

READBEAST

BEASTIALITY STORIES



The year is 13,500 BCE. A group of Paleolithic Natives have crossed the Bering straight, a vast stretch of frozen ice linking Siberia to North America. The tribe has settled in a valley in western Alaska. A famine has pushed the tribe into desperate times...

Chapter One

Tanika wanted nothing more than to prove she could reach the top of the slope before her brother, but she knew such a display could cost her life. Her brother Demur prevails ahead.

“I knew Grandfather made a mistake allowing you to come with us. You belong in the village preparing our kill with the other women. You only slow us down.” He mutters to her, as he continues up the slope.

He maintains a sure footing as he scales the rocky incline. The rest of the hunting party follows obediently behind them.

This was a dire time for their people. Many young hunters were dying in the deep forest, and the valley her tribe settled was bearing less and less food. Traditional gender roles had been abandoned for the practicality of survival, and Tanika would be one the first to help lead an uncertain future.

“My Brother, our grandfather and the elders agreed that I have proven myself with the bow. I will not let our people down. I promise.” Tanika replied, passively.

Demur remained silent and bitter as they continued. The slope felt familiar to her, even though she had never ventured this far from the village. She admires the scenery as they press onward.

The peak of the slope levels out to a lush clearing. It’s beautifully rich with aspen trees, which were losing their leaves from the beginning winter winds.

“This place is where the deer migrate from the mountain, my brothers.” Demur explains, as he removes an arrow from his holster.

“Up ahead, we find cover and wait for our kill. Part ways now, but follow my direction. Keep silent.” He motions forward commanding with his arm in the air.

Tanika wasn’t the only inexperienced hunter in the party. A few of the members were boys who had only reached their tenth sun voyage. Tanika knew it was possible some of them may not return home. She was all too familiar with the sorrow of losing family. She tried to push away those thoughts and tune her senses to nature and for the hunt, as she was taught.

The hunting party continues silently through the forest as they forge ahead in different directions. Tanika walked confidently shoulder to shoulder with her brother through the thick brush.

She stood tall for most women in her tribe but shorter than many of the men. Her stature was lean, yet competitive to a man’s, while maintaining a feminine grace. She stood firm breasted with a fair brown complexion and shiny black hair. It was braided with flowers and reached down to the middle of her back. She’s been told her eyes change colors from brown to gray but she never quite believed it.

Her beauty contrasted greatly to Demur’s, who had faced much rejection for his appearance. It didn’t help that his sister Tanika was always the favored one of the family while Demur had often felt

ostracized. His new position as hunting leader seems to have given him a confidence that Tanika wished would disappear. She wanted the old Demur back. The sweet one she grew up with, before the world seemingly ruined him.

Demur suddenly looks in each direction, making sure the other hunters were out of hearing distance. His disfigured face scowls as he inhales abruptly, the usual sign he's about to utter something really negative. He looms over her.

"I know you think since you've reached your nineteenth sun voyage, that you feel entitled to learn the ways of men." He spouts, as he pulls a tree branch away from his body and steps forward, releasing the branch directly into Tanika's face.

The sting from the impact stuns her. She winces in pain as thorns from the branch tear the skin above her eyebrow. Blood drips down her cheek as she rubs her forehead.

"However, you need to know that once I'm the tribal leader; I will remove that kind of silly nonsense from our thinking." He smirks in satisfaction. "Eternal Father is on my side, and his will demands it."

She looks angrily at him. "You didn't need to do that."

He stops to face her as she tends to her wound. "More signs of weakness from a soft heart." He quips.

"Another reason you should not be here. The deep forest will not be so soft hearted with you, sister."

Tankia begins to respond, then stops suddenly stricken with fear. She sees it before Demur does. She feels her heart racing in her chest. The moment seems to stretch out longer and longer. She remembered the tales growing up about people being savagely ripped apart and devoured by them. She never thought she would actually see one, yet there it was.

In the near distance stood a gray wolf, staring directly at her. It was not as large as the tales embellished, but it remained just as frightening. She watched intently as it stood with a confident gaze.

It's winter fur is long and bushy with patterns of mottled gray and brown. A perfectly white fur chest is stained with dried blood, as is it's mouth. A peculiar star like pattern is seen on the forehead, as its piercing blue eyes appear to reach deeply into Tanika's soul.

Just as the fear is starting to leave her, Demur turns to see the wolf and immediately shoves Tanika down, sending her nearly face-first into the dirt. He draws his bow and releases an arrow directly at the animal. She looks up in time to see the arrow miss the wolf's head. The wolf turns and disappears into the forest.

"That's right, foul beast! I am the alpha of our tribe now!" Demur yells incredulously. "You will not take away our kills any longer! Hear my voice!"

Tanika brings herself to her feet. "Why did you do that?" she asks with anger, brushing the dirt from her fur coat.

A boy from the hunting party runs to meet them.

"What happened?" He says, with a curious enthusiasm. "Did you kill? Did you kill?"

Demur slings his bow to his shoulder with a quick precision. "That was the alpha of the pack." He says with authority and scans the horizon. "I did not strike him, but my arrow sent him a message."

"You should have let Tanika hit it. She can hit anything!" The boy looks over at her, smiling.

"What did you say?" Demur says, un-amused.

"Tanika is the best shot in the village! Me and my friends saw her practice." The boy replies innocently.

Demur walks over to him and hunches down, meeting him at eye level. He raises his hand and slaps him across the face, making it instantly red as his eyes well up with tears.

"Let me tell you something. If I want to hit something, I will hit it. Even if it's a smart little boy, like you." Demur says, with a strange calmness. Tanika gasps in shock.

Demur turns the boy's face to meet his raging eyes. He pulls out a knife from his side pouch, a traditional item given to him by their Grandfather. It's a beautifully crafted weapon made with an Elk horn handle and a long black obsidian blade, sharpened with incredible precision.

Its fine edges gleam in the sunlight as Demur presses the blade against the boy's chest. The point of the blade cuts his clothing and into his skin, drawing blood.

"I am the hunting leader now, and you will give me respect. Do you understand?" Demur says, viciously.

The boy nods up and down as he sobs with pain and fear.

"That is enough, Demur! Stop it right now!" Takina says with authority. She had never been so forceful with him before, but this was a line she could not see crossed.

She steps closer to the two of them, ready to intervene. Demur pulls the knife from the boy, and stands up. He turns to face his sister. Her eyes remain fixed on his, while his knuckles tighten around the weapon. He steps uncomfortably closer to her.

"You will tell the others that we are done here. Those damned beasts frightened away the hunt. I'm going to retrieve my arrow. When I return, be ready to leave." He slides the knife back into his belt holster and gazes at Tanika with eyes of fire.

"We talk later." He turns and struts away.

Tanika removes green herbs out of her shoulder pack, chewing on them. As Demur walks out of range, she leans by the boy and removes the mulch from her mouth. She carefully places the wet green mixture on the boy's wound with her fingers.

"Everything will be alright, don't worry." He sniffs and nods his head up and down.

"Don't discuss this with anyone." She says quietly, as she embraces him comfortingly.

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## **Chapter Two**

"This news is indeed troubling and cause for much concern." The fire seemed to dance shadows

around his wrinkled and wise face. He appears deep in thought as his dry lips sparingly puff on the ceremonial pipe. He holds the smoke in his lungs as he passes the pipe to Demur, who abruptly declines. The elders murmur quietly as the pipe is passed to the next council member. The fire pops and hisses with life as Grandfather releases the smoke slowly. He wheezes and coughs as his lungs sing a tune of his aged days.

“Wolves have never been seen this far beyond the ice fields. Our world is indeed changing, if the beasts are desperate enough to come this close to our village.”

Demur stands up dramatically, kicking dust into the fire and interrupting. “I will gather our hunters and kill them all tonight! We are not afraid. We are ready!” A few of the council members nod in agreement.

Grandfather leans back stiffly as he raises his arm to Demur. “Oh please boy, settle down.” His jovial tone and timing creates much laughter in the council circle. Demur sits down, defeated.

Grandfather continues, “A true warrior knows when to use his strength and when to be clever. This issue will require some thought.” His aged eyes gaze again into the fire.

The last council member finishes his share of the pipe and hands it over to Tanika, who looks surprised to have received it. “Young lady, you are nineteen voyages now. You are also part of the council. Your voice is now equal to each of our own.” Grandfather pauses to reveal his famous smile. “And you may now partake.”

She smiles and nods in agreement. “Thank you, Grandfather. It’s a great honor.” Demur looks disgusted.

Tanika inhales the herbal smoke, cringing as it irritates her throat. The smoke gets hotter and hotter until she cannot hold it anymore and coughs it out. She feels a wave of calmness overtake her. Her senses are heightened. The sounds of the fire are richer, and she can hear the distant insects of the night. Clarity envelops her as she looks down and realizes she has been holding the pipe for what seemed like an eternity. She giggles and hands it to the next man, who politely accepts.

“Tanika, you have remained silent this whole time. Surely you must have some thoughts on this situation?” Grandfather asks inquisitively. She feels all of the council eyes descend on her, and the enormity of what she is about to say comes directly to her. She feels compelled to say it anyway. “We should ally our tribe with the wolves.” She finally says, with a quiet reluctance.

An awkward silence befalls the council. Demur bursts with laughter. “I never thought I would hear such a silly, stupid thing. Wolves are vicious, mindless beasts and they killed our parents. Who knows how many hunters have died from them as well. Or have you forgotten, Sister?”

“I... I have not forgotten, Brother.” She replies defensively.

“This idea of an alliance is an insult to the families who have lost loved ones to the beasts.” He adds, with much reaction from the circle.

“What gave you this idea, child?” asks one of the elders.

Tanika tries carefully to remove any tone of frustration from her voice. “I remember the tales and the great songs of the plains.” She pauses to form her words carefully. “Our ancestors used horses to hunt in Grandfather’s day, before the day of the great walk.” The council listens carefully as Demur waits for a moment to verbally cut into her.

"Surely the men before Grandfather's time must have thought it was impossible to ally with the horses, if indeed they were wild as the tales say." The council members nod in agreement as they begin to see Tanika's point. "If we can figure out how to ally with the wolves, maybe they will help us hunt."

"Horses may have been wild, but I have never heard of a horse eating a man." Demur says, gaining laughter from the circle. "I will forgive your sweet naivety because you are merely a girl." He retorts. "Wolves would rather eat us than ally with us. There will never be an alliance with wolves and man. They are better suited to eat our garbage, if anything at all." More council members nod and agree with Demur.

"Eternal Father is the only one we need to worry about being allies with, my brothers. All this silly talk about Earth worship and old traditions gives us nothing." Spit sprays from Demur's mouth as he becomes more passionate. "The Earth is our greatest foe! It makes life hard for us and takes away our crops. Eternal Father will rule the Earth and make life paradise for all who obey him!"

"Agreed!" Says an elder. "We must be right with Eternal Father!" Adds another." Demur continues confidently. "Wolves are the scourges of this land. They were birthed by demons! Sacrificing them to Eternal Father will bring our crops back, as well as our hunts. This is the only real solution." Demur finishes his rant while looking victoriously at Tanika. She shakes her head slightly in disbelief, as more and more seem to agree with him.

"It is clear that many challenges are at our feet." Grandfather says in a commanding voice, gaining silence from everyone. "We can not solve every problem tonight, but we need to consider more solutions as we move forward. There will be no action until we learn more. Continue the hunt tomorrow and take anyone who is able. Don't go out of your way to kill a wolf, only defend yourself if one comes near. If you waste energy in a pursuit, they will have you running in circles. They are clever. I conclude an end to tonight's meeting."

Grandfather stands up snakingly as he gains balance with his staff. "Nothing said tonight will leave this circle. We have enough fear polluting the village as it is. Now, who will help me rest these weary bones?"

Everyone stands and gathers their items. Tanika rushes over to take a hold of Grandfather's arm. Others move to extinguish the flames. Demur seems distracted with a group of men as they stand in a circle laughing.

"All the better." She thought to herself.

The walk to Grandfather's shelter was long, and helping him required patience, but Tanika always rushed at the chance. He seemed to divulge the most valuable wisdom to her during these times.

She admired Grandfather very much. He had been the only father to her and Demur ever since their parents were killed. She didn't always agree with his decisions, but nonetheless felt they were made with good reason.

It was customary for the tribal leader to pass his rites to his kin, which would have been Tanika's father had he not been killed. The elders agreed to allow Grandfather to retain leadership until Demur became of age and skill, rather than elect a new leader.

Tanika steps carefully while holding him steady and upright as they walk. "Mother's milk is shining brightly in tonight's sky, and we are still but a drop of it." He says, after a long period of silence. She looks up to observe.

"Grandfather, do you think there are other tribes, who live in other spheres, and who light fires as we do?" He smiles and chuckles from her question.

"Yes, I do. I suppose they look beyond their sky as we do, wondering if we are here as well. Maybe someday you will see beyond our sky, and you will see them too." He finishes.

"But, I thought only men could gain the sight beyond our sky."

He looks ahead, taking a deep breath to form his response. "Only men have seen beyond our sky, that is true. But, our sphere is changing. There will be many changes in the coming days no matter how many people want to fight against them. The world moves regardless." She liked the idea and smiled, leaning into his shoulder.

A cool evening breeze sweeps across the path. The bones of Grandfather's traditional necklace chime together in harmony with the whistling trees.

"Grandfather, I have a request." She says reluctantly. "I wish to not be involved with the council anymore." He turns to listen more, expressing concern. "The way they cling to this new faith scares me. I'm afraid our old ways will disappear." He nods with a certain unsurprised look. "I felt like a fool to share my idea in front of them, the way they tore at it..."

"That is why your voice is more important than ever." He interrupts. "We need young minds with new ideas, no matter how painful it is to express them." He pats her comfortingly. "What you did showed true bravery. Do not concern yourself about the thoughts of others. Regardless, it is better to be hated as your true self, than to be loved as your false self."

As they reach the entrance to his shelter, Tanika parts the cloth drapery and helps Grandfather sit on the edge of his bedding as he enters. The room is large and warm with hanging animal skins fastened to wooden poles using various bones and antlers. She sits on a chair beside him, helping him remove his traditional leadership garb.

"If wolf and man are to ally, it will have to be decided by wolf, not man." He hangs his staff on a mantle containing many sacred stones. "Man might think it is he who must tame wolf, but perhaps... it is wolf who must tame man." Tanika contemplates his wisdom as she hangs his ceremonial necklace.

"I'm worried about Demur too... surely you must see that his heart is cold." She expels quickly, waiting eagerly for a response.

"I understand, and I see how you two quarrel." He shifts his position and continues. "Demur is the only skilled tracker we have. His place in this world is needed, no matter how difficult it may be. Every Sun needs a Moon. So as it is with the wolf, even though we may not understand it." She smiles and holds his rough hands.

"The time for conversation must end tonight, you have a long day tomorrow." Grandfather rests his head back in his fur skin bedding as Tanika's eyes widen.

"Why is that, Grandfather?" She leans in closer.

"Tomorrow you will have your third eye reading, the priestess agreed to it."

Her imagination runs wild. "How can this be?" She thinks to herself. Her reading wasn't supposed to happen for another two sun voyages.

"What do I need to do?" She says with anticipation.

"Do not do anything which requires too much energy, you must refrain from eating all day." She stands up to leave.

"I don't think eating will be much of a problem." She says jokingly and kisses him on the forehead. He smiles in response.

"It's good you can still maintain humor, even in these desperate times. The night is coming in which I will not wake. You need to be strong when that night comes."

"You know I hate it when you say that!" She says firmly as she peels away the hanging furs. "Sleep at peace, I'll see you in day rise." She says, feeling the cool night air enter.

"I will sleep as peacefully as the night allows." Grandfather says as he closes his eyes.

Tanika walks to her shelter alone as her sense of excitement makes way for an unknown wave of dread.

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Chapter Three

They were late returning to the village, but the sight of a fresh kill made the wait worthwhile. Tanika watched as Demur and the hunters proudly carried the body of a young deer, singing songs of praise. She knew it wouldn't be enough to feed everyone, but it was certainly enough to lift the sinking morale.

She couldn't partake in tonight's feast anyway. She had spent the day preparing for her reading. Her closest friends were by her side. They meticulously helped to beautify her body while trading naughty stories about boys in the village. Grandfather told them their laughter sounded like a group of ravens clucking about, which only sent them into further hysterics.

Tanika was able to maintain conversation with her friends even though she never cared much for the pursuit of boys, only the pursuit of boy activities. When she was with other girls learning about plants, foraging, and healing she was thinking of hunting and the old tales of exploration. It was hard to become attached to boys anyway, since so many were disappearing.

Her best friend Amissa painted sacred star constellations along her back, while Delwyn finished a circular representation of the solar system on her forehead. They had all been friends since childhood and she was thankful they could help in the ceremony. It felt good to keep the old traditions alive even if it was only with a handful of people around her.

The sky ignited into a fantastic array of red colors as the sun began to set. Tanika knew it was time. She hugged and kissed her friends and Grandfather goodbye. She wasn't sure if it was the hunger pains she was feeling or excited nervousness as she made her way alone to the priestess' shelter.

The priestess was an eccentric old woman who lived on the edge of the village. Since the old ways started to disappear, few villagers gave her much attention. Tanika didn't know much about her, but wondered if she was even older than Grandfather. She contemplated how a woman her age could manage on her own in this way, yet somehow she did.

She was about to yell her greeting just as the priestess opened her shelter on time. She appeared

dirty and disheveled from head to toe. Her silver hair was completely unkempt and looked as though birds were nesting in it. Her garb was tattered, torn, and completely unappealing to the eyes. This is not the image Tanika had expected from a mystic.

She wondered why she went to such trouble to look beautiful in such a presence. Tanika would have wondered if this was the right place, had the priestess not been the only person living on the fringe.

“Remove your shoes and leave your weapons outside.” She barked.

Tanika did as instructed, unlacing her shoes and dropping her bow and arrow quiver. She entered the shelter and soon noticed how drastically it compared to her Grandfather’s. The entire thing was a mess. It was completely full of useless items, mostly twigs and clutter. The only clearing was in the center of the room, which had an outstretched bearskin on the ground and a small fashioned canister for firelight. She wondered where the priestess could even sleep.

She waited for the priestess to close the shelter entrance. “You’ll have to forgive me, I don’t - “

“Sit down, now!” The priestess interrupted, in a condescending tone.

Tanika sat down on the most comfortable spot on the bearskin.

“Not there! The end! End!!” She pointed with a shaking hand and yellow twisted fingernails. Tanika rolls her eyes and scoots to the end.

The priestess seemed to mumble to herself as she hobbled around the shelter. She gathered items only to put them back where they were, then rearranged them in a slightly different position. She wondered to herself if the priestess had lost her mind.

“I only lose that for which I intend to find again!” The priestess yelled, breaking the silence.

Did she somehow hear my thoughts? Tanika wondered. She couldn’t have. Better to just observe, she thought. She crosses her legs in a more comfortable position.

The priestess finally locates a leather pouch. She reaches inside slowly and carefully, and then in a quick motion throws the contents into Tanika’s face. The sting is irritating and gets in her eyes and nose. It’s a mixture of fine sand and ash. She inhales and coughs violently. As she struggles for breath, the priestess hands her a container.

“The water will not kill you.”

She doesn’t trust her at all, but doesn’t have a choice. She gulps it down and regains her composure as the old woman sits at the other end of the bearskin.

“Now we begin.” She says as she takes the water from away from Tanika, who is still trying to catch her breath.

She feels the old woman’s leathery hands on each side of her face. Her thumbs gently press into the center of her forehead, smearing the design Delwyn made. Tanika looks into her eyes, which appear cloudy and infected. The priestess closes her eyes and begins humming a soft “ahh” sound.

She feels awkward but remains still as the humming gets louder.

After an unusual amount of time the priestess stops. “You will be a leader.” She says in a slow raspy voice. “I can see that you will unite two tribes...A bond that will last for centuries, until both tribes

are no more...Our tribe and the other tribe. From now until the end of days.”

“What other tribe?” Tanika retorts. “Our tribe is the only one in this valley.”

“Silence! No questions! Only answers.” They both hear a sound of rustling outside. The old woman continues.

“This bond comes...at a price.” She finally opens her eyes and looks at Tanika. Her expression turns to anger. She pulls her hands away from her face quickly. Tanika looks confused. “You will burn this village! You are a traitor and a whore! Your son is an abomination!”

“What are you talking about? I would never..I don’t.. I’ve never even been with man! And I would never betray this village!” She yells back defensively.

The old woman spits on Tanika’s feet. “Get out! Get out and don’t ever come back!”

Tanika feels astonished and stands up in anger to gather her belongings. “You are banished from this village. Take nothing with you. Follow the north star to the ice!”

“I’ll do no such thing! You are a crazy witch.” Tanika finds her bow and hesitates a moment before holstering it. She storms away from the priestess shelter. The sounds of incoherent ranting echo through the woods as she finds her way to the village.

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## **Chapter Four**

The opening of Grandfather’s shelter flies open.

“I can’t believe it. I won’t believe it! What a waste!” Tanika paces inside with an animated fury.

“Did everything go well?” He asks with a smirk.

“Amissa was told she would be a teacher. Most girls are told whom they will bond with...” She throws down her belongings. “And I get this?! I think you sent me to the wrong crazy person!”

“I sent you to the right crazy person. Everything that was said was meant for you to hear.” He pulls another empty chair closer to his.

“She told me two different things and none of it makes sense! She said I would unite our tribe with one that doesn’t exist. Then she called me a wh - well... she called me a bad word Grandfather! She banished me to the ice. She can’t do that!”

He sits in his chair and motions for her to sit in the other. “Slow down my child, be at peace.” She plants herself across from him in a confused anger.

“The third eye reading is never complete. It is but a broken pot for which you only get a few pieces. Over time, you will find the other pieces and make it whole. It’s been this way for hundreds of sun voyages.”

“I don’t want any more pieces. Not if they are like that.” Grandfather smiles. “Do not be troubled. There are always things we don’t want to hear but we must. I must tell you something now, a piece for your broken pot.” Tanika leans in, composing herself.

"The priestess was correct. There is another tribe. They live beyond the mountains. When I go on my spirit walks, I meet with their elders. No one has known this, and now you do."

Tanika is bewildered. "But I thought, we were the last?" He shakes his head.

"They have been here for some time now. They are suffering, just like us."

"Wait..who are they?" She injects.

He hesitates before he answers. "The P'taul." He finally says.

"P'taul?! But Grandfather, they made war with us long ago. They took our lands and horses! They are responsible for the great walk! How are you meeting with them? How have you not been killed already? Our people hate them more than the wolves!"

"Yes, I am familiar with the songs. A leader has to make hard choices. Choices no one will like. Our people are weary of travel and war and so are theirs. Our tribe cannot survive in this valley, even if the harvest returns. Their tribe cannot survive either. We are both struggling in a turbulent ocean. If we don't work together, we will be both drown. A child born in their tribe is just as innocent as a child born in ours. This is something we must understand, if we want to continue."

"No one will agree to this. Demur will not agree to this." She replies.

"I know." Grandfather coughs and wheezes. "That is why you are to become tribal leader in my stead. I cannot make the walk much longer."

"But I don't - "

He continues over her. "Negotiating this peace has not been easy. It will take a bond between our tribes. I have arranged for you to be sealed with the son of their leader. Don't worry; he has a kind heart. I know it may not be ideal for you, but it is for the good of our people."

"I can't do it, Grandfather. I can't be a leader.. I don't want it."

"That is why it must be you, Tanika." He says holding her hands. "Power belongs to those who don't wish it. You've always been strong. Find your strength again. Everything will come into place."

She takes a deep breath as she takes everything in. "For the good of our people...Alright. What do I need to do?" He stands slowly. "One thing at a time. Tomorrow night during council fire I will announce your rite of passage, and give the blade to you. Demur will not take kindly to it, so we need to make sure everyone is gathered."

"I'm not looking forward to that part." She says while standing up. She holds him steady.

"Demur will be stubborn, but he will be reliable to you when you take leadership."

"Which won't be for a long, long time!" Tanika interjects. He just smiles.

"In a few days I will take you on my spirit walk, and show you the meeting place of the P'taul. We won't tell our tribe until the time is right."

He looks again in her eyes. "I won't pretend that our life hasn't been a struggle, but that struggle will end soon. Life is too short to continue such petty quarrels. Love will once again return in full force, and conquer the fear that has ruled us all."

He smiles again. "I remember when you two were both little as though it were yesterday. You've accomplished a great deal since then. Your parents would be as proud as I am, if they were here."

She hugs him. "Only because you give us direction. Sleep at peace, Grandfather."

She's almost to the point of tears, regretting her negative reception of the priestess ceremony.

"I'll sleep as peacefully as the night allows. Sleep at peace too, my child. I love you." He adds. "I love you too, Grandfather."

A hand extends forth out of the shadows, its fingers covering Grandfather's face and eyes while pulling his head backward. Tanika falls away in complete shock, gasping. Another hand drags something across his exposed neck. She only sees a flash of red and screams in terror. Grandfather falls to his knees, his throat open.

He pauses and looks into the distance, smiling one last time in awe before collapsing to the ground dead. Demur steps forward into the light.

"For the good of our people."

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Chapter Five

Tanika lunges for her bow and arrow, but he is one step ahead of her. Demur kicks her weapon out of reach. She leaps at him with all of her fury. She rips and tears what she can, scratching the side of his neck before he delivers a powerful blow, shattering her nose and sending her to the ground.

"Bind her!" He yells, holding the side of his neck. His blood drips between his fingers. "Rotten cunt."

Two men enter the room and pull her arms behind her back as she's temporarily stunned. They tie her wrists together with strong leather straps as she spits out blood. More warriors arrive outside.

"Find her traitor friends and bring them to me. Send the scouts to kill the old witch, she'll be easy." They nod in agreement and march off.

Adrenaline replaces her pain. She kicks and fights with all the energy she can muster. Her eyes remain fixed on Demur who smugly cleans his blade.

"You were always a problem. Tonight I solve it."

She breaks free of her captors. It doesn't matter that her arms are restrained. If she's going to die tonight, she will die fighting.

Her captors regain control of her, picking her up by her hair and standing her upright. They hold her arms and feet while Demur steps closer.

"I never knew your treachery ran this deep sweet sister."

She spits in his face. "You are not my brother!" She yells with force between heavy breathing. He closes his eyes, pausing before wiping his face slowly.

"This is great news. Since you are not my sister, you can produce a son for me."

This sends her into further rage. Demur's thugs wrap a cloth around her head and mouth. She can

barely breathe through her broken nose.

“Tonight there will be a trial. If Eternal Father finds you and your friends guilty, you can watch them die, so you truly know what it means to betray the tribe. Once we have a son, you can join them. Only then will the debt be paid.”

One warrior hoists Tanika up and over his shoulder, while the other restrains her ankles together. She does her best to keep her feet as far apart as possible as he does this. He motions for them to leave.

“Call the village together for council fire! Dispose of him.”

She watches two warriors drag Grandfather’s body away in a trail of blood. A tear runs down her cheek.

As the warriors carry her down the path, she can see the young scouts in the distance. They are heading toward the priestess shelter carrying torches and weapons. She sees the priestess run from her tent, her arms open wide as if to embrace them in a hug. They toss their spears into her and cut her down. Other warriors go from tent to tent, waking people from their sleep and directing them to the council fire.

The fire is lit and wide. The violent flames send embers high into the air. She sees three structures built near it. Large poles fashioned from dead trees. Smaller dead branches are built around them in large piles. The hunters set her down and hold her in place. Demur stands vigilant as villagers gather around them, confused and bewildered. Some are weary from their interrupted sleep.

She watches in horror as other hunters hoist Amissa and Delwyn onto two of the poles. They are both completely naked and gagged. The hunters fashion their arms to the pole above their heads. Other men pour a mixture of oil and animal fat over the girl’s bodies as well as the woodpiles beneath them. Their faces are stricken with fear and confusion. They can only utter muffled shrieks along with Tanika.

The elders arrive and approach Demur. “What is this? What’s the meaning of this?” one asks. “We have not agreed to such actions!” Another adds. The villagers murmur and speculate amongst themselves in confusion. Other hunters walk around with torches, maintaining order. Demur breaks the chatter with his commanding voice.

“My brothers and sisters! A great treachery has befallen us this day.” Everyone quiets down and gives him their attention. “Our worst enemy the P’taul has once again arrived within reach. They plan to destroy us!”

The crowd gasps in near unison.

“It brings me great sadness to deliver more terrible news. Our great Grandfather, who was most noble in trying to negotiate peace, has been slain by the P’taul.”

They react more, while hanging on Demur’s every word. He begins a dramatic pace.

“Their evil has corrupted people within our own tribe. Those who you see before you have confessed to aiding our enemy.” He motions to Tanika and her friends. The crowd looks at them with anger.

“They have stolen many of our weapons. They have stolen our hard earned food. They have stolen our furs and supplies and have given them to the P’taul... because, my brothers, they have allied

with them, and they lay with them regularly." The tribe becomes increasingly angry and hateful. The girls can only respond with muffled screams of protest.

"Be not afraid my people, for Eternal Father is with us. We have learned of their plans before it is too late, and I have already begun to exact justice in his name!"

He pulls his obsidian blade from its sheath and holds it in the air.

"Grandfather gave me this sacred weapon, which I have used in honor and will continue to do so!" The crowd starts to cheer. "I am honored to lead and protect our people, as Grandfather wished."

An elder steps forth. "We must have a council and decide before there is any more action!" Demur places his hand on the elder's shoulder, looking in his eyes. He turns to face the crowd.

"Do you wish to do as he says? Do you want to waste time debating what is obvious? To give our enemy time to plan their next move?"

"No!" the crowd yells, in unison. He smiles.

"Do you wish to cower and run so our enemy can take our land again?"

"No!" they yell again.

"Then we must act now. My brothers, this is Eternal Father speaking through you. Feel his spirit, as I feel it now!"

They cheer again. A few council members look at each other, bewildered but helpless.

"My people, our great Eternal Father is just, but also merciful. The witches you see before you have used sorcery to corrupt my sweet sister's mind." The village begins booing and hissing at them.

"This is what happens when we follow the old ways, and give women power that belongs to men!"

More cheers of agreement echo as the crowd becomes increasingly passionate.

"Fear not, for the old ways end tonight! I will keep you safe in these troubled days! I ask you now, are these witches guilty?"

A resounding "Yes!" from the crowd sends chills through Tanika.

"Then it is decided. Let the flames of purification break my sister's spell! Let the smell of their flesh send a message to our enemies! Let it tell them this is their fate, if they so dare enter this land!" A resoundingly loud cheer erupts, followed by the chant "Burn! Burn!"

Demur motions to his hunters to set the girls on fire. They nod and begin igniting the wood beneath the girl's feet. Tanika closes her eyes and turns away, only for Demur to pull them open and turn her head to face them. The flames quickly grow around the girls. Their cries of terror are abruptly cut short as walls of fire cover each of them.

The crowd howls another resounding cheer of disturbing elation. The fire is so great it delivers a quick death for each of them, and spares Tanika the gruesome details. She's able to force her eyes closed, tears streaming down her face. She's completely emotionally drained. All hope is lost.

She only hears the crowd cheering and celebrating, and her own heartbeat. She slumps down

defeated, trying to block it out. Demur looks around triumphantly, proud of his newfound power.

“This is our turning point, sister. Someday you will accept your fate and join us.”

She opens her eyes to look at the crowd; wondering how good hearts could change so quickly. Their expressions look so contorted with hate. She sees them start to look away from the fire. Demur looks puzzled. People start to fall one by one. Blood sprays in the air in sporadic fountains of red mist.

The crowd’s cheers soon start to sound like screams. People turn away from the fire and start to panic. Some run, others continue to fall. Shadowy figures are moving like blurs, quickly and silently. They kill villagers one by one.

“We’re being attacked!”

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## **Chapter Six**

Wolves have encircled the entire village. There are too many to count, of all colors and sizes. Their growls and snarls are increasingly louder than the villagers’ cries of terror. The people who fall are quickly ripped apart and feasted upon. Some people in the tribe even push children down to run away.

Demur is tackled by a beast, which he quickly kills as it lets out a loud yelp.

“Kill them! Kill them all! Do not fear!” Demur tries to organize his troops. Warriors fight back. Some of the beasts fall to their arrows and spears. Chaos ensues around Tanika. She sees a vicious black wolf running at her with eyes of rage. It gracefully leaps into the air, directly at her. She falls to her side, unable to run away. She watches the wolf fly in the air over her, and sink its teeth into one of her captor’s throats. The other warrior tries to pull the wolf off of him while another wolf leaps on him, tearing his arm.

Tanika scoots away in the dirt. She looks around her in every direction, full of fear.

“I need a weapon.”

She wiggles her ankles together, trying to use what little space she made to free her legs and feet out of the restraint. It seems to be working, slowly. She watches her captors fighting the wolves. One of them dies. She looks around for Demur but can’t see him.

Fire erupts in the village as more and more people fall to the beasts. For every dead human there is a dead wolf. Blood stains the dirt everywhere. Her restraint is now down to her feet. She continues to struggle, making some progress. She only needs to get one foot free.

Tanika watches her other captor overtake the wolf and slice it’s throat. He rests a moment from exhaustion then turns to see her, struggling in the dirt. Her arms are still behind her back as she continues working on her feet restraint.

She turns in time to see him walking toward her. She moves faster, struggling. He’s getting closer. She slips one foot through a loop of the restraint, but snags it on another. He is now within reach of her. She yells with all her might and finally slips her foot free.

In a quick motion, she rolls over onto her back, laying on her wrists as she looks up at him. She folds

her knees into her chest and kicks him squarely in the stomach with both feet. He falls back a few steps. The wind has been knocked out of him, and he nearly loses balance but is otherwise unphased. He regains composure and walks toward her again.

She repeats the same motion, pulling her knees as close to her chest as she can. She takes a deep breath and rolls backward, trying to pull her wrists around her butt and feet. The task is not easy. She struggles with pain and nearly dislocates her shoulders in the attempt. The restraints around her wrists tighten and cut off circulation as she winces in pain and struggle. She finally completes the action; her confined wrists slip around her ankles and pull her shoes off. Her arms are finally now in front of her.

She rolls back one last time and uses her legs to spring her body upward in a smooth arc. She lands on her feet and arises, facing her captor. He lunges his weapon quickly at her. She barley dodges, and quickly dances around his feet. He looks for her, but it's too late. She's directly behind him.

Her wrists wrap around his head and neck. She leaps onto his back and wraps her legs around his waist from behind, tightening her restraint around his throat as hard as she can. He gasps and struggles as she closes around his windpipe. He desperately flails his arms backward trying to strike her. He lands a few good hits until she shifts her position. He twirls around in a circle trying to free her from his back, but she remains steady. His face is red from lack of air as he gurgles and struggles for breath.

"This is taking too long." She thinks to herself.

In a quick move she shifts her weight and slides around, bringing his head with her. A loud crack signifies that she successfully snapped his neck. They both fall to the ground.

She looks around for his weapon and sees it in the dirt. She reaches for it. A flaming arrow whizzes into the dirt in front of her outstretched hand. She looks up startled, in time to see Demur.

Most of the wolves are dead, and the hunters have regained control. Demur calls them forward.

"Capture her!" he yells. She sees one last glimpse of her friends' bodies, which are now just disturbing black skeletons. More arrows fly at her. She turns toward the forest, running for her life.

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Chapter Seven

She struggles to breathe while running. The gag in her mouth is difficult to remove. She can hear Demur and his soldiers right behind her as they peruse her through the woods. The occasional arrow whizzes past her. One wrong step and it's over. Moonlight guides her way as her eyes adjust to the black void of the wild.

Tanika and her friends ran through these woods countless times but never at nighttime. Regardless, she gains ground from her pursuers. She finds a covering of rocks and hides behind it. She manages to pull the gag from her mouth and breathe in the cool night air. Her breaths are heavy while trying to remain completely silent. Her heart is racing. She can feel leaves and dirt clinging to her cold bloodied feet.

The hunters become silent once they lose track of her. Tanika listens carefully, looking for a sharp rock to cut her final restraint. She doesn't want to give away her position. She leans flatly against

one of the rough edged boulders, intently looking and listening for anything. She slowly peeks over her cover. She can see the firelight from the hunter's torches. Not nearly far away enough, but it will have to do.

She feels the boulder's texture in the dark and finds a suitable rough edge. She rubs her wrists up and down the edge frantically. One of the straps breaks. It's working. She looks back over her cover again. The torches have been extinguished. She knows from experience the hunters must be splitting up to find her.

Tanika rubs furiously until each leather strap snaps away. The last one breaks, freeing her hands at last. The restraint leaves red marks all around her wrists and arms. She flexes her fingers and feels the circulation flowing freely again. Her eyes are now better adjusted to the dark.

She finds a rock and tosses it as far away from her as she can. It bounces off a tree trunk and lands in some leaves.

"There!" someone yells.

She takes off in the opposite direction. Demur is not far behind. He spots her and slowly tracks her with his bow. He fires an arrow.

Tanika feels the arrow as it slices her waist. She can't help but yell out in pain. Blood drips slightly as she holds her wound. She continues running anyway.

Branches break and scratch her all over, sometimes catching her fur coat. Demur fires another arrow. This one grazes her shin and she cries again. He's trying to slow her down and it's working.

The pursuit continues. The thick forest finally makes way to a clearing. She looks ahead to see a large slope. It's same one she scaled during her first hunting expedition.

She turns around to hear the attackers coming near. She has no choice; she must hike it or be captured. She begins the incline.

It feels like an eternity but she is now halfway up the slope. At this point she is vulnerable. She's an easy target to hit, but Demur has not fired. He must be out of arrows. She looks down to see him climbing steadily behind her. No other hunters have caught up to them.

She finally reaches the top and travels through another lush clearing. Her wounds leave behind small traces of blood. She is struggling to breathe and can't run much further. The pain is too great. She is further now than she's ever been, now entering what is considered to be the wolf's territory.

The air is even colder here. Her feet are numb as they crunch into the snow. She can only hobble onward. The trees part way as she approaches a cliff. Below the drop lies a vast and frozen stretch of lake, the ice fields.

She stops to catch her breath. Demur can't be too far behind. "I can no longer continue." She thinks to herself. This is where she will make her last stand.

The sound of a bowstring stretching breaks the silence. Demur stands within range of Tanika. His final arrow is precisely aimed at her. She turns to face him, holding a sizeable jagged rock. She raises it above her head, ready to throw it into Demur's face.

"It's over. Come home with me." He says.

"You should never hold your bowstring taut for so long, Demur." She utters in a shaky but resilient voice.

She arcs the rock backward, about to throw it with all of her might. Demur scowls and closes one eye, fine-tuning his aim at Tanika's heart.

A lone wolf leaps from the darkness and attacks Demur, causing him to release the arrow and fall to the ground. The arrow impacts Tanika's left shoulder, and the weight of the rock makes her lose balance. She falls backward down the mountainside.

She tumbles down relentlessly. Rocks and other debris fall with her until she lands with a thud on the thick ice below.

Demur struggles on the ground amidst a fury of snarls and biting before a loud wolf whimper shrieks through the landscape. Tanika brings herself to her feet, the frozen ice surface sticking to her skin.

She shivers from the frigid coldness all around her. She can hear distant voices talking as Demur's hunting party meets with him above.

The moon's light reflects off of the ice surface, casting a moody white glow around the cliff side, which stretches down the fields for a vast distance. She squints her eyes to focus on the tiny shadowy figures, as they seem to be pointing down and talking about her.

One by one they ignite their arrows, which look like dancing fireflies from her perspective. Demur signals them to fire.

The arrows fly through the air one by one slowly, until they complete their arc and speed swiftly to the ground near her. She runs away from the cliff as they continue to volley all around her, spearing into the ice with great force.

Her bare feet slide on the ice as she nearly loses balance while trying to regain traction. Arrows and rocks continually land all around her.

In front of her lies a wall of white fog. She is unsure if there is even another side of this ice field, or if it just stretches on forever. If she can just make it to the fog, they won't see her. She only hopes the ice will support her weight.

Tanika regains traction, heading directly for the fog. The ice creaks and cracks like spider webs beneath her feet as she runs. Just a little bit closer and she'll be out of sight.

Suddenly her worst fear happens. She feels her right foot crash down through the ice. The water is so cold it feels as though her foot is on fire. It's not long before the rest of the ice around her shatters, bringing her other foot with her. She's now in free-fall, as if being pulled down by an unseen force.

She flails her arms, desperately trying to cling to something but it's too late. She's fallen completely through the hole in the ice, deep into the frigid depths below.

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## **Chapter Eight**

The freezing water nearly paralyzes Tanika. She holds what little breath she has. The undercurrent

carries her away from the opening in the ice she fell through. She tries to swim and kick her feet but it feels more arduous than ever. She drifts slowly and silently away from her only known chance of escape.

Under the ice, the water is a dark hue of green that shifts into an empty blackness, masking the unknown depths below. Above her, the ice sheet is textured and white, sparkling like stars in the night sky. Diagonal shafts of moonlight pierce through the water like morning sun rays in a cathedral, varying in shapes and sizes.

Her thick winter furs are soaked, heavily restricting her movement in the water. They act as anchors, pulling her away from the surface, down to the deep dark below. She's able to wiggle out of them, her naked body now more able to move freely. She loses precious air in the process.

She's able to swim her way to the surface, searching frantically for a pocket of air. There is nothing but thick ice. She runs her hands and fingers along the ice ceiling, punching and hitting a few translucent areas. Nothing gives way. The pain of holding her breath is increasing as the current continues to carry her along.

She swims down a bit deeper to gain a new perspective. To her left, she spots a wide column of circular light. This is her best chance. She swims toward it. Looking up, the ice is thin enough to see the night sky. She arcs her arm back and punches upward. Her knuckles smash into the ice, creating a muffled thud in the water. The ice cracks but doesn't break.

The current sweeps her away and she loses more air. Holding what little remains is becoming more and more unbearable. She fights the current and returns to the circular column of hope. She punches the ice again, sending more cracks in all different directions, but the ice remains intact. The impact of her punch forces all the remaining air from her lungs, bubbling out her nose.

This is it. In a moment she will be unable to stop the inevitable inhale of cold water, followed by slow and painful drowning. One more time, she arcs her arm back, and fights against the current of water as it moves forward. She feels her already battled knuckles as they smash into ice one final time. The ice shatters, her arm thrusts up through the barrier along with shards of broken ice and water. Success.

Her arm is out of the water past her elbow as she digs her nails into the snowy ice surface. She uses her other hand to further open up the puncture mark. She's able to pull her head and shoulders up and out of the water inhaling much needed air. She's coughing and trembling, trying to regain her composure but her strength is failing fast. She kicks her legs and pulls herself up as high as she can. Her upper half folds over the broken ice ledge, which is thankfully strong enough to support her weight.

With one final pull, her legs are free of the water. She lays her side, her naked body convulsing uncontrollably. Beads of water freeze to her skin as it adheres to the ice again. She folds her arms together and curls into a fetal position, trying to save what's left of her fleeing warmth.

She musters the strength to stand up. Her breaths are shallow and shaky while she hugs and rubs herself, trying to stay warm. Her long hair is already separated into frozen chunks of ice. She won't last long out here.

Ahead of her is another white wall of fog. She's completely disoriented, but finds the North Star. She follows it through the mist behind her until a shoreline comes into view. It's completely unlike anything she's seen. It's a stretch of rocky beach expanding for miles.

The rocks are molten, misshapen. Some formed at fine sharp points, jetting out in all directions. A knotted mixture of dead and living trees sometimes breaks through the conglomerate of rock formations.

She must be on the other side of the iced expanse. A flurry of footsteps is drawing near to hear. She hears them coming from the ice. Her pursuers must have scaled down and tracked her across the field. Unbelievable.

Tanika only has enough energy to stagger her way off of the ice. Her frozen breath streaks away behind her as she slowly paces forward. Moonlight guides her through an opening in the thick brush. It's a slight triangular slope stretching out to an opening with a giant dead tree. Other giant redwood trees jet upward and cast shadows along the open path. She can barely concentrate as she follows the path upward, about to freeze to death.

She's too cold with nothing to find for cover. She huddles her arms closer to her chest shivering uncontrollably. She hears the steps again, closer. It seems to be a never-ending nightmare she can't run away from. Will she really have to face death yet again? She can only think to move forward, toward the tree.

The thick sides of the forest open up to reveal the end of the slope. The sides of the precipice reveal another steep drop below. It's a nearly straight drop, with a blanket of fog masking the likely jagged field of rocks beneath. She won't risk another fall. The end of slope is the dead tree, its roots cling to crumbling rock. There is truly nowhere to go from here. She knows she's being followed.

Tanika lowers herself down on a section of dead grass near the base of the tree. She lays her side on a kind of raised up formation of a platform. She has nothing. No tools for a fire, no weapons. She's far from home, in unknown territory. She's naked, exposed, and completely vulnerable. Her hypothermia is setting in. She is moments away from death and a gleaming pair of eyes is watching her from the darkness.

She feels the eyes on her. The same way prey must feel while being stalked by a hunter. She rolls onto her back, looking down the incline she just walked up. A pair of glowing eyes looks back at her from the dark. They blink and shift position occasionally but remain fixed on her.

Is this real?

The figure steps out of the darkness and into the pale moonlight. It's a grey wolf. The beast walks with a slight limp toward Tanika and stops. Its ears are held back. It seems to approach with a slight reluctant caution and stops again. She knows the creature is within striking distance. She has nothing to defend herself, and no strength for a fight.

"If you're going to eat me, just do it now!" She yells at him, defiantly and with shaky breaths. He only stares back at her, and steps forward more. He lowers his head, looking down on her, smelling. He's at her feet now. He must know how truly helpless she is, and Tanika can only look at him.

His blue eyes seem familiar as she feels a sort of perplexed fear. He walks closer. His paws are at both sides of her body as he hovers over her. His head hangs low over her stomach as he examines her. His shallow breaths feel warm but cast frozen mist into the air.

No one has ever been this close to a wolf and lived.

She watches the wolf's face suddenly contort to an expression of hostility. His ears pull back again. His lips curl upward, revealing a set of viciously sharp white teeth.

Tanika closes her eyes and prepares herself for the end.

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Chapter Nine

Razor sharp teeth are soon overlapped by his lavish pink tongue as he licks and laps at her skin. The action doesn't make sense to her at first, but it means everything all in an instant. Her head jolts backward out of surprise and an unexpected sense of delight. She opens her eyes to see him. All the fear she once had is completely gone.

The wolf continuously licks at her face. He's gently sporadic on her cheek, chin and ear, even her lips. It feels warm to her, soft and ticklish. Tanika does something she didn't think she would do in a long time, if ever again. She smiles, and laughs.

She feels every ounce of her pain and torment, all of the stress and despair, All of the horrors she witnessed gone in this moment, from a simple act of kind affection.

He's no threat to her. She knows it for certain now. He continues to hover over her, pausing and sniffing at her. She feels warmth radiating from him over her cold and shivering naked body. She laughs and winces when he licks at her broken nose. It stings but feels healing and the pain starts to vanish.

She wants to hold him, to feel his fur in her fingers. She extends her right hand. He becomes startled, backing away. She moves her hand away from him. He looks back at her cautiously and unsure. The moment seems to be ruined until he steps back into position.

Slowly and steadily she touches the back of his neck. His fur is soft and warm, parting between her fingers. He flinches as her fingers softly feel and trace down his back. She massages his skinny yet muscular features. He allows her human touch, as it seems his fear is now gone as well. He returns to his affectionate licking.

Both of her hands are now slowly petting and stoking him affectionately along his back. He responds to it well, as Tanika likely itches places he can't reach himself. He licks at frozen drops and chunks of ice stuck to her skin. He moves methodically around her neck and shoulders. The sensation is invigorating to her and she can't help but shiver and cling to him more for warmth.

He licks at her chest and breasts. Her skin is covered in goose bumps. Her nipples hard and shriveled already from the cold are reinvigorated by the surface of his wet warm tongue, gliding over and around both of them. The pleasure helps her slowly warm up as she welcomes it, regardless if it makes sense or not.

She watches him, studying the patterns in his fur. She traces her finger along his forehead, around a star pattern. "It is you." She says out loud. She doesn't even know if he understands but she continues anyway.

"I wondered if I would see you again."

He only looks back at her with a puzzled expression.

She's too cold to say much more. Each breath they both make sends clouded frozen mist into the air. She remembers her first hunt. It seems like ages ago but this wolf had remained fixed in her mind.

She's lost in his piercing blue eyes just as she was that day.

He steps back from her and lowers his head. Cold air sweeps over her in his absence. She covers her breasts with her hands as he moves lower. She watches him intently as he moves, now to her tummy.

Her heart is racing between shallow breaths. She feels a sense of trepidation as he sniffs at her crotch. She could easily push him away with her feet, but she doesn't. His snout presses into her and his wet tongue once again laps her skin.

His tongue is long and warm as it parts her puffy and hairless vaginal lips. He tastes her again and again. The rough surface of his tongue clings to her skin a bit as it darts and moves all around her most sensitive areas. She can't help but moan and open her legs more to him.

She scoots higher on the ledge to give him more access. Her fingers scratch and rub behind his ears as if to give approval. She wondered how such a thing could be happening. It felt so strange.

The pleasure is too intense to question. His tongue continuously clings and massages her clitoris. She can only give him more to feast upon, which he does. He seems to love her taste. He doesn't stop. Is it out of instinct, lust, or out of love? It didn't matter.

His tongue continuously makes long strides inside and outside of her. She breathes heavily. The pleasure is too great. It resonates through her like nothing she's felt in her life, and her heart is pumping warmer blood through her body.

Her fingers cling to him. She closes her eyes. He makes a slurping chopping sound as he digs into her more. His teeth are getting too close for comfort and she has to push him away for a moment.

"No.. I can't...no more, please." She says to him. Her breathing starts to slow.

"I'm cold, please... cover me again."

She pulls at him a bit to indicate.

"Come up here."

He starts to understand and walks up her body. His hanging tummy fur traces up her bare skin.

"Yes."

She says to him and scratches along his back, lower than before. His tail wags and she pets him more.

"I'm so cold."

She wraps her legs around him a bit, pulling him closer. His front paws are firmly planted at either side of her, near her armpits. She wraps her hands around his back, hugging him closer to her. He looks back at her with a friendly, yet tempered ferocity. She's attracted and intrigued by it.

She arches herself up the slope so she can press her body against his. She nuzzles her head close to his, pressing her cheek into the side of his neck. The warmth feels so good to her. His fur is warm and ticklish in a sensual way.

"Stay with me." She whispers, stuttering in his ear.

Suddenly she feels him shifting and scooting close. His movements soon turn into a vigorous thrusting motion against her.

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## Chapter Ten

The wolf humps and thrusts against her naked body. She tightens her legs around his back. She can feel his member poking and prodding, trying to find his mark. She reaches down with her hand, feeling his sheath as she guides him.

His member emerges through her fingers and presses against her tummy momentarily. His penis is unlike anything she's seen, certainly different than a human's. She finds it beautiful.

It's half erect with a red-purple hue. A series of intertwined veins lead up the shaft to his pointed triangular tip. It drips warm pre-ejaculate onto her as it slides around her skin with his thrusting.

Her fingers remain gently wrapped around his furry sheath, allowing her to guide it however she wants. She moves it lower.

It shines in the moonlight momentarily as it retreats halfway back into his sheath. She manages to align the tip to her vaginal opening. He feels it and starts moving again. With a few short thrusts he parts her fleshy wet lips and he's inside of her.

"Yes!"

She moans out loud.

He's not fully hard but grows with each thrust. Her tunnel is very tight but welcomes him regardless. She can feel him growing inside of her, stretching her internally. He can't help but thrust against her ribbed walls as they wrap around him, massaging and enticing more of his instinctual mating.

His powerful thrusts radiate up her body and bounce her young breasts. She holds him and breathes heavily. His paws move and scratch at her legs. He finds better footing with his front paws above her shoulders but collapses front first against her.

They are cheek to cheek once more, her breasts pressed against him firmly as she fully hugs him with her arms. Her ankles cross around his lower back, helping to guide with each thrust he makes.

His penis is now fully hard with a curious bulb at the base of his shaft, his knot. It's a bit uncomfortable as he presses himself and his knot all the way in and out of Tanika. She continues it regardless. There's not much to stop him, and she doesn't want to. She wants more of him.

With a few more bucks and thrusts, his engorged knot slips all the way inside. Her outer lips stretch and wrap around it, swallowing it until they kiss the edge of his sheath. He's completely locked inside of her now. The entirety of his penis fills her up internally, throbbing and pulsing. She can feel his warm pre ejaculate occasionally spurting deep within her.

He pauses his thrusting for a moment. She won't let go of him, and moves her hips in a slow circular motion, enjoying his swollen knot as it rests against her g-spot.

She moans and kisses him, caressing him all over. His warmth is much needed and she feels more

invigorated with each passing moment. He's panting, eyes half closed in an expression of pleasure.

"Don't leave me."

She whispers in his ear.

"Don't ever leave."

She opens her eyes and examines her surroundings. The trees seem to slowly sway back and forth even though there is no wind. She examines them more closely. Now they seem to be growing, shrinking, then returning to their normal state.

It's as if she is witnessing them phase shifting between different time periods. Even the rock that forms the precipice appears molten and flowing, then cools and solidifies. The dead tree behind them expands with life, and then shrivels again to decay.

