

DRAGONS
OF KAITSTUD
OMNIBUS

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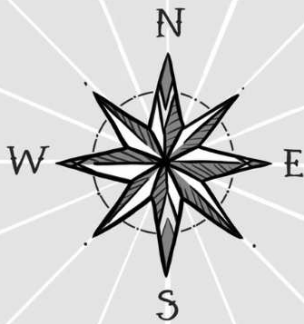
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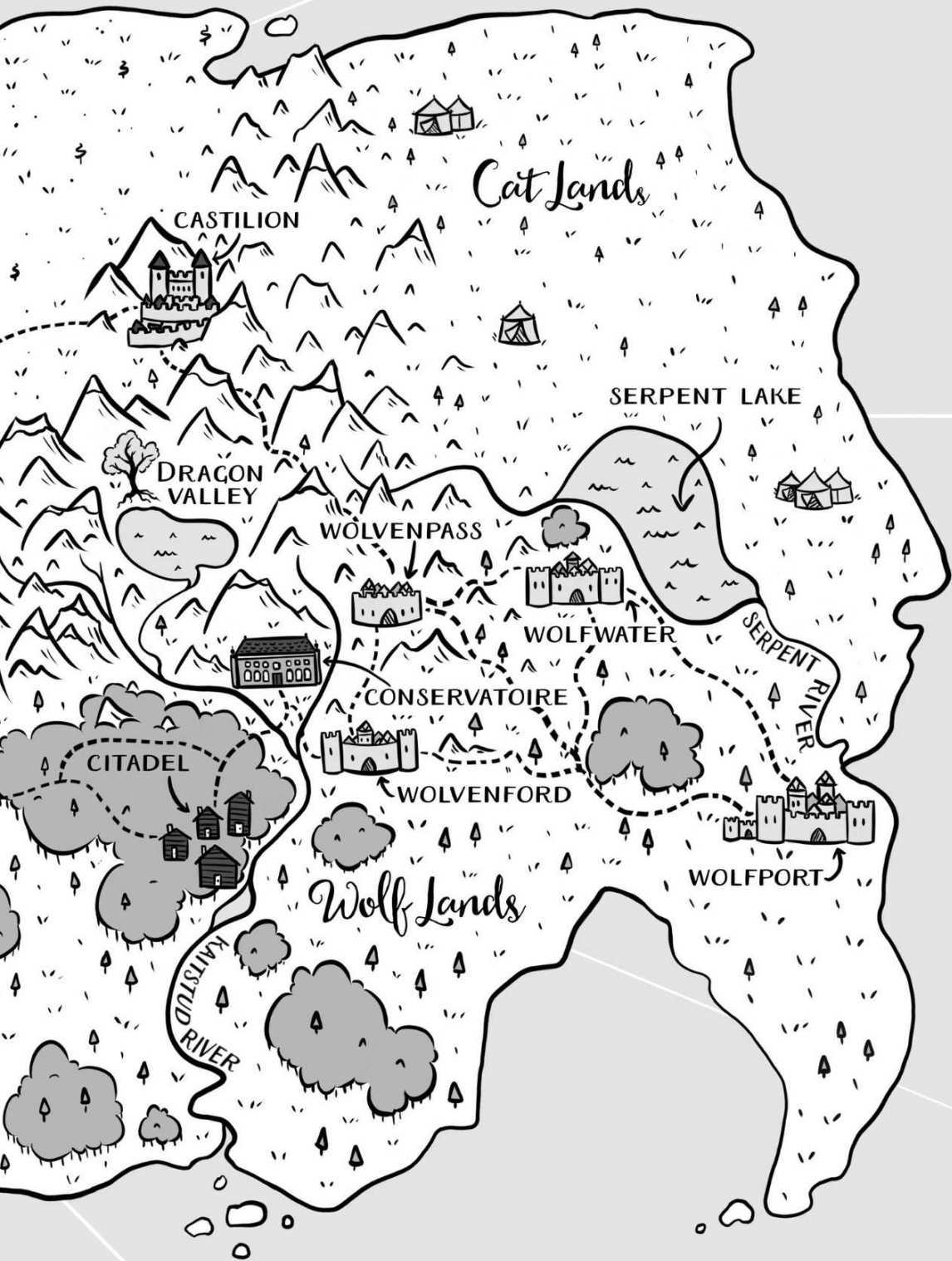
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This omnibus edition is dedicated to everyone who supported this on Kickstarter. Thank you for helping me to bring this to life!

*Please note: These stories are written in British English.
This is not a typo, just a reflection of my background.*



Kaitstud



DRAGON
SHIFT



MUSIC CHASED ITSELF THROUGH the trees. Sounds of a flute and a fiddle swooping and leaping around each other. First only a hint of a melody, but it grew stronger and undeniable. The unusual sound stopped Birgith's tidying away the remaining bread and cheese after breakfast. She had only nibbled at it with her nerves about the manifestation test that afternoon. The Bear Leader and his entourage were due to arrive about lunchtime, in preparation for the event. Did the sounds outside mean her uncle arrived earlier than expected?

Her stomach tied itself in knots as she saw a floatship through the window making its way along the path towards Littledenn. The long narrow wooden vessel floated about knee high along the forest paths, powered by the musical group sitting at the front. This ship had a small cover over the passenger area and was twice as big as any Birgith had seen before. Her heart sank, knowing this must be her uncle, the Bear Leader arriving.

She checked how much water had dripped through the water clock on the mantelpiece since her father had restarted it when he arose at dawn. "It's only three drogues since sunrise. They must have left the Citadel in the dark to get here now."

The measured flow of water from one bowl into the other gave structure to their days and reassurance that things followed each other.

“Come on, Birgith. We’d better see them arrive.” Her father’s gruff voice came from behind his beard. “Trust Otto to arrive early to keep us on our toes.” As the Bear Leader’s older brother, and the Lord Warden of the Forest, he would also play a role in the testing ceremony later that day.

They left their cottage on the outskirts of the village, and the door closed behind them with a resounding thud. They followed the path through the trees to the centre of Littledenn. As they drew nearer, the houses got closer together and the trees thinned, but never disappeared as the community was built within the forest. The green at the centre was a large open space with the communal buildings along the edges. They were squat with grass roofs to blend in with the surrounding foliage. Only the plumes of smoke from some chimneys gave away their location.

Birgith wasn’t looking forward to more people being in the village. The prospect of performing in front of the Bear Leader intimidated her enough. He never seemed happy with anything her father did, and that carried through to her too. Birgith’s stomach was jittery at the thought of the testing, so she took deep breaths to calm herself as they walked.

