwa feels like the hunted. How those mammoths and deer must have felt. Assured in their fate, giving into their death. How Kwa must look to him.

Taw-nin stands back up and walks over to Kwa. He grabs the twine, sparking fire in her body as he tightens the twine around the two stones. No slack remains for her to lie down or even sit on her heels. She kneels in the sand, waiting.

He walks back to the fire, draws a jagged flint blade from his side and holds it to the light. Turning it as if brooding over his actions. Tormenting her.

Just kill me, she thinks.

He peels back the hide covering the baby, the soft skin of a ripe fruit, and in a movement too fast for Kwa to close her eyes, he drives that flint straight into the heart of the little one. It glides like water through his fragile flesh and bone. Blood bubbles out from the dent around the blade. The infant's ocean-blue eyes frozen wide, not even being able to know the pain. The crying stops.

She jerks her body forward, screaming, cutting her wrists on the twine pinning her to the stone trees opposite him. He raises his eyes from the dead infant and meets hers. Tears falling from her eyes, everything blurring, she is choking. He speaks roughly, yet calmly at her.

And at that moment, she knows.

“Woman, you are mine.”

Chapter 6

Kwa wakes with a start as something cold and wet touches her skin, trickling down and wetting the sand. She does not want to open her eyes, fearful of what she will find. She did not mean to fall asleep, not wanting to face her dreams. But she did not dream.

Her body aches and begs to be let loose, to be set free. Anything is better than this, she thinks as she moans. She lies still as the cold wetness spreads over her body. Along her limbs, down her back, and up her neck. Her skin screams with fire. And her breasts, swollen with milk and hot with fever, feel as though they might burst.

Kwa opens her eyes to find Nlet wiping her down with a wet piece of leather. Nlet lightly holds the soft leather against Kwa’s broken and bruised skin. If not for the sun shining through the mouth of the cave, Kwa would be freezing. Nlet glances into Kwa’s eyes and realizes she is awake.

Staring with hurt in her eyes, Nlet continues wiping Kwa of the dried blood.

“It will be better,” Nlet says.

Kwa cannot believe what she hears. Someone, finally, someone who can understand her, speak to her in her own words. The harshly broken words that sound so beautifully familiar.

“You are my clan?” Kwa says.

“You are filthy, have to be ready.” Nlet dips the bloody piece of leather into a sort of hollowed-out clay rock.

“Ready?”

Nlet shushes Kwa and squeezes the leather, again placing it on Kwa’s skin and washing away the blood.

Swollen skin reaches up around raw flesh underneath. From the red and brown of dried blood to the black and sunset of bruises, her skin is like a mountain range of water- and wind-torn rock. She is broken, yet whole like the land.

Kwa coughs up blood into the sand. She tries to breathe calmly, gritting her teeth, as she sits up from the ground. Someone has loosened the twine for now. Not only is she able to sit upright, but she also has full use of her arms. The twine only stops her from leaving.

Nlet silently washes.

The clan is quiet. Kwa cannot see them from inside the cave. It looks as though the huts have been cast aside. Fires have burned out, and there are not even any children running around. The people cannot have left. Where are they?

The art on the cave walls looks unfamiliar in the light. The animals have beautifully adorned hides with speckles of color and shadows etched into the rock. They run free with the stick people. They smile. The blood is only sunlight casting off everything in their world. The handprints dance along the edges of the drawings like grass in the wind. The spears fly through the air like birds. Maybe she will run free with them as well. Maybe she will smile, and the sunlight will cast off her too. Maybe.

“What will happen?” Kwa says.

But Nlet only shushes Kwa once more without answering her question or calming her mind.

The water grows bloodier by the moment, and Nlet's hands are red with Kwa's blood. It stains Nlet and fills the grooves in her palms like animals' blood after a hunt. It will dry, crack, and flake. But what if she does not wash it off her? What if it marks her hands always? She must wash it off before then. She should wash it off now. To rid herself of Kwa, of blame.

Kwa reaches for the bloody water. Cupping her hands she holds the water and splashes it onto Nlet's hands. Kwa scrubs Nlet's skin roughly to remove the stains.

"Kwa, stop," Nlet says.

But Kwa does not stop. She cannot stop. She must clean Nlet.

Nlet pulls her hands free of Kwa's grasp and slaps her across the face.

"Stop!" Nlet says.

Kwa freezes. Bloody water drips down her arms and fingertips and the handprint on her cheek. Her eyes look past them all, past the sand and into nothing. After a moment, she gasps and swiftly brings her arms back to her, wrapping them around her belly. She begins to cry and falls onto the ground. Sand filling her wounds, grinding into her rawness. But Kwa cannot feel the pain.

Nlet dries her hands on the brown fur wrapped around her shoulders. She crawls on her knuckles and knees closer to Kwa. A cold damp hand strokes Kwa's cheek.

"It will be better," Nlet says.

As she continues to stroke Kwa's face, Nlet begins to hum a song. It is so familiar to Kwa. Her grandmother used to hum this song as she rocked Kwa to sleep when she was a small

child. Nlet is from her clan. Kwa's tears stop, and she halts, biting her bottom lip before speaking.

"They took you too?" Kwa says.

"I am not your clan; my mother was. I was a child, and my father—he was of these people—took me. Raised me," Nlet says.

"Why?" Kwa sits back up, soaking herself in the fire of her pain.

For the first time, she realizes how young Nlet must be. Kwa is in her sixteenth year, but Nlet must be even younger. Fourteen, fifteen maybe.

Nlet spins her head around, seeking watchers or listeners. Kwa guesses Nlet must think they are alone when she begins to speak.

"My mother died," Nlet answers. "But you.... The clan needs women. In two years, almost all the women and the unborn died. Childbirth, sickness, attacks. Even the mate of Taw-nin, the clan leader. We are creators, Kwa. The clan cannot live without us."

"You are a mother?" Kwa asks.

Shaking her head, Nlet looks down and scratches dried blood off her nails. "My mate is not happy."

Kwa feels something heavy and unspoken rise from her chest, lifting her up, but at the same time feels something thick in her throat like mist in the morning. Kwa was first mated in her thirteenth year, most likely younger than Nlet is now. But this is not Kwa who was mated to a man she has known all her life; this is a little girl who was taken from home by her own father and mated to an unfamiliar man.

"There is still time..." Nlet says.

Kwa nods, but she does not say what happened to her. She understands now. They think Kauko was hers, and that she can help make children for the clan. But Kwa does not believe she has that power. Either way, she must not tell Taw-nin the truth. If he finds out his new tool is broken, what use does Kwa have?

If she is to stay alive, she must learn their language. She will never be able to have the smallest freedom, or the least chance to fight, without words. Their words, smoother and longer than her own, sounding like a song sung by the fire at night. She must understand how they think in order to overcome them.

Nlet scratches her fingernails for a few more seconds before going back to the bloody piece of leather. Kwa watches as Nlet washes away the blood, but not the pain. Nlet leaves and comes back many times with fresh water from the river, and Kwa thinks Nlet will never finish.

People of the clan return to their huts with large sacks and the same hollowed-out clay that Nlet uses. Kwa cannot see what they haul, something green. The ones with sacks form a line into the right tunnel of the cave. Bringing the green things into the darkness. But with the sun so bright, they do not need fire to light their way. The people with the clay bring their loads to the side of the fire pit outside the mouth of the cave.

Kwa can see Gwun squatted down by the ashes, spinning his hands wildly to get smoke to rise from the notch in the wood. He catches the tiny flames on dried grasses and builds onto the fire pit. Grasses, small sticks, logs. It does not take long for flames to grow from the wood, turning it into coals, then ashes. Smoke rises from the fire and into the sun. He steps away and lets the women and Sele take their seats around the pit.

But Kwa does not know what the women are doing as they fill the hollow clay with river water and set it near the fire. After a while, the women peel the things that look like leafy green

stones. They carefully rip off layers and layers of large leaves and place each into the clay. Sele uses sticks to dig out rocks from underneath the coals of the fire, and then he sets them inside the hollow clay.

Kwa looks around at the women by the fire. There are three of them. A girl younger than both Kwa and Nlet; she is swollen with child. The woman from the hunt who looks to be a few years more than Kwa; the first toddler Kwa has seen, and a girl at that, sits at the woman's feet playing in the snow. And an aged woman, the oldest among them, also swollen with child. There is a baby on her lap, maybe close to its first year; still small, still breastfeeding.

Nlet stands and strides out of the cave and to the fire. She bends down and grasps one of the leafed greens in both of her hands, then sits on an empty trunk alone. The women have stopped talking, stopped working. They eye her warily. Nlet glances up, watching them watch her. Sele, though, keeps staring at his leafed green, peeling off layers, breaking it down to the heart.

"No," Nlet says.

The woman hunter nods her head.

The older woman sits next to Nlet and rubs her back in large circles. "It will happen..."

"...Vuhn." Nlet continues to peel layers of the leafed green and tosses them into the clay.

The baby on Vuhn's lap begins to whine, and Vuhn picks up what Kwa can now see is a boy. Vuhn lifts him to her breast, letting him suckle. The women sit in silence for a few more moments. But the younger girl cannot stifle her thrill as she begins to shift on the log.

"Taishe, Pah-ge... I will... birth... the...." The young girl smiles brightly.

Nlet swiftly stands and drops what is left of the peeled green into the thin layer of melting snow on the ground. She turns and walks off beyond Kwa's view of the outside world.

Taishe and Vuhn watch Nlet leave and then scold the young girl.

“What?” The young girl lifts her hands into the air.

“You... what, Manda. You... she is... to... and... was a... to.... ..it.... You... be... of... you... child!” Vuhn points a finger at Manda.

“I... not... why you are.... I am happy and... be happy... me.” Manda rolls her eyes.

“You are a... Manda.” Vuhn shakes her head and returns to her work.

They remain silent the rest of the time they work. Hands busy, mouths still.

Sele glances at Kwa for the first time, glaring at Kwa’s wounded body, hollow with hunger. Then Sele smirks and folds his head back down.

Kwa realizes she is neither one of the free nor one of the hunted animals on the wall. That would mean she is art, something beautiful to be held high and remembered. She is neither. She is the wall, the cave. These people have carved her belly, etched her flesh, left their handprints on her skin. Her body will become a vessel, a shelter for their infants. They will drain her of her power. They will use her; they will take what they need. She will become an empty space in the darkness.

Kwa sits in the cave, hands tied. Her breasts ache, and she squeezes and pushes in, releasing the unneeded milk. As the sun hides behind clouds, she shivers. Wrapping the forgotten pelt around her shoulders, she lies down on her side and lets sleep overcome her.

Chapter 7

There is a shadow darker than clouds looming over Kwa. She can feel it as she wakes, but she dare not open her eyes. Someone is in the cave with her, and it is not Nlet. Kwa can hear the heavy breathing, the heavy footfalls, the heavy smell of foul meat. It touches her, running

fingertips along her ridged and broken flesh. Along the rising of her thigh, the curving of her hip, the falling of her waist. It follows a finger along the line of her jaw.

When it speaks, Kwa knows the voice and cannot stop herself from opening her eyes to the face of Gwun so close he almost touches her. Her body starts to tremble. Where is everyone? Her eyes look wildly for someone, anyone, but they are alone.

He stands and kicks sand in her face. Choking as it fills her nose and eyes, she encloses her arms around her face as if a shell and tightly pulls her chin against her chest.

Gwun spits on her, smiles, and then leaves Kwa alone.

She does not move for what seems like a very long time, holding herself tightly on the ground. She tries not to think about him, recalling the beautiful mammoths. Their power and grace. Their size and sounds. She liked watching them, until these people attacked with their spears and clubs.

Nlet comes back to finish cleaning Kwa's wounds. When she sees Kwa huddled on the ground, Nlet runs over and kneels next to her.

"What happened?" Nlet says.

Kwa does not answer, will not answer. Instead, she sits up quietly. Nlet opens her mouth to say something, but although Kwa is covered in sand, Nlet does not question her again.

It is nearing night, and Nlet has brought a new hollow clay of water with her. She pulls her lips into a thin straight line and cleans Kwa quicker than before. Even making Kwa stand so Nlet can wash off all the sand. Nlet dries Kwa with a new piece of leather, and besides the dried blood holding her skin together like the binding on Nlet's leather, Kwa is clean.

But Nlet is not finished. She has brought clean furs for Kwa to sit on and a bundle of leather. Nlet unwraps the bundle carefully and arranges the pieces to the side of Kwa. There are feathers, bones, and shells.