"Am I in a dream?"

She wonders to herself.

But it must be real. Everything she's seen and experienced has seemed real. Everything she's felt has been real including him, and him inside of her. The pleasure from him certainly feels real.

She examines her hand. Amazingly she can start to see through her own skin. She can see her veins and tendons, her bones. She can see her own blood flowing through her, down to the microscopic level. Life is all around her. She inhales life into her lungs and exhales life back into the air. She starts to feel a sense of oneness with everything.

Tanika can even see into the wolf. She sees energy flowing through him and into her. She follows his circulatory system to a strong heart beating behind his rib cage. She can hear it beating, as well as her own. Both of them thump together in unison.

She looks down at her tummy and can see into her own womb. She can see her ribbed vaginal canal, soaking and clenching around his shiny swollen member as it continues to throb within. His enclosed knot prevents most of the built up fluid from leaving.

She sees his testicles. Inside they are beaming with life, seed yet to be released. She reaches for them and traces her fingertips gently around each one. The wolf responds in delight, shifting around his position as his scrotum shrivels to her touch.

She knows he enjoys her caress, because she does too. It's in this instant she realizes she can feel what he feels, in addition to her own pleasure. She can feel her own fingers scratching where he needs to be scratched, and the relief it brings.

She can feel how good it is to be inside of her, as well as how good it feels to have him in her. They are both one.

His memories flood and blend into hers. She experiences his history and emotions. She can see his triumphs and failures, his victories and defeats. She can see him rising through the ranks of wolves to become alpha. She learns how they communicate with each other through body language and emotion, and their hunting tactics.

She sees them as they watch and study her tribe. They observed and knew more about her people



than she ever thought was possible. She can feel them starving and scrapping for food, just as her own tribe did. She knows the attack on her people was made out of desperation.

She continues caressing and playing with his testis, as if to encourage them to produce more seed. He responds with more thrusting. The pleasure only increases throughout her body. She feels a high similar to the one she experienced during her first council meeting.

Her body is too small and tight for his knot to escape. His fully hard member is just grinding and bouncing within her.

“Don’t stop.”

She utters.

Her visions intensify as her climax builds. She can see atoms and microscopic life all around her. They form geometric patterns in the air, ground and trees. The stars above her move in synchronously circular motions.

The walls of reality crumble around her. She’s entered a sort of inter-dimensional energy plane. She can see the history of the world unfolding before her. An exploding star creates a new sun. She sees dust swirling in outer space, forming the planets. She witnesses every life form born and extinction of a species. Every evolutionary step unfolds before her in mere moments.

A history of humanity begins. People of all shapes, colors and sizes are all fighting and killing, and disappearing into dust. Out of all of the would-be rulers, poets, artists, craftsmen, warriors and lovers, she knows that she’s the first one to bond with a wolf in this way.

The next vision takes her beyond the solar system. She sees Mother’s Milk in all of its glory. She had no idea the vastness of this great collection of stars, each with their own planetary systems. There are too many to count, hundreds of millions.

Her own solar system is only one of many on the fringe of this great cluster. Soon she sees that even Mother’s Milk is only a speck among other countless specks of clusters flying past her face. This grand vision of the universe comes to a sudden end.

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Chapter Eleven

Back in the moment, the oneness with the beast. She’s not shaking from the cold anymore. She shakes from insurmountable pleasure. It’s unlike any sexual experience she’s had before, a kind of euphoria her very body and life was given to her for.

Tanika feels a strong sense of destiny, as though it could not have happened any other way.

She feels fully invigorated. All of the freezing coldness from before is completely gone as she’s warmed from the inside and out. The wolf’s breathing is heavy and warm against her.

His slippery bulbous knot is once again locked inside. He’s as far internally as he can go. His swollen member completely fills her, and continuously spurts warm ejaculate that only slowly leaks out of her, if at all.

He becomes tired from humping her once more. She’s happy to hold on and do her own thrusting. It

doesn't take much movement anyway; his pulsing member doesn't have much room to move inside, just grind.

She's unsure the number of times she's climaxed, nor how long they've been lying here making love in the wild. It's still nighttime and the sounds of wilderness slowly fill her ears again.

She feels her climax building and she wants his release. She knows he hasn't fully released either. She continues her working, slow circular thrusting combined with massaging herself. Her other hand is free to stimulate his testicles again, as she remembered how beaming with life they were.

She tightens her muscles around him with each movement, as if to slowly coax his creamy prize. She can see flashes of energy flowing from his penis through his body and to the pleasure center of his brain.

He whimpers in pleasure and twitches from each thrust she gives. A field of energy radiates from both of their genitals as she watches her tummy. The energy swirls and sparkles within both of them like fine grains of sand twinkling in the sun.

It builds within both of them with each pressing movement. She can see inside of herself once more. She loves the sight of his member engorged in her body. A welcoming fusion between species and they're both the first to experience it. He must be thinking the same thing.

She sees it just in time. First, a beautiful sparked field of pleasure exploding through the wolf. Next is followed by the eruption of sparkling beaming life that is the wolf's seed as it begins to spray.

He grunts and collapses, scratching on Tanika as he spasms. She holds him tighter. He leans forward into her more. The tip of his penis reaches the top of Tanika's inside as it thrives and pumps forth semen. She can feel his ejections internally as warm jets.

She watches the seed fill her womb more and more.

"Yes!"

Her voice and moaning continually gets louder and echoes through the woods.

"Please give them to me..." She feels his orgasm as it resonates with her own. Continually she holds and rubs him. She feels nothing but love for him, and he for her. The explosive field of pleasure radiates through her now.

Her walls close around him in her spasms, as if to push him out, but his bulbous knot prevents his escape. This causes her body to milk every last drop of sperm from him.

He's ejected everything deep into her. Filling her womb so much it's nearly to the point of discomfort for her.

The feeling is too euphoric. She can feel and see his countless gametes swimming within her. His seed seems to add to her high, a craving she's sure to want more of after this experience. It's like a drug to her and she welcomes it, watching in awe as his sperm race toward her fertile eggs.

The wolf's eyes are closed as he regains his breath. His heart beats strongly into Tanika's breasts. The side of her cheek presses against his again. He's not the only one feeling completely drained.

Tanika lost the strength to hold him as tightly as she was, she can only rest in their embrace. She

traces his fur, lost in the afterglow.

“What is your name?”

She says, and kisses his face.

“What should I call you? I don’t know if a human has ever named a wolf.”

His member is still inside her, continually throbbing and spurting.

“Mmmm...”

She moans.

She traces around his fur and once again the star-like pattern.

“I will name you.”

She turns to nuzzle her forehead against his, looking in his eyes. He seems to be smiling.

“I name you...Nova!”

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## **Chapter Twelve**

“Do you like that name?”

She says, scratching and rubbing his tummy playfully. He remains locked inside of her, continually panting in delight. He licks the side of her face as if to give approval.

She smiles again, and feels fully invigorated with a renowned sense of purpose. She feels true unconditional love radiating from him. Nova provided so much warmth during their lovemaking that Tankia finds herself sweating, even in the cold afterglow.

“I think we lost both of our tribes, Nova.”

She kisses his face and pets the side of his neck.

“At least we have each other.”

Nova stands up, trying to tug his penis out of Tanika’s body. Her genitals are still tightly wrapped around his knot. He walks in a semi circle around her. She pulls her legs away from his back, allowing him more mobility as he steps.

He lifts his hind legs up over her as he turns to face the opposite direction. Tanika keeps her legs spread as the wolf’s rear presses into her groin. His member continues to remain locked inside of her.

She learned from her visions that a wolf’s anatomy is able to swivel this direction without causing him any discomfort. He’s turned away not as a sign of rudeness. On the contrary, it’s so he can see any potential approaching predators. He is her true and loyal guardian.

His member slowly decreases in volume, allowing the slippery bulbous knot to pop free from her

vaginal grasp. Tanika arches forward and watches the length of his shaft slide away.

Nova steps forward and the tip of his penis falls free from her. It shines in the moonlight from their bodily mixture. It folds between his legs like a swinging pendulum, radiating steam into the air between Nova's wagging tail.

The organ continually spurts small drops of clear fluid.

Tanika feels a rush of excess semen spill out of her vagina. It trails down her body and flows like a waterfall into the earth below.

Nova continually scans the horizon, never forgetting his sentry duties. His dripping member throbs with his heartbeat between his micro-orgasms. He's panting in total bliss.

She's surprised when Nova flips around to face her. He quickly sniffs at her crotch before licking it clean, all over.

She moans again at the sensation.

Nova steps back and away, again scanning the horizon. Her eyes remain fixed on him. She watches his still throbbing, and ejaculating penis.

"Nova..."

She says to him.

"I want to taste you. I want to taste...us."

She crawls forward toward him on her hands and knees, mimicking a wolf in a sexual way. She butts her head into his shoulder playfully before turning onto her back once more.

She scoots her head under his hind legs, placing her face near his hanging member.

One hand holds his lower back as the other finds a soft grasp under the base of his knot. Nova doesn't object. Tanika guides his penis across her face. Feeling its warmth against her as it delivers clear trails on her skin. She lightly kissing the tip, and teasing it with her tongue.

"This is how our tribe does it, Nova."

She grinds her tongue all around the features of his spurting tip.

"I don't think other wolves can do it this way, Nova."

She says as she teases the length with small kisses and licking. She opens her mouth and welcomes the tip. Her tongue slides down it as she feeds it in, parting her lips more and opening her jaw.

She bobs her head up and down, taking a bit more each time. Pausing for breath. With each plunge into her mouth, Nova delivers more fluid. She tastes and swallows it, drinking it in.

Occasionally the seed/saliva mixture oozes from her lips between plunges, trailing down her chin and neck. She presses forward as far as she can, trying not to gag as she lets Nova penetrate her throat.

She rubs herself again as she makes love to his organ. Her lips nearly meet the base of his knot as it

travels within her.

She moans and hums into her sucking.

Nova begins to whimper as she feels his member pulsing an ejaculation of sperm into her throat. She tries to contain it all but can't. She pulls his member free and coughs and spits his sperm out of her.

Nova continues to ejaculate onto her breasts as she regains composure.

"I told you that you'd like it."

She says, caressing his penis up and down slowly with both of her hands. He slows his breathing, becoming more relaxed.

She pets him with her other hand, up the length of his tummy and his sides. His penis folds back into his sheath.

Their intimate moment is over, for the time being.

Tanika rests while she's lost in the moment, occasionally looking up at the stars.

Moments pass as she scratches him sensually, and lightly traces both her hands up his hind legs.

He enjoys her touch until she reaches a certain point. Nova lets out a loud yelp and suddenly jumps away from her.

"What?" she yells.

She stands up quickly. Nova lays down on his side, turning to lick a wound on his hind leg. He can't reach it. She sees something protruding from his upper leg, a bone.

"How did you break your leg? You couldn't have!"

She gets closer to him. She follows a dried trail of blood up his leg to the point of the object.

"How did I not see this?"

She folds his leg gently to get a better view.

"You've got something stuck in you. How long have you had this?"

Nova quietly looks at her.

"Did you have this on the ice?"

Nova's eyes look around. Tankia shifts her stance.

"You walked all that way, on the ice, with this injury?"

His ears fold back again.

"You traveled all this way..and you.. we made love and everything?" She folds her arms.

Nova hangs his head, sniffing and letting soft whimper noises.

She smiles.

“Unbelievable. You really are a true warrior, you know that?”

She unfolds her arms as his body language suggests acknowledgement. She reaches toward his wound again. His expression turns to defensiveness as he bares his teeth, growling at Tanika, loudly.

“Hey!”

She yells with force. He stops growling.

“Listen to me! I need to remove it, or it will get worse. You understand?”

She tackles him, pinning him in a headlock and using her weight to submit him to the ground. He scurries and tries to escape, whining. She folds her fingers across the bone. She closes her eyes. She pulls forcefully, and with one jerk the item is free.

Nova shrieks louder than before, and breaks free of Tanika’s hold. He limpidly scurries away from her, crying in pain. He looks at her in a pained and confused expression before running farther and farther away into the woods.

“Nova! Come back!” She yells, as loudly as she can.

“Now I’ve done it.” Tanika says regrettably.

She calls for Nova again, and waits for a response. She hears nothing.

Tanika steps more into the moonlight, and examines the object she removed from Nova’s body. It’s an elk horn handle attached to a long black obsidian blade. It’s the same blade that was passed to Demur by their Grandfather.

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Chapter Thirteen

She holds the dagger. It was Nova, she thought. He had attacked Demur. He saved me.. not once, but twice. Once on the cliff, and once below when she fell in the ice. If Demur hadn’t gotten her, the cold would have.

“Where did he go?” I fear his wound will get worse if I don’t treat it.”

She hopes he will return, but there are pressing priorities ahead. She needs to make a fire and find shelter, build one if necessary. In her belongings, she carried flint and stone, along with handfuls of dried tree fungus for quick fire starting. Unfortunately, her survival kit is gone.

She’ll have to start from square one. At least she has the blade. Its importance to her is greater now than at any time. Tanika finds a sense of irony having it in her possession, especially without the will of her people behind her.

She examines the surroundings. The triangular precipice doesn’t provide any suitable campsites. Its height provides a good vantage point. The top of the ancient tree will give her an even greater view. Its narrow branches will provide useful tools. She decides to climb it.

After placing the blade down, she leaps straight up as high as she can, clinging her fingers around the lowest branch. She swings her body and uses the momentum to pull herself up in a smooth, almost gymnastic fashion. The wood creaks and groans, remaining sturdy. She folds her tummy over

the branch, and rotates her body in order to sit on it.

She steadies herself along the base as she stands. At this point she's well balanced, leaning into the tree for support. She twists and breaks away two branches, testing them for durability.

"These will do." She comments, tossing them to the ground.

The sticks land near the place she and Nova had just made love.

If she climbs higher, she can see beyond the surrounding tree line. She continues on upward, breaking smaller misshapen branches for firewood. The tree's body narrows the higher she goes. Unknown to her, the tree slowly leans toward the cliff's edge.

She finally reaches the point where she can see above the tree line. There are rolling hills of thick forest between sporadic patches of silvery moonlit fog. She can see that she's on a small island surrounded by ice. To her left lies the wall of fog still obscuring the island from the continent she came from.

She's unsure of the distance separating the two lands. It was unknown how far she had traveled on the ice, and how far the frigid undercurrent had carried her. She shudders at the thought. It's definitely not an experience she wants again. There was no point in returning home anyway. She has nothing to return to.

Even thoughts of the old witch return.

"I should have listened to her." Tanika says. "She told me to leave and I didn't. What else did she tell me?"

The tree shifts suddenly, falling toward the cliff before stopping. She loses balance and screams. She hugs and clings to the narrow treetop as it folds over the edge. The rough bark scratches her skin all over.

She looks down past her dangling feet. The wind beneath the steep drop makes an eerie whistling and stillness. Debris and rocks break free of the root system and fall.

They reach the clouded blanket beneath, disappearing one by one. They never make an impact sound.

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## **Chapter Fourteen**

"I've seen enough cliffs in my lifetime!" She yells, her voice echoing into oblivion.

Her heart is racing. She swings around the tree in a similar way she had done with her captor back in the village.

She's on the other side, and her momentum makes the tree lean back toward the ground. She slides down the base, catching a few branches before letting go. She falls to the ground, tucking and rolling to minimize the impact.

The tree falls with her, its foundation thoroughly weakened. Its branches dig in the earth as it slides closer to the edge, as if it was trying to cling on before falling free. She watches it break and disappear from the edge. She arises from the dirt triumphantly.

“Ha!”

She returns to the former base of the tree, now just an empty pit. She shakes her head and gathers the sacred blade, along with her precious fire kindling. She walks down the triangular precipice back toward the frozen beach.

Looking down, she spots wolf tracks in the fine white sand. Nova. Two sets of tracks lead toward and away from precipice entrance. If she spent the time, she could determine the direction he went. She needs to establish her new camp.

The cold air is starting to catch up to her once more. She needs sleep, even for a few moments. The dark forest around her is uninviting for any exploration. She hopes to find a good shelter site along the beach. The molten wall of rock will likely provide a natural opening, but she'll have to travel a considerable distance away.

Nova will be able to smell the fire if he chooses to find her again. When they were linked, Tanika learned a wolf's sense of smell is thousands of times greater than a human's. She had no idea.

Along the beach, she collects some shells and dried reeds and moss. She can fashion the reeds into useful twine. A bit further, the molten wall slopes inward. Not quite a cave, but perfect for shielding the elements. The precipice entrance has disappeared from view.

This area would make her vulnerable to her human pursuers, though she's sure they are long gone. She digs a fire pit in the sand, clearing debris and brush with her fingers. She moves large rocks to form a circle around the pit.

Nearby, a fallen tree provides additional bounty. She peels away sections of dead tree bark with ease. Then she layers the sections of bark together forming a hearth, and places it in the center of the ring of stones. She gathers a perfectly curved tree branch, about the length from her shoulder to her fingertips. It will make a perfect bow. This one will not be used for hunting, but rather a bow drill, used to start a fire.

She forms tinder using dried moss and bark. She folds the earthly mixture into the shape of a bird's nest. Now she needs to make twine. The task is tedious, braiding dried reeds with shaky fingers. Soon the moon will pass away, and her pale light source will be gone. She finally reaches a length with enough slack to wrap around a spindle. She carves notches in the bow, and ties the twine at each end.

Another branch from the ancient tree will make the spindle. She sharpens the spindle slightly at one end, keeping the precious shavings. She points the end down in a notch in the bark hearth. She wraps her newly forged bowstring around the spindle.

In her left hand, she cups a clamshell and places it over the top of the spindle, allowing her to hold it upright as it spins like a socket. With her right hand, she will hold the bow. The tension in the twine wrapped around the spindle will make it spin when she moves the bow back and forth.

She attempts the action. With a few spins, the spindle collapses. She repositions it, finding a better center. A few more spins and the spindle point drills into a mark in the hearth. The continued friction scoots the hearth away.

Tanika repositions herself, getting on one knee and using her foot to steady the hearth. She locks her left wrist to her knee as she moves the bow back and forth again. The wood creaks as the friction increases. Smoke begins to trail from the point. It's working.



She carves an additional 'v' shaped notch, jutting outward from burn point. Next she places a small piece of bark under the 'v' notch. She just needs enough heat to form an ember, which she can then transfer to her tinder bundle using that small piece of bark. She continues the saw like motion. The point of the spindle drills into the hearth and generates more coal dust. Smoke begins again. She knows she only needs to continue for about a minute to be sure of a good ember.

She increases the velocity of the saw-like motion.

Snap! The twine of the bow breaks. Frustration is setting in. She repairs the bowstring and returns to the bow drill. It breaks once more. She repairs the bowstring yet again. It only needs to last once.

This time, she's able to continue. She presses her thumb into the bowstring to guide the tension. She moves back and forth, faster and faster. She's breathing heavily. Her wrists are getting tired, as well as her arms. More and more smoke emerges until she finally stops.

She pulls away the hearth. In the catch piece, there is a perfect smoldering ember. She fans in gently with her hands, allowing it to breathe. She slowly and steadily moves the piece toward the tinder bundle. The ember slips off the catch piece and falls into the dirt.

She gasps.

She hurriedly tries to scoop up the smoldering ember, but ends up destroying it in the process. She drops everything.

Tanika grabs handfuls of dirt and rock, throwing things in all directions. She dances around like a mad woman, screaming every obscenity in her native tongue. The moon disappears, leaving her in even more darkness as she curses frustration into the night.

She calms herself down and decides to make another attempt. Her tired hands work the spindle yet again. The back and forth saw motion generates another trail of smoke. She stops from exhaustion.

Moving the hearth again reveals another ember. She gently fans it while grabbing the tinder with her other hand. This time she places the tinder nest over the top of the ember, and flips the catch piece and tinder upside down.

After removing the catch piece, she quickly and gently wraps the tinder into a ball around the ember. She holds the tinder sphere to her face. There is smoke coming out of it. In the darkness, she can see the tiny glowing orb inside. She makes an 'o' shape with her lips, gently blowing on it.

Within a few moments, the tiny ember sparks in all directions. The earthly tinder pops and hisses and after a flash of smoke, ignites into a fireball.

Success.

Tanika smiles as she rotates her fingers around the fireball, keeping it alive while she places it in the center of the fire pit. She feeds the tiny fire, using bark shavings until it's large enough to add branches. She's careful not to add too much too quickly. Her morale is lifting.

Eventually the fire is wide and very warm. It brightly illuminates her surroundings. It's the perfect distance from her alcove, which she's filled with soft bedding materials.

Tanika dances around the fire. This time it's out of joy, not frustration.

"I am woman! Master of fire!" She yells goofily.

She decides to call on the wolf.

“Nova! Look what you’re missing!” She listens for anything, looking around the beach.

Nothing.

She pokes the logs in the fire. The pile shifts around and collapses, sending embers into the air. She adds one last chunk of dead tree into the pit. There is enough for tomorrow if needed.

“Nova! It’s really warm over here!”

Still nothing.

Tanika is feeling more and more exhausted. She sits with her back to the fire. If she stares into the hypnotic flames much longer, she will certainly drift asleep.

“Nova!” She yells again.

“In my visions, I saw how the wolf mate with each other!”

She pauses.

“If you wish, I can bend down like that for you! We can try it!”

She waits a moment.

No sign again.

She stands up to walk back to alcove. Two glowing eyes appear in the darkness.

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Chapter Fifteen

It’s Nova. His eyes continue to glow in the reflected firelight. He’s holding something in his mouth. He approaches her, still with a slight limp. He’s carrying the body of sizeable dead rabbit, which he drops by her feet.

“Did you bring this for me?” She says.

Nova barks in response.

“How thoughtful.” She scratches his head playfully.

His eyes close while he pants in delight, nuzzling her hands.

“I knew you’d return.”

Tanika takes the rabbit around to the other side of the fire pit. Nova seems apprehensive, keeping his distance from the flames. She finds the blade, and begins to skin the animal.

Nova paces around for a few moments until he finds a comfortable spot to lay and watch her. Tanika stretches the animal fur skin around a rocky protrusion on the rock wall.

"I don't think you've tasted cooked meat before." She says to him.

Nova moves his eyebrows and rests his chin on his outstretched front paws.

"I think a warrior deserves a warrior's meal, Nova. I wish I had some spices..."

Tanika continues to prepare the animal, fastening it to a long stick. She builds a suspension structure around the fire. It's a makeshift skewer she can rotate. She suspends the animal above the fire.

Nova looks puzzled.

"You've got to trust me." She says to him.

The meat pops and sizzles as she thoroughly cooks it. The odor is sweet and her stomach rumbles loudly. Nova's ears have perked up and he licks his chops.

"You've got to be patient, my friend."

Nova barks.

After a fair time, Tanika removes the body from the fire, and rests it on a flat piece of outstretched bark. She carves out a tiny section for a taste. It's perfect. She fights the urge to not devour everything herself, placing her hands on the body. She begins reciting a prayer out loud, closing her eyes.

"Sacred creature of the forest. You have given your life so that I may continue mine. Your energy is gone, but will be reborn within me. I will carry your nobility with me until the end of my days, when I will give my own body back to the Earth which I took from myself. I will never forget."

Tanika begins to carve out all of the edible meat. She divides it evenly, placing half of it on a separate slab. She carries the slab over to Nova.

He stands up, wagging his tail and licking his chops. He whimpers and whines slightly in anticipation.

"Next time, tell me when you're going to leave." She says, placing the meal in front of him. He moves swiftly, barely sniffing it a moment before devouring the meal in only a few bites. Tanika laughs.

"That is good, yes?" Nova chews and licks at the slab.

Tanika can't help but devour her portion in a similar manner. The meal is not much, but very welcome for both of them.

"Tomorrow we will explore. I'll find healing plants for your wound." She walks over to him again, placing the rabbit's bones down for him.

"Let me heal it this time." She adds.

Nova is distracted by his new treats.

The fire has died down, now mostly a series of glowing smoldering coals. She walks over to the alcove, making some final adjustments to her bedding. Nova walks across the campsite and follows

her. She sits down, greeting him as he approaches.

He licks her face and lips. She smiles and strokes his neck fur. She opens her mouth like she was about to receive a kiss from a human. Nova understands and licks the inside of her mouth.

She continually moves her jaw to accommodate him. Her tongue darts and presses against his, massaging it. She moans into his mouth, leaning into him. He tilts his head, continually loving on her lips and mouth. She caresses her breasts with one hand. Her vagina throbs as they make out.

Tanika has to pause for a moment.

“Oh Nova...”

She crawls on her hands and knees, nuzzling her forehead against his shoulder playfully.

“Maybe I should deliver on my promise. What do you think?”

He walks behind her, loving the sight of her small-outstretched rear end.

She feels his snout as he licks her. His long tongue once again parts her vaginal lips, this time from behind. He makes long strides in and out of her, even making love to her anus.

She moans even louder, clenching around his tongue. She pets her own breasts more, squeezing around her hardened small nipples.

She feels Nova as he jumps up onto her back.

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## **Chapter Sixteen**

She arches her back more, accepting and inviting him. He hugs her from behind, His front paws grip at her sides, sliding down to her hips as he pulls himself forward. His furry chest presses into her back as he rests his chin on her right shoulder. She looks under her body and guides his sheath once again.

He bucks and thrusts, finding his mark nearly right away. He breathes strongly through his nose and she feels his warm breath trace down the back of her neck. It sends chills through her as her young lips part for him, and pull him inside her body once more.

His thrusting is vigorous and forceful. She’s nearly pushed down to the ground from him. She uses her arms to push herself back up. She moans more as he swells within her.

He loves the cushion her rear end provides. Her cheeks jiggle as they absorb the shock of his pounding. It radiates through her body and sways her dangling breasts.

Nova moves his head to her left shoulder. His hind legs move off the ground in a bit of a swimming motion as he tries to find footing, occasionally scratching her. Nova grunts and moans in pleasure.

She joins in his moaning, and repeats his name over and over. She doesn’t feel his knot inside of her this time. It is swollen and out of his sheath, and her lips kiss the top of it, but it doesn’t enter her.

She enjoys his flanged tip as it digs in and out of her. It stretches most of her tunnel. He slides all

the way out of her, and jumps away, taking a break for a moment. The pleasure must be too intense for him.

His throbbing member swings and spurts clear fluid onto her bedding. He pants in pleasure, breathing heavily.

Tanika takes the moment to crawl in a semi circle to face the beach. She smiles at Nova, and slaps her butt. She whips her hair around to the other side, motioning for him to jump on her once more. He understands.

She feels him leap onto her once more, and grip her in a loving embrace. His swollen dripping member slides between her lips, parting and teasing them before he's back inside of her again.

She doesn't even need to guide him.

His chin once again on her shoulder, and his eyes closed as he penetrates her. His wound must be getting better if he has this kind of accuracy. His paws leave slight red scratch marks all over her body but she doesn't mind.

Her tight suction makes sloppy noises in between her breathing and moaning. She can feel his testicles swaying and slapping against her as her outer lips kiss his knot.

Her walls clench around the swollen middle of his shaft as she feels his familiar pre-ejaculate. Nova even licks her ear, adding to her pleasure.

"Give me babies..." She says in ecstasy.

She holds herself up with one hand and uses the other to grip and caress his hide, before touching her own dangling breasts.

"I love you Nova...I love you so much." She feels her climax building.

"It feels so good..."

There are no visions this time, only the familiar intense pleasure. She looks down to her tummy. Nova's penis makes a lump in her tummy that travels up down to his thrusting. She watches it intently.

The sight is enough to make her cum.

"Oh Nova!" she yells as her tight walls spasm and flood his member with her warm juices.

He ejaculates immediately after she does, causing their fluids to mix. He spasms and collapses into her, shaking from intense pleasure. She feels the familiar ejection of sperm filling her up internally.

"Yes!" she cries, loving the sensation.

She reaches behind and grips his rear end, as if to tell him to stay inside her until he is finished pumping her with his warm DNA.

Nova obeys, and rests from his humping. His throbbing member continues to deposit every drop as he wags his tail in delight. His tongue hangs as he pants with his eyes closed.

Tanika breathes heavily, touching herself all over. She opens her eyes to see an amazing field of

energy in the sky.

The field is translucent, and dances across the sky like fire. It's the aurora borealis. Several shades of green radiate throughout the field. The shapes are random in their dance.

She smiles, and reaches behind herself again to scratch Nova. He's lost in his pleasure, panting heavily, eyes closed and ears back.

Her people believed the aurora borealis brought good fortune, including a healthy harvest. It had been ages since she had seen one. She didn't think she would again.

Tanika rhythmically clenches around Nova's soaked organ, still spurting inside of her.

"I think we make good allies, Nova." She says and nuzzles him.

She continues watching the field. The random shapes start to look familiar to her. She sees the shape of a wolf. It becomes animated, and seemingly runs across the stars before stopping.

The giant apparition sits down and tilts its head upwards in a howling motion. The wolf vapor turns to look at her before dissolving back into the random field.

"Nova! Did you see that? Was that you?"

He barks and licks the side of her face in response.

She nuzzles him in return.

He backs away, pulling his penis out. His sperm leaves with it, into the sand of her alcove.

Tanika arises and stretches, sitting on her bedding. The coals from the fire radiate enough heat into the alcove. Tanika estimates it will be enough until morning. She yawns and lies down on her side. She stretches her left arm outward and rests her head on it.

Nova watches her the whole time, sitting patiently.

She motions with her right arm for him to come over. He steps close to her and collapses down, resting his back against her. She wraps her right arm around his front, petting his tummy up and down as they spoon.

His fur feels sensual against her naked skin. He pants and rests his chin on his front paws, looking out to the beach and the aurora.

"Don't leave tonight." She whispers in his ear, and kisses it softly.

Her eyes are heavy as they sink. She's nearly instantly asleep, feeling more warmth, comfort, security, and love than she's felt in a long time.

There are not many hours until sunrise. Tanika doesn't know it, but the longest night of her life will give her the best sleep she's ever had.

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Chapter Seventeen

The late morning sun shines between rolling patches of fog. Nova paces around the campsite occasionally sniffing at the ground. The fire pit is mostly ash. It pops with signs of life between sporadic puffs of smoke. The birds sing praise to the sun that carry through the wilderness of the island.

Tanika lies in the alcove partially asleep. She's feeling the day slowly calling her. Suddenly she hears the sound of sniffing in her ear, before a wet wolf tongue licks and tickles her face. She twitches and giggles as she's brought back into reality. It's a good way to wake up. She feels fully rested.

She opens her eyes to Nova, who eagerly and affectionately greets her. She smiles.

"Hello, boy. It wasn't a dream after all." She yawns and sits up.

Nova wags his tail and sits before her. Tanika stretches her arms before wrapping them around the wolf in a hug. She scratches down his back before rubbing his face between her breasts.

"We have a whole island to ourselves. Shall we explore?"

Nova pants happily back at her. She steps out of the alcove.

The morning sun feels good on her skin. She knows it's still cold, but somehow she feels a stronger tolerance to it. The rabbit fur remains stretched over the rock. It's dry and stretched enough that it can be made into clothing.

Tanika sits by the small warmth of the dead fire, cutting the fur into small sections. She uses portions of her twine to make a bra. She adjusts it to her liking before using more fur to form a bottom piece.

Nova walks around the frozen beach, trying to coax Tanika to follow.

"I'm almost ready! Do you like it?" She jokes as she poses for him in her new outfit.

She quickly stitches the remaining fur together, forming a small shoulder pack. She gathers rabbit bones for useful tools. As she's packing them away, something in the fire pit catches her eye.

She scoots the ashes away to reveal an intact tree branch. Further investigation reveals even more branches. They are blackened and warm to the touch. Tanika recognizes them as the branches she gathered from the ancient tree.

She hits a branch against a rock. It's even stronger than before.

Curious.

She includes them in her pack. Finally, she fastens the sacred blade to the end of a long stick, forming a spear. Nova whines impatiently.

"I'm coming!" she yells back at him.

He waits for her as she runs toward him. She reaches into her pack, presenting a rabbit bone for Nova to smell.

"Where did you find this? Show me!"

Nova takes off, running at full speed down the beach. Tanika runs behind him. Nova is fast, but she

finds she can maintain a fair distance.

It feels good to run. She feels an endurance she's never felt in her life. Soon they reach the precipice entrance, and quickly pass it. Molten jagged rocks are jutting up all over the beach. They are easy obstacles to overcome.

She climbs and leaps over them as easily as Nova does. He maintains a strong lead, occasionally looking back at Tanika.

Her heart races in her chest. The cold wind against her feels good. They are quite a distance from camp site and she's not even tired. Soon the molten formations along beach become impassible, and a suitable opening to the forest is on their right.

Nova leaps into the forest.

She enters the forest behind him. The frozen rough terrain doesn't even hurt her bare feet. Nova weaves around the trees and rocks. She slips on the snowy surface at times.

Nova presses ahead, swiftly and silently. He barely disturbs the terrain. No wonder he makes such a good hunter, she thinks to herself. She adjusts her route still keeping an eye on him while he presses onward.

The trees start to become taller and livelier the further they go. There is not as much snow on the ground either. Giant redwood trees stretch upward into the sky.

The ground feels warmer to her feet. She loses sight of Nova, but continues onward in the direction she last saw him.

She notices green moss on the sides of the trees, even some green vegetation in the ground. She stops to look around for Nova, but there is no sign of him.

She doesn't call for him for fear she will scare away any potential prey. She spots some tracks in the ground and follows them. Up ahead, she quietly clears some thick brush.

Beyond the brush lies a vast and lively forest. The ground is considerably warmer, and the air is humid. Columns of ancient redwood trees stretch upward into unknown heights. There is grass everywhere. It's a patch of land that somehow escaped the frigid winter, still neatly preserved.

Tanika spots a pile of animal droppings. It looks to be from a deer. This area is very active. She scans around for Nova. There is still not a trace.

To her right there is a giant bed of wild white flowers. The flowers move and form a head, which turns to look at her. It's Nova. His gray white fur perfectly blends in to his surroundings. She would not have seen him otherwise. He turns back toward the forest, looking very intently straight ahead.

What's he looking at? She wonders as she hunches down. She quietly crawls toward him, doing her best to blend in to the surroundings herself. She gets close to him, but he remains still and serious. He looks straight ahead with a look of concern.

She squints her eyes, looking the direction he's facing.

Finally she sees it.

Through the vast column of trees there is a large Elk. He hunches his head down, eating the lush

grass. He pulls his head up, chomping his green meal with his slack jaw and open mouth.

He looks majestic, his antlers are quite large with several jetting points, indicating his old age. He looks around for prey, never noticing the two of them lying in the flowers. He returns to the sweet grass.

Tanika hates the idea of killing him, but they are desperate. An opportunity like this may not come again.

When a wolf pack hunts a creature that size, they usually split up. Half of the pack will chase the creature, and guide it to an area where the slower wolves can ambush it, a type of flanking maneuver. When the wolf pack reunites, their numbers will overwhelm the prey and bring it down.

This time, there are only two of them, one wolf and one human.

It's time to put their skills to the test.

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## **Chapter Eighteen**

She lightly touches Nova's shoulder as if to say, "I'm ready."

Nova looks into her eyes before turning to the right and running. Tanika grips her spear and runs as fast as she can in the other direction, to her left.

She makes more noise than Nova, snapping branches along her way. The Elk is startled, and looks up immediately. He traces the path of noise Tanika makes. He knows something is wrong. While he's distracted, Nova circles around the other side, and catches up to the Elk, remaining completely unseen.

Quickly Nova leaps onto the Elk's rear, standing on his hind legs as he sinks his teeth into his hide. The Elk cries out in terror, and shakes Nova free of his grasp. He retreats; running full speed in the same direction Tanika went.

She watches the action unfold in between trees whizzing past her as she runs, searching for a suitable ambush site.

She can hear his powerful galloping as Nova leads him toward her. She maintains a lead over both of them. Nova occasionally leaps up at the creature, nipping and snapping at him. The animal is terrified, and tries to evade Nova to no avail. He persistently chases the Elk, never leaving his side.

Tanika is sure footed as she runs through the forest. Up ahead, there is a large boulder before a clearing in the trees. It will provide the perfect sniping position.

She leaps up onto the boulder, standing atop and readying her spear. She can almost hear her Grandfather's words in her mind:

"Do not fire your weapon where the creature is, fire your weapon where the creature will be."

She can see and hear the two of them approaching her window of opportunity. She stands properly, aiming her spear ahead of the charging Elk.

She hesitates.

One problem, Nova is at the creature's left side as he leaps and nips at him. Tanika fears she will hit Nova by mistake.

"Nova! Move away!" She yells.

"The other side! Hurry!"

She watches as both of them pass by, missing her opportunity. She curses out loud, and heads toward the opening, keeping her eye on both of them as they run by.

She reaches the opening on foot and aims her spear again. There is still another chance.

Nova switches sides and is no longer vulnerable.

She throws the spear as hard she can, and watches it fly right over the Elk, barley missing. She curses again and runs to retrieve her only weapon.

Nova bolts ahead of him, growling violently. He gets the Elk to turn around, and run back toward Tanika. She readies her spear again, her heart racing. She fine-tunes her aim, but the Elk is still too far away.

She steadies herself, slowing her breath. The Elk pivots and runs diagonally away from her. Nova compensates in his pursuit. She throws the spear.

Tanika watches in horror as the Elk kicks his hind legs. He strikes Nova. He yelps and rolls in the grass just as Tanika's spear sinks into the Elk's chest.

"No!" she yells.

Nova lies still, panting heavily and whining.

The Elk cries out in pain, running into the forest in the opposite direction, taking the spear with him.

She runs over to Nova. He's whimpering, trying to stand but can't.

"Let me see!" She gently rolls him onto his side.

She feels his body for broken bones. She can't find any. She looks for blood but sees none. She can only see a nasty bruise where the animal kicked him. She feels a sense of relief.

"I think the Elk has taken your wind but nothing else. You're going to be - "

Before she can even finish her sentence, Nova springs back up and runs into the forest on the other side, perusing the Elk once more.

"Well...okay then." She runs behind Nova.

She can see the traces of blood the Elk left behind. He will not be able to run far.

Tanika catches up to Nova, who is pacing around the fallen Elk cautiously. The spear is still inside. The Elk's eyes are wide as he looks at both of them. He shakes with pain, fear and shock. He lies on his side, breathing shakily. She knows she must end his suffering.

She kneels before the creature. She covers his eyes with her hand.

“Shh...be at peace.” She pulls the spear out of him.

He doesn't fight anymore.

She caresses him slowly with her other hand, finding his heart. It's still beating strongly.

“Sacred creature of the forest...” Nova watches patiently.

“You have given your life so that I may continue mine.” His breathing slows as she points her spear.

“Your energy is gone, but will be reborn within me.” The Elk is completely relaxed. She thrusts the spear into him one final time.

“I will carry your nobility with me until the end of my days, when I will give my own body back to the Earth which I took from myself.”

She removes the spear, feeling his life force fade away.

“I will never forget.”

Nova doesn't want to wait for a cooked meal this time. He digs in immediately at the rump of the Elk.

Tanika lets him feast as she cleans the blade and begins to skin the animal.

There is one hunter in these woods with an interest in this kill, besides Tanika and Nova.

He has remained quiet this whole time, but decides to make his presence known.

They both turn quickly to see him as he steps forward.

A giant brown grizzly bear.

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Chapter Nineteen

“Nova...stay still...”

He begins a slow growl. It changes in pitch and tone with each step the bear takes toward them. His fierce blue eyes remain fixed on the intruder. Tanika points her spear at the grizzly beast.

“Nova, do not attack. If you attack this bear, I will hurt you worse than the bear will. Do you understand?” Her spear shakes nervously along with her heartbeat.

Nova steps to her side, curling his lips while he takes a defensive stance. The two of them stand vigilant, guarding the dead Elk.

The bear turns its head to its side, eyeing each of them analytically. It grunts and snorts at them. Its body language is hostile, aggressive.

Tanika knows she must stand her ground. If she makes a run for it, it's over.

"Y..You should be asleep!" She yells.

"Go away! Go sleep!" She opens her arms wide and jabs her weapon in the air at it.

The bear responds by scratching the grass with its massive claws. Nova joins in, barking and growling continually. The bear lets out a loud grunt before charging directly at them.

She feels fear and adrenaline. Her eyes widen as it gallops forward, sending chunks of dirt into the air with each thump of its feet. The impacts into the Earth send shock waves through its massive body and fur. Her knuckles whiten as she tightens her grip on her only weapon.

Nova arches his back, readying himself to leap on the beast. He will die defending Tanika if need be.

"Nova, stay!" She yells at him. She's really saying it to herself, as she fights every instinct to retreat.

The bear is getting close. It puffs loudly through its nostrils as it runs. Just as it looks like it will trample over them, it stops. The bear stretches his front legs forward, sliding and skidding to a halt just a mere few meters in front of them. The two of them hold their ground.

"You will *not* take my kill! Hear my voice!" She yells as loud as she can, looking directly in its big brown eyes.

The bear pushes itself upward, standing on its hind legs. It towers over the two of them, as they stand in its shadow. The bear stands at more than twice Tanika's own height. They both tilt their head up to look at it. The bear opens its mouth.

Its saggy lips drooling as it inhales, looking down on them with anger. It pauses a moment and steps forward before falling back down on all fours. Its front paws hit the ground with force and Tanika feels the ground shake in her feet.

The bear meets her face to face and at eye level, opening its jaw as wide as it can before letting out a tremendous roar. It's nearly deafening and radiates through her entire body, shaking her to the core. She's completely frozen.

Trails of spit and snot fly into her face as she's met with a massive blast of warm rotten breath.

Nova, for as brave and fierce as he was, even finds himself stepping behind Tanika during this moment. She squints her eyes as the roar continues. It seems to be never ending. She closes her eyes and looks away. Finally the roar stops. She breathes heavily, unable to open her eyes.

The bear lets out grunts of annoyance, swaying his head as Tanika remains in place. The bear looks down at Nova, who continues to have his teeth bared. He growls at the bear but continues to obey Tanika's command not to attack, though he sure wants to.

The bear takes one last look at the dead Elk, realizing it is unable to claim the sought after prize. It lets out one last noise of disdain toward Nova, before slowly turning completely around and strutting away.

Nova steps forward, monitoring the beast while it walks through the foliage. Tanika opens her eyes, watching the bear disappear into the forest. She feels light headed, nearly to the point of fainting.

Their bluff worked.

Nova stops growling when he realizes they are finally safe. He begins a frantic pace, continually

eyeing Tanika, who remains looking ahead and shakily breathing.

She drops her spear and falls to her knees, slowing her breathing and trying to calm down.

Nova pulls his ears back and whines. He licks her sporadically, begging for reassurance that she's unharmed. She finally manages to respond by petting his fur. She looks at him while he licks her face.

"I'm alright... you did good." She embraces him more.

"You know I would never hurt you, right? Don't ever let me face a bear again..."

He nuzzles against her. She finds her spear again.

"You didn't tell me we were in bear territory, Nova." She removes the blade.

"Let's get out of here." She kneels by the Elk, cutting and removing essential fur.

Nova guards her once more, continually watching through the forest in all directions. She carves the animal into manageable sections as she was taught.

There is a lot of meat, too much for her to carry alone. She'll gladly leave a good portion for the bear. She lets Nova feast before she gathers her items. She slings huge sections around her shoulders.

The idea of carrying it all the way back to the beach camp is too arduous. She decides to forge through the forest, the opposite direction the bear went. Nova agrees, as long as he can scout ahead.

Tanika is getting a lot of exercise today. Her shoulders ache as the weight of their future meals is pulling her down. She continually looks for signs of predatory animals, but never finds any. She worries about the odor of the meat, but trusts Nova's guidance.

Up ahead the trees part way to a rolling hill. Nova runs ahead and climbs to the top of the hill. He looks back and Tanika, panting and waiting patiently.

Tanika notices a peculiar sulfur smell in the air. The ground feels increasingly warmer to her feet. She slowly takes her time up the hill. Nova looks up at her once she arrives.

Down the hill on the other side is a nice opening to the forest with great vantage points in all directions.

The ground in the clearing is mostly pebbles, outlining a series of large natural springs of water. Some pools appear frozen while others bubble with life, sending columns of steam into the air. The smell of sulfur is thick.

Across the clearing, large formations of familiar molten rock jet upward. Immediately she spots a perfect spot for a new campsite.

A jettied precipice will provide height as well as perfect vantage point for any potential approaching bears. The smell is not ideal, but she feels it will keep the unwanted visitors away.

She drops the precious Elk meat down to the ground, enjoying the relief and freedom it brings. She holds her shoulder and cracks her neck.

“Nova, I think you just found our new home.”

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## Chapter Twenty

Crack! The large rock impacts the sheet of ice and slides to the other side of the frozen pool. Tanika follows it. She picks up the rock and tosses it into the ice again.

This time, the impact shatters the ice into fragments. There’s no water flowing beneath, just another darker layer of frozen ice. She continues using the strength of the rock, breaking each layer.

Nova walks around and examines the pebbled expanse. He sniffs at the ground, occasionally pulling his head back with a look of disgust. Some of the pebbles are too hot to the touch, making him dance away and change directions.

Tanika digs through the broken ice layers until she finds the depth of her pit is suitable. Finally she throws the huge slabs of Elk meat inside of the pit and buries them with the broken ice shards. This will help preserve the meat.

Now that the work is over, she can explore the remaining springs. The whole area seems to have been untouched by any human presence. The next natural spring isn’t radiating steam but bubbles from the depths below.

She had seen Nova drinking from it earlier. She tosses a pebble into the water and watches it slowly sink. It disappears into the beautiful turquoise depths below.

The water is perfectly clear, as if the Earth had filtered it for eons. She kneels down, using both hands to scoop out a taste. The temperature is ice cold, hurting her joints a bit as she brings it up to her lips.

The taste is delicious, much better than the melted snow ice they were drinking before. She gulps it down, feeling instantly refreshed.

The adjacent pool bubbles with life, sending a copious amount of steam into the air. The boiling water spills out in all directions, forming mini streams in-between the stones. A large area nearby doesn’t have any rocks, just a blackened mineral mud pit where the boiling water has seeped into the ground.

As she walks closer the water’s edge, she makes the same discovery Nova did. The rocks themselves are much too hot to even touch. She nearly blisters her feet in the attempt. Tanika realizes she can use the hot surface to cook on, without the need for a fire.

A branch of the boiling stream leads her to the final water pit. She tiptoes around cautiously until she reaches it. The water is murky with grayish brown mineral silt flowing through it. The depth appears to be fairly shallow. She looks for Nova, who is busy marking his territory at the far end of the camp.

The entrance to this water pit is free of rocks, just soft mineral clay varying in multiple colors of swirling rust. The water itself is ankle deep and slowly slopes down into further depths.

She slowly steps into it until her foot is submerged. The water is perfectly warm. It seems to be an

ideal fusion of the two prior springs. She rests her weight down, feeling the soft clay as it squishes between her toes.

She puts her other foot in and steps forward. The soft Earth squishes and bubbles around both of her feet, releasing much tension and ache.

She smiles, and reaches behind her back, slowly untying her top. She adjusts her shoulders and pulls it off her body, tossing it onto some dry rocks to the side.

Next she runs her thumbs along her waistband, bending forward slightly and wiggling her body as she pulls her bottom piece down past her knees. She points her right toes down as she lifts her leg up and over it. Next she uses her left leg to step out of her bottom. She tosses it next to her bra top.

Tanika feels eyes on her naked body. Of course, they are Nova's. She turns around to see him nearby. He's eyeing her up and down with dilated pupils. It seems he has missed the sight of her naked beauty. He licks his lips and pants.

She smiles in return, and turns around to pull her hair back. She walks forward until the water is up to her knees. It's almost too hot but she can easily adjust to it.

Nova lies down, watching patiently.

She steps forward until her waist is submerged. The water feels so good. It bubbles and massages every inch of her naked body. She drops to her knees in the warm water, letting it cover her shoulders.

She turns to face Nova, and playfully splashes water on him.

"Nova! Come in! The water is perfect!"

He responds by shaking the water from his fur. He doesn't seem interested.

She laughs and continues enjoying the mineral bath. She can feel all of the dirt and dried Elk blood leaving her skin. She closes her eyes, and plugs her nose as she completely submerges herself in the welcoming waters. She uses her other hand to scoop up some silt from below.

She raises her face from the water, floating on her back as she treats her arms and legs with the cleansing soil. Nova guards dutifully, watching for any approaching predators. Luckily there are none.

She runs her fingers through her wet hair, feeling built-up dirt and oil leaving it. She stands up; letting her upper half feel the cool air.

Her fingers easily move through her hair as she pulls it behind her back, wringing out the water. The cool air is inviting as she steps forward up the slope. Nova watches as she emerges from the water.

Steam radiates from her naked brown skin. He admires her full frontal beauty again as water drips from her feminine curves.

The pool is once again up to her ankles as she wipes the cool water droplets from her skin. Nova stands up and walks toward her clothing. He leans down and grips both items in his mouth, carrying them over to her.

She smiles.

"You are so helpful!" Tanika leans down to retrieve them from his grip. Nova jerks his head away, stepping back out of reach.

She steps forward to him again, and swipes her hand quickly trying to grab her garments. Nova is too quick and bolts away a few meters. He stands with his back toward her, but turns his head to meet her eyes.

Tanika raises an eyebrow. Nova drops the items down in front of him. He raises his head and looks at her flirtatiously as he pants.

"Hm..." she says out loud, folding her arms as she walks casually toward him. She quickens her pace slightly. His ears perk up and he closes his mouth, watching closely.

Just as she's getting within reach, she leans down and extends her hand to quickly snatch the items.

Nova is one step ahead of her.

He quickly grips them in his mouth, looking up at her before bolting away. Tanika collapses to the ground in her attempt.

She's laughing while Nova runs toward the forest.