Littledenn didn’t have its own floatship, so this massive one caused lots of excitement among the children. They crowded around to watch as it floated in to the village centre and stopped by the mooring post outside the village chief’s house. The conductor and two players slowed the tempo of their song to prepare it to settle on the ground. Their music floated over the gathering crowd, who waited to welcome the new arrivals.

Once the floatship stopped all the children crowded around, stroking the wooden shell. The three Conservatoire members were the first to leave the ship and make their way to the player’s cottage. There was one in every village, available for players to use, though theirs didn’t get used often. The two players must be highly skilled to levitate a ship of that size. The precision of their music affected the power of magic, so the better the musicians, the stronger the magic they could perform.

Otto, leader of the Bear Clan, and his wife Thanca disembarked and headed straight to the village chief. The Bear Leader looked like a bear, with his ruddy skin and large frame. While his wife walked pale and delicate beside him, all pointy elbows and knees with a permanent look of disdain. The village chief smiled in welcome as they approached, her bright white teeth a contrast against her ebony skin. Her eyes widened at the five large men who followed them out of the floatship and stood awaiting further instructions.

Birgith poked her father before they got too close. “How many men has he brought with him?”

He humphed.

“Does he really think we’re that dangerous?”

He raised one eyebrow at her.

“OK, OK. I’ll be good.”

He smiled and shook his head as they continued toward the group.

Otto smiled thinly at them as they approached and winced when his brother clapped him on the shoulder.

“Brother, so good to see you.” Rupert, Birgith’s father, was all smiles and joy. He tried to counter his brother’s suspicion with positivity, hoping he eventually saw that they posed no threat to his position as Clan Leader. Birgith wasn’t convinced that it would work that way, but she went along with it.

“Rupert. Birgith.” He nodded at them. “So this is the summer you are tested. Are you looking forward to it? I can’t say I was when it was my turn, but then I knew what I would become. And that’s not the same for you, is it now?”

“No, Sir.” Birgith dipped her head to him. He was right, though not for the reason he thought. Birgith knew her heritage, she just didn’t know which of the two would show: bear or dragon. And only one of those was safe to become.

Her father had unknowingly fallen in love with the last remaining dragon and then been left with their daughter to raise. The knowledge that a dragon had survived the purge hundreds of summers before and still lived in Kaitstud would have started a hunt to finish the genocide. So, in order to keep her mother and brothers safe he claimed to have found her as a baby in the forest.

“Good, good. Well, it will all be over soon. Don’t you worry too much.” The Bear Leader’s smile was full of insincerity.

With that, he turned back to the village chief and their conversation about accommodations for his guards. With all the extra visitors already, they only had two small cottages reserved for the Bear Leader and his entourage, which wouldn’t be enough now for all seven of them. And everywhere else was occupied. So however much Otto demanded more space, that couldn’t be fulfilled without kicking somebody else out. And no-one volunteered.

After the conversation had gone around with no progress, Rupert interrupted. “Look, one can bunk in with Birgith and I, and then you can make up a third bed with blankets in each of the two cottages you have. Should give us seven beds.”

The village chief nodded. The beads at the end of the many braids in her hair tinkled at the movement.

Rupert inclined his head to his brother. “Does that meet with your acceptance?”

Otto looked at his wife, who screwed up her lips, but nodded.

“That’s settled, then.”

“Shall we inspect the testing grounds before this afternoon?” The village chief gestured away from the village centre in the opposite direction to Birgith’s cottage.

Otto and Rupert nodded, and the three left, with Thanca and the guards following behind.

Birgith had the rest of the day to work herself up into a state about the testing. Many other candidates led their extended families around the village, enjoying being the centre of attention. Birgith walked to the outskirts of the village centre and sat on a fallen tree trunk, watching the preparations.

A work party from the human settlement tended a fire, and the spitted boar that hung over it cooking for the festivities later. Other humans spread chairs and tables through the open area, set up the drinks and hung bunting around the trees at the edge of the green.

Most Bears lived some seasons in the Citadel on the river, which is where the Bear Leader resided, and then the rest of their time scattered in small villages throughout the forest. Testing was for everyone who celebrated their sixteenth summer. It took place in the Citadel, or at one of the villages that the Bear Leader visited on that summer’s procession. Birgith supposed she should be glad he had named Littledenn this time, so she wouldn’t need to travel, even if everyone else in the village blamed her for all the upheaval it caused. More candidates had chosen to be tested in Littledenn than anticipated, hence the overcrowding. No doubt for the excitement of seeing her prove herself or fail and get her comeuppance.



BIRGITH SMOOTHED THE FRONT of her linen shift. Her russet hair was, for once, neatly brushed and shined, clipped back behind her ears. Her father had given her his best wishes. Her old teacher, who had helped her get ready in place of her mother, left. She felt primed and preened like the dolls the other girls had had as children. Now it was all down to her. She sat shivering in the small tent allocated for her, forcing her breathing to slow. This was the

moment she would show them all she belonged, or else that she was the monster from their darkest history and condemn her hidden family to be hunted. She saw no other option.

From either side of her she heard the murmur of other candidates being reassured by their families, but soon even that stopped. She squashed her joy that they were also now left alone to face their futures.

She stared at the pewter goblet holding the last preparation before she entered the testing grounds. It contained a drink to ease the release of her inner animal, though no one she had asked knew how it worked or what the drink consisted of. Birgith silently prayed to the goddess to be with her and help her succeed in the testing as she lifted the cup. This drink was the key to her embracing her animal. The key to her being able to bring it to the surface. The key to being accepted within the clan.

The liquid was indistinguishable from the shadows in the cup. She gulped it down in one go. Thick and cold, it tasted of unidentifiable herbs. She set the goblet on the table and waited for something to change inside her, but couldn't feel anything. She hoped it would come by the time she had to shift.



2. THE TESTING

A BELL RANG. IT was time. Birgith had been to the testing grounds many times, as they often had their morning lessons there, when it was dry at least. It was where she had learnt to wrestle, fight with knives and shoot arrows. And she had excelled at all of them, but none of those skills would be tested today.

Birgith walked through the entryway into the testing grounds. Sandy ground in the centre with grassy banks circling round about twenty spans across. The Bear Leader stood, in all his regalia, by a small table in the middle. Around the edge of the clearing were the five guards, the village chief and her father, as official witnesses. And most of the rest of the adults from the village stood there as unofficial ones. Their shirts spanned every range of brown and blended in amongst the tree trunks surrounding the open area.