Nlet kneels down behind her and begins to braid some of Kwa's hair, slowly weaving in the feathers, bones, and shells. Nlet tugs on Kwa's hair, hurting her, as Nlet tries to remove the knots. Kwa's scalp becomes sore, and it only grows worse as the evening passes.

For Kwa, it feels like a very long time before Nlet is finished. The sun has almost fallen behind the edge of the land. The men are hauling logs and placing them carefully in the pit, building up a larger fire outside the mouth of the cave.

Nlet looks over Kwa's hair one last time then walks back around and hands her a pile of leather and fur.

"Stand," Nlet says.

Kwa quickly stands, and Nlet helps her put them on. Nlet has to pull both the leather and the fur piece over Kwa's head. The leather wraps around Kwa's body and over one shoulder. The wide fur rests around her arms. Nlet looks at her and then walks over to another leather bundle lying in the sand. She unfolds the leather and removes something. The pieces clink together as she holds it out; long teeth shine in the sunlight. A strip of thin leather runs through the holes. It is a necklace of saber-tooth tiger teeth.

Nlet lifts it over Kwa's head and pulls out the hair from underneath. Kwa does not wear anything on her feet.

"Now, me." Nlet walks over to a tiny pile of white dirt sitting in hollowed clay and begins to spit into the dirt. She mixes it with her fingers.

"What is it?" Kwa says.

“Paint. We crush it into a dust and mix it with spit in bowls. We paint our skin and cave walls.” She points to the drawings on the rock.

“Bowls?”

Nlet points to the hollowed clay. Dipping her hand into the white paint, she runs her wet fingers across her face. The flames rise high in the night, licking the little suns, sparks flying and fading. She washes her hands in the water she used to clean Kwa’s skin and presses one hand against Kwa’s chest.

“Tonight, you will become one of them. The gods will bring you into the light, give you a new spirit.”

“So there are gods?”

But Nlet only says, “Stay here.”

Kwa watches in silence as Nlet leaves the cave. The people of the clan have started to gather around the fire. Some sit down on the logs; children huddle on the ground; some men stand behind the large circle, watching quietly. Taw-nin appears from the darkness and takes his place on the log in front of the cave. The same little boy from before sets the saber-tooth tiger pelt on Taw-nin’s back with a front leg of the animal over each shoulder. The boy then lays the face of the beast over Taw-nin’s head. Taw-nin has become the tiger.

With the predator’s teeth around her neck, Kwa has become his prey.

Pah-ge is the last to come into the ring of logs and light. She wears an amazing arrangement of feathers circling the top of her head. Her hair is filled with tiny bones twisted into the white mess. Leather covers her torso and legs, but her arms are free. White paint covers every bit of bare flesh. It has freshly dried, not yet cracked.

Standing at the edge of the fire and raising her arms into the air, Pah-ge speaks a language incoherent even to these people. Words that Kwa has never heard before. She is not even sure it is a language. But to them, it is the language of the gods.

Pah-ge begins to dance around the fire, stepping nimbly for such an old woman. Some of the people around the fire start to bang on animal-skin drums. The sounds erupting from them seem hollow, empty, yet Kwa can feel them in her body. She can feel the pounding of their hands, rattling her bones and ringing her muscles. It is deep, and it is full, but only inside.

Pah-ge twirls while bouncing from foot to foot between the people and the fire. Little ones have to jump back to not get stepped on by the flailing woman. She chants louder and louder. Then stops all at once.

She turns to Kwa's direction, clouded eyes almost glowing, and says, "Come."

Kwa does not move, does not breathe. Until she realizes Pah-ge is no longer speaking the language of the gods, but her own language once more.

"Come, Kwa." Pah-ge reaches out her hand and folds her fingers toward herself. "The gods are...."

Kwa takes an unsteady step; no one is looking at her. No one is moving. Can they see this? Can they hear this? Do they know what is happening? Does she?

Kwa walks through the snow, steadier with each step. Many of the men have their torsos uncovered in the firelight. Red, brown, and black markings trace their bodies with animals, tracks, suns, fire, mountains, whole lands. This is not paint. It is not cracked or peeling, but a part of their skin. They are like stains, molding to the muscle. Wet paint within the flesh.

Kwa reaches Pah-ge inside the warmth of the fire. But so close, Kwa can see Pah-ge's eyes, the white; the burning white so awful and ending like staring into the middle of the sun and

seeing spots, forever marking her sight. She will never see the world the same. Her sight will be shaped by this moment. She cannot look away.

Pah-ge has blood on her hand. From where did it come? She shakily reaches for Kwa, and Kwa would move away—that is all she wants to do—but cannot. She is frozen like the edges of the riverbank, just out of reach from freedom. Separated from the fleeing fish. Pah-ge runs her warm, wet, and bloody fingers along Kwa's face from the right side of her forehead over eyes and nose and cheeks onto the left side of her jaw. Like being clawed across the face, Kwa bleeds. As the thick red drips down her face, Kwa realizes that it is not blood. It is the body paint of the hunt, like that on the cave walls. Only spit mixed with dry colors.

Kwa lets go of a breath as Pah-ge grabs Kwa's arm with the same red hand and hauls her around the fire. Pah-ge is amazingly strong for such an old woman, Kwa thinks as her back aches. Maybe she looks older than she is?

After one full loop, Pah-ge jerks her down to the ground. Kwa can feel wounds open. A few clay bowls wait with paints and powders. Each one a bold, bright color: red, blue, black, and even a green. She has never seen anything like it before. Pah-ge grabs a handful of the green powder and points at it for Kwa to do the same. A handful of powder, they both stand, and Pah-ge speaks once more in the language of the gods. When she finishes, she tosses the powder into the flames, and Kwa does the same. With each handful of powder the fire blazes a bright green. Blue tips enclose these green flames, and the coals turn a sunny yellow.

The people shout and scream around them; the men howl like wolves in the night. Pah-ge jerks Kwa's arm again, leading her around the fire. Pah-ge stops Kwa directly in front of Taw-nin, Kwa facing him, her back to the fire. Pah-ge stands to the side of them and faces her people.

"The mate of Taw-nin died... the..." Pah-ge says.

Nlet steps up to Kwa's side, whispering in her ear a clearer understanding of Pah-ge's words.

"He looked long for a woman, to bear his children for the clan. Then, at the great mammoth hunt, the gods sent us a woman." Nlet stops to look at Kwa. "A woman from the old clan, from a time when women were stronger. The gods sent us Kwa." Nlet's eyes have filled with tears, and she turns away.

Kwa listened to her beautiful words, the flow like a river thick with fish. Kwa does not know what Pah-ge means when she says the old clan, but Kwa realizes that she is being mated to Taw-nin, the leader who lost his mate. But it was not their gods who sent her here, she thinks. There are no gods. Only the land, the water, and the deep blue above.

The people shout and howl again into the night. Their calls rise and fly away in the cold winds. The women stand and begin to dance, while men bang on drums. Nlet draws Kwa into the dance around the fire where they hit their hands together and begin to chant. Both men and women sing the words of their elders. Powders fly into the air, into the fire, changing colors of flames and skin. Even the children dart between the legs of the women, screaming and grabbing little hands upward. And Kwa is beginning to understand their words.

Furs whip in the wind around their arms and legs twist in circles. The bones and shells in their hair and around their necks clink together with the women's movements like the sound of teeth chomping, mixing with the striking of the drums. The beat overtakes their bodies, winds around their limbs and jerks them back and forth. The song becomes part of their bodies, guides them.

The music owns Kwa now; even her wounds cannot stop her. The pounding overwhelms her just as the other women, like one heartbeat together keeping them alive. The men watch in a

bewildered state like the gods themselves have possessed the people. The spirit frees itself in the song. The people, the spirits, the gods become one.

The heat of the fire and the possession of the music drip sweat from their bodies. It gathers on their brows and trickles down their cheeks. Kwa tastes a drop on her lips. The salt blooms in her mouth after so long without food. She grows dizzy and feels weak by the time Pah-ge stops her.

Pah-ge leads her to Taw-nin and presses on Kwa's shoulder. Kwa sits down at Taw-nin's feet like one of the children sitting down by the feet of her father. She glances up at him, firelight bouncing off his sharp features, the same as the night he stabbed Kauko.

After the powder is gone and the bowls empty, some of the men leave the edge of the circle to fetch the meat for supper. They drive a straight stick through the meat and lay it across the two sticks standing upward.

Sele serves Taw-nin first, then the men, the women, and finally the children. He hands Kwa a piece, but Kwa only stares at it, careful not to look at him. The charred flesh flakes off with a touch of her fingers. She bites into the meat, ripping it apart. It is chewy tonight; the taste of ash and burned blood fills her mouth. The first bite of food she has had all day, and she does not want it. She can feel her throat saying no to the meat with a gagging. She would have settled for water.

The rest of the people seem to like the meal. Laughing with mouths open, spit dripping down their chins. They speak loudly and enlivened as they tear into the meat like ripe bloody fruit. Kwa feels the burn rising up her throat. She swallows it back down and hands her meat to a child sitting next to her.

"Here. Take mine," Kwa says.

The little boy, the one who lays the saber-tooth pelt across Taw-nin, stares back at her hesitantly. She shoves it at him.

“Take it,” she says.

The flames jump in his dark eyes. He opens his hands, and Kwa drops the meat into them. She turns away, drawing her legs into her chest, wrapping her arms around them, and rocking herself at the foot of her new mate.

Kwa thinks of home, to a time when her mother still lived, when Saswun still lived. Those few seasons when Kwa thought everything would be fine. She was the mother of the clan, mate to their leader. But nothing lasts long in this world. Kwa remembers it well.

She woke up in the middle of the night. There was no one reason, only the restlessness of summer. She sat up in her mat of furs and glanced around her. Her mother was fast asleep. So was Saswun. Kwa crawled over to the little nest of furs she had made for Saswun. The fire was burning still, just enough light to see that Saswun’s chest was not rising, just enough to see her lifelessness.

She had not been sick or weak. Her birth went well. She had died in her sleep like an old woman.

Kwa’s face burns where the paint touches her skin almost as if she actually had been clawed. It is like when the sun darkens her skin and in time turns it red; she can feel the fever inside. She scratches her face and digs the paint from cheeks and eyelids. Her hands are red with paint or blood. She scrubs her face, rubbing the skin raw under sharp nails and rough palms. These marks must leave her face, or the marks will kill her. She knows they will kill her.

Kwa feels a hand on her shoulder. She stops scrubbing and peeks from between her fingers at Nlet who sits down next to Kwa, away from Taw-nin.

“You are blessed,” Nlet says.

Blessed? Kwa only looks at her, eyebrows furrowed, bewildered.

“To be the mate of the leader. It is an honor.” Nlet stares into the fire, not moving at all.

“I do not want it.” Kwa tries to be quiet. “How can it be an honor if I do not want it?”

Nlet, squinting her eyes, turns to Kwa. Nlet raises her arm, but stops and sets it back on her own leg. “Gwun is my mate.” She hangs her head.

“I am sorry,” is all Kwa can think of to say. She places her hand on top of Nlet’s, folding her own fingers around each of Nlet’s.

Nlet lightly grips back. “I want to go home.”

“Me too. I was wrong to think I should leave.”

Nlet swings her head back around to face Kwa. “You left?”

“My family died, and my mate left me.”

Nlet nods. “Tomorrow I will teach you to be like one of them. You will have to.”

Kwa knows. She also knows what will happen when Taw-nin’s night has come to an end.

“Is he a good leader?”

Nlet thinks about this for a while. “Yes.” But she says nothing more.

Kwa sees Nlet is watching something, and Kwa follows her gaze, finding Gwun.

“I have to go.” Nlet gives Kwa’s hand a light squeeze and lets go.

Kwa watches Nlet following Gwun home. It will be me next, Kwa thinks.

* * *

Chapter 8

Kwa follows Taw-nin in the dark, matching her footsteps to his. His are so much farther apart; he is so much taller. The fire burned low, and he chose a burning branch and stood, knowing she would follow. So she did. He leads her to his home, their home.

No, not ours, she thinks. It will never be ours.

It is the largest of the mammoth-skinned huts, reaching higher into the sky than the flames from the fire. He brushes the flap over the opening aside and walks into the shadows. She follows him.