"Nova! You are a scoundrel!" She yells at him. "I'm going to catch you!"

~~~~~

Chapter Twenty-One

Nova runs at full speed, escaping the pebbled clearing. Tanika is not far behind, despite his head start. The clouds above move like flowing foam. The sky slowly turns from blue to a purple hue as it enters pre-sunset.

Nova darts and moves between the jetting redwoods. Tanika tries something new, using the trees to pull herself forward as she runs. Nova changes course but she compensates.

She's laughing when she can, trying to use her breath efficiently. Her joy echoes throughout the woods. Nova hunches down and runs underneath a fallen tree. When Tanika reaches it, she flows over the top like rushing water.

Golden rays of sunlight shine between rolling mist in diagonal columns. Small insects flutter about in the light. She can feel them parting over her face as she passes through them. Nova weaves again, trying to throw Tanika off his trail.

She grips low hanging branches and kick boosts herself forward. Her body is moving gracefully, contorting in new ways to avoid and navigate obstacles. The cool air quickly dries her wet naked skin.

She can feel the endorphins rushing through her blood. She never stumbles, and begins to feel a type of invincibility in her pursuit. The rough terrain no longer hurts her feet, but feels good. She welcomes the fallen branches instead of avoiding them. They provide traction.

Nova finds a moment where he can look back; even he is surprised that she has kept up this far. Tanika's garments continue to flap in the wind, never leaving his grip.

“Nova!” she yells between massive breaths.

“I told you I’m going to catch you!”

Tanika’s nose twitches to a familiar scent. It smells similar to a skunk, but not as foul. The smell is sweeter, more inviting. She recognizes it. It’s the sacred herb she smoked during her first council fire.

Nova darts into a field of tall wheat-grass, disappearing. She loses sight of him, but she can see the tall foliage parting and swaying as he presses forward. She slows her pace, parting the wheatgrass with her arms as she follows him. Small white moths flutter about the field. The sky turns to a pink orange hue.

The foliage changes to a mixture of wildflowers. Honeybees and other insects fly between them as she carefully steps around. She’s lost sight of Nova but carefully studies the broken foliage to trace his steps.

He can’t have gone far.

She notices wild berries and other useful herbs as she moves about. She’ll have to collect some later.

Something catches her eye on the ground. Upon closer inspection she recognizes her clothing. She steps over her articles and continues to press forward. They are no longer the object of her pursuit, but rather the capture of a certain devious wolf.

Then it suddenly hits her. It’s a wall of pungent herbal aroma emanating from a huge grouping of leafy plants, many of them taller than Tanika. It’s the same one she detected before, but it’s much stronger here. This must be the source of it.

There’s a rustling in the center of the plants. She feels the flowery sticky sap on her skin as she parts the plants and finds the source of the rustling.

Nova is lying on his back, playfully rolling around on the soft soil beneath. He moves from side to side nipping at the air. Tanika leaps on top of him, lightly pinning him to the ground. He growls quietly. Tanika rolls and wrestles with him.

“I’ve got you now!”

He playfully nips at her wrists as they roll and play with each other. She giggles as he licks her. She tickles him in response.

“Nova is a bad wolf. Very Bad!”

He growls and barks. She rolls on her back, bringing him on top of her. He attacks her with vigorous licking. She giggles uncontrollably and shudders. He’s hitting all of her ticklish spots along her neck and ears.

“Nova you can’t! No!” she yells between laughter.

She tries pushing him away but it only encourages him more. She wraps her arms around him and rolls back on top of his body. She nuzzles her head into his shoulder. He barks at her quietly. She pets him before lying by his side to take a few breaths.

Looking up the sky, she admires the colorful red and orange streaks. Nova sniffs and pants, lying

still as he catches his breath too.

Tanika rolls to her side, cuddling against him. She scratches her fingers gently up and down his tummy. She looks further down and notices that Nova has a sizeable erection emerging from his sheath.

“Oh...did I do this?” she says sensually.

Her hand caresses his nipples before wandering lower. She wraps her fingers around the bottom base of his penis, aiming it straight up before stroking the shaft up and down slowly.

Nova sniffs in pleasure and closes his eyes. She loves the warmth she feels from it. She lets go for a moment so she can move her hand even lower to massage his testicles.

He opens up his legs to give her more access. She fondles them gently, circling them in her fingers before moving back up to stroke him. She traces her fingertips around his knot before moving up his member to feel each detail of his triangular tip before clasping her fingers around the center of his shaft.

He instinctually bucks and thrusts up and down as though he were inside of her. She feels as his organ expands even more inside of her closed hand, becoming fully erect. She kisses the side of his face, smiling.

He's totally lost to her touch. She continues her kissing, moving down his body.

She repositions herself, switching which hand holds his erect member so she can hold herself upright. Her hanging breasts slide down his body until she softly presses her face against his member.

She delivers soft kisses up and down before running her tongue along the center of his organ and deciding to tease his testicles again. She kisses and sucks them, parting her tongue between them. She runs the tip of her tongue all over the texture of his scrotum.

Nova turns his head to the other side, his eyes closed.

“Is this why you brought me here?”

She crawls up his body, placing her knees on either side of him, hovering. She parts the fur on his chest softly, examining the bruise the Elk left behind.

“Nova...you were so good. Let me heal you...” She reaches down between her legs, once again clasping his swollen member.

She points it up toward her, touching it to her vagina. She moves it around, teasing herself before dipping his tip inside.

“Mmm...” she moans.

She places her hands on his upper shoulders as she lowers herself down, slowly taking all of him in. This time she wants to be the one who rides him. He sniffs in pleasure again.

She moves up and down, slowly coating his bare penis with her human wetness. Nova places one paw on her shoulder, as if to stable his body to her grinding. He opens his eyes, turning to look at her.

She looks deep in his eyes, tightening herself around him, holding him deep. She can feel him spurting already, which only makes her move faster. She uses her right hand to hold herself up, closing her eyes while she caresses her own breasts. His member feels twice as warm inside of her.

She places her hand down into the grass again, pushing herself up and down. Nova's bushy tail wags and moves between her cheeks, sensually teasing her as she moves up and down.

She leans downward more, pressing her breasts into his fur. Moaning into his neck. She arches upward, feeling an orgasm building. She slowly circles her lower body around his erect fountain, letting it circle her internal tunnel.

The pleasure feels intense. Once again her body tightens around his foreign member and floods it with her ejaculate. She rises up while she convulses around him, letting her tunnel collapse around his tip. This causes him to release his load into her.

His penis nearly slips out until she lowers again, making sure she can feel it deep.

She leans against him again, resting and breathing heavily. Keeping him inside of her.

"Oh Nova..." she moans quietly.

Several multi colored butterflies swarm around the two of them as they lie in the comforting afterglow. The sky turns into a beautiful dark orange hue as the sun slowly starts to disappear.

There will not be much light left before nightfall. She kisses Nova's forehead and stands up. He does as well.

Tanika collects a sizable section of flowery herb before the two of them make their way through the foliage. Nova keeps pace with her. She smiles when she finds her clothing once more on the ground.

She quickly fastens her top and bottom before gathering a series of berries and healing herbs.

"This was a good idea." She says to Nova, affectionately petting his head.

Nightfall creeps into the forest as they make their way back to the campsite. The forest becomes disorienting in the dark, but luckily they can follow the sulfur smell. Finally they reach the familiar clearing, and trace their steps back across the pebbled surface.

The Moon creeps it's way through the clouds. It's completely full tonight. The entire area is warm enough that Tanika doesn't feel the need to make a fire. Her belongings are still there, as well as the frozen Elk Meat.

She finds a soft patch at the edge of the rocky precipice incline. She stretches before lying down. Nova lies in front of her as usual so she can cuddle up next to him.

She quietly chews some healing herb before placing it along Nova's knife. He flinches a bit as she holds it in place.

The sounds of the bubbling springs along with the chirping crickets help her drift to sleep almost immediately. Hours pass by in mere moments.

Tanika wakes up in the middle of the night, sensing something is wrong. She feels bewildered as her eyes adjust to the darkness. She reaches out for Nova but he is gone.

The realization that he is missing sends her upward instantly. She looks around frantically for her companion.

Just as she is about to call his name, her train of thought is interrupted by a loud wolf howl. She turns to look up the slope, spotting Nova. He stands atop the incline, sitting and arching his head upward to the sky.

He lets out another long howl. It's the first time Tanika has heard him do this. She listens for a moment. The howl is long and beautiful, but it feels longing with a sense of sadness to it.

"Nova...who are you calling for?"

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## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

Every night it's the same. He leaves her to sound his mournful cry. Sometimes she can sleep through it, other times it's more difficult. Each time he disappears, she knows he'll return.

The two of them have become effective hunters. They mostly target smaller game, and only when it's absolutely necessary. Tanika has converted her bow drill into an efficient hunting bow. The branches from the ancient tree make perfect arrows, and fly with incredible precision and speed.

She occasionally finds traces of the bear. She knows their alliance with it is fickle at best, and it's always a source of tension in the back of her mind.

For every mistake she makes during the hunt, she learns and adapts on their next run. She and Nova communicate like a well-oiled machine. She even taught Nova a series of whistles. One for parry left, parry right, return it back, and ambush.

Nova's howling is something she can't quite grasp. Additionally, she feels an unknown sense of longing within herself.

Tanika sits by the rocky precipice, carving a ceremonial wood pipe. Nova carries his favorite toy, a half chewed up piece of driftwood, toward her. He drops the item by her feet, looking up at her.

"Not now, Nova."

He barks in response with a soft whine. She ignores him.

Nova nuzzles his head under her hands as she continues carving. Tanika impatiently turns away. Nova doesn't give up easily, taking the toy in his mouth and half jumping up in her lap.

"I said no!" She yells, pushing him away.

Nova drops the item, pausing to look at her with a puzzled expression. She refuses to meet his eyes. He walks away and slumps down, letting out a sigh while he rests his chin on his front paws.

She can only continue carving for so long. She drops her tools to examine the chewed up driftwood.

"Nova!"

His ears perk up as he looks up at her. She stands up and throws the wood in the air as hard as she

can. Nova arches his head, tracking it as it sails across the enclosure.

He springs into action, chasing it with great speed. She watches him leap into the air and catch the item in his jaws gracefully. He shakes his head playfully when he lands, then trots back toward her.

She starts to sob as he drops the item by her feet again. She kneels down to meet him, gently petting the soft fur of his ears.

"I'm sorry." She says, sniffing.

Nova licks the tears off her cheek without hesitation.

"I don't know why you stay with me."

She's easily forgiven. His love for her is truly unconditional. She spends the rest of the late afternoon with him. They run together and play fetch until hunger starts to catch up once more.

As the evening starts to encroach, she decides to build a fire. She will prepare a delicious meal with blended vegetation, herbs and spices. While the meat cooks, she ignites the traditional herb in her newly forged pipe. It's the first time she will partake of it since her first council fire.

Nova nips and chases the smoke when she exhales it from her lungs, making her laugh. She can feel the welcoming high and her heightened senses overcome her.

Nova becomes increasingly playful and silly. She adds the finishing touches to his dish, making sure it's perfect. He wags his tail and sniffs at it before he feasts. She can tell he approves.

She sits by the fire and begins her meal. The taste is incredible as she gazes into the dancing flames.

"Nova, do you want to leave? Are we in danger here?"

He tilts his head at her while he licks and chews on a rib bone.

"I don't know the answer." She says thoughtfully.

Darkness surrounds them and the sounds of the night fill the air. The fire has died down to glowing radiating coals. Tanika yawns and stretches her arms. She walks toward their sleeping area.

Nova runs ahead of her. He blocks Tanika from her bedding.

"What?" She asks.

He responds by simply burying his snout into her crotch. He sniffs before pawing at her loincloth, trying to remove it.

"Oh..." she says and smiles.

She seductively and slowly slips it down her knees, making her genitals available to him. His tongue is quick to lap them. She notices the feeling right away; it's different this time. Her loin is more sensitive; the pleasure is twice what it normally is.

His tongue lavishly laps her, even as she lies down. He follows her while she lays and parts her legs. The pleasure is intense as she grips and holds his fur.

“Nova...stop. It’s too much...”

He doesn’t obey. He just growls as he sensually eats her. She moans louder than before. Her orgasm is twice as long and intense. She squeezes her thighs around him as she uncontrollably convulses. Every detail of his long tongue radiates through her.

It must have been the herbal smoke; even her sexual senses are heightened. It seems to have the same affect on Nova. Their lovemaking is drawn out throughout the night.

Both of them shake and convulse like never before, even as they mate.

“We need to do this more often...” She says as she trails off into sleep.

Nova falls asleep along with her as he finishes. His engorged knot remains deep inside of her body as both of them slip into unconsciousness.

Later, an otherwise perfect evening is contrasted by an intense nightmare.

Tanika grimaces in her sleep. She hears people screaming. She feels terror as they run around her. She calls out to them with no response. Soon the people are on fire, and all of the shelters around her ignite. The entire village in her vision goes up in flames.

Tanika screams as she bolts up from her sleep. She drips a cold sweat, breathing heavily.

Nova is by her side. He whines in concern, sniffing at her face.

She stands quickly, throwing on her thick Elk furs and shoes. Nova stands and paces around nervously. She gathers her weapons and other supplies, quickly slinging them over her shoulder before she runs into the forest, leaving their camp behind.

Her eyes adjust quickly to the darkness as she makes her way through the woods. Nova loyally follows. The two of them comb their way through the thick obstacles, finally making their way to the frozen beach.

She stumbles onto her knees in the fine white sand, breathing heavily as she looks onward, across the frozen ice field.

The wall of fog separating the island from her home continent has lifted. She can see far into the vast distance.

Her heart sinks dreadfully.

In the sky, the Moon is dark and blood red. It casts an eerie orange glow in the clouded night sky. A column of black smoke, rising from the distant mountain range, divides the glowing sky.

The smoke is not coming from her home. She knows its origin.

It’s the P’tauli village.

“Nova...” She utters between heaving breathing.

“We must cross the ice.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

The atmosphere paints unyielding sorrow all around while she cautiously steps onto the field. Her breath once again freezes in the air, and seems to trail endlessly away.

The ice softly crunches under her feet and she can only recall the time she broke through. She tries to push the thoughts away and follow her determination forward.

Nova is less reluctant, walking across with ease. The faint clicking of his nails on the surface helps to break the silence. She turns to look back at the island, as it may be the last time she sees it.

Nova patiently waits and looks up at her.

"You'll save me if I fall again, right?" She adjusts her shoulder pack and presses forward.

Nova walks ahead of her, but never out of sight. His guidance helps to quicken her pace.

She can hear and feel the energy of the frigid waters flowing beneath her feet. The ice creaks and moans to her steps.

Before long, the two of them are halfway across the field. The fateful cliff she fell from comes into view. She can even see the arrows still stuck in the surface, undisturbed.

The idea of scaling this cliff is unthinkable.

"Show me the way." She says to him.

Nova diverts to the left, and they head toward an easier access point. The foreboding silhouette of land is getting closer. The ice changes in degrees of thickness, occasionally splintering to her footsteps, as they approach.

Nova runs ahead and reaches land. He turns back to look at her, panting. She takes her final steps off the field, feeling a sense of relief.

The two of them travel up the mild incline. The familiar sight of aspen trees reminds her she's closer to home. The distant billowing smoke remains her only compass. She estimates it will take a full day to reach.

The journey ahead is unknown. She wishes she could have seen the route her Grandfather had promised to reveal. Luckily for her, this territory once belonged to Nova and his pack. If anyone is to be her best guide, it's certainly him.

She removes the sacred obsidian blade and secures it to the end of a long stick forming a new spear.

A pain in her stomach has her take a moment for a break.

"Nova time to eat!"

She pulls out two sizeable chunks of dried Elk jerky. She tosses the first to Nova as he sits before her.

She slumps down against a tree, stroking his fur as they eat. She looks upward at the sky. A handful of stars sporadically pierce through the orange polluted clouds. It will be morning soon, time to press onward.

The distant owl calls amidst the symphony of crickets surrounding them. Their footsteps crunch on frozen tree leaves as the land slopes downward. The sky begins to change into a dark purple hue, the subtle hints of predawn.

They traverse down one of the many rolling valleys they will have to overcome. Traveling in a straight line will not be an easy task.

The day moves on as they travel down a seemingly never-ending coastline. Glacial formations jet up all around the outskirts, occasionally tearing into the landscape. For every clear path ahead, another one is disrupted by the formations.

Tanika finds herself backtracking to find new routes as more fields become impassible.

Mid day turns to afternoon, then to evening. The frustrating realization that she will need to set up camp is setting in. It appears as though she hasn't made much progress toward their destination.

That night, she sleeps naked with Nova. He doesn't howl this time, and she gets a much-needed deep sleep cuddled next to his warm body.

The next day yields better results. They traverse many valleys and streams. Glacial walls continually disrupt the flow of the land. The black billowing smoke continues to rise into the sky, albeit more faintly today.

The two of them stop to take a rest. The sun shines high in the sky. Tanika divides the remaining meat from her pack. It's the last of their food but she has plenty of water for the rest of the trek.

As she looks upward at the sky, a large black figure circles high above. Judging by the wingspan it's an eagle. Tanika sips at her water, lost in the hypnotic trailing. She pours out more water for Nova, who nips at the stream in the air.

"Lets go."

They pass from their clearing into another thick series of trees. Nova stops and looks around frantically.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Before she can react, a series of lines cross her face silently and quickly. She can barely focus on it before she feels the chords and cables constrict around her, limiting her movement.

Nova growls and barks viciously. He's been trapped in separate netting, made from the same material that restricts Tanika. Figures are moving behind them. Hands reach through and snatch her items away.

They take her bow and arrows, her pack, even her decorative necklace snaps free of her neck painfully.

She grips her spear and prepares to fight.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Four**



Warriors surround them, pointing their weapons aggressively close. The spear tips are Clovis points made from a cloudy translucent material. She's never seen it before. Tanika uses her limited range of movement to swing her spear at them, then thrusts her weapon forward at the closest man.

Someone in her blind spot grabs her spear, forcefully twisting and pulling it from her grasp. He nudges her off center, and she falls on her backside. The other warriors tighten the netting around her.

The man who took her spear is looking at it intently as he slowly steps into her view. He has a masculine look, red and black war paint striped all over his body and face. He wears a ceremonial necklace with eagle feathers jetting from his long black hair.

He looks distinguished between the other men in the party. A long leather shroud wraps around his right arm. He's lean and muscular, shorter than Tanika. He seems to have a commanding presence as he runs his finger along Tanika's ceremonial obsidian blade.

"Kill the beast!" One of them yells.

"No!" She returns defiantly, struggling in the netting.

She manages to roll in front of Nova as a shield. She spouts a colorful barrage of threats and curse words at the men.

The leader points a clenched fist in the air and shakes his head in a 'No' motion, never taking his eyes away from the black blade. Tanika hurls her insults at him, which escape his ears as he continues to ignore her.

Nova growls a deep guttural ferocity as he chews on the netting, eyeing the men. The warriors step backwards nervously, but keep their spears aimed. The leader hands over Tanika's spear to a man next to him, asking him to examine it. Then the leader hunches down and meets Tanika at eye level.

"You're ungrateful." He says smugly.

"What?!" She snarls. "Give that back!"

He continues. "My men saved you from this beast, and this is the thanks we receive? And you won't even let us kill it? Shame."

"Listen! 'It' is named Nova! He is my ally! You saved me from nothing. You are a fool!" She retorts.

The leader seems to grin. He tilts his head.

"Allies? Allies! Ah Ha Ha!"

His tone is jovial and booming. He stands up and folds his arms. He looks down at her before arching his head backwards in another of his exaggerated laughs.

"Ha ha ha!"

The other man returns the spear to the leader and nods his head. The leader thrusts the end into the ground in a dramatic motion. He pulls out a small wooden whistle, pressing it to his lips. It doesn't seem to make an audible noise, but Nova reacts to it. He places his whistle away and extends his right arm horizontally.

Within a few moments, a gust of wind swirls around the leader. A mild tornado of debris twists in the air as the source of the wind gust comes into view amongst the flurry.

A large golden eagle, the one which had been circling high above, swoops down and grips the leather arm shroud with its mighty talons.

The eagle stretches his wings out as he lands, giving the leader an almost angelic appearance before it finds its balance and folds its wings away. It shines dark brown feathers with lighter golden-brown coloring along his napes. The eagle has additional white markings along his head and tail. It looks down at Tanika, tilting his head and blinking its predatory yellow eyes.

The leader feeds it a piece of meat before slipping a small leather hood over its beak and head, blinding it. He moves the eagle up to an unseen perch along his shoulders.

"Allies. Ha!" The other warriors seem to find his performance entertaining.

He steps to the side, hunching down to meet Nova.

"What is this word... 'Nova?' I have not heard this word." He says to Tanika.

His eyes remain fixed into Nova's, as they have staring match.

"It means 'star birth.'" She replies.

Snap! Nova lunges forward with a slight growl, nipping in the air toward the man's face. He flinches instinctively backward, startled. The eagle flaps his wings as it regains its balance. The man can only respond with a nervous laughter to save face.

"Star Birth! Fascinating... I don't thinking our netting will contain a Star Birth. Sorry men, you will be killed first when he breaks free. But...when I fight Star Birth and win, he will make a fine fur coat." He folds his arms as he stands, seemingly analyzing how Tanika will respond.

"It's *your* skin he will wear as a coat!" She hisses back at him.

"Good one!" He says before pausing. The men around him seem to look concerned. The leader continues.

"No. It's *your* people who wear wolf skins. Not ours." He pulls Tanika's spear from the ground before squatting down to meet her at eye level once more.

"What are you taking about?" She quips defensively.

He points her spear tip toward her. "Why do you approach our village with weapons of war??" He says inquisitively.

"They are not weapons of war! I am a hunter. Release me at once!" She replies.

"Ha! A girl hunter... with a wolf as an ally...now I've seen everything! I think if I release you, you'll finish the attack your people started and kill us all." He inhales slowly through his nose.

"I am no warrior. I don't know what happened...I came here because I want to help. I have seen the black smoke!"

"You've seen nothing." He retorts. "You wish to help? You're too late. I think you led your people

here.”

“I did no such thing! I have been exiled. I am no leader.”

“A likely story!” He injects sarcastically. “A girl hunter arrives holding a leader’s blade, with weapons of war, all after a sudden attack on my people? If I’m to believe you...can you command the wolf to spare our lives?”

“I can try.” She says ominously.

“You can try?” He replies. “Good enough! Let’s try it.” The leader says confidently.

“Are you crazy?” One of the men blurts out.

“Of course I am, but what more do we have to lose? Set the wolf free!” He booms toward them.

“Release me first!” Tanika demands.

He eyes her up and down. “Hm. Very well. Put your arms behind your back.”

She does as instructed. She shifts her shoulders to move her arms in the constrictive netting. A warrior lifts the netting up behind her and begins to tie Tanika’s wrists together.

“If you attempt anything, you and your wolf are dead.” He says matter-of-factly.

“Fine. If you or your men do anything to Nova or myself, I will show you what I can do with restrained wrists.” She says with confidence.

The leader grabs her netting and lifts it up over her. The other warrior stands her upright once he’s done tying her wrists together.

“Someday I would like to see what you could do with restraint.” He says with a grin. “Please, see to your ally.” He motions his arm over to Nova.

She walks around to Nova, still tangled in his own netting. Seeing him trapped this way makes her angry. She hunches down to see him.

“Nova, it’s alright. I’m alright.” He whines a confused tone as he tries to lick at her face. “We have to trust them...for now. Do *not* attack!”

“Why do you speak words at it?” One of them blurts out. “It won’t understand. It’s just a beast.”

She looks over at him. “He most certainly understands words. Don’t interrupt!”

The leader nods his head. “Continue.” He says to Tanika.

“We’re going to be alright.” She says to Nova.

He seems to understand despite his confused expression.

“Release the netting.” She says to them.

It takes a moment for one of the men to be brave enough to step close. He leans down and grabs the net, pulling it away from Nova and swiftly stepping away. He quickly aims his spear in a defensive

position. The rest of the men aim their spears in a synchronized militant fashion.

“Put your weapons away! Now!” She yells.

The leader motions for them to comply. They each holster their weapons, reluctantly. Nova growls and sidesteps, looking each man in the eye. He turns completely around to guard Tanika.

“Nova! It’s all right. Be at peace!” He slows his breathing, never making himself vulnerable as he moves around her. He sniffs at her wrist restraints before nipping at them, trying to free her.

She scoots away. “Not now. Stay with me.” He whines in anxiety but keeps by her side.

“Fascinating.” The leader says. “I never thought I would see such a thing. So far, you have spoken truth. What is your name, girl?”

“I am Tanika.” She straightens her posture. “What is your name?”

“I am called Anax.” He replies. “I am leader of the mighty P’taul. We will lead you and Star Birth to our village. Our elders will decide if the rest of your story is the truth. You will remain restrained, and walk ahead of us. We must move now, before nightfall.” He points his finger at the trailing black smoke.

“I agree, Anax.” She motions to Nova, who starts walking ahead of her. She follows him as the rest of them slowly gather behind, aiming their spears once more. They remain mostly silent as they trek forward.

One man behind the party is holding Tanika’s pack around his neck. He doesn’t carry any weapons. His right arm is missing from the elbow onward. He uses his left arm to open her pack, and sift through her belongings. He puts something in her pack up to his nose, and makes a peculiar expression.

“What are you doing, Protis?” Anax barks.

“She carries a stink weed. I’ve never seen it before.” Protis replies.

“Don’t put that in your mouth! It could be poison.” He pulls it back suddenly, still looking at it as they walk.

Tanika turns her head back. “That’s not poison! It’s sacred. It’s meant to bring tribes together!”

“I trust her. I will taste it!” He says jovially.

“It’s not meant for eating, it’s meant for smoking. It’s not yours it’s for everyone. Maybe I will share it, if you spare our lives!” She yells back.

“Enough! No talk. Put it away Protis!” Anax sounds a bit irritated.

Protis sighs and returns it to her pack. “You’re no fun, Anax. Can I at least touch the wolf’s fur?”

“If you wish to lose your other arm, you can try it!” Another man yells jokingly.

“What is an arm for, if not to lose it?” He quips back. The men start laughing.

“Enough!” Anax injects. “Keep walking.”

They don't have to travel much further until the village comes into view. A huge mountain of glacial ice surrounds an enclave. The glacial ice slopes down, blinding the source of the billowing smoke, which lies around the bend.

There are makeshift structures built up around the edge of the ice wall. Burned shards of wood and debris are scattered all around. Tanika squints her eyes to see people, which she can't.

Nova stops and appears cautious.

A familiar and faint voice carries down to her.

"Tanika! Tanika! Is that really you?"

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Chapter Twenty-Five

A young boy runs toward them. "You're alive!" He yells at Tanika, before stumbling to a stop. A look of fear strikes his face as he stares at Nova.

"It's alright!" She yells back at him.

Anax walks quickly in front of Tanika. He hunches down to the boy.

"You know this girl, Raj?"

"Yes! She saved me from her brother Demur!" Raj opens his fur coat, revealing a scar on his chest.

"I never thought I would see you again!"

Tanika slumps down as Raj runs up to hug her.

"When the wolves came, I got really scared and I hid in the forest. I thought you were dead!" He explains as he hugs her.

"I'm glad you're safe!" She says to him. Anax stands up.

"Demur...is your brother? Great! Fantastic. What a wonderful person he is! So much honor and integrity..." He trails off sarcastically.

"How come she's all tied up?!" Raj asks insistently.

"We have to be sure. I need to consult the elders."

"No you don't! She's good, not bad!" Raj looks up at him assuredly.

"Ha! Very well. I'll take the wisdom of a child over our elders today. Auctor! Please do the honors."

The man who analyzed Tanika's spear steps out of the group. He's the same height as Anax but more lean with a slightly feminine look. He steps behind Tanika and works to untie her restraints.

"Where are the rest of your people?" Tanika asks Anax.

He turns and motions the men to holster their weapons for good, ignoring her question. Auctor pulls

the straps away from her wrists. She pulls her arms in front of herself, rubbing them before hugging Raj again briefly.

“Raj, I want you to meet Nova.” She motions over to him. Raj walks toward him slowly. “It’s alright, he’s a friend.”

Raj walks near him cautiously extending his hand. Nova pulls his ears back in a friendly expression. He sniffs Raj’s hand before licking it. He laughs and runs back toward the P’tauli encampment. Nova barks playfully, and runs with him.

“He certainly likes you more than he does me!” Anax yells at him.

Raj throws open one of the large shelters. Nova waits at the entrance, his tail wagging.

“Come see!” He yells inside.

A group of children come out slowly. They are younger than Raj, boys and girls. They look disheveled; their faces are stoic until they see Nova, who greets them in a friendly way.

Their expressions start to change as they circle around Nova, approaching him without hesitation or fear. Nova nuzzles against them affectionately, letting them pet his fur. They start to smile in wonder and amazement, jabbering in curiosity.

A little girl holds a worn piece of rope up to Nova, allowing him to sniff it. He gently grips the rope in his mouth before shaking his head away, freeing it from her grasp.

“Hey!” she yells.

A few warriors pull their spears out and charge toward the wolf.

“Wait!” Anax booms at the men with authority. He steps in front of them with his arm out, blocking their movement. They look at each other with concern before watching Nova intently.

Nova darts away from the children, then hunches down with the rope on the ground, barking at them. Raj runs toward Nova and the rest start to follow, giggling. As they get closer, he grips the rope again and runs away at full speed.

The children boom with laughter and chase after him. Nova runs just fast enough for them to catch up before he darts in a circle, weaving and leading them between the shelters in the encampment. Their laughter echoes throughout the glacial surroundings along with their smattering footsteps.

One by one, the shelters open up. The elders living inside step out to witness the commotion. They watch the children playing with Nova in complete shock. They remain silent with dumbfounded expressions.

Raj finally grips the rope, trying to pull it away from Nova. He growls and refuses to let go, digging into the ground. Raj laughs as Nova shakes his head and frees it from his grasp, running away again. Tanika laughs.

“Amazing.” Anax comments. “These children... they have all watched their parents die. I never thought I would see joy return their lives.”

Tanika pauses for a moment. “If enemies can become friends, I think anything is possible.”

"Hm." He mutters.

"What happened here?" She inquires.

Anax turns away from her. "Auctor! Tell the elders to prepare council fire."

Auctor nods and walks toward the encampment with the rest of the warriors. Protis walks toward them. He bows politely before handing Tanika her belongings.

"We must talk more about the stink weed." He says with a grin.

"We will. Thank you." She slings everything around her shoulder and holsters her spear. He waves at her with his stump and walks toward the camp.

"Walk with me." Anax says to her, motioning toward the black smoke. Anax reaches behind his shoulders, nudging the eagle's feet. The eagle grips his arm shroud and he lowers it down again. He removes its hood slowly.

The creature blinks as it adjusts to the light, looking at Tanika briefly. It turns to meet Anax's eyes. He nods and raises his arm. The eagle stretches his wings and takes flight. The two of them watch as it lifts off and soars into the sky. It continues flying into the distance until it disappears.

"I never thought man could ally with the hawk." Tanika comments.

"I thought the same thing about the wolf." Anax replies. "The eagle is a symbol of power to us, but even power is fleeting. Ever since the famine, the eagle has to fly greater and greater distances for his hunt. Each time I free him, I fear there is a day where he will not return."

"Have you given him a name?" She asks.

"I have not. Perhaps you could help me find one?" He says as they walk.

"Certainly."

Anax looks at the ground. "The night your people came...we were having council fire." Tanika looks at him attentively. "They came wearing wolf skins and bones. We weren't prepared."

They slowly approach the bend in the glacial wall. Tanika shudders as the smell of death begins to fill her nostrils.

"We don't allow the children to cross this point. Not that they want to."

Anax stops and looks at Tanika. He motions his arm for her to walk ahead of him. She hesitates a moment. Anax looks at her insistently. She takes deep breath and braces herself before walking around the bend.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Six**

"This area was our trading post." Anax explains. "People gathered here daily and nightly. They were telling stories, speaking their minds, sharing foods and crafts."

Tanika holds her mouth as they walk around the ruins. Ghostly shells of wooden structures jet out amongst piles of burnt debris. Burnt animal skins are scattered amongst black smoldering wood shards.

"We have tried to extinguish the flames, but as you can see...deep down they continue to burn."

Tanika can feel warmth radiating from the center of the billowing black smoke. She gasps as she starts to see dead bodies. An occasional arm jets out of the debris, forever reaching toward the sky.

"You asked where my people were? We have a handful of warriors, some elders, and children without parents. The rest of the P'tauli are here before you." Anax steps over the body of a young woman, face down in the ground with arrows imbedded into her back.

"First, they took our horses. Do you see the prints in the ground?"

Tanika sniffs. "Yes." She says solemnly.

"We didn't imagine our own horses would be used to trample us. Even the children."

Tanika averts her eyes as they walk by more bodies. They have expressions frozen in fear. Two elders slowly place ceremonial shrouds over them in rows strewn about the frozen tundra.

"I don't know if your people sing glorious songs of war. Ours do, but none of the songs mention the dead children. They seem to suffer the most when - "

"Enough!" Tanika yells.

Anax stops abruptly, turning to look at her fiercely. "What did you say?"

"I said enough!" Tanika yells shakily, tears streaming down her face. "I've seen enough!"

Anax steps closer to her. "You've seen nothing."

"Don't tell me I've seen nothing. I saw my friends.. I saw my grandfather.. Don't tell me - "

"Stop! I Don't blame.. It's not you I blame..." Anax continues. "It's myself." He pauses before leading her away from the ruins. "When your brother came, he gave our warriors a choice. Either join him, or perish with the rest. Many were noble, and fought back. Many did not. Now, his army is twice as large."

"I'm sorry." She says.

"We destroyed our weapons so he could not get them. He took everything else, including our women. Do you see the ice wall?" He points to a slope of broken snowy debris.

"There was an avalanche?" She asks.

Anax continues. "Many people lived in our trading post, but most of our people made homes within the ice. When people didn't go along with Demur...his warriors destroyed the supports, and the ice collapsed around them. There are families in there...families that will remain in the ice forever. It was all very deliberate."

"I wish...I wish it had been me instead." Tanika says.



"What do you mean? With them?" He asks with a slight confusion.

"No..I mean, I was supposed to be leader, not Demur. It was the will of my Grandfather."

He nods. "Your grandfather was a good man." Anax places a hand on her shoulder, and turns her away from the destruction. They begin walking back to camp.

"You knew my Grandfather?" She asks.

"Yes, I did. When my father was leader, we'd meet with him. I told my father that your Grandfather was going to stab us in the back."

"You did?" She inquires.

Anax laughs. "Yes, I said it right in front of him! He just smiled and told me it was good that I didn't give him my trust. I wasn't expecting that at all." Anax smiles. "He told me to never believe anything he or anyone ever said until they can fulfill on their promises. After that I never showed him disrespect. He just - he had a way about himself."

"He did." Tanika says and smiles. The two of them make their way around the bend, toward the encampment. Raj comes running toward them.

"Tanika! Your wolf ran away!" He yells between heavy breaths.

"It's alright." She says to him as he stumbles to a stop.

"Nova is like your Eagle. Sometimes he will vanish, but he will always return. You may hear him cry to the Moon tonight." She rustles his hair playfully.

"I think you and others had too much energy for Star Birth and scared him away! Is everyone ready for council fire?" Anax says to him. He nods up and down.

"Join the others and prepare the drums." Raj runs toward the camp ahead of them.

"Our council fire might be different than yours." Anax explains, "Our elders will want to question you. I'm sure you have much insight."

They walk a slight distance away from camp, opposite the direction of the ruins. Unseen from view, a type of amphitheater structure has been dug into the ground. Tanika is impressed with the craftsmanship. A series of concentric circles lead in a descending spiral down toward the center, the deepest portion.

Wood and bone structures are finely fastened together along the edges of the structure for support. The mid section of the rings is an extended platform with drums precisely spaced apart from one another. The drums themselves look like large circular wells with outstretched animal skin stretched around each one, fastened tightly with rope in concurrent triangular shapes. A large fire pit is crafted in the center, with the highest-ranking elders sitting along the inner most rings.

Auctor adds wood into the pit as Protis makes his way down toward the center. Soon the other warriors are helping the orphan children find seating along the outer rings.

"Everyone attends the council?" She asks.

"Yes." Anax replies as they descend. "Everyone that's left."

Auctor approaches them. "It's ready, we're just waiting for you."

Anax nods. He leads Tanika down to the center. She notices a few of the people looking at her with suspicion.

"Welcome everyone!" Anax says with a booming voice. "Once again as we sit in our circle, we see the vast number of empty seats." He pauses. "It fills me with sorrow and regret. I'm sure many of you feel the same. We will rebuild. We will continue as always."

He motions for Tanika to stand up. "On our hunt today, we found an outcast from the western tribe."

A few people murmur quietly amongst each other.

Anax continues, "She is not with the others. She convinced my hunting party, and she will convince anyone who doubts tonight. Many of you have already seen... she brings an ally wolf."

He looks over at Tanika. "Will star birth attend this council fire?" She smiles. "I don't know. I think he is checking the surroundings."

"Hmm... Well, let us begin."

Auctor hands Anax a flint and stone. He holds them in each hand as he ceremoniously bows while handing them over. Anax steps into the center of the pit, kneeling down.

"Let it commence." He says before striking the objects together, causing a spark.

He collides them a few more times in an almost mechanical fashion until the tinder pile ignites. He adds a bit of kindling to the tiny flames, fanning them before holding a larger stick straight up in the center of the fire.

One by one, the elders take a section from the outer kindling and lean it on the centerpiece while Anax holds on to it. They each walk in a circle, adding to the structure until it becomes a somewhat conical shape.

"We are one!" Anax says before he pulls his hand away.

The flames engulf the structure. He graciously bows and each elder returns to his or her seat. Tanika watches intently. She can feel the heat radiating throughout the encircled structure.

The warmth of the fire quickly overwhelms the cold night air. One by one each council removes their outer layer of fur coating. Tanika removes her coating until she's down to a shorter two-piece fur shroud. Her top is sleeveless but covers from her neck to her midriff, though she's quick to wrap it up with her coat.

Tanika's lower portion is a sort of primitive skirt, half of the portion covers her left knee while the cut line moves up her body a bit like a spiral, exposing her right leg higher on up. The people around the fire are about as conservatively dressed.

Warriors in the circle eye Tanika up a down as she crosses her legs. Anax seems to barely notice her as he talks with Auctor quietly.

Tanika shifts around a bit, feeling slightly uncomfortable as the whole event seems to have become less formal. People murmur amongst themselves as Protis sits down next to Tanika.

"Greetings!" He says joyfully.

She embraces him in a hug as he tries to wrap his missing arm stump around her.

“Wolf girl, can we talk about the stink weed? Do you have it with you?”

She smiles and reaches into her bag. “Yes, well...when we would smoke it, it was always at council fire like tonight. But, I thought there was more to the ceremony tonight?” She asks while digging through her belongings.

“We P’tauli are, well, how do you say? Sometimes we are not so formal. We have structure until the structure becomes a nuisance. There is a set structure to our fire council, yes, but are we in a hurry? No. Not even in these times. Everyone is distracted with their own distractions.”

“Young girl!” Yells one of the elders, interrupting their conversation.

Tanika looks over at him. He sits with both hands resting on a walking stick pointed down at the dirt between his feet. His fur garb is wrinkled and wraps around his body like an ancient robe. His frail body has a slight shake to it as he looks at her with squinted eyes. His sagged eyelids and rigid face convey a permanent expression of joy along with a sense of innocence even his aged days.

“Sweet girl! I wish for you to tell me about this wolf you call Nova.”

Tanika sits upright, never evading his eyes. “I ...I’ll tell you what I can. There is a lot about Nova I don’t understand myself.” She replies to him.

“Speak up!” The Elder yells at her.

“She says she doesn’t know much of anything but she might tell you the little she has!” Auctor yells to the elder. Anax turns to listen in.

“I didn’t say that.” She says back.

“Tell us about the wolf!” Raj injects from the outer circle. “How did you make the wolf friends with people?” He pushes his way forward in the circle with other kids echoing Raj’s curiosity.

“Raj, I didn’t make him become friends. Nova chose to - ”

“What do the children wish to know?” The elder asks Auctor, who scoots closer to him.

“They want to know how Tanika became allies with the wolf!”

Anax folds his arms with a slight grin. “I wish to know that too!” He yells back at her. She shifts uncomfortably in her seat.

“There was a night in my village when there was a...a purge. That was the night the wolves came. And they attacked us.”

“Is that how you got those scratches on your legs?” Raj asks, pointing his finger. Tanika looks down to see scratches clearly made by Nova. She tugs at her shroud, trying to cover them in her embarrassment.

“Raj...not now.” She says through gritted teeth.

“The boy wants to know if the scratches on her legs are from the wolf!” Auctor yells to the elder.

"Wolf scratches on her what?" The elder yells back at him.

"Listen!" She injects.

"They killed the wolves and then they tried to kill me. Nova is the last of his tribe."

"Are you certain of that?" The elder responds. Scratching his chin.

"I want to know, how come the wolf scratched you if you two are friends?" Raj says insistently.

"Raj, aren't you supposed to be seated elsewhere?" Tanika asks him with a hint of harshness.

"Ha ha ha!" Anax laughs, seeming to enjoy Tanika's discomfort. "Raj, will you and the children take the drums to the cave?"

Anax motions up and away from the circle.

"But we just got the drums in place! Are we not going to play them later?"

"Yes, you will have to go back and get them when we're ready."

"I don't want to do that it's a waste!" He yells back, slumping over.

"You will do it because I'm your leader, and I said so! Go now!" He flaps his hand authoritatively at Raj.

"But I want to hear how Tanika made the wolf Nova a friend!" Raj stipulates.

"This really is a historic event, we must know every detail." Protis adds to the verbal onslaught.

"I don't remember much of it, sorry.." Tanika says, shifting in her seat once more.

Anax places his elbow on his knee, leaning in to rest his chin on his fist like a statue as he listens.

"The wolf will single out the one separated from the herd, the one left behind." Another elder says to her. "There must be something you can remember sweet child?" He chimes. "What was it you did to earn the wolf's trust?"

"Yes, tell us what happened! What did you do?" Raj touts.

Everyone leans in to hear her response.

"I, well...Nova..." She trails off.

"Take your time child, but tell us everything. Every detail." The elder says while he drags his walking stick around in the dirt.

"It was...I didn't expect our alliance."

"Yes? Go on." An unseen voice adds.

"Well, it was simple. You see, Nova, he..."

"She's trying to get something out about the wolf!" Auctor yells toward the elder, interrupting again.

"Nova was what?" Another person yells.

"Nova was...hungry, and I fed him." Tanika slowly says.

A silence befalls the crowd.

"Oh!" The eldest says, breaking the silence. "That makes perfect sense!"

Tanika chuckles a bit. "Yes, well - "

"The wolf will let man do all the hunting - all of the work. Then, the wolf will rest.. even if it's only for scraps. Ha! Strange wolf chose a woman. A non-hunter."

"No! I am a hunter. I learned from my people and through him. We work together!" She retorts.

"You do not know the hunt! You do not know the hunt, until you hunt the mountain makers!" A warrior barks at her.

"Enough!" Anax injects. "Enough questions tonight. There are drums that need to be secured by Raj and his friends. Right Raj?"

"Yes..." Raj says defeated.

"Good! Now scatter like the wind!" Anax and the others laugh as the kids scramble to carry the drums away.

"Now that they're gone, wolf girl.." Tanika looks over to Anax, smiling a bit from embarrassment. "Tell us about this smoke herb?"

She clears her throat. "Well, this plant is said to bring knowledge, and heal, and do magical things. So our tribe would smoke it during our council fire."

Anax smiles "I see. Well in honor of our guest, maybe we should prepare some?"

"Yes!" Protis yells immediately.

"I think we have our first person to try it. Fitting!" Anax says with much laughter in the circle.

Tanika hands the ceremonial pipe to Protis. "You will have to hold the pipe with your arm, but I will light the fire for you." Tanika explains.

"You mean I can't ignite it with my stump?" He quips.

Tanika takes a small stick from the fire and lights the end of the pipe. Protis inhales, and coughs out the smoke.

"Are you still alive?" Anax asks him jokingly.

"I feel...I'm better than alive! And.. I'm hungry!" Protis exclaims.

Tanika laughs and motions for him to pass the herb around the circle. Each member partakes, regardless of hesitation. When the pipe comes back around to her, she politely refuses and hands it again to Protis.

"Why don't you partake?" Anax questions.

"I wish to give away my share, so that others may enjoy." She says toward a grinning Protis.

"That's it men, she's poisoned us!" Anax says with laughter.

"You know it's not true!" She says back jovially. "This Moon is... it's not my Moon to partake."

"Who are we to impose?" Protis exclaims. Tanika ignites the pipe for him once more and he takes a long drag.

"Hmm. Interesting." Anax says thoughtfully. "I believe it's time to feast on today's kill!" The small crowd shifts their attention to Anax's announcement.

"When did you kill? You didn't have anything when we came to the village." Tanika directs at Anax.

He ignores her question. "Auctor! go get Raj and the others. Have them bring the drums back. Don't let them argue."

Tanika shakes away her perplexity.

The feast commences once the children return. Large sections of meat are distributed evenly to everyone. Tanika finds the taste a bit bland, vowing to teach the P'taul about seasoning. She still can't shake the question of the meal's origin.

"The taste is twice as good!" Protis exclaims. "It must be the sacred herb!" He adds.

Once the feast is over, warriors begin to perform with the drums. They synchronously bang large padded bones into the multi-sized instruments. The vibrations send a thunderous rumble throughout the circle, as members within feel compelled to dance around the flames. The marching rhythm smatters through competing polyrhythms from other players.

Tanika finds the improvisation impressive and loses herself in the rhythm. Other elders talk amongst themselves away from the loud music. Anax moves away from Auctor to find Tanika. He dances alongside her.

"You seem to have survived the council fire!" Anax yells at her between continuous beats.

She smiles. "I hope so!"

Anax gets closer to her, still dancing. He moves his hands symbolically over her body, incorporating the movements into his dance.

"What's this?" Tanika asks.

"This is how man and woman dance with each other in our tribe. Try it!"

She smiles and masks his movements in her dance. Her hands move over his body without touching him, along his shoulders and back, then along his muscular chest.

"Yes! Now you're getting it!" Anax says loudly to her.

"I hope this doesn't mean something in your tribe!" She replies back to him.

"Only that you are now my servant!" Anax says jokingly. She laughs in return.

"I want you to know that Auctor prepared a place for you to sleep. You will be protected. Where is Star Birth?" He questions.

"Sometimes he sleeps in the woods." She explains to him.

"I have things to prepare. Auctor will show you to your shelter."

"Thank you." Tanika replies.

"Rest well this night. Tomorrow, I have much to tell you. It's very important. Can I trust you?"

"What is it?" She says impulsively.

"A secret I wish to reveal to you." Anax says. "Something that I've even kept from my own people."

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Anax and Tanika walk beyond the smoldering ruins. Nova follows obediently, sniffing the ground in all directions as they go. The morning sun only mildly helps warm each of them in the cold air. Anax has remained quiet during most of the walk.

"Nova seems... less hostile toward you." Tanika says, finally breaking the silence.

"Yes, that's good." He replies bluntly.

"I was unsure how Nova would react to a large group of people." Tanika adds.

"He will always follow me, even if it's at a distance. Maybe soon he will sleep closer to the village."

Anax shifts his shoulder pack. "Yes, perhaps. And perhaps someday he will trust me fully. It will be difficult. I am the one who threw that net on him." He chuckles. It's the first time in the day he's shown levity.

Nova turns his head toward them, as if he knows he's being talked about.

"My father always said netting disrupts trust. Between you and me though, I think Star Birth got himself captured to protect you."

"You do?" She asks.

"Certainly. It's as you said, he goes anywhere that you do. When a wolf gets an objective, it's very hard to stop him from completing it."

"I know how that is." Tanika says slyly. "Is it much further?" She adds.

"You will see soon enough. I want to ask, Have you ever been beyond your village? And I don't mean toward us but..the other way beyond?" He looks over at her.

Tanika shakes her head.

Anax continues, "Beyond your village to the east, there is another great wall of ice. This one does not meet ocean like our ice does. This ice stretches over the land, a vast land unknown to us."

"Really? I have never seen it." She says curiously.

"Soon the ice will melt away, and the land beyond will be revealed to us."

"Sounds like a great story." Tanika replies.

"It could be. Or, it could be something very bad."

Tanika furrows her brow as she listens.

"Our people speak of another tale, an old legend. It says one day the Earth decided to give man fire for knowledge and warmth. Man loved the gift of fire, and used it wisely for a short while. One day man used fire for war, and the Earth discovered it."

"What happened when Earth found out?" Tanika asks.

"It was not good for man." Anax finishes.

"It reminds me of a song my people sing, a similar tale." Anax nods as they trek away from the village.

"There was a time of war long ago. People fought so much; they forgot their families and they destroyed the land. It made the sea angry, and it rose up until it covered the plains. Soon the sea threatened to cover all the land. The people went to a sky dancer - a great eagle. His name was Bunjil. They asked Bunjil to help them stop the sea from rising. He agreed to do so, as long as people changed their ways. He made them promise to respect each other and the laws. When the people agreed, he flew into the sea, and dove inside the water."

"Then what happened?" Anax asks with a tone of genuine interest. Tanika smiles before continuing.

"The people thought Bunjil had drowned, until there was a great wave. Bunjil came out of the wave and flew into the sky. The sea subsided, and Bunjil became the stars above our head. I can show you which ones during council fire."

"It's a good story for tonight." Anax replies.

"I think you should name your eagle Bunjil. Maybe he will stay with your people." Tanika says to him.

"Bunjil... perhaps that's why the eagle hawk leaves us...because the people broke their promise. I like the name."

The terrain continues on a rolling set of glacial hills and slopes. The P'tauli village disappears behind them. Nova runs ahead of them.

"If the ice is to melt away, we should prepare. That is why I've brought you this far." He says to her as they watch Nova follow his nose around a bend.

"There was one thing your brother did not find. Star Birth seems to know the way." Anax says with a smile.

A concealed pathway wraps around a larger glacial formation. Anax motions for Tanika to follow it ahead of him. She weaves through the narrow pass until she finds Nova pacing around a pile of dead tree limbs piled around a large vertical glacial wall.

Anax walks over to the limbs and brushes them to the side. Clearing away the debris reveals large sections of broken ice piled around. Anax lifts each section of ice and carefully rolls each one to the side. With each chunk of ice removed, a formation is slowly revealed.

Tanika tilts her head to examine it. A white object reflects the mid day sunlight. It's smooth and bends to form half of an archway within the ice.

"Is that a bone?" She asks while he continually clears more debris.

"It is a tusk." Anax says between lifting.

"It's from the mountain makers. The mammoth that our people hunt."

Tanika puts her hand on her hip, looking down at him with a raised eyebrow. He turns to look up at her.

"What?!" He says with energy as she folds her arms.

"You do *not* hunt the mammoth." She replies sternly. Nova barks at Anax in solidarity.

Anax smiles. "We hunt the mammoth." He turns his back to her to continue clearing debris.

"You cannot have command of the hawk and hunt the mammoth!" She barks at him.

Anax laughs. "I am telling you as I stand here and as I breathe... that we hunt the mammoth."

He clears away enough debris to reveal a second mammoth tusk finely intertwined with additional bone and wood forming the top of the archway structure. He turns his attention to removing the lower portion of debris.

"My people tried to hunt the mammoth, but our spears would not kill them. It was said that they were not meant for hunting." She says to Anax while petting Nova's fur.

"The P'taul have many secrets. We can make weapons sharp enough to cut skin with ease. It is very dangerous to hunt the mammoth. Warriors often die in the hunts. The worst is when someone dies and the rest of us come home with empty hands."

Anax rolls away more large sections, revealing an entrance to a vast cave.

"Our people became so good at the hunt, they began to do it for sport. They killed for fun, for glory, for waste. Soon there were few mammoth left. I tried to warn them." Anax says, trailing off.

"Sounds like my tribe." Tanika adds.

"There is one mammoth I track...one that I still try to hunt. She is very stubborn. Much like you."

Anax grunts as he pushes away the final chunk of ice debris. The entirety of the archway is revealed. Daylight shines down through the opening, revealing a great chasm within the glacial wall.

Nova walks to the entrance weaving his head as he looks down the tunnel. He turns to look at Tanika

as if to get permission to enter.

“Welcome to the collection.” Anax says as he motions for them to enter.

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## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

Nova walks into the cave as Tanika lowers her head to enter. She traces her hand along the melted frozen structure of the ice wall.

“The air feels warm! I was not expecting that.”

The end of the tunnel appears to connect to a larger opening.

“This place was discovered by Protis.” Anax explains. “The ice holds many mysteries.”

Nova confidently trots ahead into the larger area, sniffing around the edges.

Her eyes widen as she enters the room after Nova. It’s a large nexus with other tunnels diverging in different directions. Many of them seem to be constructed by the P’taul but have been left unfinished.

The ice varies in height as it forms natural steps and slopes nearing each pathway. Stalactites and Stalagmites are richly formed and spaced apart throughout the spacious area. The walls stretch upward to great heights, shifting from blue and green hues into a white ceiling high above. The ceiling has a cloudy translucence that allows enough sunlight to illuminate the entire area.

Nova’s steps echo throughout the room as he disappears down one of the offshoot tunnels.

“What is this place? It’s amazing!” Her voice swirls around the vast cavern walls like fluid.

“We P’taul have an appreciation for the ice. There is much to learn from it before it melts away.” Anax folds his arms as she walks around in admiration.

Tanika walks to the other side of the room, tracing her fingers along a peculiar ice formation. Within the ice wall is embedded a series of green vines, artistically weaved around other green vegetation. The frozen plant life appears to be intentionally placed as it weaves between multicolored flowers.