She shuffled to her allocated spot in the semi-circle round her uncle and bowed her head; the other youths joining her when they were also ready. Twenty-five were to be tested, half from Littledenn and half from further afield, all sixteen summers old. They stood in a crescent of freshly pressed white linen, with the Bear Leader in the centre. Through the corner of her eyes she spotted Mylo, her best friend, to her left and relaxed. Fergus was the

one beyond him, but she refused to acknowledge him. She and Mylo had been good friends since they met as small children in Littledenn. She didn't remember punching Fergus to stop him picking on the smaller tawny-skinned boy, but the story had been told many times. The relationship between the three had continued as it had started.

When they were all in place, Otto nodded and the five guards shifted into their bear forms. Their human forms shimmered and when Birgith's eyes resolved what she saw they stood a head taller, their clothes transformed into a covering of brown fur.

"Welcome to your manifestation test. This is when you show us your worth to the clan. When you discover what sort of animal you will be."

Smirks broke out from the audience, and Birgith assumed everyone thought that comment was pointed at her.

"When I call your name, please come forward and we can begin."

Birgith focused all her attention on the sand, trying her best to block out the details of what happened around her. The others were called forward one by one, and she tried not to watch. They were all predictable anyway. All those she knew of came from strong bear families so the outcome was never in doubt. Mylo's shift wobbled, but he became a sleek black bear. Fergus took a few minutes to become a grizzly bear, and there were a handful of brown bears, spectacled bears and even one polar bear. One girl from outside Littledenn took two tries, but finally shifted into a small brown bear. They all returned to the line triumphant, having successfully shifted to a bear and back.

The only wildcard was her, claiming to be a foundling left on her father's doorstep as a baby. Rupert had never tried very hard to find out who abandoned the baby, as he came up with the story. The others who searched had to give up too. Many worried she was from a fox spy, but she soon learnt to put up with that. Now she would prove them all wrong. Or at least she hoped so.

All too soon it was her turn. She stepped forward into an air of expectancy. Her uncle smiled and held out his knife. She raised her right hand, as instructed, and he slashed her pointer finger. She winced at the burning sensation, but he grabbed her hand before she pulled it back. Blood ran down her finger and he guided it onto the crystal on the table in front of him.

The crystal flashed through all the colours of the rainbow as it absorbed her blood, continuing to glow as it changed colour.

Otto frowned. "Well, it's glowing, so you're a shifter. But I've never seen it change colour before." He looked up at her. "Now it's your turn. Let's see what you're made of."

He gestured off to one side, where there was space. Plenty of space for a bear, but how big did a dragon get? If she became a dragon, which way should she face to limit the amount of damage she would do if she flamed by mistake? No, she couldn't do this. Her heart raced, her breath sped up, and she searched for a way to escape.

Otto laid a hand on her shoulder. "Now, the animal is inside you. Close your eyes and trace your breath into your core. Find there the kernel of your being."

She'd heard these instructions many times before from her teacher in their practice sessions. Birgith tried, as always, to follow them. But she felt two kernels inside her, not just one. She never discussed this with her teachers, as she needed to keep her heritage a secret. Now she wished she had.

Not that they ever completed the shift in their classes, as that was too dangerous when you were young. It could end up with children becoming half human and half animal, which is why the manifestation test started. Forcing everyone to wait until the children were grown and able to control their shifts better. So the next step was new to Birgith. She swallowed, forcing her breath in and out of her lungs.

"Now, open it and bring your animal out for us to see." He stepped back to watch.

An expectant hush fell on the clearing. She stood there, her cheeks burning as whispers and chuckles broke the silence. Which of the two cores inside her should she choose? One would bring acceptance and membership of the clan, but the other would mean destruction. She didn't dare look up for her father. There was nothing he could do to help.

Otto spoke softly, so only Birgith heard. "There is no shame in what animal you become, Birgith. None of us know where you came from. You proved with the blood crystal that you're a shifter, and a strong one by the looks of it. Now let us see your animal and deem if you are worthy to be part of our clan."

Her uncle's words went over her head. Her only focus was trying to work out which core was which. Running out of time she grasped for one and tried to bring it to the surface, as her uncle instructed. But as she embraced it, the sense of it seemed to dissipate, and disappeared. Her heart beat faster, thumping against her ribs. The other one, then. But that also dwindled as she tried to bring it up from inside her. How could she get out of this?

She shook her head and clamped down on her feelings, forcing them to remain hidden.

"I... I can't." She squeaked.

The whispers around the edge rose and threatened to bring her to tears.

Her uncle frowned. "Birgith, you need to do this or you will be classed as human, not shifter."

She knew this, but somehow she had always assumed the danger would be shifting into a dragon, not that she would be unable to shift at all.

“Whether you are a wolf, a cat, or a fox, instead of a bear doesn’t matter. But in order for you to join this clan, or another, you need to prove yourself. The results of the blood crystal are not enough. You must manifest your animal form.”

A tear leaked out. “I’m trying. It doesn’t come to the surface.” Her voice fell to a whisper.

The Bear Leader sighed and closed his eyes. “One last chance, Birgith.”

She searched inside herself for the bear essence. She had to do this, didn’t she? It had to come to the surface. But something was blocking it. She pushed down the fear and rage about her situation: dragon responses weren’t helpful that day.

Ignore the wind swirling around her hair. Ignore the jeers and laughter from the crowd. Ignore the scent of food wafting from the village. All she wanted to do was to sink into the earth.

Her worries seemed baseless now. Part of her wished she would shift into a dragon, just to prove to them all that she could shift. Though she knew any joy at that would be short-lived.

“You don’t have to fully transform, just manifest enough that we can identify your animal.”

Birgith knew that, just hadn’t thought it would apply to her. Those who only manifested part of their animal when tested were considered lesser, but still members of the clan. Even that was beyond her.

Otto shook his head and called the next name, forcing her to return to the line. She had been so sure she would be able to choose between her animals, but maybe that was a delusion. Maybe her mother had known all along that she would be a disappointment, and that’s why she’d left her as a baby. She stifled her tears, still aware of the audience while the testing continued.

When everyone had completed the testing they all trooped to the village green, where the rest re-joined their families. Birgith stood at the back of the crowd, staring at the ground, as the whispers spread around her.

