

BOOK THREE OF THE WOLF CHRONICLES

SPIRIT OF THE WOLVES

DOROTHY HEARST

A NOVEL



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THE WOLF CHRONICLES



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OF THE
WOLVES

DOROTHY HEARST



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*Dedicated to my sweet, stubborn Emmi, and to wolves, dogs, and all who strive to make a world
worthy of them*

I crouched at the edge of Fallen Tree Gathering Place, a freshly caught rabbit warm and limp in my jaws, my haunches trembling. The Swift River wolves were preparing for morning hunt, touching noses and speaking quietly to one another. Dawn light filtered through the branches of two tall oaks that stood guard at the clearing's edge, dappling the Fallen Spruce that divided my pack's largest gathering place.

No, not my pack. I was no longer a Swift River wolf and Fallen Tree was no longer my home. It was the place where I had learned what it was to be wolf, to run the hunt and howl the song of the pack, but I no longer knew if I was welcome there. I had chosen my task over my family, and my former packmates were as likely to chase me away as they were to greet me. I was tempted to turn tail and run, but in the last hours I'd seen my packmate murdered, survived a fight with a human who had sliced open my haunch and climbed painfully out of a pit I'd thought inescapable. I wouldn't turn coward now and forsake the wolves who'd raised me. I had just one chance to get them to listen to me, and if I could not, they would die.

A soft grunt drew my attention to a patch of moss just outside the gathering place and to the human girl asleep upon it. TaLi, whom I loved as much as I would my own pup. Her legs were drawn up to her chin, and she shivered under the preyskin clothing that humans wore to keep warm. When I was four moons old, I had pulled her from the hungry waters of the Swift River, saving her life and breaking one of the most sacred rules of wolfkind. Our legends—and the unforgiving Greatwolves who ruled over us—forbade the wolves of the Wide Valley from having any contact with the humans, and I should have left TaLi to die. I could not do so, for the moment I first looked into her dark eyes and smelled her smoky scent, I knew I could never leave her.

A dark gray wolf sat guard next to the girl, his ears pricked and his silvery eyes alert. Ázzuen was my best friend and the smartest wolf I knew. He was also the wolf I trusted most in the world. TaLi would be as safe with him as with me.

The girl stirred, and her long dark headfur fell away from her face, revealing the jagged cut on her forehead. At the sight of the wound, a sudden fierce anger rose up in me. TaLi was mine to protect, but I hadn't been able to stop the human male DavRia from hurting her when he injured me. He had wanted TaLi for his mate, and when she refused him, he'd gone crazy. He'd killed my packmate Trevegg and TaLi's grandmother and wounded me. I stifled my growl. I would get TaLi to safety, but I couldn't let my birthpack die to do so.

Lowering my ears and tail as I would to greet wolves I didn't know, I turned back to the gathering place and walked slowly across the mossy ground. I set the rabbit down and whuffed to announce my presence. Minn, a thin, weasel-faced wolf, saw me first. He was a year older than I and had never liked me, which didn't bother me much; I never liked him either. Werrna, Swift River's warrior secondwolf, saw me next. Ruuq and Rissa, the pack's leaderwolves, followed her gaze. Ruuqo frowned, but Rissa opened

her mouth in a wide grin. Her scent of spruce and oak brought with it memories of my first hunt, of running through the territories with my pack, and of warm milk and a safe den.

“Kaala!” she said, eyeing the rabbit. “You don’t have to bring gifts to Swift River. You’re always welcome here.” She lowered her white-furred head in greeting. “Have you decided to stay with us after all?” The hope I heard in her voice made my throat tighten. She wanted me to stay with the pack. I could not do so.

“I came to tell you something,” I said.

“We already know about Trevegg,” Ruuqo growled. “And the old woman.”

“Something else,” I said. I wanted to meet Rissa’s gaze to let her know how important my message was, but a wolf not yet a year old couldn’t just stare into the eyes of her leaderwolf. I looked over her left shoulder instead. “You have to come with me outside the valley.”

Because outside the valley was where we needed to be, and quickly. When I defied my pack and the Greatwolves to be with TaLi, I discovered that our legends were lies, and I learned the true Promise of the Wide Valley wolves: we were to be guardians of the humans and to watch over them for all time. For, left on their own, the humans thought of themselves as different from all other creatures and would destroy the very forests they depended upon to survive. It was up to us to prevent this. In the time before time, a wolf named Indru had promised the Ancients that we would convince the humans to accept us into their packs and thus embrace the world around them. The Greatwolves had lied because they wanted to keep power over the humans for themselves.

When I discovered their deception, responsibility for the Promise fell to me. I had failed and if I could not succeed soon, the Greatwolves would kill me and all those I loved. If the humans didn’t do so first.

“Why would we leave our home?” Ruuqo’s dark-rimmed eyes narrowed as he glowered down at me. He could still make me feel like I was a smallpup when he looked at me that way. I took a breath and then another.

I had one last chance to keep peace between wolves and humans. Ruuqo had chased my mother from the valley when I was just out of the den. Less than a moon ago, my mother had sent a wolf to me with a message: I was to meet her outside the valley, at a rock as large as a hill, and I must do so for the sake of all wolfkind. I was not to tell Ruuqo or Rissa. The only reason I could think of that she would send such a message was because she had the answer to the Promise. Until I had that answer, the Swift River wolves were not safe.

“DavRian’s blaming us for killing the old woman,” I said to Ruuqo. “He’s telling the other humans that all wolves are vicious, and that they have to get rid of us before we slaughter them. They didn’t believe TaLi when she told them it was a lie. They’re coming for us.”

Ruuqo growled and Rissa looked stunned. I don’t know what I expected. Perhaps that they would have a plan for how to get out of the valley, or that they would tell me what to do, but all of them just looked at me as if I should have the answer. As if I were the adult and they the youngwolves.

“The Greatwolves will protect us from the humans,” Rissa said at last. “They said that would.”

Milsindra, the Greatwolf who most wanted me dead, had told her that. It was one of her many lies.