“What is this? It’s beautiful.” She says to Anax. “Did you find it this way?”

Anax points down a tunnel to their left, the one Nova disappeared into.

“Do you hear it?” He says to her.

She leans in to listen. The subtle sound of running water echoes throughout. Tanika follows the winding tunnel until the sound gets louder. She enters another beautiful blue area with a small waterfall intermittently pouring into a deep green pool of water. Nova sniffs at the edge, walking around a complex ring of stones placed there to contain the pool.

“Star Birth is wise to not drink of that water.” Anax says as he enters the room with them.

“How come?” She replies, cautiously looking into the green pool and at her own reflection.

"This water will freeze anything it touches. Have you ever wondered how Protis lost his arm?" He says, nodding his head toward the pool.

"It was this water?"

Anax nods. "Protis was curious and touched the water. In an instant, his arm was completely frozen. He was amazed by it, but as he displayed it to us he hit his arm along the glacial wall. It shattered and became as dust."

Tanika raises her eyebrows. Anax chuckles.

"I told him I would put his arm back together, but I cannot find all the pieces."

Nova moves away from the pool and treks onward through the labyrinth of tunnels.

"Nova, don't go too far." She says to him.

"All tunnels lead back to the center, don't worry. There is a second fountain much like this one, on the other side. Let me take you there."

Tanika and Anax walk beyond the green pool. He leads her through a similar cavern, not too far away. The next room they enter has a waterfall similar to the green one. This one emits steam but doesn't seem to have an affect on the ice around it. The water is cloudy, with a white milky consistency.

"This pool will melt anything. Another one you don't want to touch."

"What is the purpose of something like this?" Tanika asks with curiosity.

"We are not sure, but Protis and the elders were studying it. You see, when the waters of this pool meet the waters of the other one, you can do some amazing things."

Anax leads her down another tunnel. She can hear Nova's footsteps in the distant tunnel system. Along the walls she sees various hand crafted tools frozen within.

"It's difficult to get the right mixture, but once you do, you can suspend life within the ice."

As they keep walking, Tanika studies each frozen object embedded within. There are miscellaneous animal bones and plants each lined up in various stages of growth. Another section contains a large school of fish. She looks down, studying each of them.

"We can preserve anything and forge it into a block of ice. That's how we made these walls." He says to her.

"It's amazing. Did my Grandfather know about this place?"

Anax nods. "I took him here personally. Remember when I told you about my people hunting the mammoth?"

"Yes, I still don't know if I believe it." She quips.

"When my people were leaving mammoth bodies to waste away, I had the elders preserve the meat in secret. Down there." He points down another great tunnel as they reach the nexus.

"I told your Grandfather that we were going to solve the famine. We did."

"You have a collection, of everything?" She asks him.

"Not everything, but enough to feed a tribe for many sun voyages. We have a collection of seeds, but no decent soil to plant them. Your Grandfather said our tribes could trade, and we could use your sacred meadow. A shame that will no longer happen."

"Yes, a shame. Our meadow stopped bearing food." She says while examining a strange object in another ice wall. It's a section of tree bark with a series of strange carvings colored with dark ink.

"What is this?"

"I was hoping you could tell me." Anax replies.

"Me? I've never seen anything like it."

Anax folds his arms. "Strange. We found them near your village."

"There are more?" She asks eagerly. "And they were found near us?"

Anax nods. "We think the symbols represent words. It's always the same message."

"What does it say?"

Anax leans forward and traces his finger along each symbol. "We think this symbol represents 'father' and this symbol is 'eternity.' This one is 'gift.' This other one is 'sun' or 'power.'"

Tanika nods as he continues explaining.

"We think this message says: 'Here is a gift to eternity Father. Eternity Father gift me the Sun in return.'"

Tanika's face is flushed. "Demur! It came from Demur!"

Anax pauses with a look of concern.

"What?" She asks him eagerly.

"There is more. These messages...they were found with dead boys, usually very young. Hunters...they were tied to a tree, usually with a wound in their chest or heart. We thought it was a member of our tribe, but we never found the culprit."

Tanika collapses to the ground. She covers her face before punching the ice as hard as she can. The loud thud echoes throughout the cavern. Anax places his hand on her shoulder comfortingly.

"We thought we were losing our hunters to the beasts of the wild...but it was just a ritual. A pointless evil ritual! What a fool!" She stands up with force, brushing herself off.

"Are you alright?" Anax asks.

"I'm fine." She says sniffing.

"Walk with me." He says calmly, guiding her down the final passageway.

"Did my Grandfather tell you... that we were to bond?" She asks him, trying to change the subject.

Anax sighs. "I knew I was supposed to bond with a woman...But I never wanted to." Tanika looks at him curiously.

"You didn't?"

"Well, no. You see, I never..."

"Never, what?" She asks insistently.

"I never...well, I prefer other... men." Anax says with a hint of reluctance.

"And...what?" She responds.

"And...your tribe doesn't find this wrong?" He asks with puzzlement.

Tanika laughs slightly. "No. It is not wrong in our eyes."

"Well it is a great shame in my tribe. Auctor and I must keep it a secret."

The two of them enter another large room. It has a pool in the center, with handcrafted waterways converging from two directions.

"This is where we forge life into the ice. We've constructed channels for the two water sources. Mixing the two is not easy. It is a craft that may be lost to us, since Demur slaughtered most of elders that studied it."

Tanika turns her head as she hears Nova approaching from another tunnel. "Auctor is your other?" She says with a smile. "You hide it very well."

Anax smiles too. "Auctor is threatened by you. I can read him. He is jealous even though he has not said it."

Nova pants happily as he approaches Tanika. "Tell Auctor not to worry, I have my own other." She says while gently scratching the top of Nova's head.

"I want you to know that trust you to keep these secrets." Anax replies.

"I will keep your secrets, if you keep my secret." Tanika says gently.

"Thank you. But, you have a secret?" He says inquisitively.

"Yes."

She smiles, placing her hands on her tummy. She looks down at her hands.

"I am carrying a child."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Anax folds his arms, taking his signature astute stance. "You don't look like you are. I mean... how

do you know?"

Tanika smiles. "I just do."

He smiles in return. "What I meant to say is, I wish many blessings to you and your child. We P'taul have an announcement ceremony everyone partakes in around the fire. We'll prepare it for you tonight."

"I'd rather not do the ceremony...at least, not tonight. Can we...wait? I mean no disrespect..."

Anax scratches his neck. "Of course. I want you to know that our women elders can tend to you if you need anything, especially when the time comes. Don't worry. We'll protect you."

"Thank you. It means a lot to me."

"I will tell you the same thing I told Raj when we rescued him...you are P'taul now, always and forever."

Tanika embraces Anax in a hug, feeling a tremendous sense of relief.

"I did not think I would ever have a tribe again." She says in his ear before pulling away from him.

"Whatever there is to face, we will face it together. That is why I wanted to show you this place. If anything happens to me, or if you need to come here for any reason, now you know. There are only a few others who do. We must protect it."

Nova circles around the two of them, and then sniffs the edge of the pool. He lifts a hind leg to mark his territory on a stone. The two of them laugh.

"I think that means Star Birth approves, or does not approve. I'm not sure." Anax says with a grin.

"Nova approves, I'm sure." The two of them begin walking toward the nexus.

"I hope that your child's father did not perish in the purge." Anax says with a slight reluctance.

"Thankfully he did not." She replies.

"That is good. Does he know about the child?"

"I'm sure he must know." She replies with certainty.

"You two must have been separated in the purge. He is your other, and when we finish rebuilding, I will find a way to reunite the two of you."

Tanika brushes her fur coating and the back of her neck, keeping an awkward silence.

"Is your other still living in village?" He asks.

Nova trots ahead of them into the nexus.

"No." She says bluntly.

"He is living in the wild, as you were? We can use Bunjil to find him. Do not worry. We will find him before your brother does." Anax promises her as they step into the nexus.

Tanika turns to face him. "Anax, I appreciate your efforts...but it's not necessary. My other is always with me."

His thick eyebrows scrunch together in confusion.

"I don't understand. There is no one here but us."

Tanika takes a few steps away from him before slowly slumping to her knees. Nova turns and trots toward her. She smiles before sitting down and meeting him face to face. Her hands slowly and sensually move down his back as Nova starts to lick her lips. She closes her eyes, digging into his fur as if pulling him closer. She opens her mouth, allowing his tongue in.

They kiss each other passionately for a few moments. Tanika has trouble pulling away from him, but she finally does. She softly bites her lower lip, feeling sensually flushed. She hugs Nova, scratching his fur as he rests his chin on her shoulder. The two of them turn to face Anax, who looks back at them with a priceless expression.

"What are you trying to tell me?" He says while scratching his chin.

"It will be many Moons before I give birth. Even though he is very small, I can feel him kicking inside me. It's like he is running in a dream. Even now, as we speak." She says as she stands up.

"Ha! Not possible. None of this...none of what you say. You are playing a joke. I'm no fool, but it was a good effort."

She smiles. "I can't explain it, but...there was a night when we were together. We saw the green aurora in the sky. The dancing colors took the shape of a wolf. It was then that I knew...I knew I would carry his son."

Tanika lifts her fur coat, revealing her tummy. She places Anax's hand on it. He pauses.

"Yes, I feel it but..."

He leans forward to examine her belly. The imprint of a tiny wolf paw stretches her skin from within.

Anax pulls back in astonishment and places both of his hands on top of his head. He takes a deep breath, briefly turning his back to Tanika. She pulls her fur coat back down.

"Now... I have truly seen everything." He says before turning back around to face her, placing his arms at his sides.

Tanika places her hands on her hips, and raises an eyebrow.

"Do you hunt the mammoth?" She asks with a slight grin and sarcastic tone.

"Do I hunt the...Ha! Ha ha! You are very funny, wolf girl. Yes, I hunt the mammoth."

Tanika looks down at Nova, who looks up at her, panting happily and wagging his tail. She looks back at Anax, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"Take me. Take me on the hunt!"

Anax smiles. "I've been waiting for you to say that."

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## Chapter Thirty

"...Then, whoosh!" Tanika moves her arm upward dramatically.

The firelight dances around the children all huddled together around Nova. He chews on a leftover deer bone from the night's feast.

"Bunjil and his family flew to the sky and became those stars!"

The fire cracks and pops, sending wispy embers into the air, seemingly on cue. She points at the pan shaped constellation twinkling above them in the night sky. All of them arch their heads upward to see.

"He is always there, watching over us."

Some of the children hold their hands up to block the firelight, getting a better view.

"Will he ever return?" a boy asks.

"Will our Bunjil become a star too?" adds a girl.

The rest of their voices yammer over each other. Tanika smiles and steps back from her dramatic pose.

"Maybe someday, when there is no hate in the world."

"Why does your tribe hate us?" One of them asks.

"Yes! Why did you make war on us?"

Tanika slumps down a bit. "I don't know...it's not so simple, you see..."

A young warrior sitting in the outer ring stands up. "What does your tribe say about it?" He yells over everyone.

Tanika pauses. "There were things that happened before any of us were born. Choices were made long before any of us could have a say. Our songs tell of a time when..."

"What? What do your songs say?" He injects defensively.

"We..we sing about the great walk, and the time the P'taul took our land and horses..."

"We P'taul did no such thing! Your songs are false!"

Raj stands up to join in. "No! You are wrong!" He yells back at the warrior.

"Raj it's ok." Tanika says, trying to stop the escalation as the mood starts to shift.

"The western tribe lies and breaks their promises!"

Nova's head perks up, sensing hostility. Anax stands up with authority. "Enough! It is in the past."



"Is *that* in the past?" He yells at Anax, pointing toward the smoldering ruins.

Auctor decides to join the fray. "You will be in the past, if you do not show Tanika respect!"

Anax places his hand on his shoulder, trying to calm him down. The young warrior grips at his spear.

"You are all fools and will join the rest if we continue to trust the westerners!" The children become silent with a look of confused concern. Anax steps forward.

"Your father was a fool to trust them, as you are now!" The warrior yells ingratiatingly at him.

"You are done with this fire. Return to your shelter." Anax says sternly.

The fire is the only thing making noise as they stare at each other fiercely. The tension is palpable as the young warrior huffs while he gathers his belongings, storming out of the circle.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - " Tanika says to them.

"It's not you who should apologize, it is us." Auctor says, interrupting her.

"Little Raj showed us his true bravery and skill today during the hunt!" Anax booms, changing the subject.

"Really? Does that mean I can join you in the mammoth hunt tomorrow?" He says gleefully.

"You may join. It is time." Anax says smiling.

"Yes!" Raj dances around the fire enthusiastically. The other children chime in begging to go, but Anax ignores them. The elders laugh and talk amongst each other as levity returns to the group once more. Tanika feels something tugging at her shroud. She looks down to see a little girl looking up at her.

"Can we run with the wolf?" She asks softly.

"Yes, of course. Don't go too far, stay by the village." Tanika says with a smile.

The little girl joins the other orphans. She picks up the bone and throws it in the air. Nova barks and chases after it. The rest of them laugh and run with him. The remaining warriors circle around Anax and Auctor as they discuss tomorrow's hunt.

Tanika finds a seat at the edge of the fire, relaxing as she stares into the flames. As everyone talks amongst each other, Protis casually joins her.

"Apologies for my tribe this evening." He says, looking down at her.

"Oh, thank you Protis. It's all right. I understand. Please sit down."

He smiles and sits next to her. "Some wounds never heal. I should know." He looks down at his half-arm.

"I am sorry for your injury." She says to him.

"It's alright." He says honestly. "I gave it up in the name of discovery. It was for a good cause, and I would give it again for something just as important."

Tanika smiles and brushes her hair behind her ear.

"I wanted to ask you something." Protis says with a slight reluctance.

"You may ask me anything!" Tanika replies comfortably.

"Your bond with Nova, it seems quite strong."

She shifts in her seat slightly. "Yes, it is quite strong."

"I think I know just how strong it is." Protis returns.

"You...you do?" She asks with a bit of surprise.

He nods. "Before the attack on our village, I owned a horse. She was very smart, strong, and beautiful. She had a shiny brown coat with spotted white all over. I would never let her go on the hunts."

"I see. Why are you telling me this?" She says inquisitively.

"There was a day I was feeding her sweet grass and cleaning her fur as I do..."

"Yes?"

"Yes, and well...she made her... affections known to me. I couldn't help but feel the same for her and well...before I knew it, we became as one."

"You...mated?" She asks with caution.

He nods. "She loved me...and I her. I thought there was something wrong with me..." He explains, scratching the back of his neck.

Tanika smiles. "No, Protis. There is nothing wrong with you."

"That's a relief!" He says smiling. "I never thought I could tell anyone, I thought I was alone until I saw you and Nova...I thought you might understand."

"I do understand. I'm glad you told me. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. You're not alone."

Protis sighs with relief. "Thank you for not laughing or anything..." Tanika hugs him comfortingly.

"People ask me all the time if I can feel my missing arm, even though it is no longer there."

"Do you feel it?" She replies as she pulls away from the hug.

"The truth is I do not feel my arm. But, there is a miracle that happens when my stump is..."

"When your stump is...what?" She asks.

"When my stump is...inside of her...I can feel my arm again. I can make a fist; I can move my fingers...all within her body. She seems to respond, and enjoy it... But when I remove my stump, the feeling leaves me. I am afraid I will never see her again. I am not sure if she ran away or if she was captured in the attack." He says with a sad frown.

Tanika leans in closer to him. "Nova has a great sense of smell. I am sure we can find her, I will try."

"You will try one day?" He says enthusiastically.

"Yes, I promise."

"Thank you!" he says sniffing, holding back tears of joy. "It would mean the world and all the eons for me."

"Anything for a true friend." She says hugging him once more.

Anax walks toward them, as everyone seems to be leaving the council fire.

"Don't tell me you're bothering Tanika for more smoke weed." He says jokingly to Protis.

"Sorry Anax, he gets the remainder of my share." Tanika quips back at him.

"I knew it!" He responds.

"I deserve a treat for all of my hard work." Protis chimes in.

"Oh you do?"

"Yes. I finished the connecting tunnel. We can travel to the collection from the village now."

Anax rubs his chin. "Already? That is good news. I suppose you do deserve a treat, Protis. I always knew you could do twice the work with only half the body parts."

Protis whips his head over to Tanika as she tries to suppress her grin.

"Don't even..." he says, pointing his finger at her. She covers her mouth with her hand and averts her eyes from both of them. Protis has a silly grin on his face as he turns back to Anax, who looks back at him with a raised eyebrow. He looks back at Tanika with his puzzled and analytical expression. She turns away from him, trying not to laugh.

"What's going on? Am I missing something?"

Tanika bursts out laughing. Protis can't help but join in. Anax folds his arms and shakes his head.

"You two...I knew I should never leave you two alone together."

"Certainly not!" Tanika says, turning around and regaining her composure.

Protis shrugs. "With that in mind, I will retire to my studies for tonight. Sleep well."

"Sleep well Protis." Both of them utter at once.

He bows graciously before walking away. Anax walks with Tanika toward her shelter.

"Protis never goes hunting, does he?" Tanika asks.

"No. He believes all life is sacred. If you notice, he always refrains from eating meat at the fire. Must be why he's so thin."

Tanika ponders for a moment. "I understand. Maybe in that spirit, we should not kill the mammoth tomorrow."

"Then, why go on the hunt?" Anax asks.

"To experience the hunt, to truly understand what it means to be P'tauli. We have enough food saved in the collection...and Raj will be with us too, right?"

Anax nods. "Are you sure you want to go? Your child is truly special. Perhaps we should not risk it."

"I must go. I want to learn the ways." She replies.

"Very well. I want you to understand that anything can happen, even if we maintain a safe distance. If it comes to it, you need to kill or be killed yourself."

Tanika nods. "I understand." She says to him, as they approach her shelter entrance.

Anax bows to her. "I bid you a restful sleep. Without horses, it will be a long day of walking. Get plenty of rest."

"I will sleep as peacefully as the night allows, thank you." She says, hugging him. "Don't let Auctor keep you awake either." She says to him.

Anax smiles, then holds up his fist, the P'tauli symbol for 'shh, quiet.' He winks at her before waving goodbye. Tanika rolls into her fur bedding, nearly falling asleep instantly.

Hours pass by like minutes before an unexpected intruder awakes her.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Nova whines and paces around her shelter. It's the first time since their arrival he's been in there. His soft wolf snout presses around her face sporadically. He licks at her cheek and ear, and then tugs at her bedding. Nova brings her insistently from her sleep. It takes her a moment for her eyes to adjust.

"...Nova?"

He whines in response, nuzzling her face before trotting around her room energetically.

"What is it?"

She slowly sits up, yawning and rubbing her eyes. He motions to the door and back at her.

"Something to hunt?"

He barks in response to her.

"Shh quiet, you'll wake everyone."

She's half asleep as he tugs at her sleeve, trying to pull her out the door.

"Wait!"

She fumbles in the dark finding her belongings. She holsters her bow and arrows along with the sacred blade. After stretching her arms and legs she throws open her shelter's canopy. A light

snowfall trickles down over the village. Everyone is sound asleep as Nova darts off silently into the night.

“Nova!”

She throws at him in a loud whisper.

“Wait for me!”

The frigid air is most unwelcome, sending shivers through her body as she begins a slow jog. She can faintly hear Nova’s trailing footsteps through the dampening snowfall.

She quickens her pace, as the sound gets louder and closer. Soon enough she feels the warmer blood flowing through her and the cold air feels refreshing. She breathes heavier as she runs as fast as she can. She never sees Nova, but follows in his footsteps.

The trailing snowfall whizzes past her like stars in space travel. She opens her fur coating to allow more airflow to her sweating body. The moon hangs in the sky with just a sliver of light as they traverse the deep night. The sounds of the wild fill her adrenaline as they make their way through the iced woods.

Tanika leaves the thick of the frozen P’tauli forest connecting to a great stretch of field. She stops for a moment, breathing heavily as she feels her heart thumping in her chest. Nova leaps as he runs gracefully through the field. He looks like a tiny figure in the distance.

“Nova!” She yells at him.

He stops and turns back at her.

“We are too far! We will not make it back by morning!”

His ears move back and forth analytically before he turns and continues his path up the field.

“Nova!”

She yells a final time before taking a deep breath and following behind him.

The end of the field marks a brief break in the snowfall. A dried river bed beneath the field marks the beginning of a vast set of rolling hills that stretch into the deep horizon, eventually connecting to the familiar mountain range, which shields her old village. In the daylight she’d be able to see the finer details, but tonight it’s a mere tiny outline amongst a wintery starscape.

Nova’s tracks lead away from dried riverbed into a more secluded yet optimal vantage point. He stands in the middle of a huddled clearing. The wisps of his breath give him away in the dark, as do his reflected blue eyes as they turn to look at Tanika. “Finally you stop.” She whispers to him as she catches her breath, slowly walking toward him.

“Nova, why have you led me here?” She says, as she gets closer.

His eyes remain fixed on her.

“Where is the prey? I do not see it.”

Nova curls his lips sniffing at her. He begins a slow guttural growl. Tanika doesn’t understand it’s

her that's become the prey.

Nova darts around her and leaps up at her, pressing his front paws into her back. She stumbles forward onto her knees, and then stands herself up.

"What are you doing? We have to go."

He breathes heavily before nipping at her sleeve. He grips and pulls, tugging his head from side to side. Tanika stumbles again, lurching forward and nearly losing her balance. She pulls her sleeve from his grasp.

"We can't play! We have to go!"

He barks and growls back at her, arching his back before leaping up again. His vicious white teeth snap into the collar of her fur coating. She feels his hot breath on her neck before he slides around, tearing her coat as he falls down her body.

He pulls at her clothing as if it were skin on a fresh kill. The leather straps fastening the middle of her coat start to break. Her left shoulder slips through the opening, exposing her breast to the cold as she falls over with Nova.

He moves to the side and scratches at more clothing along her hips with his paws. Tanika grunts as she tries to find balance.

"Stop it! We have to leave now!"

She says before turning and pushing him away from her. He turns and pulls his ears back before baring his teeth. She looks fiercely back at him as she pulls her torn clothing over her nakedness.

Nova darts again, gripping a new section of her coat. He growls and shakes, trying to peel it from her body.

"I said stop it!"

The more she resists, the more it seems to entice him.

She nudges him away with her feet and sits up right. She looks down his body to see his fully erect penis already protruding from its sheath. Its colorful knotted base sends shiny noticeable throbs down the length of his textured shaft as it drips into the frozen ground.

He breathes heavily as snow continues falling around them.

"We can't! We must return now!"

Nova grips her pant leg near her ankle, ripping and tugging with force. Her waistband falls down to her knees. She covers her exposed vagina with one hand and tugs her waistband with the other. She can feel her son scurrying around within her.

As she's pulling her clothing up, Nova walks up and tries to mount her while she sits on the ground. Tanika is thrown off momentarily as Nova partially succeeds. His bulbous erect member slips through the opening in her shirt. Her young breasts are small but welcoming as her almond brown nipples teasingly scrape around his penis before it lands upright between her minor cleavage. Nova thrusts and bucks as if he were inside of her.

His paws rest on her shoulders as the warm jets pour from his wand all over her chest, dripping from her shriveled nipples. It has been a while, She thinks to herself. She raises one hand to stroke his back sensually before she playfully shrugs him away from her body. She pulls her tattered coat up over her head, exposing her topless body to the night.

She crawls down on her hands and knees, always facing Nova. She knows she wants to give in to him, but starts to enjoy this resistance game.

“No!” She yells at him, swiping in the air with her hand. He darts around, trying to leap on her back.

She lunges forward with her palms, nudging him away.

“Stop it!” She yells. He growls back at her.

She stands up. His eyes follow hers as she slowly pulls her pants down, making herself completely naked. After she steps out of her clothing, she runs her hands up her legs and up her inner thighs.

She sensually touches her vagina while her other moves up to her breasts. She squeezes both of them back and forth as she shivers in the cold. Her other hand continuously circles around her clitoris.

“You want this?” She says down to Nova.

“Come get it.” She turns away from him, accentuating the movements in her hips and rear end as she walks away.

It’s not long before the impact nearly sends her off balance again. Her young breasts jiggle as Nova tries to mount her from behind. She remains standing upright as his paws clutch her bare waist. She holds Nova’s arms as he humps the side of her leg. She holds him in place, scratching his fur as he feels pleasure simply rubbing against her skin.

It’s been too long for Nova. He’s built up so much sperm and urns to release in her. She gyrates her body against him, mimicking his humping in a teasing way.

She playfully nudges him away from her body again. It’s not a good night to tease him, as he returns by jumping against her with more force, sending her to the ground once more.

Nova tries to mount her collapsed body again, not even caring if he makes it inside of her. She crawls and spins around, moving him off. He growls as she wraps herself around him, wrestling on the ground. He barks and nips his teeth but she just roars back at him as they roll around on the ground.

She rolls him onto his back, pinning him down and straddling his chest as she holds his powerful jaws closed with her hands.

“You don’t scare me anymore.” She says, breathing heavily as she slowly grinds into him.

She moans as she rubs her vagina into his soft fur. She arches her back and slides down him, before swallowing the tip of his penis into her body. He sniffs out in pleasure.

“Is this what you want?”

She says while she slides down the length of his member, plunging it into her body slowly up and down a few times. She bites her lip as Nova twitches beneath her.

“This is all you get.”

She whispers as she rises up, letting his penis flop out of her body. It was difficult for her to do, as his organ always feels so welcoming within her. This sends Nova into a lustful fit as he scurries to get back on top of her.

He rolls around, quickly releasing himself from her pin before he's back up on top of her. He grips her hard as she remains on her hands and knees.

She feels him find his mark right away as her dripping opening lets him inside, knot and all. His claws dig into her skin as he humps into her with more force than he's ever used. Blood drips down her sides as she buries her cheek into the ground, her body arched in in a triangular shape as he bucks against her wildly. She moans loud into the night in-between the violent sloppy thrusts of their lovemaking.

She reaches behind and grips his hind legs as he furiously tries to swim on her naked arched body. Tanika's toes clench around her feet in pleasure and a bit of pain as Nova digs his paws into her legs. His front paws find balance along her back as his thrusting is absorbed into her jiggling backside.

Both of their bodies are speckled in snowflakes as they mate. She continues moaning out in pleasure, gently scraping her fingertips along his dangling testis. Nova grunts as he feels her familiar welcoming tunnel. Her human insides continually welcome and massage his foreign member.

Tanika looks at their surroundings briefly during intercourse. She starts to recognize certain elements and features. This clearing looks like a wolf den, she thinks to herself. Why did Nova bring me here? I don't remember this den from my visions. Scattered around them are various bones, covered in natural growth and the increasing blanket of fresh snow. Tanika doesn't believe this den belonged to Nova's pack, though it looks ancient and abandoned long ago.

He scratches along her back as she contracts around him. She knows he will ejaculate soon. She clenches around him and closes her eyes. He continually scurries up her raised body as though he had just climbed the tallest mountain peak in the land. She feels it, that sudden rush of warmth, followed by the quickening of his breath. Feeling him deposit his DNA is all it takes for her to release herself.

She moans as she joins in his orgasm, flooding his buried penis in her human wetness. As Nova releases into her, he does something he's never done before. Nova arches his head back, taking a deep breath before howling loudly into the night. Tanika feels his roar resonate through her body as it shrieks throughout the landscape. It sends chills and energy throughout her already twitching body.

Nova's howl seems to echo long into the night, well after he is done with the roar. It changes in tone and resonance a few times before seemingly shooting out in all directions like a sonic shock-wave. Tanika hasn't ever heard or felt anything like it. The volume was certainly enough to reach her old village let alone the P'tauli one.

Soon Tanika can feel a vibration within the ground itself. A slow rumbling is heard before it builds up to the sound of loud crashing all around. Tanika squints her eyes, focusing on the outstretched landscape. Nova remains buried deep within her, resting happily but restricting her movement.

Even in her hue of pleasure, she is bewildered. Out in the distance she can see the ice fields, the

source of the strange noise. The vast stretch of frozen ice, the one she traversed long ago, splinters violently.

She watches it crack and break into countless pieces. Large wisps of water spray high into the air as floating chunks of ice collide. Other pieces are swept away as the roaring waters become alive underneath, consuming the broken sheets all around.

“Nova...what did we just do?”

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## Chapter Thirty-Two

Bunjil flies high in the sky above them. His wings are spread far apart in a slow casual glide. He circles the hunting party as they trek ahead on foot. Tanika studies the intricate white pattern that lies beneath Bunjil’s golden brown feathers. It would be a terrifying image for Bunjil’s prey to see in its final moments.

“The field, it shattered at night? I always thought it would break in the daylight.” Anax muses as they walk side by side. “I must say, wolf-girl, I’m envious. It must have been a sight!”

Auctor quickens his pace slightly to join the pair. “No wonder you didn’t get any sleep.” He injects slyly.

Tanika smiles and shrugs. “What does it all mean?” She asks the pair. The other hunters trail behind, bantering and joking amongst themselves. Raj is at the very end of the pack, along with a playful Nova.

“I told you the prophecy of the ice melting away. This is all part of it. Now that the fields are gone, neither of our tribes will ever return to the motherland. We are to remain here, in the new world.”

Tanika absorbs Anax’s words. “I suppose it means I will never find my island again.” She says with a sigh.

“Island? What island?” Auctor says with an intense interest.

“When I was on the ice there was an island. I lived there before I found your people.”

“There is no island out there.” Auctor states confidently.

Tanika shakes her head, slightly squinting. “No, there is. I know what I saw. I found Nova there.”

Auctor places a hand on her shoulder gently. “If you were on the ice and saw those things, it means that you were dead.”

“Dead?” She says profoundly.

“Stop trying to scare the girl!” Anax exclaims as he hits Auctor’s shoulder playfully. “She is standing here now, is she not? That kind of thing does not happen.”

“All death is only rebirth.” He replies.

“Now you’re just being too deep!” Anax booms sarcastically, with no reaction from anyone.

"What did you bring back from this place?" Auctor asks her, ignoring Anax.

"I was, and am still alive. I brought with me..."

"Bunjil is changing directions!" Yells one of the hunters, cutting off Tanika.

Everyone stops to look in the direction of his pointed finger. Anax shields the high noon sun from his eyes as he watches Bunjil analytically. "We're getting close. We will have to be silent very soon." He booms to party.

"Finally!" Raj beckons back.

Auctor begins a quick pace away from the group. Everyone watches him intently, remaining perfectly still. Auctor squats down to examine the ground. He looks back at them and cups his hands around his mouth.

"Raj! Tanika!" He yells before motioning them to come over.

The pair jogs across the plain to meet him. Auctor runs his finger along the edge of a sizeable indentation in the ground. It's a circular type shape with other successive indentations trailing away.

"Mammoth tracks." Auctor states matter-of-factly as he stands up.

Tanika and Raj look at the site with wide eyes and open mouths.

"What!" She exclaims. Soon Anax and Nova catch up to the trio.

"Is this how you interpret silence?" He asks everyone, with a slight tone of discontent.

"I'm sorry." She responds quickly. "It's just...I didn't think they would be quite this large!"

The other hunters accumulate around the tracks. They are not as impressed with such a familiar sight, but get enjoy watching Tanika and Raj react.

"She's the largest we've ever tracked. Maybe that's why it's such a challenge to kill her." Auctor says he and the others turn to watch as Raj runs over to one of the footprints. He leaps into the center of the indentation before curling himself into a ball within the track.

"I can fit in it!" Raj exclaims.

Anax kneels down by him. "I wouldn't be in the path of a Mammoth foot's like that if I were you." He pauses dramatically. "I've seen a Mammoth stomp a full gown hunter into the Earth."

"Wait, you are allowed to scare a child, but I can't muse about a false island?" Auctor sneers at him.

"This is no joke. What we're doing is dangerous. And if the wolf-girl says there is an island, there is an island." Anax returns back, then smiles at Tanika.

Raj stands up quickly and dusts himself off. "I'm not afraid. I'm ready!"

Tanika rustles his hair playfully. "Spoken like a true warrior."

"I will consult my maps." Auctor replies.

"I'd like to see them." Tanika adds.

Anax blows his whistle and gestures up at Bunjil silently. He watches the great eagle soar away in the direction of the tracks.

"We need to make our final preparations. Will star birth chase a creature this size?" Anax asks as they both look over at Nova.

He sniffs intently around the mammoth tracks, pausing to look back at the pair.

"He did it before. I'm sure he will do fine." She says with a smile.

Anax turns again to the sky. Bunjil maintains a circular flight pattern in the near distance.

"We will find out soon enough. Bunjil has found her."

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Chapter Thirty-Three

The hunting party finishes adhering the final pieces of camouflage to their clothing. They will use dried grass and dark face paint to blend into the surroundings. The large flat plain before them slowly slopes upward. A snowy mountain range is seen in the hazy distance. Although the grass is mostly dried, a few green blades sporadically jet up amongst the field. It's not hard to imagine a large herbivore exploring the tundra here.

The hunters will have to split into two teams, and then converge on the Mammoth from opposite directions. Ideally, they would approach an entire herd. They would frighten them, and use their fear to lead them in whichever direction was most suitable. The slowest of the bunch would become the primary target. Other more grisly tactics included leading a herd into a narrow pass before rolling large boulders onto them from above. Today's landscape doesn't afford them this tactic.

Since arrows have little to no effect on the animals, they have always had to use spears. P'tauli spears are specially designed. Not only do they have sharper points, but also they have a two-part chute system to allow for greater force and distance. Even with these advantages, close range is still a necessity and having a single target instead of a herd will provide a unique challenge.

Anax makes a few more gestures directed upward at Bunjil. He responds by banking his flight pattern to the left, then to the right before he continues circling high above the great Mammoth in the distance. The hunting party's position on the slope continues to keep them obscured from view.

"That is good." Anax whispers aloud.

"What is good?" Tanika responds quietly.

"There is a watering hole. Water means mud. Mud we can use to slow her down, or get her stuck."

Tanika thinks a moment. Her request to spare the animal has sadly fallen on deaf ears, as the hunters desire a fresh kill.

"Bunjil told you all of that just now?" She asks.

"Well, just the first part." Anax shrugs. "The rest I learned from observation. What else are allies

for?"

"I am ready. I want to be the tip of the spear." Raj says with certainty and confidence. Anax turns and puts a hand on his shoulder.

"Soon enough. I think wolf-girl would have my head if anything bad happened on your first Mammoth hunt."

"Anax is correct!" Tanika says to Raj, nodding up and down. Anax scrunches his eyebrows.

"...Regardless, we will need to attack from two different directions. I need a better look."

He crawls on his stomach up the slope slowly, using his forearms to propel forward. Tanika and the others follow up behind him.

"Keep your heads down." Anax commands in a harsh whisper.

Slowly each member reaches the top of the slope. They gaze into the distance to see the silhouette of the great mastodon.

It stands with its back facing the hunting party in the near distance. Sure enough, there is a large collection of glacial melt forming a small lake that dissolves into a sizeable stretch of mud. The lumbering animal leans down, touching its trunk to the water. Bunjil continues to circle above it, his reflection likely appearing in the water beneath.

Anax scoots back down the hill.

"Perfect. She is here..." He begins an illustration in the ground with his finger.

"Toward us, there is a stretch of mud. I want our second half to move over there." He points along the slope, motioning further down.

"Do you see?" He looks back at the hunters, making sure everyone is paying attention. Each member nods in agreement.

"Can Star Birth direct her into the mud?" He asks Tanika. She nods confidently in response.

"Good. Once she is in the mud, I want the tip of the spear to attack first. Then the second half will join with us from the opposite direction."

Raj scoots in closer. "I understand." He replies.

Anax smiles. "I know where you think you're going, but I want you in the second half." Raj sighs and slumps down. Anax looks down into his eyes.

"Next time. I promise you." He points out a few warriors. "I want each of you to know that Raj is your commander." He says with a wink. They smile and nod. Raj seems to beam back to life again with a grin.

"Move into position. Go!"

Raj and the second half of hunters quietly move along the slope down to the ambush point. Anax watches until they are far enough away to his liking before signaling them to stop.

"Alright wolf-girl. Show us your magic, like you did before."

She scoots down the slope to meet Nova. She pets along his fur gently resting her hands on the back of his neck as she looks into his eyes. She guides him up the slope and points to the Mammoth in the distance.

"Just like before. Go get her!" She pats him and motions for him to run. Nova remains in place, looking at the Mammoth and then back at her.

"Go! Now!" She commands.

He pulls his ears back, whining with hesitation.

"What are you waiting for?" She repeats the motion.

"Come on, Nova..."

The hunters look at each other and then to Anax as he folds his arms. Nova looks onward. He pauses, taking a moment to gather up his nerve before he leaps up and bolts over the slope. He runs across the field as fast as he can toward the Mammoth.

The hunters quietly scoot up the hill, keeping low and silent as they watch the action unfold. Nova keeps his target in sight, never missing a step. An unfamiliar pungent aroma starts to fill his nostrils, as he gets closer. The hunters watch eagerly as Nova becomes smaller in the distance.

As Nova gets closer, the Mastodon's towering height becomes increasingly intimidating. Regardless, he approaches the beast with the confidence that he has a thousand wolves behind him, even though he doesn't. He slows down and enters the Mammoth's shadow.

The elephant-like creature has a dark brown colored fur, which is matted and tangled in areas, with much dirt and oil. Flies swarm around the coat in sporadic areas. The source of the pungent aroma is clear to Nova, as the Mammoth must certainly have seen cleaner days.

The miniature lake is perfectly still, reflecting a perfect mirror image of the sky above before the Mammoth trunk touches it, sending concentric ripples throughout the image as it slurps up the delicious clear water. Nova pulls his ears back and begins his aggressive dance around the animal. He growls and snarls with much ferocity, making himself known and circling around to the edge of the lake.

She slowly coils her trunk upward, turning her massive head toward Nova. He barks up at her in an animated fury. She points her tusks right at him. They are pearl white, thick at the base then twisting to a fine point. Each tusk is longer than the length of Nova's body. She could easily gut him in one swipe, though the great beast remains still. She slowly lowers her head and looks on him with giant hazel eyes, larger than grapefruit.

The mammoth inhales slowly. The air flowing into her lungs whistles and sounds similar to wind blowing through a rocky cavern. She blinks twice, turning her head away from Nova and returning to the lake for another drink. Nova tilts his head in puzzlement, and then continues his bark.

He nips at her front feet, not taking too kindly to being ignored. She lifts her front foot up as if to relieve a scratch while she sips the water. Nova runs around to her backside, leaping up and sinking his teeth into her rump. He receives a swat from her tail and the sting sends him back to the ground whining. He's no more a nuisance than one of her flies.

Nova continues his assault, weaving under her massive hind legs. He leaps up at her stomach and sinks his teeth into her hanging tummy fur. He growls as he hangs on with his powerful jaws. He whips his head back and forth and his body twirls as he hangs on, suspended in the air. Nova's hind legs aren't even touching the ground as he continues to cling to an unresponsive mammoth while she takes another drink.

Anax loses his restraint and bursts out laughing. Tanika can only look on in bewilderment. Auctor grins as the rest of the men join Anax in a chorus of laughter. Nova drops to the ground and runs back to the front of the giant beast. He blocks her path to the water, growling and barking up at her fiercely. She responds by pointing her trunk at Nova. Soon a torrent of water sprays the noble wolf like a firehouse.

Nova is overwhelmed as he rolls away from her, carried by a stream of water and mud. He stands up, shaking and dripping wet. He watches as she turns away from him once more and takes another sip from the lake. Nova pulls his ears back, whining in defeat before running back toward the hunting party.

Anax wipes his eyes, chuckling as Nova approaches. "Oh star birth...that was good. That was a good show."

Tanika reaches her hand out to him.

"What happened Nova?" She asks with a smile. He licks her hands, whimpering a little in humiliation.

"Oh, but that was so fierce! Who could resist such an attack?" Anax says mockingly.

Nova walks over toward him and shakes his fur, sending a barrage of water droplets at him. Everyone raises a hand to block the spray.

"I told you she was stubborn. We need a new plan."

Everyone huddles together quietly as Anax animates a new strategy with his hands.

"The tip of the spear will need to guide her toward the mud pits. Then we'll call for the second half, and strike together."

He motions for Auctor to go explain it to the second half. He nods and runs quietly along the slope toward them.

"Do not pierce the animal with your spears until we are reunited with the second half. Only our combined attack will bring her down. We will only guide her, do you understand?"

Tanika and the other hunters nod in approval. Auctor comes running back, giving the signal that the other team is up to speed. Anax nods.

"We go now. Stay low."

Anax climbs swiftly over the slope, remaining hunched down as he quickly and quietly charges toward the distant mammoth. Tanika, Auctor, and the rest of the hunters follow suit, each of them gripping their hunting spears. Their pace quickens as Anax presses forward.

The Mammoth hasn't noticed the party charging toward her. They continue on a path that remains

in her blind spot. Nova paces along side everyone, ready for a second encounter. Tanika's heart pounds furiously the closer they get to their target. Just as they are about to be within reach, Anax stumbles to a stop. He signals for everyone else to stop, holding up a fist while he turns back at the group.

Tanika looks at him with a puzzled expression. Anax reaches for his whistle, looking up at Bunjil and blowing it before holding his arm up. His fingers are flat, pointed like a horizon line before he dips his fingers to the ground and moves his hand in a dive motion.

Everyone watches as Bunjil folds his wings in, diving straight down toward the mammoth. He falls toward it with incredible speed before opening his wings, flapping them to cushion his landing. The elegant predator grips its talons around the edge of one of the Mammoth's tusks.

Bunjil opens his wings again, squawking loudly as he and the mammoth meet face to face. She lets out a startled bellow and shakes her head, freeing the bird. Bunjil flies up to land on top of her head, nipping his beak on her fuzzy ear.

"Now!" Anax yells.

He runs in front of the giant beast waving his arms and jabbing his spear toward her face. Tanika does the same thing, joining in at Anax's left side. She yells at the Mammoth and jumps up and down slightly, waving her hands. Nova approaches the other side, barking furiously. The Mammoth's eyes scan all around as she sees more and more hunters approaching her. She starts to panic, letting out a great roar.

"It's working!" Auctor yells as he joins the fray.

The mammoth stands up on its hind legs. She kicks her front feet, as she gets taller and taller.

"She's turning!" Anax yells as he shifts to the other side.

The Mammoth's mouth is open wide in terror as she swats up at Bunjil with her trunk. Tanika finds herself lost in the moment, in awe of the great towering creature, even as its vast shadow falls right over Tanika. The giant Mammoth starts to pivot as its front end comes crashing down, directly toward Tanika.

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## **Chapter Thirty-Four**

She feels something grip her arm painfully and jerk her away. She finds herself embraced in a hug with Auctor as they stumble and roll away. They look at each other intently for a moment before the Mammoth's front feet return to the earth, right where Tanika was standing.

The impact of the Mammoth's landing shakes the ground, causing everyone to lose his or her balance. Even Nova stumbles awkwardly, trying to regain his footing.

Anax lays on the other side of Tanika, looking at her and Auctor. "That was too cl.."

His eyes widen in fear. Anax yells a curse word before pressing both Auctor and Tanika's face into the mud. Anax presses his own face down as well, just as two giant tusks sail over the top of them.

The Mammoth swings her head down and around as she turns, barely missing the trio as they lie

face first on the ground. Anax springs to his feet and pulls both of them up with him as they quickly stumble out of harm's way.

"Are you still with me, love?" Anax asks.

Auctor coughs and wipes his muddy face. "Always and forever, love."

Tanika laughs nervously as she tries to regain composure. The other hunters continue jabbing their spears at the Mammoth, dancing around it strategically.

Bunjil continues to fly around the animal as a distraction. Anax composes himself and joins the other warriors.

"It's working! She's almost facing the mud!"

Tanika and Auctor grab their spears and rejoin the party, ignoring their muddy faces. The great Mammoth lets out another frightening roar and begins to retreat.

"Chase her!" Anax commands loudly.

Everyone jogs alongside the startled creature as it gallops toward the thicker mud stretch. Nova runs faster than the others, jumping alongside the Mammoth, nipping in the air. The hunters regroup with even numbers on both sides of the Mammoth.

"That's it! Guide it to the mud!" He yells, trying to maintain order.

Nova runs between the creature's massive legs as it gallops. The shaking ground causes everyone to stumble but they maintain a safe distance and speed.

"Careful Nova!" Tanika yells between heavy breathing.

She looks ahead as the ambush spot draws closer.

"We're almost there! Don't let her pivot!" He barks.

The Mammoth swings her head to the right, knocking three of the hunters to the ground. Auctor stops to help them up. Anax looks back at them as they pass, but presses forward with the rest of the men. Below his feet, the ground starts to feel thicker and sloppier.

"Stay to the side! Don't get stuck! We're nearly there!" He yells at them. The fallen hunters try to catch up once they regain footing.

"Second half! Get into position now!" He yells.

By the time they get to the ideal spot, their combined attack will conclude the hunt. Everything is going according to plan as the panicked Mammoth starts to slow down.

"Tip of the spear! Get on the right side!" The hunters dart around, and regroup to prepare for the final strike. The ambush sight comes into view.

"Second half! Begin your attack!" Anax yells, gripping his spear.

The hunters in Anax's party aim their spears, waiting for Anax's command. Tanika runs alongside Anax, keeping her eyes on Nova as he continually darts back and forth. One of the hunters falls down as the mud becomes too much for him. Soon, another one falls behind. Strangely, the



Mammoth has not slowed down. The mud is proving to be more of a challenge to the hunters.

“Second half! Attack now!” Anax looks around, noticing a surprising lack of support. He curses out loud at the men.

“Tip of the spear! Attack!”

His command is too late. The hunters who have maintained the chase are ineffective as they toss their spears at the Mammoth. She shrugs away the few weapons that sink into her shoulder. Many of the men have lost their stamina, out of breath and exhausted after running in the mud. The Mammoth ends up running out of reach, and into the distance. Once again escaping Anax’s hands.

He stops running to catch his breath for a moment in frustration. Tanika and Nova slow down and approach him. As the Mammoth disappears, he turns to face his men.

“Second half! Where were...” Anax’s tone begins in anger, but trails off as he looks at the ambush sight with a stunned expression.

“Anax?” Tanika asks in bewilderment.

Anax drops his spear and runs toward the spot. Nova runs with him.

“Anax!” She yells, running to catch up.

She watches as he slumps to his knees next to a fallen body. Tanika quickens her pace to catch up. Auctor begins running along side her. The rest of the hunters join in. She stumbles to a stop, gasping as she sees the body. Several arrows jet out of the young hunter’s back.

Anax stands up, looking at the blood on his hands. Blood stains the ground all around them, in giant pools. One by one she sees more dead bodies. Nova frantically weaves around each young hunter’s body, licking their faces in vain as he tries to wake them up. He whines a mournful confused tone as he looks at Tanika with sad eyes.

Each member of second half has been slain. Then it hits her.

“Where is Raj?!”

She walks frantically around the massacre site, turning over each body.

“Raj? Raj!” Tears are streaming down her face as she passes over them one by one.

Auctor checks each of the hunter’s pulses but doesn’t find anyone alive.

Nova’s sad whine turns into a viscous growl. He bares his teeth and pulls his ears back violently. Tanika turns to face the direction he’s pointed. Across the plain, off in the distance, three horse riders stare back at Tanika. They remain perfectly still.

She squints her eyes to get a better view. Two of the men sit atop their horses while the middle one stands next to his. She steps forward and covers the sun from her face to get a better view.

There is a fourth figure, much smaller. He’s on his knees with his hands tied behind his back. A look of fear is stricken across his face. Another restraint covers his mouth.

“Raj!” Tanika screams. Her voice echoes across the tundra.

The third figure pulls a hood over Raj's face, and then picks him up. He slowly carries him over to his horse and slings him over it like a piece of meat. Raj lets out a muffled, barely audible scream. The man swiftly seats his horse before pointing his finger directly at Tanika.

The horse riders' clothing appears to be made of bones and skin, giving them an almost demonic appearance.

Tanika scowls. "Demur!" She screams viciously.

Her forcefulness maintains across the plain as her voice reaches the men. The rider lowers his pointed finger, as he slowly pivots his horse away. The other two riders follow suit, then the three of them gallop away.

Nova darts after the horse riders at full speed, on a direct path to save his friend.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

"You should have let me pursue them." She says to him stoically. She exudes a restrained angst.

"Then you would be gone too. Perhaps even dead. Surely he was luring you into a trap."

The firelight dances around Anax dramatically. It's been a long day for everyone. It was either the lighting from the fire, or the recent events which had everyone looking aged. Regardless, each of them felt like lost souls thrust into a situation they weren't completely prepared for.

Tanika knew a confrontation with Demur was inevitable, she just wanted it to be on different terms.

"We can't just do nothing!" Tanika paces around the council fire, unable to stay still. There were only a few members still in attendance at this point, the highest in the leadership. It had been hard enough breaking the news about second half, let alone the capture of Raj. It was a lot for everyone to take in.

The P'taul had shown an amazing restraint, even after they were nearly wiped out. Everyone just wanted to return to some form of normalcy, but now it feels like they are in a corner. Anax is feeling pressure from all sides.

"We are not doing *'nothing.'* The scouts are out looking. If anyone can bring him home, it's your star birth."

"You saw those men! They had horses and arrows...I'm afraid that he.."

"Don't even think about it." Anax says, cutting her off. "The wolf knew what he was doing."

"Something is wrong. They should have returned by now! I'm going out looking."

"No, you're not!" Anax straightens his posture as he mechanically looks at Tanika. "He wants you to react, that's what this is all about. If we are impulsive, we could fall into his hands. See this whole thing through your hunting eyes."

He points at his eye sternly before continuing.

"We don't have horses, they do. How far is your village? We wouldn't even make it there. We've been over this."

Auctor stands up, interrupting. "If we are going to raid the village, it should be tonight! Anax, you know what we have."

Anax turns to him, meeting his eyes with a stone cold expression.

"What is it? What's he talking about?" Tanika asks.

"We'll take our best hunters! We'll be there and back before sunrise." Auctor adds.

"I will *not* allow it." Anax seems to scowl at Auctor in his gaze. "As I said before, we could be led into slaughter. We must wait."

"If we do that, it will be too late!" Auctor snaps back

Anax looks fierce as breathes in through his nostrils. "You are excused, Auctor."

They look at each other intently a moment before he walks away. The elders look stunned, since this dramatic event is a first.

"We will have council in the morning." Anax booms to everyone, turning away from Auctor. "If they have not returned by then, we will discuss our options. I'm getting weary of everyone second guessing me. If anyone wants to go out there and die, feel free to do so. As for me, it's time for sleep."

The tension is palpable as Anax dismisses the council. He talks to a pair of elders, avoiding Tanika. She watches as Auctor continues back to his shelter. She picks up her items and runs to catch up with him.

"Auctor! What were you talking about? Why did you say you could get to my village and return before sunrise?" She asks, catching her breath.

He places a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry, I will bring your boy back. I have a plan. Tomorrow I'll explain, and I will show you my maps." He turns away from Tanika for a moment, looking at Anax from a distance.

"That means a lot to me, thank you. What about Anax?"

"Between you and me, Anax hates it when I am assertive. He likes to be the dominant one, if you know my meaning."

Tanika laughs. Auctor smiles, then continues on a more serious tone.

"We'll work it out, we always do. The real problem... is that war is coming. I know it, he knows it. And I think you know it too."

Tanika slowly nods.

"Times will be dark. Choices will be difficult. But we're going to face them with the strength of the Mammoth. Do you understand?"

She nods again, sniffing. She opens her arms and embraces Auctor in a warm hug. He feels her hair

soothingly as they hold each other. "Get some sleep." He says quietly in her ear. "Tomorrow you're going to need it. Trust me."

"Alright." She says as they pull away from each other. "Sleep at peace."

"Thank you." He replies, politely bowing before they part ways.

Tanika returns alone to her shelter. She removes all of her clothing before slumping into her soft bedding. Her shoulders and back muscles are tense. She does her best to massage it away, but it's no use. She breathes slowly and heavily as she closes her eyes.

Suddenly her shelter opens up and a figure steps inside. It's Anax. Tanika turns to her side to see him. He holds the cloth flap open and allows Auctor inside after him.

"What is it? What's wrong?" She asks, covering her breasts with her animal fur bedding.

"Nothing's wrong. Everything's just fine!" Auctor boasts.

"What about Raj? What about Nova?" She asks eagerly.

"Nova is fine. He is sleeping and guarding Raj right now!" Anax says with a smile.

"What a relief! They must have returned while I was sleeping. That's great news!" She exclaims with elation.

"What do we do now? What do you need?" She asks while pulling the fur skin tighter around her body. Auctor stares at her breasts while Anax eyes her up and down. The two men look at each other before turning back to her.

"We need you." Auctor bites his lower lip.

"We've been talking about...experimenting." Anax explains as he steps closer. He slides his fingertips down her covers until his whole hand is cupping her right breast. She slaps his hand away swiftly.

"Something new? You say?" She stands up, holding the covers to her body. She pivots from Anax and walks up to Auctor. She pulls her covers back, letting them fall to the floor. She presses her naked body on his side. She places her left hand along his back and her right arm on the other side of his waist.

"You don't deserve something new. But, he does." She says, leaning into Auctor's shoulder as she looks at Anax with seductive eyes. Auctor's expression is priceless.

Anax grins, stepping closer to them. "Why only him?"

She ignores his question, slowly creeping her left hand up his back. She moves her right hand from his waist, placing her fingers flatly on his tummy before sliding her hand down Auctor's loincloth. He breathes in as she wiggles her hand inside, before gently fondling his genitals. She caresses them soothingly much to his delight.

"Both of you know that I have an 'other.'" She says, continually eyeing Anax. Auctor's right hand finds a firm grip on Tanika's bare ass cheek as he becomes increasingly erect to her touch. His left hand moves over to pet her breasts.

Anax folds his arms, enjoying the show. "Yes." He says with a smile.