Inside is dark, but for the light from the burning branch Taw-nin carries. He sets it down in the pit of ashes and builds up the twigs and small logs piled against the wall of the mammoth skin. This is the first time she has been inside one of their huts. The logs holding up the walls are dug deep within the ground, as though a circle of trees fell down to meet in the middle. Furs lie all around the sides, against the walls, just far enough away from the fire to stop a spark from reaching, catching, and burning them alive.

The walls of skins are covered in paint. Not only sights from the hunt, but sights from Taw-nin's life. He and a woman holding an infant stand on a cliff over a waterfall, the one from the settlement. His arms are outstretched toward the sky. But paint has been dripped down the wall, covering the woman in a red so deep it looks like blood. His mate who died. And the child, what happened to it?

Taw-nin has started the fire from the burning branch and sits on his haunches, staring at Kwa. But she does not want to look at him. She thinks about the heat of the flames, the smoke choking the hut, billowing out of the hole where the logs meet above them. Her eyes water as the smoke stings them.

“Come here,” Taw-nin says.

But she does not move, does not even blink as tears fall down her cheeks. She must not look. She must not show him that she heard him or even understood him.

“I said come here.”

Should she? No.

Taw-nin leaps across the hut, seizes her arm, and jerks her to the ground. She screams in pain, feeling her wounds open.

“You will.... You will.... You will honor me,” he says.

Kwa does not answer him. The fur tickles her nose as he presses her face against the pelt. He lets go of her arm, and she slowly sits back up on her heels. Watching her, he reaches out as if he is afraid she will run away like a wild animal. But she knows that running away will only lead to her death. He is a predator, and he will have her dead or alive.

He strokes her cheek down to her jaw with the back of his hand. Lightly, like the smoke drifting across her skin, only burning the tender flesh of her eyes and lungs and insides. Her belly tightens, not at the thrill or lust but at the pain she knows is coming. The burning. The bruises.

It was never like this with her last mate. It was a shared understanding between them. He was the man; she was his mate. She watched him grow up to become a man, to become the clan leader. It was an honor to be chosen as his mate. She did not want another man. But Taw-nin is another, wholly unfamiliar to her. She will not open for him easily.

The lines in Taw-nin’s sun-darkened skin are beginning to form wrinkles. His teeth are stained and eyes yellow. So much older, so much more powerful.

He slips his saber-tooth tiger pelt off his shoulders. Under his hair, Kwa can see the black stained claw marks across his chest. They rip his skin away to uncover the darkness within, hidden by hair and leather. But she knows the truth; she knows what lies beneath.

She feels the tips of his nails as he grazes her skin, following what is left of the red painted scratches on her face like he put them there himself. He smirks.

Taw-nin's hands trail down to the bottom of her fur wrap; he lifts it over her head and lays it with the untold furs lining the ground in his hut. He wants the rest of the leather off her body; she can see it in his eyes.

She looks away and into the coals of the fire. The edges are yellow, slowly changing to orange, red, and then black in the center of each piece. They fall from the logs above and land at the bottom, meeting the others. They burn until they fall apart, turning grey and white.

"Take off your..." he says.

Nlet was the one who put it on Kwa; without someone to lift it back over her head, it would stay on her. She stands and Taw-nin follows her to his feet. The hut is so tall that not even his head touches the top. She raises her arms above her head and waits for him to realize her need. Bending down, he grabs hold of the bottom and lifts it over her head, unpeeling her like a ripe fruit. She stands before him bare. He is still covered from the waist down, and all at once, Kwa can feel the cold in the hut. A cold that the fire can never warm.

He touches her, running his fingers along every bit of her scabbed and bruised body. Blood from the open wounds stains his hands. But he does not mind the cuts, swells, and purple skin. Kwa can see the hunger in his eyes even with the hairs rising on her body in scorn. Walking around her, he looks closely at every part like he is choosing the most sought-after piece of meat

from the latest kill. She wraps her arms around her ribs and waits for him to end his judgment. And at last he does. But it is far from over.

Without stalling, he strips off the leather covering his legs, fully unruffled with his naked body. It is natural for him, she thinks.

He points to the ground.

Maybe he will be kind if I obey, she thinks as her knees sink into the thick layers of fur.

“Hands....”

She places her hands flat against the fur, tightening her fists and grabbing as much hair as she can between her fingers, steadying herself.

He walks around and spreads her legs.

Kwa can remember the tightness in her body the first time. It was summer, hot with the fire. Sweat dripped from her body, matting her hair against her back. She was almost aroused. Almost. He was kinder than she thought he would be. They took off their hides and pelts together. She bled, and he was happy.

Kwa bleeds this night too. She lies huddled against a wall, as far on the other side of the hut as within her bounds, bloody back sticking to the fur. Taw-nin went to sleep almost right away, but she does not want to close her eyes. Staring at his dark form across from the dying fire, outside and now within her body aches. But although she tries, she cannot keep her eyes open forever, and with time she drifts into a dreamless sleep.

* * *

Chapter 9

The sun rises and lights the inside of Taw-nin's hut. He is still asleep. Rubbing her eyes, Kwa wraps one of the furs lying on the ground around her body and walks into the sunlight. Blinded at first, she makes her way to the river and washes the red—both paint and blood—from all over her body. Sitting on the edge of the river, she releases the pain in her breasts as she watches the sun disappear behind clouds. Too warm to snow, it might rain today.

Kwa stands, walks toward the main fire pit, and sits next to Nlet who hands her a clay bowl of leaves the color of grass at its roots.

“What is this?” Kwa says.

“Cabbage.”

Kwa watches as Nlet picks up the leaves, folds them, and shovels them into her mouth. It smells like rotten meat, but Kwa carefully folds a leaf and sets it in her mouth. The cabbage is sweet yet bitter. She has never tasted anything like it and eats the rest as quickly as Nlet.

“Today I will teach you to sew,” Nlet says.

She takes their bowls and hands them to Sele. He fills them with more cabbage and hands them off to two other clan members.

Kwa follows Nlet as she weaves in between the huts. The snow has almost all melted. Nlet comes to a small hut closer to the edge of the river than most. She sweeps away the flap, stoops, walks inside, and holds it open for Kwa.

The light from the hole in the top shines down inside the little hut, brightening the darkness.

Taishe sits, folding a pile of leather. Nlet lifts a large bowl and points at Kwa to pick up the folded leather. Taishe follows them out of her hut, and together, they walk back to the main fire pit.

Nlet shows Kwa how to cut the leather into shapes with a sharp piece of flint. Once the shape meets Nlet's liking, she shows Kwa how to use a bone tool Nlet calls an awl to poke holes along the edges at close spans.

The rest of the men wake up and eat the food Sele readies for them. Kwa watches the men as they sit and talk. Gwun stares at Nlet, watching her every movement and disregarding the men around him. Kwa glances back at Nlet, who is looking down as she stabs the leather with her awl. When Kwa looks back at Gwun, he is still staring, barely touching his food. She silently goes back to her work.

Gwun stands and takes his eyes off Nlet for the first time since he sat down and says, "It is time to go to the field." He walks off and most of the men follow him.

Kwa stands to watch, realizing there are rows and rows of what looks like more cabbage at the edge of the settlement. She sits back down and leans into Nlet's ear. "Nlet, what is the field?"

Nlet glances at Kwa, stopping from her work. "It is where we grow food."

"Grow food?" Kwa says.

Nlet stabs one more hole in her piece of leather, and she is finished.

"How do you grow food?" Kwa tightens her brow.

"We plant and water seeds."

Slumping her shoulders, Kwa thinks. Seeds? Plant? Grow food?

Kwa watches Nlet as she finds a small, sharpened bone in the bowl. At the bottom of the bowl, Nlet pulls out a long thin thread. Kwa cannot stop herself from touching it, so smooth and pliant, she realizes that it must have come from an animal. Nlet ties one end tightly and threads the other through a hole in the small bone. Watching Nlet in wonder, Kwa sees how she binds two pieces of leather and weaves the bone leading the thread in and out of the like holes.

Kwa looks up as she hears a child yelling for her mother. Running, the toddler trips and falls. Taishe throws her sewing aside and rushes to the child.

“Come now, my baby. You are....” Taishe holds the child in her arms, rocking her. The mother picks up her child and sets her down by the other women. As Taishe carries on sewing, she sings to the child to calm her.

Finishing the holes as soon as she can, Kwa finds her own bone and thread. She tries to tie one end and thread the other, but she cannot make the knot, cannot fit the thread through the hole.

Nlet smiles and takes the thread and bone from her. She slowly ties one end and threads the other, but Kwa still cannot understand how. Nlet hands her another stabbed piece of leather, and she once again shows Kwa how to line it up with the one on her lap. In and out, in and out. Nlet begins for her, but when it is Kwa’s turn, she cannot follow the steps, does not know when to go out or in. Still, sewing gives Kwa a sort of happiness. She is making something, even if she cannot make it well or does not know what she is making. Her chest swells, and she smiles at her crooked work.

Some of the children, not old enough yet to work, play by the river. Kwa can barely see them through the huts and trees. The children laugh and shout loudly, splashing each other and

running away. Vuhn watches over them. Sometimes she yells at them when they hurt one another or make one another cry.

When Taishe, Nlet, and Kwa finish sewing, Nlet gathers the pieces and holds them up to show Kwa.

“For you,” Nlet says.

Kwa stares at the pieces of sewn leather and then at Nlet.

“Here.” Nlet walks over to Kwa and takes the furs from her shoulders. Nlet slips a piece over Kwa’s head and arms, wrapping it around a shoulder, and ties another piece around Kwa’s waist.

Kwa looks down at her body. She will be able to look the same as them now. She owns something. They are not just a few pieces of leather sewn together; they are a few pieces of her.

She smiles. “Thank you.”

But the day is over too soon. Night falls and with it, Kwa’s pride as Taw-nin leads her back to his hut. She does not bleed tonight, only becomes a little more bruised and sore. Lying there in the heat of the fire, eyes tearing from the smoke, she sees something glint from Taw-nin’s mats. She sits up, crawling over to find a sharpened bone blade tucked under Taw-nin’s arm.

As soon as the sun rises, Kwa, in a new leather covering, hunts for Nlet. Kwa smiles when she sees Nlet sitting by the main fire pit, stirring cabbage around in bowls filled with water.

Sitting next to her, almost touching, Kwa points to the bowls. “What is this?”

“I am boiling cabbage.”

Kwa looks at the water bubbling in the bowl. “Boiling?”

“The water heats and softens the cabbage, like meat over the fire.” Nlet smiles a little.

Kwa shakes her head. “Why?”

Nlet’s smile fades. “Because that is how the men like it.”

Kwa does not speak for a while, listening to the children wake and run around the settlement. “What is today?”

Nlet stirs the cabbage around in the bowls. “Fishing.”

Fishing? Kwa waits for a fuller answer, but she never gets one. Nlet only stirs the cabbage around the bowls silently.

“What is wrong?” Kwa says.

Nlet stops and looks at Kwa. “Gwun.”

“What happened?”

But Nlet does not answer.

The men hold twine twisted together like the inside of a beehive. They throw them into the river, letting the water rush through the holes. But the fish get trapped, slam against the twine, flap and struggle. When the men haul them back to the surface against the current, the twine is filled with fish.

“Nets,” Nlet says.

Kwa stares at the men wielding nets, their muscles bulging with strain. When the nets are filled, the men lug them over to the riverbank. The women stand waiting to get the fish from the nets. The fish lie, jumping, gills gasping. Quickly stabbing them with sharpened stones, the women toss them onto the ground a few feet away.

Scales shine in the sun. Blood seeps from the slits of their gills, but the fish keep jumping around on the ground like a dance of light. Beautiful, Kwa thinks as their blood stains the dirt. They only want the water; they only want to be set free, to go home. But the clan will have fish tonight. No one will go free.

Stone in hand, Kwa stabs a fish from the next net. But she moves carefully so she will not reopen her wounds, and as she snatches the fish, it is too slippery; it jumps out of her hand and sails into the light. It plops to the ground a few steps away, still, dead. Slowly, she walks over, grabs the fish with both hands, and sets in the pile with the others.

Sele is with them. But he is not throwing nets into the river or hauling them out of the water. He stands with the women, stabbing and tossing fish into the pile. A man doing a woman's job. It is the first time she has seen him all day. Where has he been? He is hardly wearing anything, only a wrap to cover his crotch, and there are old slashes across his back, white scars that have swollen against his darker flesh.

My back will look like that, Kwa thinks.

After stabbing a fish, blood on his hands, Sele looks up and meets the eyes of Kwa. She can see something there, something dark. Kwa frowns and turns away, waiting for the next net. She will not walk over to help him.

