

1

Adjusting



I woke suddenly, startled by my surroundings. For a moment, I had no idea where I was. I sat up in bed with a start, my red hair sticking out in all directions. I blinked my eyes repeatedly as I blushed from the sudden rush I felt, awakening to unfamiliar surroundings. As my bedroom slowly came into focus, it seemed strange since I hadn't slept here in more than six months. I shook my head as memories of the prior evening flooded my mind. I was home, returned to my family and back to civilization against my will. I'd told Chima I wanted to stay with them in the forest, but they wouldn't listen. Until I was of age, I'd be forced to live amongst my own kind.

Though I'd missed my family something awful and was happy to see them, I missed Zari even more. I fought back tears as I debated whether to run into the forest, screaming for him at the top of my lungs or whether to ride out this forced separation. Sunlight streamed in filtered rays through the east window of my bedroom as I thought of Zari. My heart ached for him.

My dad was scientifically minded, so I knew he'd never believe that Zari or the Forest People existed, much less the fact that they had preternatural abilities. Mom was more open minded than my dad, so I hoped that after things quieted down, I might be able to at least confide in her since the deception I was living bothered me. I'd already racked my brain, trying to find a way to tell them about Zari without success, though I

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still hoped that with time, I could find an appropriate solution. Even if I told them and they believed me, it would still put the clan and most of all, Zari, in danger. The secret of their existence had to be kept.

As my thoughts turned back to Zari, I so wished he lived in my world. He looked human, although he was even more handsome than my kind. I pictured him in my mind with his large emerald green eyes, his face framed by the shock of shiny dark auburn hair that accented his light tan skin as it shimmered in copper waves to his waist. His face was beautiful, especially his eyes, along with a small, chiseled nose and full, soft lips. His exceptionally tall, slender frame revealed muscles that even Michelangelo would've wanted to sculpt. I sighed deeply at the vivid picture in my mind.

There was also his power or energy to be considered, supernatural gifts passed down eons ago from his ancestors. I'd only begun to unravel the mysteries surrounding these esoteric powers. Though he was fierce and protective of me, he was also tender and loving, a side of him most never saw. His gentleness was the antithesis of his aggressive side. Most of all, he was in love with me. My mind spun joyously as I reflected on the memories. My happiness was short lived, however, when Mom came bursting into my room, interrupting my thoughts and bringing me crashing back to reality.

I stared at her almost as if she were a stranger since I hadn't seen her in months. Her long, bright red hair was loosely pulled back, revealing her fair skin and blue eyes. She looked like I remembered her, though, and wore a hand embroidered peasant top of bright colors over blue jeans along with large cuff bracelets. I was happy to be home for her sake.

"Good morning, sunshine! Did you sleep well, now that you're back in your own bed?" she trilled as she entered the room. If she had been any happier, I thought she might burst.

"It was really great, Mom. I slept so well. That's certainly something I missed. It's much softer than leaves." I grinned at her, though I wished that she hadn't chosen to appear at that particular moment since it interrupted my thoughts of Zari.

"If you're up to it, we have a full day ahead. How are you feeling, baby?" Mom looked closely at me, trying to discern my mood before sitting beside me on the edge of the bed.

"I feel fine. What has to be done today, except buy some grain and hay for Lightning?"

"Ah yes, the horse." Mom smiled, but I knew she wasn't thrilled with Zari's gift even though it was a dream come true for me.

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"There's a lot to do today." Mom continued as she reached out, pushing the hair from my face and tucking it behind my ear. "You have to speak with the police. They need to take your statement since you were reported missing. I also need to warn you that there'll be a lot of TV reporters that are going to want to talk to you. Your disappearance made big news and with you suddenly reappearing, it's a huge story. I wish we didn't have to deal with them, but there's not a choice. After that, we need to see about getting you back in school, although we won't do that today. I think your dad wants to take you to Dr. Kelly for an exam to make sure you're OK."

"Argh," I growled. I'm just fine, Mom. I don't want to go to the doctor. There's absolutely nothing wrong with me and nobody's harmed me, I promise."

"Well, you'll have to take that up with your dad."

"I wish I hadn't come home. If I'd known I'd have to deal with all this, I would've preferred to stay in the forest. Life there's good and so simple, none of this pressure."