The Bear Leader stood with the village chief, Birgith’s father, and Thanca at the edge of the gathering, where Otto made a speech to them all. He emphasised the importance of loyalty to the clan and what an honour for them to be full members. He explained how their responsibilities would be worked out over the next few days, but for that evening they should enjoy themselves and celebrate with their families.

At the end of her uncle's speech Birgith tried to catch her father's eye, but he was discussing something with the village chief. Birgith didn't feel like intruding, so she headed towards the food. The scent of juicy, succulent roast boar wafted over the crowd and soon most people joined the queue.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" Fergus strode up to her, his blue eyes shining for a fight and a smirk around his face. His blond hair had a perfectly straight parting, falling in curtains on either side of his forehead.

Birgith gestured. "Waiting for some food. What does it look like?" Trust him to be the first to make things difficult for her. Throughout their schooling he had belittled her for not being worth including as she clearly wasn't a bear. To him, at least. Now he was going to rub her failed test in her face.

He came in close, crowding her. "It looks like little Miss Perfect is getting above her station."

She clenched her jaw. "Whatever." And tried to push past him. She had had enough of the day and just wanted food and to disappear.

"You heard the Bear Leader. All clan members are welcome to help themselves to food. But you're no longer a clan member, are you. Humans have to wait til we're all done."

He gestured off to the side, where the human population stood. All helping serve the food, but he was right that none of them were eating. Looking the other way, Birgith saw her uncle's back where he was stood talking to a proud parent from outside Littledenn. Next to him, Thanca gave her a predatory smile.

"You're not the only one with friends in high places." Fergus whispered in her ear. "Now, get out of our way."

"Oh, come on, Fergus. Stop being so petty. Just let me get my food. I'm hungry."

By now the other clan members in the queue turned to watch.

Fergus smiled. "You know what, just this once, I don't see why I should care." He raised his voice, so more people heard him. "You no longer deserve special treatment, Birgith. Now we all know what a freeloader you are. Couldn't even manifest the smallest part of a shift." He pointed behind the bench, where a group of humans served food. "That's where you belong now."

Birgith stared at him, but he didn't flinch. His smile grew the longer it took her to respond.

Just then the Bear Leader and his wife walked up behind Birgith.

"What seems to be the problem?" Her uncle asked.

Birgith continued to stare at Fergus. “Nothing.” She threw her wooden plate at his feet and stomped off to find her father.



BIRGITH SPOTTED HER FATHER over the heads of the crowd, on the other side of the green. Most of the other people moved out of her way as she approached, warned off by the thunder in her gaze, but Mylo didn't. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to one side.

"Not now, I need to speak with my father." She tried to brush him off, but he held fast.

"I need to talk to you, Birgith." His black hair was tied into a high bun, leaving his eyes free to bore into her.

"What?" She stared at him. Usually he would quail and go along with her when she was determined, but he stood his ground.

"I saw what happened with Fergus."

"Yeah, thanks for reminding me." She crossed her arms and resisted tapping her toe on the ground. Why was he stopping her now?

"I know what you can do."

She raised one eyebrow.

"Come live with me."

She nearly choked. That was not what she had expected him to say.

“I know we can’t marry, as you don’t know your heritage, and without being a clan member we’d never get permission.” He tripped over his words in a hurry to get them all out. “But we can register a liaison, and then you’d have a position in the clan and no one could push you out of the food queue again. I’ve been thinking of this since I saw your test. This is the only way for you to stay here and still have-”

“Still have what Mylo? What would you expect of me?” She sighed. “To cook you dinner every day? To do all the housework? To be the perfect housewife for you?” She did all of that already for her father, but somehow this felt different. He was her friend, but nothing more than that.

“No, my mother-”

“You expect me to move in with you and your mother?”

Mylo’s mother was a traditional older lady who had never approved of her son’s friendship with her, even if the Lord Warden had adopted her. So having to move in with her after Birgith had failed the manifestation test, and proved all her fears were right, was something Birgith didn’t want to contemplate.

He shook his head. “Yes. No. Maybe. I haven’t thought this through have I.” A few strands of hair fell down either side of his face.

“Mylo, I’m not sure I’m ready for something like that. I don’t want to be tied down and trapped. And you’re like my brother, wouldn’t it be weird to live together in a liaison?”

“I just want to help you, otherwise Fergus is going to be after you.”

She smiled. “Thanks for trying to protect me, but I can look after myself.”

“I know you can, just-”

“And it would only encourage your mother to find a suitable match for you.”

Mylo grimaced, his disgust at the idea of settling down and starting his own family evident.

Birgith put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll think about it, OK?”

“That’s all I ask Birgith. I’m just trying to help.”

“Thanks. Now I really must find my father.” She patted him on his shoulder and continued around the party to where her father stood.

Families surrounded every other candidate, all congratulating them and discussing what they would do now as clan members. For most it meant more freedom, the ability to choose a role within the community, and some would move into their own lodgings. But for Birgith, her result meant less freedom and relegation to a lesser standing. Many, like Fergus, would search for ways to humiliate her and rub her new lowered status in her face. Not that she tried

to show anyone up in their schooling, but many resented that the outsider their Warden had taken pity on, beat most of them in their lessons, especially combat.

With a deep breath, she focused on the future and being able to escape Littledenn with her father and patrol the lands with him. The green wild space called to her. That was where she belonged, and that was where she headed. Her status wouldn't matter in the long run. She was the best choice to become her father's apprentice. No one could deny that.

She found her father at the edge of the gathering and stood beside him while he finished his conversation. When the other man left, he turned to her.

"Enjoyed your meal?"

She snorted. "Fergus stopped me getting anything. Forced me out of the queue, now I'm no longer a clan member."

His eyes flared, and he searched the crowd for Fergus.

Birgith put her hand on his arm. "Papa, don't bother. It's not worth it."

He looked down and pulled her into a tight embrace. "We can get through this. It means nothing, your classification."

She savoured the strength of him, the sense of safety he always gave her. But this time it was different. She pulled away, drawing him further under the trees and away from the rest of the group.

"But it does. What if you're wrong about me? What if I can't shift? What if my future is as a human?" A chill cascaded up her spine.

"Oh, Birgith."

This time she let him hold her tight, closing her eyes and pretending the testing had never happened. Breathing in his scent of woods and pine she tried to dispel the overwhelming sense of cold inside her.

"There is more to you than you realise right now. You will see. And when you discover it you will prove all these doubters wrong."

She sniffed, but held herself tense. They were still at the feast. She couldn't forget that. All those friends and neighbours would turn on her if they realised she was a dragon. Bad enough to be classed as a human, but at least she was alive and free.