Kwa does not have to wait long as Taw-nin throws another net onto the riverbank. This time she stabs deeper, grabs with both hands, and tosses it into the pile with only a little slip. The women of the clan use one hand to stab and one to toss. Will she ever be like them? Does she even want to be?

Walking over to Nlet, Kwa says, "Why is Sele with the women?"

Nlet watches him as he stabs another fish. “You have not seen? Sele is a man no longer. Just like a little boy can become a man, a man can become a woman.”

A man, yet not a man? Not anymore. If a man can become a woman, can a woman become a man too? Or is Sele only being punished like the women every day? Is he being beaten and raped as well? If not, how can he call himself a woman; he knows nothing about what it means to be a woman. To never speak your thoughts, to do whatever a man says, to have his children, to watch his children die. Because they aren’t yours. Nothing is yours when you are a woman. Nothing.

But what could cause a man to become a woman?

Chapter 10

When the men stop fishing, the women and Sele clean the fish in the river, washing off the blood and mud. As they clean the fish, they place them on a piece of old leather. Slowly, all the fish have been washed in the river and wait on the leather slab to be brought back to the settlement. Each of them grabs hold of the leather’s edges, lifts, and hauls the fish to the main fire pit.

Nlet shows Kwa how to use a long sharp stone to slice the meat from the head and spine. The fish heads are roasted over the fire first, as the women continue to cut the meat. Each time someone finishes with the head, it is hung from a stick over the fire. Who would want to eat that, Kwa thinks. But her question does not go unanswered for long. Gwun steps up and takes the first fish head, shoving it into his mouth, chomping down. Juices drip down his lips and fall off his chin, but he does not seem to care. All the men grab a head hanging from the stick and bite down as the juices flow. Kwa gags.

She drops the fish she is cutting and runs for the river. Standing on the slippery rocks, she heaves into the flowing water, but nothing comes up. She coughs once more, and her bare foot slips from its perch. Kwa feels herself falling into the river when two hands grab her arms and tug her back from the water. She lands against someone's warm chest as they stumble back together. The hands release her, and she turns to find Sele.

Breathing heavily, throat dry, she says, "Thank you."

He stares into her eyes for a while before he says, "I am sorry I... not save you or your child from Taw-nin."

But Kwa's heart is pounding, and she does not understand, cannot get rid of the sick feeling in her belly. "Save?"

"I... your pain; Taw-nin killed someone I... too."

Kwa steps back from Sele. "I am sorry, Sele. Kauko was not my child."

His face smooths to stone. "He was not?"

"Oh, Sele, do not tell. They will—"

He raises his hand. "Then do not give me a...." He turns and strides back to the fire quickly and quietly. Slipping into the light without anyone noticing.

Kwa follows back to the fire, not sure what she has done.

Once all of the meat is cut from the bones, the women hang the slabs from the stick, letting them roast in the smoke. The scaly backside faces the fire, the soft red meat toward the sky. Kwa can hear her stomach growl as she watches the fish turn from red to white; clear juice drips from the scales underneath. Ready for their fate.

She feels something touching her hand, and looks down to see Nlet has entwined their fingers. She gives Kwa a weak smile and turns back to the fire. Kwa leans in to her, making sure Gwun cannot hear.

“What happened?”

Nlet speaks so softly, Kwa is not sure Nlet spoke at all: “He cut me.”

“Where?”

“I am not with child.” Nlet’s eyes well up with tears, and letting go of Kwa’s hand, she lays her head down on her knees.

Kwa tries not to think about the backlash of angering Gwun. Him punishing his mate for something she has no power over. Kwa knows it is not for lack of want that a woman cannot get pregnant. All at once, a thought hits her. Maybe it is not the women of the clan, but the men stopping the next age of clan members.

Rubbing Nlet’s back, Kwa wonders how Nlet did not bleed to death.

Pah-ge steps over to the fire pit. Kwa has not seen Pah-ge since the mating ritual and has not missed her.

“It is Vuhn’s time,” Pah-ge says to the women.

Vuhn’s time? Nlet sits up, wipes her eyes, and stands. She leads Kwa to her feet, and together with Taishe, Manda, and Sele, they follow the old woman into the cave. Pah-ge guides the women into the tunnel on the right. It is bigger on the inside than Kwa thought, and well lit with a large fire. Vuhn lies on her back, legs spread apart, feet on the ground. Kwa understands now: the birthing position.

There is a younger girl sitting by the fire, holding Vuhn's baby boy, caring for him. Pah-ge points all around Vuhn's body, and the women each sit where Pah-ge points. They wait for further orders.

"...hands," Pah-ge says.

Each woman grabs hold of the woman's hand next to her, Kwa following their lead. They have made a ring around Vuhn's body—Taishe, Manda, Kwa, Nlet, Sele—leaving a space for Pah-ge to guide the infant from the womb like she has guided all of them through the cave and into this cavern of rock.

Vuhn breathes heavily, drawing each breath in and out with what seems to be a great effort. She is old. Kwa has never realized how old, has never seen the age so embedded into Vuhn's face. The wrinkles, the sagging skin. Maybe in her fortieth year, Kwa has never seen such an old woman give birth and so soon. The swell of her belly is too small. Has the child even had time enough yet?

Pah-ge begins to dance around the fire and chant to the spirits. Once again the spirits seem to possess her as she lifts her arms into the air and cries out in the language of the gods.

Is it real, Kwa wonders. Are their gods real? Her clan did not have spirits or gods, only the land, the sky, the sun. Kwa is a child of nature.

"...your hands," Pah-ge says.

The women lift their linked hands.

"Sing with me...."

They all know this song, a birthing chant. Even Sele seems to know some of the words. But Kwa does not know, does not sing. She watches the sweat drip from Vuhn's tightened red

face. Her fists are squeezed tight, and Kwa cannot imagine how singing is going to help this woman give birth.

Pah-ge walks over, sits down in front of Vuhn's legs, and grabs hold of the other women's hands. Together they chant, and as they chant, they begin to sway back and forth and back and forth around the tormented woman. The women continue to chant, but Pah-ge begins to say other things, quickly and quietly. Kwa cannot understand her.

Vuhn breathes heavier and heavier.

"Push," Pah-ge says.

Vuhn's face turns blood red, teeth grinding, as she pushes the infant out of her womb. Pah-ge says the word again and again until the infant slides from the mouth of Vuhn's womb. But Kwa is sitting opposite from Pah-ge and cannot see.

There are no cries, no sounds at all.

Vuhn tries to sit up to see what is happening. Her tiny infant girl is dead. Kwa is not sure if Vuhn understands this, because the mother reaches for her infant, snatches her from Pah-ge's arms, and holds her tightly. Vuhn, rubbing the infant's head, rocks her child from side to side and hums her a song. Blood and womb smear all over Vuhn's face, arms, hands, and chest. But she does not care, does not even know. It is not long before tears begin falling from her face. Her cries become louder and louder as they echo off the cave walls. Like a whole group of women crying and mourning the loss of this beautiful little girl, but it is only her mother.

Pah-ge brushes Vuhn's hair back from her face. "It is all right."

But Vuhn does not stop crying. None of the women know what to do. They only sit around the mother who continues to rock her dead infant. Vuhn in time falls silent, but does not let go of her daughter.

Only the crackling of the fire can be heard in the cave. No one speaks for a long while. Vuhn lies, staring up into the darkness of the cave, infant in arms. She does not weep for the loss of her infant anymore. Kwa is not even sure Vuhn is breathing. She is so still and silent. Each woman hugs and kisses her before leaving the cavern, except Sele who only stands and walks out with a slight smirk. Not even the swollen Manda speaks, most likely too frightened for herself. The young girl carries the baby boy out after the women. But Pah-ge and Kwa do not leave. Kwa sits and watches Vuhn, wanting to be with her. To share her pain.

After some time, Vuhn closes her eyes, slipping into sleep. Pah-ge carefully slides the infant from Vuhn's arms and wraps her in leather, covering her face from the world and laying her by the fire.

Kwa crawls over to the bundle of leather and peels away the wrapping to see the little body. She is so tiny. Too tiny. She had at least until the end of the season before she was ready, but nature does not wait for the ready. It does not wait for gods or spirits to guard or to keep from harm. Nature comes in the night, ripping the breath out of infants and mothers. Abandoning the ones left alive, alone, and empty inside. It does not take their breath, but it takes something from them, something that cannot be seen or named. Something deep within all of them. And when that is taken away, a fiery, aching hole is all that is left.

Kwa turns to Pah-ge. "Why? Why did your gods not save her?"

Pah-ge looks up from the fire, meeting Kwa's eyes. "Why did the gods not save your child?"

Kwa can feel her anger rising. Heat and pain.

"The... cannot... the gods, Kwa."

“Taw-nin killed my child. How could the gods have saved him?” Kwa tightens her lips, furrows her brow.

Pah-ge stares into her eyes. Wide and bright in the flames, Pah-ge’s eyes bore into Kwa. Kwa stands up and stomps toward the tunnel opening.

“Kwa, tell them to be ready.”

The fresh air seems to rid Kwa of the death closing around her. She breathes in deeply and steps over to the fire pit. The women must have told the men; it is thick in the air.

“Be ready.”

Kwa is surprised when the women do not move, but the men stand and walk away. It seems to Kwa that the women bring life into the world, and the men take it out. She sits with the women while they wait for the other two.

Soon Pah-ge and Vuhn, cradling the infant, walk out of the cave and into the light. Together, the women walk to the edge of the clan’s huts, slowly picking flowers as they go. Right before the woods begin, piles of rocks cover the ground, marking graves. There are many graves, new and small.

The men wait for them, standing around a small hole in the ground, dirt and rocks piled on the side. Vuhn sets her daughter carefully into the grave and sweeps a smoking pine branch over her.

Nlet says to Kwa, “She is cleansing the body.”

Cleansing?

Each woman places her flowers in a ring around the bundled infant. When they are done, the men cover the bundle, flowers and all, with dirt. They pack it down with their hands and then

set the rocks around in a circle, smaller and higher until one rock sits on top of the rest. The clan stands around the little grave for a moment, and then one by one, they leave.

Nlet leads Kwa away, but Kwa cannot help staring at Pah-ge holding Vuhn as Nlet and Kwa walk back toward the fire pit. She cannot help but take hold of Nlet's hand as they walk. Nlet squeezes Kwa's hand.

"Nlet, the child I brought with me, Kauko, he was not mine. My daughter died soon after birth, and I became a wet nurse. I—"

Nlet's eyes have grown large and frightened. "Kwa, you must not tell anyone. You must—"

The sound of a twig breaking startles them, but when they glance around, no one is there.

"Never tell," Nlet whispers in Kwa's ear.

Never?

Chapter 11

"This is an atlatl," Nlet says.

She hands Kwa the atlatl, and Kwa runs her fingers along the smooth round body of the carved stick. The softer wood has worn away to uncover the darker ridges bending around the sides. It is not very long, but thin and hooked at one end. Small, heavy stones are tied to the hooked end, weighing it down for more power as Nlet has told her.

Kwa places the atlatl back in Nlet's outstretched hand. Nlet sets a small spear against the hook; a carved-out hole in the end of the spear keeps it in place.

"Like this." Nlet cocks her hand backward over her shoulder and swings forward.

The spear is freed as the atlatl stays in Nlet's hand. Flying so much faster than by hands and arms alone, it lodges deep within the bark of a large pine tree.

"Now, you," Nlet says.

Kwa stalls. She has never done anything like this before. She has never been a part of the hunt. Stepping forward, she picks a small spear from the pile on the ground, and places the hooked atlatl carefully into the spear. Cocking the atlatl over her shoulder, she follows Nlet's movement forward. The spear flies from the atlatl and whips through the air, missing the tree by a body's length.

"Again," Nlet says.

Kwa places another spear against the hook and thinks about the tree, the bark, the grain of the wood. Rearing back, she frees the spear and watches as it nips the side of the tree and flies deep into the woods. Not waiting for Nlet to tell her again, Kwa grabs another spear. This time she aims by swinging her arm back and forth, aligning it with the middle of the tree. She rears back, swings forward once more, and frees the spear. It hits the side of the tree, right between two pieces of bark.

Nlet strides up to judge the wound and frowns. "Harder. It must be deeper."

So Kwa throws harder; over and over and over again, she throws harder until her arm feels like it will fall off her body. "I cannot, Nlet. No more."