Mom leaned over and hugged me. "Oh, honey, it'll be ok. Like they say, your fifteen minutes of fame. It'll be over with before you know it."

"I know, but I still don't have to be happy about it."

"Well, how about you get ready and let's face the world, OK?" Mom rose to her feet and walked towards the door before turning back. "I love you, baby, and I'm so glad you're home and safe. I missed you so much. I'll do everything in my power to try and make this easy for you. I really do understand how hard it'll be. I'll see you downstairs in a bit."

"Ok, Mom, thanks." I shook my head, dreading the day more than anyone knew.

2

Explanations



I got out of bed and walked into my closet. It was odd to have a choice of clothing since living in the forest hadn't afforded me that luxury. I chose a pair of jeans and a lively green, flowered shirt that I liked and dressed hurriedly, grabbing a couple of bracelets as an afterthought. As I walked toward the door of my room, I caught a glimpse of myself in my full length mirror. Doing a double take, I stood in front of it, shocked at the sight. My jeans were loose, even baggy and too short, also. Though I'd glanced at myself in the bathroom mirror, I wasn't at all prepared for the sight that was before me. Here was the image of a young woman, tan and muscular, with red hair, sun bleached toward strawberry blonde. When I became lost the previous spring, I'd been ghostly white, with bright red hair. I'd never been particularly athletic outside of pitching for my softball team back in New York and it showed, but now, I couldn't believe my eyes. I was a stranger in comparison to how I visualized myself, since my only comparison was the memory of my appearance before my life in the forest.

"Hurry up, Gracie!" Mom's voice rang out from downstairs. I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as I headed out of my room.

As I started down the stairs, I heard running behind me. Patrick waved as he bolted past me, holding his wallet in his teeth and fumbling with his books.

Late as usual and living life on the edge. Some things never change, I thought as I laughed to myself.

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“Good morning, sleepyhead. We have a busy day in store,” my dad greeted me, not wasting any time. “First, we have to go to the police station so they can take your statement. Then I’m taking you to Dr. Kelly for a checkup and to Dr. Brian for a little chat to make sure you’re OK.”

“No! I don’t want to go to the doctor. There is absolutely nothing wrong with me. I’m healthy and happy to be home. Nothing bad happened to me at all. I just got home and you want to treat me like a lab rat. All of this makes me want to go back to the forest so you’ll just leave me alone!” I growled in anger.

My parents looked at each other, stunned, not expecting my angry response.

“Don’t speak to us in that tone,” my father asserted, though I could tell he was attempting to suppress his aggravation. “I’ll hold off on the exams for now. I know it’s overwhelming coming home after being lost for such an extended period of time. However, if, in my professional opinion, I feel you’re having any difficulties, I *will* take you to your doctor.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, looking down. “It’s just that I want to get back to my life. I don’t want all of the attention or to have to endure being put under a microscope. I was very lucky to have survived, but the day to day living was just that, nothing more. I scrounged for food and shelter. With it being summer, it made it easy. The hermit was a nice old man. He took me in and gave me warm clothes. I told him where I lived, and he brought me home, that’s all. He just wanted to remain anonymous. He doesn’t want the attention. I don’t blame him because I don’t want it either. It’d be the same circus for him if he came forward as it’s shaping up for me.”

“Honey, it’s going to be hard to re-adjust and I understand. We’re just trying to help you.” Mom reached for me and pulled me to her. “I promise to try and make it easy on you, but you just can’t avoid the police and there will, no doubt, be questions from the kids at school. You mustn’t get angry when somebody is curious about what happened. I’m sure there’ll be those that’ll say hurtful things also, so you also need to prepare yourself. Just remember, we love you and are behind you one hundred percent.”

“That’s right, pumpkin, we love you so much and are so worried about you. Anyway, we need to go down to the station and at least get that over with.” My dad was trying to sound less stern, invoking his pet name for me.

“OK, Dad, I’m ready,” I said, though the thought made my stomach roll.

“Don’t you want some breakfast first?” Mom asked.

“No, I just want to get this over with, so let’s go.”

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There was a strained silence as our silver Mercedes sped towards the police station. I was shocked when we pulled to a stop, seeing a humongous group of reporters and camera crews rushing the car. My dad turned to look at me.

"You don't have to say a word, just walk past them quickly. You don't owe them any explanations." His concern was obvious by the strained look on his face. Momentarily, his blue eyes flashed in anger as he glanced at the milling crowd.

