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The Adventure



“Gracie, are you about ready?” My mom’s voice drifted into my bedroom from downstairs.

“I’ll be right there, Mom,” I called back with a sigh. I was sorry I’d agreed to go with her, yet I couldn’t help but look forward to exploring the mountains. I’d wanted to see them since we moved to Nanaimo, but this trip was cutting it too close. Tonight was my first date with Garrett Jenkins and I wanted to have plenty of time to get ready. My room was a mess since I’d already pulled out every piece of clothing I owned, trying to decide what to wear.

Garrett... what can I say? My heart was his the first day I saw him sitting two desks over in English. He was the masculine equivalent of gorgeous and there was something in his voice that made me feel like I already knew him as he sat at his desk, whispering something to his friend, Jack, who was sitting in front of him. Why I felt this, I have no clue, but it was undeniable. I couldn’t help but memorize every detail about him, his blue shirt and jeans and his tall, slender build. The sky blue color of his shirt matched his eyes, which contrasted with his dark brown hair. He’s perfect, at least in my opinion, even though he’s a star athlete and popular in school, unlike me. In spite of his popularity, he seems nice and maybe a little shy, a trait I can totally relate to. When he first started talking to me, my heart was in my throat, but I wanted to know everything about him. I learned he loves the outdoors and being in nature which is totally foreign to this city girl but I think I like it, even though I would’ve liked him regardless of his wilderness skills and looks that would make Cupid blush.

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

I've never felt this way about anyone before... *not ever...* and just being around Garrett makes me so nervous that I can't think, much less eat. This might be a problem since he's taking me for pizza and a movie and I don't want him to think I'm a loser if I don't eat. I already told myself that someday I'll marry him. That thought had absolutely *never* crossed my mind before and it probably shouldn't now, since I'm only sixteen. This will be a problem if things work out. My parents want me to finish college before getting serious with anyone. As far as I'm concerned, that ship sailed the moment I saw him. I just hope he feels the same about me.

My phone buzzed and the ringtone roared to life.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Grace, I was calling to make sure we're still on for tonight."

A shiver raced up my spine at the sound of Garrett's voice. I shut my eyes and took a deep breath, savoring every syllable before answering.

"Yes, absolutely, but I need to warn you. I might be a little late because I promised to go with my mom for a photo shoot in the mountains. I don't know how long it'll take her to finish up since she never seems to hurry, regardless of the circumstances."

"That's fine. Call me if you get delayed, OK?"

"I will. I promise."

"I'll see you at six, then?"

"I wouldn't miss it." I grinned and held the phone over my heart as the call ended before pulling on a pair of jeans and my favorite long sleeved NYU tee shirt. As I stood in front of my full-length mirror, brushing my hair, I thought about how this was going to be an epic day, maybe the best one ever.

"Gracie, you better hurry!" Mom's voice echoed impatiently from below.

"I'll be down in a minute!" It was hard to keep the attitude out of my voice.

I pulled my hair into a messy ponytail, added some lip gloss and a little mascara as a finishing touch before running out the door and down the creaky wooden stairs into the kitchen. By now, I'd shrugged off thoughts of Garrett with some effort, thinking instead about our trip to the mountains. I grabbed a glass and poured some orange juice, sipping it as I leaned on the long granite countertop and stared blankly into the living area as I tried to imagine the mountains. It was sunny and warm for early April, making it a perfect day for such an outing. My mom, Lilly, who's an artist, had planned to photograph some scenic areas as inspiration for some new paintings. Since we'd only recently moved to Canada, today was our first trip into the wilderness.

Mom and my brother, Patrick, were sitting at the small, antique wooden table that's in our breakfast nook. I love this spot because it's surrounded by a bay window.

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

Here, any opportunity to sit and enjoy the sunshine is a treat since the weather's dreary a lot of the time.

Mom glanced up and grinned. She looks just like an older version of me with pale skin, freckles, and long, wavy red hair, but she's a lot more outgoing than I am.

"Honey, are you excited about our trip to the mountains?"

"Absolutely! I can't wait to explore some of the island. The mountains look so gorgeous from here. I can't wait to see them up close."

"You two'll probably get lost. Then what'll you do? You should've waited till Dad and I could come with," Patrick added, shaking his head with a half-smile.

"Well, you could cancel your tee time," Mom suggested before finishing her orange juice.

"Are you crazy? This is the first sunny day in ages and we're not about to miss it."

Daddy and Patrick shared their love of golf and were going to play, after his rounds. My dad, Dr. Michael McKay as he's known to most people, wasn't home, having left for the hospital earlier in the morning. He'd taken a position in Western Canada, moving our family across the continent from New York City to one of the more rural suburbs outside of Nanaimo, on the East Coast of Vancouver Island, British Columbia. He'd ruined Christmas entirely by making us move during the holiday break since he didn't want my brother and me to miss school. It was a real bummer. He said he felt that moving away from the city would give us a slower and safer lifestyle, so he traded our high-rise apartment in Manhattan for the wide-open space of five acres that backed up to forest land, complete with large evergreen trees and a sprawling yellow two-story house.

Except for missing my friends, I was happy he made the move. I often dreamed of living outside the city. Central Park had always been my favorite hangout since it was about the only place where I could sit on the grass and actually see an occasional squirrel. But now, I get to enjoy nature every day. Living here's like having my own personal park or at least it feels that way.

"Don't you want some breakfast?" Mom interrupted my thoughts again, staring at me with a crinkle between her brows.

"No thanks, Mom, this is fine."

"Well, we're finished here and I'm ready to go, so make sure you have everything you need, baby." She paused and looked at my brother. "Patrick, you can clear the table and put the dishes in the dishwasher and I don't want any attitude." When she turned her back, he looked up and leered at her, eyes shooting daggers. Yep, that's my brother.

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

I rolled my eyes as I gulped the rest of the juice before racing back up the stairs in a last minute search for a warm jacket.

“Hey, sis, don’t let a bear get you!” Patrick yelled after me.

Sometimes I think I see the devil in those blue eyes. I love my brother, but Patrick lives to torment me. In spite of his never ending harassment, he’s also protective. It’s OK for him to tease me pitilessly, but nobody else can. I was mortified when he punched a kid back in New York for yelling “I’d rather be dead than red on the head” at me. Of course, he got by with it, he always does. His looks and personality are so different than the rest of us. He has blonde hair, while my dad has black hair and blue eyes. He’s also more of a social creature. He’s everything I’m not, being extroverted, fun loving, and the life of any party. I swear he must be adopted.

I rushed back down the stairs a few minutes later and grabbed my backpack from our overstuffed, brown leather sofa. I waved at Patrick as I flew by, having heard Mom honk from the Range Rover.

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“Are you ready for this?” Mom asked, grinning as I climbed into the passenger seat.

“I’m more than ready. I’ve wanted to see the mountains up close since we moved here.”

“Well, let’s get going! We have to get back in time for your big date.” She shot me a knowing glance and grinned again as she put the SUV in reverse.

I felt the heat rise in my cheeks and I looked away, rolling my eyes. Garrett and my date with him were the last things I wanted to discuss with my mother. Fortunately, we were busy taking in the scenery and talked very little after that as Mom drove northwest from Nanaimo toward the mountains.

I plugged in my earbuds and listened to music as I thought about how my life had changed. I really liked living in Nanaimo. Though it’s small, it’s modern and offers plenty of shopping and restaurants. There are also areas that are quaint, with cute little shops that line some of the streets with their hanging baskets of flowers dangling from antique looking streetlamps. It’s nothing like New York... and the scenery... oh my gosh, it’s awesome, with snowcapped mountains to the northwest and the Strait of Georgia to the east, so we live close to the water and the mountains at the same time. It’s so cool.

Even though it’s great, living so close to nature, I hated going to a new school because I had to endure the inescapable pummeling over my hair color and freckles. Of course, ginger is the new red or at least that’s what I tell everyone. But the ‘dead than red’ comment will echo in my psyche forever.

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

To make matters worse, my new classmates stare and make remarks about my clothes and jewelry. Back in New York, it didn't matter. My mom and I like similar styles since she dresses young. She has a great eye for fashion and loves clothing that's unique with most of it having a somewhat Boho look. I don't want to change the way I dress, so I'll just have to deal with it.

###

We soon turned off the main road, leaving civilization, toward some heavily wooded hiking trails that Mom had talked about. The paved park road was only about a mile long and was lined with huge, towering, old growth evergreens as it snaked along. I gawked in amazement, enthralled by the sheer size of the trees as I felt a tingle of excitement being so close to the majestic giants. A small parking lot at the end of the road was rimmed by various rustic looking wooden park signs that pointed to several nature trails and a picnic area.

"I looked at the map and this trail is supposed to take us to a river. I want to get some shots there before we continue up into the mountains," Mom said as she stepped from the Rover and put her jacket on while gazing at the surrounding scenery.

"That'll be cool. Those trees are huge, aren't they? I've never seen trees that big! It's so different here than New York." I felt a cool breeze brush me as I smelled an undeniable sweetness emanating from the forest.

"I agree. They're amazing. I've never seen anything like them either. I believe this is the trail. Doesn't look like much, does it?" Her brows seemed to furrow with doubt.

"I don't think it's supposed to be a sidewalk. After all, this isn't the city, Mom."

Oh well, it doesn't matter, let's go." She waved her hand as if to shew away the notion and picked up her camera bag from the seat, locking the Rover before heading toward the trail.

As we walked along the path, Mom kept talking, but I was quiet, taking in this strange, beautiful new world. I was awed by the rich emerald hues of the tall evergreens, spruce and fir, and the lush, bright green vegetation of all sorts that lined the trail. It was hardly a trail, being more of a narrow, winding path through the mossy floor of the forest. I noticed a smattering of colorful, early spring wildflowers in a variety of shades— purple, blue, yellow, and white— as they peeked shyly from spotty sunlit areas. It seemed that everything sparkled in the forest due to tiny droplets of water from an early morning mist. I shut my eyes for a moment, breathing in the sweet fragrance of the forest. It was a heady mix of evergreens and wildflowers, infused with the scent of recent rain. It smelled heavenly to me.

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I wonder what it would be like to come here with Garrett. I can see why he loves the forest now... It's so beautiful, I thought.