"You think a man would let you stop? Again."

Kwa trudges over to the tree and removes the spears from the bark, having to tug hard for the deeper ones to free their prey. Nlet steps over once Kwa has gathered all of the spears.

"You need something little," Nlet says.

She turns and walks away. Kwa follows, flattening the grass with each step. Grass that is returning once more to its summer green.

Nlet leads Kwa to a pile of mammoth bones by a tree. She steps over to the pile and picks up some of the bones. Carefully, she leans the bones against the trunk of the small tree and the branches. There are bits of rib bones and chunks of skull. Nothing large. Nothing even the size of Kwa's own hand.

"I cannot hit this," Kwa says.

Nlet turns and stomps over to Kwa, snatching the atlatl and a spear from Kwa's hands. Without halting, Nlet places the spear against the atlatl and sends the spear flying through the air and smashing through the smallest piece of bone sitting on the highest branch.

"I can," Nlet says.

This world is so unfamiliar, Kwa thinks. Women using weapons, hunting, killing. The women from her clan birth children and gather. They hardly ever even use tools; they cannot handle them or make them. Women in this world have so much more power. They are so strong. Yet they are losing the gift of life, the gift of women. Could it be that as they become more like men in their ways, they lose the gift of women?

Kwa takes Nlet's challenge, grabbing the atlatl back from Nlet and setting all but one spear on the ground. Kwa stands, places the spear against the atlatl, breathes, rears back, and swings forward, freeing the spear. It embeds itself into the tree, knocking the closest piece of bone from the branch. She tightens her mouth and snatches another spear without looking at Nlet.

This time, Kwa thinks. But she only sends the spear flying past the bone-filled tree and into the darkening woods.

“Your body is not right,” Nlet says.

Kwa turns to Nlet and frowns.

“Watch me, Kwa.”

Kwa hands Nlet the atlatl and a spear. Nlet steps back with her right foot, planting it into the dirt. Her right arm rears back as her left arm stretches forward. Muscles tightening, she spins forward as she swings the atlatl through the air, sending the spear flying straight into a chunk of bone.

Kwa sighs as Nlet hands her back the atlatl. Kwa thinks more about her body’s movements this time, trying to follow the shape of Nlet’s: her power, her beauty. And when the bone tip of the spear meets its brother on the branch, Kwa almost does not believe it.

One corner of Nlet’s mouth turns upward. “More tomorrow. We will leave the sunrise after,” Nlet says.

As Kwa and Nlet walk back to the settlement, Kwa stops when she sees Taw-nin mending the leathers on Pah-ge’s hut. Pah-ge waves her finger at him, and he just nods his head as he keeps working. Her scratchy voice fills the air, but Kwa and Nlet are too far away to hear what she is saying.

“She raised him.” Nlet comes up from behind Kwa. “After his mother killed herself—”

“Killed herself?” Kwa’s brow furrows.

“She cut her wrists, bled to death.... He had no one. Pah-ge took him in when he was only a little boy. One night, after his mate died, I heard him crying. Pah-ge was there, and he yelled at her: they all leave me, Pah-ge! Why do they all leave me!”

“Why did she kill herself?”

“I do not know.”

Kwa turns to Nlet, whose eyes are filled as she watches Taw-nin and Pah-ge.

“I miss my mother too, Nlet.”

Staring at the sun, shoulder aching, Kwa stands with the atlatl in her hands once more. It has been another long day for her, throwing the small spears over and over again. Nlet woke Kwa early that morning to ready her for the hunt tomorrow. But the sun has crossed the sky now and begins to fall below the land.

“What will we hunt?” Kwa picks up the pieces of bone and gathers the spears from around the tree.

“The red deer.”

“Where are they?”

“Near the falling sun.” Nlet points to a gap in the trees.

Kwa stands and follows Nlet’s finger, and they watch as the sun drops.

“Nlet?”

“Yes, Kwa.”

“How did Sele become a woman?” Kwa glances at Nlet, the setting sun turning Nlet’s face the color of clay.

“He was found with a man.”

Kwa frowns. “What happened?”

“The gods, Taw-nin, say only man and woman can be together. When Sele and Fyrin were found together, Taw-nin had Gwun beat them as you were.”

Kwa can see Gwun, whip in hand, slashing away at their backs. Sele's scars. She thinks of the leather against her own skin, how her flesh burned. She sees the men, heads hanging, blood dripping from their lips.

"You were the first since," Nlet says. "Taw-nin stood before the men and said they were now women. But Gwun had never beaten anyone before." Her voice softens. "He went too far. He liked it, Kwa. He liked hurting people."

Kwa realizes Nlet has begun to cry.

Nlet covers her face with her hands. "Fyrin died."

Kwa thinks of Sele at her beating. How he looked at her. He tried to tell her something. What was it? He had been there, tied to those trees. He had watched Fyrin die.

Nlet, tears down her face, turns her head to Kwa. "Taw-nin showed the clan what happens when you do not obey. When you do not obey the gods, do not obey Taw-nin, to be with who you want to be with most."

Kwa reaches out her arm for Nlet's, but stops herself.

As Kwa lies naked on the mats covering Taw-nin's hut, still damp with his sweat, she watches the smoke from the fire pour out the little hole at the top of the hut.

She thinks of her aim, her spin and weapon: the slender spear, the hooked atlatl. The atlatl guides the spear through the air and to its end. So unlike, yet they fit together perfectly to become one powerful weapon.

Kwa will hunt tomorrow with Nlet and others. Her body shivers at the thought. She has never been the predator before.

Taw-nin lies on his side across from Kwa. His shadow flickers against the walls. Breathing slowly, his chest rises and falls steadily. For only a second, Kwa imagines him covered in his own blood, writhing in pain. And then it is gone. Taw-nin is there once more, sleeping quietly.

Chapter 12

Before the sun touches the land, Kwa, Nlet, Sele, and a man named Ong meet Pah-ge by the river. The sky has been lit a soft orange, only enough to see Pah-ge sitting down, bowls of paint to the side of her. They each kneel down before her, faces bare. She paints white and red. The colors of the hunt. Lines across cheeks or down the forehead, nose, and chin. Over the eyelids or down the borders of the face. She walks around each of them, chanting, as they stand in a line.

“You are ready,” she says.

They leave at sunrise. The hunters. Sele follows behind, dragging the pallet. Nlet and Ong lead the way, while Kwa stays in between the two groups. Watching Nlet lead, becoming the hunter. Kwa sees Nlet’s power and wants to be a part of it.

How does a woman become a man?

They tread lightly through the woods as the sun glides across the sky, following the river. All the sounds of the woods seem louder in their silence. Birds call overhead to each other from tree to tree and in the air. Little insects, hiding under leaves and inside the bellies of trees, buzz and tick.

But when Kwa no longer hears the scrape of the pallet against the mossy ground, she turns to find Sele gone. The pallet rests on the ground a few trees back, and she can barely make

out the edge of leather behind a large pine. Kwa circles around, keeping her space until she sees Sele picking little purple flowers from a vine crawling up the tree. But the leaves spread in the shape of a womb, and the flower reaches off its stem, bending upward and out, opening with bearded lips curling outward and down. The shape of the mouth of the womb. The barren vine.

A throbbing, sickening weakness grips her muscles, flies through her bones. She breathes heavily, trying to push down the panic rising in her throat.

A woman came late one night to their fire. She was dripping in sweat, but it was cold outside. The first frost of winter. Kwa was only a child then, seven maybe. Most of the men were away hunting. It was only Kwa, her two little brothers, and her mother at their fire. And until the woman, a clan member named Minn, startled Kwa, she and her brothers were sleeping. Blinking away blurry dreams, Kwa listened to the woman.

“Help, Dbed. Please,” she said to Kwa’s mother. “He will know. He will know it is not his. Please.”

Kwa’s mother scoured through her dried plants, leaves, and flowers of different colors and feels. She stopped and stared for a while.

She gave Minn a handful of dried leaves the shape of wombs and little purple flowers the shape of the mouths. “Do not ask again.”

“Thank you.”

Kwa waited a while after Minn left to ask her mother, “What was that?”

Her mother frowned. “The barren vine. It kills unborn and sometimes the mother.”

“Why would Minn—”

“Sleep, Kwa.” Her mother shook her head slowly, staring at the fire.

* * *

Sele snaps his head up from the trunk of the tree to find Kwa watching, but it is not only fear that passes over his face. It is also the hint of a smile, the curling of lips. Not only her knowledge, but also his.

Kwa stumbles backward and rushes to find Nlet, not far away, still keeping a steady pace. Kwa follows her and Ong, not daring to look back, to find Sele watching her. But soon, she hears the familiar scraping of the pallet and knows that Sele is not far behind.

Nlet halts. Kwa almost runs into the back of Ong, as she staggers on her toes. Sele stops as well. They all wait for Nlet, the leader of the hunt. Pointing at Sele, his pallet, and then down, she orders him to set it on the ground. Pulling a spear from the leather sack on her back, she raises her atlatl in the air. Kwa and Ong ready their atlatls as well. Sele has chosen to hunt with a club.

Nlet steps silently to the edge of the trees. Kwa did not realize they were so close, but there standing in the clearing is a small herd of red deer.

Their matted, hairy necks are almost as thick as their bodies. Sharp antlers reach up into the air with so many points that Kwa cannot count them all. A few of them have lost their antlers already. The deer chew on the grass, ears upright, listening, waiting for a threat. A head pops up from the grass, turns, watches with black eyes. But his pointed ears do not hear them, his black eyes do not see them, and his wet shiny nose does not smell them. Red fur reaches down the deer's bodies and meets with the white of their faces, underbellies, and tips of their tails. They think they are out of harm's way, but they only know predators who need to touch them to kill them.

Nlet points down the line of trees. Each of them prowls down the row and hides behind one. She wants to go for the closest deer: a large buck that has yet to shed his antlers.

They ready their weapons, watching Nlet, waiting for the signal. She looks at them, points and rears back. Kwa and Ong follow Nlet's movements, all rearing back and freeing their spears at the same time. The spears fly through the air and tear through the belly of the deer, one behind the shoulder. He takes off through the field, deer darting in every direction.

The hunters erupt from the tree line, chasing the deer as quickly as they can. But even with the blood dripping from his body, he is still too fast for them. Nlet, Kwa, and Ong ready more spears as they race. Rearing and swinging, only Nlet's spear hits the deer. Ong's barely misses the deer's thigh, and Kwa's flies too far above the animal to strike. Even with the fourth spear jutting from his body, the buck does not slow his pace. The hunters are losing their prey.

Kwa does not know how much farther she can run. Her lungs heave for air; her muscles ache. She falls behind the others, not as strong as Nlet, when out of the corner of her eye flies a club straight into the front right leg of the deer. The leg buckles and bends oddly underneath the animal; he trips over his now useless leg and falls forward, toppling on the grass.

Kwa slows as Sele sprints up from her side. He snatches the club from the ground and stands over the fallen stag. Breathing heavily, he looks down at the wounded animal's crumpled body. Smiling, he raises the club above his head and smashes it down onto the deer's skull. Cracking fills the air as bones shatter under the blows of the club. Again and again until there is nothing left but chips of bone, innards, and blood seeping into the ground. Painting the grass red. Nlet, Ong, and Kwa all watch as Sele stops and looms over the animal. He looks at them, staring back as blood drips from his face.

It only takes a moment for Nlet to remember herself. “Sele, get the pallet.” She points back toward the direction from which they came.

Sele does not see them anymore. He is looking far away, through them. But he follows Nlet’s order and walks back the way they came.

Kwa shivers as he passes her, almost touching her shoulder with his arm. She breathes out, not even realizing she was holding anything in.

Nlet stares at her. “When he comes back we will cut up the body.”

Kwa nods.

Ong keeps his eyes trained on Sele until he comes back, and something in the way he watches, Kwa realizes Ong was the fourth man on the mammoth hunt.

They clear the pallet of the tools and leather. Making careful slices, they work together to skin the animal, wrap the pelt, and begin to cut away the meat. Ong tears apart the bones, quickly arranging and wrapping them. They do not do as clean a job as with the mammoth; their goal is speed. Once they return to the settlement, then the unharmed bones and innards will be well cleaned. The deer’s head is in pieces, and they must cut it from the body. The antlers, however, are mostly whole and are placed on top of the pallet when they are finished.

They only leave a few useless bits of the animal behind, mostly the shattered skull. Pah-ge will not be happy missing the teeth.