Dragons had ruled Kaitstud until they were slaughtered hundreds of summers before, and the four shifter clans took over. The continent was now split between the bears, wolves, cats and foxes, each with their own Clan Leader. Within each territory lived a subordinate community of humans who served them. And that was who she would now join.

Footsteps approached and her father's arms tightened around her.

“There you are, brother.” Her uncle’s voice cut through her thoughts. “I wondered where the two of you went.”

Birgith turned to see him and Thanca, fake smiles plastered on their faces.

“You were very composed today in a difficult situation, Birgith.” Otto’s hand dropped to her shoulder, pushing her into the ground. “I’m sorry I had to put you through that.”

“What happens now, Uncle?” She looked up at him. As far as she knew no-one was put forward for the testing without some shifter blood, so to get a full human classification was unheard of. Almost everyone became clan members, with a few who had weak shifter blood and were limited in how much of their animal they formed.

He shrugged. “Well, tomorrow you must talk to the village chief about what you can do. Eventually you’ll need to find accommodation in the human settlement, but we won’t rush that. You can stay with my brother for now. I’m sure no one will mind that.”

Rupert growled behind her. “That’s not good enough, Otto. She’s my family.”

“What can I do? She isn’t part of the clan by birth. Nor has she proved herself today to be a bear.” The Bear Leader shrugged and his nose scrunched up. Birgith’s father had told her his brother did that, and he had no control over it, but she still expected him to sneeze every time.

Birgith stood back, trying to pretend she wasn’t there. The murmurs of the feast were a background buzz. Smoke from the fire rose beyond the crowd, and roasting meat wafted tantalisingly across to them. They stood at the edge, away from the others, but not far enough away not to be heard. Many of the village community would celebrate her downfall and circulate news of their discussion.

Thanca stood, arms crossed, sneering at them both with one eyebrow raised. She’d never been a warm person. The few times that Birgith had met her she asked probing questions, looking for a weakness to exploit and taking delight in other people’s downfall. Birgith knew she would find no help from her.

“I give you my word.”

The Bear Leader turned to Birgith. “My brother adopted you, but I can’t show a preference for family here. I’m sorry.”

“Otto, come on.” Rupert grabbed his brother’s arm.

“My hands are tied, Rupert. What would you have me do?” He stretched his arms wide. “You know the rules as well as I do.”

“This is a ridiculous situation.” Birgith’s father clenched his fists and turned away.

“You said it yourself, Rupert. She was, for whatever reason, left on your doorstep as a baby. We have no idea who she is or where she comes from. I can’t risk it when her parentage is unknown. I’m sorry.”

Birgith saw her father wrestling with himself. He pulled at his ear and screwed his eyes up as he stared into the middle distance. Would he tell his brother the truth now, after so many summers of hiding it?

She tried to catch his eye, shaking her head. This was not the time nor the place to reveal that her mother was a dragon. And why would Otto believe the story without that detail? There was no other reason that her father would have kept the secret that he was really her father.

Birgith had been through the options so many times since he had first told her he was her real father. And she couldn’t see a better way for him to have kept her without endangering her mother and brothers. The same reasoning applied now. There was no way out, except for her to shift, and that appeared impossible. She had been brought up to think of herself as a bear, but had now failed the test. What could she do now? Birgith chewed the inside of her cheek, unable to work out what would now happen.

Her father turned to face his brother, now a step away. “But you said it yourself. The blood crystal showed that she has shifter blood.” Her father was grasping at straws now, but keeping the secret.

“That’s not enough, Rupert. It never has been before.”

Thanca spoke for the first time. “Look after your daughter, Rupert. Prepare for her to move into the human settlement. They are her family now.” She sniggered, trying to stop herself but failing.

Rupert glared at his sister-in-law so hard, Birgith thought it would have set her aunt on fire. “There has to be something we can do.”

Otto laid a hand on her father’s shoulder. “Look, if she learns to shift, and is a bear, then she can come to me to prove it. And I will change her status. But until that happens, I can’t do anything more.”

Well, that was something, but how did she learn how to shift? Thanca looked like she’d sucked on a lemon for even that concession. But it was out of her hands now.

“I’ll hold you to that, brother, see if I don’t.” Birgith’s father stared deep into his brother’s eyes. “Come on, Birgith. Let’s go home.” And with that, he took her hand, and they walked away from the feast back to their cottage.

The sounds of merrymaking diminished the further away they got, until the sounds of the forest covered them. Animals scurried across the ground, the branches swayed back and forth in the wind, and the last of the birds called to each other before they found their roosts for the night.

Back in their cottage the familiar scents of wood and straw surrounded Birgith. She lit the lamp and placed it on the table, before slumping into a chair. All her plans thwarted, she would have to move out of the only home she had ever known. And what would she do as a human? How could she learn to shift when she was no longer surrounded by those who could? What if she never learnt? Would she be trapped in the human village, away from both sides of her family?

“What do I do now?”

Her father was the only person left to ask.

“I don’t know, cherub.” He busied himself pulling things out of the cupboard. A moment later he handed her a hunk of bread and some cheese on a wooden trencher. “Here, you didn’t eat earlier.”

Birgith took it and munched a small portion of cheese. “I don’t want to leave you.”

“I know.” He knelt by her side and took her hands in his. “I want you to stay here too, but there’s no way the village chief will allow that.”

She sighed. “At least I’ll still be able to help you in the forest.”

His grip on her hands got tighter. “I was told in no uncertain terms that my apprentice had to be a clan member.”

“What?” Her eyes widened, and she felt dizzy. “Why?”

Most clan members were happier in their human forms, and never shifted after they’d proved the ability. They were stronger and faster than regular humans, but Birgith was too. Not being able to shift into a bear would be no hindrance in the role, and they both knew that.

He stood and thumped the wall. “Damn it.”

“But I’m the best tracker and hunter. Everyone knows that.”

He spoke to the wall, just loud enough for her to hear. “That doesn’t make a blind bit of difference. The forest wardens have to be full shifters.”

She slumped further in her seat. All evening she had held on to that plan. And now that was gone too. She had no home, no role, no future.

“Mylo said I should form a liaison with him.” She mumbled into her hands, unable to look at her father.

He turned to face her and growled. “He had the audacity to proposition you so soon after the testing?”

She waved her hand. “No, not like that.” She took in a deep breath. “He figured it was a way for me to stay in Littledenn.”

His face relaxed and the thunder left his face.