Mom paused ahead of me, taking in the view and snapping a few shots.

"This place looks like a masterpiece waiting to be painted," she gushed.

"I agree. And the air is so clean and fresh. I just love this place! I wish I could've grown up here instead of New York." I stooped over and picked a purple flower from the path, sniffing it.

"Well, we're here now. That's all that matters." She lowered her camera and turned to face me.

"It's so peaceful, too," I added. "There aren't any horns honking or smog. I'm so glad we moved. I miss my friends, though. The scenery's just gorgeous, isn't it?" I shut my eyes and took in another deep breath of the sweet, fresh air.

"Yes, and I can't wait to paint it! I'm sorry you miss your friends, but look at the bright side, now you've got a date with your dream guy. You wouldn't have him if we were still in New York."

"Oh, Mom. I don't *have* him, it's just a date." *Though I hope it turns into more, I thought.*

"Well, he's got good parents. You know his dad's an architect that's highly respected in the area and his mom's active in a lot of charitable activities."

"I know, but that doesn't have anything to do with him. Hey, look! A deer!" I pointed to the fleeting figure as it crossed the path ahead of us. My heart hammered, seeing a live deer so close and in its natural habitat. I was thankful for the interruption since I was irritated that Mom kept bringing up Garrett. *How is it she always seems to know what I'm thinking?*

"Oh, wow. I hope it's not dangerous." She took a step backwards toward me.

"It was running away from us, Mom. I hardly think it's going to stick around long enough to hurt us."

"I suppose, but you can't be too careful around wild animals...."

"I know."

We continued a sporadic conversation as we moved along the sunlight-checked trail before reaching a small clearing on the edge of a rocky riverbank. I stood out of the way while she took tons of photos. I was busy surveying the lush, green landscape anyway. I was so impressed by how pristine and serene it was. The light gray rocks in the small river caused tiny rapids that made the water splash and glimmer in the sunlight while the sweet, clean smell of the water permeated the air. Everything seemed almost perfect so far.

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"Why don't we walk down river to those rocks sticking out into the water?" Mom suggested, gesturing downstream. "I think it looks like a good place to take some shots."

"Yeah, that sounds great. Look how clear the water is."

"It's definitely not New York, is it?" she added as she fiddled with her camera.

We weaved our way along the rock and driftwood strewn bank of the river about a hundred yards before scrambling onto the flat, gray rocks.

I sat on the edge of the outcropping and took off my jacket and sneakers, rolling up my jeans before sticking my toes in the water. The minute I did, I jerked them out, shivering.

"Wowie! That water's cold!" I screeched from the frigid surprise as I grabbed for my jacket.

"Baby, don't you think it's a little early in the year to play in the water?" Mom looked over and laughed at me, her red hair glinting with cinnamon highlights in the bright sunlight.

"I guess. I really didn't think about it. The water's so clear that I couldn't help myself. It's not like the murky ponds in Central Park."

I put my sneakers back on and lay back on the rocks by the river's edge, listening to the musical sounds of the water rushing alongside as a gentle breeze brushed my skin. The water was so clear that I spent some time staring into it, noticing the streambed was made up of various colored, rounded rocks. I watched as leaves ridden by the occasional dragonfly drifted by while I waited for Mom to finish up.

Though she was talking between shots, I wasn't really listening, giving only half answers. I was far too fascinated by the life that encompassed the river. The songbirds sang their melodies from the evergreens as I watched fish swimming and reflecting the bright, golden sunlight in flashes as they made their way upstream. Far above, I heard a cry and looked up to see a lone hawk gliding effortlessly through the cloudless blue sky. I also noticed a thin ribbon of whitish smoke twirling skyward above the deep green of the treetops from a camp further upstream. I sighed, thinking how foreign this natural world was to me.

I hope Garrett will take me camping someday. I think it would be so cool. I'd already decided I liked the idea, given the opportunity.

"How perfect is this? I'm so glad we stopped here." I raised my voice above the river's song as I looked at my mom.

"Me, too, honey. It's so lovely," she agreed as she finished her shots and we started picking our way back through the numerous rocks and tall patches of cattails as we wandered back up the riverbank.

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Back in the Rover, Mom looked at the map again before returning to the main road that led to the mountains. As the snow crowned peaks grew closer, the terrain grew more rugged and the road more crooked as it followed a rock strewn stream at the bottom of a steep ravine. I stared down at the shallow, whitewater rapids as they crashed against rugged, gray boulders that littered the streambed as it curved its way beside us. It was beautiful in a wild way.

“Mom, you should get a picture of—”

As the words left my mouth, the Rover careened wildly and Mom shrieked. I looked up just in time to see horror on her face and a black haired figure race across the road as she swerved to miss it, fighting for control of the top-heavy SUV. I froze in terror when it fishtailed out of control and left the pavement, zigzagging wildly when Mom stomped the brakes, causing it to skid closer to the ravine and hit the guard rail. It seemed like time stood still as it teetered for a split second before plummeting down the embankment, rolling and toppling end over end amidst the sounds of crunching metal and breaking glass. About that time, everything went black.

###

I don't know how much time passed before I became aware of my surroundings. For a moment there was stunned silence....

Finally, I moved, shaking my head, trying to clear the fog from my mind. I immediately panicked and looked over at Mom, slumped in her seat and covered in shattered glass. Her nose was bleeding and she moaned. At least she was alive! I touched my own head, feeling wet warmth and finding blood near my ear as pain shot through me. I fought to gather my wits enough to speak.

“Mom! Are you alright?!” I screeched as I struggled to unlatch the seat belt.

She looked up and shook her head slowly, groaning and grimacing.

“I think I'm OK, but my leg's broken and it's stuck where the floorboard caved in. I feel like I'm going to have a black eye from the airbag. Are you hurt?” she slurred.

“No, I'm fine except for a cut on my head. We've got to get out of here. Nobody'll see us down in this ravine unless they're looking for us.” I paused as another thought crossed my mind. “What *was* that animal we almost hit?” I was still dazed and trying to piece together what'd actually happened. I glanced around noticing that the Rover had come to rest upright against one of the boulders in the stream.

“Honey, I can't get my leg free. Call 911.” Mom rested her head back and closed her eyes, wincing in pain. “I don't know what it was. Probably a bear since it was black. It all happened so fast.”

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

I found my cell phone under my feet after a short search, and fortunately, it still worked.

“What are we gonna do? There’s no signal!

“Go back up to the road and see if you have bars there. If not, flag somebody down.”

“Mom, I don’t want to leave you here.”

“Nonsense, I’ll be fine. I’m OK except for my leg. Now go.”

The door was jammed, so I pulled myself out of the broken window of the battered SUV, sliding into the frigid, rushing water of the stream. I was shocked when I saw it was partially suspended, its rear resting on a large gray boulder, its back axle and tires gone. The icy water took my breath away and the cold stayed with me as the cool mountain breeze bathed my wet skin. When I started up the incline, I soon realized it was far too steep since I kept sliding back down when I tried to climb the slippery, moss covered rocks. Realizing there was no way to reach the road, I hurried back to the SUV, trying to think what else I could do. I was so upset that I was practically incoherent and my head was pounding.

“Mom, the slope is almost straight up. I can’t make it to the road.” My teeth were chattering and I shivered as the freezing water swirled around my legs. “What if I try to make it to the top of a hill across the stream? It’s not so steep and the water’s shallow, so I can cross. I think I’ll have service if I can make it to higher ground. I don’t think there’s any other choice.”

“Baby, I don’t want you to do that. It’s too dangerous. We can wait; someone will come looking for us.” She leaned forward and looked at me before wilting back against the seat, shutting her eyes.

“But Mom, did you tell Dad which road we were taking? Does anyone know where we were going, other than ‘to the mountains?’ Besides, he and Patrick are out on the golf course.”

Grimacing in pain, Mom hesitated for what seemed like forever before answering.

“I guess you’re right, but you be careful. I don’t know what’s in these woods and you don’t either. That bear or whatever it was might still be around.” A crease furrowed her brow as she glanced my way, her eye now visibly black and the sclera filled with blood, giving her a frightening appearance.

“I will. Are you sure you’re going to be OK while I’m gone?”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. It’s just my leg.”

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From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

It wasn't easy walking due to the abundance of ferns, mosses, and other vegetation, not to mention many felled tree limbs. Large, rotting remains of fallen trees along with their huge stumps lined the forest floor like massive skeletons of long dead giants. It made a shiver run up my spine, because I almost felt like they were watching me. I shook my head to discard the thought.

Climbing the steep hill was brutal so I stopped to rest. My head was exploding and my body was becoming noticeably sore with large, purple bruises appearing over much of it. *I'll probably look like the Hulk when they start to heal— green all over*, I thought. To add insult to injury, I was also exhausted from fighting my way through the dense vegetation. Fortunately, I found a large stump of appropriate height and proceeded to perch on the makeshift bench. I checked my phone, but there was still no signal. My lack of success was upsetting. I knew I couldn't stop for long, so I pushed myself to continue uphill as my bruised muscles throbbed and complained.

"Growing up in the city doesn't help me now. I just hope Mom's OK. So much for my date with Garrett," I muttered as I trudged up the incline, juggling disappointment and worry.

I was enormously relieved when I finally came upon a spot where the trees thinned near the top of a hill. I paused for a moment, overjoyed when I realized I had two bars.

"Yes!" I touched the numbers and put it on speaker.

"911, what is your emergency?" a woman's voice answered.

"Thank God! We... we've had an accident and ended up in a ravine beside the road," I stammered, practically yelling into the phone.

"What's your name and is anyone hurt? What road are you on?"

"My name is Gracie McKay and I don't know what road. We're new to the area. My mom, Lilly McKay, has a broken leg and a bloody nose and is trapped in our SUV. My dad is Dr. Michael McKay and we're from Nanaimo."

"Do you have any idea where you are?"

"We were driving to the mountains and were on a crooked road with a ravine to our right. At the bottom was a stream with boulders scattered along it."

"I know that road. Can I speak to your mom? Is she able to talk?"

"She can talk, but I had to climb a hill to get a cell signal, so I'm not with her."