Why did Sele behave with such savagery? Why did he not stop when the animal died? There was something in his eyes, a fire deep within. It was lit at the sight of blood and grew more unbridled with every blow until only death lasted. Like fire burns away to uncover within, violence has shown something hidden within Sele, something too powerful to stop. Kwa will not allow herself to be alone with him.

* * *

Chapter 13

Returning to the settlement, the people hail the hunters. The sun is low in the sky, nearing night. Men and women rush over to them: the bearers of food, of life. The people shout and begin to chant. Parting the crowd, Pah-ge appears.

“Kwa, Nlet, come,” she says.

The three women step from the crowd and walk in the direction of the main fire pit. Pah-ge picks a burning branch from the fire and leads them deep within the cave: the tunnel on the left.

Kwa remembers the hunters bringing the mammoth meat in here during the first days of her capture. But when they arrive in a small cavern with holes in the ground, they do not stop. Following the bends of the cavern as it narrows and drops downward, they trudge farther into the darkness.

Going deeper into the cave than she has ever gone before, Kwa drags her fingers along the rough, raw walls like clay with dirt gathering in the gaps. The cold envelops her. The ceiling comes down like teeth in a mouth, and it dips low, rising high only moments later. She flinches when freezing water drips from the ceiling onto her head.

Fire from the branch leaps on the walls, and the same stone trees, aged and saplings, appear in the darkness as at the mouth of the cave. The ceiling melts down to meet the floor and shimmers in the firelight like little suns in the night sky.

More water drips from the ceiling; Kwa listens to the beat, the only noise other than their footsteps and the crackle of fire. There are holes in the ceiling, large ledges leading up into shadow, while they have to crawl under and squeeze around the parts of the ceiling that have

crumpled to the uneven ground. They must climb down as the ground drops. It is like the woods, mountains and valleys underground. Whiteness shines on the rock like milk on a breast, and green rivers long dried stream down the walls. Others like old flesh sagging and wrinkled, so thin she can see through them by the light of the branch.

Kwa is in the womb of the land; will she come out reborn?

And just when she thinks they can go no deeper, they turn a sharp corner and step into a cavernous room already lit with a fire. Bright paintings flicker in the flames. Coal smeared, burned onto the walls, breath of bison large and small. She can feel the thunder of their hooves in this place, trace their muscle movements. Horses, mammoths, lions, bears. They run with each other as one, and in other paintings, away from the hunters as the animals are killed. Above, drawings on the ceiling in the colors of sun, blood, moss, bark, following the rock. Some drawings scratched into red on the ceiling, fading to the tan of the rock. White speckles on red ceiling, splatter. Red hands by spotted horses.

Clay bowls line the floor under an empty piece of wall by the fire. Some have powders of different colors, some bits of coal, one a few brushes made of horsehair and notched bone. Everything is ready for them. Pah-ge knew they would do well, knew Kwa would kill.

Pah-ge says a word that Kwa does not know.

Kwa only stands there, looking at Pah-ge. But Nlet quickly takes off her leather from her body, standing naked next to Kwa. Kwa does not dare look at Nlet.

“Kwa...” Pah-ge says.

This time Kwa does as she is told, turning away her eyes, stepping from Nlet and toward Pah-ge.

“Now you paint the hunt.” Pah-ge strips herself as well, sits by the fire, and begins chanting.

Nlet squats down by the coal and chooses a long, thin piece. Stepping to the wall, she sets coal to stone and lets her arm flow across the imperfect surface, leaving a trail of black behind her. She looks at Kwa.

“Come.” Nlet stretches out her arm and curls her fingers inward as though pulling Kwa closer to herself and holding her there.

Kwa steps forward heedfully until she reaches Nlet. Nlet places her hand on top of Kwa’s, turning it over and setting the piece of coal in Kwa’s fingers. She guides Kwa’s hand to the wall and presses Kwa’s hand against the stone. Together, they draw lines both light and dark, shaping a deer from nothing but coal. They draw many more legs than the animal had, stretching them out as though he were still running. Forever alive on the wall.

When they finish the drawing, Nlet chooses a brush and a bowl of red powder.

Nlet lifts the bowl to Kwa’s face and says, “Spit.”

Kwa gathers a pool in her mouth and spits it into the bowl. Nlet does the same. They continue to spit into the red powder until they make enough to create a pulp. Blending with the brush, Nlet smooths the paint. Again, she reaches for Kwa’s hand and guides her as they brush the red onto the stone, giving color to the pale animal. The color of blood.

Nlet lets go of Kwa’s hand and looks at her. Dipping her own hand into the red paste, Nlet carefully presses her fingers against the wall below the deer.

“Now, you,” Nlet says.

Kwa dips her hand into the paste and sets it next to Nlet’s handprint. They too will live forever on the wall.

Nlet removes her hand and turns to face Kwa. She grazes first her fingers against Kwa's chest then lays her whole palm down on Kwa's prickling skin. Dragging her hand along, Nlet arrives at Kwa's breast and rests there. Nlet looks up at Kwa, their eyes meeting in the firelight, and Kwa opens her mouth to speak when the crunch of dried bone stops her. Nlet drops her hand from Kwa's breast, and Kwa realizes for the first time that Pah-ge is no longer with them. Someone else has come into the cavern.

Swiftly, they turn to face Sele. He smiles at them from the opening.

Paint drips from Kwa's hardened breast, and she can feel her breath quickening, her fingers tingling, telling her to flee. But she cannot leave Nlet.

He does not have a weapon, just stands at the opening, the only way out. As he steps forward, Kwa can see the fire in his eyes again.

Nlet drops the bowl, splitting in half as it hits the ground, paint flying into the air and splattering upon the women's legs. Kwa glances down at the paint, and before she knows what is happening, she is lying on the ground, head-splitting pain boring into her skull. Nlet's screams echo off the cave walls, rattling in Kwa's head.

Kwa opens her eyes, but black spots flit across her sight. Rolling over, groping for something, anything. Rubbing her eyes, the spots slowly fade into a blur of moving shapes. The firelight to her left, Nlet and Sele struggling shadows to her right. Again, Kwa gropes the ground until she finds something white and wet red. One end soft, the other sharp: the brush.

Trying to stand, she becomes dizzy and falls on her knees into the coated red dirt of the cave floor like blood, blood everywhere. Nlet has stopped screaming. And as Kwa's sight clears, she cannot find Sele.

The breath is knocked out of her as Sele kicks her in the stomach. Falling onto the ground, she struggles for breath, still grasping the brush.

Sele laughs. “Kwa. I know Kauko was not yours. And you know... the barren vine.”

“You are killing”—Kwa grabs her stomach, gasping—“them all.”

He stands back for a moment, looking at her. “I loved him, Kwa. I loved him, and Taw-nin took him from me.” He bares his teeth.

“L-loved?” She presses the sharp tip of the brush against her palm. “What do you want?”

Sele squats over her, clenches her face with his hand, and squeezes her skull beneath his fingers. “Do not tell, and I will not only... your... but I will... Nlet to live.”

Kwa whimpers as he squeezes harder and harder.

“I will kill... you love, Kwa.” He lets go of her head, rises, grabs a burning stick from the fire, and strides out of the cavern into darkness.

Kwa loosens her grip on the brush, dropping it to the ground, and crawls the short distance to Nlet, who is bruised and bloody. Kwa sits down by Nlet’s side and sees her scars for the first time. The deep cuts on her inner thighs made by Gwun. They reach up deeper where Kwa cannot see. Kwa reaches her hand to touch Nlet, but stops and strokes her cheek instead until she wakes.

Nlet’s eyes open slowly.

Her brow furrows. “Kwa.”

“Come, Nlet.”

Kwa helps her to sit up and breathe calmly. One arm wrapped around Nlet’s back and her hand on Nlet’s stomach. Nlet rests her head on Kwa’s shoulder, and Kwa can smell her hair, like

sweat and river water. Nlet's arm wraps around Kwa's back, fingers rubbing circles on her healing skin.

"You are hurt?" Kwa says.

Nlet quickly shakes her head against Kwa's shoulder.

Kwa lifts Nlet's chin carefully and wipes the blood dripping from her mouth. "We need to find Pah-ge."

Nlet does not speak as Kwa lifts her to her feet; Nlet clings onto Kwa's arms. Kwa moves away to pick up their leathers, but Nlet grabs Kwa's arms and draws them together. They hug, hips, bellies, chests against each other. Nlet's face deep in Kwa's neck. Kwa breathes heavily, unsure of what is happening, her whole body tight.

"Nlet, I—"

"Help me dress, Kwa."

Nlet pulls away, and Kwa picks up her leathers and helps Nlet dress. Then Kwa dresses herself, aware of Nlet watching.

As they slowly, carefully, make their way through the cave back out the mouth, Kwa says, "Nlet, do not tell anyone."

Chapter 14

"What happened?" Pah-ge says as she sits on the fur mats in her hut, squinting at Nlet's wounds.

The clan members eat red deer by the fire. Kwa can hear their shouts from inside Pah-ge's hut.

"She fell," Kwa says.

Pah-ge pinches her lips together. “Yes. She must have.” She digs through little leather bags with paintings on them, different colored lines creating unfamiliar shapes. “Here.”

Pah-ge opens a bag with red paint in a tapered winding line. She rubs a few of the leaves against Nlet’s wounds. Holding them there as she wraps leather strips around Nlet’s arm and chest. The skin still seeping blood from the edges of the leather.

Kwa’s stomach twists, her throat feeling full, she stares into the fire until it is over, trying to breathe evenly.

“Thank you, Pah-ge,” Nlet says.

Pah-ge nods and waves them away with her hand. Kwa leads Nlet out of the hut and back to the fire. The men roar like animals, the women wordless like plants. Vuhn hands them each a piece of meat as the two women sit down on a trunk. Neither touches their deer, they only gaze into the fire, now and then glancing at one another warily. Sele is not there.

Both Taw-nin and Gwun choose the night’s end at the same time, walking away to each of their huts, and the women know to follow. Kwa and Nlet were holding hands, but now their hands part, fingers hanging on, slowly slipping. Kwa stares at the ground as she walks. With the snow melted, she has no footsteps to follow. She can go any path she wants, as long as it leads her back to Taw-nin’s hut.

Lying awake, watching the little suns through the hole at the top of the hut, she tries not to think about Nlet, about Sele. But she cannot. She can choose either the barren vine or Sele, either way she must watch Nlet die.

Kwa turns her head to Taw-nin, and her eyes drift down to the sharpened bone blade lying next to him. Lifting herself onto her hands and knees, she crawls over to Taw-nin. His chest rises and falls with every breath.

I will not miss you, she thinks as she clutches the bone. Carefully pulling it away from Taw-nin, she raises the bone and nudges the flap of the hut open. A cold wind brushes her bare skin, only a leather wrap covers her from breasts to thighs.

The full moon hangs midway across the sky as Kwa strides past the edge of the huts to the waterfall. The falling water pounds onto the rock underneath, grinding away with every drop. It never stops. Only more water, falling farther. The hole only widens. But the water hides the emptiness beneath, the never-ending grinding away. Everything on the surface appears natural; the water flows smoothly down the river.

Looking up into the sky, the little suns above, Kwa presses the bone's tip against her wrist. Her heart pounds in her chest, through her body. Her legs and arms, her head. So small and fragile. The blood drips wet down her arm, off her elbow, as she begins to drag the bone against her skin.

"Kwa."

Spinning around, Kwa hides her hands behind her back as she stares at Nlet.

"I heard everything."

Kwa shakes her head, holding out the hand without blood dripping down it, palm out against Nlet.

"What is the barren vine?" Nlet's eyes shine in the moonlight, wet with tears.

"It makes women barren, kills the unborn, sometimes the mother."

Nlet's mouth has fallen open. "Kwa, we must tell them."

Kwa drops the bone and looks down at the ground. "Then tell them."

"Kwa." Nlet's face twists in pain, brow lined, lips bitten.

Her eyes hunt Kwa for an answer, but Kwa has none to give.

“I am scared.” Nlet grabs onto Kwa’s wrists. Her fingers slip over Kwa’s bloody skin, and she glances down, seeing the blood. “But I am not the only one,” Nlet says. “You didn’t cut deep enough.”

Kwa looks down at the ground and nods slowly.

Nlet smiles with her mouth, but not her eyes.

Chapter 15

When Kwa wakes the next morning, the sun is already overhead. The women have boiled the cabbage, even some of the men are up and eating. As Sele hands out the bowls of food, Nlet does not touch hers.