"Let's just hurry," I said as we exited the car and pushed through the frenzied crowd of reporters and up a couple of steps into the modern, two-story, gray station house.

"We're here to see Sergeant Murphy," my dad said as he approached the window.

"It'll be just one minute, Dr. McKay, he's expecting you." The young woman with neatly ponytailed black hair looked toward me and smiled as she paged Sergeant Murphy before continuing. "I'm so happy to meet you, young lady. It's nice when we have a happy ending around here. Everyone had imagined the worst." She smiled again as Sergeant Murphy entered the foyer.

The sergeant was tall and blonde. He appeared to be in his thirties, but the wear from his job made him seem much older. He shook hands with my parents and then turned to me.

"So you're our miracle girl," he said as he grinned. "Gracie, my name is Sergeant Murphy. You can call me Matt, if that's OK." I could tell he was trying to put me at ease, though he was failing miserably. "Would you mind us having a little chat about what happened to you? It won't take too long, just a formality." He smiled warmly, but I felt his gaze probing every expression.

"Sure." I nodded, knowing I had no choice in the matter.

"Let's go to my office, OK?" Sergeant Murphy held the door open for me as we were buzzed through before turning down the hall toward his office.

I glanced back at my parents, hesitating. Mom smiled at me. "It'll be OK, don't worry. We'll be right here," she mouthed. I nodded at her as the door closed behind me.

The office was sparse, with only a family picture and a couple of Royal Canadian Mounted Police commendations on the side wall, the front and back walls being windowed. Sergeant Murphy offered me a chair and reached into his desk drawer for a recorder.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, just answer them honestly, OK?" He was more direct now and I fidgeted, uncomfortable in my surroundings. "There's no reason to be nervous, Gracie. I just need this to close your file, do you understand?"

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"I understand." I spoke with no emotion, though my heart was pounding so hard that I could hear it hammering in my ears.

As Matt continued to fiddle with his recorder, I suddenly heard a deep and concerned voice in my mind.

Are you OK? I feel you're upset! Tell me what's wrong, my love. Do I need to come to you? It was Zari, and he was worried because he'd picked up my anxiety. I flinched and almost panicked as I tried to concentrate hard enough to send a reply.

I'm fine, just having to tell the story about being lost. It's hard for me to lie convincingly. I miss you! I was barely able to send the thought when Matt began his questioning.

"Did you have any arguments with your parents before you became lost in the forest?"

I knew instinctively where this was going.

"No, I love my parents, and we get along just fine. I didn't try to run away, if that's what you're thinking." I was angry at the insinuation.

"Gracie, please understand, I have to ask these questions to make sure there's no wrongdoing on anyone's part." He smiled at me again, trying to set me at ease, though my skin crawled and I was anything but calm. "Tell me how you got lost, OK? The 911 operator told you to stay where you were and keep your cell phone on."

"I'm sure you know that we're from New York," I began. "The battery on my cell phone died. I couldn't understand it because it was charged, so I thought it must have been damaged in the accident. I was worried about my mother and I thought I knew the way back to where we had the accident. Next thing I knew, I was lost. I had no concept of time or direction. I was so scared. Anyway, I kept walking, but only went further into the forest, I guess. I slept out that night and tried to go toward the ocean over the next days since I believed it was closer than heading back toward Nanaimo. I thought I could flag down a ship or find someone at the beach. Anyway, I ate berries. When I got to the beach, I ate clams and drank from a nearby stream. I found a small cave that served as a shelter." I told my story as calmly as I could, while looking around the office in order to appear calm and detached. I was desperate to look and sound convincing.

"I kept thinking somebody would come, but they never did. I was afraid to go back into the forest because of bears and mountain lions, so I just lived near the beach. I lost track of time and just lived day by day. The cliffs were too rugged to walk down the beach away from the cove where I lived, so I just stayed. Eventually, this scruffy old man came along. I think he was a homeless guy. He took me to his place and gave me some clothes and helped me get home. That's about it."

Matt was unconvinced. "Gracie, you mean to tell me you lived for all of that time by yourself? I find that difficult to believe."

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"That's how it was, whether you believe me or not. I've read a lot, and I'm not stupid." I could tell Matt wasn't buying my story and I couldn't help but be defensive.