"OK, Gracie. I want you to stay where you are. I don't want you to go anywhere since you might get lost in the forest. I'm sending help now. They'll find your mother and then come for you. Alright? Just be sure to keep your phone on in case we're disconnected because they'll locate you from the signal. In the meantime, I'll stay on the phone with you."

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

I was about to answer her when the call dropped. I gasped with horror as I realized the battery was low about the time the screen went blank as I tried to re-dial 911.

“Nooooooo! Don’t you die on me!” I screamed at the phone. I looked around and found a nearby rocky outcropping where I sat and waited while time dragged interminably. After a while, I became restless as I fidgeted with a wildflower I’d picked. I needed to do something... anything.

I might as well go back to where Mom is, I thought. They can’t find me with a dead cell phone anyway. I had a full charge this morning. I can’t believe the thing died. It shouldn’t have. Maybe the accident did something to it.

I shoved the phone in my pocket and started back toward the stream, hurrying along since I was worried about my mother. My bruised muscles burned and protested bitterly at the forced march. At least it was downhill. As I picked my way through the obstacles on the moss-covered forest floor, I soon realized I wasn’t sure where I was or which direction would take me back to the stream. An uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach washed over me as I continued to make my way through the forest. Even though I was tired and hurting, I kept moving, thinking the SUV or at least the stream was just ahead of me. My thoughts waffled between fear and aggravation with myself as I fought my way through the thickly wooded forest.

Being absorbed in my thoughts, I didn’t see the huge spider web, damp with droplets of water, as I plowed into it, sending me scrambling backward, pawing at my face as it stuck to me. Gasping for air, I suppressed a scream when I saw an enormous black and yellow spider scurrying rapidly down my leg to escape the commotion. It frightened me so much that I felt like I was going to be sick.

“I can’t do this! I have to find my way back to Mom! Geez, I hate spiders. I’ve never seen one so ginormous! Maybe nature is overrated after all,” I sputtered as I spit repeatedly, trying to remove any remnants of spider web from my mouth.

As I leaned forward, my hands on my knees, trying to recover my composure and catch my breath, I had this weird feeling that something or somebody was watching me. It gave me the creeps and only intensified my fear. When I felt it, my hair stood up and goosebumps raised on my skin.

This forest is so creepy. I’ve got to get out of here! I had no idea how, though.

My mind raced as I scanned the area, feeling that something horrible was waiting for me behind the next tree. I heard a twig snap close by and jumped, yelping in fear. By now, my heart was pounding I was so frightened as I tried to hurry along, stumbling through the underbrush as I attempted to find my way out of the woods. I snagged my foot on a fallen limb and fell, losing one of my sneakers in the process.

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“Good grief!” I grabbed a small tree nearby and pulled myself up, brushing the dirt and other debris off before hopping back to retrieve the wayward shoe.

“Sheesh, Gracie, you can’t even walk without being a klutz and tripping over yourself,” I muttered as I re-tied my shoe laces while sitting on a log. “Fine camper you’d make. I have no idea what kind of animals live here. I don’t know if there are poisonous snakes or deadly spiders or whatever. And what *was* that thing we almost hit? It didn’t look like a bear. I don’t know what it looked like. It almost looked human. I’ve never seen anything like it. Whatever it was, it was huge. Why do I feel like I’m being watched? It’s so weird. I have to get out of here before something gets me!” I kept talking to myself. The sound of my own voice was somehow comforting and I hoped it would scare any animals away.

When, after searching for what seemed like a long time and I couldn’t find the stream, I decided to yell for help, hoping someone would hear.

“Help! Can anyone hear me? Help me!” I screamed with such force that it caused me to cough. At this point, I felt as if I’d been lost for most of the day, although I wasn’t certain. I desperately wanted someone to find me, to help me make my way out of this dreadful, frightening forest. My skin crawled as my fears continued to increase as time passed. I was in pain also, which only made matters worse.

“I’d kill for some Tylenol about now. This is what I get for thinking I knew how to find my way out of here. I should’ve known better,” I grumbled as I scanned the woods again. I was embarrassed that people were looking for me by now and worse yet, they’d have to call in search and rescue on a large scale if someone didn’t find me soon. I felt sickened by my own thoughts.

I continued to yell as I moved through the forest, thinking surely someone would hear me soon. I thought that perhaps I’d find a landmark, a rock, a stump, or something that looked familiar, but the forest looked the same everywhere. About that time, I saw a tall, shadowy figure dart behind a tree and I jumped, but then, there was nothing there, although I was certain I’d seen something and that something was watching me. I fought back tears I was so terrified and tried to run, but it was impossible with all of the undergrowth. More time passed and I kept moving but still, no one came as I fought my fears in a losing battle. Panic was consuming me, causing me to shake and my knees to feel weak.

I was struggling to reach the top of a hill when I tripped and slid down a steep embankment, shrieking as I grabbed wildly at anything that would stop me. It seemed like everything was in slow motion as I skidded faster before managing to grab a sapling about the time I felt myself go airborne, the abrupt stop dislodging my phone. As I clung to the sapling, suspended in midair, I was paralyzed with fear, hearing the

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phone shatter far below, but even worse, I felt woozy like I was going to faint when I glanced down and saw that I was dangling above a sheer drop that bottomed with boulders that rested hundreds of feet below.

I took a couple of deep breaths and avoided looking down again, praying the tree would hold and not break from my weight. As I tried to heave myself onto the ledge, I felt my anchor give way and I shrieked as I plummeted. The sapling stopped short of breaking completely, but now, I was even further from the ledge and my arms felt like jelly. In such a state of panic, I was afraid I wouldn't have the strength to climb again. I tried in vain get a foothold as I dangled helplessly, swinging to and fro from my efforts as the tiny, broken tree continued to snap and crack. I think the fear of imminent death finally pushed me to haul myself upward hand over hand. When I finally topped the cliff, I laid on the cold ground, panting and hugging the partially uprooted sapling while my heart felt like it would explode. It was some time before I attempted to claw my way back up the hill and when I did, it seemed like it took forever, half crawling and half dragging my way upward since I didn't dare try to stand for fear of falling again. My body was screaming from pain as I struggled, making the climb all the more excruciating.

When I finally reached the hilltop, I sat on the ground and cried. I'd never been so scared in my life and I couldn't think my way out of this.

What am I going to do?

2

Telacki



I'd been wandering through the patchwork darkness of the old growth, evergreen forest for hours when I eventually came upon a small, grassy meadow. I was thrilled by my luck and hoped I could see something familiar if I left the impenetrable undergrowth of the woods. I immediately felt the welcome warmth of sunshine when I left the chill of the shade.

"This is so much better!" I muttered to myself as I soaked up the sun. My mood lifted a bit, that is, until I looked down and saw I was a mess. I was dirty and my favorite sneakers were ruined, covered in green stains from the forest. *Well, at least it's sunny here. Maybe a helicopter will fly over,* I thought as I scoped out the little clearing, noticing it was filled with a rainbow of wildflowers that accentuated the green of the grass and the blue of the sky, but otherwise, there was little else of interest other than a few scattered rocks. .

I sat cross-legged in the grass, resting and trying to make a plan. Nestled amidst towering evergreens, the open space offered a gentle breeze that gave a welcome coolness to the sunlight once I thawed. Unfortunately, the comfort of the warm day and the cheeriness of the wildflower painted meadow did little to thwart the feeling of terror that continued to consume me. I had no idea which way to go to find help, not to mention my throat was on fire from shouting. I tried in vain to overcome my fears, telling myself that surely somebody would find me soon, but nothing seemed to work.

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My head and heart pounded in sync like a band banging out a song while the sick feeling gnawed at the pit of my stomach. But it wasn't only from the exertion of having fought my way through the forest or from the accident, it also stemmed from fear caused by the persistent notion that something or somebody was stalking me and it had only grown worse as the day dragged on.

I hope Mom is going to be alright. She just has to be... I thought as I tried to get my mind off of my terror. *I hope Garrett won't think I'm lame for getting lost. I won't be able to show my face at school.* My thoughts were as depressing as my predicament.

A butterfly with radiant blue and yellow colors lighted on my knee as if to cheer me up, but nothing could suppress the feeling of dread that consumed me. Even worse, I was losing hope that search and rescue – or anyone else for that matter – might find me. I glanced up at the azure sky and noticed a few wispy clouds floating by. Normally, a clear day, sitting on the grass would've been a real treat in Central Park, but this was totally different. This place was wild and untamed, and the frightening feeling that something was watching me kept growing, which unnerved me even more, so I jumped to my feet.

"Is anyone there? If this is some kind of joke, it's *not* funny!" I yelled into the darkness of the surrounding woods as I turned in circles, looking in every direction. I heard nothing. My mind was becoming my worst enemy.

"I'm glad it's still daylight, but I have to get out of here before dark. It's so beautiful here, but what if a bear comes along... or maybe a cougar? Why is it I feel like somebody's watching me? I wish my stomach would settle down, it's making me dizzy. I never get sick at my stomach and I can't ever remember being lightheaded like this. I hope I don't have a concussion from the accident. Maybe it's because I'm so scared. I wish I could just throw up, maybe I'd feel better. If I were back in New York, I'd know what to do.... I hate this." I couldn't help but hope the sound of my voice would scare off whatever was watching me. I tried to tell myself that everything would be fine, but I didn't believe it.

I stood in the meadow for a long time, trying to decide which direction to go to find my way back to civilization. An airliner flew high above, but too high to spot me, which was even more discouraging. The only things I could see from the clearing, outside of the forest, were some nearby mountains. They were breathtakingly gorgeous with the snow gleaming in the sunlight like diamond encrusted crowns on their summits. Being new to the area, however, the peaks were of no help in determining my location, other than I thought that perhaps I should go in the opposite direction since we were headed toward them when we crashed. I was disappointed the clearing held no other clues. More than anything, I dreaded going back into the shadow drenched

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depths of the forest. I lingered in the meadow, trying to think what else I could do. After a while, I decided to wait there since I couldn't bear to go back into the woods, especially with the creepy feeling I had. My body was hurting and I hoped by staying in the meadow, a helicopter would spot me.

I continued to call for help but heard no response. I was so angry with myself, having brought nothing with me that might help since my backpack and jacket were still in the Rover and I'd lost the dead cell phone when I fell from the cliff. A light wind wafted through my hair as I considered what to do next. The breeze only served to irritate my uncomfortably hot skin, which had turned from pale white to a bright pink from a developing sunburn.