The women are in the field today, picking more cabbage. Kwa can see rows and rows of the green plants. The layers of leaf over leaf, hiding away the tough, white heart so unlike her own.

“You can tell if they are ready by the color,” Nlet says, pointing to a greener cabbage, “this one is ripe,” pointing to a whiter cabbage, “this one is not.”

Kwa nods her head, not looking at Nlet. Turning her back to Nlet, Kwa follows her down a row, picking off the ripe cabbages. Neither of them talks. The tightness in her chest has come back, the fullness, the want to split open and out.

Passing the middle of the sky, the warm sun hangs overhead like the moon last night. Only, the moon did not seem so heavy, so likely to fall from its fragile perch in the sky and come tumbling down to land. It would set fire to the world, Kwa thinks. If only the sun would let go.

“Kwa!” Taw-nin stands at the edge of the field, waiting for her.

She does not stall; she strides toward him and whatever awaits her. He looks at her for only a moment before ripping off her leather. She hides her cut wrist behind her back without thought, only to realize she hid the wrong piece of flesh. Following his gaze down, she sees the black and green bruise stretching across her stomach.

“Who did this?” he says.

When she does not answer, he slaps her cheek so hard that she falls to the ground.

“Who did this!” He seizes her by the hair, lifting her to slap her again.

“Stop!” Nlet rushes over to them.

Taw-nin glares at her, clenching Kwa’s hair tighter. “Who?”

Nlet drops her head to the ground. “Sele.”

Taw-nin lets go of Kwa’s hair, and she falls to her knees on a patch of grass. He strides back to the huts, darkness in his eyes.

“What have you done?” Kwa stares into the distance, through the tree line outside of the field.

“I am sorry, Kwa. But neither you nor Sele is a man, and I do not have to listen to either of you.” Nlet walks away, toward the huts.

For a while, Kwa does not move. Staring away from the huts, she listens to the men. Taw-nin and Gwun finding Sele, shouting, no fighting though. Not like Kwa thought. When there has been nothing for a long time, Kwa stands and walks slowly into the woods.

The dirt here is very fine and almost white. Black shadows reach across between trees. The sun will fall, and the shadows will stretch. Kwa caught somewhere in the middle.

A bird caws above her, and she stops before following the sound. Stepping lightly on the dusted land, she runs through the trees, after the bird.

“Stop!”

But the bird only flies faster and higher until Kwa can see it no longer.

“I have to know!”

As a roar cracks the air, Kwa is the one to stop. Looking around, she sees nothing. Until a bush rustles and out steps a saber-tooth tiger.

Kwa sucks in a breath, unable to let it go. The tiger growls as it slinks closer. It sniffs the air while staring right at her. Its yellowing teeth stick out from its mouth. Spit drips and darkens the dirt. Kwa steps backward until she hits a tree. She grabs the trunk tightly, digging her nails into bark.

The tiger roars again, opening its jaw past the ends of its fangs.

Holding out her shaking hand, she says, “Please.”

The bush rustles again, and two cubs run to the tiger, their mother. The growl halts in her throat, and she licks her cubs’ heads and backs. Their hair rising against her rough tongue. She glances up at Kwa once more, but Kwa understands now.

Keeping her eyes on the mother, Kwa steps around the tree and backward until she is a safe distance away. The mother stretches out by her cubs and yawns as the cubs fill their bellies.

Kwa walks back to the settlement alone. No birds or tigers, only her thoughts. The sun has fallen below the land by the time Kwa reaches the settlement. The main fire burns, but so does another. Kwa stops as the fire casts shadows against the hide walls. She steps closer until she can hear those inside.

“You ... little...!”

He throws something at her, but she ducks in time. It hits the wall, pushing it outward. The man drives stone against stone, and then he holds something up to the light, thin and pointed. Trailing his finger along the edge, he smiles.

“Come.”

She stalls. “But I—”

“I said, come!”

She holds out her hand. “I am with child! I was waiting to tell you, until I was sure. But I am.”

“You are?”

“Yes.”

He drops the cutting stone and knocks her down. But she does not spring back like the wall. Divots cover her, and shadows fill her holes. Kwa watches as the fire inside of the woman’s walls is blown out. She becomes the moon in the daylight.

Kwa falls to her knees in the dirt and cries, heaving silently.

Chapter 16

The shadows are long in the early light as Kwa walks through the huts to the main fire pit. When she reaches the pit, Nlet is not there. Pah-ge sits, rocking and chanting on one of the tree trunks.

“Where is Nlet?” Kwa says.

Pah-ge does not even open her eyes. “I told her to....” She points toward the river.

Kwa stands there for a moment, staring at the old woman, then turns and follows the river until she sees Nlet. Nlet sits on the ground by the edge of the river, hacking away at something in her hands. She looks up, her eyes meeting Kwa's.

"Taw-nin will fight Sele at the sun's height. Carve with me," Nlet says.

Kwa does not sit next to Nlet. Her chest feels too full, too tight. She looks at Nlet's belly, to see if it has swollen, if it can be seen.

Nlet smiles. "Come closer, Kwa."

As Kwa moves closer, she looks down at Nlet's hands. Lying heavily in one of Nlet's small palms is a white piece of bone, in the other is a sharp stone. Kwa watches as Nlet strikes the stone against the bone, wearing away the softer bone. She pauses and hands Kwa a larger, rougher piece of bone and another sharp stone.

Kwa strikes the bone with the stone, not doing much harm.

"Harder," Nlet says.

Again, Kwa strikes the bone, this time chipping away a piece in the middle. She sighs and stops to watch Nlet. Kwa realizes that Nlet is not destroying the bone; she is creating. A little round woman, large sagging breasts, birthing hips. Her face smooth, no eyes or ears, no mouth. The woman. So different from Nlet's own body.

Kwa strikes her bone again. She does not want to make this perfect mold. She will never make this perfect woman. Kwa strikes again and again, creating a new woman. To show Nlet. To show her how beautiful and perfect she is.

Together they chip away at the bones of women.

But Kwa does not understand how Nlet can see the woman underneath the bone, how she can uncover the body. Kwa's woman is not the one she wanted. The sun is high in the sky by the time Nlet stops Kwa.

"We must go." In one hand, Nlet grips her finished woman.

"Yes," Kwa says.

Together they walk to the fight, slowly, each gripping her sharp stone and her own woman. When they arrive, Sele stands waiting for Taw-nin, who walks into the ring as the crowd parts. The clan members stand around the two men, making a circle like birds around slain animals.

The two men stare at each other, walking around, eyes never leaving the other. In an instant their bodies collide, fists and faces, skin to skin they combine. Blood is freed from one to reach the other, smearing with sweat. Their skin opens and bruises as water when a fish breaks the surface. Flesh rips and tears from bones like bears ravaging one another.

Only the children cry. What few there are. The men and women are enlivened by violence: against others and amongst themselves. They bleed for brutality. Spit drips from their mouths with howls of passion, not of pain or horror.

The dust flies into the air as Taw-nin falls, sun to land. Kwa can almost see the fire begin to burn.

Standing over his prey, Sele stares at Gwun. "Nlet, come."

Gwun's hands tighten and pain fills his face as he watches Nlet and his unborn child taken from him. He looks for her, but when he finds her, locks his eyes on her, she does not look away from Sele.

Having killed the leader, Sele will now lead the clan. Unless someone else will challenge him, Kwa thinks. But no one steps forward. No one breathes. Until Nlet steps between the men in front of her and into the circle, facing Sele.

Kwa grips the stone in her palm tighter and drops her unfinished woman. A finger pricks against the sharp point, and she watches as a drop of her blood falls to the ground, blending with the dirt.

“Have me first,” Kwa says. “I was the mate of the leader.” She steps forward, between Nlet and Sele.

His smile wavers. Kwa swallows and walks steadily up to him.

“No, Kwa,” Nlet says. But her voice is small somewhere in the distance.

Sele stands over Kwa, feeling victory, feeling her death like he felt Taw-nin’s. Blood drips down his chest. Lifting his hand to her face, he strokes her cheek.

It is a hollow touch, Kwa thinks, stretched leather brushing against my face. There is nothing inside of him. He is empty.

“Kneel,” Sele says.

But Kwa just stands there, staring into his eyes. When she sees it, sees the fire rising in his eyes, Kwa takes the stone in her hand and squeezes.

Afterword

Don't Say *The Word*! Saying *the word* (in the context of understanding) can ruin a story. That is why I try to never say *the word*. Of course for every story, *the word* is different. "The Hunt," for instance, has a few. Ed can never say he both hates and loves his mother or that he feels like he should have been born a woman (and spends his adult life hiding it). He never even mentions they go to church for his own brother's funeral. In "In the Shallow," Brooke neither says she enjoys whitewater rafting, nor does she say she dislikes her boyfriend. She definitely never admits she is wrong. The only person who says *the word* love in "woman, you are" is Sele to Kwa, and this articulation is only allowed because it puts *the word* in her head without her truly understanding the meaning. She asks, "L-loved?" to Sele, but he never explains the meaning (99). Most importantly, Kwa and Nlet can never say it to one another. Saying *the word* makes something real, and sometimes we do not want it to be real. We give it nicknames or avoid it all together. We think we have separated ourselves from the truth, but just like the characters in my stories, we are wrong.

In my junior year, I took a Zombie Fiction class. (Yes, LSU actually has one of those.) As odd as this may seem, it has been one of the most influential classes for my writing. Along with my Creative Writing concentration, I also have a Literature concentration. Literature classes have not only taught me how to analyze literature, but more importantly, how to write literature. In Zombie Fiction, taught by June Pulliam, I learned about The Other and what makes us fear The Other. I also learned about internal conflict. Zombies and other monsters represent internal conflicts so great that they must be physically manifested. But how can this be transferred to

everyday life, to a story without an actual monster? I realized internal conflicts could manifest themselves in just about anything.

In this collection, I chose nature to represent the physically manifested internal conflicts of my characters. Focusing these internal conflicts on nature allows me to hide the monster, *the word*, without the reader or the protagonist even seeing it. An important element to making a protagonist realistic is his inability to see the truth, *the word*. Ed's mother dominated him, and I wanted to reflect this domination in nature with the beetles, lichens, weather, water, etc. Almost every description of nature in the story is one of dominance and destruction, of frailty and pain. Just as his mother damaged him, he sees the damage of the natural world without realizing the connection to his own life. Brooke describes the river like her relationship; she is the water (brook) while her boyfriend is the rocks (craggs) that have fallen into and ruined the flow of the river. Kwa often relates herself and her situation to the fish in the river. She sees their inability to escape and unknowingly recognizes it as her own. The ants from her childhood become the Cro-Magnon clan, while the exploited cave becomes herself. The characters focus in on the aspects of nature that relate to their own lives as their problems overwhelm them. They are unable to see anything besides the world around them as a reflection of themselves without even knowing it. Just as the reader must decipher the characters, the characters must decipher themselves. It is a learning process for both, even if the characters do not always find out the answers, even if their word remains a mystery.

Selected flashbacks can help the reader unscramble the truth, uncover *the word*, behind each character. Instead of simply telling the reader what happened in the past, I believe it is important to show the reader, to give her a mental image of the relationship between past and present events. To know exactly what happened in the past, to make that connection in the

reader's mind as well, I implement flashbacks. Ed uses them to see his childhood, the relationship he had with his mother. Ed allows the reader to take an intimate look at his family past. Kwa misses her family, but also learns important lessons such as the uses of the barren vine. When Nlet tells Kwa what happened to Sele and his lover, I decided to use a mixture of Nlet telling and Kwa imagining what happened. The reader can not only hear the actual events, but also can use Kwa's imagination to see what might have happened. Brooke mostly tells the reader about her past, but there are glimpses of actual events such as Craig singing metal music: "*suffocation, no breathing...*" (14). Without a past, characters seem incomplete; their word becomes less essential to their being.