"I didn't say you were stupid, but there are people that are experienced woodsmen that have perished trying to live like you said you did. I don't think you're telling me the entire story." Matt stared hard at me, making me fidget in the chair.

"Well then, I guess I was just lucky." I tried to keep my cool, but underneath, I was shaking and my stomach churned. I eyed the window and wished I could dive through it to escape the Inquisition. I wanted to be anywhere but sitting as a captive in Matt's office. My mind drifted to the forest and for a moment, I thought about running away, returning to the people I loved, but I was soon jarred back to reality by Matt's next question.

"Tell me about the hermit. Did he hurt you in any way? What was his name, and where does he live? Can you describe him to me?" I cringed at the dialog, but took comfort in the fact that they would never find him. I laughed humorlessly to myself at the deception.

"Let me think," I began. "He was old and bent. He had gray hair, and he was short with a beard. He was generally unkempt and lived pretty far from the beach. His house was more of a homemade shack and was deep in the woods. He'd come to the beach to dig clams. His name was Bo. He never told me his last name, and I didn't ask. He wore an old military jacket. I think he must have been a soldier once. I think his experience in war made him want to live away from people, but I don't know for sure. He was very kind to me. I stayed with him until he located my house. I'd given him the address. He had an old truck that he drove to the side of the woods behind my house where he dropped me off. He said he'd had enough of the human race and made me promise not to have anyone bother him. He was more than glad to help me, though. He was absolutely kind and generous. He didn't touch me or in any way do anything inappropriate. I'm so thankful for him. If he hadn't found me, I would've died with winter coming. I was beginning to have trouble staying warm." I smiled as convincingly as possible as Matt watched me closely.

"What about the horse?" he asked.

Ugh, I thought. I'd forgotten about Lightning since I was concentrating on convincing Matt. It was hard, trying to fabricate the stories and remember them well enough to repeat them consistently. Trying to explain Lightning further complicated matters.

"Bo loaded him in the back of his truck and brought him with me. I couldn't leave him. When I found him, he was by himself. I don't know where he came from. I assume that he was from a band of wild horses. He was thin and obviously orphaned. I kept

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him with me in the cave. When he would lay down, I would lay down with him for heat. I gathered food for him. We became friends. Please don't take him away. Without him being there, I wouldn't have survived," I pleaded in earnest.

"That's not our intention unless somebody claims him. At this late date, I doubt that'll happen. Where you live is zoned for livestock, so there shouldn't be any problem with you keeping him." Matt smiled at me this time. Apparently, he'd felt the honesty in my love for the colt. "Is there anything else you can tell me? Your story just seems too easy, too simple." He tried to speak softly to cushion the fact that he didn't believe me.

"No, that's what happened. I really don't remember the day to day of it. Like I said, I really lost track of time." I smiled at him again, hoping to convince him.

"OK, then, young lady. We're done. If you remember anything else, feel free to call me. I'd really like to know the rest of the story." Matt handed me his business card as he rose to escort me back to the foyer.

"OK, I will," I replied, having no intention of calling him.

I cursed the fact that I was such a crappy liar and wasn't fooling him or anyone else for that matter.

When we reached the foyer, Matt asked my father to come to his office, leaving me with my mom.

"Are you alright? I'm so worried about you."

"I'm fine, just didn't like his attitude. He didn't believe me, I think. I'm just glad it's over." I sighed as Mom put her arm around me.

"Honey, you have to realize it's nothing short of a miracle that you survived all of that time by yourself in the wilderness. It's difficult for all of us to fathom." She brushed the hair back from my face. "I believe you, but if you've anything else to say to me that you haven't, you know that whatever you tell me is safe with me. I promise I won't even tell your father."

"Mom, I really appreciate that. Just know that I'm fine and all's well. I'm unharmed and really glad to be home." I reached out and grabbed her, clinging to her as the stress undid my emotions along with the added hope that perhaps someday, I might be able to confide in her.

###

The swarm of news people hovered around us as we left the police station. Sergeant Murphy had agreed to hold a press conference to address my return and ask the media to give us our privacy. I was glad he was handling it since the less I had to say, the better.

There were more news people waiting at our house when we returned home. My dad also asked that they give us our privacy, only stating that he and Mom were

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thrilled that I'd survived my ordeal and was home safely. He declined to answer any more of their questions, even though they crowded around him and kept yelling their queries at him and me. It was difficult to get through the throng of reporters as we forced our way through the group and into the house.