"They won't," I said. "If the humans start murdering wolves, the Greatwolves will save us. We've failed in the Promise and they'll kill us. They want to kill every wolf who shares my blood." Rissa was my mother's sister, and every wolf in Swift River was related to me.

"They said we would be safe," Rissa insisted. "And they told us you could leave the valley unharmed."

"They're lying. Like they always do. You're in danger."

"We can protect ourselves," Ruuqo said. "We'll fight the humans if they come for us. Promise or no. If they can even find us with their weak noses and useless ears." He snickered. "We're staying."

"You shouldn't go either." Werrna glared down at me. "Rissa will have pups in a little over a moon, and we'll need help feeding them."

It was even more reason to leave. Pups would make them that much more vulnerable.

I tried once more. "The Greatwolves won't help you. They'll kill you."

Ruuqo picked up the rabbit in his mouth and carried it away.

One by one, the others turned away from me. Minn began to dig a hole next to the small hill the pack used as a lookout. Rissa and Ruuqo spoke quietly to one another. Once Werrna continued to watch me reproachfully. A few moments later, Ruuqo barked sharply and all four of them darted from the clearing and to the hunt. I backed away and out of the gathering place, the taste of failure once again bitter on my tongue.



Ázzuen was waiting for me by the moss patch, still guarding the sleeping TaLi. When he saw me, he stood, stretched out his long back, and trotted to me. He had shed his winter fur, and his lighter spring pelt showed a lean wolf, almost fully grown.

He touched his nose to my face. His scent of juniper and Swift River wolf eased the tense muscles between my eyes.

"They won't come?"

"No. They think the Greatwolves will protect them."

He cocked his head to one side. "Most wolves won't listen to the truth if they don't like what they hear," he said.

"They'll die if they stay."

"Not if we get to your mother in time," he said. "She'll tell us what we need to do to keep the Promise and they'll be fine. We can leave the valley now, find Neesa, and get back before the humans or Greatwolves do anything."

He looked toward the eastern mountains at the valley's edge, his tail wagging. "We can do it," he said. Ázzuen's human, BreLan, had left the valley almost half a moon before, and Ázzuen longed for him.

Every wolf in the valley knew how clever Ázzuen was. If he thought we had a chance, we just might.

My chest ached at the thought that I could be with my mother in a few days' time. I hadn't seen her since I was a newborn pup, and I missed her so much that every time I thought of her I had to hold back a whimper.

Ázzuen started to say something else, then his eyes widened and he woofed a warning.

I caught the scent of spruce and mud and fur and whirled to meet the gaze of the one wolf in the valley I least wanted to see.

Milsindra stalked forward on long legs, her muscles rippling under light brown fur. Dark flecks colored her pale eyes and malice darkened her disposition. She smelled of Greatwolf—a deeper, meatier scent than that of an ordinary wolf—and of spruce. Her scent was marred by an undercurrent of bitterness that I thought must come from her malevolent nature. Like all Greatwolves, she was half again as large as an ordinary wolf. I started to shake, and my mouth went dry. Milsindra believed that I was a danger to wolfkind. She was also in a battle for the leadership of the Wide Valley Greatwolves, and my taking on the Promise was one of the things in her way.

She stood over TaLi, her teeth—twice as long as mine—almost touching the girl's face, her breath ruffling TaLi's headfur. I held my own breath, hoping that TaLi wouldn't awaken to see the jaws of a Greatwolf over her. A moment later, Milsindra's mate Kivdru, a shaggy, dark-furred Greatwolf, strode into the grove, knocked Ázzuen onto his back, and stood atop him. Ázzuen scabbled under Kivdru until the Greatwolf dug his huge paws deep into Ázzuen's belly. Ázzuen went still.

Milsindra smiled, her teeth sharp, her eyes cold, and her message clear. She and Kivdru could kill those I loved best and there was nothing I could do about it.

I raised my chin to her.

"You promised we could leave the valley safely," I said, my heart pounding so hard I could hardly hear my own voice. "You told Ruuqo and Rissa you wouldn't hurt us if we were left."

"And yet you have not gone," Milsindra purred. "You came back here. Your problem, Kaala, is that you cannot decide which pack you belong to, wolf or human. It is one of the things that makes you so dangerous. It is what makes you the drelshik."

Drelshik. It meant cursed wolf. Our legends told of a wolf born to destroy wolfkind. Such a wolf, the legends said, would be of mixed blood, would bear the mark of the crescent moon, and would treat humans as if they were wolf. My mother had mated with a wolf outside the valley and I had a moon-mark of pale fur on my chest. When I found TaLi and led some of my packmates into an alliance with the humans, many wolves came to believe I was this drelshik.

"Or the drelshan," Ázzuen gasped from beneath Kivdru's paws. The legends also said of a mixed-blood wolf, the drelshan, would come to save wolfkind. Half of the Greatwolf council believed I was the drelshik, half the drelshan.

"You will keep your muzzle shut unless I tell you otherwise," Kivdru growled. He lowered his head and took Ázzuen's neck in his jaws.

I hurled myself at Kivdru, hoping the force of my leap would tumble him off Ázzuen. I would have had more luck toppling an oak tree. Kivdru swung his huge head into my side and knocked me to the ground. I landed hard on my wounded haunch, and yelped in pain. At least Kivdru's teeth were no longer at Ázzuen's throat.

TaLi came awake then, roused by the fight. She looked up at Milsindra and gasped, then scooted backward so that her back rested against a tree stump. She held her storied blade out toward the huge wolf, gripping it in both hands. She was one of the few humans who knew of the Greatwolves and of their role in the lives of wolves. If she was afraid of Milsindra and Kivdru, she didn't show it.

"Are you all right, Silvermoon?" It was her name for me, because of the moon mark on my chest.

The humans could not comprehend our speech, or the language of any of the other creatures of the woods, but sometimes I could make TaLi understand me in other ways. I whuffed softly at her to let her know I wasn't hurt. She loosened her hold on the stone and got to her feet, and bowed unsteadily to Milsindra and Kivdru. She had grown so rapidly in the past few moons that her long legs and arms made her awkward.

"Greetings, Lordwolves," she said formally.