She smiles back at him. She strokes Auctor's penis up and down slowly inside of his clothing. He watches as she massages him before closing his eyes and tilting his head back in pleasure, breathing heavily.

Tanika's left hand continues up his back, then wraps around his left shoulder. It becomes apparent to Anax that she's holding something in that hand. It's her sacred hunting blade. The obsidian edges glisten as she holds it up to Auctor's throat. His expression seems to change from pleasure to surprise. His heart quickens as she holds his penis a bit more firmly in her other hand. She remains fixed on Anax.

"What makes you think I'd betray my other?" She asks him in a raspy voice. Anax seems delighted by the whole thing.

"You didn't tell me you were bringing a toy." He says smiling, slowly stepping closer.

"How could you let your guard down so easily, Anax? I think my body distracted you." She steps back a bit, but brings Auctor with her. She runs her thumb over the top of Auctor's swollen penis tip, smearing his precum all over the texture.

"See? You *are* becoming P'taul." Anax reaches for the weapon swiftly, wrapping his fingers around the blade.

"Nova will not mind. In fact, let him come. It will make things more interesting." He says, pulling the blade away from Auctor's throat. Tanika refuses to let go as he places his other hand around the blade.

"And what if Nova kills you both?" She asks him.

The two stare at each other intensely as he angles the blade upward, blood dripping between his fingers. He then rotates the weapon, making her wrist contort in a way that forces her to release it.

He takes the blade and steps backward, breaking eye contact to look at it.

"If he kills us, then we will have died doing what we loved."

Auctor turns to her. "Could you release your grip slightly?"

"What?" She asks. Then she looks down at his loincloth, realizing she mistakenly transferred her grip into the other blade she was holding. She lets go.

"Sorry..." She rests her other free hand on his chest.

"I didn't say release your grip all the way." Auctor says with a slight grin. Apparently the threat to his life only made him more excited. She continues softly stroking it up and down as he responds by pinching her nipple. His other hand teases between her ass cheeks.

Anax looks at the wounds on hands. He takes Auctor's left hand away from Tanika's breast, then cuts his palm with the blade. Anax interlocks his fingers in Auctor's hand, pressing their open wounds together.

"Auctor and I are bound by blood. Do you trust me?" Anax asks Tanika. She nods.

“Give me your hand.”

She starts to remove her hand from Auctor’s loincloth.

“Give him the other one.” Auctor demands before he teases her ear with his tongue.

“Both of you are too demanding.” She exclaims, playfully shoving Auctor back a little. He adjusts his clothing with a grin as she places both hands before Anax, palms open.

Anax gently cradles her hands. He looks in her eyes a moment as he gives each hand a quick cut. He takes Auctor’s other hand and cuts it similarly. He puts the blade away before interlocking his left hand with Tanika’s right. Tanika’s left hand then takes a hold of Auctor’s right. Auctor places his left hand into Anax’s right, completing the union. The three of them stand together in a triangle, allowing each other’s blood to flow into the next.

“We are one.” Anax says, after a few moments. Each person lets go of the other’s hand. Tanika steps away and walks over to her belongings. She slumps to her knees, then bends down to rummage through them, giving the men a nice feast for their eyes.

“What are you doing?” Anax asks.

She turns to face them, still on her knees. She’s chewing a green mixture as she motions them both over.

“If there’s one thing I want to teach the P’taul, it’s how to properly treat wounds.”

She places the mixture on Anax’s hands before wrapping it tightly with a leafed bandage. She does the same thing to Auctor, then to her own hands.

“If there are two things I wish to teach the P’taul, the second would be how to properly season meat.” She says with a smirk.

Anax steps closer to her. “My meat is perfectly seasoned.” He says, motioning subtly down. Tanika raises an eyebrow.

“You couldn’t have come up with something better to say?” She says flirtatiously. Anax shrugs as Auctor laughs.

“Regardless, I still want to taste it.” She says back at him. She pulls Anax’s loincloth down without even asking. It catches a moment on his already erect member. She forces his loincloth down his legs as he penis is fully freed, making him completely naked. She tosses his clothing away and eyes his member. It’s perfectly tanned and smooth as it points at her face.

She cradles it gently in her hands, gently pulling back his foreskin to deliver soft kisses and licks. Auctor drops his clothing, becoming naked as he steps closer to Tanika. His member now points toward the other side of her face.

Tanika’s mouth opens as she pulls Anax’s penis inside. Her tongue gently welcoming his shaft by massaging it as she allows his organ into the back of her throat. Her lips meet the base of Anax’s balls and she moves her head from side to side, letting his swollen member grind against her throat texture. Anax moans while Tanika’s left hand finds a soothing grip on Auctor’s member, stroking it back and forth as she pleasures Anax. Anax caresses her hair as she bobs her head, then starts touching Auctor’s chest with his other hand.

Tanika slowly pulls Anax's penis out of her mouth, the shaft with her shiny saliva coated all over it. She turns her head to Auctor's penis, and opens her jaw to pull it in. Auctor moans as it slides into her mouth. It feels very similar to Anax's member as she makes love to it. She wonders if it's the first time either of these men have been with a woman. She likes the idea of being their first.

Auctor moans as she makes love to his member. Tanika's right hand strokes Anax's wet penis. It makes squishy noises as her motions pull more of his precum to the tip. After giving Auctor a few good bobs, she pulls his penis out of her mouth and begins masturbating both of their shiny wet members at the same time.

Both of the men turn to one another, moaning as they kiss each other. Tanika continually pleasures each of their throbbing organs. Both of them caress her hair from each side. She arches up higher, and with each penis in her hand, she presses their tips on each of her nipples. Both men are oozing precum on her as she traces the shiny trails around her young nipples.

Each man leaves her nipple nice and shiny, and perfectly erect. She pulls both members away before bringing them together. She makes each penis tip touch each other, letting each man's precum coat the other's tip. Then she gets an idea.

She presses both penises together before angling them toward her mouth. It works, she's able to fit both of them inside. She sucks both of them at the same time, opening her mouth as wide as she can as she accepts both of them into it. She loves the idea of having four testicles to play with, and she takes full advantage, caressing and bouncing both pairs in her hands.

Both members seem to throb in unison as she sucks them in her mouth. It must be too much for Auctor, feeling his penis pressed so tightly against Anax as it's being sucked by a woman at the same time. She feels him throbbing as his moaning gets louder. Then he starts spurting. She can feel and taste the rush of his human sperm. That doesn't stop her. She keeps bobbing against the conjoined genitals.

Not soon after, Anax joins in Auctor's moaning. It seems that Auctor's orgasm has triggered Anax, and she feels a warm jet from his ejaculation. Feeling two penises throbbing and cumming deep in her mouth is incredibly exciting for her. Tanika rolls her tongue around both members as each of them spurt and spray their human seed into her mouth.

She keeps them both organs contained in her mouth as she bobs, pausing to swirl their collective cum around her mouth before swallowing it. They are both moaning louder and breathing heavily into each other as they thrive within in her mouth. Once she is sure they are done emptying, she gently pulls each member out of her mouth.

She stands up, still holding each twitching penis. She turns to kiss Auctor. He presses his tongue into her mouth, running his hands all over her body. She pauses kissing him to take a breath and that's when Anax takes over. He grabs her chin and turns her face, viciously making out with her, hoping to taste their joined mixture. Anax's hands roam and touch each and every inch that Auctor misses.

Auctor kisses her neck and moves down her body. He leaves a trail of kisses until he meets her left breast. Her hardened nipple is still soaked and shiny from his own precum. He begins nursing tenderly on her left breast while she makes out with Anax. He stops kissing her and moves down, sucking her right breast at the same time Auctor suckles at her left. She moans loudly, digging her nails into each man's back as they please each breast. She moves her nails sensually over them until they run through their hair.

Auctor pauses to take a breath, and Tanika takes the opportunity to kiss him. They kiss and make out for a good few moments as Anax pleasures her breast.

Auctor stops for a moment, pulling away. Tanika looks puzzled. "What's wrong?"

She hears a wolf howling in the distance, toward her left. "Did you hear that?" She asks.

Auctor reaches up to his mouth and pulls out a tooth. He examines it in his hand. "This isn't mine. It must be yours." He says with a confused expression.

Anax reaches up and runs his fingers through Tanika's hair, but accidentally removes a good clump of it. He stops sucking her breast and looks at the portion of hair between his fingers.

"What is wrong with you?" Anax asks.

"I...I don't know." She says, feeling embarrassed.

Soon there's a loud thumping noise on the roof of her shelter. A hole breaks through and the three of them look up to see Bunjil. His head presses through the hole in shelter. He looks right at Tanika and squawks loudly. When he lifts his head back up and out of the hole, daylight is shining through.

Bunjil flies away from Tanika's shelter, and the walls tumble down. Soon her shelter is gone, and the rest of the world is exposed to her. The entire village is gathered around as daylight shines all around the three exposed people. She turns to Anax and Auctor, who are now fully clothed. Tanika is the only one naked. Soon, she realizes that not only have the P'tauli gathered around her shelter, her old village has as well. Even Grandfather is there, as well as Amissa and Delwyn.

Everyone points at her and starts chanting "Whore!"

She covers herself up with her hands and looks at Anax and Auctor. "What is this? What's going on?"

A second wolf howl cuts into the distance, from Tanika's right.

Anax walks toward her. He pulls out her ceremonial obsidian blade. "You don't deserve this." He says, before crushing it into dust with his hand.

"No!" She yells fiercely at him. "Why did you do that?"

Suddenly she feels a hand on her shoulder. It's her Grandfather. She turns to face him.

"You know what you have to do." Grandfather says to her. "Do it."

She hears a third wolf howl coming from behind her, and that's when she wakes up.

Tanika rises out of her bed. She breathes heavily, looking at her hands. There are no wounds, scars or bandages. It was all a dream, she thinks to herself. Catching her breath.

She curses out loud when she realizes she can't finish her scenario with Auctor and Anax. She hits her bedding, feeling sexually frustrated.

Tanika is a mix of emotions as she comes to the realization that Raj and Nova are still missing.

A fourth wolf howl interrupts her line of thinking, and she hurriedly throws her clothing on. Tanika was very familiar with Nova's howl, and this was not it. She runs outside of her shelter, trying to

figure out where it came from.

“Nova!” she yells into the night. “Where are you?”

Tanika waits a considerable amount of time outside, but she hears nothing.

“I need you now, more than ever.”

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## **Chapter Thirty-Six**

Their voices echo down the long icy chamber, along with their muffled footsteps. The frozen surroundings seem to amplify a watery filter as the cool air carries them through the tunnel. Auctor leads Tanika through a portion of The Collection she was unaware of. They pass by various P'tauli supplies and armaments, all of which are neatly preserved within the luminous frozen walls.

“Why do we keep so many things here?” Tanika asks him.

“One day, the oceans will rise and cover all of the land. We hope this place will survive that time. We have everything here, our stories, our seeds. Enough to start again.”

Soon the chamber splits into another direction. Tanika follows the divergent path, until she feels Auctor's hand on her shoulder.

“Not there, here. This way.”

She looks back at him puzzled.

“Protis is down there, trying to fix his arm or something foolish. You can go see, if you want to loose what you ate this morning. We just kind of leave him alone.”

“Perhaps another time.” She says, shrugging.

The pair continue onward. At the end of the tunnel, Tanika sees a large room that's apparently lit from the outside. Before that point, they stop at a large mural embedded within the ice. It's a large collage, made up of flat circular wood disks cut from a tree trunk. They are overlapped on top of one another, to form a large singular design. Judging from the number of rings, the tree must have been at least two-hundred sun voyages old.

“If Bunjil could fly high enough to see all of our land, this is what he'd see.” Auctor says to her, as she traces her fingers around the collages finer details.

Within the wooden plates are fine black markings, apparently burned into the wood with incredible precision and attention to detail. The fine etchings perfectly outline the landscape around them. She starts to recognize all of the valleys and rivers she and Nova crossed to reach the P'tauli village. She smiles as she examines the village's finer details, imagining the scope, scale and grandeur it must have taken. In this moment she turns solemn, at the same time realizing the amount of destruction Demur must have brought no nearly wipe it all out. The representation is vastly different than the ruins she arrived to.

“I've never seen a map like this. How did you do it?” She asks.

Auctor smiles, beaming to life as he prepares to expound on his favorite hobby. His body language shows elation as he explains the unique shale rock the P'taul use for their weapons, and how it's integral to the tribe and everything they do.

She listens to him explain how rare and difficult the shale is to quarry until her eyes wander around his body. Then her mind wanders back to her dream, and to how real the dream felt. It was vivid, like a memory.

She nods in agreement as Auctor explains how the P'taul form the blades for various purposes, and how it's integral to nearly every aspect of P'tauli culture. She's actually focused on her dream, wondering if it was an accurate representation of the two men naked. She speculates if the two of them secretly felt that way about her, or if it was just her own desire to explore. It might be odd to be thinking such things currently with so much at stake, but perhaps she needed a break from the tension.

Auctor continues on and on about the fallen tree he carved the wooden plates from, and how long it took him to complete the map rendering. Tanika's mind is picturing the pair of men penetrating her over and over. They could take turns...she thinks to herself. She even wonders if she could fit them both inside of her vagina at the same time. It was bad, but would Nova even mind? Knowing him, he really would just want to join in, she thinks to herself.

Tanika had learned how to recognize a dream from reality, but this one had caught her off guard. She thought again about the ending, and how it left a sour note to an otherwise beautiful moment. She thought of how she would change everything if she could experience it again.

When the walls fall down, instead of covering her nakedness, she would let everyone see it. When the village scorned her with the word 'whore,' she would say: "Call me what you want! I'm here to make love with two great men who deserve it!" She smiles as she imagines telling off the judgemental horde. "Those who wish to stay, will witness a work of art when my body is covered in their seed!"

"...Tanika?"

"Y..Yes?" She replies, stumbling.

"On the subject of wood, I wonder if you could tell me about your bow?"

Tanika clears her throat. "My what?"

"Your weapons, the bow and arrows. What type of wood did you use to make them? The properties are quite unique." Auctor says scratching his chin.

"I don't know what type it is. Just an old tree I found when i was alone. I gathered the branches before the tree fell - "

"Yggdrasil."

"Yggd...?" She inquires.

"Yggdrasil. It was the tree of all trees. Long ago, it was so large that it stretched into the sky, higher than the mountains. All of man kind lived in this tree, and so did the eagle with no name, until it was cut down. The elders say that nine branches broke free, growing new trees all over the world. Where did you find this tree? And don't say it was the island."

"I'm saying it was the island."

She smirks before pointing her hand to an empty portion of the map. "Here. The island should be here."

"I've traveled up and down this coast, looking across an empty field of ice. I have never seen what you say is there."

"Well, you should add it to your map. It is there."

"Will you take me there someday?" Auctor asks her sincerely.

"I will show you everything." She says smiling at him.

"I hope so. But, what interests me today is what's down here." He points his finger at the representation of her village on the map. "What is this place?"

She leans in. "The riverbed, beyond the sacred meadow. Funny...I always feared I'd end up there, forever making beads with the elder women."

"That life was not meant for you." Auctor says smiling. "Do you notice something about this river?" He traces his finger along the graphical representation as it stretches through the landscape like an artery.

"This is all dried up." Tanika explains to him. "The river used to flow into our village. It was green everywhere, and we had the Salmon run. Life was easy, until the water slowed down."

Auctor nods before pointing further down the river. If you ever venture down here, beyond this pass, there are bones of people throughout the land. Have you been here? Do you know what this is?"

Tanika seems puzzled. "No, I've never been there. I've never seen that."

"It spooked us, so we didn't go close. From what we could see, this is a dam. It was built to prevent the flow of water on purpose."

Tanika seems stunned at the revelation. "Why would your people build such a thing there?"

Auctor shakes his head. "No, not our people. *Your* people. We would never get so close to do something like this. We wondered why your people built it."

"I don't know. Maybe..."

"Regardless, no dam built by a man can stop *this* wall of ice..." He points to a section of map connecting the river into the main section of the ice fields before continuing.

"...and now that the field is broken, and the water is flowing once again, I'm sure this river is full once more. I think the water flows into it, just like the day of the green, that you just told me!"

"If that's true, what good will that do us?"

Auctor points away, toward the vast room nearby. "In there."

Tanika enters a vast room, circular in shape with slanted iced walls at each end. The ceiling is three times higher than the connecting tunnel they had just exited. A circular opening showcases the

layers of ice forming the dome of the structure, while opening the room up to the sky. A great diagonal shaft of sunlight illuminates row after row of fine wooden racks, each containing large items draped in mammoth skins. Auctor walks over to one of the racks.

“You know your village better than we do.” He says to her, his voice cuts through the sound of a distant breeze. For a moment Tanika is taken back to the island. She gazes between the wooden racks to see that the end of the room opens up to a blue horizon, the ocean that was once the ice field, now churning with life.

“As you know, we’re down to only a few hunters and warriors. If they die, we will have no defense from another attack.”

Auctor climbs up the edge of the wooden rack, loosening a strap that holds the Mammoth skin drape in place. It falls away, revealing the hull of a great boat. He walks to the other end, releasing the final restraint. The tarp falls to the ground, revealing the entire shape of the ship. It hangs upside down on the wooden rack, like a giant pea-pod. Tanika had not known the concept of ship building, as her people had never conceived of such a thing. It was a finely constructed craft, lightweight material with thin animal skin wrapped around the body.

“One of these is perfectly balanced.” He explains to her. “It will carry a group of warriors across the sea, if you so desire.”

“The P’taul are full of surprises.” She says back to him with a smile.

“You will take our finest, and our bravest. Follow the coast line. Find your river, like I showed you. Use the stealth of night to rescue Raj, before it’s too late. You will lead them to victory, and come back alive. Are you ready?”

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

Tanika stands at the bow of the ship. She assumes a confident stance, the pose of a mythical figurehead, bound and determined. She looks onward toward the setting sun, watching the watery horizon as though she had complete command of it. The vessel carries them along the coast line which is on their left, through mostly calm waters. Their boat leaves behind a chevron shaped wake, radiating in all directions.

The P’tauli warriors, both young and old, routinely steer the boat with their oars. They are all painted for war, with black and gray stripes hand marked across their mostly naked bodies. Their wrists and ankles are wrapped in dark stained shells forming sections of armor. A cool ocean breeze rolls over the group much to their delight, as they build up a sweat from rowing.

Tanika wears a Mammoth fur garb along with the same armaments around her wrists and ankles. Her face is painted with a single black stripe wrapping around her eyes, which seems to illuminate them. Smaller gray stripes outline the single black one, giving her an almost wolf-like appearance. A small white star is painted on her forehead, with black and gray stripes lining her arms and legs.

The occasional floating ice chunk knocks into the hull of the ship, the thud squeaks the fine mesh netting that encompass the vessel, rattling Tanika’s nerves. She can not show it though, not in front of the men.

When Auctor and the warriors slid the boat into the sea earlier, she had to be the first one to board it. Having never been on a ship, plus her recent phobia of drowning, in addition to everyone watching her, meant that she didn't have most sea-worthy of legs. She fell over a couple of times as she tried to find her balance, once nearly capsizing the vessel.

The warriors laughed. One of them joked to the man next to him that Tanika's stumble meant that it would be easy to rape her on the boat. He thought he had said it quietly enough, but he didn't. The only thing she had to do was whip out her beautiful obsidian blade, displaying it to everyone before casually using the point of the blade to clean her fingernails.

"Go ahead and try it." She says shrugging. "It's been a while since I've tasted human blood. I miss it dearly."

The blade, in and of itself, was enough to command authority. However, it was the certainty and inflection in her voice that left the warrior feeling genuinely disturbed. The rest of the men fell in line immediately after that. Auctor smiled, knowing she would be just fine in his absence. She knew she couldn't look weak, not if she was about to lead the men into a potential battle.

She had decided from this point onward, she wouldn't be controlled by her fears any longer. If she was meant to drown, she would let go and embrace it. Grandfather had once told her that it is far worse to fear doing something than to actually do it. She tried to repeat those words in her mind during the difficult times when she needed to hear it.

It was this kind of defiant attitude which allowed her to face her fear of the wolf. Once she did that, things turned out much differently than she had expected. She thought of the love that Nova had shown her, and given to her.

She thought of love he displayed when he ran after Raj without a moment's hesitation. It made Tanika love Nova that much more. She knew the priority of the mission was to rescue Raj and get out of there quickly, but she secretly hoped she could find Nova and bring the pair of them home. At the very least, she hoped to find answers.

The sky turns into a golden red as the sun gets smaller and smaller in the distance. They continue to press onward, they should reach their destination well into nightfall. This was a new experience for all of them, not just Tanika. It had been many sun voyages since the P'taul had used shipping vessels at the motherland.

The warriors did as the elders instructed, and performed well. As long as the crew stayed near the coast, they could travel up and down the landscape without catching a cross-current and being swept out to the sea.

The ship itself was speedy, but it would still be quite some time before they found the river, in addition to navigating it to the insertion point within the sacred meadow. Tanika hoped the dam would be broken as Auctor had predicted. Otherwise, it would be a long walk to her village. They would have to consider abandoning the mission, something she was increasingly determined *not* to do.

She eyes the features of the steep coastline that they travel along. With the small amount of remaining sunlight, she examines a familiar looking slope. It looks just like the one she had tumbled down, during the night of the pursuit. To her right, she should be able to find her island. The visibility is very clear this evening as she looks down an empty ocean until it meets the clouds in the horizon. She squints her eyes analytically.

"It must be here," She thinks to herself.

"I know I'm not crazy."

The voyage continues. Day transitions into night. The Moon trades places with the Sun, and the ocean turns from a deep blue into a deep black. The vessel parts through endless fields of floating broken ice, yet continues to remain intact. It's a fine example of P'tauli craftsmanship.

The men continually joke and banter among each other as they row. They speculate about rescuing some of the captured P'tauli women, and how there would be a "reward-orgy" on the boat ride home.

"Maybe we can rescue a couple of them from the wolf-girl's tribe!" One comments.

"Not for me! My cock only works inside of P'tauli pussy."

"We can't have sex on the boat because the movement would capsize us! It won't work." One of the men adds. "..And who would be left to row the boat if we're all making love?"

"*You* will row us, since you are the most ugly."

"No, no. All of you have it wrong! They will each sit on our laps, and we will all row as we fuck them!"

"Don't you know that rowing while fucking only makes you cum harder?" Another adds, to much laughter from the group.

Tanika smiles and shakes her head. Some things never change, no matter which tribe you belong to, she concludes. At least it keeps them focused, and distracted from potential death.

"Up ahead!" Tanika yells, silencing their filth. "This looks like our channel! Take us in." She commands.

The coastline levels out and opens up to a partial reservoir. The warriors steer the vessel into it. The further they go down the channel, the more she can see the remains of a broken dam. Auctor was right.

Tanika had wondered if this dam was used to make a lake, or perhaps a fishing hole, anything but the grisly image Auctor had painted. The dam looked as though it had fractured the stream, sending it in multiple directions, which only eroded this portion of land into a marshy mess. Those days are over now, as the river seems to have taken back its original shape from long ago.

"It really looks like it...that it was made to starve the land, and us. My people. But..why?" She muses out loud. "If the stream had continued, we could have at least managed through the drought..How did we not know about this place?"

How could Grandfather not know? She thinks to herself. Each warrior struggles to form an answer to her questions, so they opt to remain silent.

Grandfather must have had more pressing issues, like peace with the P'taul, Tanika concludes to herself. This dam is also in wolf territory, many wouldn't want to venture.

She was always told that the river had dried up from natural causes, but that is no longer true. They were also told the young hunters were being killed in the forest by the wolves. She remembers the

inscription from Demur that the P'taul found, and how it alluded to him sacrificing a child to gain power.

Is that what *this* was about? Sacrificing the land too? She didn't know what to think anymore. Much of what she had learned was a lie. She knew the old ways were good, but she was the last of the old ways, her and Raj. The rest had died in the purge, which now seemed so long ago.

"Look!" One of them whispers, pointing at the river bank.

They each remain still as the boat slowly carries them by a human skeleton laying out along the shoreline. This was a detail she had hoped Auctor was wrong about, but there it was, staring back at her. More and more bones come into view, on each side of the channel. The skeletons vary in shape and size, but they have all been arranged in a symbolic, ritualistic fashion. The display is unknown, but clearly intentional.

"This is a bad omen! We must turn back!" One of the men yells loudly.

Tanika turns back at him fiercely. "We are *not* turning back! Steady forward!" She commands before turning to face ahead. "Ready your spears. Keep silent until we reach the Sacred Forrest." She finishes.

Each man rows the boat quietly as they leave the valley of death. As they press on, walls of fog slowly drift across the river. The ship passes through a thick blanket, obscuring their visibility and surrounding them in the color gray.

They exit the patch, only to enter another smaller one. This patch of fog is shallow as it bubbles and rolls across the river, barely covering the water. It gives a peculiar illusion, as it appears as though the ship is being rowed through clouds in the sky.

Tanika remains fixed on the path ahead. In the far distance, the clouded skies are lit up with red. She holds the point of the ship as she leans forward right over the water, examining. "It can't be dawn already..." She whispers aloud.

"Do you smell smoke?" One warrior asks, quietly.

Tanika scrunches her face. "Yes, I can. They are having council fire!" She replies to them. "It means we can circle the village and not be seen."

"Good." He replies.

Tanika continues. "I think we can start looking for Raj in the...Oh, No!" She yells.

"What? What is it?"

"They might be...He's having a trial! Like they did for me and, Delwyn and..and..." She turns to face them, looking each man in the eye one by one. "Row faster! We might be too late!"

They move efficiently, building momentum with each row as the vessel gains speed. The men arch back and forth faster than before to propel the ship onward. Tanika squints her eyes as the wind blows her beaded hair backwards.

They fly down the wide riverbed until the ship penetrates another wall of obscuring fog. This time, the fog stings Tanika's eyes. She's forced to close them and turn her head away. The other men are

doing the same thing as the vessel slows down. The men start coughing as they choke on the intense aroma of smoke.

Tanika tries to catch her breath, covering her mouth and rubbing her eyes.

“Too much smoke for a council fire, lady wolf! This is something else.” One manages to blurt out.

The vessel slows to a near stop, mildly gliding along the slow river current. Tiny white flakes start to slowly drift down on them.

“It’s snowing!” One of them exclaims.

“It’s too warm to be snowing! Can’t you feel how warm it is?”

“Of course it’s warm! You’ve been rowing the whole time!”

“Shut your mouth fool!” He barks back.

Tanika feels it too. “Press forward!” She chokes at them. “Row!”

The men slowly and inefficiently come together, rowing and coughing, trying to cover their mouth. It seems to intensify the further they go.

“Do you hear, a rumbling? like a grinding or churning?” One asks.

“Press forward.” Tanika responds.

“It’s not snow, it’s ash.” A man says out loud.

The vessel finally emerges from the wall of smoke. Each of them open their eyes to the source of it all, a vast and tall forrest fire. It stretches from left to right, across the distant horizon. They each feel the heat instantly, as though they were standing directly in front of a camp fire.

Tanika feels her heart sink a bit. The sacred forrest, where she had spent her childhood, was being destroyed before her eyes. She remembered the secret swamp she and Amissa had found, and the tree shelter where they first met Delwyn. She remembered the meadow the deer would graze in, back when the deer were not hunted and they trusted people. All of it gone.

“Demur is a fool.” She says through her gritted teeth. She turns again to face the men.

“Press forward.”

“We can’t go through that! It looks like it goes right across the river!” A man yells at her in a protesting tone.

She remains vigilant. “We will make it. Press forward!” She barks at them.

“Have you completely lost your head?!” The man yells back as he stands up. “We will all be cooked alive if we go into that!” He points viciously at the horizon while looking in her eyes.

Tanika pulls out the black obsidian blade in her right hand, pointing it at the man. Everyone jumps back a bit, startled. Tanika smirks slightly before slowly turning the blade, pointing the tip at her neck. The men look at each other in confusion as Tanika grabs a fold from her Mammoth skin garb with her left hand.

She slowly glides the tip of the blade down her clothing, splitting it open. She slips her left shoulder through the opening, exposing her left breast to everyone.

"The hotter it gets, the more clothing I'm going to need to remove. If anyone wants to see, I suggest that you...press forward."

The man who was standing up protesting nearly loses his balance as the ship springs forward. He looks down around him, a bit bewildered. He expected to see everyone refusing to row, but instead he sees every man rowing in unison except for him. He looks back up at Tanika, who smiles before turning around to face the forrest fire they are headed into.

The man sits back down, staring at the floor in contemplation. A few moments pass before he snaps out of it, grabbing his oar and joining in with the rowing.

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## **Chapter Thirty-Eight**

"...Are the two of you trying to overthrow me?!"

Tanika and Auctor sit in the confined corner of the room like the captive prisoners that they are. Auctor projects the image of a boy being scolded by his parents. Tanika assumes a more indifferent posture, sitting straight in her seat, as the interrogation continues. She maintains eye contact the entire time. Part of her thinks he's joking, but she remains unsure. He was always good at masking his true emotions.

"No." Auctor finally answers him. "We just wanted to return the boy."

"Well, that's what I want too. I want to hear it from her, though." Anax replies with authority, turning to Tanika. "Tell me what happened next."

"We continued up the river." She replies, matter-of-factly.

Anax folds his arms. "Now, at this point..were you completely naked, or just partially?"

Auctor accidentally releases a slight chuckle, followed by a sting of a look from Anax.

"I was naked." Tanika replies without hesitation.

The corners of Anax's cheeks hint at a smile. "Well, that's one way to motivate your warriors. Continue. I'm sure you have a captive audience." He says with another look to Auctor.

"It was very hot and - "

"I'm sure it was!" He cut's in sarcastically. She rolls it off and continues.

"...And we were choking on the smoke, but we kept on regardless. The wall of fire got closer. As long as we went through the bend, we could make it to my village. I could see the path ahead, even when the others could not."

Anax nods slowly. "Let's say you and your team made it to the village.. But the fire gets worse. You rescue the boy, but when it's time to escape...your only exit is cut off by the intense flames. What were you going to do in that instance? What was your plan then?"

"It wasn't...I had no plan."

He leans backward. "Ah, no plan." He clears his throat before standing up. "Alright. Continue the story. The one about the naked pregnant warrior, leading her troops into a Forrest fire."

Anax steps away from the pair, and walks over to a ship which has been overturned and set aside on the ground. He runs his hand along the flame charred and fractured wooden hull. His hand stops when it reaches two arrows embedded within the ship.

"That story has a nice beginning, but not so much the ending." Anax says, looking back at them.

"It could have been a lot worse, you know." Auctor blurts out over the top of him.

"We'll get to your role in this whole thing later." Anax darts back, motioning to Tanika with his arm.

"...Once we made it to the wall of fire, that's when they showed up. Several horse riders, on both sides of the river. They surrounded us." Tanika recants.

"Did you attack them?"

"They attacked first. There was a lot of confusion. I fired my bow and killed two of them. The men threw their spears and killed at least one more. Then they set our ship on fire, and we had to retreat."

Anax takes a deep breath, then turns again to Auctor. "I seem to remember telling you that I was going away to track the wolf, and I want you to stay with the village. I seem to remember saying we would plan a raid when I return. Do I have false memories?"

"It was my idea." Tanika cuts in boldly.

"Sure it was. Now what? You barely return home with injured men, and a broken vessel? Now our enemy has some of our weapons. Now our enemy has knowledge of our ships. The element of surprise has been spent. What did you gain from it? No rescue, No Raj. You killed a few of their men. If they weren't justified in another attack on us before, they certainly are now."

Tanika stands up, kicking her chair over. "What do you want me to say? Anax? They were going to kill Raj! He might already be - "

"You *don't* know that. You are letting your emotions get involved. Maybe you shouldn't be involved..And you." Anax shakes his head at Auctor. "Going behind my back like that. What were you going to do if the tribe had been attacked, while all of your warriors were out on a boat?"

"I would have faced them." Auctor says with confidence.

"Ha! I'm surprised. Usually it's Protis who shows such boldness. You've been talking to him too much! Him and this one, with the wolf's blood." He points at Tanika without looking at her. She folds her arms.

"Shit! That's a bad combination right there. Enough to give anyone a headache! Have I reamed both of your asses enough? I really just want us all to work together. Do I have your trust?"

Both of them nod.

"Now we are in the great chase. We cannot afford to stumble. I will tell you what I learned from the

wolf tracks. It's not great. Please sit down." Anax says. He waits for them to sit before he slumps back down with a sigh.

"What is it?" The two of them ask over the top of one another.

"I went to the place we last saw him. The place we last saw star birth. I followed his tracks, and I read the Earth."

"What did you find?" Tanika asks with eagerness.

Anax pauses. "The wolf chased the horse riders for a long time. I could see where he confronted them, all three. He spooked them real good. Lots of tracks, lots of movement, lots of confusion." He says, nodding before continuing. "He led the horses all over the place. But then at one point they each started circling him, and that must have been when they started firing their arrows."

Tanika finds herself holding Autcor's hand and covering her own mouth with her other one. She braces herself for worse news.

"There were arrows in the ground but no blood. I don't believe they hit him, at least not that I could see."

Tanika breathes a slight sigh of relief.

"Before I tell you what happened next, there's a lot I don't know..A lot I can't read."

"Tell me." Tanika demands.

"Well, there's something that happens that spooks everyone. Perhaps another animal. Everything gets confusing and jumbled together. And the wolf tracks.. they change. The gate is different - the spacing. Perhaps star birth is injured here, but again there's no blood. The horse riders continue on, but the wolf tracks go back into the rocks where I cannot read them. I don't see human foot prints either. I don't think he freed Raj."

The sound of footsteps gets louder and louder until a man comes running into the room, diverting everyone's attention. It's Protis.

"Anax! Everyone get your weapons! We need you now!"

"What is it?" Anax booms back at Protis.

"There's an intruder."

Anax nods in agreement, standing up. Auctor starts following Protis down the cavern.

"Auctor, get my bow!" Tankia yells after him. He nods in agreement before disappearing.

Tanika pulls out her obsidian blade as Anax finds his spear. She feels Anax's hand on her shoulder and turns to him.

"Tanika, those tracks I read...and thing that spooked everyone.." He says to her.

"Yes?"

"...I think it was another wolf."

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

The P'taul have all gathered around the ruins of their former village. Feeble hands draw back on bow strings as the elders aim their weapons at an ominous figure staring back at them on the horizon. It looms far enough away for them to not see much detail.

"Horse riders, moving in!" One warrior yells.

"How many? I only see one!" Adds another.

Other hunters scramble in, talking frantically over one another. The young men take cover behind the rubble, and aim their spears amongst the commotion.

Protis tosses his spear to the ground. He scans the horizon, covering his brow with his one hand. Anax arrives with the rest of the hunters. Auctor and Tanika follow behind him. Anax is quick to survey the defensive forces scattered around. He neglects to see one of the warriors breaking from the ranks. A lone man runs directly toward the threatening figure looming in the near distance.

Anax snaps his head around, locking in on him. "What are you doing?! Protis! wait! You are unarmed!"

He continues running toward the figure. Protis turns back to Anax for a brief moment. "You think I don't know that?!" He quips.

Anax rolls his eyes, sighing through his nose as he starts running after him. "Don't think I can't catch up to you and beat your ass! I will do it if this horse rider doesn't kill you first!"

Protis maintains his pace above Anax, never stopping his lead. "There's no rider!" He yells back at him.

"What?!" Anax exclaims through his heavy breathing.

Auctor takes command for Anax, staying with the warriors in the ruins. He instructs them to lower their weapons. Tanika runs after Anax, quickly catching up to him. She holsters her black obsidian blade. She and Anax watch as Protis continues running toward a horse with no rider. It's a beautiful paint horse, colored milky white with splashes of brown throughout its fur. A rope has been tied around the horse's mouth and head. The rope stretches to the ground and drags behind it as it strolls. The animal seems to recognize Protis and gallops toward him.

"Be cautious! It could be a trap!" Anax yells at him, looking in all directions.

"It's no trap. Just my Cocoa Leaf." Protis answers with a smile.

The mare whinnies as the two approach each other. She gallops but stumbles to a stop. Protis throws his arm around her neck as they embrace. Cocoa leaf lowers her head, nuzzling against him while breathing heavily through her nostrils, nearly knocking Protis off his balance. Tears stream down his face.

"I thought you were dead. I thought I would never see you again." He says quietly at her. His fingers comb through her mane but get stuck in the tangles as he pulls away from their embrace.

Anax and Tanika catch up to the two of them. Protis quickly wipes the tears away from his face, out of their view.

Anax continually scans the surroundings, looking for signs of an ambush. "I'm starting to wonder why I'm even a leader, if no one will ever follow my words." He utters in a contemptible tone.

Protis turns back at him. "What? Did you think my horse would burst into flames and kill us all?"

"This is *your* horse?" Tanika asks with elation. "The one you asked me to find?"

Protis nods with a smile as Anax examines the rope tied around her.

"Well I found her." Tanika finishes jokingly.

Protis smiles. "No, wolf girl. I think she found me."

"She traveled all this way?"

"Yes, must have. All the way from your village." Protis runs his hand along her side, finding burn marks along her body.

"Oh girl, what did they do to you?" He says while hunching down. He carefully examines each of her hooves.

"Look at the sweat marks up here." Anax says, pointing with his finger along her upper back. "Somebody was riding her.. and without a saddle. Not for the whole journey though.. No one can ride bareback for such a distance." He moves his hands along the rope, then pulls up the end that was dragging behind.

"The horse was confined. Someone cut this rope with a knife. Look." Anax shows the frayed end to Tanika. She holds it in her hand, then finds the red stains further down.

"Blood?" She asks Anax, looking at him for confirmation. He nods his head.

"Someone with bloody hands cut this rope. Someone in a hurry." He says while pointing. "The hand prints here are too small for a man..and the sweat marks. It was probably a child."

Protis stands up as the three of them exclaim the same word simultaneously.

"Raj!"

Anax chuckles slightly. "It seems our little shit might be too much for your people to handle, wolf girl. But where is he? Why isn't he here? Maybe the horse bucked him off. Or... Raj got separated?" He ponders while scratching his chin.

"Cocoa leaf wouldn't throw him off." Protis responds. "Perhaps he was captured again?"

Tanika steps away from the group and cups her hands over her mouth. "Raj!" She bellows into the deep distance.

"Are you here?!"

The three of them listen in silence for a response, but hear nothing.

"Make a noise if you can't speak!" Tanika yells. Her voice carries a vast distance, but again they only hear the wind rustling in response.

Auctor arrives to the group, along with a few young hunters. Tanika continues looking into the distance for a sign.

"We think the boy tried to escape, but only the horse made it here." Anax explains to Auctor and the others. "Take them on foot to the mammoth fields, see if you can find anything." He says, pointing with his finger.

Auctor nods at Anax in agreement.

"Wait!" Tanika injects. "Let's take Cocoa Leaf! We'll be able to cover more ground, and maybe she can -"

"No." Anax says over the top of her. "The horse has traveled far. It's amazing she even made it here, and clearly she needs food and water." He turns away from Tanika.

"Protis, take her to the collection. Melt down anything you need. Make sure she gets rest and treatment."

Protis nods his head at Anax. He starts to lead Cocoa Leaf away.

"Here, take this." Tankia says, showing Protis her black obsidian blade. He looks back at her with a puzzled expression. "Cut her free of that."

He nods again at her, carefully taking the blade in his hand. Tanika watches as he carefully and methodically saws the tangled rope. Protis is careful not to cut Cocoa Leaf's skin. Anax pulls the constrictive rope away from her, then coils it up in his arms. Protis returns the blade to Tanika and she promptly stores it.

"Will you please teach me how to ride a horse soon? Once she's better?" She asks him.

Protis seems to hesitate as the two of them walk away from her. "I'll think about it."

Tanika is puzzled by his reluctance, until she feels a hand on her shoulder. It's Anax. "We have much to discuss. Come with me." The two of them walk together toward the ruins, where some of the warriors are still stationed. Anax stops to address them.

"My brothers! All of you drew your weapons, and pointed them at a threat that turned out to be nothing. Just a waste of your time and energy."

Anax pauses to study their reactions, many of which seem to be of failure, disappointment.

"Good work!" He continues. "The threat to our people is very real. Our enemy wants us all dead. I'm impressed how quickly all of you assembled, and prepared yourselves for battle. I'm sure it will be even faster, and more efficient next time there is a threat. You all are truly our only hope."

The warriors nod back at Anax, mostly with smiles. Tanika is impressed with his leadership in this moment, reminiscent of Grandfather. Anax seems to be born for his role, despite his short stature. He always has a commanding presence. The pair walk together through the halls of the collection. Anax leads her into a large room connected to the boat docks.

The room is draped in more of Auctor's maps, large and highly rendered. A circular table made of ice

is in the center with empty wooden chairs outlining it. The area looks like a type of planning room for Anax and the elders. He motions for Tanika to sit down. She rests in one of the suspended chairs, finding comfort as the leather hide squeaks against the fine wooden structure.

"I never told you this but.." Anax begins, pacing around slowly with his hands behind his back.

"...When your brother arrived with his warriors, the elders decided that I should remain in this room. My father tried to negotiate with Demur. It gave us enough time to evacuate the children, some warriors, and the highest elders."

Tanika leans in, listening closely.

"I wanted to be there, with him. I wanted to face Demur...But I was the next in line. They thought I should remain safe, along with the future of the P'tauli people. We could only bring a few. If we brought the whole village, it would have revealed our hidden collection. They thought it was important...So they sealed the tunnels once we were inside. After enough time had passed we left the collection, and.. I got to see everything. The destruction, and my father's dead body."

Tanika shakes her head, looking down. "I'm sorry. I didn't know.."

Anax continues. "My father and I..we were not the best of friends. But the attack did something to me, and to us. We changed as a people. I saw the spirit die in everyone. It seemed as though we wanted to give up. I even sealed the collection, and forbade anyone to return to it. Then one day, a girl appeared."

Tanika looks back up at him, locking eye contact. His lips reveal a subtle, hidden smile in the corner.

"She was the enemy.. but she did the impossible. She lived alone in the wild, hunting where no man had hunted before. She tamed the killer beast, and made him her ally. She inspired something in the P'taul. Soon, they want to continue our traditions. They want to hunt the Mammoth again. They want to live again. The heartbeat has returned."

"I didn't do anything." She says, instantly.

"Oh, but you did." He retorts. "You did everything! And now, when there is an attack on you, or...an attack on the boy, it is an attack on us. No one attacks our family. Both of you are family, and the fire burns within all of us. You know what I say is true. Those men on the boat were willing to die for you."

Tanika nods, unsure of what to say.

He sits down at the other end of the circular table. "The people want war for what has happened. The truth is..we do not have the strength. Your brother has more warriors, we would all die in such an attack. But...I will not be able to hold the P'taul back, just like I was not able to hold back Protis, running after that damn horse."

Tanika chuckles a bit, sniffing. She clears her throat. "What do we do?"

"You know your brother better than we do. There's got to be a way...for us to have peace. Some kind of peace. What does he want?"

There's a long pause as Tanika thinks to herself. "It's like you said. He's a hunter, and he's using Raj to get to me...to us. He has a lot of beliefs, and he's convinced a lot of people. If I could talk to him

maybe I could find something. But it seems to me he's too far gone."

Anax sighs. "As much as I hate to say it, I think the boy was taken after he got on that horse."

"Maybe I could ride cocoa leaf to my village. If he sees only me and not the P'taul, he might talk. I don't get the feeling Protis wants to teach me to ride though."

Anax stands up. "I'm afraid I have to agree. The move would be risky. You would be too vulnerable on a ship as well." He leans over the table, digging his knuckles into the iced surface. "Time is running out for the boy. We must think of something." He says, looking down.

"I know! What about Bunjil? He could certainly make the journey quickly."

Anax looks back at her. "Yes...but what good would that do?"

"Could he carry something? Something light?" She asks.

"I suppose so. I've never tried something like that... What are you thinking?" He ponders, scratching his chin.

"You told me about the symbols painted by the dead bodies you found. Auctor deciphered the text, did he not?"

Anax nods. "Alright. Yes. You're onto something."

Tanika stands up. "When Auctor returns, let's send Demur a text message."

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## **Chapter Forty**

### To Demur: Son of Abrian and Kenelm

Behold! I am your great Eternal Father. I bring you this message from high above, because I am displeased with your actions! Demur has been a bad boy! Very bad!

You have taken innocent life, spread destruction across the land, and killed members of your own family. You've committed these abominations in my name, for your own selfish desires, and the pursuit of power.

For these reasons, I have given your sister Tanika rebirth. In her second life, I have given her the roar of the bear, the eyes of the eagle, the strength of the mammoth, and the blood of the wolf.

You will no longer harm the child you have stolen. You will return him to his people by sundown of this day. You will make peace with the P'taul. They have food, and you may establish peaceful trade with them. You will not make war with the P'taul. They are few in numbers, but their footsteps will shake the Earth.

Verily I command these things to you, my loyal servant Demur. Disobey my instructions, and you will face my judgement!

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Auctor scrunches his face critically.

“What?” Tanika asks.

He scratches his neck, maintaining his scrunched brow. “It’s just...are you sure the creator of the universe would call him a ‘very bad boy?’”

“Well, I - ”

“And the tone of it - it seems...”

“What does it seem like?” Tanika asks again.

Auctor straightens his posture, stepping away from the council fire as it pops. The embers soar upward and illuminate the mostly empty circular amphitheater. “It seems like you’re mocking him.”

“I love it! It’s perfect.” Anax quips with a slight smile.

Tanika folds her arms. “Maybe we can change some of the words.”

“The creator of the universe puts the wrong words down, then changes them?” One of the elders ponders.

“We’ll write a new one.” She answers back.

“We don’t have unlimited leather hide, you know.” Auctor shakes his fine pointed instrument in his tired hand.

“Enough! Don’t you see I have a hungry bird that’s ready to fly? It’s a long journey ahead.” Anax says, booming over them. Bunjil stretches his wings, changing his footing slightly along Anax’s shoulder.

“I think he just shit down my back. Give me the message.” Anax stretches his open hand to Auctor. He sighs and rolls up the message. It looks like a scroll as he fastens the ends of the hide leather together.

Anax presents the scroll to Bunjil. He arches down, looking at and tilting his head. Anax moves the coiled message lower, by the eagle’s feet. Bunjil turns his head away, seemingly uninterested. Anax shakes it a bit.

“Come on, take it!”

Bunjil extends one of his powerful claws, grasping the scroll for a moment before dropping the message on the ground. He looks back at Anax with another titled gaze, blinking.

One elder turns to the other. “Is this even going to work?”

Anax bends down, lowering to pick up the message. Bunjil flaps his wings and shifts positions along Anax’s back, finding balance with a squawk.

“He’s only helped me hunt, nothing like this. Give me a moment.”

He holds the scroll out again. Bunjil grips it with a claw as Anax motions a few hand signals. They look at each other a moment with no reaction from the eagle. Anax raises his eyebrows and with

wide eyes nods back at him.

Bunjil lets out a final squawk, flapping his wings as he leaps from Anax's shoulder. He grips the message with both claws. With a few great thrusts, he soars over the council fire and flies high into the deep dark night.

"He will arrive to your village before sunrise." Anax turns to face everyone. "Now we wait."

It's a dramatic end to another council fire as everyone heads home. Attendance was again small, but not the overall feeling of angst. The P'taul seemed to be stretched thin increasingly on a daily basis. Those who were more able-bodied were in high demand for guard-shifts or search parties, routinely combing nearby forests for signs of Raj.

The latest buzz of the village, however, was the return of cocoa leaf. Protis had spent much of the day giving small horse rides for the children. It was clear cocoa leaf hadn't received much attention in a such a long period of time. The whole event seemed to be mutually therapeutic for everyone involved, a good distraction from all of the tension and loss.

Tanika had watched Protis from afar as he held the activity. He and cocoa leaf displayed a genuine rapport. She could tell they shared a bond as strong as Anax and Bunjil, or even as her and Nova.

Tanika has become increasingly determined to find her wolf companion. She's convinced she can ride horseback at night, and cover a vast distance. She trusts Anax, but wants to examine the wolf tracks herself. Maybe there was something she could find on her own, or perhaps he was keeping something from her about the whole thing. While everyone heads home, Tanika walks to the collection, to find Protis.

The halls of the collection always radiate a soothing warmth, despite being made completely out of ice. Tonight it was no different, even as she traveled down the iridescent path toward protis' forbidden section. She calls out his name as she approaches the first open chamber. She pauses and listens closely for a response, but only hears her own voice echoing into the glacial infinity.

She cautiously steps into the open chamber. The smell is difficult to bare, and she covers her mouth. The entire enclave is strewn with various animal bodies. Some of them had missing skin or limbs, or had been cut open. Tiny vines wrap around preserved intestines, and were occasionally connected to bubbling vats of natural glacial water. The entire place looked like an area for food preparation after a hunt. With no one in sight, she promptly exits. No wonder she had received such a stern warning before.

The hallway is tall and wide as it stretches onward. The sound of flowing water echoes through the stretch. Tanika passes by other connecting rooms which are either empty or in various stages of abandoned construction, with frosted ends of wood supports jetting throughout.

Soon she nears the source of flowing water. The end of the hall finally connects to another vast open area, similar in size and scope to the large boat docks at the other end. The room radiates a warm luminous green tone. Large boulders are strewn throughout, formed from a type of molten conglomerate. The source of green light becomes apparent, as the ice walls contain vast stretches of alfalfa, along with wheat, barley, and various grains. It seems to go out forever, like endless fields. The construction of the walls must have taken many hours.

Two streams of water outline the edges of the room, which are held in place by another short wall made from smooth river stones. The flowing water looks clear and drinkable, unlike the chemically murky compound she had seen when she first entered the collection. Wooden panels are evenly

spaced from the water, separated like stalls. Dried straw litters the floor. The whole place seems to be designed to house a number of animals, likely horses.

The stalls are all empty except for one at the very end. It's occupied by a beautiful paint horse, cocoa leaf. She casually eats from a pile of green hay.

Tanika steps around one of the large boulders to get a better view. She sees protis. He appears to have a type of brush in his hand, running it along cocoa leaf's body. She can also see that he's applied some type of green ointment to portions of her, likely to treat her burns.

"Protis!" she yells, cupping her hands over her mouth.

Her voice is drowned out by the frequency of the roaring waterfall behind protis. The cascade of water flows from a natural chute of an opening in the ice ceiling. The blue glow of the chute above illuminates the water until it shifts to a natural translucence as it splashes below. The water collects into a great pebbled aquifer that diverts into the two streams which outline the room. The crashing water creates a misty field that carries throughout the area the two of them stand.

Protis finishes brushing the horse. He steps onto a ledge of the aquifer, near her rear. Tanika watches as the horse moves her tail to the side while he runs his hand along her muscled hind leg. From tanikas perspective, it looks as through Protis stops a moment, his hand and fingers tracing and gently penetrating her genitals.

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Chapter Forty-One

Tanika feels something brushing against her groin. Startled, she leaps away before gently leaning her back along the molten boulder. A quick look down her clothing reveals nothing but her own naked skin gleaming back at her.

"It must have been in my mind. But did I just see...what I think I just witnessed?"

Tanika utters to herself out-loud, with little chance of being heard by anyone.

She peers around her shoulder, watching intently as Protis steps up onto the stony edge of the aquifer. In one motion he removes his furs, and Tanika's eyes trace up and down his naked body. She soaks in every inch of his thin, but athletic frame. The mist from the waterfall behind him collects around his toned features. The white light refracting from the stony glacial walls helps to outline his firm stomach muscles, his lean arms and legs.

She imagined him being a great sprinter out in the wild. He might even be able to keep up with Nova, at least for a short while; She thinks to herself.

Oh Nova...

Just the sight of him running in the fields, or during a hunt, was enough to nearly bring her to orgasm. Knowing that those powerful legs propelling him forward would soon be swimming around her own body, in whatever position she chose, it was as if he was transferring that same amount of energy into herself as they made love. Tanika's mind seems to race in thought.

Then there was the sight of Protis' penis, swelling to firmness just as Cocoa Leaf backs her hind end

playfully into his bare human waist. He starts laughing.

“Woah, girl! You almost made me fall backwards.” He says with a chuckle. He gently drapes her tail around the back of his neck and shoulders while gathering his footing along the rock ledge.

“Don’t make me fall on my ass.” He says, positioning himself closer. The mare scoops at the ground as she gyrates into him. “Let me fall on yours.” He says, leaning into her. Her massive vaginal lips flex from bottom to top, revealing a swollen pink clit appearing briefly like a flower before she consumes his human member.

“Well then.” Tanika says aloud. “I did see what I thought I saw.”