I was mentally exhausted. I raced to the backyard, whistling at Lightning as I exited the French doors. He trotted to me and nuzzled me as I hugged him in return, taking in his scent. I loved how he smelled of that certain sweetness horses have. *He's so beautiful*, I thought as I admired him, his brilliant black and white tobiano coloration exquisite. I felt peace when I was with him outdoors. About that time, a reporter and his cameraman rounded the corner of the house, looking into the backyard. He began yelling questions at me as I ran into the house.

3

Plans



It was Wednesday, and I asked if I could wait until Monday to start school. I wanted all of the news hoopla to evaporate before I had to face the inevitable. Mom agreed, so the rest of the week was spent shopping online for clothes that would actually fit me. I wasn't about to venture out to the mall. Meanwhile, Dad was having a paddock and barn built for Lightning, which thrilled me. I was re-acclimating and happy, except for the emptiness in my heart. I felt lost without Zari and Telacki. Communication had been spotty with them, at best, since they were in the middle of frantically gathering last minute food for the coming winter. I hadn't had time to communicate either, since my family was hovering over me constantly. I was almost frantic to see Zari, and the secret of his importance in my life was cutting a hole in my heart. I felt like I'd fall apart if I didn't get a chance to see both him and Telacki soon.

###

"I have some important news," Patrick announced at dinner that night. "I have a date with Mary Johnson Saturday night," he said smugly. "We're going to the movies downtown and out to dinner afterwards." Patrick made no bones that he liked the pretty brunette, but since he was relatively new to the school, it had taken him time to work up the courage to actually approach her, a problem he never had in New York. After all, he was a senior and was tall with a shock of blonde hair and baby blue eyes. On top of that, he was muscular and athletic. All of the girls swooned over him in New

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York, and he took full advantage of his popularity. It'd been an unpleasant surprise when he found that he wasn't the center of attention after the move to Vancouver Island. Nevertheless, he was obviously pleased with his newfound success as he grinned when he announced his news.

"Oh that's great, honey," Mom said as she smiled at him.

Dad wasn't so enthusiastic.

"You should've asked me first. Patrick, you know we have Dr. Marshall's retirement party on Saturday night. I don't want your sister to have to stay home alone."

"Oh, heavens yes, I'd forgotten all about that party!" Mom was quick to agree.

"I'll be *fine!*" I interjected vehemently. I was thrilled at the idea of some freedom. "You guys go and have a good time. I could use some space. After all, I got used to having alone time when I was lost. I kind of miss it." I was sick of the smothering I'd endured since my return. Besides, just maybe, it could be an opportunity to escape the house to see Zari and Telacki. My heart leapt as I was instantly filled with hope.

"I'm not about to leave you alone, young lady." Dad was resolute and unbending.

"Dad, I'll be seventeen soon and I survived for more than half the year alone in the wilderness. I don't think a night at home is too dangerous under the circumstances. Besides, you guys are driving me crazy, treating me like I'm fragile or something. I can't breathe without someone being right there to see if I'm OK or if I need something. There's nothing to fear here. There's a good alarm system and there are neighbors. And... I promise I won't burn down the house," I added quickly, trying to lighten the mood.

"Maybe she's right, Michael, we have been a little overprotective perhaps." Mom was usually my advocate and was generally easier on me than Dad. She seemed to understand what I was saying. "I think it'll be OK to let her stay by herself. It's just for the evening anyway. We can call and check in."

"Lilly, are you sure about this?"

"We used to leave her alone sometimes before. I don't think there's any harm now."

"I guess," Dad said after a lengthy pause, though he wasn't thrilled. "Gracie, do not leave the house, do you understand?"

"Yes, Dad, I understand. In fact, if it makes you feel better, I'll even wear my cell phone around the house so you can call me anytime during the evening and I'll answer on the first ring, OK?" I smiled at him with my most persuasive expression. Moreover, I was just thankful my mom had convinced him.

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“Oh!” Mom interrupted. “We had your cell phone turned off! We’ll get you a new phone and have it turned back on tomorrow. I was also thinking that maybe you’d like to go for your driver’s license also. I mean, since we missed doing it after your sixteenth birthday.”