I'd been in the clearing for a while by this time and dread of the upcoming night weighed heavily on my mind. I collapsed onto the grass near some rocks, exhausted and thirsty.

I'm too old to have done something this careless, I thought, chiding myself. I should've stayed where I was on the top of that hill like the 911 operator told me. I just hope I can manage to make it out of here... alive. I shook my head and laughed humorlessly.

Gazing at the forest, it felt strange and mysterious, and I was afraid of the unknown. I laid back in the grass and cried when I noticed the shadows were growing longer and there was no way I'd make it out before dark.

I need to find some place that's safe to spend the night, but where? Any place I can climb, a bear can, too, or worse yet, a cougar. There's no way of knowing what other types of animals live here either.

"Arghhhh," I growled in frustration. As I stared upward at the sky, my vision blurred by tears, exhaustion claimed me and I drifted off into a restless sleep.

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When I woke, it was dusk. I sprang to my feet, startled, angry with myself for having fallen asleep and petrified of the descending blackness that surrounded me. I realized I was incredibly thirsty from yelling for help and my throat was on fire while my tongue felt like sandpaper. I was hoarse and had almost lost my voice. I realized that being lost wasn't my only problem since I hadn't had any water all day. My thirst was consuming my thoughts and my mouth felt like an inferno.

Where can I find food and water, much less shelter, especially in the darkness? I wish I hadn't fallen asleep. Now, I'm really in trouble. I was almost hysterical as tears gushed down my face again. *This can't be happening!*

My stomach felt sick again as dread washed over me while I searched the tree-line, trying to see in the waning light. About that time, an owl hooted nearby, causing me to yelp and jump with alarm. From across the meadow, I heard another one answer.

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As I listened, I heard a twig snap, and then another.... My heart hammered as I strained to see across the meadow in the direction of the noise. I held my breath and listened again, though all I could hear was my heart pounding in my ears.

“Be brave! Everything will be alright. Just breathe. You’re being silly. Animals are afraid of people,” I told myself.

I noticed the moon beginning to rise, so at least the twilight wasn’t as black as before, but that didn’t prevent terror from descending upon me as the feeling that I was being watched intensified. About that time, I heard a stick break again, this time louder, closer.... I started to walk away from the direction of the sound, striding quickly, only to hear a subtle swishing in the grass behind me and more cracks and crunches coming from more than one place. Whatever it was, there were more than one, and... they were advancing on me. I was about to run when I heard a low growl. I froze instantly, petrified, still having no idea what was stalking me. It seemed my unknown pursuers paused when I did, giving me a moment to think. I was closer to the tree-line now, and I spotted a fir tree whose branches appeared low to the ground.

I fought back nausea from paralyzing fear and even though a million tiny stars now twinkled brightly in the night sky, the moon hadn’t completely risen, so I couldn’t see well, adding to my terror.

Suddenly, I gasped as I saw the outline of something slinking toward me. As I strained to see in the near darkness, I realized it was a wolf. I knew instantly that where there was one, there was a pack. Without hesitation, I bolted toward the tree, flying as if my feet weren’t touching the ground and willing my sore muscles to move even faster. I heard yips and growls as the pack charged, racing behind me. I was almost to the tree when I tripped on a rock and crashed to the ground. Making it to the tree was no longer an option, so I jumped to my feet and grabbed a stick, raising my other arm in front of my face to shield it from the attack.

“Get back!” I screamed as I saw countless shadows racing toward me. I swung the stick at them and screamed again, but they kept coming. At that moment, I knew I was going to die a horrible death, so I mentally told my parents goodbye and that I loved them.

In those brief seconds and just as I lost all hope, a giant arm wrapped around my waist from behind and snatched me up without missing a stride as if I were a ragdoll being tucked beneath the stranger’s arm. I dropped the stick and gasped. I hadn’t heard anything else approaching and my mind raced as my nearly paralyzed body tried to react while my abductor raced across the meadow at a run. About that time, the wolves reached us and launched themselves in a vicious attack. Without missing a step and with only one free hand, my captor sent first one and then another flying through the

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air with incredible strength and agility. The wolves cried out in pain and landed with a thud, but the assault continued because there were many.

At least twenty wolves joined the onslaught as I hit the ground hard, rolling to a stop. Freed from my captor, who was busy fending off the savage attack, I sat up, hoping to make a run for it, only to catch sight of the tallest woman I'd ever seen. The woman flung the wolves into nearby trees while striking some with her fist, killing them instantly. As the attack slowed, the woman's eyes suddenly emitted a bright, red light, causing the remnant of the pack to cry pitifully as they tried to run from the woman, rolling and staggering blindly in their efforts to escape. I almost forgot to run as I gaped at the bizarre sight because the wolves seemed to be trying to flee from some unseen force. I couldn't imagine what was happening.

With the woman occupied, I realized this was my opportunity to get away, so I jumped to my feet, struggling with wobbly knees, and tried to bolt for the edge of the woods, though I kept stumbling and falling. My flight, however, was short lived, as once more, giant hands lifted me. This time, I began to scream and struggle wildly when suddenly, I clearly heard a kind, reassuring voice.

Don't be frightened, little hairless one. Please stop screaming, it said.

I was astonished because I didn't hear the voice with my ears — I heard it in my *mind*. I squirmed and quickly turned in a continuing effort to wiggle free, coming face-to-face with the woman. I was stunned to see that her body was covered in short, slick hair that shined in the moonlight. It reminded me of the hair on my grandmother's Chihuahua it was so shiny and short. I froze again, too astounded and fascinated by the strange woman to remember how afraid I actually was. The long hair on the woman's head was braided in multiple braids and pulled neatly away from her face and her hands were enormous. I couldn't believe the woman's strength, not only in the encounter with the wolves, but the ease with which she picked me up.

As I stared at her, I saw gentle, dark eyes and a lovely face, even by human standards. Though I felt relief at not being alone, the tremendous height and strange appearance as well as the abilities of this mysterious stranger was frightening. I looked closer, straining to see her clearly in the moonlight, but when I did, the woman's eyes suddenly radiated a greenish-white light. This frightened me even more so I quickly looked away, realizing again how terrified I actually was.

Without another word — or thought for that matter — the woman tucked me under her arm and set off at a fast pace in the direction of the snowcapped mountains, leaving the clearing behind in a matter of steps. My ribs and stomach screamed in pain, both from the wreck as well as being carried in such a fashion, causing me to groan

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with each stride as it jarred my aching body. Hearing me, the woman stopped abruptly and put me down.

What's wrong? I heard in my mind.

I considered trying to escape again, but decided against it in light of the woman's size and speed as well as the terrors awaiting me in the darkened forest. My thoughts raced as I tried to comprehend how I could hear the woman's voice mentally. It was confusing to say the least. Out of options, I paused and took a deep breath, choosing my words carefully before answering.

"It's hard to breathe when you carry me that way. Are you going to kill me?" My scratchy voice squeaked and trembled as I spoke.

Of course not, child! The woman chuckled and then smiled, answering inaudibly.

A wave of relief washed over me, though I felt only slightly more confident now. I also wasn't sure what to think about the woman calling me a child. Maybe she thought I was a child because she was so tall compared to my height of slightly over five feet.

I decided to ask the woman for some water, but before I could verbalize the request, the stranger's reply registered instantly in my mind.

OK, just a short way from here.

Things just kept getting weirder by the minute.

The stranger picked me up without another word and put me on her back this time. She abruptly turned left and proceeded down a dimly lit path, illuminated only by the pale, ghostly moonlight filtering through the dense forest in lace-like patterns. It seemed the forest was beautiful at night, but also haunting in an eerie way.

The woman moved at dizzying speed and in complete silence, dodging massive trees and jumping shadow-drenched stumps as she raced through the woods. At one point, she leapt over a large rock and I almost fell. The woman quickly caught me.

Hang on to me so you won't fall. I don't want you hurt.

"OK," I muttered out loud, but it came out like a raspy-voiced whisper with a squeak as my throat burned and complained. I felt numb and not exactly scared anymore, but I couldn't understand why.

After a few minutes, the woman slowed and slid gracefully down a steep embankment, stopping at the edge of a rocky stream. The moon had fully risen and its light streaked through the trees, causing the ripples in the water to sparkle and dance. The stream gurgled as if it were alive, bouncing over rocks and tree roots. The woman lowered me to the ground so I could drink. As I gulped handfuls of the cold, rushing water, I sneaked a quick look at the towering woman again. She was probably seven feet tall and had a slender, but athletic build with muscles that rippled, yet her grace and beauty were undeniable. The smooth, pale-gray skin of her face shined in the

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moonlight. Short, slick, reddish-brown hair covered her entire body except for her face and neck, her hands, and feet. Her buckskin clothing was minimal and strategically placed. *What is this person? I've never seen anyone with hair like that or gray skin. Star Wars* crossed my mind and I considered aliens, but soon discarded my theory since I really didn't believe they existed. But still, I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought about trying to talk to the woman, but before I could ask anything, an inaudible introduction flashed into my mind like instant knowledge.

My name is Chima. I am of the Forest People.

In one fast, fluid motion, Chima knelt so I could see her face. My eyes widened at the sight of her so close up. I was startled, but not exactly terrified anymore. Her features were refined, with high cheekbones and straight, white teeth. Under the circumstances, I should've been petrified with fear, yet I felt a soothing calm wash over me. I couldn't understand how I could feel such a profound peace while my heart continued to pound in terror to the point I thought it might explode. The paradox was astonishing and incomprehensible. Hesitating, I managed to muster some courage.

"My name's Gracie." My voice squeaked and cracked, so I resorted to a whisper. So many questions flooded my mind, but before I could ask anything, Chima *spoke* again.

Gracie, it's time to go. We have a long way to travel.

"Where are we going? I need to go home... Now!"

I'm taking you where you'll be safe. You won't survive alone in the forest and I can't take you to where your people are.

"I don't understand. Please, just take me to the nearest road," I begged.

I can't, child. I'm sorry. There's too many of your kind in the forest and I mustn't be near them, but don't worry, I'll help you. Please be patient.