Words also play a role in the point-of-view. For each story, the point-of-view was carefully chosen, and sometimes changed. In first-person, I could use Brooke's voice to not only give the story a bit of comedy, but also to properly express her fear when she thinks she will drown. Third-person for Ed and Kwa allowed me to step in and explain the world without their minds confusing the reader. Although the reader does step into Ed's mind often, I do not let his thoughts take away from the description of events. The reader can still clearly see what is happening, while getting a look into Ed's distorted view of the world: "Ed stared at the wood-paneled wall of the bedroom. Tears ran down his cheeks. The black lines in between each board. He could see the wood beginning to split" (8). Kwa was definitely the most difficult to write. At first, she was telling the story in first-person. However, she is neither as mentally complex nor as contemporary as a modern human. In order for the reader to understand the story, it has to be in third-person. I step in often to use more accurate (but less Germanic) words or to use more modern words than she would know; examples include drum and necklace (62, 30). This stepping-in allows the reader to understand exactly what is happening in the story. My readers

have to work enough to decode my characters; they should not also have to translate long descriptions in Germanic terms when one Latinate word would explain exactly my meaning. It is not just *the word*, but also every word that maintains the story. Words must be chosen carefully and for specific reasons as they are the building blocks to literature. Without a strong foundation, a writer cannot create a strong story.

Every one of the stories in this collection uses present tense. It is the tense I write in almost exclusively. Present is right in the moment; neither the reader nor the characters know what is going to happen next. This uncertainty gives the story immediacy and apprehension that past does not.

“Love” or the lack thereof (in “resentment” or “hate”) persists as one of *the words* in this collection. I want to portray stories of love, but of the more tragic and unattainable variety. Augusta never loved Ed the way she loved his brother. Even after her death, he continues to search for the affection he never received as a child. Ed also feels a certain sexual attraction to his mother, and at the same time, hate. He feels he should have been born a woman, but still likes women. This internal struggle with women is why he hunts only does. He can admire their beauty, enjoy the chase, and then overpower them, something he could never do to an actual woman, especially his mother. Brooke discovers her love for adventure and danger, not for her boyfriend. Although danger originally attracted Brooke to Craig, she is not thirteen anymore and must look for danger elsewhere—whitewater rafting. Finally, Kwa and Nlet can never be together because of the patriarchal and god-fearing world in which they live. Sele was caught with his love, and they were both punished. Fyrin lost his life, and Sele lost his love and his power as a man. As women, Kwa and Nlet have even less agency to express their feelings toward each other, and in the end, Kwa can only show Nlet her love.

Realization of *the word*, the truth, for both my characters and my readers is a journey. Realization is a battle between what my characters think versus how things truly are. Brooke comes to her realization at the end. She understands now that she wrongly judged Dicky and the adventure of whitewater rafting. Although she does not say her emotions aloud at the end, she internalizes the truth: “And I don’t tell him that I want to come back next year, alone” (18). Kwa learns the word for love from Sele, her foil, without understanding the meaning of the word yet. She has those feelings, but cannot connect the emotions to the word. Sele’s love is destroyed physically as hers is mentally. In the end, Kwa learns the meaning of love, but never says it aloud, never tells Nlet. She does, however, in the end show Nlet how she feels by taking her place, offering herself to Sele. My stories, like life, do not always end with the realization of the truth. Simple-minded Ed will never accept the truth. He will neither allow himself to believe that he loved his mother sexually and hated her at the same time, nor will he allow himself to understand that he should have been born a woman. He has passing thoughts, just as everyone does, and his actions demonstrate a certain level of understanding, but he will never stop hiding from the truth.

As humans create their own worlds and selves within their minds, they fail to realize the truth, their own word. Hiding as Ed does, we protect ourselves from our monsters. When in truth, our monsters can show us things about ourselves that we never knew before. Ed has the potential within himself to be happy. Brooke accepts her truth and her happiness as a thrill-seeker. Kwa and Nlet are trapped by the society around them, but they know the truth as well. Their possible happiness is only bound by the world in which they live. Ed is close to the truth, but just like most of us, he rejects that he has anything, a ‘monster,’ to hide.

* * *

Two summers in a row I went on whitewater rafting trips with my friends down the Ocoee in Tennessee. I did not always have the best of times on these trips, but each time I learned a little something about myself. These trips inevitably inspired “In the Shallow.” Brooke was born as an extra project for an Honors Option course, a flash fiction piece.

I did not know where I was going when I started it, but over the months it evolved into what it is today. I deleted two of the five characters, leaving only Brooke, Craig, and Dicky. At first, the story was more about a bad relationship. Hopefully, it developed into something more about finding oneself, a passion. Brooke’s desire for danger and excitement leads her into a relationship that she despises, leaving her with a sour disposition. She does not believe anything can ever be as good as she wants it to be, but she finds in the end, expectations and assumptions are a danger in themselves.

Last summer I went to Colorado for the first time, a family trip that inspired my story “The Hunt.” It also comes from a long fascination with Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and Jonathan Demme’s *Silence of the Lambs*. A while ago, my father read a book based on a man named Edward Gein, 1906-1984, who it just so happens is the real-life inspiration for both Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Hannibal Lector and Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lambs*. My father still had the book, and after finding it, I read it on the drive back from Durango. My father also used to be an avid hunter and even won a few competitions with a bow and arrow. His expertise was the main source for much of the story, while the descriptions of nature came from our many hikes in the Rockies.

The edits in “The Hunt” are subtle. I cut out many of the present participles choking my sentences, as well as any adjectives that modified less important nouns. I did keep many of the adjectives, but only in sections of the story that reflect the internal conflict of the protagonist. At

least, that is what I tried to do. I also added a little background, in the flashbacks especially. The family now has a radio and listens to Christian music, Ed goes to school on weekdays, and his ma holds her own services on Sundays in their house. The alcoholic father felt a little too stereotypical, so I changed him to drug addict with bloodshot eyes and a sweaty forehead. Since his ma's voice was a little too confusing to pinpoint from where exactly it was coming or who exactly was speaking, Ed now responds to the voice with actions and "yes, ma'am" (2). Most important is the overall message of the story. At first, I had Ed actually kill a woman, but I realized that this would limit my story to horror and Ed to a simple murderer. Now, I hope the reader can leave with a little doubt in her mind about what actually happened. I wanted to portray Ed as someone confused, someone alone and struggling.

It is also because of my father that I got the idea for my novella. Years ago we were watching the History Channel; we did this often when I lived at home. A show was on about how the Neanderthals became extinct. A few theories played through with disease, fighting, and lack of resources, but the last image has always remained with me. A lone Neanderthal woman trudging through the snow and holding on tightly to a baby wrapped in furs. When Mr. Thomas mentioned a novella, I knew instantly on what I would write. Although it was with my father I watched the show, my mother was the main source of information for this story.

"woman, you are" evolved into something so different from what it first started as. The entire process was my most valuable writing experience so far. There were so many problems when I finally finished my first draft that the idea of a completed version seemed unlikely. My diction was poor, my characters lacked realistic motivation, the definition between clans was not strong enough, etc. Then I studied abroad with LSU in Paris, France for five weeks over the summer and had the opportunity to visit Pech Merle, a prehistoric cave in Cabrerets with

paintings over 25,000 years old. When I returned from France, I went through the entire manuscript (about eighty pages at that point) and looked up the origin of every word. Thanks to the *New Oxford American Dictionary* application on my laptop, it only took about a week to completely change my diction from Latinate to Germanic. I cut characters and moved them, switching scenes and actions. Sele became more prominent, while I pushed Taishe into the background. I struggled at first with the idea of a homosexual love interest, but it came so naturally to my story that I did not want to change it in the end. I researched more than I ever have for anything in my life, even taking a Historical Anthropology course, where I learned how the sex of a person does not determine his role in certain societies. I also used much of what I learned from my Images of Women class, which focused on violence and survival in literature. I wanted the Cro-Magnon clan to have a very set idea of man and woman and if a biological man does not fit the gender mold of a man, then he is a woman. There is only black and white. I also wanted to show how limited the idea of a binary gender system is with the fact that Sele can instantly become a man when he kills Taw-nin. He is still gay, yet cannot be with a man. The title, “woman, you are,” comes from Taw-nin’s line “Woman, you are mine” (52). It is not supposed to mean “you are woman.” Instead, it is the subjectification of woman. As a woman, you are whatever I as a man say you are. Looking back on the development, it is hard to say what ideas entered my head first, but somehow they all built on each other, working to create what it is today.

There are a few stories that have inspired my collection and my game. First, Joyce Carol Oates’s *The Female of the Species* gives the reader an amazing variety of voices and tragedies. In “The Banshee,” Mummy gets remarried to Gerard and has Baby. The little girl from Mummy’s

first marriage takes Baby to see if Daddy has arrived at the party, but Baby is heavy and the roof is precarious. The third-person point-of-view follows the understanding of a young child while still giving the reader a complex story. The little girl hates Baby and unconsciously wants to hurt the child and to return to herself the affection she lost from her mother. She feels Mummy has been stolen by Baby and Gerard, and without Daddy, she is alone. In “The Haunting,” Marybeth has nightmares about the rabbits caged in the basement, but there are no rabbits, just empty cages. The reader slowly finds out about the father’s death and is led to believe the mother killed him. While the young girl hears bits of conversation about her family, she does not seem to understand them on a conscious level. She is only concerned about the rabbits caged below her.

Each of Oates’s stories leave the reader knowing more than the protagonist. The little girls cannot possibly comprehend what is truly happening to them as they have neither developed the logic nor the maturity to understand. While the reader can see that the little girl hates Baby and may be trying to actually harm the child, the little girl does not. Likewise, Marybeth may one day come to realize that her mother most likely killed her father, but for now, only the reader can see the truth. Manifested in a desire to see her father and nightmares of caged rabbits, these little girls’ monsters hide the truth from them.

Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* is a collection of fairy tales retold to create strong female characters that outwit male antagonists. The novelette based on the legend of Bluebeard, “The Bloody Chamber,” shows the oppression of a much older man upon his innocent bride. In the end, her mother, shooting a gun and riding a horse in a dress, saves her. Little Red Riding Hood or “The Company of Wolves” shows a protagonist defeat a werewolf without fighting him at all. Instead of resisting, she outwits him. Carter’s diction and original recreations of stories

that have been told for centuries changed the way I look at fairy tales. Young women lose their innocence and outsmart older men; they are not bound by the past. Carter rewrites history.

Any reader familiar with the tales of Bluebeard and Little Red Riding Hood will instantly be able to guess the outcomes of these stories, but they would not completely be right. The mother saves the young woman in “The Bloody Chamber,” not her brothers, while the young woman in “The Company of Wolves” becomes a werewolf herself in order to overcome the villain. The truth hiding in these works is the rejection of tradition, and the protagonists will never be able to see this rejection as the reader can.

I wanted my novella to be about gender versus sexuality and the conventions of a patriarchal society or a sexual binary. Kwa and Sele are both homosexuals. As Kwa gains agency (learns the Cro-Magnon ways) she becomes more masculine. She is not gay because of how the men in her life have treated her, but only realizes her feelings after she meets Nlet. Kwa sees Nlet as a friend, wants to protect her, cares for her, and eventually loves her. Nlet’s feelings toward Kwa (whether she too is a lesbian) are not important. I wanted to paint Nlet and Kwa as opposites in that Nlet believes in the conventions and expectations of women, the dominance of men, the need to be the perfect and ever-obedient wife and mother. Kwa slowly believes in this way of life less and less. The reader is left to decide what Kwa does in the end.

Lastly, Amy Hempel’s *Reasons to Live* collects stories of grief into a beautiful work of humanity’s hope and sadness. There are too many stories in this work that have shown me something new and inspired me, but I only chose a couple. “Going” tells the story of a young man who almost kills himself in a car accident after his mother passes away. He suffers olfactory hallucinations and focuses on smells throughout the short story. In the end, the reader discovers his hallucinations are connected to his mother’s death. “The Man in Bogotá” is narrated by

someone imagining talking a woman down from a ledge. The narrator tells a story about a man who is kidnapped and ends up leading a better, healthier life because of it. The story becomes a lesson in life: “He wondered how we know what happens to us isn’t good” (Hempel 98).

Although the reader is told the truth behind both stories, it is only at the very end. The reader never finds out if the young man realizes the connection between his mother’s death and his hallucinations, just as the narrator never tells the story about the man in Bogotá to the potential jumper. The truth is still hidden, always.

A river runs through each of my stories. It helps Ed find his deer, shows Brooke a new passion, and leads Kwa to her fate. Each character follows and uses the river; their goals all center upon it. One of the strongest forces in nature, water is necessary for life. While water is often clear, the deeper the water becomes, the more difficult it is to see what lies beneath. Water hides life under its darkness and great pressure, similarly as my characters’ truths are pressured into hiding. All rivers lead to oceans and all oceans are connected, just as words connect to create stories. The river’s surface only shows a piece of the whole, like a story without *the word*. What lies beneath, however, is never as simple as what we are able to see on the river’s surface.

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