Milsindra whuffed a laugh and took a step toward the girl. Then she looked over her shoulder at me and opened her jaws.

"If you hurt any of us, the Greatwolf council will find out," I said desperately. "They said we could go. Zorindru is still leader of the Greatwolves." Zorindru was an ancient Greatwolf who believed that I was the savior, not the destroyer of wolfkind, and had sworn to help us with the Promise.

Milsindra turned away from TaLi. Three long, stalking strides brought her face-to-face with me. She kept walking forward, forcing me back into the trunk of an aspen. I heard Ázzuen growl. When my rump hit the tree's rough bark, Milsindra bent her head toward mine.

"You are disrespectful as well as dangerous, youngwolf. I told you that your involvement with the humans would bring death. You should have stayed away and listened to things to wiser wolves." She pulled her lips back still more. "Though, perhaps it was for the best. Now I can convince the council that that old fool is too age-addled to lead."

"What fool is that, Milsindra?"

The voice was cool, almost friendly. Milsindra startled and swung her head toward the ancient Greatwolf who sat calmly at the edge of the clearing. Zorindru returned her gaze through half-lidded eyes.

Two other Greatwolves settled on either side of the oldwolf, their ears pricked and their haunches tensed as they guarded him. They dipped their heads to me. Jandru and Frandra were the Greatwolves who watched over the Swift River pack, and they had helped me more often than they had harmed me. They also supported Zorindru's rule over the Greatwolves.

Milsindra shoved me hard with her shoulder as she turned to step forward and address Zorindru. Her voice was calm, but her flanks quivered. Zorindru was her leaderwolf, even if she did defy him.

"You were wrong, Zorindru," she said. "A wolf is dead at the spear of a human, and it's this drelshik's fault." She jutted her chin at me. "We need to get rid of her and all who share her tainted, human-loving blood."

Zorindru stood. He had ruled the Greatwolves since long before any wolf I knew was born. He was so gaunt that his spine showed through his ragged fur and he seemed much frailer than I remembered.

He stared at Kivdru, who still stood atop Ázzuen. Kivdru glared back. Zorindru held the younger wolf's gaze so long, I was ready to howl to break the silence. Then the oldwolf lifted his lip. His teeth were worn down, and I wondered if he could still even hunt for himself, but his snarl held enough power to make Kivdru lower his ears and step off Ázzuen, who scrambled to his feet, coughing.

Milsindra stalked over to Zorindru, her haunches still shaking. She was half a head taller than he was, and her muscles showed as clearly through her sleek fur as his bones showed through his. Still, she seemed to fear the ancient wolf. When she spoke, there was entreaty in her voice.

"The humans killed the oldwolf, for no reason at all," she said. "It's only a matter of time before they start hunting wolves throughout the land. Humans and wolves always fight. It's happened over and over."

It was the greatest challenge to fulfilling the Promise. Wolves had to stay with humans to keep them from feeling separate from the world around them, but every time wolves and humans came together, they fought. I was supposed to change that.

"We told the drelshik that she, her pack, and her humans could live if she was able to keep peace between humans and wolves," Milsindra said. "She hasn't done so. The only solution is to get rid of the humans and the wolves who run with them."

"You told us we had three moons," Ázzuen interrupted. "It's only been one moon since we started."

Kivdru leapt for him again, then staggered back as a large, black-feathered shadow dropped from above and slammed into him. The raven spread his wings wide as he landed in front of Ázzuen and stared beadily at Kivdru.

Tlitoo was a young raven, but his head still came up to Ázzuen's chin and his wings were nearly as wide as a wolf is long. That, plus a thick beak and sharp talons, made him a formidable fighter. He had been my friend since I was a smallpup and a staunch ally against the Greatwolves. He was also the Nejakilakin, the raven who could move between the worlds of life and death. He could bring me with him, and could also take me into the minds of others. But I was the only one who knew that.

I took advantage of the distraction he'd caused to check on TaLi. The girl was standing on her tree stump, watching us carefully, her stone blade still clutched in her hand. She was safe, for now.

Tlitoo eyed Kivdru and spread his wings.

*"Gruntwolves think they rule,
But sometimes must be humbled.
Ravens help with that."*

Ravens often spoke in this strange way. I usually found it annoying, but when I saw Kivdru's frustrated expression, I wanted to lick Tlitoo from beak to tail. For some reason I'd never understood, the Greatwolves were wary of ravens. Kivdru stepped back.

"The youngwolf is correct," Zorindru said, inclining his head toward Ázzuen. "There is not yet war between the wolves and humans here." His tawny eyes met mine. "How do you plan to make sure it stays that way, Kaala?"

"I'm going to find my mother—" I began.

Milsindra interrupted. "Your mother who broke the rules of the Wide Valley by whelping you!" She glowered down at me, deliberately turning her back on Zorindru. Her anger seemed to overcome her fear of him. "This oldwolf and the fools who follow him believe that she has the answer to why wolves and humans cannot live side by side, and that her answer will allow us to fulfill the Promise. They believe that she will give the

information only to you, her daughter, the drelshik. I think that humans will fight with us no matter what we do, and that you will only help them destroy us. The council, however, overruled me. They said you may leave the valley to find her.”

Zorindru coughed softly.

“It would appear that you are once again dissatisfied with my leadership, Milsindra, and the decisions the council makes under it,” the ancient Greatwolf said. “Do you wish to challenge me?”

Milsindra swung her head to regard him for a long moment, then looked away, lowering her tail. Zorindru lifted his.

“We will give her until Even Night to do so, Zorindru, that’s all,” Milsindra said.

There were two Even Nights every year, when day was as long as night. The next one was less than a moon away.

Milsindra raised her tail. “If she does not bring us an answer by then, we—and those who follow us—will take the Greatwolf council from you. We will kill the humans and the wolves who consort with them.” She dipped her head to Kivdru, and the two Greatwolves loped out of the clearing. Frandra and Jandru chased after them.

My legs gave out from under me. Now that Milsindra was gone, I could admit to myself how terrified I’d been. Zorindru lowered his nose to mine.