“Thanks, Mom. That’d be great! If it’s OK, though, I’m going to turn in a little early tonight. I’m tired.” I forced a yawn, though I was in no way sleepy. I told them “Goodnight” and rushed up the stairs. I couldn’t wait to speak with Zari and Telacki.

I jumped in the middle of my queen sized bed and sat cross-legged, gathering my thoughts. *Zari, can you hear me?* I concentrated on Zari’s handsome face as I sent out my thoughts. *Please hear me!* Though my telepathic skills had become well developed during my time with the Forest People, the distractions associated with being back in civilization made it more difficult to concentrate effectively. It seemed all I could hear was the low noise of the TV downstairs, and it was maddening. Still, there was no answer from Zari that I could hear.

I wanted to cry, I missed him so much. Our communication had already been compromised since Zari had to guard his thoughts from his cousin, Zakima, since he disapproved of his relationship with the “hairless one” as he put it.

Telacki, can you hear me? I tried again. I hoped that if Zari didn’t hear me, at least Telacki would. I concentrated on Telacki’s face as I spoke in my mind. *Telacki. Telacki...* But, there was nothing, only silence.

I concentrated on her face again, but felt incredibly sad as I pictured her. I couldn’t understand why. Then it dawned on me, I was homesick, homesick for my forest family. A tear rolled down my cheek as I felt stabbing pain from our separation.

TELACKI! I screamed in my mind. I held my breath and listened intently. Then I heard it in the depths of my mind. *I’m here, how are you? I miss you!* It was Telacki. A wave of relief washed over me.

I’m OK, but I’m going nuts here. I shot the thought back. *My family hovers over me, and I’m having trouble getting any time alone to talk to you. I miss you and Zari so much. How are you?*

We’re all well. Telacki answered. *I miss you every day. I can’t even imagine how Zari feels.*

Have you seen him?

Yes, he’s miserable without you. I try to encourage him, but he just mopes around. Zakima’s upset with him over his attitude.

How about Moodray? Have you seen him? I asked.

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Yes, his family came for a visit during the large moon. I was so happy to see him. We've been speaking with our minds, so that helps. I felt Telacki's love for Moodray as well as sadness that they were so far apart.

I was thrilled, having finally connected with her, but I couldn't wait any longer to tell my news.

What are you and Zari doing three nights from now?

Why? What's happening?

I'll be alone that night. Do you think you and Zari can come for a visit? Please say yes, I miss you both so dreadfully that I feel like I can't breathe. I looked at the ceiling and closed my eyes, concentrating, not wanting to miss Telacki's response.

I'll make sure we're there. We'll wait for you at dusk so you can see to walk into the edge of the forest. We don't want you to get lost again! Telacki's excitement at the idea of the visit was palpable.

"Yes!" I forgot and shouted out loud for joy.

An immediate response drifted up from downstairs.

"Honey, are you OK?" Mom had heard me.

"I'm fine, Mom," I replied sheepishly.

I took a deep breath.

Telacki, I can't wait to see you and Zari. Tell Zari I love him, and I'll see him then. Goodnight!

Goodnight, my sister, we'll see you in three nights.

I sat in the middle of my bed as I felt sheer joy wash over me. Zari was coming, and so was Telacki. I couldn't wait until Saturday.

4

Reunion



If the week could've gone any slower, I couldn't imagine it. All I could think about was Zari and Telacki's upcoming visit. My head spun as I recalled times past with my forest family. I touched my lips, remembering Zari's first kiss and his loving embrace as he held me close, never wanting to let me go. I relived that memory now, over and over, not ever wanting to lose it to time.

What little solitude I was afforded by my now overprotective human family was precious since this was the only time I had to embrace the memories that I held so dear. As a result, I spent as much time as possible outside with Lightning in an effort to obtain the privacy I needed. At least I could confide in him, not to mention he brought back sweet memories of long rides with Telacki. More importantly, I remembered Zari giving me the colt when he and Telacki brought me home.

"Will this week ever end?" I whispered to Lightning as I brushed his mane. He turned his head and nuzzled me as if to agree.

Saturday finally arrived, and my heart was in my throat as I watched my parents drive away from the house. Patrick had already left for his date with Mary Johnson, but it seemed like forever before my parents departed for the retirement party. Their car wasn't even out of the driveway before I was call forwarding the phone to my cell phone. I wasn't going to waste a precious moment as I ran out of the house so rapidly

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that Lightning spooked when he saw me barrel out the French doors onto the patio before slamming the gate and racing to the tree line.