Chima picked me up and bolted toward the path before I could say anything else. At least I was encouraged when she said she'd help me, but my mind was having trouble dealing with this unexpected turn of events. It was all I could do to hang on as she ducked and darted through the forest again with preternatural speed and agility. I tried to comprehend how the woman could move so quickly and silently, considering her size and especially in the dark, shadowy forest, but I had nothing. The chain of events was so incomprehensible that I began to question whether this might be a dream... or was it more?

I think I'm losing my mind. Maybe the wreck injured my brain. I'm so confused, yet I feel an eerie calm... But why? Is this really happening?

To further complicate matters, I had no idea how much time had passed since I'd left the stream. My face burned from scratches caused by stray branches slapping me as

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Chima flew through the forest before I learned to duck. Still, I felt lucky that I'd been rescued rather than devoured by the pack of hungry wolves.

As our flight through the wilderness continued, I fought exhaustion, concentrating instead on the ongoing struggle to hang on to Chima. Her hair made her slick. Fortunately, about the time I felt I couldn't travel any further, we emerged from the forest into a small clearing. A sheer rock face at the base of a mountain loomed ahead, its jagged spires reaching skyward. I looked upward beyond the precipice, seeing the mountains in close proximity, snow gleaming in the moonlight like a Thomas Kinkadee painting. It caused me to think of Mom.

If only I'd done as I was told. I'm so sorry I didn't listen. Please let her be OK.... My thoughts were interrupted as Chima abruptly slowed.

I wasn't sure what would happen next, seeing we were at the dead end of what appeared to be a small canyon. As Chima approached the face of the cliff, a gap appeared near its base. I could've sworn it wasn't there when I looked a few seconds earlier. I didn't have time to question it, though, since Chima dashed through the entrance and into a cave as a wave of dizziness swept over me, nearly causing me to topple.

Once inside, I saw a low fire dimly lighting a large room. To my utter amazement, there were other Forest People in the cave. Chima put me down and walked over to a large ivory-colored male. Though he was old enough to be my father, he looked young for his age and was incredibly attractive, with huge blue eyes and refined features. His natural ivory hair and fair skin made him more striking than any air brushed male model. *I guess these people have all the best genes!* I thought as I shook my head in disbelief. They embraced and touched foreheads, gazing deeply into each other's eyes, appearing as if they were entranced as they stood locked together, motionless.

How strange. I stared, trying to figure out what was going on, examining every detail about them since it seemed I didn't exist to them at the moment. Getting my first good look at the Forest People, outside of seeing Chima in the moonlight by the stream, made me feel completely intimidated by their sheer size. The male was even taller than she. I still wondered what they were since they obviously had a strange appearance and size, as well as abilities I couldn't even begin to understand. Even though they were human, they obviously weren't humans like me. I wondered why it seemed that nobody knew about them. Were they like a lost tribe in the Amazon? I ruled that out quickly since they seemed to be living right under our noses. Why hadn't they been discovered? Maybe my *Star Wars* theory wasn't so far from the truth...

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I felt extremely awkward and frightened as the strange ritual continued and I certainly wasn't sure what to do next, if anything. I didn't know whether to run or stay and attempt to communicate with them, so I just froze. I managed to look over my shoulder toward the opening of the cave, only to see that where the opening had been, there was now a curtain of sorts – a barrier that looked almost like heat waves rising from hot concrete in the summer. The fire reflected on the barrier as if it were alive, dancing on the ripples of the opening. The inside of the cave also appeared to move, swaying in the flickering firelight like ghostly images that sparkled from crystals embedded in the rock of the cave.

As I stood alone, not far from the entrance, trying to decide on a course of action, I heard another voice in my head. This time the voice sounded like that of a girl closer to my age.

Hi.

I immediately turned in the direction of the others sitting by the fire and saw a girl staring at me. She was probably ten inches taller than I and looked very lithe, with lean, sculpted muscles. She was stunningly beautiful in an exotic way. Her slick, chocolate-colored hair shined in the firelight and the long hair on her head was braided in numerous braids, though it wasn't pulled back like Chima's. I finally decided the entire group looked like normal people except for their incredible beauty as well as their height and the amount of hair on their bodies. I managed to smile at the girl, buying me a few seconds as I tried to decide what to say.

"Hi," I finally squeaked as I faced her.

She tilted her head, motioning for me to come toward her as she held out her hand. In it were various colored dried berries and a few leaves. I took a cautious step forward and stopped.

My name is Telacki. Please, come and eat.

With the invitation, I felt a pang in my stomach as I was reminded that I'd skipped breakfast and hadn't eaten all day. Telacki smiled, revealing incredibly white teeth, as I stepped forward cautiously until she was within reach.

"My name is Grace, but call me Gracie," I peeped.

In one fluid motion, Telacki stood, using only her legs to rise with surprising ease, before handing over the berries and the tender, young leaves.

"Thanks," I sputtered before wolfing down the berries. I never knew fruit could be so sweet. I couldn't decide whether they tasted sweet because I was so hungry or if the berries really were that delicious. While I was eating, Telacki went further into the cave and soon reappeared with more berries. I was thankful because that first handful wasn't nearly enough. Telacki seated herself by the fire and waited in silence while I

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finished my meal, except for the leaves. I didn't know what type of plant they were from and was afraid to eat them in case they were poisonous.

I wasn't sure what to do once I finished the berries, so I stood there, waiting to see what would happen next. I'd never felt so awkward in my life. Telacki patted the ground, motioning for me to join her. I hesitated, but decided that she seemed harmless, so I took a seat near the fire beside her. I was unbelievably grateful for the warmth of the blaze since I was thoroughly chilled without my jacket. As I sat beside Telacki and gazed into the fire, it dawned on me that I was feeling much better about my circumstances. These people seemed friendly and I felt encouraged since I'd met someone who, despite her height and strength, appeared to be closer to my age.

This is all so weird, I thought as I questioned my reality again. I wish my head would stop hurting. Maybe this isn't real. Maybe it's the wreck and I have a brain injury. It feels and looks real, though.

Telacki smiled as if she knew what I was thinking, her large, expressive eyes glittering in the firelight. I smiled back, although I was still somewhat unnerved by this strange girl. As I stared at her, I also felt intimidated by her beauty. She had smooth café au lait skin and large golden eyes that set off her chocolate colored hair. *What strange hair color for a person.*

I also sneaked a look at the faces of the other Forest People sitting across from me. An old brown female had hair that was mostly white from age. Her face was deeply ruttled with jagged wrinkles and her eyes glowed red, which gave her a frightening appearance. I'd never seen anyone's eyes emit light until I saw Chima battling the wolves. That just *wasn't* normal and it made me uncomfortable. It also made the old one look utterly evil. My stomach churned as I looked at her.

To the old woman's right was a pale skinned teenager who had the brightest red hair I'd ever seen. I laughed to myself, thinking his hair was actually brighter red than my own. He had defined muscles like the others and was probably close to seven feet tall, yet I could tell he was still young. He was extravagantly handsome and I found myself drawn to him, though he seemed serious. About that time, he grinned at me, revealing a mouthful of straight, white teeth. The unexpected gesture caused my face to flame crimson. I was glad my sunburn hid it, along with the embarrassment of being caught staring at his scantily clad, ripped body.

Telacki watched as I scrutinized the others and then she spoke aloud for the first time.

"Gracie, you see my mother's mother? Her name is Shayka and my brother is Na-ashi."

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They both nodded as Telacki gestured to them and made the introductions. Nashi flashed another disarmingly brilliant smile. I blushed again.

I was still too unsure of myself to say much.

"Hello," I whispered, mustering a smile as my gaze wandered from one person to another, finally stopping at Chima.

"Gracie, this is my husband, Kecáshah," she said, speaking aloud and bowing slightly to the large ivory-colored male. Her voice was melodic and deep, yet feminine. I had so many questions for Chima, but decided not to ask them because I didn't want to push my luck.

"We'll be going to hunt now, so stay with Telacki until we return," Chima added.

I barely had time to nod before the couple disappeared through the shimmering curtain at the entrance to the cave.

Are you tired? Telacki asked as soon as they left.

I had the feeling she already knew the answer for some strange reason.

"Yes, I'm exhausted."

Immediately, Telacki rose and offered her hand. I took it as she pulled me to my feet and led me to a small side room in the cave. The door to the room was tied back and was made from an animal skin, perhaps some type of deer. As I followed her, I sensed probing eyes behind me, which was unsettling, almost like the feeling I'd had earlier in the forest. I didn't like it. I looked back and saw Shayka glaring at me with those red, glowing eyes. I decided I was afraid of her as the hair stood up on the back of my neck.

The little room was so dark that I couldn't really see, but somehow, Telacki must've known I'd be uncomfortable by myself because she led me there by the hand. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could barely make out a mattress of sorts in one corner of the room. It turned out to be a thick pile of leaves and dried grasses that were topped with some type of furred animal hide.

"Here, sleep," Telacki urged as she pointed to the bed.

I didn't object as I fell onto the soft fur covering. Telacki crawled in beside me and snuggled close, pulling another skin over us. At first, I was surprised and very uncomfortable being so close to her, but it was cool and damp in the cave, and I'd become chilled the instant I'd moved away from the fire. Telacki was better than a warm blanket with her abundant hair. I assumed she must've known a hairless human would be cold, so I decided I was thankful instead.

It was quiet in the cave, and after the trauma I'd endured, I thought I would easily find sleep, but that wasn't the case. I was safe, at least for the time being, so my

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thoughts drifted to my mother. I wondered how badly she was hurt and wanted to be there for her in the worst way. Tears flowed as I thought of her... and Garrett. I was so disappointed about missing our date.

As I lay in the darkness of the cave with Telacki close beside me, the memories of how I ended up in such an unbelievable situation began to replay in my mind in vivid detail.

What am I going to do now? I thought after pondering the day's events for some time. I was cozy and warm, sandwiched between a faintly snoring Telacki and some incredibly soft animal skins. The comfort I felt finally allowed exhaustion to claim me, making my thoughts fuzzy. Attempting to make any decision about what to do next was impossible, I decided before drifting off into a deep, dreamless sleep.