“Milsindra is under control for now, but not for long,” he said. “She is convinced that the only way to save wolfkind is to stop you. There are many on the council who attempted to follow her, and I will not live forever. Find your mother, Kaala, and do so quickly. I can help fend off the humans—and Milsindra and Kivdru—until Even Night. After that, I can make no guarantees.” He dipped his head to me, and slipped into the woods.



I released a long, relieved breath. TaLi exhaled at the same moment. She jumped down from her stump and ran to me. She threw her scrawny arms around my neck, and hugged me hard enough to make me grunt.

Tlitoo gurgled impatiently. “Wolfflet,” he quorked, “if you get into trouble every time I leave you, we will get nothing done. I cannot watch you as if you are newly fledged.” He regarded me with beady eyes, the ruff of feathers around his neck puffed up in annoyance. He spread his wings, revealing a white crescent of feathers on the underside of one of them. “You should not have returned to your old pack. You are not of them anymore.”

“She had to try,” Ázzuen said.

Tlitoo regarded him for a moment, then darted forward, grabbed Ázzuen’s ear, and yanked. When Ázzuen yelped and stumbled away, Tlitoo dove for his nose. He was about to attack Ázzuen’s tail when a pale gray wolf trotted into the clearing.

Marra was Ázzuen’s littermate, a tall, fleet wolf who could outrun any prey in the valley. Her light gray fur was damp and muddy. A human boy ran up to stand beside her. He carried two of the preyskin bundles the humans called packs, one in his arms and one on his back, as well as two of the walking sticks some humans liked to use. His preyskin leg coverings were as damp as Marra’s fur. The two of them must have come from the river. The boy was breathing hard. He fell to his knees and began to wheeze. Marra like

nothing more than to run, and the slow pace of humans—even of the human she loved as much as I loved TaLi—frustrated her.

“Are they coming?” she asked.

“They are too cowardly,” Tlitoo answered. “They will hide here like mice in a burrow.”

TaLi grabbed one of the packs MikLan had brought. Like us, TaLi had to leave the valley. Her grandmother had been training the girl to take over her role as krianan, a spiritual leader, of their village. The krianans were tasked with keeping the other humans in balance with the natural world, but many humans in the Wide Valley no longer listened to them. TaLi’s grandmother had made TaLi promise to reach the krianans outside the valley to tell them what was happening here. BreLan, the boy both TaLi and Ázzuen loved, was already there, waiting for her. Before I could get to my mother, I was determined to see TaLi safely there. I licked her hand, and tasted sweat and dirt.

“Now can we go, wolflet?” Tlitoo quorked. “We do not have time to dawdle.”

I couldn’t argue with that. We had less than a moon to find my mother and return to the Wide Valley with a way to fulfill the Promise. I tried not to think of what might happen to Rissa and the rest of Swift River in our absence. I couldn’t help them by staying in the Wide Valley.

I took a deep breath. I was only ten moons old. For most of my life, older wolves had made decisions and led the way. That time was past. TaLi shifted her pack on her shoulders. Ázzuen and Marra watched me expectantly.

I yipped once, and led my packmates from the aspen grove. We had no time to waste.

As we neared the banks of the river that marked the edge of Swift River lands, Ázzuen, Marra, and I kept the humans between us. The riverbank was exposed and a good place for an ambush. But the only one waiting for us there was a friend, a tall, broad-chested wolf with fur the color of summer grass.

“So Ruuqo and Rissa wouldn’t come?” Pell didn’t bother to hide his disdain. He was larger than the wolves of Swift River and well-muscled. At nearly three years old, he was supposed to be the next leaderwolf of the Stone Peak pack, a rival to Swift River. Instead, he had chosen to come with us, though he had no fondness for humans. Marra said it was because he wanted me for his mate. I thought he just craved adventure, as many youngwolves did. I was glad to have such a strong wolf with us on our journey.

“No,” I said. “They think the Greatwolves will protect them.”

I told Pell and Marra what had happened with Milsindra in the aspen grove. I was afraid that Pell would say something contemptuous about my birthpack. He’d always thought them weak. Instead, he licked the top of my head and nipped me lightly on the ear.

“You already knew that Milsindra wanted to kill you, Kaala,” he said. “We just have to get to your mother quickly.”

Marra yipped in agreement and splashed into the river. Ázzuen and Pell charged in after her and began to paddle across. MikLan waded in until he was up to his chest, then swam.

I looked at TaLi in concern. She couldn’t swim. She had grown taller since I’d found her clinging to a rock in the rain-swollen river and she’d crossed the river many times since. Still, it made me nervous every time she did so. She was tired and injured, weaker than I’d seen her in a long time. The river was as wide across as thirty wolves standing nose to tail, and fast-moving after the end of winter rains. I wished I was strong enough to carry her across.

“I’ll be fine, Silvermoon,” she said.

She stepped onto a rock in the river and then leapt to another. I swam as close to her as I could. To my relief, Ázzuen, who had reached the far side of the river, waded back in so that he was standing at the spot right before it got too deep for a wolf of his size to do so. The water pulled at his chest, but he kept his footing. I remembered him as a smallpup, struggling the first time we crossed the river. He had been the weakest wolf in the Swift River pack. Now he stood as strong and steady as the most dominant youngwolf.

When Pell saw Ázzuen standing in the river, he looked at me and then splashed in too. TaLi was more than halfway across.

“I don’t need your help,” Ázzuen said to him.

Pell ignored him. He was taller than Ázzuen and could wade a full wolflength farther into the river. Ázzuen, trying to follow him, lost his footing and fell into the water.

TaLi, watching them, fell, too, just before she reached a rock two leaps away from the riverbank. She splashed face-first into the water and, for a terrifying moment, disappeared. Ázzuen, Pell, and I all lunged for her. Right as Ázzuen and Pell reached her, she sat up in what I could now see was a shallow part of the river. Unable to halt the momentum, Pell and Ázzuen crashed into her and she almost went under again. She shoved both of them away, struggled to her feet, and staggered toward the riverbank. Ázzuen took the preyskin clothing the humans called a *tunic* in his jaws and tried to pull her to shore. She fell once more. Crawling on her hands and knees, she reached the riverbank just as Ázzuen and I did.