“He’s my friend. He was trying to help.”

Her father nodded as he considered the idea. “Well, it has its advantages.”

“No!” She shouted. “I am not entering a liaison with anyone. Even to stay in the village.”

“OK.” Rupert conceded. “Though it is an option to consider.”

She raised her eyebrows. “It might work for a short time, but I’d have to live with his mother.”

“Are you sure?” He looked deep into her eyes, searching.

She forced herself to smile. “No, but the human settlement can’t be that bad. All I need to do is to learn how to shift, then I can prove myself to Uncle Otto and I can return. Simple.” She had to show she accepted this as she worried what he would do otherwise.

“Hmmm.”

He didn’t sound convinced, but she would not let him stop her.

“Or you could leave and find your dragon family?”

She stared at him, eyes goggling. “I... I... isn’t that a bit drastic?”

He sighed. “Maybe. Probably. But once you’re with the humans, you will need to follow their rules. That makes the chance of finding your family more difficult.”

Before she could answer there was a knock at the door. On the other side stood one of Otto’s guards.

“I was told you were putting me up.”

Rupert ran his fingers through his hair. “Yes. Of course. Come in.” He stepped back to let the stranger in.

The guard looked around the room, turning up his nose at the sight of Birgith. Rupert busied himself gathering blankets and cushions for the guard on the floor in the corner.

Having a witness put an end to any further conversation. She sighed and continued eating, her thoughts racing round the idea of just leaving to find her family. But where would she look?

Her father returned to her. “What about work? What will you do as a human?”

She paused. “That I don’t know yet.” Her smile slipped. “Can we take this one step at a time, Papa? First finding where I can live and then sorting out work.”

“Sure. Though I worry I’m going to lose you.” He held her close.

Birgith didn’t really care about the village, but her father had always been there for him. She couldn’t imagine a day without seeing him. She couldn’t leave. But she must.

The three of them settled down for the night.

Birgith took a deep breath, full of pine and leaf scent, comforting in its familiarity. What were her dragon family doing? Were they thinking of her too? When would she ever be able to see them? Should she leave and try to find them? What would they think when they learnt she couldn’t shift? Would they reject her? Then she would be on her own. More so than in the human settlement. At least there she would be close to her father.

She forced herself to stop her worries spiraling, or they would blow out of control. One thing at a time. She needed to just focus on the next thing. Move to the human settlement, find a job to do there. Once that was settled she could worry about learning how to shift and proving herself to her uncle. And then, once she was considered a clan member, she would decide how to find her family. Logical steps and a plan of action calmed her.

The guard’s snoring serenaded Birgith as she fell asleep with the conviction that they could sort everything out in the morning.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING there was a loud hammering on the cottage door.

“Open up! Birgith, you need to get out here now.”

She wiped sleep from her eyes, and opened the door, still in her night shift. On the other side stood Fergus, the headman of the human settlement and two older shifters.

If anyone was going to enforce her change in status, it would be Fergus. Now was his opportunity to rub her failure in her face, and he was going to take full advantage of that. Again.

Fergus smirked. “Work party started a drogue and a half ago. You’re late.”

The headman hung his head and wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Behind her, Birgith heard her father walking across the room to join her and the guard sleeping in the corner stirred.

“All humans are on clean up duty this morning.” Fergus pushed a broom towards her. When she didn’t take it he dropped it to the floor with a clatter. “Refuse me. Go on.” His grin broadened and his eyes flashed. “I’d love to punish you.”

“What are you talking about, Fergus?” Birgith looked all around, trying to work out what was going on.

Fergus pushed the headman forward. “Explain, old man. Help your newest human member understand her responsibilities.”

His eyes looked sorry, but he spoke clearly. “After the feast, all adult humans have to contribute towards clearing up.” He took a deep breath and continued in a lower voice. “Those who don’t are flogged.”

Rupert wrenched the door out of Birgith’s hands. “Flogged? You’re threatening to flog my daughter?” He towered over them, eyes flashing.

The headman wrung his hands together, his mouth making no sounds. His grey hair hanging dank around his wrinkled face.

Fergus sneered. “Of course not, Lord Warden.”

Her father relaxed, but Fergus wasn’t finished.

“We’re reminding the newest member of the human settlement what she needs to do. After all, yesterday she proved she didn’t belong in the clan village.”

Rupert stepped forward. “This is not a line you want to cross.”

Fergus stood his ground, though his smile wavered. “I’m not the one crossing a line. I’m not the one harbouring a human overnight without approval.”

“What?” Birgith forced out. “This is absurd. My father? How can that be without approval?”

“Ah, but you’re not are you. You were adopted, but as a child. If you’d proved yesterday that you belonged, then nothing would have changed. But a Bear can’t have an adopted human offspring.” He paused for emphasis. “So your adoption is no longer valid and you are just any other human woman. For whom approval needs to be granted to stay overnight in the village.”

What did he mean? Birgith felt lost, cast adrift. She was no longer adopted? No longer belonged to her father? She was all alone and being forced out of the only place she’d ever known.

“Get out of here, Fergus.” Her father crossed his arms. “Stop this. Birgith will transfer to the human settlement, as we agreed last night with my brother. But we all need time to get that sorted.”

“Sorry, but there is no time.” Fergus didn’t look sorry, but stood firm and resolute. “We all have responsibilities and I can’t be seen to shirk my new duties because you’re getting a piece of ass.”

Her father spluttered and pointed down the path back towards the village. “How dare you? Get out of here. Now. All of you.”

Fergus swaggered back a step. “It won’t be long before that becomes the accepted story. No one will believe it to start with, but the longer she stays here the more the rumours will circulate.” He paused and turned back to face them. “I understand it.” His gaze traveled up and down Birgith’s body. “I wouldn’t say no either.”

Birgith’s stomach burned, and she realized how thin her nightgown was. She crossed her arms to cover herself better, but the skin on her legs crawled.

Her father took another step forward, his fists clenching. Birgith stepped behind him and grabbed one of his arms. “Don’t. I’ll get my stuff and go help. It’s no big deal.”

At least she hoped it wasn’t. The face-off outside the cottage was getting worse the longer it went on. Going with Fergus seemed the only way for her to stop it. And it gave her the excuse to get dressed, which would help her feel better too.

Fergus smirked as she turned. The guard stood on the other side of the door, listening to every word they had said. Birgith frowned at him, and he set his shoulders back and joined the group outside.