3

Strange New Life



The next morning I woke with a start, clueless as to where I was. I suppressed a scream when I saw Telacki nearby, watching me as I gradually remembered the day before. My head was still pounding as a vivid reminder and I was sick with worry about my mother and had no idea how to find my way home. I also wondered how far Chima had carried me. The look on Telacki's face told me that she'd already read my mind.

"Don't worry, Gracie. We'll help you find home. As far as your mother, she's fine. My father hid in the woods and watched as your kind rescued her. In fact, he saw the accident since he was chasing a scout from the mountain clan that crossed the road in front of you. The intruder actually caused it. There was a young one with him also, but he ran off."

An intense feeling of relief washed over me as I stared at Telacki's smiling face.

"Thanks so much!" I gushed, embracing her without thinking as tears flooded my face. When I realized my reaction might be unwanted, I quickly backed away, embarrassed. Telacki only grinned more, convincing me that she really was reading my mind.

After I thought about what she told me, the entire picture became clear.

"Do you mean it was one of the Forest People that we almost hit?" I asked.

"Yes, he's from an enemy clan that lives in the mountains. He'd crossed into our lands so my father was trying to catch him. Mother was with him and watched you all

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day, making sure you were safe... that is, until the wolves started stalking you. C' mon. Let's eat." Telacki rose to her feet and gestured, starting toward the front of the cave. I shook my head in disbelief before following.

The small room was lit by sunlight streaming in from the large room where the cave's entrance was located as well as a small crevice near the top corner of the room, so I didn't have any problems seeing as I followed Telacki. I was still half asleep, but my mind raced as I thought about the accident and what she told me.

That's why I felt like I was being watched yesterday. I was! This is so bizarre!

I still couldn't come to grips with the fact that there were tall people, living in the woods only a short distance from civilization. *They're so like us in some ways and are obviously human... but more... What are they?* I was clueless.

In the front room, Chima was stoking a small fire. She stopped momentarily and handed me a stick with a piece of meat on it.

"Here, Gracie, you can cook this over the fire."

"Thanks, Chima. I'm starving."

About that time, I noticed the rest of the family eating it raw.

How can they do that? It's so gross! I'd gag if I had to eat it raw, I thought as I wrinkled my nose.

"Gracie, are you afraid to eat meat without fire?" Telacki asked with a giggle.

"We don't eat it that way at home. And yes, I don't want to eat it raw. That's nasty."

The family laughed at my admission as I blushed blazingly.

The meat I was roasting popped and sizzled, giving rise to an enticing aroma that weakened my resolve. In the end, I was thankful for the breakfast and the warm fire, but it sure wasn't sausage and eggs. Nevertheless, I tore hungrily at the cooked meat because I was famished after the light dinner of berries the night before. I felt as if I hadn't eaten for days. The meat tasted good, like barbecue, except it needed seasoning. My thoughts ran wild as I ate, imagining all types of helpless creatures being the source of my breakfast. It was upsetting and almost killed my appetite, not to mention watching the others eat the raw, bloody meat.

The room was bright now as sunlight filtered through the entrance to the cave. I looked around the large room and noticed a small spring in the corner that fed into a tiny pool. The pool overflowed into a crack in the floor of the cave and then out of sight.

Wow, they even have running water, I thought as I explored the room. It was large and oblong with the ceiling and floor having a scattering of small stalagmites and stalactites. The clear crystals randomly embedded in the rocks I'd seen the night before sparkled in the filtered light. I was sure the entrance to the cave was not a normal rock

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formation since its shape was a bit too perfect for a natural opening. I ate my breakfast in silence as I surveyed the cave and tried to make sense of this strange new world while Telacki watched me with curiosity.

I was still upset about what had happened, but I was grateful for the family of Forest People. Nevertheless, I wished I was home and my heart ached for my mother. I knew my parents would be upset and worried and for that matter, so was I. Search-and-rescue teams were probably out looking for me by now, as they always were when someone was lost in the mountains. I told myself it would only be a matter of time before the Forest People helped me find my way home... at least I hoped that was the case. I finally managed to push my thoughts aside about the time Chima looked my way.

"Do you know where you come from?" she asked.

"I live in a two-story yellow house at eight thirty-seven Mulberry Lane—."

"Child, I don't know addresses and I haven't seen a yellow house," Chima interrupted, a furrow creasing her brow. "Do you know in which direction you live?"

I shook my head, discouraged.

"I know it's in Nanaimo, across the Strait of Georgia from Vancouver. I live in a large yellow house with white trim. I can't tell you more since you don't know the names of the suburbs or streets."

Since I was already lost before Chima rescued me, I had no idea how to tell her where I lived. I felt a sinking feeling at the thought.

Chima knew what I was thinking.

"I do know the name Nanaimo, as that is a big place of your people, so that helps. But, I haven't seen your yellow house. There are so many places between here and there, but don't worry— we'll find where you belong. It might take some time, though. Be sure and stay with Telacki, we don't want you to get lost again."

"Thank you," I whispered with as much enthusiasm as a whisper can have. "I'm very grateful for your help and I owe you my life." Then I turned to Kecáshah. "I'm so thankful that you were able to see that my mother was OK. I was sick with worry."

"It's our pleasure, little one," Kecáshah replied in a deep, bass voice.

Telacki hopped to her feet and motioned for me to come along into the daylight outside. As I moved through what I thought was the mirage that covered the cave entrance, a wave of lightheadedness hit, causing me to stagger and almost fall as I exited the cave. When I lurched forward, I looked back, only to see the sheer rock cliff behind me. There was no longer any sign of an entrance to the cave, which blew my mind. I looked around the sunny little clearing, ringed by giant evergreens, and decided it looked like the tiny meadow where Chima found me.

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“Oh, you hairless ones, so sensitive to everything,” Telacki quipped about that time and then giggled as she gave me a playful shove. “We have powers, you know, and your kind doesn’t tolerate them very well. We use our energy to create a type of portal that allows us to go through solid rock to reach our caves underground. There are several types of portals, but this kind is to protect our homes. If there’s already a natural opening into the cave, then it can also be concealed using our energy to look and feel like rock. That’s why you feel strange when you encounter this. In fact, most of the time when your kind comes in contact with our power, you feel dizzy, though sometimes it can make you nauseated or disoriented.” Telacki laughed again when she saw me shaking my head.

“So that’s why I feel so strange around you! It’s so weird. Last night I was terrified, but suddenly I felt numb, even though my heart was still beating like crazy.”

“Oh, that was just Mother. She knew you were afraid so she sent her power to make you relax,” Telacki continued, waving her hand as if such a feat were nothing. “We can stay outside, but there are rules. We can’t go out of Na-ashi’s sight.”

I was still trying to digest all of this unbelievable information that Telacki was throwing my way. My mind just couldn’t conceive of it, so I pushed it aside for information I could handle.

“Where’s Na-ashi? I don’t see him.”

Telacki pointed to the top of a large cliff in the distance. “He’s up there.”

Sure enough, standing still under a large fir tree, I saw Na-ashi. He was so distant that he didn’t appear to be more than a tiny red dot.

“He’s so far away,” I said. “How can he see us?”

“Don’t worry. He can sense where we are at all times. And, he can hear our thoughts so he’ll know if we go too far or if there’s danger. It’s his day to watch.”

“What do you mean by *watch*? As in babysitting?” I asked, thinking that we were much too old for that.

“No,” Telacki replied with a giggle. “It’s his day to watch over the entire area along with the other sons. See Tamaka up there?” She pointed to a black spot atop the ridge on the other side of us. “We’re a clan, you see, and many other families live on this land. The sons each take turns, three at a time, watching the entire valley and down to the great water. They warn us if your kind is coming.

“In times past, they hunted us as well as the native peoples, but now, they’re usually hunting animals, although occasionally, there’ll still be one that tries to find us. Either way, we’re forbidden to reveal ourselves to them. The sons also watch for other dangers, like storms, so we can make it to our homes before the weather changes. I’m

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glad because I don't like the bright flashes and loud noises in the sky when it rains." Her eyes got big and her brows rose in fear as she explained.

My curiosity suddenly roared to life and I wanted to know everything. Telacki's eyes widened as she heard how many questions I was about to unleash.

"There are other Forest People here? How do you understand my thoughts? I heard your parents speak in a funny-sounding language last night— is that your language? Why can't you talk to other people? You're talking to me."

Telacki held up her hand and had a pained expression on her face.

"Wait— I'll tell you as best I can, but slow down so I can answer before you ask me more questions. I understand that your kind prefers to speak out loud, so I'll speak to you in that way."

"First, yes, many Forest People live in this land, along with other types of peoples and spirits, too. For example, the Fish People live in the ocean and conceal themselves from your kind as well. Our families live in peace with each other as well as the other peoples and in harmony with the land. That is, with the exception of the mountain clan since they're a clan of criminals. We're an ancient people and have lived here for thousands of years. We have great gifts that our Creator gave our fathers' fathers when we were born as a people long ago. One of those gifts is to read minds and to speak to minds. We have many other gifts, also, as well as our own language as you heard. It's spoken much faster than yours," she said as she blew a stray hair from her mouth and brushed it from her face.

"We know all of your languages since that's one of our gifts and we can communicate with any hairless tribe, if need be. When we're young, the teachers in our clan also escort us to be close to your people. Hidden away, we read their thoughts and hear them speak so we can practice the language and learn a little about your culture. It's a type of school for us in case we ever need to communicate with your kind— like you, for instance. We are, for the most part, forbidden to interact with the hairless ones, though. This is for our safety since your kind makes war and has also hunted us, like I told you. We were friends with the native peoples that used to live here and we traded with them, but your clans came and killed them and then made the survivors move to other lands. We watched in shame, but without going to war ourselves, we couldn't stop it. It was a very sad time." Telacki looked down and slowly shook her head as if she felt the shame herself before continuing.

"Our laws prevent us from harming or interfering with the lives of your people unless they harm one of us. Since the native peoples were your kind, we couldn't help or interfere in matters not involving us. There was a great mourning after this happened and we moved deeper into the forest to live. We didn't want to be around your people

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and we used our gifts to avoid them. When my mother was watching, she knew the wolves would kill you. She heard your fear and saw them stalking you. She couldn't bear to leave you to be torn apart by the pack. That's the one exception to our law – if a hairless one's in great danger, we can help." Telacki gestured toward the cave with her hand. "C'mon, you need to rest."