“Please don’t help me across the river again,” she said to Ázzuen and Pell, wringing out the dried preyskins she wore as clothing. She was beginning to smell like wet deer.

I pressed against TaLi to try to warm her, only to realize that my fur was as wet as her clothing.

Adjusting her pack on her back, TaLi glared at all of us and stomped into the woods.



It was darkfall when we reached the low hills that abutted the eastern mountains at the valley’s edge. While the humans built a small fire and laid out preyskins to sleep on, I ranged up the nearest hill. It would take the humans at least half the next day to climb it, and I wanted to see what awaited us. Ázzuen, Marra, and Pell explored other paths, looking for the best way up the hill. I soon found a trail that rose gently enough to make for easy walking. Faded scents of humans and the more recent aroma of deer told me who had used the path before us. The human scent was old enough that it didn’t concern me. Satisfied, I trotted back to our humans.

They had allowed their fire to go out. I was glad. Smoke in the night would have made it easier for anyone—human or wolf—to track us. MikLan was curled up around both packs as if guarding them. I looked for TaLi next to him. She wasn’t there.

I lowered my nose to track her, following her trail away from the embers of the humans’ fire to a birch grove nearby. Her scent was there, along with one I knew all too well.

Churned earth and human footprints scrambled one upon the other beneath my paws. One of TaLi’s foot-coverings, her *boots*, as the humans called them, lay crumpled in the dirt. The human male DavRian’s scent of sweat and dream-sage was all over it. My lips pulled back from my teeth in a snarl as I barked sharply three times to call my packmates.

DavRian had taken her. She was gone.



I couldn’t believe I’d been so careless. I shouldn’t have left her unguarded. DavRian had stolen her once before, after striking her so hard she’d fallen unconscious. He was violent and dangerous and TaLi was alone with him. Panic weakened my legs. TaLi had blunt teeth and weak jaws and was almost as helpless as a pup. I forced myself to move on unsteady legs. I’d sooner place my own throat in Milsindra’s jaws than leave TaLi with DavRian.

Deep in the birch forest, I heard a shout and then a scuffle. I ran toward the sound.

~~DavRian had left a trail like a rampaging elkryn and I easily followed the broken branches and trampled earth he'd left behind.~~ In a small clearing among the birches and spruce, I caught up with him, then slowed so I could approach unseen.

DavRian knelt, gripping TaLi and clamping his hand over her mouth. I crouched down, forcing myself to control my fury at DavRian and my fear for TaLi and trying to think of the best attack. Then something in DavRian's expression caught my attention. I expected to see anger or hatred in his face, but he looked down at TaLi with tenderness. DavRian had wanted TaLi enough to leave his own village to try to win her. He had been devastated when she'd chosen BreLan over him. I knew that a wolf without a pack could act strangely, could feel so alone in the world that he did foolish things, and DavRian was a lonely human. He was whispering something to TaLi, and it looked like he was telling her his deepest secrets. For a moment, I pitied him. I had been rejected by my pack when I was a smallpup and knew what it was like to be shunned by those I wanted most to care about me. Then I saw the bruises and cuts on TaLi's face and the fear and fury in her eyes, and I snarled. DavRian was alone because he was malicious and weak, not the other way around. I watched him, trying to decide how to free TaLi from his grasp.

He had set his sharpstick within grabbing distance. It was made of alder wood, and looked like a long, thin branch. Unlike an ordinary branch, it was almost completely straight and smooth. On the end of it was one of the stone blades that the humans could make as sharp as any fang. The humans called them *spears* and they were among the favorite hunting and fighting tools. At his waist DavRian had another blade, this one fastened to a smaller piece of wood. He must have thought I was foolish enough to run after him without making sure it was safe to do so. He'd told other humans over and over that we wolves were lesser creatures and that we were savage and stupid. It was my good luck that he actually believed it.

Ázzuen padded up behind me. He touched his nose to my face. His familiar scent of Swift River Pack, moist earth, and juniper calmed me. I found myself wanting to return his touch by curling up beside him and letting our breath mingle in sleep. I shook myself, wondering how I could think of resting while TaLi was in trouble.

"You know it's a trap?" he whispered.

I dipped my head in acknowledgment.

"Like we hunted the aurochs," he said, then circled around so he was crouching on the other side of the two humans, hidden by thick grouse bushes. DavRian was shifting uneasily from knee to knee, turning his head sharply back and forth as he waited for me. Ázzuen and I didn't even have to look at each other. When we had killed an auroch—huge, evil-tempered beast—just a few days before, we had brought it down by angering and then pouncing. Considering DavRian's disposition, Ázzuen must have figured it should work just as well with him.

Ázzuen rustled the leaves of the bush where he hid. DavRian stood and, still clutching TaLi, whirled toward the sound. I stalked up behind the human and took the edge of his tunic in my teeth and pulled. He squealed like a forest pig and spun back around. TaLi stomped hard on his foot and drove her elbow into his stomach just as Ázzuen darted from his hiding place to jump at DavRian. DavRian released TaLi and dropped his

sharpstick. TaLi fell to her hands and knees, snatched up DavRian's sharpstick, and darted into the woods. Ázzuen butted DavRian once more and I slammed into the back of his legs, toppling him to the ground.

Ázzuen bolted into the woods after TaLi, but I stood over DavRian. My anger drew my lips back from my teeth and made my fur stand up along my spine. Saliva dripped onto his chest. He had killed TaLi's grandmother and would have killed me and all of my packmates. He'd hurt TaLi. And I knew he'd come after us; he'd try to steal TaLi from me again.

Never kill a human unprovoked. It was one of the most important parts of the Promise. If wolves killed humans, then the humans would attack us more often than they already did, so we never harmed them unless it was in defense of our lives. Some creatures break promises as easily as a raven snaps a twig. We do not, for trust is everything in a wolf pack.

I stepped away from DavRian.

"Silvermoon!" TaLi called. "Come on!"