Protis moans a bit as he bucks back and forth slowly, gently bouncing into her meaty buttocks.

“It really looks like she’s enjoying it. I should go...Oh!”

Tanika feels it again. It had been quite some time since anyone touched her that way, or for that matter penetrated her. She couldn’t explain it. Her insides stretched and moved as though they were firmly wrapped around a warm organ, which she could feel moving in and out of her, but nothing was there but herself. It’s as though a phantom limb keeps entering her body.

“Mmmm...I sh..should really, uh! Go...”

She covers her mouth with one hand, and her crotch with the other. Her legs are wobbly with pleasure as she stumbles to the exit. The feeling of making love while walking is quite the peculiarity for her. Once she makes it to the archway, she leans out from the supporting beam and gazes down the long icy corridor.

She pauses.

“No one is coming.” She says before darting back into the great room.

She crawls back to her viewing boulder, to get get another good look at the two. Tanika had never been much of a voyeur, but this was a scene she couldn’t pass up. The strange invisible thrusting continues within her. She can’t help but touch herself to add to it.

“Maybe it’s Nova? Maybe he is sending me his love through a dream.” She wonders to herself. “Has our bond become that strong? It would be great if it did.” She smiles at the idea.

“Nova’s thrusting is more vigorous than this...and his size swells with each one. This one feels more consistent. It feels very, human.”

She watches intently as Protis mates with Cocoa Leaf. She loves the sight of his member emerging, shining from her horse juices only to disappear into her again. She loves seeing it more than she thought it would. Perhaps it reminded her of her own animal lovemaking with Nova. Protis’ motions even match what she’s feeling inside of her body right now. Then it dawns on her.

“I must be feeling what that mare is feeling! Mmm...” It feels too good to question, or complain about. Now she feels justifiably connected to the event. She feels her breasts as her pleasure builds.

“Give it to her good, Protis! Yes!” She yells between moaning. Protis stops and covers himself up.

“Is someone there?” He yells out over the waterfall. It seems Tanika went too far this time.

“No! Just keep going!” She yells again, before silencing herself. “What was I thinking...”

Her heart races as Protis scans the room. As the moments pass, even Cocoa Leaf looks confused, and tries to lure the young man back into action. Protis shrugs before disrobing and mounting his prize horse once more.

Tanika hums in pleasure to that familiar feeling again, the penetration within. She wonders if Protis knows he’s mating two females at the same time. The idea that he didn’t know made the whole scenario that much more enticing. She also started to wonder if he was going to deposit his seed into a womb where it didn’t belong, much like how her own womb was flooded with the seed of an animal that didn’t belong. Now that it had been, new life was forming inside of her. The first of it’s kind. The certainty that Tanika would give birth to a male wolf cub is what sends her into orgasmic bliss.

She writhes and squirms on the floor uncontrollably, her hands and fingers sensually massaging herself within her clothing as she gushes. In her blissful pleasure, visions and knowledge flood her mind at the same veracity as when she and Nova first made love.

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## **Chapter Forty-Two**

Tanika floats between consciousness and reality, space and time. Her body, like before, stays behind. A library of knowledge is at her feet. Ideas, dreams, and wisdom fly by her at lightning speed. She wants to take it all in, to retain something she can take back with her. As much as she tries, it’s like attempting to contain oil as it slips through her fingers.

She writhes on the ground in pleasure, stuck in the swirling psychedelic maelstrom. For a frightening moment, she loses all identity of self and ego. An index of her childhood memories flips through her, as if to bring her back. The memory of her first hunting expedition plays vividly like a vision. She relives the moment before her eyes.

The group is walking back to the village. They’ve just descended the steep mountainside that Demur took them to, empty handed. The sun sets in front of them as they hold their hands up to block the piercing light. Everyone is tired, aching, and hungrier than when the hunt first began. Demur leads the group in front while each hunter walks single file behind him. Tanika opts to be at the end of the line. The tension from earlier, when Demur threatened the boy, still lingers. Naturally, he walks alongside her.

“You watched me practicing with the bow?” She asks him.

He nods in agreement. “You can pull the string all the way back and I cant! I wish I was grown up so I could. But I’m stronger than everyone thinks.”

She smiles. “Of course. You know so much about me but I don’t know much about you at all. What’s your name brave warrior?”

“I am called ‘Raj.’”

“That’s an interesting name. I don’t think I’ve heard it before.”

He shrugs, looking down at the ground as they walk. “It was some old crazy lady. She yelled it at me and then all the other orphans started making fun of me and called me it. The elders said it means

'scar' from the old tongue." He holds his chest lightly. "I thought I would get my scar in a hunt or maybe saving somebody from a wolf or a bear. Not like this."

"I'm sorry. That should not have happened." Tanika looks ahead, making sure the others aren't listening. She overhears Demur.

"... I really *did* think we'd be hunting, not baby-watching!" He grunts to the men behind him, who chuckle. She's sure the comment was directed at her or Raj, probably both. "I told Grandfather it was a stupid idea. Only the strong survive."

"Raj, did you say you are an orphan?" She asks carefully. He nods in agreement. "I know what it's like to lose parents. It's very tough."

"At least you have your Grandfather." He says cutting in. "I didn't even know my parents.. just that they died on the ice in the great walk. Now I have no one."

Tanika takes his hand as they walk side by side. "That's not true. You have me."

Raj smiles and intertwines his fingers between hers, giving an affirming squeeze. His expression quickly changes and he brings his voice to a whisper. He pulls her arm down to draw her closer.

"..Then don't make me go back!"

"What are you talking about?" She asks, stopping.

"I can't go back to the village. I'm in big trouble!"

"No you're not! Don't you even think that!"

"No no.. I am! I told a lie to the elder and I think Demur knows it! I think that is why he cut me."

"What do you mean? What lie?" She asks with concern.

"Well... when the elder asked me how old I was, I told him I was older than I really am." He says hesitantly. The other hunters have walked around a bend in the trail, out of sight.

"You told a lie about your age? That's it?"

"It was so I could go hunting..only the older boys are allowed. Now he will tell the elders! I just want to escape and live here in the forest!"

Tanika chuckles a bit. "You'll do no such thing! Look, Demur wants to be tribal leader, so he's trying to be favored by Grandfather. He will be at council fire tonight. If he tries to get you in trouble, I'll tell everyone what he did to a child, and no one will believe or respect him."

"Girls aren't allowed at council fires!"

She grins. "Are you sure about that? Don't worry. I will take care of Demur for you."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

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Chapter Forty-Three

“Ha! What’s wrong with you?”

Anax waits for a response, but only gets a disjointed sigh from Tanika as she lays on the ground.

“What’s wrong with her?” He says while turning to Auctor, who hunches down to inspect.

“She’s holding herself, and moaning. Don’t you see? It’s completely obvious...she’s sick.” He says to Anax.

“Sick?”

“Yes. I told you not to go in that room!” He beckons down to her. “The smell gets me every time.”

“Let’s give her some privacy for the sake of the ice!”

Tanika slowly returns to reality, gradually waking in a foggy haze. She sits up and holds her head, eyes closed. She folds her knees to her chest and yawns.

“How long have I?...Ugh. What are you two doing here?...” She says, rubbing her eyes.

“We came for the horse. What are you doing here?” He asks, folding his arms.

Tanika stretches. “...I came for the horse too.”

“Sounds like we all want the same thing! Where is Protis?”

“You are *not* taking her!” Protis booms to them from the middle of the room as he walks toward them, fully clothed. Anax quickly steps around the boulders to see him.

“Ah! There’s the man. You are aware of the crisis concerning the boy, correct?” Anax says to him. They both approach a comfortable personal space.

After a pause, Protis responds. “Yes.”

“The time is near for the wolf skins to return him. I sense something is wrong.”

Protis leans back, slowly inhaling through his nose. “And?”

Anax leans toward him. “I will only take her as far as the mammoth fields. I will retrieve the boy there, and we ride home together. I don’t want them any closer to the village than they need to be. I will go alone, and your horse will not be harmed. You have my word.”

Auctor is quickening his pace to the two of them. “We agreed to go together!” He yells at Anax. Tanika is not far behind. “If you are going, I am going too! Raj is my...”

“Silence! Both of you!” Anax snaps. “This is between the two of us only!”

“I’ve been the one to treat her wounds. I know everything she’s been through. More than any of you!” He points to each of them with his limb. “She didn’t return only to become everyone’s transport. Don’t you have boats? And don’t you have wings for that, Anax?”

“The time for Bunjil’s return has long passed. He is likely dead.” Anax states coldly. It’s the first time

Auctor and Tanika have heard this. "The light is short. The mare tried to bring him home once. Let her finish the job. Will you help us, or not?"

"She's seen enough war. The answer is No."

Anax slowly nods. "Hm. And shall we count you out of everything else too?"

"Yes, please do."

He wasn't expecting that answer. "Well...I won't!" Anax turns away in a slight huff. "Get your weapons." He barks at the pair. "We depart now."

"Now we're going with you?" Tanika inquires.

"No time." Anax heads toward the exit with intent, with Protis returning to the waterfall at the other end of the expanse. Auctor and Tanika walk briskly to keep up with Anax.

"I will leave special instructions for the elders. If only I return...or, if only the two of you return they will....ugh! Why am I explaining all this to you?!" Anax quips, with confused looks from the pair. "The only important part is...I need you two to witness if I get killed or not. You two will need to stay behind, witness, and return here if anything goes wrong...no negotiating! Are you with me?"

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## **Chapter Forty-Four**

"Shouldn't we be going with many, many more warriors?" Auctor snarks.

"And the two of us, we came to witness? It sounds kind of.."

"Stupid!" Auctor snaps over Tanika.

"I was going to say 'sacrificial.'" She says conclusively.

"I will remind you both that my original plan included a horse!" Anax finally grunts back to them as they trek forward. "There is still time to prevent war. I will negotiate the release of the boy."

"With what? Your charming words and smile?"

"Yes."

"You must have smoked all of Tanika's stink weed to think of something like this!"

She laughs. "Anax must have a smoked mind to think the two of us will stay behind, especially if he's in danger!"

"Everyone else is running toward death, why can't I? You will both stay behind. Trust me."

"Yes.. And if you get killed for your smile, What if we are run down by their horse army?" Auctor adds.

"You won't. You two are clever."

"I like your confidence..."



"This has always been about me. That's why they killed Bunjil." Anax says clearing his throat.

"You think...they took our Eyes, and you still want to negotiate with them?"

Tanika listens in on them, intently.

"They may also have the girl's wolf. Don't you want to see?"

"They don't. Nova is free. Nova is alive." She says with certainty.

Anax stops and turns back to her. "Have you spotted some tracks?"

"No. I feel it. I sense it." She holds a clenched fist over her heart. "I know it."

There's a brief pause as Auctor turns to look at Anax.

"And you think *I* have a smoked mind? Enough talk! Save your breath for the journey ahead."

The three of them don't speak much further as they forge into the arduous trek. They have not visited the fields since the day of the ambush, and it's likely the three of them feel the same heaviness increasing as they near the site. Tanika will search for Nova when the time is opportune.

"Here we are." Auctor says quietly, as they each uniformly stop for a break.

"Not much has changed, has it?"

Aside from vast melted patches of ice, the area remains eerily undisturbed. Anax scans the horizon with his fingers arched above his brow. "There is no life here. We must have beat them."

A mild humidity coats the air through the fields. The vast view, which would normally stretch to the distant mountain range, is muddled by a churning fog. It bubbles like caldron in slow motion, blanketing the scenery into obscurity. It creepily rolls toward them from the distance, a grim gun powder grey that seeps into the clouds above, dulling the colors around.

Despite the thickening grey, the late afternoon sun finds a way to pierce through and shine into Tanika's face. She shields the light in the same manner as Anax as she looks away to her left. The glacial lake from which the mammoth drink from, has increased in size from the melt.

"What do we do now?"

"We wait."

Hours seem to pass as they quietly listen to the still cool breeze, scanning all directions routinely. The setting sun starts to golden the surrounding mist.

"What if they did not get the message? What if this all in vain?"

Anax turns to Auctor. "Perhaps Bunjil took your message and tossed it in the stream! Then he flew away, saying goodbye to mankind! Is that what you want me to say?"

"There's no one here!"

"Could they have gone another way?" Tanika chimes.

"They must cross these fields to reach our village. The only other way, would be the stupid way that you came."

"The 'stupid way?'"

"Yes. No one can go the stupid way now that the ocean is returned. This is the only way. I intend to meet them here."

"Must you use that word? It's not, 'challenging' or 'courageous?' Tanika went the challenging way.." She says, trailing off as Anax looks away. He pretends not to hear her.

"Wait, don't you feel it?" Auctor says pointing to the ground.

Anax leans down, lightly pressing his cheek into the tundra.

"Horses! They're...here."

Anax stands up and promptly gazes across the field. The setting sun casts a red hue, and the crimson fog seemingly parts ways on cue for a single horse rider, emerging from a thicket of dead aspen trees.

"I can't tell if it's Demur. It could be a scout. Too far away to see for certain.."

"This is where you two stay." Anax says abruptly.

"I don't think so! We face them together!" She snaps back.

Anax answers calmly. "There are some things only a tribal leader must see, and decide. When Demur attacked us, I did not face him. When I took Raj on the hunt...I told him to stay in the wrong hunting party. It was my decision that got him captured."

"Don't blame yourself, Anax!"

"I bare the responsibility, So I will trade my life for his." He states matter of factually.

"Tanika, you are to rule in my stead. That is why you two are to remain behind. I have told the elders. Once the exchange is made, and they have taken me, then -"

"No!" Auctor cuts in. You're *not* going through with this!" His lip quivers a bit. Anax puts his hand on Auctor's cheek.

"Old friend. You know it must be this way."

Tanika is surprised. "I'm not..I can't rule. I'm not P'taul! We need our leader. We need you!"

Anax shoves Auctor away. "Be strong!" He yells before drawing his spear, seemingly on them. Tanika's eyes widen.

"She will need your wisdom. Do you understand?" Auctor sniffs as he nods in agreement. Anax holds the spear a moment before throwing it to the ground. "You two must be the ones to escort Raj home." He reaches behind his back, removing a bow and arrows as well as other concealed knives around his ankles. He tosses it all into a pile at Tanika's feet.

"And you.." He jabs his finger into Tanika's shoulder. "You hunt the Mammoth! You are P'taul!"

Anax raises his arms above his head. "Now both of you get down and be quiet!" He takes one last look at the two of them before saying "So long." He turns away and walks up the mild incline. He heads toward the tundra expanse, with the horse rider on the opposite end. Anax yells toward the rider, easily cutting through the quiet mist.

"Out for an evening ride?"

The distant rider spots Anax, and turns slowly toward him.

"A joke! I am alone! Do you see my hands? I have no weapons! I will approach you slowly!"

The horse rider changes course, and casually approaches Anax from afar. He can see that both the rider and horse are adorned with various skeletal remains. They clank together as the horse slowly trots, slumping in its stride from all the weight.

Auctor is overcome with emotion. Tanika leans into him.

"I will not let them take our leader's life! Do you understand?"

Auctor nods up and down sniffing. "Yes. I'm glad we're thinking the same thing. What is your plan?"

"I will take that ridge directly over there." She says, pointing with her finger. "I can get there without being seen. You can take position by those rocks. We'll be able to see each other."

"Good. Where are your bow and arrows?" He asks concerned.

Tanika shrugs. "I will only have one shot. You will have to cover my blind areas as I retrieve my spear. There must be more beyond the haze. We can use the fog and confusion to hunt down every last one of them. I will not risk harming Raj, so we'll only attack if Anax is killed. Is your head clear for this?"

"Yes. Anax will not be happy."

"Then he shouldn't have made me leader. Do you remember our hunting hand signals?"

Auctor takes his turn to shrug.

"Remember them quickly! We should go now." Tanika grips her spear.

They nod to each other, departing silently. Tanika heads for higher ground, while Auctor stealthily moves toward the lower rock ridge. Both of them will have an equal vantage point to the middle of the tundra, where Anax and the horse rider are set to meet.

"Demi, is that you?" He beckons to the rider, who remains silent.

"If it is you...or, if it is your Voice, let me tell you something!"

Tanika crawls along the upper ridge, finding a good position out of view. She looks down on them, breathing heavily as she readies her spear like a javelin. She eyes Auctor as he readies his own bow and arrow. She follows the rider with her intense aim.

Anax continues in his slow stride. "Demur's Grandfather and my own Father, used to meet in this very field! The one you and I are standing in right now! Do you know what their one agreement was?"

The rider continues, silently.

“...They agreed that the conflict would remain out there! Not in these fields! In that spirit, I invite you here now! For an understanding!”

The horse rider then stops in his tracks, as does Anax. They are close enough to see each other. Anax cringes from the decayed smell. Beneath the smattering of bones, both horse and rider seem to be lathered in a dripping black tar. Only the whites of the rider's eyes can be seen through the mask, like a twisted samurai. The horse exhales the same red mist that permeates their foggy crimson surroundings.

“I am Anax, leader of the P'taul! There is no army behind me, and I have no weapons. Allow the boy to approach me. When I see that he is not harmed, and I see him walk over that ridge behind me, I will give myself over to you.”

The rider stares back with a blank expression.

“Isn't this what you wanted? Let's solve this as men, here and now!”

The leather squeaks as the rider begins to dismount. He hits the ground with force, and turns with a military precision to unfasten the load behind his horse's saddle.

Tanika signals down to Auctor to lower his weapon, which he misinterprets. Auctor draws his bowstring back as Tanika waves frantically for him to stop.

The rider slings a large item over his shoulder, which he carries and lays on the ground before his horse. It's a large bag of some kind. Anax glares at him, puzzled and angry. “What is the meaning of this?”

The rider bows with his arms open, before turning and stepping up onto his horse again. He quickly turns the horse, and trots away in the opposite direction.

“This is not what we agreed!” Anax yells back.

“I'm talking to you! *Not* your horse's ass!”

The horse rider simply gallops away, into the thick of the dead aspen trees. The notches in the trees look like giant eyes, an endless field of them, each following Anax's every move as he slowly approaches the bag. He can faintly hear warriors whispering to one another.

With a shaking hand he slowly opens the bag. It looks like the one Raj was captured in. He closes his eyes before slowly opening them to reveal what he most feared. It's the mangled remains of a dead young boy, unmistakably Raj. It hits Anax hard. He falls to his knees, paralyzed.

Tanika drops her weapon. She covers her mouth, turning away to emit a muffled shriek. Auctor slumps down in disbelief.

Anax cradles the body. He's in shock. “I've failed.” He can only hold back the tears so long. He takes a few moments to compose himself before he inhales abruptly, sealing the bag. Then he screams a bone chilling war cry, silencing the hundred pair of eyes he feels are watching him from the mist. He raises up with clenched hands, quickly reaching for a leather pouch. He uses it pour oil onto the bag.

With a quick strike of a flint, he ignites everything. The flames help to radiate Anax's consuming

anger. Finally a delighted, sinister laughter echoes back at them through the trees. It seems to relish in their sorrow.

Anax finally turns away, marching across the massive field. Tanika and Auctor run from their positions to meet him. They are all crying, confused and angry.

“Anax! What now?”

Anax throws a piece of scrap leather onto the ground. Auctor stumbles and slouches down to investigate it.

“It’s a message that was included with the body.” Anax explains. “I cannot read the text. But it does not matter.. It does not matter what it says. I can tell you what it means.”

“What is it?”

“We are going to war. And we are all going to die.”

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Chapter Forty-Five

Anax sits at the edge of a plateau. A vast chasm lies before him. The stream which carved this steep canyon through the eons of time, is now a path of frozen ice at the end of the long drop. The other side is a jagged rock wall, too steep and too far for anyone to dare leap toward.

He sits cross-legged with his hands on his knees, and a straight posture. He meditatively breathes in the cool night air. A half-moon hangs in the sky, dimly illuminating the rocky detail all around. He listens intently for a moment. The whistle of the flowing air in the canyon below resonates through him before he opens his eyes.

“Your tracking skills are improving.” He says out-loud.

Tanika slowly steps behind him, out of her concealment. “I wasn’t spying on you.” She says while finally sitting next to him on the edge.

“We call this place ‘The valley of Wings.’” Anax explains. “If you are hunting in the wild, and you get separated from your partner, it is agreed that you will return to the place that you last saw each other. This is the place I found Bunjil for the very first time. We would meet here if we ever got separated in the mammoth hunt.”

“Have you seen anything?”

“What was that old story...about the eagle leaving because mankind used fire the wrong way? No. I have not seen him and I don’t expect to.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but you don’t seem very upset by it. He was your ally.”

Anax interlocks his fingers, shifting in his position. “My father was one of the last of a generation. I always wanted to be like him. I wanted to hunt, and to ally with the eagle as he did. He wasn’t known for giving gifts, but one day when I was seven or eight voyages old, he brought me a gift from a hunt.”

“Oh?”

“It was a baby rabbit. It had brown fur, white stomach. Spots. Very soft. I loved him immediately. My father said, ‘Take care of him but do *not* give him a name.’ Well, the rabbit would always stomp his feet, and of course I gave him a name.”

“That’s sweet. What did you call him?” She wraps her arms around her folded legs, resting her cheek on top of her knees.

“I gave him the name ‘Two Sticks.’ One day I went to feed Two Sticks and he was gone. I called his name, I searched the forest, I asked everyone in the village and we could not find him. After much searching I went to my father, and I told him what happened. He only said, ‘Now you are ready for the hunt.’ I wish I had known what he truly meant by that.”

Tanika pauses. “What did he mean by it?”

“Well, he took me on the hunt like he promised. I felt honored! I was the youngest one in the party. My father lead it, with the older boys and their fathers. We stopped to rest along a path, and the boys started hitting the bushes very hard with sticks. I remember thinking, ‘What are they doing? What are they doing?’ Then, I see the rabbits running into the path...scared. And that is when my father sent his hawk. Woosh.”

Anax moves his right hand forward like a bird.

“I never knew a rabbit could scream until that day. I never heard such a thing. Suddenly, the hunt was not so...pretty. And all I wanted to do was run down that path, and kick that stupid bird as hard as I could. My father knew it, and he held me in place. He made me watch the worst thing I had ever seen. Then he said, ‘This is what happened to your Two Sticks! This is the way of the wild. This is why the P’taul do not give names to animals!’ I didn’t say anything. I just turned around and started hitting him as hard as I could. The other fathers were laughing, the boys were laughing. I thought the whole thing was horrible. My father would beat my ass if I ever hit him like that. This time, he just sat there while I attacked him with all my child fury until I could not any more...and as I lay there in the dirt, out of breath, he says to me; ‘Pain is weakness. Leave it behind.’”

Tanika frowns. “I’m sorry. That must have been difficult for a child.”

“It is the P’tauli way.” He tosses a small rock into the great void. “Bunjil did not want to go, I knew it. I sent him anyway. Now I am the last of that kind, with no son to pass on the knowledge. It would have been Raj.”

She turns to Anax. “Why did you burn him?”

“What?”

“Why did you burn his body?”

“Did you come here to talk about this?” He says, closing in on himself.

“Just answer me Anax! I saw my friends die that way. Raj deserved better!”

“When I said there are certain things that only a leader must see, that is what I meant. It was something that I knew Demur wanted [I]you[/] to see, and I did not want him to win.”

"I saw Raj in that bag."

"I know." Anax says, unfolds his arms. "For the P'taul...It is the highest honor to reach the Sun. Fire is the closest thing we have to the Sun, since it is so far. We burn our bodies to return to our true mother, and I gave that honor to him. To undo what Demur did."

"But...how are we to give back to the Earth if we are just ash?"

Anax ponders her question carefully. "Do you bury your dead?"

"Yes, to return to the Earth."

"In our eyes, it is repulsive to be in the ground."

"Well, I hope you don't have control of my body when I die." She says assuredly.

"As do I." He says looking at her. He throws a rock into the void, a bit harder this time. They both listen as it smashes into the cliffside, chiming and tumbling into the great depth below.

She shakes her head and huffs. "Why did we come here?"

"What?"

"I mean, why did our people come here? So long ago...Both of our people came to a new world, to start again. But here we are, playing the same game, destroying one another." She pauses. "I was once told by a mystic that I would unite our tribes, not bring them to war. How silly, It didn't come true."

Anax contemplates for a moment. "Perhaps the mystic meant another tribe."

"What other tribe?" She asks.

He shrugs. "What of your ally? Have you found your wolf?"

"I Don't think I want to."

Anax seems puzzled, so Tanika elaborates. "If we are to go to war, I know that Nova will not leave my side. I could lose him, and I don't want that to happen. I would rather go alone, without him."

"The army we face is much greater than ours. We are but a band of inexperienced youth and ailing elders. Empty ships without warriors. If we are to stand a chance, we need all the help we can get. You are leader now, the choice is yours."

"You will always be my leader." Tanika says looking at him.

"As will you." He returns.

She smiles. "Are you so certain that Bunjil is gone?"

"Yes." Anax stands up, keeping his eyes fixed at the void. He pulls up his weapons and holsters them around his shoulder. "There were golden eagle feathers in that bag." He says, looking down at her. "We don't have much time." He concludes with finality while he turns away from her. He briskly walking down the steep which lead to the plateau. She remains fixed at the hypnotic black canyon pass, contemplating her next move.

The cold night air passes over her as she heads down the path after Anax. He heads toward the P'tauli village with determination. It's likely Auctor has already arrived there, and informed the elders of the events. Naturally there is no trace of Anax to be found, and he's likely a considerable distance ahead. She has no fear walking alone, but finds the incomprehensible silence unbearable. It seems as though not only every night animal, but the insects have abandoned the land.

Tanika stops in her tracks. Her frozen breath is illuminated from behind. The half-moon that was shining on her back during this walk is beginning to disappear on the horizon behind her.

"I know where I must go."

She remembers exactly where the site is. He had guided her there, and it was the last place they made love. The ancient wolf den. Even though the moon has disappeared, her night vision works flawlessly. Tanika fights her way through a seemingly endless field of dead tree branches.

"It wasn't this difficult before!" She yells, her hair frustratingly tangles in the vast web. Finally she breaks free.

The entrance of the old den is littered with signs of a fresh kill. Tanika hunches down, inspecting a bloody ribcage. She sniffs at it.

"Deer?" She says, looking up.

She's met face to face with a pair of angry yellow eyes. A brown wolf is staring her down. Even in the dark she can tell it's a beautiful golden shade, radiating a similar tone to Bunjil's color. The wolf emits a low warning growl, never blinking in its close-range ferocity.

"You are fierce, but you do not frighten me, boy!" She yells at it. The brown wolf quivers its lips around perfectly white and fierce teeth. Another wolf growls in return from the shadows.

"Ha! I know the sound of that one!" She responds. Soon enough, Nova leaps onto her, and she rolls onto her back with him on top of her. The brown wolf quiets down as Nova attacks Tanika's face with his tongue. She's laughing and clinging to him tightly. "I knew they could never take you! I missed you so much!"

Soon enough she's opening her mouth and sucking on his tongue between deep breaths. Nova is happier to see her than ever, and emits a wine as they make out. The other wolf cautiously approaches, sniffing at Tanika but keeping it's distance as she sits up.

"Nova! did you make a new friend?" She turns to the brown wolf. "Are you the other Anax spoke of?"

Something snaps on the ground the left of her, followed by footsteps. Tanika then see's the figure move like a shadow. Instinctively, she draws hers knife. Nova and the brown wolf turn to look, but are not concerned. Tanika squints to look in the dark. Another pair of eyes comes toward her, this time they are pure white. A third wolf steps closer, no wonder it seemed invisible. It has a pure shiny black coat.

Tanika puts her knife away just as a fourth wolf appears. This one is pure white, seeming masking the black wolf like a shadow.

"Another!"

She looks closely again at the black one. "I know you!"

It blinks in response. Each wolf seems to be studying her intently, even Nova.

“I know each of you! But...where?”

Then she realizes it. They are each the surviving members of Nova’s original wolf pack.

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## **Chapter Forty-Six**

The brown wolf is intent on examining the unknown intruder. Despite Nova’s affection, It insists on facing the foreign entity - the human being so brazen to enter a wolf den, let alone their own. It’s fearful, but wants to truly know Tanika. It approaches her with reluctance, but not without determination and bravery. The wolf carries the same sense which allowed Nova to break the barrier of human contact so long ago. Everyone watches intently. Nova and the other two wolves stand back and don’t interfere on the unfolding meeting. They remain poised to leap in if needed.

Tanika’s heart races, but not with fear. Rather, it’s a feeling of excitement. Perhaps this wolf can even sense it now.

“It’s alright.” Tanika says out loud. “I’m no enemy. You must smell it.”

Tanika smiles. “Yes, come closer.” She hunches down and stretches her hand forward.

She watches closely as it sniffs at her, remaining perfectly still. The wolf slowly blinks, twitching its nose skeptically. She withdraws her hand, and slowly stands up. The pair of golden eyes are following her every move. Tanika takes a bold step toward the wolf. It remains in place, even as Tanika takes an additional step closer. She’s within striking distance from the creature. Her hands are open, showing her palms.

“I’m not here for a fight.” She says calmly.

The animal responds by pressing its snout into Tanika’s clothing, down by her groin. The wolf is able to determine Tanika’s emotional state as it smells at her. Slowly and carefully, Tanika responds by pulling her clothing down, revealing her vagina. Her sexual aura clouds the entire wolf den as a consequence.

Immediately, the white and black wolves are both aroused. Their ears perk up, eyes wide as their tongues hang in their lustful panting. They each step closer, their heads hanging as they prowl toward Tanika. One turn and growl from Nova makes them freeze in place. Nova turns back to watch Tanika, seemingly smiling as he pants. The golden wolf sniffs at her body intently. This time getting a reading of Tanika’s entire sexual history, including the life growing in her womb.

The wolf pulls its ears back as its demeanor completely shifts. It let’s out a happy, almost remorseful whimper as all hostility evaporates. The wolf wags its tail, panting before it spins in a playful circle, keeping its brown eyes on Tanika as it sits down, raising a paw in the air up at her.

Tanika laughs. “Oh, are we friends now?” She says with her hand on her side.

She’s starting to pull her clothing up with the other hand, but the brown wolf quickly leans forward and dives back into her crotch. The thick pink tongue is quick to cling onto Tanika’s bare genitals. It laps her up and down, pulling her lips and clit with its welcoming warm texture. The wolf’s eyes are

closed as Tanika runs her fingers over its golden brown fur, making this wolf the second one in history to be touched by a human.

She bites her lip, moaning while lightly digging her nails into the beast's scalp, before petting its ears and neck. "Yes...it's been so long..."

The white and black wolves are now pacing back and forth in a line, as though they were being impeded by an invisible wall. That wall, rather, is Nova. He paces back and forth too, boldly blocking their path. The wolves have a voracious appetite which is growing with each passing moment. Nova moves in front of them as though he can see behind himself, greedily keeping the view for himself. The black and white wolves are stumbling over each other, shifting their heads up and down, trying to view it all. They whine in their angst, as Nova pants happily with a proud arousal.

Tanika helplessly clenches her thighs around the brown wolf's head. Its tongue is now penetrating her, clinging to her inner walls with each darting insertion. Then, she feels a spasm of pleasure and chills as the tip of the wolf's tongue reaches Tanika's cervix.

She shivers and pulls herself away from the beast, moaning and convulsing. The wolf only licks its lips while looking at Tanika, loving her taste.

"Oh...boy! Mmm..." She moans, pulling her clothing up. "...What should I name you?"

The wolf gleefully nuzzles against her, playfully dancing around Tanika. She pets at the wolf's fur with each pass.

"You have a grace about you." Tanika says while studying its movements.

"My Nova traveled over many lands to find you. You are special to him. I can tell!"

The brown wolf pants happily to her words. It spins again in a playful circle, this time laying down on its side. The wolf then rolls onto its back, playfully wagging its tail between its sprawled out legs. It's there most vulnerable and submissive pose Tanika has received yet.

"Ha! Someone wants a belly rub!" Her voice echoes around the den.

Tanika squats to her knees besides the playful beast. Its tummy is a lighter and fluffier shade of brown from the rest of the coat. She strokes its chest up and down, much to the wolf's snorting delight.

"I can read you...You have a strong spirit. Your heart beats with nobility. I feel it!"

The wolf pants heavily with half closed eyes, loving Tanika's warm slender hands. She knows just how to satisfy all the right places. Tanika smiles, loving how delighted the wolf is to her touch. Her hands slowly move lower and lower, to the wolf's more sensitive lower region until she feels something unexpected.

"Oh..." Tanika says, pausing to be sure.

"...And you're female."

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Chapter Forty-Seven

“You have the color, and purity of our Earth mother. That’s what I name you, Earth.”

Tanika sits crosslegged with the brown wolf, Earth, resting comfortably in her lap. Earth lays relaxingly on her back while looking up at Tanika with expressive eyes. Tanika breathes heavily, feeling absorbed into Earth’s gaze. She sees her own reflection in her radiating eyes, even in the dark. Her heart races, and her nipples harden as she gently strokes Earth’s many breasts.

The action reminds Tanika of a time of naive experimentation with her best friend, Amissa. Eventually when the two of them were brave enough, they introduced Delwyn into their exploration. It was a bond the three of them had which they never told anyone about. It seems like only a brief moment before Amissa and Delwyn were more interested in boys and Tanika became interested in more practical skill sets. If only Tanika could return to such a simpler time, before everything changed.

“I told you I was a friend.” She says softly, as both of her hands caress Earth’s rubbery protruding nipples up and down. Earth is in heat. It’s a fiery lustful season that resonates through Tanika as she wanders her hands sensually over the wolf’s body.

“You like it, don’t you?”

Earth sniffs in delight with half-closed eyes, thrusting her hips provocatively upward. Tanika accepts the invitation, moving her hand soothingly over Earth’s aching groin. A few circular motions from her palm make Earth thrust and kick with her feet in pleasure. Tanika smiles, and gently presses her fingers down and to the sides, opening her vagina. Earth’s pink flesh glistens as it’s exposed to the night air. Her scent drives the other three wolves into an even higher sexual frenzy.

Tanika licks her lips before thoroughly moistening her index finger in her own saliva. She returns her lubed digit to Earth’s spread opening. After a vigorous circular rub around the wolf’s swollen clitoris, Tanika carefully inserts it welcomingly into her sex. Tanika pulls her other fingers away, allowing Earth’s lips to fully seal around her finger, as far as her second knuckle.

Tanika moans as she feels Earth’s inner warmth. She imagines the pleasure a male wolf must get from such an encompassing, and intensely warm interior. Earth wags her tail as she thrusts into Tanika’s prodding finger. She forms a hook shape and twists it in and out of her. Earth leans back into Tanika’s chest in euphoric spasms.

It’s becoming increasingly difficult for Nova to wrangle the other two wolves. The three of them are now circling Tanika and Earth like a pack would circle a downed prey. Nova emits a slow guttural growl as he paces after the white and black wolves. They increasingly ignore Nova’s commands as they tighten their prowling circumference around the pair.

“You have been mated recently. I can feel the seed within you.” She says, prodding for Earth’s g-spot. The wolf loves her touch, and whines in pleasure while gyrating her body accordingly.

“Was it my Nova? Or, one of them? I’m guessing they are male?” She ponders out loud playfully, continually twirling inside Earth. She eyes each wolf intently as they pass in their concentric circles. Certainly enough, the pure white wolf and the pure black wolf both have sizable, throbbing erections. The pure white one has a bright red hued member, while the other is a faint purple. Both of them have complimentary shades compared to Nova’s which seems to contain both of their colors.

Each wolf walks with a fully erect, knotted member protruding from their sheaths, swaying back and forth to their strides. Tanika can’t tell which is dripping more, their dangling members or their perverted drooping tongues. She imagines they must be creating an invisible trail as they slowly

spiral closer toward them for the kill. She eyes each wolf seductively as they pass.

“...Or, maybe you had all three of these wolves?”

With each pressing movement, Earth thrusts into Tanika’s finger, sending it deeper within. She’s bold enough to add a second finger inside, stretching Earth’s tightness.

“All three of these wolves? And you still want more?”

Earth snorts and spasms her head in pleasure. Tanika smiles and leans forward, keeping her eyes locked on the encroaching pack. With her other free hand, she pulls at the neckline of her own clothing. The thick mammoth hyde of her clothing is difficult to tear, but the fine stitching comes undone down the front. She pulls it down until the opening is large enough to free her breasts.

“I can’t say I blame you..” Tanika says, as she places Earth’s head between between her dangling bare breasts. Is it her imagination, or have they become fuller? Heavier? Either way, it feels great having them pressed into an affectionate wolf’s face. She moves her shoulders back and forth, looking seductively at Nova as her sensitive nipples graze Earth’s ears and snout.

“I would want each of them too.” She says finally, before moaning loudly. She feels Earth’s tongue start to cling to her dangling mounds. Tanika responds with more vigorous up and down movements within Earth’s increasingly slick tunnel.

“I want to find out which of you made love to this beauty.” She says, pulling her two shiny fingers out of Earth’s inside. She then uses the slickness to coat Earth’s exterior, sensually massaging her outer lips circularly. Tanika scoots back, laying Earth on the den floor. She never takes her hand off of Earth’s quivering vagina, even as she crawls slightly on her hands and knees, hovering over the panting brown wolf.

The pure white wolf slowly steps closer to the pair. He hangs his head, slowly pressing his snout closer and closer to Earth’s spread legs. Tanika’s knees are at either side of Earth’s head. Her ass raises as she leans across Earth’s body to meet the white wolf face to face while he licks his lips.

“No!” She yells at him. “Mine!”

The black wolf follows Tanika’s lead, turning to bark at the white one. Soon enough Nova is barking and charging at him as well, and he whines and pulls his ears back. He hangs his head down as backs away from the charging wolves in confusion.

Tanika giggles.

Soon they are too close for comfort, and the white wolf bares his teeth at them, erupting in a barking match with all three sounding progressively more violent over one another.

“Hey! Relax!” She yells back at them. Her tone commands each of their attention as they all turn to look at her in near synchronicity. She smiles while gently parting Earth open again with her fingers.

“We’re only just getting started.”

Nova is the first to turn and walk back toward the girls, followed closely by the black wolf. Both of them are panting happily, while the white wolf hesitates to rejoin the circle.

She smiles. “Don’t scare him away quite yet.”

She turns her attention downward. Tanika extends her tongue before pressing her face into Earth's mound. She moans into it as her breasts grind down against Earth's. Tanika's tongue circles her clitoris and she clings to Earth's lean convulsing body. It sings in pleasure, and she moves as though running through the plains in a dream. Tanika tastes her all over, and darts her tongue back and forth in a vigorous massage. Her long black hair drapes over Earth's squirming hind legs. She uses one arm to prop herself up, while her other hand is free to caress Earth's chest more heavily.

She pauses to take a breath, looking back toward a blissful wolf expression. "I know this taste anywhere." She says down to her, circling her fingers over her twitching exterior. She turns back to deliver soft kisses to her velvet lips. "This is my Nova." She concludes before her tongue sinks further into her pink flora.

It really tastes sweet to her, like a nectar Tanika craves. She tries to mimic what Earth did inside of her moments ago, repaying the affection she had been shown. "The two of you really do make a fine mixture." she concludes as she kisses her way up Earth's chest, gently sucking gently and sensually on each nipple she finds. Her fingers gently pinch and massage the others as she teases with her tongue.

Out of Tanika's field of view, an encroaching wolf dramatically interrupts the intense pleasure. He bares his vicious teeth quickly before sinking them into Tanika's body.

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## **Chapter Forty-Eight**

"Nova!"

She yells back at him, turning her attention away from her golden wolf affection. Nova has clamped his mighty jaws into Tanika's raised hind end. Through her thick mammoth furs, it feels like a firm pinch on the meat of her ass cheek. Although it feels good to Tanika, it's a bit of a distraction from the task at hand.

"Wait your turn!" She says, pushing forward. "I'm getting to know our new friend. Well, my new friend."

Nova's grip slips off her ass, but remains firmly clenched on a fold of her clothing. He responds by growling and shaking his head. She can hear her furs start to tear as the rip echoes through the wolf den.

"Nova! I've made enough alterations to my clothing. Stop it!"

As before, he's determined to fulfill his own objective. He plants his paws firmly forward in the ground. He returns his guttural growl as he plays tug-of-war with her lower clothing. She can feel it starting to slip, and she grips her belt and waistband with her right hand. She tries to nudge him away with her leg, but it only encourages him further. Her clothing rips from her left thigh downward, and Nova seizes her pant leg and pulls it away like a sleeve, exposing her leg to the night. He tosses the section of clothing away as though it were a nuisance.

Soon enough, Nova grips her other pant leg down by her ankle. This time, she is able to shake it free of his grasp until she feels a ticklish tongue affectionately licking her exposed inner thigh. Tanika looks down giggling as Earth takes advantage of Nova's handiwork. She crawls around Earth in a circular, clockwise fashion. Tanika continues on all fours as Earth remains on her back. Nova strafes

around, sidestepping to match Tanika's movement. She looks down into Earth's radiating eyes.

"You are friendly." She says down to her. "But I must ask you...will you bring my Nova home from war?"

She feels a tug at her ankle once more. Nova has returned his grip, this time with more strength. Tanika fights her waistband slipping down her body, gripping her clothing with her left hand as she holds herself up with her right. Almost immediately, something pulls her left hand away.

"Hey!"

The pure black wolf has a firm grip on her left sleeve, pulling her arm away as she tries to pull it forward. The pure white wolf lunges in, seizing her right sleeve and jerking it the opposite direction, opening Tanika's arm wide. As the white and black wolves are pulling against each other, Nova pulls Tanks lower clothing down to her knees. For a brief moment, Tanika is suspended above Earth as though she were being drawn and quartered by the male wolves. Nova is the first to free his section of clothing, pulling the tangled folds past her feet, bringing Tanika's shoes with it. She wriggles her tangled legs free and her knees hit the soft dirt. Nova shakes the clumped furs away with the other section, making Tanika half-naked.

The growling pair of wolves rip and tear furiously. Tanika watches as the stitching in the center of her shirt continues to break downward. Her breasts are dangling over Earth's face and she wastes no time licking them to Tanika's delight. One final rip down the center gives Tanika enough slack to wriggle her shoulders and arms free of her top. She leans forward and collapses onto Earth as her mammoth fur coat slips off her back, making Tanika completely naked. The white and black wolves fight over the coat until they tear it to pieces.

"That was my favorite P'tauli outfit." She says matter-of-factly into Earth's ear. "It's alright. I have your warmth."

Tanika lowers her body down fully, pressing her nakedness into Earth's welcoming body. Earth pants in delight, welcoming Tanika as she wraps her hands and arms around her, stroking the fur on her head and neck. Earth licks Tanika's left ear when she nuzzles into her soft neck.

"Mmm..." She moans, as she grinds her lower half into the wolf. She can feel her vagina rubbing against Earth's. The wolf bucks up against her in return. Tanika moves her hand between them, petting each of Earth's rubbery nipples while both of their wetness blends and marinates into one another.

A jolt of pleasure surges through Tanika like electricity as Nova laps his tongue at her exposed lips. She feels the other two pair of eyes soaking up the show as the black and white wolves are laying down. They seem to have expended their energy destroying Tanika's fur coat and prefer enjoying the show - for now.

Since they are pressed together, Nova enjoys the taste of both Tanika and Earth as his long tongue even slides between both of them, darting back and forth between each welcoming opening. Tanika moans louder.

"I can feel your heartbeat.." She says raspily to Earth.

The pure black wolf stands up promptly, quietly and slowly approaching. Tanika pushes herself up using both hands. Once again Earth laps at her breast while Nova continues eating them both. Tanika shakes with pleasure, fighting her body's convulsing so she can watch the wolf approach. He

pants happily as she extends her hand forward for him to smell. Once he does so, he licks her palm and fingers. She smiles.

"I am most familiar with you. But... from where?" She says at him.

Tanika's hand grazes around his neck, and out of pure reaction and instinct, he flinches backward.

"It's alright! Trust me."

He seems to understand, and reluctantly steps forward. Tanika looks closely at him. There seems to be an irregular fold in his fur, tracing around his throat. It's a hideous scar.

Tanika is shocked for a moment, then smiles widely. "They thought they killed you! Good to see you again, old friend."

Earth closes her eyes, taking a break from licking at Tanika's erect hanging mounds. She pants in ecstasy as Nova seems to focus his tongue on her body.

She recalls the events, seeing them unfold in the black wolves eyes.

"You were there the night of the fire. When I was held captive, you helped set me free...you nearly died, so that I may live. Your blood is strong, and here you are!"

Tanika turns away from him, looking back at Nova.

"I think Nova has kept you away from this beautiful Earth."

Tanika turns back again to face the dark beast.

"But, tonight...it would be my honor to have you inside me."

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Chapter Forty-Nine

"Come closer, Night."

The black wolf steps toward to her, meeting her at face level, to a signature inviting smile.

"Yes, the night of all nights. The one I needed you the most...I don't think I'd be here now, if it weren't for you."

The black wolf, Night, is now the third wolf to be touched by a human. Tanika's hand is a warm welcome blanket as it graces across the dark wolf's shiny black fur. She pets him across his cheek, without worry he'll remove her hand with his sharp teeth. She leans forward to scratch his head and ears, then down his neck.

"Yes, Night. You understand! Nova knows that you saved me as well." Her hands are both itching his shoulders. Neither of them break their eye contact with each other, although Tanika's soothing fingers have a way of melting a fierce warrior's intense expression. Tanika looks over her shoulder to see Nova busy relating a very relaxed Earth.

"You helped me escape...before Nova took Demur's blade. That's why Nova is letting me touch you

now." Tanka crawls away from the pair of wolves, on all fours, closer to Night. She keeps one hand running along his lower back while moving slowly and seductively along the side of his body. He sniffs at her hair, and sweaty skin. He licks his lips, delighting in the salty aroma.

"Wounded, but so strong. If I could heal your scars, I would." Her hand rubs along his side. She feels his breath on her raised ass, wiggling it as though she had a wagging tail for his amusement. Every movement mimicking a female wolf, or at least how Tanika thinks a horny wolf would behave. Either way it works. Night is completely comfortable with her touch, even as she grazes down to his throbbing exposed member.

The moment she feels Night's penis, she receives a jolt of pleasure herself. Once again, a lavish wolf tongue laps at her exposed groin. She moans Night's name, not knowing it's actually the white wolf feasting upon her now. Night growls at the white wolf as Tanika feels his erect, warm member in and. She strokes it gently, encouraging the tiny clear spurts of precum jetting out in response to her touch.

Tanika mistakes Night's hostile growling at the white wolf as groans of pleasure from her touch. Soon enough, her lips meet his aching member and the wolf's growling quiets. Night closes his eyes and pants in bliss, allowing the white wolf to lather away at Tanika's body. She loves feeling his warm member in her mouth, knowing she could pleasure him in this way after what he did for her. Her muffled moaning is sure to send soothing vibrations through his body.

Every few moments she has to open her mouth and pour out her saliva and wolf ejaculate mixture, before plunging Night's massive penis back into her mouth again. She sucks him as hard and as deeply as she can, gently holding his bulging knot. At some point the pleasure becomes too much. One tongue on her skin starts to feel like two, and then three. Sure enough, Nova and Earth have scrambled to their feet and compete with the white wolf as it licks at her. All three snort and breathe in, nudging one another to the side as though they were wolf pups again competing for food in the same litter.

For Tanika, it feels like some kind of never ending warm lather machine. Each tongue working in unison to cover every sensual part of her naked body. It really is too much to bear, her body shakes in pleasure and she nearly collapses to the ground with Night's member in hand. Earth is pushed away by the remaining two males. They cover her body as Earth seems to pace back and forth looking for an open area to lick. Night continually remains in bliss, spurting his juices on Tanika's cheek as she moans out in ecstasy.

Earth crawls down a bit to nuzzle her head under Tanika's swaying breasts. She really seems attached to them, and Tanika doesn't complain. Earth wags her tail furiously, nipping and lapping her tongue on Tanika's hard nipples.

The familiar feeling of a wolf's paws are gripping at Tanika's sides now, finding placement along her hips. The tongues that had been lapping at her flesh have stopped. Tanika thinks it must be Nova attempting to mount her, until she feels it start to enter her. The wolf's weight and size are different, as well as the balance. It's the gentle humping motion of the white wolf, eager to enter Tanika, that gives him away. Nova seems distracted with Earth at the moment, and the two run away playfully.

She continually strokes Night's penis. It keeps him distracted as the white wolf slides the rest of his member into Tanika's body. He has a playful way of mating with her, and she welcomes it in delight.

"I meant to start with Night..."

Even though the white one was brazen in his approach, she can see now that he and Night both

work as a team. Tanika has an intense flash as their bodies connect. It's a cool pleasure she feels, and she finds herself gasping for air. The white wolf's penis makes her feel as though she were instantly on top the tallest mountain peak in the coldest month of winter. With each bucking thrust she gains more insight into him.

When Raj was missing and Anax told her about the wolf tracks, it had been him. Nova was outnumbered and it was this wolf that appeared. He had confused the wolfskin horses, and allowed Nova to escape. It all made sense now.

"You saved my love...I owe you as much as I owe him."

Tanika's wet vaginal lips part way to embrace his member more and more, until he is fully inside of her. He's the fourth wolf to be touched by a human, as the two become one. Tanika scoots his paws up her body a bit and wriggles her shoulders to push him up while he bucks and thrusts. She nuzzles into his face and scratches the other side of his neck. She knows it's been a long time since he's mated, and the excitement of trying a human is too irresistible to him.

"You took away my breath, like the wind. I will call you Wind, for now..."

She moans in lust, loving sex with Wind. She urges him to completion, begging for his sperm inside of her. She's careful to keep him from knotting inside of her, as she's hungry for Night's sperm as well. She nudges Wind off behind her.

"Your turn!"

Night happily accepts her invitation. He is onto and inside of her without hesitation. she moans feeling the second new wolf penis penetrating her. Where as wind felt like a frozen storm, Night makes her feel like burning embers from a long fire, just the right warmth. It's a nice compliment to the intense cool that Wind seemed to provide. Tanika feels a sense of invisibility as well, as though she were absorbing the wolf's ability to hide in the shadows, to move invisibly through the night.

She moans with each buck and thrust while the expended Wind lays to the side, lazily watching their mating with a panting, pleased expression. As Tanika bonds with Night, she can feel that Nova and Earth are mating nearby. She wishes they were closer so she could watch, but regardless she feels everything Nova does.

Once she feels Night deposit his seed, she greedily rolls on top of Wind, playing with his still erect and throbbing member. She craves more, and sits on it. Carefully she bounces on him, sinking all the way down to his knot and back up again.

"Yes..."

She rides him like she would ride a man. This time Night becomes the observer, laying blissfully in his afterglow.

Tanika know's Nova is close to releasing his sperm inside Earth. She imagines it while she bounces up and down on Wind. She wishes she could be there, and somehow ensure his seed stays inside her body. It's this idea that has her body craving wolf seed from every member of the pack. She wants that unity, that oneness.

Eventually both wolves stand up. Tanika finds herself stroking both of their penises in unison. It's as though both wolves had been ready for this opportunity. Each pf them spurt semen onto Tanika's left and right breast with her moaning as the clear fluid drips off her pointed nipples.

Her mind floods with lustful desires, like having both of them inside her at the same time. Could they both fit inside of her vagina? She wanted to find out. Wind was the one that wanted to lay on the ground, with her straddling him. If only Tanika could encourage Night to mount her at the same time.

After a few tries, she's able to guide him inside. she feels her walls stretching to their limit as both wolf members are pressed together inside of her. She moans as she feels her incredible tightness encompassing them both at the same time, and the combined juices making them slip and tangle within her.

Once Earth and Nova return, Tanika gets her turn with him once more. Her body aches from all the wolf pounding but she craves countless orgasms. She loves feeling Nova inside of her again, knowing which spots to hit in just the right way. As her lover mates her once more, she watches Earth and the other two enjoy their own sexual exploration.

"What a greedy bitch." Tanika says, laughing.

The five of them fall asleep together, each basking in their own euphoric bliss. Tanika is the only one awake, softly stroking Nova's head. Tanika feels each of them running in their sleep, and wonders if they are each sharing the same dream.

It's unknown how much time has passed, yet Tanika knows it's time to return to the village, to her people. It's hard to break away, knowing she's now part of the pack.

"You don't belong with us and our problems." Tanika says to Nova.

"Don't follow me back to the village. Stay here until it's over."

This time she says it to every wolf, as she begins the difficult task of moving away from them without disturbing their sleep. Quietly and carefully she exits the wolf den without so much as an interruption. Once she passes the row of thickets, she turns back only to see those familiar glowing blue eyes. She knows in her heart there's no convincing him not to follow her. They stare intently at one another before Tanika turns away, and heads toward the P'tauli village.

Her entire pack follows directly behind her.

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## **Chapter Fifty**

Anax sits beside Auctor. Their weapons lay near the temporary firepit while they stare down at the burning embers, fading leftovers from the emergency council fire. Auctor is the first to see Tanika approaching. She's naked, scratched, and bruised, along with bits of multicolored wolf fur sticking to her skin. Her frazzled hair remains in place as she struts along. Anax finally notices Auctor in his confused gaze, then turns to see the object of his attention, finding her feminine figure in the dim light. He springs up to meet her, while uttering a smattering of p'tauli curses.

"What did they do to you?! I knew I should have guided you home! Auctor, get her something to cover herself up in. Those animals.. our enemy raped her!"

Auctor scrambles to find mammoth furs while she bursts with laughter.

"She's in shock." Auctor says as he drapes the furs over her shoulders. Tanika shrugs them off her body.

"No, I don't need them. And I'm fine! It's not what you think." Auctor looks increasingly puzzled.

"What's wrong? My body? You don't desire women anyway." She adds sardonically.

"That's not entirely true.." he says, trailing off. Tanika raises an eyebrow.

"Star birth!" Anax blurts out. Each of them hear the soft sound of running feet before Nova sprints up to him gracefully from the darkness. Anax squats down on one knee and Nova licks his face affectionately. Anax scratches behind Nova's ears as they reunite.

"You found your ally! Where did you go, boy?"