"Oh, OK." I was so freaked out by the information overload and my pounding headache that I really didn't know what to say, so for the rest of the day, I laid around, answering Telacki's questions about my world and trying to allow my body to recover. By the next morning, I was feeling much better and my bruises had begun to morph into a rainbow of colors.

This day was as gorgeous as the day before with sunlight streaming through the opening into the cave. I yawned and stretched, noticing the soreness from the accident had started to subside and my headache was gone. I thought about my mom and hoped she was OK as I pulled my hair into a fresh ponytail and stumbled into the front room since Telacki was still asleep.

Chima and Kecáshah were sleeping, tangled in each other's arms, forming a mosaic of ivory and russet. Shayka was nowhere to be seen and Na-ashi was just waking up. I saw a pile of berries on a flat rock by the small fire and Na-ashi motioned to them.

"Eat," he said, grinning. His captivating smile always seemed to somehow make me blush, most likely because I kept catching myself staring at his nearly naked, buff body. Knowing that he probably knew what I was thinking only made it worse.

About that time, Telacki walked into the room and joined me by the fire for our breakfast of berries. As I ate, I thought about home. I fought back tears because I missed my family and worried about my mother. I knew Telacki understood my thoughts and felt my pain so I was grateful that she didn't acknowledge it this time since I wanted to suffer in silence.

I thought in turn about each of my family members, Patrick with his insufferable teasing and of course, my mom. She was always so full of life, but I worried about her under the circumstances. She worked from home until recently, having acquired a small gallery in an upscale area that she probably wouldn't be able to enjoy, considering everything. I also missed my dad. He was strong and the pillar of our family. I knew that Mom would be clinging to him for the support she needed to survive my disappearance and recover from her injuries. Of course, I thought about Garrett also. *What's he thinking? Will he still want to date me or does he even care?* I couldn't stand my own thoughts.

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Telacki and I finished our breakfast in silence, sitting on the tan stone floor of the cave near the fire. I was the first to stand and walk toward the opening and out into the sunshine. I anticipated the wave of lightheadedness this time and made it through the portal without staggering. Once I was outside in the little meadow, I looked back and noticed a pile of leaves and roots on a rocky outcropping. Telacki appeared behind me within seconds and motioned toward the ledge, having heard my mental question.

"These plants are for winter food and medicine," she explained. "We dry them in the sun and then store them in the rooms further back in the cave where it's cool and dark. We dry meat, too, so that when the weather is cold and snowy, we'll have plenty to eat."

"Oh, I see." I nodded. "What did you have planned for today? I'm so dirty. How do you stay clean?"

"That decides it. I had something else in mind, but instead, we'll go for a swim. It'll be cold for you, but it'll feel great to me. C'mon. Follow me!"

I sprinted after Telacki, who ran down a path parallel to the rock cliff where the cave was located. After a couple of minutes of running down a trail through the dense forest, we found ourselves in a small clearing surrounded by cottonwood and fir trees. Tumbling off of the steep rocky outcropping high above us was a ribbon-like waterfall that plummeted into a rock-lined pool below. The tiny lake overflowed into a stream that gurgled and disappeared into the forest. At the foot of the falls, near the base of the cliffs was lush, green vegetation of all sorts, fed by the spray produced by the waterfall. The little meadow surrounding it had a rainbow of wildflowers and various sized rocks scattered in the grass. I assumed that the rocks must've fallen from the cliffs above as I took in the magnificent view. *This place is absolutely gorgeous. I wish I lived here!* I thought as I stared in awe.

Telacki climbed the rock precipice with incredible speed and agility before springing from the heights, diving in a graceful arc into the clear water near the base of the falls. I gasped, thinking she was crazy for diving from such heights but momentarily, she surfaced nearby, splashing water at me as I stood at the water's edge.

"Come on in, Gracie!" she yelled above the roar of the falls. "The water's perfect."

I removed my shoes and jumped in, clothes and all. I felt that my clothes needed a good wash anyway.

"It's freezing!" I shrieked as I surfaced, causing Telacki to laugh loudly.

As I swam, I caught glimpses of fish in the crystalline water. They appeared to have a silvery glimmer from the reflected sunlight that flashed brilliantly when they turned. I tried to swim after them, thinking it would be fun to catch one, but of course,

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they were too fast. When I surfaced, I saw Telacki watching me. She was clearly amused.

Telacki moved in the water with little effort, diving and swimming underwater mostly. I was a good swimmer, but I couldn't help but marvel at how she could hold her breath for such extended periods. The first time she went under and out of sight, it frightened me because I thought she might be drowning when she didn't resurface. She sensed my panic, though, and swam to the surface, splashing water at me again. We both laughed, though I was more relieved to see that she was alright.

"I feel like a block of ice, so I'm getting out," I told Telacki when she resurfaced, leaving the water to sit on a nearby rock in the bright morning sunshine.

Telacki was right about the water being freezing, I thought as I sat on the rock, shivering. Fortunately, the sun was warm and there was no wind. Telacki continued to jump and spin, diving into the sparkling water while I thawed out. I decided watching her was almost as much fun as swimming.

As I perched on the large, gray rock with my knees pulled to my chest, I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned quickly, looking into the edge of the forest, but there was nothing to be seen, though I was sure I'd seen something tan in the shadows. A few moments later, I sensed movement again, just out of sight.

"Telacki, there's something out here!" I yelled as fear washed over me. She immediately bounded from the water and raced to me.

"I keep seeing something move in the tree line," I whispered as Telacki stood dripping beside me.

"What is it? Can you tell?"

"No, but I think it's tan."

We scanned the shadows cast by the line of evergreens, looking for movement. Suddenly, Telacki pointed to a large cougar, crouching close to the ground, stalking us from behind some tall grass. When I saw it, I shrieked and tried to run, but Telacki grabbed me.

"Hold onto me!" she hissed as I felt a swirling sensation in my head. My body felt heavy, as if it were made of stone as I gulped to suppress a wave of nausea. I watched in disbelief as the big cat immediately stood from her crouched position. She'd been ready to spring at us, but now she seemed as confused as I was. The cougar stood very still, sniffing the air for a few moments, her tail flicking back and forth as she stared in our direction. Finally, the large cat slowly turned and walked to the pool, looking both ways before lowering her head to drink.

I held my breath, afraid to breathe or even look at anything other than the cougar as my heart tried to leap from my chest.

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"What just happened?" I whispered when I finally exhaled.

"Look at yourself, and tell me what you see," Telacki said, her voice almost inaudible.

I looked down at my body, but saw nothing! I was completely invisible!

"How'd you do that?! I can't see myself! I can't even see you!" I exclaimed as I heard Telacki giggle.

"I told you we had powers! Do you want to do something fun?" she asked as she poked me playfully with her elbow.

"Sure, but can we do it far away from that hungry cougar?"

"Why? Don't you like cats?" Telacki teased.

I shook my head and frowned at the joke.

"Very funny," I squawked sarcastically, too scared by the encounter to find humor in anything.

"Follow me." Telacki giggled again as she dragged me along by the hand, clearly enjoying my confusion.

It felt weird, walking in a cloaked state as we started down the trail. It wasn't easy since I couldn't see my feet and I tripped a few times over fallen limbs as we made our way through the forest. We held hands since I couldn't see Telacki and didn't want to lose her.

We walked down a winding, shady trail while large spruce branches created a green archway over the path. The sunlight peeked through, forming a living mosaic of shadows and light that danced on the ground in front of us in a gentle breeze as the trees rustled above. I admired the magnificence of the forest as we walked. I decided I loved its natural beauty more than anything I'd ever seen, even though it was dangerous and I sometimes felt I was living in a constant state of fear.

As we continued our way down the path, we came upon a doe with her newborn fawn. To my surprise, Telacki pulled me toward the fawn. Even if they couldn't see us, I thought the deer would surely hear us coming, but I soon realized I couldn't even hear myself walking. We drew closer until we stood within reach of the fawn.

Gracie, touch the fawn, I heard in my head.

I hesitated and then reached for the tiny animal. It bucked suddenly with its back humped up, startling me. I almost tripped as I made a hasty retreat. I heard Telacki laughing in my mind as I watched the confused fawn bolt back to its mother. As we walked back to the trail, we both laughed at the fawn's reaction as we continued our invisible game.

"Do you want to see some more animals?" she asked.

"I'd love to. This is so cool!" I was still thrilled about touching the fawn.

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We passed other animals along the way, none of which had any idea we were so close to them. There were rabbits and a skunk as well as a family of raccoons. We kept our distance from the skunk, since surprising it could turn into a smelly experience. Telacki pushed her luck by touching a large black bear. I stood back in the shadows, too afraid to go near it. It was a huge male, already fat from the spring's offerings, with a shiny black coat that rippled when he moved. Telacki laughed when he jumped and grunted with surprise when she touched him before racing invisibly back to where I was hiding.

Our game of spying on the forest creatures continued for a while. I loved animals, so I couldn't get enough. Seeing wildlife so close up without them being afraid was so cool.

In the end, hunger and weariness persuaded us to head back to the cave. As we walked slowly through the forest, another wave of lightheadedness washed over me when Telacki removed the cloaking. I grinned, amazed that I could see my own feet again. Telacki laughed noisily at my surprised expression. I shoved her, giggling with her as we raced back to the cave at top speed, at least for me.

4

Zakima



It was dusk and the western sky looked as if it'd been painted with oranges, blues, pinks, and purples atop the tall evergreens when we arrived at the cave entrance. Of course, I only saw the rock face of the cliff as we approached. I hesitated before following Telacki through the portal. Once again, I felt lightheaded as I walked into what appeared to be a solid rock wall.

"Telacki, can you see the entrance?" I asked as she stepped through it.

"Of course, but only because I know it's there. Our kind feels it more than sees it. That way, others with gifts have trouble finding the entrance portals and it keeps us safe. They have to concentrate on the spot to know if it's there. With all of the rocks and cliffs, it's hard to find them."

"But I saw it when Chima first brought me here."

"That was because she made it so you could see. Otherwise, you would've panicked, thinking she was running into the rock."

I just shook my head, human understanding failing me.