I snarled one more time at DavRian and ran to find TaLi. I caught up with her as she sloped, with Ázzuen at her side, through the woods and back toward the humans' resting spot. When we reached MikLan, I fetched TaLi's foot-covering for her.

MikLan scrambled to his feet.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"DavRian found us," TaLi answered, taking the boot from me. I expected her to be frightened, but she just sounded determined. I nosed her hand, wondering if she was a right. She smiled down at me, her eyes fierce in the moonlight.

"I knew he would," she said, "so I let him take me." She balanced on one foot and pulled on the boot. "When he asked where we were going, I lied. I told him we were going to the Rellin village in the southern hills."

It was a smart thing to do, and brave, but I hated it when TaLi took risks. I pawed her leg.

She grinned. "By the time he figures out that's not where I went, he won't be able to follow our trail." MikLan frowned at her. He was worried, too.

"I do know what I'm doing," she said to us. I had protected TaLi since the first day I met her, and I couldn't help but think of her as a pup. But when I looked at the firm set of her jaw, I knew I could no more keep her from facing danger than I could keep Ázzuen or Marra from hunting vicious prey.

She squatted next to the preyskin she had slept upon and began gathering the humans' belongings into their packs.

"Let's move camp," she said.

I sat next to her as she worked, looking out beyond the clearing and listening for the sound of DavRian's footsteps, guarding her as best I could against the darkness of the night.

The humans found a new sleeping place an hour's walk away, between three tall rocks that would both shelter them from the rising wind and hide them from DavRian. I was glad, not for the first time, that humans had such weak noses. He wouldn't be able to find us by scent.

With the wind came the beginnings of a rainstorm. MikLan took a large rolled-up elkskin from his pack and TaLi took one from hers. The humans had found a way to keep the skins from decaying and to make them as supple and strong as if they were still on a living beast. They unrolled the skins, then shoved their walking sticks into holes they dug in the soft dirt. Ázzuen watched, his ears pricked in interest. The humans and their tools held an endless fascination for him. TaLi and MikLan used their clever hands to secure the skins to the walking sticks, then tied the two together with strips of dried deerskin woven with reeds to form a small shelter. Ázzuen sniffed along the bottom of it. Tlitoo followed behind him, quorking deep in his throat. When the humans turned away, he pecked hard at the bottom of one of the walking sticks so that the skins fell down around Ázzuen. Tlitoo cackled.

"Stop that!" MikLan said. He scowled at Ázzuen, pushing the skins away. The rain had flattened the boy's headfur, making him look smaller than usual. There was no way for Ázzuen to tell MikLan that it was the raven who had made the shelter collapse. Tlitoo chuckled, pleased with himself, and strode a few paces away.

"If you could talk to your humans, you could tell them what happened," he said. "It's too bad you never learned." TaLi's grandmother was the only human I'd ever met who could understand us.

Ázzuen snapped at the raven. Tlitoo leapt just out of reach, quorking happily.

The humans shoved the walking sticks back into the ground and crawled into the clever shelter. The skins repelled the rain, and, though I was impatient to leave the valley, I was also exhausted, and the humans' cozy den tempted me.

Pell jumped up onto one of the rocks. I couldn't help but notice the strong muscles moving under his wet fur.

"I'll keep watch, Kaala," he said. "You need to rest." He'd chosen a rock as far from the human shelter as he could get. Pell didn't trust humans, and he'd once told me he had no desire to hunt with them. As we'd walked, I'd caught him watching MikLan suspiciously more than once, and he startled easily when he was around them.

Ázzuen claimed another rock and Marra the third. I wanted to keep watch with them, but it had been two frenzied, panicked days of running and fighting for my life since I'd had a good rest. My eyes were closing as I stood.

MikLan sat cross-legged at the shelter's entrance, his spear across his lap, his face serious. He was younger than TaLi. It was hard to trust him to watch over us, but he wanted to take on adult responsibilities, just like I did, and I admired him for it. As he stumbled toward the shelter, he smiled at me. MikLan had always been easy with us.

even more so than TaLi. From the first time we met him, he had treated us just as he would his own kind. Marra thought that it was because he was still fully a child. I hope he wouldn't lose that easy trust now that he was leaving childhood behind.

I left my packmates on guard and crept into the shelter. TaLi was already asleep, and settled down next to her. I listened to her even breathing and waited for sleep to come. But as tired as I was, my eyes would not stay closed. I wriggled closer to TaLi. I needed rest, but there was something I needed more.

"Tlitoo!" I whispered. He didn't answer. I called again, a little louder. I was about to call a third time, when he stalked into the shelter.

"I am not an owl, wolf. I am not a bat. I have been up too much of this night already."

"I want to see what she's dreaming," I said.

He clacked his beak in annoyance. I lowered my ears.

"All right, wolfling," he grumbled. "If you look at me like a hungry pup, I have no choice. But next time you are most in need of a nap, I will wake you up."

Still grumbling, he pushed in between me and the sleeping girl. I had told no one, not even Ázzuen, what Tlitoo and I could do together. I didn't want my friends to know how different I really was.

Tlitoo and I had gone into the minds of Greatwolf and ordinary wolf alike, but it was entering TaLi's thoughts that most fascinated me. I wanted more than anything to be able to talk to her. When Tlitoo took me into TaLi's mind, I felt as close to her as to another wolf, and I craved that closeness now.

Tlitoo quorked softly and lay against me, so that he was touching both me and the girl. He needed contact with both of us to make the journey.

I readied myself for the lack of sound and smell that always accompanied me into the mind of another, and for the sudden feeling of falling that still made me gasp. I couldn't prepare for the confusion and dizziness that followed me into TaLi's mind. Entering into the thoughts of another wolf was less jolting. The strangeness of the way humans saw their world—through vibrant colors and soft edges—was especially disorienting.

I waited until my nausea receded, then sank into TaLi's thoughts.

I saw the old woman's face and cringed away, remembering how I'd helped cause her death. Then I took a deep breath. If this day in the old woman's shelter was important enough for TaLi to dream of it, I could have the courage to see it. I allowed myself to relax into her thoughts.