"More than one, it seems." Auctor points out the three pairs of glowing eyes, staring at them from the dark beyond.

"What the..."

One by one, the other wolves cautiously approach the three humans, keeping a respectable distance.

"You said you needed more warriors, Anax. I suppose I found some for you. They will go wherever Nova will go."

"You will never stop surprising me, wolf girl." Anax says, rubbing the top of his head. Auctor places his hand on Tanika's shoulder.

"Tanika, Anax is ready for war..but there is another way. A path to end this blood."

"Tell me." She says back at him.

"The island you were living on, we have enough ships to get our people there. We can take the way that you came to us, the 'stupid way.'"

"Now you believe my island is there?"

"If we can't find it, we can return to the motherland."

"Our ships are meant for short distance." Says Anax, cutting in. "They will break apart in the violent sea. I can think of better ways to die. If all of you want to leave, so be it. I will die here on this land, with honor."

"You will not! You go where I go." Auctor blurts before turning back to her. "Think about it." He says with sincere eyes. "It's almost morning, and they are on their way. If we are to leave, it should be now."

"They are not heading this way." Tanika says with certainty.

"You didn't see or hear them?" Anax inquires swiftly. She shakes her head.

"They must be biding their time. Planning...we can't be sure." Anax muses aloud.

"What is that?" Tanika asks, pointing at a large object in the center of the amphitheater. Anax turns to it, smirking. Nova collapses at the edge of the makeshift fire pit, resting his head on his front paws, tired from the journey. The other wolves rest along the edge of the village. They will protect the village in shifts throughout the rest of the night, despite not being fully acclimated with the

P'taul.

The two men escort Tanika to the center of the amphitheater. As they descend, the object becomes increasingly more visible in the dark. It's a giant black stone tablet, with a round base which molds up to the smoothly polished and flat surface.

The tablet itself is semi rectangular with tapered edges, the width and length of an average man. The centerpiece is knee high to Tanika. She runs her hands along the slightly angled tablet, feeling along the inscriptions covering the entirety of the flat surface. Since the P'taul have no written language, they have carved detailed pictographs representing an outline of their history.

"It's beautiful." She says, remarking at the numerous man hours it must have taken to carve out the massive ornament.

"You wouldn't say that if you had seen this in the daylight." Anax says with a snap. Tanika looks to him for an explanation.

"This stone is stained with blood. Too much for all the rains of time to ever wash away."

"This was a monument of sacrifice." Adds Auctor. "We used to bind animals, and people. Our enemies..even your people, in the early days."

Tanika pulls her hand away. "How did it work?"

"See the holes in the top and bottom?" Auctor says, pointing. "That's where we would bind their hands and feet, before we...before they, would slowly kill the sacrifice."

"Now you can see why Auctor and I buried the wretched thing." Anax adds with a slight disdain.

"Your father was so angry when you told him you lost it!" Auctor adds, laughing.

"He was so proud of it!"

"Do you know how many men we lost bringing this across the ice?!" Anax says, impersonating his father. Both of them laugh.

"Meanwhile, he stood over it every council fire without even knowing!"

They continue laughing while Tanika smiles and sits down on the lower edge of the tablet, crossing her legs.

"Why have you unearthed it now?" She asks Anax.

"All of us have bad history." He explains. "If the P'taul are to be no more, then the history we leave behind should be complete. Even the history I hate. Besides, it gave the children something to do when they were worried about Raj."

"Anax told them there might be ancient treasure buried there. They dug with such enthusiasm. You should have seen their faces when they found it!"

"I hope you didn't tell them its true meaning." says Tanika, while she opens her legs and lays down on her back, shuddering as her bare skin meets the cold stone surface.

Anax nudges Auctor. "Don't get any ideas!" He looks back at Anax with a smirk, then sits down on

the lowest row of seating at the bottom of the amphitheater. Tanika raises her feet to the surface, using her legs to scoot her body and head to the top edge of the stone slab. She lays in the same position the sacrificial victims must have been in. She looks up at the stars for a moment in silent contemplation. Anax begins a slow pace, stepping around the monument slowly. He rummages through his leather pouch.

Tanika turns to her side, propping her head up with her right hand and resting her left hand on her raised hip. She faces both men in a feminine and seductive pose.

"You know, I had a dream about you two." She says softly.

Auctor leans forward with interest, while Anax is focused on his task. Tanika notices Anax is holding her sacred blade. He extends his arm wearing the leather shroud, which protected his skin from Bunjil's talons. Underneath the shroud, he cuts at the thick black twine which secured it in place.

"That blade doesn't belong to you!" She barks at him.

Anax doesn't answer, and continues cutting. He makes his final incision, and the shroud falls off his arm and to the ground. He removes the twine, which leaves behind red grid like patterns on his skin, like scars.

"Maybe you should come and take it." He replies, holding the knife out, tauntingly.

"In time." She says, stoic.

He smiles back at her, flexing the fingers of his bare arm. He uses the blade for one final act, reaching behind his back to cut free the secondary perch for Bunjil that ran along his shoulders. It falls to the ground next to his leather arm around. Anax grunts and stretches in delight. Those items had been a part of his body for so long, he had forgotten how good it felt to be free of them.

"What was your dream?" Auctor asks, trying not to sound demanding.

"Did we mate?" Anax adds.

She laughs. "You would ask that.. and In that way."

"Well.. you're telling us about a dream, laying the way you are. Why not?"

"Let her explain!" Auctor whines.

She lays back down, with her hands behind her head and elbows up, looking at the stars again.

"In my dream, we became blood siblings."

"What is that?" They both ask at once, then look at each other.

"We cut our hands and held them together. Just like I did with my best friends..only it was me, you, and Auctor. We became one this way."

"I like the sound of that! But Auctor can't handle pain. Also, His hands are too precious to him." Anax quips while he rolls the black twine in a circle. He walks behind the monument.

"Not true!" Auctor snaps back.

Anax begins to loop the black twine through the roughly drilled holes in the stone slab.

“Give me your wrist.”

Tanika slowly extends her right hand back toward Anax. He loops the twine around her lower arm, then ties a knot, synching it beneath the slab.

“Now your other.”

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Chapter Fifty-One

Tanika grins, and gives her left hand to him.

“Stop messing around!” Auctor snipes. Anax ignores him.

“What was it you said to me? When we first met?” Anax asks her, as he tightens her left wrist to the slab. She pauses to recall.

“I remember! You said you would show me what you could do with restraint.” He says, grinning.

“I knew then, at that moment, there was a warrior inside you.”

Anax takes Tanika’s blade and glides the point across her bare skin. He’s slow and methodical, carefully not pressing hard enough to cut, with the goal of being sensual. It’s working. Tanika’s heart races as she breathes deeply, shuddering while she bites her lower lip.

Auctor stands up in a huff. “Anax, it’s late. If we’re not going to leave, we should get some sleep before the battle.”

Anax pulls away, walking to Auctor. “I think it’s safe to say, dear one, with everything we’ve been through..and everything that awaits us, not one person here will be getting sleep tonight.”

He steps closer slowly until they are face to face.

“Not you..” Anax says, before kissing Auctor’s lips, then he tilts his head.

“Nor I..” he says, kissing the side of Auctor’s neck.

“..and not one man guarding the ruins right now, will get a moment of rest this night.”

Auctor shudders as he feels Anax’s hand move down his waist and into his lion cover.

“So...why don’t we spend this night, the last night we’re alive, doing what we love?” Anax concludes and wraps his fingers around Auctor’s already hardened penis.

Tanika tilts her head to get a better view, enjoying the show. Auctor moans a bit as Anax gives a few affirming strokes up and down.

“I see you are already ‘on board’ with this idea, love.” Anax says with a smirk, removing his hand from Auctor’s genitals. Anax takes Auctor’s other hand and interlocks his fingers with his.

“I want to add something.” Tanika says, interrupting. The two men turn from their gaze and look at her.

"If you want to erase the history of this tablet, perhaps the best way is to use it for something else."

Anax points the sacred blade toward Tanika, smiling. "See? You see...she has the right idea!"

With his other hand interlocked in Auctor's fingers, Anax leads him back toward Tanika. He pauses momentarily, squatting down to place the sacred blade on top of the belongings he freed earlier.

Her eyes follow the two men as they approach her from the side. Anax frees his hand from Auctor's grasp, but not before guiding it to Tanika's left breast. Anax steps around the slab, feeling her hair before cupping both hands over her right breast.

"Anax, we shouldn't. Not while she's restrained."

Anax smiles, pulling his hands away from Tanika. He removes the leather pouch which was bound around his waist.

"She's not restrained." He says, climbing onto the tablet. He sits on her waist with his knees on either side, straddling her. She can feel his hardness beneath his last bit of clothing.

"She could free herself at any moment." He adds, returning his hands to her breast, massaging it.

"You forgot to bind my feet." Tanika says with a hint of rasp. He turns again to Auctor.

"See? Nothing to be afraid of."

Tanika uses her feet to scoot forward slightly, grinding against Anax. She raises her knees, touching them against his back.

"I'm very flexible." She says, stretching her legs upward, then running her toes to the back of his neck. Anax leans back.

"Oh?"

She nods, biting her lip. She bends her feet to cradle Anax's jawline on both sides.

"I could snap your neck like a twig."

He smiles. "Mmmm.. my kind of woman."

"Or maybe.. I could squeeze the air from your lungs with my thighs."

"It's a better way to die than drowning in the sea. Don't you agree, Auctor?"

Auctor nods before lowering his head, forming a seal around her hardened nipple, then sucking it gently.

"Mmmm and I thought you two had no interest in women, Only men. Or rather, each other."

Anax feels from her other breast down her body as Auctor continually teases the other with his tongue and hands.

"Every man has an idea to try something new." His fingertips trace around the wolf scratch marks outlying her body. "You know about that, don't you? Trying something...new?"

Auctor takes a break from sucking. "It's a pity we didn't try this sooner. Don't you agree, love?" He

kisses the nape of Tanika's neck, feeling over her chest. Anax scoots backward, slowly folding her legs back down onto the flat surface.

"Only when we're facing death do we wish to live like there's no tomorrow. Pity." Anax muses, resting on her knees and caressing her thighs. Auctor caresses both of her breasts in a circular motion.

"Imagine being like this." Anax continues, brushing her legs. "So helpless. Vulnerable. Naked.." his hands move proactively close. "Facing death...then something else happens."

Tanika refrains a moan as she feels Anax tracing his fingers around her vaginal lips, teasing her.

"Have you ever been in such a situation?" He asks slyly while gathering enough of her wetness on his index finger to begin probing it inside her slowly.

"No." She says with a deep breath. "Never..." She finishes, sarcastically.

"Didn't think so." Anax moves his finger beyond his second knuckle, pressing until it's all the way inside of her. He hooks it within, twisting into her ribbed walls.

"Mmmm..." She moans. "Better make it two..."

"Anything you say. If you tell me to stop, I might think about it." Anax removes his finger as Auctor returns to sucking her breast again. He moves his hand down to her groin, circling his fingers flatly against her swollen clitoris.

Auctor takes his turn playing with her sex, and Anax scoots back further down her legs, then leans forward. He uses his right hand to prop himself up. Tanika opens her legs more as he uses his left hand to enter her again, this time with his index and middle finger. He lowers his face to her abdomen, kissing it softly and slowly moving up her body as he probes her. She moans and breathes heavily before he pauses.

"What about when you took the ship? And those warriors.."

"Anax.. any more from the two of you...and I won't be able to answer anymore questions." She breathes deeply as Auctor's tongue twirls around her areola.

"Besides... I thought we weren't speaking of it again. You were so angry.."

"Well.." he pauses for another kiss." I think I'm over it." He delivers another before continuing. "You must have felt something. Having all those men behind you, each of them ready to die for you..each of them wishing they could fuck you."

Anax twists his fingers within her. His braided hair brushes her skin as he gets closer to her other breast.

"How did you know they wanted to..."

"To fuck you?" Anax says, with a few pumps from his fingers within her. She nods with a few heavy breaths, eyes closed. Auctor notices a scar on Tanika's shoulder. He feels it for a moment with contemplation, wanting to ask but remaining silent.

"I know my men." Anax answers. "And I know what they want."

Finally Anax reaches her other breast and both men suck on each at the same time. Tanika moans and squirms in delight as both of her hardened nipples roll around their tongues at once. It takes time but she finds a moment of composure.

“Thinking about it now makes me feel sadness.” Tanika gasps with a slight shudder. Anax stops with his fingering, pulling them slowly out of her body. Both men stop their oral pleasing and Anax looks down at his fingers. They each glisten from her wetness, a sparkle from the reflected moonlight. He feels the moisture with his thumb before looking back in her eyes.

“Why sadness?” Auctor stops to await her answer too.

“Sadness.. to think warriors are old enough to fight and die, many having never known a woman’s touch. If they are going to give their lives, they should feel a woman’s love at least once.” Tanika answers with finality.

Anax gives a slight smile, raising his wet fingers to his lips. He inhales deeply, filling his nostrils with her aroma, before pressing his fingertips to the corners of lips to exhale a loud piercing whistle which echoes into the dark. A sleepy Nova perks his ears up, and the other wolves take notice at Anax.

“What was that for?”

Anax doesn’t answer, and instead looks behind his shoulder. The three of them listen to the faint sound of drums. Auctor nods and stands up, removing all of his clothing.

Her heart beats with anticipation as the drumming gets closer, and louder. Anax stands up, turning his back to the sprawled Tanika as he removes the last bit clothing he was wearing.

Soon enough, the source of the drumming becomes clear. Two figures emerge on each side of the upper levels of the amphitheater. They each carry a large drum, secured to their bodies with leather straps forming an x shape around their muscled backs. They descend each level slowly, maintaining a deep pulsating rhythm as they beat their drums with padded mammoth bones.

Once the two warriors descend into the middle row of seating, two additional warriors begin their descent from above. They each carry a pair of smaller, higher pitched drums. They add poly-rhythmic fills to the lower bass of the pulse pounding sequence. It becomes clear that the men only have the drums covering their nudity. War paint covers their muscles, with brightly dyed feathers adorning their black hair.

Anax and Auctor stand naked at either side of the sacrificial altar as the drum-line enters the bottom pit with them. Each warrior slowly walks in a clockwise formation, maintaining perfect synchronicity and military precision. The rest of the P’tauli warriors slowly descend into each row, one after the other, carrying lit torches. The flickering firelight illuminates their toned naked bodies, additionally covered in multicolored warpaint. The drumming warriors form a square around the altar. They continue drumming until each torch bearing warrior has filled the rows of the amphitheater.

The four drummers complete a final sequence then yell out a guttural war cry.

“Ooohh ahh!”

The men in the auditorium rows clank their torches against the stone seating before raising each light into the sky. They each yell the same chant, “Ooohh ahh!” Back at the drummers even louder, sending chills through Tanika as the men remain militantly frozen in silence. Anax turns back to face

her.

“Do you feel sadness now?” He asks slyly.

Tanika takes the slack from her bound wrists, moving each in a circle, and wrapping the cords tighter around them.

“I feel resolve.” She says, using her legs to raise her groin upward.

“But I want you inside of me first.”

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## **Chapter Fifty-Two**

“You must hear my thoughts!” Anax says to her.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He crawls on his knees between her legs on the slab, then places his hands underneath her, squeezing her ass as he helps hold her upward. His swollen penis tip rests on her clit as he prepares to enter her.

“Don’t just jab it in like you’re killing a Mammoth!” Auctor says insistently. The men start laughing as Anax traces his member up and down her lips, soaking up her moisture on his pulsing tip.

“What do you think I am? Primitive?” Anax quips back. “No. I am.. polite.” A gentle thrust from Anax allows his tip inside of her. Tanika clenches around it and her welcoming tunnel helps fold his foreskin downward, forming a ring as he slowly presses half of his member inside.

“Uhh..” She moans.

“Good.” Auctor says, walking behind the stone slab. His fingers trace down her outstretched arms down to her shoulders. He leans down to her, using his hands to tilt her head to the side as he meets his lips with hers.

Auctor is a good kisser, perfectly sucking her lips in between breaths. His tongue parts her lips and meets her own, just as Anax slides all the way inside of her. He hold her hips, guiding her body against his own until her secondary lips kiss his testicles. She moans into Auctor’s mouth as Anax arches upward, breathing heavily at the night sky.

Auctor squeezes both of her breasts while Anax begins a slow rocking motion. Tanika feels her walls wrapping around his sliding shaft as she continues kissing Auctor passionately. He moves one hand away from her breast so he can stroke his own penis at the same time.

With that, the drummers begin a new rhythm, fast and rolling. It projects images of running through the forest in Tanika’s mind as she feels Anax quicken his movement. Each thrust he makes soaks in more wetness from tanika.

Warriors in the amphitheater have secured, or even dropped their torches so they can masturbate.

Others watch intently, hoping for a turn. One warrior can’t help himself, and runs up to the slab from the front row. With one hand, he contains Tanika’s bouncing breast, but can no longer hold back the fierce essence building within. After some quickened stroking, he grunts while his creamy ejaculate sprays a white line across Tanika’s heavily breathing tummy.

He breathes heavily, nearly collapsing on her as another man approaches on the other side. He

moans and sprays a secondary line going the other direction, forming a semen shaped 'x' across her body. Their seed drips down her sides and collects a few drops on the stone surface. Tanika breaks from kissing Auctor.

"I hope that's not all you have to give me. I expect more." She says to both of them. They look at each other and return to their seats with excited expressions, working on themselves to create a new supply.

Anax doesn't stop. He bucks into her with increasing ferocity. His body builds a sweat, both from working her and the collective torchlight in the arena. He opens his eyes to look at Auctor, who smiles.

"Give it to her!" He says with coy over the drums.

"Not without you." Anax says back to him with heavy breaths. He looks down at Tanika. "Should we make it..two?" She bites her lower lip and nods. He thinks for a moment while resting deep inside of her.

"Auctor...lay how she is, beneath her."

He nods in acknowledgement. Tanika unwinds her wrists, creating more slack in the chords. Anax slowly and reluctantly pulls out of her and they both moan in delight. His erect penis glistens with her juices, twitching precum as it leaves her.

Anax scoots back on the edge of the slab, once again using his hands to support her from beneath. He places her legs over his shoulders and lifts her upward to make room for Auctor.

"Don't steal the air from my lungs."

"I can't promise that." She replies, loosely wrapping her legs around Anax's neck.

Auctor uses the moment to lay his back on the stone slab. He can feel the heat from her body resonating as he wriggles his head back beneath her outstretched arms. He helps support her body upward as Anax presses his face into her opening, licking and kissing it passionately.

She moans and convulses uncontrollably while he teases her sex, taking his time to lower her down onto Auctor's awaiting body. He pulls his head back to take a breath.

"Auctor.. this will be your first woman. Don't jab her like you're killing a Mammoth!"

"Very funny. I'll do my best."

Anax guides her downward so her back will lay on Auctor's chest. His chin rests on her shoulder as Anax finally Rests her backside onto his waist, pulling away from the pair. He takes Auctor's erect penis in his hand pointing the length upward so Tanika's vagina can gladly accept it, which she does. He moans as he feels her internally.

"Auctor is sizeable enough I knew this would work. How does he feel?"

Tanika simply moans as he kisses the side of her neck and ear. Her legs dangle over the sides of the altar as Auctor grinds and wriggles beneath her, loving the feeling of her encompassing warmth.

"Guess that answers my question. Room for one more?"

"Yes..." She says lustfully. Her wetness oozes down his shaft and body as he hands caress her

breasts once more.

Anax climbs on top of the pair, straddling Tanika once more. He digs his penis against Auctor's, prodding his swollen tip along the vein of his shaft, until it meets her clasp outer lips.

Although it's a very tight fit, he manages to press his way into her vaginal tunnel at the same time Auctor is inside. Both organs throb and writhe within, massaging each other as Tanika's warm ribbed tunnel coats them both at once, forming a very tight seal.

The men around them are intrigued by such a sight, having never witnessed such an act. The drummers keep pounding away, sweat dripping down and bouncing into smaller droplets on the thin Hyde that resonates their intense tones. Some men ejaculate onto themselves, perhaps too shy to approach the trio as they become one.

Anax moves on top of them such that Auctor will remain inside. Even though it's a slower rhythm, the tight bond is incredible. P'tauli warriors cheer them on, but the sound is drowned out to the trio, engrossed in their lust. Unknown time passes before them.

Anax hunches over, resting his chin on her shoulder opposite of Auctor. Tanika hears and feels male heavy breathing in stereo, and four hands roaming over her naked body.

Both men seem to throb within her to a single, unified heartbeat. Tanika is the first to climax, wrapping them both in a warm rush. She gasps as she convulses around them, triggering Auctor to release a large deposit of sperm deep within her. Anax feels it swirling within, coating his own organ while Auctor's member writhes in delight. The feeling forces Anax to surrender his own. He thrusts until he can't move, adding his own seed to their creamy coalescence. His heightened testicles rest own onto Auctor's own, massaging them as Tanika's body milks every last drop from the pair, still embedded within her.

Both penises are not enough to block the flow of their seed, which now drips down Tanika's spread legs, forming a small pool beneath them on the slab. She relaxes her tension as Anax finally pulls out of her.

The men drumming slowly become offbeat in their rhythm. One by one they slowly stop playing, both from exhaustion and eagerness. One by one they loosen the drums and drip them in the dirt, revealing their hard naked bodies.

Anax holds her up again, letting Auctor scoot away before laying her down again. He looks to the crowd with open arms.

"Who's next?"

The four former drummers encroach on the ceremonial altar.

"Did you even need to ask?" Auctor says, finding his place next to Anax. He takes his hand in his own, intertwining their fingers. Both men face each other, openly hugging and pressing their naked glistening genitals together, enjoying the afterglow. The warriors seem bewildered by this. Anax turns to them.

"Oh, like you didn't know!" He yells.

"We kept it a better secret than we thought." Auctor adds.

Tanika pulls her two wrists together, and the chords finally snap her arms free. She gleefully wraps

her free fingers around a penis on her left and her right, slowly stroking the two muscled drummers on those sides of the altar. A third drummer presents his member near her mouth and she turns her head, playfully nipping at it with a smile.

The fourth drumming warrior squats onto the slab in the same position Anax was just in, between Tanika's legs. He readies his hardened organ to enter her gooey opening. A line forms behind him, of eager men and virgins awaiting their turn with her.

"Was it what you thought it would be?" Anax asks.

"Even better." Answers Auctor as the pair sit together on the first inner row of the amphitheatre.

"I'm glad you convinced me to try it."

"The important thing is if she is enjoying it."

"Do we even need to ask?"

The two men converse as she becomes engrossed in male bodies. A feast of flesh as she collects p'tauli seed from each man, some more than once. Each one leaves his sperm to lubricate the next man, only to deposit more. Endless hands and fingers, touching every inch of her. A sea of faces, moaning and grunting in carnal delight.

"You told me she was with child. She doesn't look it." One man says to another.

"Does it matter? The end is near."

Tanika feels the onset of soreness from all the men inside her, but she craves it all the same. The pleasure is too great. The sacrificial altar is covered with love, rather than blood this night, all thanks to her.

In the midst of a long line of countless orgasms, she has a mystical premonition.

"Anax!"

She tries to yell it, but something blocks her voice. She has to remove the young warrior's penis from the back of her throat.

"Hey, no biting!" He whines as she turns her head.

"Anax! They're coming!" She yells with a free breath.

"They certainly are!" He yells back.

"No, my people! They are here!" She forces over everyone. Anax stands in a hurry, raising a clenched fist.

"Everyone, quiet! Listen.."

"Where are the wolves?" Auctor asks. He looks up at Anax with concern, holding his arm.

Anax looks around intently, seeing no trace of them. Tanika sits up, worried. The p'tauli warriors quiet down, scanning all directions.

A faint wolf growl breaks the silence. The sound of many horse hooves is getting louder, closer.

“Men of the P’taul! Drop your dicks and grab your sticks! Time to fight!” Anax yells in a deep commanding tone.

The men scatter, bumping into one another as they scramble for weapons and torches. Tanika feels eagerly on the ground, searching for her blade between everyone running around her. She finds it, and whistles to Nova without a sight or response.

“Are we a bunch of clumsy fucks?!” Anax yells with intense force.

“No!” The warriors yell in booming unison.

Anax runs to the top of the amphitheater. He scans the horizon, watching the dark, blurry horse riders drawing near. He turns back, looking down at everyone.

“Destiny has arrived to erase the P’taul! Will you let it?”

“No!” They boom again.

“Are we one?!”

“Ooohh ah!” They yell at once, even louder.

“Show me!”

“What are you waiting for?!” Auctor yells. “Join your leader! Fight to the death!”

“To the death!” They each yell, raising their spears. They split uniformly, running up the isles to join Anax. They yell with rage and adrenaline.

“Cover all points! Those without weapons, meet them with your fists! Have no fear!” Anax commands.

Tanika’s heart races as she grips her blade tightly. Auctor touches her shoulder.

“This is it. Stay low. Find your wolves.” He instructs. She nods. Both of them follow the last of the p’tauli warriors up the steps as the men in front aim their spears at the encroaching mob.

“They will surround us! Stay here! Attack on my command!”

“Ooohh ahh!” They bellow with acknowledgement.

A single wolfskin rider leads a large group of additional horse riders behind him, roughly twenty. They ride in a tight formation as they head speedily toward the P’tauli amphitheater. Each one is adorned with the same clanking bones, overpowered by the deep clopping of the galloping hooves which scoop away the thick tundra.

“Find your target now! Steady..” Anax commands.

Warriors surround Anax, forming a protective barrier. Those with short range weapons hunch down on one knee. Those with long range spears draw them back, preparing to throw. Auctor and Tanika run up to either side of Anax. Auctor aims his bow as Tanika whistles again for Nova. No response.

“Fire!” Anax screams, throwing his arm down as the galloping horse brigade gets within range. With that, a volley of long range spears fly toward their intended targets.

"T'eska m'untrei!" Screams the lead horse rider. The wolf skin warriors quickly reach behind their backs. They pull out some large interwoven shields, holding them in front of their bodies as they ride. They are quick enough to absorb the impact of the incoming P'tauli weapons. Anax looks bewildered, as P'tauli sparkstone will pierce mostly anything.

Nevertheless, the wolf skin riders find their shields with the protruding spears to be too heavy, and toss them to the ground. This leaves them vulnerable to a second attack.

Anax instructs the close range warriors to form a circle around the amphitheater, protecting the long range fighters as they resupply. Auctor loads another arrow to his bow. He closes his eye as he aims.

"Where are their weapons?" He asks Anax. He shrugs in response, intently watching the invading horde as they start to encircle them, just out of range.

"Where is *YOUR* weapon?" He asks him again with urgency.

"I'll worry about that later." He responds calmly.

"You'll be the death of me." Auctor retorts, tracing the lead horse rider with his arrow. He fires, but misses.

Nova and Earth leap from the shadows, growling viciously at a pair of horses. They dance around both of them, viciously barking and barring their teeth. One horse darts away in sheer panic. The other rares upward, kicking its front hooves in the air with a fearful whinnie. The wolf skin rider is nearly thrown off backwards as he attempts to regain control.

The horse rider that darted away has looped around, and charges back toward Earth and Nova in an attempt to trample them both.

"Nova!" Tanika screams helplessly.

Night makes his appearance, and in one swift bound he leaps over the horse, sinking his teeth into the wolf skin rider, sending him to the ground with a thud. Wind speedily chases the stray horse away in the opposite direction. Night regains his footing and climbs on top of the fallen rider. He shrieks in terror, covering his face while Night bites into his skeletal armor, snapping the bones with his powerful jaws. The man furiously tries to push him away.

The whole commotion disrupts the flow of the wolfskin formation, as more spooked horses dart away. Nova and Earth peruse them, herding the riders into more confusion.

Tanika makes a break for it, sprinting into a hole in the battlefield. She steps on a wolfskin shield, struggling to pull a p'tauli spear free.

"Something is wrong. They could have easily trampled us by now, but they haven't." Auctor mentions to Anax, flowing his bow. Anax remains silent in fierce concentration.

The lead horse rider barks unknown orders at his men, waving his arm in the air. Half of the riders regain control as Earth and Nova scatter away.

The fallen rider stands with Night clenched around his wrist. He struggles to free the vicious wolf from his armor. Wind is running at them, ready to join in the tug-of-war.

The commander and his men head toward the fallen rider in an attempt to rescue him. Night and

Wind see them approaching, and retreat just in time. The lead rider demonstrates his skill, leaning to the side with an open hand. The fallen man catches it, and is hoisted aboard the galloping horse. A few men break away to retrieve the spooked horse as everyone else regains formation quickly.

Tanika finally frees the spear, readying it in one hand while gripping her sacred blade in the other. She stands ready to fight, but watches the horse riders gallop away.

"You're right." Anax says to Auctor. "They're retreating."

"What are they doing?"

The wolves have reunited. They approach Tanika on the battlefield. She sets her weapons down as Nova approaches, panting.

"Good work boy. Don't scare me!" She says to him, giving a reaffirming scratch behind his ears. He eagerly sniffs at her crotch before licking it.

"Mmmm not now.. Alright, maybe a little."

Anax is focused on the army. "They're testing our defenses. They'll make a second pass."

"They've stopped. See?" Auctor says back.  
Tanika and the wolves run back to Anax and Auctor.

"How many dead?" She asks, catching her breath.

"None." Auctor answers.

The wolves form a circle of protection around the trio, even going so far as to snap and growl at their own warriors standing behind them. The men back away, startled.

"How many of them did we kill?" Anax asks her.

"None that I saw."

"Look! He's dismounting." Auctor says, pointing.

The lead rider steps off his horse, motioning for his men to hold back. He walks alone toward the P'tauli encampment.

"What's he doing?"

"I don't know."

"He intends to talk! What should we do?"

"I should meet him." Anax responds with certainty.

"Is that wise?"

"Not at all. But I'm going to do it."

"Well, what should we do?" Auctor asks with concern.



“Stay here.”

Anax walks out of the circle of warriors, slowly heading toward the leader as he approaches. The stars slowly disappear as the sky changes into a hue of dark blue, the beginning of pre-dawn. Both parties remain still, watching intently as their leaders strut toward each other.

Anax walks with his head held high in confidence. He’s weaponless, and completely stark naked as he stops in his stride.

“That’s close enough!” Anax yells at the man, with his hand out.

The wolfskin leader complies, keeping a respectable distance. In contrast to Anax, he stands in complete wolfskin regalia with outer bone infused armor. He slowly looks Anax up and down in silence as he stands before him with clenched fists resting on his hips.

“See anything you like?” Anax asks sarcastically.

The man responds by removing his helmet. He looks down as he places it in one hand, holding it to his side. He looks up and gives his hair a shake, revealing his face. He blinks, revealing that his left eye is completely white. A deep scar runs down that side of his face, from his forehead to his cheekbone. The rest of his face is bubbled from apparent burn scarring. He is quite handsome despite this deformation.

“I am called Jolon.” The man finally says. “Second in command to Demur.”

“I am called Anax. Wish I could say I’m pleased to meet you.”

“Demur told us the P’taul are nothing but gluttonous, lust indulging fools.” He replies.

“One of those statements is correct! Pity you didn’t arrive sooner. You missed our party.” The man steps closer to Anax, causing him to tense up.

“My men and I have traveled a great distance.”

“I told you to stay there!” Anax yells. Jolon ignores him and steps within striking distance of Anax. He extends an open hand.

“We have abandoned Demur. We’re here to join you in your fight.”

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Chapter Fifty-Three

Anax is looking down at Jolon’s extended hand. He shifts upward to Jolon’s eyes with a blank expression before pivoting his back to him, and walking toward the p’tauli amphitheatre. Jolon slowly returns his hand, forming it into a fist and down to his side, offended as he watches Anax return to his people.

A second wolfskin horse rider gallops toward Jolon, who keeps his gaze aimed at Anax. The rider stumbles to a stop near his side.

“What happened? What’s he doing?” The warrior asks down to Jolon. His horse paws at the tundra and snorts.

"I don't know. I think he needs to talk to his people."

"I don't like this, and the men are worried. We should leave."

"Give it time, Das. Go back to them now, it should only be me here."

"Demur never said they'd be naked." Das retorts.

"No he did not."

"Ya!" Das yells out, while he kicks the sides of his horse, steering it in a circle before galloping back to the other wolfskins. Jolon remains steady.

After some incoherent discussion, Anax and Tanika walk back toward him. Nova follows closely to Tanika's side and the three wolves keep further behind.

"Do you know this man?" Anax asks her, pointing.

"Not intimately." She replies. Nova sits down, staring at Jolon. The blue dawn seems to amplify his eyes.

"I know him." Anax says confidentiality but with a hint of disdain, folding his arms.

"He and his men nearly killed us all."

Tanika looks puzzled, thinking Anax is talking about their recent skirmish.

"He came before, with Demur. They are the ones who collapsed our homes and took our horses." He finishes staunchly.

"Is this true?" She says to Jolon.

"Yes."

"And you're here to finish the job?" She asks concurrently.

"No. We're here to return the horses and fight by your side."

Tanika turns to Anax, trying to read him. He returns a skeptical gaze. Jolon slowly squats down, keeping eye contact with Nova.

"It seems the whispers are true!" Jolon says loudly.

"What whispers?" She asks, turning to him.

"There are whispers in the village that Demur's sister is alive. They say... That she lives in the wild and hunts with a wolf that no man can kill. They say, that she will return one day to restore balance...and free her people." Jolon finally looks away from Nova, meeting her eyes.

"You are Tanika. Aren't you?" He asks, slowly standing.

She has a hard time hiding a smile in the corner of her mouth. Anax rolls his eyes before rudely interrupting.

"He's trying to appeal to your vanity. Don't let him!"

Tanika straightens her posture, and her expression, then clears her throat.

“Why have you abandoned Demur? And why have you come to us now, on the eve of battle?” She asks him more intensely.

Anax furrows his brow, then rubs his chin as he studies Jolon.

“You have no reason to trust me, I can’t convince you.” He pauses. “But.. it was how he treated your captured women, and what he did to the boy..it was too much for me to follow.”

Anax tightens his knuckles. “You will give us all of your weapons, right now. And our horses.”

Jolon hesitates. He looks back at his men. “How do I know you won’t kill us all once we surrender them to you?”

“You don’t.” Anax replies, swiftly.

“I know what Demur is planning. My betrayal will have angered him greatly. I can give you valuable information but time is fading. Me and my men will not be treated like prisoners.”

Tanika takes hold of Anax’s hand, pulling him aside. She speaks to him too quietly for Jolon to hear.

“This is exactly what we need!”

“Yes, just in time.” Anax says, looking back at Jolon with a slight smile.

“We need to find out what he knows.”

“Once we do, and have our horses, we will bind the men and throw them into the sea.”

“What? Anax!” Tanika hits his arm.

“Hey! You don’t actually believe him, do you?”

Jolon folds his arms, leaning in to attempt to decipher what they’re saying.

“I’m not certain but I know enough to see that he’s not lying.”

“This is part of Demur’s plan. They will lead us to our death!”

Tanika struggles to top his argument, remaining silent. Anax turns back toward Jolon.

“You will give us your weapons but remain on horse back!” He says booming over to him. “I will talk to my tribe, and convince them not to kill you, for now. Wash’te?”

Jolon pauses and rubs his chin. “Fine. Wash’te.”

“Great! Once you have given us your weapons, you can join us for first meal. I’m sure everyone is very hungry.” Anax motions for Auctor.

“Where do we tie the horses?” Jolon inquires while unlatching his armor.

“You may tie them up at the ruins, so you can marvel at your accomplishments.” Anax says with his back turned once more.

Jolon sighs. “As you say.”

"He'll go in the sea first." Anax mutters to Tanika. She responds by hitting his shoulder once more.

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## Chapter Fifty-Four

"What is this shit?" A burly wolfskin groans. His guttural voice and inflection would intimidate the average spectator. Each tribe of warriors have filled the P'tauli amphitheater, but continue to remain separated. Even in this time of union the tension is as palpable as the meal being served.

"This *'shit'* is a delicacy you have yet to taste!" A P'tauli warrior cackles back. "You should be more grateful. Mammoth meat is something you would never eat otherwise! Your people can't even hunt them like we do."

The wolfskin throws his gigantic hunk of meat to the ground. "If your hunting is as good as your fighting, you'd all be dead! And I'll die if I eat this. Feed it to the wolves."

"I'll show you that my aim is true. I can hit you in one throw of my spear!"

"Try it!" The men are laughing and encouraging them on.

"Enough!" Anax shouts over everyone. "We're here to find an understanding, not to trade insults."

Jolon seems to smile as he chews on a giant rib bone.

"Will Demur strike today?" Auctor asks him.

"No. Demur wants you to come to him." Jolon answers, with a mouthful.

"Why?"

"He plans to lead his people further into the new land. He believes they are in danger."

"From us?"

"No. You are a danger, yes, but there is a greater one. He doesn't want to waste time invading p'tauli territory. He just wants your resources, which is why he was hoping the fight will be in his land."

"What danger?" Tanika injects. She feeds Nova and he licks her fingers. Jolon swallows his food before answering. "A drop of mother's milk will fall from the sky, onto our valley, turning all men to dust and all dust back to the sky with it."

The men look at each other with confused and skeptical expressions. "It's the last thing the mystic said to us before she was killed that night. I'm sure you know the night I speak of."

Tanika ponders for a moment. "Yes. But.. Demur doesn't believe in the old ways. He wants to destroy them!"

"It's true. But he believes this one thing."

"Hypocrite.." she mutters.

"If your people trek into the new land, without food or warmth..you will all certainly freeze to death."

There is still too much ice, I've charted it all." Auctor adds, leaning in with conviction.

"Yes. Many of us know he has lost his mind to madness. If we strike the village in a way he's not expecting, we can cause an uprising. We might have a chance to defeat him."

"If we follow your words, you could lead us into Demur's hands, and give him the victory. You might be working with him, even now as we speak." Anax says insistently.

"I know we can't erase what we've done. I know you have no reason to trust us. If you prefer, I can take my men and leave. We will find our own way, and my words can flutter in the air, never entering your head." Jolon stands up abruptly, and his warriors follow suit. "We thank you for a good meal."

Tanika stands with her arms out between to two tribes. "What Anax is trying to say is we need more information about where to strike. We have detailed maps we can review together, if you choose to stay."

Anax gives Tanika an irritated look.

"I want an assurance that we are working together, and not against each other." Jolon retorts.

Everyone looks down at Anax, seemingly pitting him on the spot. Anax looks around, reading his people along with the wolfskins.

He hesitantly replies, "You have my word."

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Chapter Fifty-Five

The highest ranking warriors have each gathered in the map room of the collection. It will likely be the last time this center is ever used for such a large gathering and operation. Tanika, Anax, Auctor, and Protis, along with a hand full of the best p'tauli warriors meet with Jolon, Das, and four of his best riders. The wolfskins are impressed with the detail which Auctor gave his map renderings. Nevertheless, they are out of date to Jolon's knowledge.

"The p'tauli women are being held here, and here." Jolon explains, pointing to areas past the sacred valley, along the dried banks. "They are held in cages, used for the pleasure of Demur's warriors."

"Why didn't you free them before you came to us?" Anax asks.

"We didn't have much time. We could only gather half of the horses."

"If he has more horses, we will not be equally matched in battle." Auctor adds to the conversation.

"You should have brought more horses." Anax says with a disapproved tone.

"Perhaps you would be happier if we brought you all the mountains? And the streams as well?" Jolon responds with a sarcastic disdain.

"Your idea of putting us in ships is foolish. we would be better served to ride with you into battle!" Jolon pleads, smashing the center table with his fist.

"We demonstrated our skill to you last night. We are better suited for that than in your ships!"

"Anax, he's right." Tanika says with a soft touch of his shoulder.

"If I allow you to join the horse riders, we will attack through the sacred valley. Through here." Anax says, pointing swiftly at the massive tree line.

"No!" Jolon blurts, practically interrupting him.

"No? The trees will provide protection from Demur's arrows!" Anax insists.

"Most of Demur's warriors will be in the sacred valley. He's counting on you to come here."

"What does he have planned?" Tanika inquires.

"Oil." Das adds.

"Yes. The warriors will hide high in the trees. Once you have crossed, they will drop oil on you from above, and set you all on fire." Jolon concludes.

"Ouch."

"Yes, ouch. Don't go this way. His spies will see you coming along the ridge, and send smoke signals."

"I can take the wolves along the ridge, and kill the spies." Tanika says confidently.

"No. You will lead the ships with the P'tauli warriors. The wolves will stay in the village, and protect the elders and children. Your ships will enter here, through the long river."

"That's where I got into trouble." Tanika says with concern. She folds her arms defensively.

"Demur has planned for that as well. He has diverted the canal, so he can send his own ships behind the bend, to this place. Your 'collection.'"

"He knows about the collection?" Auctor says with concern.

"He gained the knowledge through the boy." Jolon answers.

"How?"

"How do you think?"

A grim silence befalls everyone for a moment while Anax thinks. He places both palms on the edge of the table, leaning forward into his shoulders.

"We can drop ice boulders on top of his ships from the cliff above."

"The elders won't be strong enough." Auctor insists.

"They can. We'll use leverage." Anax explains over him.

"It won't be enough. His ships are not as good as yours, but they will make the voyage here. He'll invade once your warriors are too far away."

"Then we'll let them inside. Protis, you know this place better than anyone. Can we collapse the halls on top of them?"

"We can't!" Protis exclaims. Everyone turns to look at him.

"The collection is lost anyway. Can it be done?" Anax insists.

"I suppose I can break open the support gates. It will bring the sea in, and flood the channel ways, but -"

"Do it." Anax booms a commanding tone. "What else?"

"We need a show of force." Auctor adds.

"A show of what?" Tanika and Jolon both ask simultaneously.

"Why do you think my father wanted to meet your Grandfather in the valley of the Mammoth?" Anax asks them. They each shrug in response.

"My father wanted to demonstrate our power. He wanted your grandfather to see what a small group of warriors with a few hawks could do to bring down a huge beast. What is it your people say? 'Don't fuck with us?' it was like saying that, but showing it instead."

"Impossible." Das utters with a sneer.

"See? Your people have tasted the meat, and still don't believe. Don't fuck with us!" Anax reiterates. The P'tauli men chuckle.

"We'll use our ships to show force." Auctor says, stepping closer. "And we'll shoot down the men hiding in the trees. Anax and Jolon will lead the riders through the sacred valley once the trees are clear."

"Once we enter the village, Jolon will take his men and free the captive women. I want you to give weapons to any woman willing to join the fight. Do you understand?" Anax asks Jolon, intently.

"Yes. We will do it." He responds with certainty.

"Good. My men will engage Demur's horse riders. We will circle back to the banks, and lure the warriors. By this time, we should have more arrows to take care of them. We will use the ships to flee with the women and anyone wounded. Tanika will know the best place to stop the ships." Anax finishes.

"Yes. The ships will stop and wait here." She says, pointing out the position on the map. "But I will not lead the ships there." She finishes.

"What?" Anax asks with a raised eyebrow.

"I will not be in a ship. I will not lead the ships. Auctor will."

"What?!" Auctor exclaims with a concern in his tone.

"Auctor will?" Anax asks, folding his arms.

"Yes. Everything will go as planned, but you must all wait for the fire. I have an idea."

"Fire? What's she talking about?"

"Trust me." She says, before pulling Anax aside. She whispers something in his ear quietly enough that no one else will hear her. Anax slowly nods as he contemplates her words. He turns back to the group.

"As she said, wait for the fire. I did appoint her as leader, after all."

"What are you talking about?!" Jolon exclaims, adding to the confusion.

"Trust me. I will take care of the men hiding in the trees. I just need a single horse." She says to everyone.

"Has she completely lost her head?" Das exclaims.

"You don't know her like we do." Anax says, matter-of-factly.

"I think you all have..." Das mutters under his breath.

"Then it is agreed. Auctor will lead the ships and we will wait for the fire to begin the attack." Anax concludes.

"This should be quite an interesting day.." Jolon says with a skeptical shake of his head.

"We will use the remaining daylight to prepare. We leave before sundown. Get rest, food, weapons, and anything else you need. This concludes our meeting." Anax says with finality. He motions for everyone to leave the map room.

"Protis, I'm going to need Coco Leaf." Tanika says to him. Protis stops in his tracks.

"I told you she will not go into battle! She stays here!" Protis exclaims with insistence.

"I know." She says softly. "She will not go to battle. You have my word. She will return to you before Demur's ships arrive."

She extends her hand for him to shake. He looks down on it with hesitance.

"Protis, I promise."

"If she will not see battle, then I agree." He extends his one arm, giving her a firm handshake.

"Thank you." She says with an affirmative squeeze of her fingers with his.

"I will need help learning how to ride her."

"I will teach you, but For this I ask a favor." Protis adds.

"Oh?"

"The brown wolf seems quite friendly. I would like some time with her, to.. to train her. Like you did with Nova."

Tanika smiles. "I need her by sundown. And don't anger her, she might take your other arm!"

"I understand. Let me know when you want to ride. Have you had a chance to see the stallions? They

are quite...impressive.”

“Hmm. What’s impressive about them?”

“...their strength.”

“I’m sure that’s what you mean.”

He gives a slight smile. Tanika seems to ponder, rubbing her chin as everyone walks in single file down the collection exit tunnel.

Anax, Auctor, and Jolon walk together. They speak out of earshot of Tanika, Protis and the P’tauli warriors strut behind as they near the bright daylight of the tunnel exit.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you, how did you get that beauty mark across your face?” Anax asks Jolon. He turns to Anax slowly.

“This is a mark of dedication. Loyalty. Those close to Demur must get a mark.”

“And are you loyal? Are you dedicated?”

“I am dedicated to my people. I am loyal to what is best for them. What’s best for them is not Demur. He is mad with power, and his time has come.”

“I suppose we will find out tomorrow, in battle.”

“If you do not know by now, you will soon enough.” Jolon says conclusively. Anax eyes him with suspicion while they exit the vast glacial cavern in silence.

Eventually the group of leaders walk around the bend which leads to the P’tauli encampment. Anax becomes frozen in place. He’s stunned at what the other Wolfskins have done while they had been planning the battle.

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## **Chapter Fifty-Six**

Jolon holds a hint of a smile.

“It may not be perfect, but I hope it’s close enough.”

Anax feels momentarily bewildered, a sense of being transported back in time. The wolfskins have spent the afternoon rebuilding the destroyed P’tauli village. All of the rubble that was scattered throughout the land has been reshaped to the forms they once held. The marketplace with its impressive polished Mammoth bones hold the stretched canvas for shade above each vendor booth. Instead of food, crafts and other goods, each station is loaded with shields, health pouches, and other armaments for each warrior to be adequately equipped.

“I know I can’t take back what happened to your people. But I told my warriors, if we are going to work together, it should start here. I borrowed your strongest P’taul for the effort. Come see!” Jolon seems to motion to them with eagerness.

“How did you...” Auctor blurts.

“Our horses and your ropes helped clear the ice from the collapsed shelters. We recovered the

bodies so your people.. so we can pay respect.”

Anax remains silent. With a stone expression, he extends an open hand to Jolon. They shake hands for the first time.

“You deserve something to come home to, when we win the war.” Jolon says with affirmation.

“Your weapons will be returned. Take whatever you need. Our sparkstone is sharper than your black obsidian. Our craftsmen can reshape your weapons, if you so desire.” Anax concludes, and the men part ways for their final preparations.

Tanika and Protis run to catch up to Anax and Auctor. Anax turns to them with a slight hint of a quiver to his lip and voice.

“Do you see what they did?” He says while pointing.

“Impressive..” remarks Protis while stopping to catch his breath. Tanika stops ahead of him.

“I told you, Anax.”

“We meet here before sundown. Then we depart.” Anax booms commandingly, regaining his stone composure.

“Don’t wait for me. I must leave ahead of the army for my plan to work. Protis will let me take his horse, but I must learn to ride.”

“Sure, you let her take the horse but not me!” Anax quips to Protis. “Do what you must, we will wait for the fire to begin the attack.”

With that, she and Protis nod their approval before heading away to find cocoa leaf.

“One more thing!” She yells back to Anax as she turns in her tracks.

“The wolves will not stay in the village. They will go where I go. It is the will of Nova, the will of the pack. I cannot stop it.”

Anax nods in approval and the pair steadily jog back toward the collection.

Auctor leans in to Anax. “What did she whisper in your ear?”

“She told me we can’t let Jolon know her plan, in case he will betray us.”

“You know what that’s about, right?” Auctor asks quietly.

“What?”

“She will take the horse and escape. There is a ship waiting for her, it has been arranged. There will be no ‘fire.’”

Anax rubs his chin. “Her destiny ia before her feet, but only she is allowed to choose it or not.”

“If she will not lead her people, we must make certain Jolon takes over. They will not accept P’tauli rule over them.” Auctor adds.

“Agreed. If our village is overrun, Protis agreed to collapse the collection. The elders will evacuate the children. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. I go where you go, love.”

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

The wolves lay comfortably beside one another in the spacious area of the collection assigned for the horses. Earth is the only one separate from the pack. She walks around the crudely constructed stables, sniffing curiously. Protis stands in the center, holding onto cocoa leaf through a simply made halter.

“Approach her from the front, always.” He explains to a reluctant Tanika. She steps forward toward the majestic mare.

“Let her smell you. Let her smell your hands, then you can touch her fur. She may want to share your breath.”

“What do you mean?” She asks, touching Cocoa Leaf’s left cheek.

“Breathe into her nostrils. It’s what horses do with each other. Once you do this, she will know your breath forever.”

Earth approaches Protis, licking his fingers.

“Don’t be nervous around a horse. They can sense it. Do you want to ride a saddle, or bareback?”

“What is a saddle?” She asks. Cocoa leaf raises her nostrils to Tanika, inhaling deeply as Tanika exhales after the question.

“It’s a cushion for your ass.” He explains with a smile. “Real men ride bareback, but you will be more sore.”

“Well, I guess I should be a real man.” She answers slyly.

“Remember what I said about how a horse can sense if you are nervous or scared? They can feel it even more when you’re on their back. Think of how much you can feel on your own back..”

Protis sensually runs his finger tips down her back, to her most lowest part. This causes her to jerk unexpectedly.

“It’s the same for a horse, if not more. When you ride, ride with confidence.” She nods.

“Are you ready to get on?”

“Yes.”

“I will help you up, use my shoulders if you need to. Always walk close to a horse, touching as you go, so they know where you are.”

He walks along cocoa leaf, running his hand smoothly down her side before kneeling down at her mid section. He nods to Tanika for her to climb aboard, leaning into her steps as she lightly climbs onto the gentle mare. He hands Tanika the reins, and gives cocoa an affectionate pat of his hand.

“Squeeze her in the belly with your feet to move forward, and pull on the reins to make her stop. Yell the word ‘ya!’ to go faster.”

“I understand.”

“Try it here, you have enough room.” Protis steps away to give them space. Tanika leans forward, giving a gentle nudge with her feet. Cocoa leaf remains in place, snorting and turning to look at her.

“That was too soft. Let her really know your intention! Try again.”

Tanika scoots backward down cocoa leaf’s spine. She leans forward, folding her legs back further to brace herself for speed.

“Ya!”

She yells, giving a swifter kick with both of her legs. Cocoa leaf winces and lunges forward. The great horse begins to spin around, starting to buck and kick her hind legs in the air.

“Woah!” Tanika tries to contain the out of control animal. She can only hold on for so long before she is thrown off and onto the ground. Protis is cautiously rushing in to regain the reins as cocoa leaf huffs and snorts angrily.

Nova is quick to his feet, barking angrily at the horse who apparently tried to kill his love. The other wolves begin to join in.

“Stop!” Tanika yells with force. The wolves are silent instantly as her voice echoes through the vast chamber. Protis leads cocoa leaf away from the commotion and ties her to a stall, petting and calming her down.

Tanika slowly stands up and brushes off her furs. Nova trots toward her, ears back and head down. He whimpers concern, inspecting her body for wounds. She reaffirmingly scratches his head while his eyes beg forgiveness for his outburst.

Protis jogs back to Tanika, with Earth following.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Just a few scratches. What happened?”

Protis bursts with laughter. Tanika is less amused.

“What?”

Protis eventually regains his composure. “ Well, you kicked her hamstring...and she kicked your ass!”

“I’ve wanted to be a rider ever since i was little. Maybe I’m not meant to ride a horse.” She says with embarrassment.

“You are fine. Just don’t do that again.”

“Is the horse alright?”

“She’s fine too, just annoyed. I’m sure you wouldn’t like that much either, if someone did that to you.”

Tanika nods and sits on a small rock. She raises her right leg to her left knee so she can inspect her slightly bloodied scratches. Nova lays down at her side, followed by Night and Wind.

"You should know that you are the only one I trust to ride her. I believe you when you say you are not taking cocoa leaf to war."

Protis finds some nearby straw to sit on. Earth lays her head comfortably in his lap.

"Why won't you fight with us?" Tanika asks quietly. "We could use your skill against them."

"I will tell you a deep truth, one you will not hear from Anax or even your people." He says, with a deep breath.

"What is it?" She asks with genuine curiosity.

"If we were to go backwards in time, back beyond the great walk, back beyond even the earliest days of the motherland, you would find that there is no 'us' and there is no 'them.' We were only us! No P'taul, no Wolfskin. Just one tribe."

He motions with a single finger. "The idea that we are a tribe and there is another tribe, it's a lie! It's always been a lie, but It's been so long that we have forgotten."

"My grandfather said something similar to me...I think you are right."

"I know I'm right! So.. when we go to war with another tribe, it is like brother killing brother! We go to war with ourselves! Our own family." He says with tones of passion and conviction.

"When I became a healer, learned about infections." Tanika says and switches her other leg, cleaning the area around her skinned knee.

"I have learned too, in my studies." Protis responds, scratching behind Earth's ears. She closes her eyes.

"Yes. Sometimes an infection will spread. In order to stop the spread, a person must burn themselves."

Protis looks to be deep in thought, listening to her words closely.

"Very soon I will have to make a difficult choice. I fear that I will not have the strength to make it." She sighs.

"I know you will have the strength. I have seen it in my visions."

"You have visions?" She asks him, leaning closer.

"Yes, and I know you do too. We gain insight through the ninth field."

"What is this ninth field?"

"There are many fields of existence. You, me, the wolves, everything we are seeing now - our lives are lived in the third field. We briefly enter the fourth field when we dream at night. But the ninth is about death and rebirth. It's an endless plane, like a loop. It is eternal love. We would die to get there if we knew. Is what I'm saying making sense to you?"

"I wish I could believe there is that plane, waiting for us after death. I fear there is nothing."

"Most of us do. Maybe that is why some men choose to make this life a struggle. I'm not certain, but I know love exists. I believe we get a taste of the ninth field when we make love, and our bodies unite. Some can get past the awe and gain knowledge or visions."

Protis gently stands up, slowly walking toward the end of the stables. Earth walks over to join the rest of the wolf pack.