Once the door was closed and she was alone Birgith swapped her nightclothes for breeches, a linen shirt and her jerkin. She splashed cold water on her face and braided her hair in a simple plait over her shoulder. It was the easiest way to keep it out of her face. As last, she picked up her utility belt and buckled it around her waist. Feeling more herself, she stepped out of the door, forcing herself to smile.

She marched down the path into the village centre, Fergus insisting on holding tightly to her arm. Not that she was planning to run anywhere. Most of the other clan members they passed gave her a sad smile or a nod, though a couple curled their lips and looked away.

By the time they reached the village green, most of the straightforward tasks were finished. The litter was collected, the chairs and tables returned where they belonged, and the unused food and drink stored again. The one obvious area that hadn’t been done was disposing of the pig carcass and cleaning the cooking area. Normally the men would start on that first, as it was the longest and dirtiest job. Today that had been left for her.

Fergus waved towards it. “Your task for today, Birgith. Make it spotless.”

She sighed and walked over to get started.

Fergus smirked but said nothing, watching to see she did as he had instructed.

Birgith still had her shifter strength, even if she was now classed as a human. While many humans would struggle to lift the entire pig, she easily carried it to the pit on the other side

of the village. Birgith wrinkled her nose and resigned herself to the grease splattering her clothes. There was no way she could protect them. The smell of cold roasted pig permeated everything.

Fergus frowned at her as she walked past him carrying the carcass.

Once she'd got rid of the bones and covered them in lime to help them decompose, she returned to the grilling racks and spits. Barrels of water stood ready for her to wash down the equipment. It wasn't such an awful job, and it soon forced all of her worries away. She started whistling, and continued louder when she saw how it made Fergus scowl. Music from those untested by the Conservatoire was banned, but she had no sensitivity to the power of music. At the time that had stung, but now she was free to hum or sing when she wanted.

One of the human girls came over and handed her a battered wooden cup of water. "Here you go."

"Thanks." She smiled. "I'm Birgith."

The other girl giggled. "Oh, we all know who you are." She nodded towards Fergus. "He has been ranting about you since we started. It took a drogue for him to get the headsmen to agree to get you."

Birgith nearly choked on the water and had to spurt it out of her mouth so she could breathe, narrowly missing her companion.

Her eyes widened as Birgith gasped for breath. When their eyes met, they both started laughing.

"I'm Leonie." She held out her hand, and they shook. "If you're interested in housing, there's a spare bunk in my dorm room you're welcome to." She was tall and skinny with long blond hair in a ponytail down her back.

"Thanks." Birgith sighed. "I think that's just what I need." A dorm room. How many were in there together? She'd never shared a room, except with her father.

While they stood there, the Bear Leader and his entourage came out of the village chief's cottage and loaded up all their things into the floatship. Otto looked everywhere around the green but at Birgith, while Thanca licked her lips and smiled at her in triumph. Soon the players joined them and with a flash of the conductor's baton the music started and they were off. Birgith sighed as the music faded into the distance. So much for hanging about and giving her a second chance.

She squinted down the path it had taken and set her shoulders back. She would make this new situation work. With a scowl at Fergus, she put down her cup and got back to work.

Soon the work was completed. The other humans picked up their things and headed back to their settlement, while Birgith steeled herself and turned toward her father's cottage.

Fergus stood up. Right in her way. "Where do you think you're going?"

She looked him right in the eye. "I want to collect things from my father's cottage, so I can move into the dorm with the others." She waved one arm behind her to the retreating backs of the other humans.

He frowned at her. "You can't stay there. You need to move in with the other humans."

"Did you hear what I said?" She pushed past him. "Come with me if you like, so you can make sure that's what I'm doing." His footsteps fell in line behind hers. She strode out so he wouldn't be able to catch up.

At the cottage her father sat outside mending his hunting nets. He jumped up as soon as Birgith came into view. Though his eyes flashed when he spotted Fergus behind her.

"What's he making you do now?" He growled.

She walked past him into the cottage, pulling her father after her. "Wait outside, Fergus. I'll be done in a dram." She shut the door in his face.

Inside she breathed out and forced her body to relax, before opening her eyes and smiling at her father. "I met a nice girl called Leonie, and she's offered me a space in her dorm in the settlement. So I'm here to pack up my things and take them over there."

"You're moving? Now?" This time it was her father who seemed bewildered and lost.

She pointed her thumb behind her to the door. "Well, he seems to be making this as difficult as possible, so I figured going by myself is the easiest way."

Her father frowned. "I'm going to talk to my brother. He said we would have time to make this change." He turned towards the door.

"They've gone."

He looked back at her. "What?"

She shrugged. "I saw the floatship leave earlier. They're all gone."

He blinked, but spoke no words.

"So, it doesn't matter what he said. He's no longer here."

Her father drew her into his arms. "Birgith, this wasn't the way I meant it to be."

"I know, Papa, I know. But we need to make the best of it."

After a dram he dropped his arms and they packed her things into sacks. He included blankets and her knives, while she checked he had food for a few days.

"I have cooked for myself before." He smiled, but his eyes were sad.

"I can't help myself. I'll worry about you on your own."

He chortled. "Oh, cherub, not as much as I will worry about you."

She smiled back as she put the last things in the sack. "Time to go."

"It doesn't have to be so soon. Otto promised you a few days before you had to move."

"But he's not here." She sighed. "Fergus is, and he's determined to have me follow the rules as a human, with no exceptions."

Rupert glanced towards the door.

She stepped up to him. "Don't. He's not worth it."

He sighed, folded up his weatherall, and added it to her sacks. "You might find this useful." It was a large, tightly woven cloth covered in wax and dried to keep out the wind and rain. Rupert wore it as a cloak, but he had also used it as a tent when caught out of the village in inclement weather.

"But, Papa..." Birgith couldn't continue. He had spent weeks making that out of sailcloth and bear fat. It was one of his most treasured possessions.

"I insist." He held her hand. "Besides, now I won't have you under my feet all the time I can make myself another one."

She looked around the cottage, taking in all the homely details. The fireplace which smoked when the wind blew from the east, the table where she'd learnt to clean her weapons, and the view out the window into her forest.

"What's a few days, anyway. I'll come and find you in the forest when I can." Returning to Littledenn would be difficult without permission, and Fergus would do all he could to stop her getting that permission. Better to bump into each other outside of the community.

He held her tight. "I'll be thinking of you. Never doubt that."

"I know. Me too." She savoured his strength and protection, knowing that she needed to leave it, but not able to tear herself away. But she had to.