I held my breath as I ducked behind the brush and into the edge of the forest. I stood under the towering evergreens, taking in their sweet fragrance while looking around, waiting expectantly for Telacki and Zari. I wasn't disappointed. Almost as quickly, two forms materialized, removing their natural defense, the ability to cloak themselves and disappear. I raced to them, hugging them both before turning back to Zari. He embraced me and then kissed me, his warm, full lips on mine as I took in the warmth of his breath. "I missed you, my little one," he cooed in my ear as he pulled back, stroking my hair and calling me his pet name.

"Oh we've missed you so awfully!" Telacki spoke emphatically, interrupting the moment.

"We have! I don't know if I can stand this separation," Zari chimed in immediately. "Something has to change. Seven seasons of this will be my undoing."

I was so happy that I had tears in my eyes.

"I agree. I can't stand to be apart from you, either, but I don't know what we can do about it. I'm open to suggestions."

"Let's move deeper into the forest and we'll discuss it," Zari said as he looked around suspiciously, always my protector.

As we walked through the deep mosaic of shadows that drenched the moonlit forest, Zari held my hand and Telacki followed.

"I have an idea," I said as my eyes widened. "Instead of going into the woods, come back to my house. You can cloak until we're inside. We'll eat and make plans. Nobody's home, so it'll be great."

Zari and Telacki looked at each other with surprised expressions on their faces.

"Do you mean it?" Telacki was the first to ask.

"Absolutely!" I was vibrating with excitement.

"I think that'll be so much fun," Telacki gushed, grinning.

"I don't like it. It's too dangerous." Zari was less than enthusiastic with the idea of being so close to human civilization.

"Come on, Zari," I turned and faced him. "Pleeease?" I batted my eyes at him and stuck out my lower lip.

Zari frowned, but relented, chuckling at my exaggerated expression.

"OK, but just for a little while. What'll happen if your people return home unexpectedly? Have you thought of that?"

"They won't be able to see you. I'll get their attention while you escape out the door." I grinned, thrilled with my idea.

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As we walked back toward the house, I realized I was walking alone. They'd already cloaked. I giggled and reached out, grabbing Zari's invisible hand.

"This is going to be epic. I've never seen inside a hairless one's home." I could feel Telacki's excitement as she spoke.

Zari was quiet and still unconvinced. His previous upbringing in the clan of evil outcasts made him extremely cautious and overprotective. Most of all, he was distrustful of my people since he was taught hatred for them.

As we approached the house, Zari stopped.

"I'm not going any further," he hissed stubbornly.

"Nobody can see you, or even feel that you're around for that matter, Zari. What's wrong?" I stared where I thought Zari's face would be if he weren't invisible.

"There are cameras on your house. I sense them. We can't go near them. They're forbidden," Zari growled.

"You're invisible. A camera can only take a picture of something that can be seen. They're just there to keep us safe," I explained.

"Safe from what? Is there danger I know not about?" I felt Zari stiffen as I held his hand.

"No, it's just in case one of our kind decides to break into our house and steal something. Really, it's safe, I promise. Won't you trust me, Zari... after all that we've been through together?" I pleaded.

There was silence for a moment, but finally Zari let out a huge sigh.

"OK," he relented.

"Yes!" Telacki gushed. "Let's go, I'm so curious!"

I walked through the French doors into the house, followed by my invisible friends. "OK, you can uncloak now."

Telacki immediately became visible and her mouth dropped open in wonder as she surveyed the room.

"Your home is so beautiful!" she said as she caught her breath.

Moments later, Zari uncloaked and stared at me, clearly unhappy.

"This is so wrong. We shouldn't be here." His face bore a worried expression as he stood in the room facing me. He shifted slightly from one leg to the other, the outward manifestation of frayed nerves.

I hugged him and smiled. "It'll be alright, I promise." As I backed away, he still looked as if he were going to bolt from the room. It hurt me to see Zari in such a state, considering he was normally so brave. This time, the tables were turned, and though I understood, having been in his place in their realm not so long ago, I only hoped that

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with time he could adjust to my world. *There must be a way for us*, I thought as worry flooded my mind. Being together wasn't going to be as easy as I thought after all.