"Again I say, since we know love exists and we enjoy it, why not make love instead of making war?"

Protis reaches behind a stack of woodworkings. Once he's done rummaging, he carries a sizeable item wrapped in cloth back toward her.

"Perhaps those who wish to take love away from this world can't be reasoned with?"

"Sometimes I wonder that too."

"Are you ready to destroy this place, as Anax ordered?"

"I have saved what I need." He responds, folding the object from under his arm and extending it to Tanika.

"And I will do it to save the ones I love. I've been meaning to give this to you."

She takes the item from his hand and places it in her lap. He motions for her to open it. She removes the twine at either end of the cloth tube, carefully rolling it out across her lap.

Tanika's eyes widen as her bow and arrows are revealed. It looks different, but she recognizes her trusted weapon despite the reconstruction.

The twine she had used for the bowstring has been replaced by an intensely fibrous and interlaced hempstring.

At each end, the bowstring seemingly disappears into additional finely wrapped fibers for extra strength. The bowstring itself wraps around two additional circular gears crafted into the wood at the top and bottom of the bow. The center of the bowstring has a neatly polished bone, presumably to fit in the notch of each of her arrows. Additionally, the center bow is thickly reinforced for grip and accuracy, with red markings indicating cross hairs and additional horizontal markings to help account for distance. An open u-shaped notch will hold each arrow in place as it's loaded and fired.

"I've never worked with wood of this nature." Protis explains. "The circles you see are made of sea coral. The design would normally snap p'tauli wood, but your bow will now bend all the way backwards, giving you the strength of ten warriors."

Tanika looks at the craftsmanship in awe, finding herself speechless.

"Your arrows are longer now, with arrowheads made from our sparkstone. I used the feathers of Bunjil at the end of each arrow. They will fly with incredible speed, strength and precision."

"Protis, I don't know what to say. I -"

"You don't need to say anything. Just try it."

She stands up and slings the arrow quiver around her shoulder, then holds the bow elegantly with both hands. The two of them walk to the back of the room together.

"Now, aim at the wood panel at the stall in front of you."

With a quick reach behind her back, she draws an arrow and loads it into the chamber of her bow. The tail end snaps into place in the centerpiece of the bowstring.

“Wait!” Protis yells. He runs to the other end, passing several wooden stalls before quickly untying cocoa leaf’s lead rope. He escorts her to the other side of the room. The wolves follow his every move with ears perked in curiosity.

“Alright. Go ahead!”

“I wasn’t going to hit her, Protis. I’m a better shot than that!” She yells over to him defensively.

“I know. Just do it, you will see why!” His voice echoes around the vast hall. She finds her target again, the wood stall divider that’s a fair distance from her, but close and wide enough to be practically in front of her. With one eye closed, she draws her arrow back.

The coral wheels slowly turn, quietly ratcheting the bowstrings tension. Surprisingly she can pull the arrow back with ease. The wood bow softly creaks as she keeps going. The weapon folds completely backward into a radical u-shaped bend just as he said it would. She pulls all the way back as far as she can go, and amazingly the bow has not broken.

Finally, she adjusts the red marked cross hair to the center of the stall. She takes a deep breath before holding it in to steady her aim just as she was taught, just before she releases the bowstring. She feels the impact of the string returning to form, and the bow itself nearly flies from her grasp. The arrow springs forward and is propelled through the air with incredible velocity. It emits a hauntingly hellish whistle as it sails, only for a moment.

Not only does the arrow hit its target, it punches a sizeable hole completely through the wood. The arrow keeps going, exploding a hole in each stall divider in succession, sending small bits of wood debris in all directions.

Not to be slowed down, the projectile exits the final wooden panel, and the haunting whistle ends with a loud bang. Sparks fly as the arrow impacts the rocky ice wall mosaic, spooking the animals.

Tanika gasps in shock. Protis ducks down impulsively as the arrow deflects into the roaring waterfall, and finally lands with a splash in the aquatic pool below.

“Ha ha!” He yells out. He gives the horse a comforting few pats before jogging to aquifer. Tanika breathes heavily and her heart races. She is in a state of disbelief. Protis runs over to the very last stall. He’s able to stick his head, arm, and shoulder through the final impacted hole. Tanika can see him through all of the destroyed layers. He clutches the arrow, soaked from the water but still intact.

“The arrow is still sharp!” He tosses it lightly into a wood panel, and it sticks with ease.

“What do you think?” He asks with jovial tone, walking back to her.

She looks down at her trembling hand. “I...I like it! I mean, I really like it!” She says with a smile.

Protis pulls the arrow out of the wood. The translucent arrowhead gleams in the ambient room lighting.

“A weapon of this nature should not go in to the wrong hands. It might be strange for me to give you such a thing, after what I said.”

He continues by untying cocoa leaf, leading her back over to Tanika. The arrow rests under the armpit of his amputated arm.

"I wouldn't use it to hunt, I fear it will ruin the meat." He explains with a smirk, and hands over the lead rope to Tanika. With expressive eyes he reaches for the arrow. He reluctantly hands the feathered end to her next.

"Only the best, to protect my cocoa."

"She will return to you, I promise." She holsters the bow, then aligns the arrow back into her quiver, fitting snugly with the others.

"Wherever you need to go, you should depart now." He places his hand down and helps boost her back up onto the horse. Once she finds a comfortable seating, she trots cocoa leaf in a circle, then pulls her to a stop. She looks over to the four wolves, each standing and staring at her intently.

"I can do this." She quietly whispers to herself.

"If I don't see you again, I - "

"Don't. We will meet again." She says to him, interrupting. He quietly watches her as she confidently steers cocoa leaf toward the vast exit."

"Ya!" Tanika yells, holding onto the reins, along with cocoa leaf's flowing mane. She leans forward as the horse obediently begins a steady run. Cocoa leaf gracefully leaps over some boulders before dashing out of the vast exit, conclusively galloping down the exit tunnel of the collection.

A pitched whistle from Tanika sends the wolves sprinting behind. Nova leads the pack, with Wind closet behind, and Night following. One by one they disappear outside, all but one.

Earth stops in place, looking backward at Protis. He drops to his knees, causing her to run back toward him. She prances onto him, affectionately licking his face. His hand pets along her back in an embrace, before pushing her away.

"She needs you."
She looks back at him, as if begging him to join.

"Go!" He yells, with a point of his finger. With a whimper, she turns away from him and scampers out of the room.

"Farewell."

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## **Chapter Fifty-Eight**

Warriors of P'taul and wolfskin clamor about the trading market in their final preparations. Some share strategy, some share stories of hunting and sex. A wolfskin can be heard arguing with a P'taul about the merits of wearing armor as he argues against it, insisting on the speed of a free body.

Others help adorn each man with traditional war paints. Some opt to joke or play music for an attempt at levity. A minor few remain silent, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

Jolon and Das are looking over a portable map Auctor made for them. They are concerned about



resting points, worried the horses will be too exhausted after the journey to fight against Demur's men efficiently.

All of the horses are tied to wooden posts. Plentiful trails of green alfalfa and straw are strewn about. Children and Elders hand the horses frozen carrots and grains, ensuring they are well fed for the journey ahead. One horse, however, is not restrained.

A great black stallion with a white fur stripe running down its long face has a well groomed shine to his coat. It reflects the nearly setting sun as it slowly paces between the busy and interweaving crowd of people.

The horse is ridden by Anax, who is already adorned in full p'tauli war regalia. Two rare p'tauli necklaces hang down his bare chest. The one closest to his neck has several white claws from a sabertooth tiger, likely passed down from the days of the motherland. The second is littered with turquoise stones placed in-between beads that neatly fit in the gaps of the claw necklace.

The turquoise stones match that of those made for his bracelets, which large enough to cover half of his muscled forearms. He wears a type of ceremonial leadership crown. Attached to it are large elegant feathers, each of them dyed a bright orange. They neatly jet out from ear to ear in a half circle, conveying a radiant Sun.

His face is mostly painted red, but there are white circles around his eyes, with thinner white and dotted lines jetting down his cheekbones. Each man nods their respect to him as he carefully moves around them, inspecting every last item to the detail.

"Are you really going to wear that?" A voice from the crowd reaches to him.

Anax pivots to see Auctor, holding his decorated bow. He is equally adorned in ceremonial war attire. He wears light mammoth furs and an similar amount of body paint. Contrary to Anax, his war paints are tones of dark blue and black, signifying his naval command.

"The enemy will see you coming a valley away with those feathers!"

Anax swiftly dismounts. His well mannered horse remains in place, lowering his head for a scratch.

"It's tradition." Anax responds, walking to him with his head held high.

"It might be, but so was that ugly slab. If you abandon tradition, you will blend into your surroundings better." Auctor slings his bow around his shoulder.

"Maybe I want them to see me approaching." Anax says confidently. The two men stand for a moment face to face before embracing in a hug.

"You look good."

"So do you."

Jolon and Das approach the duo. Their bone armour clanks with each step, even amongst the chattering warriors.

"Is everything prepared?" Jolon asks in-between their moment. Anax gives Auctor an affectionate Pat on the cheek. "We are nearly finished."

Auctor turns to face the Wolfskins.

"My commanders are preparing the ships now. We'll depart through the harbor in the collection, the same time as your men."

"We have some concerns." Jolon retorts with a defensive tone.

"As do we." Anax says overtly. He folds his arms with a slight raised eyebrow.

"What are your concerns?" Auctor says diplomatically, scratching his chin.

"Demur's spies will signal we are coming, especially if we rest too much. Are we certain Tanika will eliminate them?"

"You can ask her yourself." Anax nods for them to turn around. Each of them shield their eyes, squinting on the distant horizon. Tanika is approaching the party from the distance. She maintains a valiant stride on her trusted horse, with the four wolves following.

"Are we certain Demur will not change his plans because of your betrayal?" Anax's asks, causing them to turn back to him.

"Word will not reach the four spies in time, so they will be in place. As for the tree line, he is too eager to test his new weapon." Jolon rubs the back of his neck.

"Hmm.." Anax acknowledges.

"They are not expecting a morning attack. But, they will certainly be prepared for one." Jolon clears he throat.

"I want three of your men on my ships." Auctor demand confidently. "Give me your least skilled riders who are still good with a bow."

Das and Jolon exchange looks.

"Well, we can give you Moon Watcher."

"He won't be happy about it, but I'll remind him that he screamed like a girl when the wolves pulled him from his horse."

The four men laugh jovially. "In return for your men, I'll give you the best three P'tauli riders. But I want them close to you and Anax."

"Very well."

Anax rolls his eyes, shaking his head slightly. Tanika nears the men, slowing cocoa leaf to a stop a fair distance from Anax's stallion. She dismounts and ties down the mare, Patting her affectionately as she drinks from a nearby supply of water.

"One more thing." Anax draws their attention to him once more.

"We will not armor the horses."

"Why not?" Das asks with a surprised tone.

"It will wear the horses down too much. We want them fit by the time we reach your lands."

"I don't recommend this." Jolon adds. "No armor means they will be vulnerable to spear attacks."

Raj's friends run away from the gathering. Each of them approach a happy Nova, who is eager to play. The rest of the wolves follow suit. They sniff at the giggling kid's hands curiously. Tanika pulls her hair over her ear as she approaches the four men.

"There's our star." Anax jokes.

"You could say that." She says with a smirk. She greets each man with a hug, including Jolon and Das.

"I almost didn't recognize each of you. So fierce!"

"We should give you some war paint." Auctor replies with a smile.

"I don't need war paints." She says, looking down at the ground. Auctor has a slight frown.

"Nonsense!" Anax blurts with a scrunched expression.

"I must depart now, if I am to kill the spies ahead of the riders. There is no time."

"Do you remember where each of them are?" Jolon asks intently. Das eagerly leans in.

"Yes I do." She says quietly.

"Do you want me to send a rider with you?"

"No. I've got them." She motions to the wolves, who are now frolicking around with the kids. They laugh as one of them is knocked over from Wind.

"I should leave now."

Anax places his hand on her shoulder. "Let them have some time, you can afford it. The paint would mean a lot to me, to us."

Her eyes meet his, and she finally nods in agreement. Anax motions a female elder over to them.

"Give her...the look of a wolf. And a star on her forehead. Use the colors of the pack." The elder smiles a cute toothless grin, and begins mashing berries into a dye mixture on her stone shaped palette.

"Oh! I almost forgot. Excuse me." Auctor runs away to gather something.

"The horses.. they will not have armor?" Jolon asks for confirmation.

Anax pauses. "Give them p'tauli hides. They are light enough, and should do the trick. Protis will show you where they are."

Jolon and Das exchange skeptical looks. "Very well. We should fabricate them now."

Anax nods. "Return here when you're ready. It should not take long." They end by shaking hands.

"Tanika, if we do not see you in battle, see you on the other side. Safe journey."

"Good luck." She embraces Jolon and Das one final time as they depart for the collection.

"Sit." The elder woman requests, squatting down. Tanika sits beside her, crossing her legs. Anax

follows suit. With shaky but gentle concentration, the elder slowly applies her paint mixture to Tanika's left arm.

"Are you ready for what you need to do?" Anax asks.

"I think so."

"You are already a great rider, I saw the way you came in. You'll serve your Grandfather proud."

Auctor returns in a huff and joins the circle, sitting down on Tanika's right side. He's carrying Tanika's sacred blade, along with a smaller pouch stained in a dark black shade. He places the pouch and bandages between his legs.

"Give me your right hand." He asks. Tanika moves her hand to him, palm up. She notices that he's holding the blade downward.

"Oh, blood-siblings?" She asks. He turns her hand over.

"Not exactly. Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

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Chapter Fifty-Nine

"Your blade is sharp enough to do this. I think it will give it the most meaning."

Auctor dips the blade into his pouch. When it emerges, the tip drips a shiny black dye.

"I've done this many times."

Tanika winces slightly as he pokes the top of her wrist with the point. When he pulls the blade away, he's quick to wipe it with the cloth bandage. It leaves a perfect black dot imbedded in her skin.

"Will it be permanent?" She asks.

"It will be with you always, as you will always be with us." He responds.

She smiles and closes her eyes, feeling as the elder woman begins her facial design. She sits steady and patient as the two artists finish their final touches.

"Look."

Auctor says after a final cleansing with his bandage. She opens her eyes to a small, yet intricate design on the top of her right hand. It's a circle, three quarters round with a straight line down the gap and to the center. A smaller dotted circle outlines the icon.

"I love it! What does it mean?"

"It's the P'tauli symbol for unity." Anax explains.

"We are one." Auctor adds. "But, it's incomplete."

"Incomplete? I want the rest of it!" She demands.

"I will finish it when the war is over. Watch...it will go from black to a lighter brown." Auctor says. "It will feel itchy, you will want to scratch it. Don't or it will ruin it. Instead, swat the skin like you're swatting a mosquito." He explains.

"Thank you." She leans over and hugs him.

"The paint is still wet!" The elder gripes. Tanika pulls away.

"Sorry."

"She looks fine." Anax insists. "Now she is as fierce as the rest of us!"

Tanika's face is a blend of dark brown, gray, and black. The white paint around her eyes gives her an animal look, with subtle highlights indicating whiskers. A radiant star is on her forehead, as promised. The colored pattern is replete down her left arm as well.

"It's nearly sundown, you should depart." Anax says insistently.

"What about the rest of her right arm?" Auctor inquiries.

"There's no time. Here." Anax hands her his arm shroud. "I no longer need this. May it give you the wisdom and speed of the eagle."

She smiles, slipping the shroud over her right arm. After tightening the new interlaced chords, she flexes her fingers individually.

"Fits perfectly."

Each of them stand and help the elder to her feet. She gives each of them a thankful kiss on the cheek and darts over to cocoa leaf. She frees the horse quickly and with a boost from the water container, Tanika steadies herself ready to depart.

Auctor runs to her, holding the sacred blade handle side up.

"Don't forget!" He yells to her.

Tanika pivots her trusted horse so she can lean down far enough to retrieve it from his grasp.

"I won't." She answers, taking the weapon and pulling herself upright. She holsters the live security in her furs.

"Ya!"

Cocoa leaf is off in a flash. She gallops out of the village as the warriors look onward, the wind in her hair. A shrill whistle of Tanika's lips sends the wolf pack running graciously behind her.

Tanika looks behind her shoulder, glimpsing the village one final time. The children are running and waving goodbye behind them. It's not long before they disappear into the horizon.

Tanika looks forward as her and the wolves head on a trajectory toward the valley of the Mammoth and beyond to fight Demur's entrenched spies.

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## Chapter Sixty

It's been a long journey, even with incredible speed and stamina of this horse. They are nearing the halfway point, when Tanika stops to take a much needed rest for both her and her companion. The wolves have been outrun and are nowhere to be seen, but she knows they aren't far behind. Increasingly she can sense their nearing presence.

Beyond the next rise ahead lay a series of ridges and peaks. Those are the ones which Jolon said the spies are camping in.

The sky is a rustic golden hue. The Sun hangs just above the cloudy horizon before it will begin its rapid descent to nightfall, which will signal Anax and the others to depart. Tanika knows she must act quickly to pave the way for the army. She and Nova are well seasoned hunters, but the additional wolf pack adds a degree of inexperience and uncertainty.

Cocoa leaf snorts and huffs as she remains in place. The nearby decayed treeline will provide adequate coverage. The horse hangs her head to inspect and graze the foliage. Tanika drops her pack to the side followed by her weapons.

When she lands on the ground, she feels the soreness between her thighs upon impact. After a stretch and crack of her neck, she rummages through her belongings. It's been a while since she tasted her elk jerky, but the flavor and freshness have held up well. Her stomach rumbles through her meal. After gathering up her carved pipe and sacred herb, she gives a few reassured pats and strokes of cocoa leaf's fur.

"I won't be far."

She explains, walking far enough away to keep line of sight. She squats down on a comfortable patch of tundra, crossing her legs in a meditative Zen like position.

She places her pipe on her lips and a few careful clanks of her fire stones ignite the loaded herb. She puffs gently, carefully feeding the smoke as she gently inhales.

The symphony of nighttime insects are slowly beginning their song as while the warm smoke in her lungs is held. She closes her eyes, feeling her heartbeat. Mentally she seeks the familiar connection to the nearby nature.

After a full belly, cocoa leaf squats to her knees and lays down, munching thoroughly on her last bite of sweet leaves. Tanika slowly exhales, releasing the contained smoke to the breeze on her face. She welcomes the wave of relaxation that envelops her, with her mind gaining clarity with each puff of her pipe.

Wind is the first wolf to arrive. It likely irritates Nova, as the other two follow his lead closely behind. The pure white wolf pants happily as he slows his pace. The pack will easily find Tanika thanks to her trail of smoke. In this moment, Wind follows his nose to another sweet smell.

Cocoa Leaf turns around, feeling a slightly cold and curious wolf nose sniffing around her rump. She parts her tail, allowing Wind to lick at her velvet lips, which he eagerly does. She lets out a sigh and returns her head to a resting position at her side. She closes her eyes with enjoyment, twitching her lips as Wind's long tongue laps at her in long strides, parting and even penetrating her as he feasts.

Nova is next to arrive, and eagerly heads straight over to Tanika. Earth and Night follow their noses to Tanika's empty pack. Earth buries her head in the empty pack. When she lifts her head, Tanika's pack covers her face. Night dances around her, trying to nip at the container while Earth tries to shake and scratch it free from her head.

Tanika opens her eyes with a laugh, feeling Nova's tongue locking her face. He happily laps up her exhaled smoke. He tastes the Elk meat on her lips and breath. She can feel how hungry he is, and indeed how hungry all of the wolves are.

Wind is overcome with lust.

He paws and grips at Cocoa Leaf's sprawled out hind leg, then leaps on top of her massive hind end as he finds footing. His eager tear-shaped pink tip emerges from his furry sheath poking at the mare's winking, twitching lips. With a few bucks and thrusts, he's inside of her warm welcoming entrance. With his cheek pressed on her lower back, Wind begins his unstoppable motion.

He pants heavily, feeling his member expand within the horse's tight contracting walls. Cocoa leaf looks back at him a second time and feels as she takes his entire penis, engorged knot and all. She rests her head once more and sighs amongst the succulent slurping sound of the wolf's love.

"Nova, I need you now more than ever. You must help me guide them."

Tanika feels a sense of arousal, thinking it's purely from Nova and his affections. She places her pipe down then scratches his face and fur.

"Back away." She says, nudging him.

Nova pivots in a circle, giving her some space before sitting down. He watches her hands as she pulls out her last scraps of meat. He licks his lips, remaining in place.

"Good boy." She says with a smile. She tosses a piece into the air. He follows the path intently, leaping and snatching it with precision.

Earth and Night have finished fighting over Tanika's bag, and early approach her when they see the game she's playing with Nova.

The two of them crowd Tanika, whimpering for their share. She stands up, tossing each of them equal pieces.

Next, she practices calling them each by name and commands them to go to specific areas of the field. They each obey respectively, catching the treats at greater distance and velocity.

"Good. Where's Wind?"

The moment the words escape her lips is the same moment when Wind's pent-up load of wolf sperm escapes his penis, spilling down cocoa leaf's lengthy tunnel. He rests from his humping, panting in pure pleased ecstasy. Her continual twitching swollen clitoris seems to milk every drop from him while she maintains her grip around his fully embedded, pulsating organ.

Thanks turns to see him, finally baring witness to inter-species mating happening at her flank.

"Wind!" She yells. He manages to turn to his side, tongue drooping in pleasure. She laughs.

"Can't get enough, can you? Bad wolf."

He manages to raise up with his front paws, arching his back like he conquered a mountain.

"Come over here! More time for that later!"

He struggles to free himself, as cocoa leaf seemingly begs for more. A gushy pop emits as he steps backwards from the mare, freeing his swaying dripping member. Another wink of her of her mound

sends a trail of his semen down her lips. Cocoa leaf lets out a pleased snort.

“I need your energy, it’s important. Come here now!”

Wind proudly struts to her, dripping along the way. Tanika sits on her knees to greet him. The other wolves are walking back toward her from across the field.

“You almost missed it.” She says to him, handing over the last scraps of food. Wind chomps at it eagerly while sitting down. Her hands pet through his fur affectionately.

“This may not work, but I must try.”

She keeps one hand flat on his forehead before closing her eyes. She imagines the furthest point they would have to travel to in order to reach Demur’s last spy.

“You must go first, since you are the fastest.”

She tries to imagine the rendering Auctor made, and the point which Jolon pointed out. She imagines what it must actually look like, and the terrain along the way. She imagines sending the images into Wind’s mind like a projection, using all of her intent.

“Use the ice and snow to your advantage, so you will remain invisible on your journey.”

Tanika opens her eyes to see Wind staring back at her intently and very close to her face. He is perfectly still, in almost a trance-like state. Tanika snaps her finger by his ear, and he blinks himself out of it.

“Go!” She yells and points her finger. Wind scurries away in a flash, swiftly running toward his objective. Tanika exhales in astonishment.

“It worked!”

She calls Night over to her, then repeats the same thing with him. She imagines the third furthest spy and where he’s located.

“Do what you do best. Use nightfall and the shadows to sneak up on this man.”  
With another snap of her fingers, Night departs for his target.

She instructs Earth to blend into the muddied ground as she stalks the third spy. The Brown wolf obediently runs off in the same direction at Tanika’s command. Nova is the final one. She prances him affectionately in a hug before pressing her forehead to his.

“Nova my love, we’ve been through so much together. Do this final act for me and it will be over. This man is the leader of the spies. He will send colored smoke to the others, and they will warn Demur. He is not far, but you must go now. We will see each other again. We are one.”

Nova takes a deep audible breath and leaps up onto her, almost pushing Tanika backward as he rests his front paws on her shoulders for a full body hug. She holds him as he falls down her, licking her face before he departs. She watches as he disappears around the bend.

Tanika crosses her legs on the ground and returns to her meditative pose, the same one Anax had on the rocky cliffside. She closes her eyes just as the Sun disappears in the horizon, turning the clouds into a dark magenta shade with the limited remaining light.



Her heartbeat steadies. She returns focus, embracing but also eliminating the surrounding nature simultaneously from her mind. In order for her plan to work, the wolves will have to be in their positions at the same time. Hopefully she has staggered their departure accordingly.

She concentrates harder. She imagines where Wind must be located in this moment. What does the landscape look like? What does the ground feel like to my paws? Is the air cold? Think, Tanika.

It's getting darker. Even though her eyes are closed, her surroundings are dimming. The maelstrom of random noise behind her eyelids changes with each breath she takes, each thought. Time becomes cyclical. Wind can smell a human, she thinks to herself.

"I can smell what he smells!"

She bursts with realization. There is a human nearby, just like Jolon said.

Tanika imagines Wind following his scent. Soon enough the images she imagines herself seeing gain more and more detail. She's convinced that her and Wind are sharing the same vision.

"Yes! That's it..."

She can smell the man's sweat. She can hear the soft crackling of his dying campfire embers. She can smell the slight whiffs of faint smoke from that too.

"You're getting close, good."

Where is Earth? It's difficult, but she attempts to shift focus. In doing so, she loses her connection with Wind. It's nothing but black now. She curses out loud in frustration. Don't panic, just breathe. Focus. She continually reassures herself.

Her heartbeat increases, and the images return. Earth is on track, her footsteps are treading lightly through mud.

Tanika has completely shut out the surrounding noise of insects and the whistling breeze hitting her face. She can still sense cocoa leaf, but her focus is elsewhere. In this moment, she can only hear what Earth hears. It's faint, but she can hear a man singing. She recognizes the song as one her tribe would sing on the hunt. This man is cooking a rabbit.

"Good. If I did it once, I can do it again. Where is Night?"

Tanika's legs are numb. The coldness creeps up her torso, tingling into her arms and fingers. She remains still, focused on her task.

Evening creeps over the land faster, and Night the wolf is feeling confident, comfortable in his darkening surroundings. He has a steep climb, but he floats over the boulders with ease and grace, dodging trees and obstacles in between. Tanika flies with him, and he's not even tired from his lengthy journey.

She feels Night's hunger in her own stomach. Indeed, all of the wolves are hungry. She can feel it with increasing intensity.

"Soon enough."

Tanika's entire body is numb. Warm blood is flowing through her, just as though she has had a long run through the forest herself. Her body breaks into a cold sweat.

Her thoughts focus to Nova instantly. He's laying in some bushes, never taking his eyes from his target. She can see the man clearly, he's sitting on a rock carving arrows. His fire pit is well built, with various brush within reach to signal if needed.

"Good work love, stay here."

Tanika's heart is pounding. She feels a rush of adrenaline. She can switch between the wolves with ease. Each of them are nearing striking distance of their targets. She recognizes each of the men, loyal servants to Demur.

Her heart pounds intensely in her head. She feels all four of their heartbeats on top of hers. It's becoming difficult to breathe, overwhelming. She can feel herself commanding the wolves in every minute detail, creeping them in closer, slowly.

Soon enough, the line between Tanika and the wolves dissolves. It's no longer

Tanika and them, they are one in the same. Tanika is the pack, and they are her. She is in four places at once, collectively seeing everything at once.

She moves them in, steady and quiet. Each wolf walks behind each man, behind each blond spot. She smells their blood, and thirsts for it. Sweat pours down her body. She shakes with swirling adrenaline in her veins. They are only a few steps away from each man. Tanika stalks them all. She breathes heavily, her heart thumps in her chest. She bares her teeth, and each wolf opens their mouth, ready for the kill. They pose their bodies for the pounce.

"Feast."

Tanika opens her eyes with a gasp. She's back in the field, sitting in her cross-legged pose. She's disconnected from the wolf pack. Her numb body tingles with returning sensation as does her hearing.

Her eyes struggle to adjust to the pitch blackness of the night sky. Stars shine sporadically through distant billowed storm clouds. She stares off in the dark horizon, regaining her thoughts. The wind is blowing gently against her.

Suddenly the faint sound of a man screaming reaches her ears. She listens closely. A second man bellows in horror even closer. A third, and fourth join in the chorus of terror increasing in volume. It's only a few moments before the screaming stops, and their echoes bounce off the valley walls into obscurity one by one. Now it is pure silence.

Tanika cracks a victoriously wicked smile. Lightning rips across the sky, illuminating the detail all around. After the concussive boom of the storm, Nova howls at the new moon. One by one the other wolves join in his howl, signifying to each other their mission has been accomplished.

Tanika's sinister smile is short lived, as the realization hits her. The sound has reached Demur's ears as well. She jumps up quickly, gathering her remaining items. She runs over to the well rested mare, still lying in place. She jumps on her back.

"Get up!"

The mare slowly stands, finding her balance. Tanika takes the reins, steering her straight ahead. Cocoa leaf gallops around the bend. As Tanika's eyes adjust, she can see each wolf descending carefully down the ridgeline from each of their posts. She travels as fast as the horse will go so each of them can rendezvous in the center of the valley.

The wolves gather up and wait for Tanika's arrival. Each of them pant happily from a delicious meal. All of their coats are coated in red, their own war paint. Eventually Tanika joins the pack, slowing Cocoa Leaf to a stop. She's happy to see all four wolves. The path ahead is now safe for Anax and the approaching riders. Tanika pivots her horse around. The new moon hangs in the sky, illuminating the distant p'tauli valley. She can faintly see the craglined cliffs, beyond which lies the open ocean.

The thought occurs to her that she can reach the p'tauli village by morning. She would depart on the ship Auctor left for her, alone. Nova deserves to live as a wolf, away from the folleys of mankind. Let them fight the war themselves.

The wolf pack stares at her, eagerly awaiting her next command.

"Ya!"

Cocoa Leaf takes off, quickly galloping at full speed. The horse parts through clouds of rolling fog. Tanika's black hair flows evenly as it whips behind her in the cold night air. The wolves follow suit, running gracefully behind the majestic horse. Nova leads ahead of the wolves, which flank his left and right sides in a v-shaped chevron formation.

Their path will take them out of the mammoth fields. There is one more stretch before they will round the final bend. Tanika and the wolves are headed straight toward Demur and his army, which vastly outnumber them in the thick treeline of the sacred forest.

This will be the hunt of Tanika's life.

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Chapter Sixty-One

It's now pre-dawn. Storm clouds have rolled in, limiting some visibility with patches of rolling fog outlying the ground of the sacred forest. The creeping sun casts a red hue throughout the cloudy sky as it begins its rise over the horizon.

Demur stands high on the Wolfskin territory's inner bluff. It gives him a vantage point over the entire village, as well as the sacred forest where much of his army is stationed, shielding the village. A stone wall has been built up around the tree line, with sticky black tar used as mortar. It will certainly block an invading horse army, and give perfect cover for Demur's archers.

Most of his forces await high in the trees, ready to rein down his sinister sticky oil, and ignite the approaching P'tauli army. Behind Demur lies the newly carved out canal. He's already dispatched his crudely constructed ship fleet. If he's timed it correctly, they will loop around and reach the P'taul collection after avoiding Auctor's incoming fleet.

Demur's loyal commanders are at his side, additionally scanning the horizon. They await smoke signals beyond the trees, but Demur is certain his spies in the deep forest have been killed. Demur has everyone on alert, and the acoustics of the inner bowl of the bluff will allow him to bark orders down at his warriors without him having to enter the battle himself. His horse riders are split between patrols along the inlet and inner village.

"Do you hear that?" One of his commanders ask him.
Demur shakes his head.

"It sounds like...can you feel it? An Earth-shake."

Demur listens intently. A low pitched rumble is faintly audible.

"It's not that!" Demur insists in an almost childish whine.

"Horses? It's them?!"

Demur doesn't have an answer. Now they feel a slight vibration in their feet. A perplexed Demur looks onward as the rumble turns into a series of concussive booms, increasing in volume.

"Look!"

He steps forward, squinting his eyes. The tallest and furthest tree outlining the sacred forest sways, then falls swiftly to the ground. A second tree falls, followed by another, and another. Trees are falling and crashing between one another amongst the increasing concussive booms. Some men in the trees have fallen to the ground. Screaming warriors can be heard as more trees fold and collapse in a path of destruction heading toward the village.

The commanders are increasingly perplexed and the rumbling ground shakes them to the core. Men continue yelling, many abandon their posts. Warriors are seen leaping over the stone wall in an attempt to outrun the approaching menace.

Other men gather by the stone wall, armed with lengthy spears. The final row of trees part way violently. The stone wall explodes, sending rock debris flying in all directions. The four men with spears shield their eyes while they are enveloped in a dark shadow. Heavy stones arc through the air and land on abandoned shelters, crushing them.

The object of the destruction finally comes into view as it emerges through the dust and debris. A huge dark figure, ominous and intimidating in its blurred obscurity, the shape gains more detail and is revealed to be a giant Woolly Mammoth. Tanika and the wolves have been chasing it for some time before sending it on a trajectory straight toward the Wolfskin village. Just as planned, it folded the trees with ease and crushed the stone wall as if it were a minor nuisance.

The Mammoth stops in her gallop, emitting a loud vocal roar as she enters the village. Even Demur is stunned. The great beast slowly stands on her hind legs, raising upward nearly twice her height in a frightening pose. Her tusked head eclipses the rising sun, and casts an elongated dark shadow, stretching over much of the village in cold darkness.

Two of the spear-armed warriors are bold enough to go in for the kill. Each of them thrust their spears upward into her exposed stomach. The great Mammoth roars again, beginning her slow and heavy descent downward.

Her massive feet cover each man, and they disappear underneath when she lands on the ground once more. Their bodies are flattened into the ground like a hammer striking a nail. Their spears are the only thing left, standing upright momentarily before falling to ground. The impact of her massive stomp sends a shock wave all the way up to Demur, who nearly loses his balance.

The two remaining warriors toss their spears into the side of the Mammoth, but they fail to pierce her thick hide. The Mammoth leans to her side as she swings her head at the men. The sharpened ivory tusks decapitate one man and slice the other. Both of them fall over, dead.

The Mammoth huffs and grunts, looking around for an escape. Shelters block her path. Demur finds wits and orders his archers to surround the creature and shoot her at once.

The men scramble into a half circle, keeping a fair distance while they load their arrows. One by one they volley their attack. The arrows sail through the air one after another until they impact the Mammoth with a thud. Again, the projectiles fail to pierce her skin, and simply fall to the ground at her feet.

The Mammoth roars again, and the men trip over each other as they scramble to escape. She lunges forward and to her right. The fleeing men are able to evade. She turns to her left, and lunges after that part of the brigade. They are less fortunate, and two men are impaled by each tusk. They are killed instantly and drop their weapons. The Mammoth stops in her tracks. She shakes the bodies free of her tusks, changing the perfect white color to a dark red.

Terrified villagers begin to flee into the forest. An enraged Demur orders their execution. The Wolfskin brigade hesitantly obeys and begins to chase them down. He turns his focus back to the giant beast.

“Bring the oil! Bring the oil! Cover it now!” He demands viciously with spit flying.

The Wolfskin warriors regroup. In pairs, they carry grotesque oil-fuel containers made from elastically stretched animal intestine. They are heavy, and the pairs heave the containers back and forth in a swinging motion before opening it.

The first pair successfully throws the glistening fuel up onto the Mammoth. It splashes upon her thick matted fur, slowly dripping down. The next pair splash their fuel on her other side. Again and again she’s doused in oil. A splash lands near her backside, and then another splash directly in her face. The oil drips down her forehead and into her eyes. She squints hard at the irritant as it causes momentary blindness.

The Mammoth becomes panicked, aimlessly stepping backward. She groans in discomfort, trying in vain to rub the oil free using her raised knee.

“Bring the fire! Where is my fire?!” Demur screams.

A final volley of fuel is hoisted into position. The two men lift up the bulbous intestinal sack at both ends to begin their heaving motion. Another pair of men are a safe distance from the fuel container.

One of them has a fuel dripped ball attached to a long rope. The other warrior squats to one knee, and strikes two stones together in an attempt to ignite it. After a few strikes the fuel ball ignites in a flash. He begins to twirl the ball in a circle to gain momentum. He’ll have to wait until the pair throw their fuel supply before he launches his flamed weapon. The ignited fire starter audibly swooshes in the air with each spin as he readies the throw.

The Mammoth’s occupant finally decides to make her appearance. Not only had Tanika pursued the Mammoth on horseback with the wolves, she had steered Cocoa Leaf very closely to the side of the charging behemoth.

Night and Wind carefully raced ahead on the Mammoth’s right side, while Earth and Nova trailed closely to her left. All four wolves had to avoid being trampled as they steered the Mammoth on a straight path. It was a difficult maneuver, and Tanika only had one chance.

Once everyone was in position, Tanika jumped up on the mare’s back, resting her feet along her spine in a squatting pose. She was able to leap away from the galloping horse, and gripped onto the Mammoth’s massive hind leg.

The four wolves broke free, guiding Cocoa Leaf away from the chase and off in the opposite direction. Tanika mentally instructed the wolves to guide the horse safely back home. Once the mare was heading back toward the P'tauli village, Tanika rode the Mammoth the rest of the way. It wasn't as valiant of an entrance she wanted. Tanika would have preferred to ride the Mammoth on her back, but she was able to hang on this whole time.

Not only has the Mammoth been soaked in oil, so has Tanika. She struggles to pull herself up the Mammoth's slippery fur, but she finally manages to scale the beast's rump.

She leans forward, slightly crawling up the Mammoth's massive spine. Her feet squish against the soaked thick fur as she feels herself narrowly slipping off the beast's side. Some warriors are frozen in perplexity as Tanika becomes visible, climbing up the Mammoth's huge shoulders and up to the back of her neck.

Tanika finds her balance and stands fully upright atop the woolly beast. The warrior with the twirling fireball catches her eye. With the golden rays of sun outlining Tanika's body from behind, she swiftly draws her elegant compound bow and quickly loads an arrow. With one eye closed she draws her bowstring back and aims at the fire warrior.

With a deep breath, she launches the arrow at him.

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## **Chapter Sixty-Two**

The haunting whistle is delayed as it follows the arrow downward. The sailing projectile first cuts through the oil sack in mid-air with ease, spilling the fuel contents directly over the two men beneath. The deadly trajectory continues, impaling the man twirling the fire. He falls backwards, instantly dead and permanently pinned to the ground. His fire sling slips from his grip and makes a small arc toward the oil drenched men, igniting them instantly. The screaming men run in opposite directions, fully engulfed in flames.

One of the men aimlessly runs for help toward two additional warriors carrying an oil cannister. They attempt to fend him off, but the inflamed man collapses on top of them. The oil container explodes and the three men disappear into a fine mist.

The loud blast of the explosion spooks the Mammoth with a jolt and Tanika is nearly thrown off. She hangs on to the side, trying to regain footing. Demur's men regroup as he furiously barks orders down at them.

"More oil! More fire! Where are my archers?!"

Demur then orders all remaining warriors in the sacred forest to group around the mammoth. He eyes the mysterious warrior atop the great beast, suspecting it's Tanika.

"I want that thing dead!!"

The second torched man collapses on top of the nearest abandoned shelter. He rolls around furiously in an attempt to extinguish the flames, but it's no use. He breathes his last breath, and the home is completely engulfed. A rumble of thunder and a swift wind picks up, spreading the fire to more homes. Panic ensues throughout the village. Demur orders his horse riders away from the inlet so they can instill order in the village.

Tanika regains her footing along the back of the Mammoth's neck. She draws her bow again, picking off two men in front of her, who drop an intact oil container. To her left, she spots the family attempting to flee into the forest. Three of Demur's warriors have caught up to them and stop running, drawing their spears backward in an attack formation to take aim at the escaping family.

Tanika is quick to take aim, closing one eye and using the red notches of her bow to adjust for the distance. The screaming arrow sails through all three warriors. All of the bodies fall to the ground with missing heads. The fleeing family reaches the treeline, never looking back.

Another man approaches the mammoth twirling a lit fireball. She pivots quickly and sends an arrow to him. The impact throws him backward a considerable distance and pins him to a tree. He struggles to remove the arrow from his chest as the tree he's stuck to ignites from his own weapon.

A group of archers form a strategic line and begin firing upward at Tanika. Some of the arrows impact the Mammoth, who groans in discomfort. Another few arrows whiz by her face, too close for comfort. She dives down to her stomach to avoid being hit. The archers are loading more arrows and Tanika takes the moment to carefully scrape the oil out of the Mammoth's eyes.

The archers return fire once more and Tanika screams when one arrow slices her ear and removes a portion of her hair. She raises her arm to shield her face, and two arrows impact her arm shroud. The tips have penetrated the leather and scrape against her arm.

"Arm your arrows with fire, idiots!" Demur's voice echoes to them with irritation.

Tanika must act fast. She slides down the side of the mammoth, hitting the ground on her feet with a thud. She holsters her bow, and scrambles to grab the oil container. She looks over her shoulder, seeing the archers wrapping their arrows in flammable cloth.

She slices the container open, and drags it in front of the giant Mammoth. It looks down at Tanika and blinks, with her bloodied tusks pointed directly at Tanika.

"Drink!" She yells up at the Mammoth.

The beast huffs back at her in disdain, slowly backing away.

Demur's horse riders are approaching, but fleeing villagers slow their path. The riders change course and herd the people around like cattle.

Tanika opens the vile package, stepping closer to the Mammoth. "I know you don't want it! Just do it!" She pleads.

The huge animal concedes reluctantly with half closed eyes, dipping her trunk into the intestinal sack. The archers behind Tanika begin sparking their arrows, igniting them one by one.

In one gulp, the Mammoth inhales all of the vile fuel. It's only a moment before the foul mixture reaches her taste buds. She winces, squinting her giant eyes as she rejects the terrible concoction through her trunk in a forceful sneeze. Meanwhile the archers have taken aim at the creature, and pull their bowstrings back.

Tanika pivots around and points the wooly trunk at the archers. One by one they ignite in flames, screaming in terror as she showers them with the oil spray. The collective fire catches up to the spray and becomes a wall of flame that Tanika aims at anyone approaching her. The last of the firey mixture hits the remaining men with fuel containers. They each explode in succession, sending

weapons and body parts flying in all directions.

Tanika screams as she feels the intense heat of the fire starting to reach both of them. The fire extinguishes in one last puff as the mammoth expels the last of the fuel. She hacks and coughs, shaking her trunk and spitting the last drops.

"I'm sorry." Tanika says, touching her massive cheek.  
The horse riders are quickly approaching them with armed spears.

"Time to go. I've asked too much of you."

Tanika draws her sacred blade and runs underneath the Mammoth between her massive legs. She jumps up by her hind end, momentarily holding the creature's tail. She jabs the blade into the woolly muscular backside, the equivalent of a bee sting to motivate her.

"Ya!"

Tanika falls back to the ground. With a roar and gallop, the Mammoth is off. She tramples empty shelters on a booming path of destruction, removing the coated oil from her fur.

Demur's horse riders pursue the fleeing Mammoth as it carves a path directly through the lit council fire, extinguishing it instantly. The mammoth's massive feet destroy the stone structure and kick up dust with each step.

"Forget the beast! Kill the lone warrior! Kill her now!" Demur spits out.

The horse warriors break free of the chase as the mammoth leaves the boundary of the village, and disappears into the wild once more.

"Good girl." Tanika says, readying her bow for the incoming attack. She reaches into her quiver. She discovers in horror that she's out of arrows.

The horse riders loom closer, forming a circular pattern around her, preventing an escape. She holsters her bow, replacing it with a wolfskin shield. Her shrouded arm, with arrows still embedded, grips her sacred blade as she readies herself for a final stand.

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Chapter Sixty-Three

P'tauli horse riders led by Anax charge through the sacred forest with ease, following the path carved by the mammoth. The horses uniformly pour over the collapsed stone wall like flowing water.

Anax is the first one to draw his spear, and the rest of the men ready their weapons one by one. He spots the circling Wolfskin riders, heading directly to them at full speed despite his unit being outnumbered. His confidence leads the way, even as the last P'tauli horse gallops onto the battlefield.

"Split them up!" Anax yells over the successive thumping of horse hooves.

"Ooh ah!"

Anax leans to the side of his pitch black stallion steadying his spear along his forearm and under his armpit, pointing the length in a jousting motion. He's the first to strike a Wolfskin rider, hitting his

lower back from behind. He arcs the spear upward, crunching through the warrior's skeletal armor and leaving him with a ghastly slice along his side. The man shrieks as he falls from his horse, which whinnies wide eyed in fright. The remaining P'taul engage the circling Wolfskins in a counter clockwise motion.

Tanika shrieks out as she's nearly trampled by the spooked Wolfskin horse trying to flee the mayhem. Anax finally sees her, baffled by her presence on the ground. Soon his train of thought is interrupted by an attacking Wolfskin rider. Anax quickly deflects the warrior's spear with a shield gifted to him by Jolon.

The Wolfskins have each shifted their focus on the invading P'tauli horde, allowing Tanika a chance to escape the carnage. She's hunched over, doggedly dancing around the chaotic manage of clanking weapons and yelling warriors.

Demur watches the unfolding battle with increasing anger and frustration. He's feeling the power slipping through his fingers. Thoughts of losing are forced into the back of his mind while denial is brought to the forefront.

"If we lose the riders, we lose the war my lord!"

"Nonsense!" Demur grunts, while backhandedly slapping his officer in the face. The man winces, touching his bleeding lip.

"What do you suggest then, exhaled one?" He asks through heavy angered breaths.

"Send in the scouts!"

"Superior, they are just children. They will be trampled, and we are out of weapons and oil."

"Give them rocks! Do I have to think for everyone?" Demur spews with a flurry of hits and shoves, sending his officer stumbling to his knees.

"Go!" He spits down at him with a pointed finger.

"Yes, lord."

At the P'tauli village, a line of elders stand on the roof of the collection. They are at the furthest point before a steep drop off into the turbulent frigid ocean. A single man stands atop the highest lookout point, heavily wrapped in furs, yet still shivering from the Arctic sea breeze. His back is hunched over from his aged days with one hand covering his brow as he scans the fogged aquatic horizon.

"Here they come!"

Just as predicted, Demur's own naval fleet creeps toward them from the clouds. The Wolfskins precariously steer feeble crafts toward the opening of the collection, the empty ship port they intend to invade.

In preparation, the younger warriors have split the ice ledge at various points with wedged shape wood jetting up through the fault lines like stakes for a tent. A few good hits to the wood will free vast sections of glacial wall onto the ships below, but it will take precise timing.

“Wait..”

He says quietly, and holds a shaking hand out at the defensive line behind him. The first of many ships is steadily heading toward the open port, having not seen the old watchman above.

“First one... Now!” He yells through a fur covered face, casting frozen breath to the wind.

Two elders behind him shakily raise sizeable rocks before driving them into the wedged wood. With each strike the gap in the ice widens until the wood is finally driven down fully. With a loud cracking noise, the first section of ledge slips free, and falls down toward the lead ship. It sails down at them like a giant pointed stalactite.

The point of the ice section touches down into the water between two ships, creating a giant splash. The violent wake is large enough to capsize both vessels, sending several Wolfskin warriors into the frigid waters. A third boat attempts to steer away from the shockwave, but the water sends it reeling into the wall of the collection with a crash. The other lead ships bob around in the waves and furiously row to regain formation.

“Second shelf, get ready!” The watchmen eyes downward intently as another of the boats is nearing the entrance. Wolfskins are yelling over one another in commotion while one of the furthest ships is more stable and arming archers to fire up at the watchman.

“Now!”

A second large section is freed with more ease than the first one. It falls with precision, striking the bow of the encroaching ship. It splinters apart as the opposite end is thrown upward. The men scream as they are flung high into the air like a catapult. The second huge splash adds to the turbulence and consumes another vessel.

The old watchman waits again before commanding the third and final ice drop. A volley of arrows strike the man from below one by one. He looks down at each of them in his legs, stomach and chest. He struggles to breathe, helpless to remove them. Blood drips into the ice as he turns to face the remaining elders.

“Forget the ice.. It’s time to escape.”

It’s the last order he will give before he collapses to his knees, and slumps off the ice wall, never to be seen again.

The elders gather their packs and begin to retreat. One stays behind, and with his remaining strength and tears frozen to his face, he drives the final wooden wedge before falling into the snow from exhaustion. The ice section remains in place despite his effort. Below him, the waters become steady enough to allow the invading ships to flow into the collection one by one.

The Wolfskin warriors flood into the ship room, readying their weapons. Each tunnel they find has been blocked by collapsed ice and rubble, except for one. They march on through the ice tunnel in a steady line. The further they go into the collection, the more subsequent rooms are sealed off.

“Keep going! We’ll dig out their treasures once we’ve killed them all.”

The Wolfskins delve through bend after bend of the glowing ice tunnel until the leader comes upon a point that opens up into a larger room that seems to dead end. A single shaft of diagonal light from above illuminates Protis as he stands facing the approaching army holding a single rope.

"Halt!" The wolfskin commands to the men. They each stumble to a stop behind the leader.

"Take us to food storage and we will spare your life."

Protis pulls the rope toward himself, nearly falling backwards. He looks at the rope in his hand with a depressed sigh. He slumps over, defeated.

"Alright." He finally responds. "The tunnel is back that way."

"There's nothing! Everything is collapsed."

"Then we're too late." Protis retorts, sitting down.

"Where is your leader? Where is Anax?"

"Behind you." He says. The men turn around, seeing nothing but the empty tunnel. Protis bursts with laughter.

"Kill this crippled idiot!" One of the Wolfskins insists.

A heinous whistle seems to whisk by them, followed by a low rumble beyond the ice walls. The wolfskins start to panic. One by one they start to gasp for air, coughing and grabbing at their throats.

"What have you done?" The leader asks angrily, pointing his spear at him.

"You'll see."

The man charges at him, drawing his weapon back for a throw. The rumble intensifies and the archway into the room gives way, sending chunks of ice down on the Wolfskin, crushing him instantly. The remaining men turn and begin to flee in the opposite direction. They shriek in horror with the last of their air as a torrent of ocean water floods the tunnel.

Protis closes his eyes with a smile as the surrounding ice walls of the collection collapse all around him.

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## **Chapter Sixty-Four**

Commotion surrounds Tanika. She fends off enemies knocked from their horses, and other warriors. Her blade is her only defense.

The battlefield is littered with wounded, dead and dying on both sides. Horses scatter about without riders. Arrows jet up from the ground between patches of burning soil. Villagers flee and find cover when they can.

A fallen Wolfskin warrior throws his weapon down as Tanika lunges at him. He raises an arm to surrender, clutching his chest with the other. She can see he's bleeding profusely.

"I can't. Please.." He gasps.

She holsters her blade, kicking his spear out of reach. With hesitation she searches in her pack for healing herbs and bandages. By this time the scouts arrive on the outskirts of the storm. The child soldiers form a line, and begin throwing stones at Demur's own horse riders. They are too quick and nimble for the warriors to retaliate, and offer a good distraction.

Anax finds a break in the battle, galloping swiftly over to Tanika. She stands behind the hunched over man, applying her medical treatment.

Anax points his spear down at the man, uncomfortably close to his face. He winces from her bandage application.

"Do you swear allegiance to this woman?" Asks Anax, with a tilt of his head.

"Yes.." He offers with a grunt.

"Best choice you've made all day!"

Anax smirks, retracting his spear. He shifts his focus to her.

"We thought something happened to you. Your horse ran right past us, along with the wolves."

"Good." She says plainly with a nod. She adds pressure to the man's chest. "Just as I planned."

Anax scans around contemplating the havoc. "You alone did all of this?"

"I traded them for a Mammoth." She says bluntly.

"What?"

"She did." Gasps the wounded man.

"Only you..."

A Wolfskin rider is galloping toward the group from Anax's peripheral.

"Behind you!" Warns the wounded man, wide eyed. Anax reflexively pivots his stallion, pointing his spear at the intruder with precision. The horse rider jolts to a stop.

"Woah, brother! It's me, Jolon. Save your ferocity."

Anax smiles. "Good of you to make it. I knew we should have given your men different markings." The men chuckle, sharing in a brief moment of levity amongst the simmering chaos.

"They have fallen back, but we are still outnumbered. Where are the ships?" Jolon asks nervously.

"Move the families and any prisoners to the shoreline. Gather the horses. Once our warriors arrive we can move the wounded out with the ships. They should be here soon." Anax says with a bout of confidence.

"Once your men arrive, we can secure the village. It will be over!"

Anax eyes the far ridge, focusing in on the single shadowy figure of Demur, who seems to loom over it all.

"Nothing is over until the end."

"Then I must go. Tanika, catch!"

Jolon heaves a wrapped bundle at her, containing some of her arrows. His horse nods, prancing around a bit with a snort.

"I only found three, so use them wisely. I will see you both when it's over. Ya!"

Jolon departs, galloping his horse between mangled homes around the village. Tanika and Anax prepare to regroup everyone and guide the people to the river bank. Demur's commander rides his horse up the ridge-line to update him on the battle.

"My lord..we've lost many. The P'taul have taken most of our land! Those who remain have retreated to find weapons. You must join us in battle! Lead your people, we are lost!"

A wide eyed Demur clenches his fists angrily. He rigidly approaches his bleeding commander while he dismounts his horse. Once he's close enough, he throws a trinity of twine laced stones. It's a device normally used in a hunt to bind a prey's feet together.

The contraption whirls in a triangle, sailing through the air until it hits his commander square in his neck. The stones wrap around his throat. They tighten with each pass and pummel his jaw and head once they lock into place, closing his windpipe with the twine.

The man drops to his knees, clutching his throat in a feeble attempt to free the trap. He's choking for air, astonished as Demur runs his fingers through his hair.

"You have little faith. I am Father's chosen."

Demur holds the man's forehead, pushing him over backwards. He struggles to get up, but Demur is quickly on top of him. He fights until Demur digs his knee into the warrior's throat.

"Soon you will meet him yourself, brother. I will save our people before the star falls. You will see."

Demur rests down on the man, fully pinning him to the ground. He covers the flailing man's eyes. His punching and kicking have no effect on Demur, who calmly smothers him.

Demur's attention is focused across the valley where a lone rider, Jolon, heads toward the trapped P'tauli women.