TaLi knew that her grandmother would not be with her much longer. The old woman had told her that her lungs had weakened, that she would not live out another winter, and that TaLi would have to be ready to take over as krianan.

"You have the wolves," NiaLi said. "You are the first to run with them in many years. That will help you." TaLi looked over her shoulder. A young wolf slept heavily against the mud-rock wall of the shelter, snoring a little and moving her paws in her sleep.

TaLi walked over to the wolf and sat beside her.

"I can't talk to her," TaLi said. "Not the way you do." She had spoken to the animals when she was little. She'd talked to rabbits and ravens who told her she smelled bad, and even to roars and lions. She had understood the giant wolves her grandmother had taken her to see when she st

stumbled on her feet like a colt. But now she could not. Often she thought she saw meaning in Silvermoon's eyes, but she could never be sure.

"You will have to find another way," NiaLi said.

TaLi lay down next to the wolf and inhaled the rich forest smell of her. When she was four her grandmother had begun training her to become the next krianan for the village, and from then on she had been alone. So many of the village did not want the krianans telling them what to do and what they must and must not hunt. They laughed when TaLi told them they were just as much a part of the forests as the animals they hunted and the plants they ate, and they had shunned her. She'd felt as if she no longer had a family.

Until the day she had fallen in the river.

She had struggled for life, but part of her had wondered what would happen if she let herself float down the river and over the distant falls. When the wolf splashed into the water and swam toward her, she thought it must be coming to kill her, for she'd been told since she could walk that wolves lived to kill humans. But the wolf bobbed near her and TaLi grabbed its fur. It swam with her to shore, saving her life.

Then it stood over her, panting, and she could see huge teeth. She waited for it to kill her then but it did not. It helped her home.

She rested her back against the warmth of the wolf and looked up at her grandmother.

"They might not let me be krianan," she said.

"I know, child," her grandmother said. "If they do not, you must leave the valley. You are a krianan whether they accept you as one or not. You must find the krianans who live in the forests surrounding the village of Kaar. They know that we must be part of the natural world. They know that if those like DavRian prevail we are all lost, and they are fighting for our cause. You must go to them and help them. You and your wolves."

TaLi stared at the old woman. It was enough that she was supposed to convince her own village to keep the natural way. She couldn't possibly do so among strangers.

"You must," the old woman said, as if she could read TaLi's thoughts. "What happens in Kaar will influence what happens throughout much of the land. They are a village larger than any you have ever seen, and they are deciding whether to go the way of the krianans or the way of those who believe that humankind must rule all other creatures. I am too old to make the journey and I trust no one else. It must be you."

"What if the wolves won't come with me?"

"It is their task, too." The old woman's voice grew sharp. "You have not been listening. The wolves and the krianans share this task. Your wolves are discovering it, they have told me so. If you can't find a way to talk to them, you will have to find other ways to keep your tasks aligned."

The old woman struggled to her feet and limped toward TaLi.

"You have the strength to do whatever you choose. You and your wolves. It is your duty, and you know you can do it."

"I will," TaLi whispered.

The old woman looked down at the girl and the wolf, and an expression so complex passed over her face that TaLi could not catch exactly what it was.

"Her name is Kaala, you know," NiaLi said, smiling down at the snoring wolf. "And her friends are Ázzuen and Marra. You are all lucky to have found one another." She rose slowly and returned to her seat by the fire, wincing as she sat and pulled her furs around her.

TaLi buried her face in the wolf's thick fur. "I love you, Silvermoon. Kaala." She whispered the words she had never said aloud to anyone, not even BreLan. "I can do this if you help me."

Each beat of the wolf's strong heart, each steady breath it took, relaxed her and at the same time gave her strength. She didn't know when she fell asleep, but when she awoke the wolf was gone and her face was wet and sticky. She smiled. Silvermoon—Kaala—always licked her when she left. TaLi stood, kissed her sleeping grandmother on the cheek, and slipped out into the cool morning air.



"Wake up, wolfling," Tlitoo rasped. "Daylight comes."

I blinked up into Tlitoo's beady gaze and forced myself the rest of the way awake. Going into the mind of another creature always made me tired, but I wanted to howl with exhilaration. I had learned something important from my journey into TaLi's memory: our tasks were one and the same.

I should have known as much, for the krianans were responsible for keeping other humans in touch with the Balance. The Balance was what kept the world whole. Every creature strove to live, and to have as much food and territory as it possibly could. But if one creature grew too strong or took too much, the Balance would collapse and many creatures would die. The humans upset the Balance, which is why the Promise came to be. The human krianans reminded their people of their place in the world.

I remembered that day in NiaLi's shelter. I'd arrived weary from a failed hunt and had paid no attention to what the old woman said to the girl. Now that I had, it made my heart race. I already knew that both wolves and krianans were sworn to keep the humans in touch with the natural world, and I knew that TaLi had to leave the valley. Now I knew that her task and mine were the same and that the krianans she was looking for might be able to help us achieve it.

I also saw something TaLi had not. She had not understood the expression on the old woman's face, but I did. The humans relied so much on their words that they were not skilled at reading expressions as we were, even among their own kind. The old woman's face when she looked at us was full of fear and worry. But there was more. There was hope. The old woman was not naive. If she had hope, then so did I.

I licked TaLi's face until she awoke. She wiped her face with the back of her hand.

"That's disgusting, Silvermoon," she said. "Grandmother said your name is Kaala."

I licked her again, from chin to forehead. Then I stood and went to the opening of the shelter to let TaLi know it was time to go. When she blinked sleepily at me, I leaned toward her, tongue out.

"All right!" She held up her hands in front of her face. "I'm awake."

She got to her feet and pushed her way out of the preyskin shelter. MikLan had fallen asleep, but my packmates were still on guard. I followed TaLi as she disappeared behind the rock. The scent of slightly bitter spruce made my nose twitch.

"You don't have to watch me, Kaala," she said as she squatted behind the rock. Yes, she did. I couldn't lose track of her again.

Leaves crackled behind me and I turned, expecting to see Ázzuen or Marra. Instead I saw a flash of gray fur disappearing through the bush.