Chima was waiting for us as we entered the cave. She and Kecáshah had slept most of the day after their hunt the night before.

"Did you girls have a good time?" she asked, though I could tell she already knew the answer.

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"It was really cool, Telacki made me invisible so I could touch the animals!" I gushed as I glanced around, noticing that Shayka was holding an infant.

"Oh, a baby! How precious! May I see her?" I asked. Chima nodded, so I walked over to where Shayka was sitting.

The child looked like it was very young since its russet colored hair was sparse and it was all head, hands, and feet. The baby squirmed in Shayka's arms and reached toward me, managing a mostly toothless grin.

Shayka looked concerned, so I looked back at Chima.

"It's alright, go ahead, she told me, so I cautiously approached the baby. The old woman glared at me and held the infant tightly. I wasn't sure what to do since Shayka obviously wasn't going to let me hold the child, so I reached out and stroked the baby's head as she babbled and drooled in pleasure at my touch.

"Hey, little one. Aren't you a pretty girl?" I cooed. All the while, my hair was standing on end and I felt completely creeped out by Shayka and her red eyes.

Telacki, sensing the question in my mind, explained.

"The baby's name is Talima. She's my niece. My sister, Mallati, and her husband have gone hunting so we're babysitting."

Talima drooled and smiled again. Shayka picked a leaf from a vine basket beside her and crushed it in her hand to release its sap before giving it to the baby. Talima smacked on the leaf and grinned. I thought about my friend, Annie, and her little sister back in New York, concluding that the leaf must relieve the pain babies experience when teething.

As I continued stroking Talima, two more Forest People entered the cave. The female growled immediately and charged toward me at lightning speed. Chima was faster, though, and tackled her before she could hurt me, shouting something at the woman in their strange language as they tumbled to the floor of the cave, rolling and struggling with each other and emitting snarls and growls. Shayka backed against the cave wall, carrying Talima with such speed that I couldn't even remember seeing her move, while Kecáshah's blue eyes flashed red when the black-haired male dropped a couple of rabbits he was carrying and started to race toward me. Kecáshah grabbed him by the neck, restraining him before he made it very far.

Telacki stood frozen, horrified by the sudden turn of events as her father restrained the newcomer. I jumped to my feet, wanting to run, but I couldn't seem to move, instead, I crumpled to the ground, shaking violently and almost passed out. I couldn't seem to make my heart slow down, either, as it hammered in my chest. All of the color must have drained from my face as I struggled to catch my breath because I

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noticed Telacki gaping at me with a worried look on her face. Regardless, I was about to faint and vomit at the same time I was so afraid.

“Gracie, Talima is Mallati’s first born and when she saw you near her, it frightened her very much. She wouldn’t have intentionally hurt you, but she was planning to toss you across the room away from Talima. Your kind is much more easily hurt than we are, so I had to stop her. Please don’t be frightened.” Chima’s voice was calming as she spoke.

I’m so sorry Mallati frightened you. I hope you’re not mad at me and my family, Telacki chimed in almost instantly, but only in my mind.

I felt the sincerity of their verbal and mental apologies, but I still couldn’t find my voice. I was shaken to the core and still felt considerably nauseated and dizzy, not to mention terrified. I gasped for air while I watched Telacki’s sister glare at me with murderous red, glowing eyes.

As I slowly regained some degree of control, I couldn't help but notice that Mallati was a stunning creature. She was by far the most unique of any of the Forest People I’d seen. Her ivory complexion was flawless, and her hair was shiny and honey blonde. Her finely chiseled features and willowy grace would’ve been the envy of any runway model. I couldn’t understand how she could appear so lovely and yet be so dangerous.

About that time, Kecáshah slowly released Mallati’s mate from his grip.

“Gracie, this is Zakima from the clan that lives in the mountains. His people detest your kind. He was very upset when he saw you, and even more so, since you were near Talima.”

Kecáshah’s blunt explanation made me very uncomfortable and I shrunk back as I stared at Zakima. His appearance was striking, the male version of his wife’s beauty and just as deadly. The shiny, blue black hair on his tall, slender frame contrasted with his pale gray skin and red, glowing eyes as he glared at me. I felt an explosive rage radiating from him that only added to my terror since I wasn’t sure what to do. As I considered my options, Chima pushed out a wave of her energy.

Immediately, I felt a little lightheaded and my mood shifted from petrified to calm. I thought it was strange that Chima could have such an effect simply by looking at me with the same glowing, green eyes that I’d seen when she rescued me. I was thankful for the comfort, though, regardless of how I’d received it. Even though I felt better, I was still worried and watched as a still outraged Zakima quickly stalked over to Mallati, his angry stare never leaving me. His eyes continued to emit red light, but at least it wasn’t as bright as before. Mallati was watching me also, but she soon shifted her attention to Talima, who’d begun to cry. She caressed the infant’s head and then

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touched Talima's forehead to her own. The crying stopped instantly. I wondered what the "touching heads" thing did, remembering Chima and Kecáshah touching that way like some bizarre ritual. About that time, Chima shook me from my stupor.

"Are you hungry, Gracie?" she asked, trying to diffuse the tension in the air.

"No. Thank you." Even though I felt calm, I could barely manage to answer. Truthfully, the ordeal with Mallati left me feeling exceptionally weak and I couldn't understand why my reaction was so extreme.

"If it's OK, I think I'll go to bed," I said, wanting to get as far away as possible. I nodded to Telacki before stumbling into the small room and onto the pile of leaves and grass, wrapping myself in the soft fur of the animal skins.

Back in the main room, Zakima was still angry. I watched through the doorway as he stalked back and forth and complained bitterly to Kecáshah, insisting that having me there was a danger to the entire clan.

"Back in the old days of my clan," he growled. "They would've made a feast of her." I heard him say.

Terror crushed me like an avalanche, realizing that maybe my days were numbered since he must be a cannibal. I sat up in the bed and shook, holding my stomach as it rolled.

"How can I escape? I have to get out of here, but how?" I muttered under my breath.

It seemed that Zakima's comment upset Kecáshah since his eyes suddenly flamed red and he took a step toward Zakima, staring him down as he spoke in a harsh tone to his son-in-law.

"Zakima, you are of our clan now. You must live as we do or return to your people without Mallati. The child's kind moves closer each year. If they were to discover our secrets, and if they thought we were killing their kind, there would be a war, a war that we might not win. At the very least, we'd be forced to abandon our homes and move north to the hard country where there are few of their kind. For us, it's better to stay here for now, where there is much food. It's essential that we remain kind and return the child when we find where she belongs, so there will be good reports of us instead of bad, should she tell them about us."

"As you wish, my father, though I strongly disagree," Zakima replied in a restrained voice, grimacing as he spoke. As soon as the exchange with Kecáshah ended, Zakima turned and stormed out of the cave. Mallati, carrying Talima, hurried after her husband.

I could see a worried look on Chima's face as she reached out to Kecáshah, laying her hand on his arm.

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"Do you think he'll hurt the hairless child? His clan harbors so much hatred for their kind. I could feel it in him. I'm afraid for her. What do you think, Kecáshah?" she asked in a low voice that was hard for me to hear.

Deep in thought, Kecáshah was silent for a moment.

"I don't think he'll hurt her. It means death for him if he kills her since she is an innocent and has done us no wrong. He loves Mallati and Talima and he would lose them if he broke our laws. He knows he would either have to escape back to his clan, who would probably kill him also, or be executed here. I believe the love for his mate and daughter will prevail. Nevertheless, we must watch and listen in case I'm wrong. I don't think we should completely trust him. When he spoke, his mind delighted at the thought of the hairless child's death," he answered, shaking his head in dismay as he stared at Chima.

Shayka watched the entire commotion while sitting against the wall on the far side of the room, eyes still glowing red which creeped me out even more.

At least Kecáshah didn't want me dead, but now, I was terrified of Zakima and I didn't trust Shayka either. I also realized I wasn't as safe as I thought. Tears filled my eyes as I wished for home.

When Telacki came to bed, I asked her about what I'd heard.

"Do you think Zakima will hurt me?"

"No, he was just upset. My father knows that he came to us from a clan of criminals that has no qualms about killing the hairless ones, though. They consider your kind inferior, even though they're prized when captured because they believe they receive power from consuming them. It's said that the clan no longer practices cannibalism, but my father doesn't believe it. Zakima's words came too easily in his opinion. His values and beliefs are completely at odds with the philosophies of our clan, but he knows Zakima's love for Mallati brought him to us. He didn't appreciate Zakima's remarks, though, and oftentimes wishes Mallati had chosen a different mate. His influence on her sometimes sways her judgment. He knew she never would've charged you if it hadn't been for him."

"I can't help it. I'm really scared of him. He's so black and his eyes were so red. It made me think he looked like something out of a horror movie."

"A what?"

"Never mind. Will you help me hike out of here? I really want to go home, especially after this. I'm afraid to stay."

"Don't be, Gracie, it'll be fine. No one'll hurt you, I promise. Father's just unhappy with Zakima anyway. After he and my sister chose each other, Zakima talked her into moving away into seclusion away from our family. This upset Father and now

From the Desk of Melanie F. Reed Phantom Forest - Befriended

that he has a grandchild, the distance between our homes has become an even greater issue since he and Mother want to be a part of Talima's life. He can't do anything about it, though, except keep suggesting that they move closer so he and Mother can babysit Talima. Tonight, however, he could insist that Zakima abide by his rules when it comes to you since you're a guest in our home."

"I understand, but that's not all, Telacki. It also makes me uncomfortable the way Skayka looks at me. Why does she hate me so much?"

"She doesn't hate you. Grandmother just wishes Mother had left you in the meadow. When she was younger, the white soldiers that massacred the native people also tried to kill what few Forest People they'd seen. To Grandmother, those memories are agonizing since my grandfather, Keoloki, was shot in the leg by one of the white soldiers. She hates your kind because of his painful lifelong limp resulting from the shooting. So, she's unhappy you're here, but I am," Telacki encouraged.

"Thanks, Telacki. I'm sorry I've caused such problems for your family."

"Don't worry, they won't hurt you and you haven't caused any problems. I'm really glad you're here. It's exciting to learn about your world and to have someone my age to talk to. Go to sleep. I'll plan something fun for tomorrow."