"Did you see that?" Ázzuen asked, his eyes wide as he leapt down from his watch spot.

above me.

~~I lowered my nose to the ground, following the scent of spruce, dry and sharp with a bitter undertone.~~

Ázzuen was the one who found the paw print, clearly defined in the mud. Just one but so distinct I couldn't believe it hadn't been left deliberately. I placed my own paw next to it. It was half the size.

"Greatwolf," Ázzuen said.

Not just any Greatwolf, I realized, burying my nose in the print. It was Milsindra. She hadn't even tried to hide her scent as the Greatwolves could. She was following us and she wanted me to know it.

The fur on my back prickled. I didn't know what Milsindra was up to, but I knew her well enough to know that it wouldn't be good. She'd been forced to let me leave the valley, but I knew she thought that doing so was a mistake. And I knew, as certainly as I knew the moon would rise, that she would do anything she could to make me fail.

I stood atop the mountain pass that would lead us from the Wide Valley and looked back at what had been my home. I could see the long, snaking path of the Swift River and the outline of Wolf Killer Hill, but everything else looked small and unfamiliar in the afternoon light, as if the Wide Valley were already a strange place to me. Ázzuen looked back, too, but Marra and Pell gazed only forward. Tlitoo spiraled overhead, dipping and soaring on the updrafts. Another raven flew beside him. I recognized Jlela, a female raven who often flew with him.

Next to us, TaLi and MikLan gasped for breath. Humans, even young ones, move more slowly than we did. Though I had not caught Milsindra's scent again, I kept imagining that I could feel her hot breath on my back, and Even Night was not much more than three-quarters of a moon away. We'd kept the humans moving quickly, tugging on their preyskin clothing when they slowed and nudging them with cold noses when they rested too long. Still, it had taken us a full day and half of another to reach the high pass that would lead us to the lands beyond the valley.

I'd thought the Wide Valley was vast. Now I could see how small it really was. The land before us, grasslands mixed with forest, stretched so far that I couldn't see the end of it. Large hills covered with dry, scrubby grass rose to our right, and to our left stood a forest of pines, cypress, and spruce. My stomach rumbled. That much land would hold enough prey for ten packs. It had been a long time since I'd eaten my fill.

Just beyond a copse of cypress stood a rock the size of a hill. It had to be the place where I was to meet my mother, but the vastness of the land disoriented me, and I couldn't judge how far away the rock was. I didn't even know if she'd be there yet. It was still over a moon until I was supposed to meet her and she was hiding from Greatwolves. Yet my breath caught. For the first time since I was a smallpup, it seemed possible that I might really see my mother again. I remembered the scent of her milk, and the warmth of her belly, and most of all the sense of feeling safe and protected.

When you are grown and accepted into the pack, you must come find me, she had told me before Ruuqo chased her away, and I had never forgotten it. I couldn't believe that in a little as a day I could be with her.

TaLi's hoarse voice shook me from my thoughts. "We have to find a place where two fallen pines cross over one another at a stream," she said to MikLan. Both she and the boy were swaying on their feet as they gazed across the grasslands. Dark clouds drifted over the plains, promising more rain.

TaLi clutched a piece of deerskin. She looked at it and then toward the lake. "We go as far as that rock, then follow the map to the Crossed Pines."

Humans were limited to using their eyes to find places they'd never been. Their *map*, I guessed, was another clever way they'd found to compensate for their weak senses.

We made our way down the mountain and to a small hill below. The rain found us then. It had taken the humans hours to walk down the mountain, and it was nearing

dark. It was time for them to rest.

~~They set up their shelter beside a large boulder. I had hunted many times in the rain~~ and run across Swift River lands in a thunderstorm, but I preferred being dry. Ázzuen, Marra, and I crowded into the shelter. Pell, still suspicious of the humans, waited outside in the rain. TaLi and MikLan took firemeat out of one of their sacks. I knew I should let them save their food, but I was so hungry that I couldn't help whining a little. Firemeat was even better than ordinary food. It was rich and chewy, tasting of the smoke of the humans' fires, and a mouthful of it was as satisfying as twice as much ordinary meat. Ázzuen and Marra were no better than I was. They watched the humans and their food unblinkingly. TaLi smiled and gave me a chunk of her firemeat and handed some to Ázzuen. MikLan did the same for Marra. Guiltily, I gulped down my share.

"We'll have to get more food soon," TaLi said, as she watched their supplies go down our throats.

That, at least, was something we could help with. The two young humans talked for a while, then lay down to sleep, curled up on a preyskin they had spread upon the ground.

We waited until they were deep within their dreams, then Ázzuen, Marra, and I crawled from the shelter. The rain had stopped, leaving behind a night lit by a sliver of moon.

When Pell saw us, he bent his forelegs and lifted his rump high.

"I'm hungry," he said.

We had been running—eating what bits of food we could find and bolting what scraps the humans could spare for us—ever since we'd left Fallen Tree three nights before. The hunt was just what we all needed. I looked back to where the humans were sleeping.

"We can't leave them alone," I said.

"We will watch your humans." Tlitoo bobbed in front of the shelter. Jlela perched atop it. "And we have found their Crossed Pines. They are just beyond the place where the spruce trees give way to pine."

"You can't watch the humans. You have to sleep," I said. Ravens, like humans, sleep during the night.

"We will wake if anything comes near," Jlela said, settling her wings and hunching her head down between them.

"It is very hard to sneak up on a raven," Tlitoo added, "and neither the Grumpwolf nor the human male are near." Grumpwolf was one of his many names for the Greatwolves. When I still hesitated, he spat a berry at my head.

*"The fur-brained wolflet
Thinks it knows more than ravens.
That will not end well."*

I couldn't help laughing. I dipped my head to the ravens.

"Let's find some prey," I said to my packmates.

Marra yipped in excitement and took the lead. She had an excellent nose, which was especially important in unknown lands. We would have to not only find prey but also stay alert in case we crossed into any wolf territories. In the Wide Valley, we knew where every pack's domain began and ended. Here we would need to be careful.

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