With a sigh she stepped back, picked up her sacks and went outside.

"Oh good, you're still here." Before Fergus could react she dumped the sacks on his toes. "You can carry these for me." And she walked down the path towards the village. After a couple of steps she turned back and waved at her father, forcing herself to smile so as not to upset him further.

Fergus stood there frowning, rubbing his toe. "Carry your own bag."

She grinned at him. "But all Bears are considerate towards the weaker humans and do what they can to ameliorate their position if it allies with their own tasks." Reciting back the Bear Clan guidelines had never felt sweeter. "As I'm sure you're going to be escorting me to the settlement, there's no reason for you not to carry them. Now I'm a human after all." She

raised one eyebrow. Better make the best of it as there didn't seem a way out of needing to move, and annoying Fergus made it almost bearable.

Fergus spluttered, but couldn't come up with a reason not to do as she said. He threw both sacks over his shoulder and fully laden they walked back through the village towards the human settlement on the other side.

On the way, Mylo stopped them, pulling Birgith to one side. Fergus let the sacks thump to the ground, but didn't follow them.

Mylo pressed another sack into her hands. "I can't believe you're going through with this."

Birgith sighed. "It will be temporary. Trust me."

"I'll miss seeing you." He hugged her. "The village won't be the same."

"Thanks, Mylo." Her eyes filled with tears, which she tried to blink away.

When Fergus started tapping his toe against the ground, they let go.

"My offer is still open." He looked deep into her eyes.

She smiled. "Thanks, but I need to do this myself." At least with the humans she would be away from Fergus and able to work on shifting by herself.

She turned and resumed her walk out of Littledenn.



ON THE EDGE OF the trees by the gates to the human settlement, the headman waited for them. His sunken eyes fixed on her and he leant on a carved stick.

“Welcome, Birgith. You are now a member of our community and entitled to your share of everything we have.” He held out his hand.

She grasped it. “Thank you, I must admit I’ve never been here before. Where do I go?”

The settlement was in a giant clearing between the trees, encircled by a low wickerwork woven fence. Some branches overhung the fence, but not even a sapling was growing up within the barrier. There were a few strides before the buildings, each with a thatched roof and small windows. Grubby children ran between them with a handful of scrawny dogs. A group of ladies sat by the door to one of the building, some weaving on lap looms, and others preparing food. They eyed Birgith cautiously.

“No one has been sent here from the clan village in as long as any of us can remember, so many are wary of you.” The headman smiled, and his eyes flicked back to Fergus standing behind her.

“Oh, yes.” She turned to him. “Thank you for bringing my things. I can take them from here.”

He dropped the sacks and rolled his shoulders.

“Well, off you go then. I’m sure you’ve got far more important things to do than watch me unpack.”

He frowned at her.

“You’ve brought me here. Mission accomplished. Goodbye.”

“Don’t you go sneaking back into the clan village. We’ll be keeping an eye out for you.”

“I know. I get it. This is my life now. Blah blah blah.” She shooed him off with her hands. “Now leave me to it. Go do your super important Bear stuff that I can’t be a part of.” Her gut twisted at her words, but she couldn’t show Fergus.

He glowered and crossed his arms, his eyes cruel. “I’m looking forward to catching you, and teaching you a lesson about where you belong.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Good, you sit up all night on watch. I’ll be asleep right here.” She looked up at the sky, considering the clouds. “Looks like it will rain later. That’ll make you cold and wet outside, while I’ll be cosy and warm asleep inside.”

“Don’t mock me.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Fergus. Though you’d better hurry now.” She smiled at him. “Let my uncle and Thanca know that I’m installed here. No hard feelings.”

With one last look around the settlement, he turned and stomped off.

Birgith turned back to the headman with a smile. “Well, that got rid of him.”

The headman’s mouth was open. “He just left.”

She shrugged. “He knows he can’t beat me, so he can’t push too much.”

“But, he’s a shifter.”

“So?” She sighed. “I failed to manifest as an animal in the test, but that doesn’t change who I am. Every other skill a shifter has, so do I. And for most of them, I was the best of the group training.”

The headman blinked. “That will take some getting used to.” He put a hand on her arm. “Please be wary about who you tell. It will be hard enough for many of our community to accept you, without finding out you are really a shifter.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to make trouble. In fact, my uncle said all I need to do is learn to manifest, then he’ll change my status and make me a clan member. So, I hope this will be a temporary thing.”

He drew his eyebrows together. “Please-”

She put her hand on his. “I won’t try in the settlement, don’t worry. No one will know what I’m doing. None of your people will be at risk.”

He released his breath. “Thank you. Now, let’s get you settled. Come with me.”

Birgith picked up her three sacks, and they walked towards one of the larger buildings. Her heart raced as she went further away from the covering of the trees, leaving the protection behind her.

“We have separate dorms for the unmarried guys and girls. Anyone in a partnership has their own cottage, and young children live with their parents.” The headman pointed to different areas of the settlement, with different sized buildings. “There’s a spare space in this dorm you can have.”

They approached one of the larger buildings and ducked through the doorway. Inside the floor was flagstones, with the thatch visible from inside above the thin wooden walls. Birgith shivered, maybe she wouldn’t be as warm and cosy as she’d promised Fergus, especially once the summer turned to winter.

There were ten beds in the room, five on each side, each with a woven screen between them. The headman led her to the end of the room, farthest from the door. The others beds she passed had obvious signs of the people who slept there. Clothes thrown over the chair, coloured bedspreads, books and hair clips scattered over the chest at the end of each bed. The bed the headman approached had none of these, but it had a view out of one window across the settlement and to the trees surrounding it.

Birgith set her bags down. “OK, then. What next?”

“Take some time to sort your things out, and I’ll call a meeting soon. When the bell rings, ask any of the others and they’ll show you where to go.”

Birgith nodded, and the headman left her in the dorm.

She turned to her sacks and started organising their contents in her new space. Inside Mylo’s sack was a carved candle stick about as long as her forearm made into the likeness of a group of trees, with the candle coming out of the canopy. Birgith held it tight and inhaled the wood smell. Mylo must have made this himself. He had also included a lumpy package wrapped in greaseproof paper. Peeling the corner back, Birgith saw with a smile he had given her a stock of the rock cakes she loved so much. A tear glistened in the corner of her eye as she considered her friend.

The door crashed open and Leonie ran through, juddering to a halt just in front of her bed.

“You’re here.”

Birgith placed her candlestick on the chest and raised her hands as if to say where else would she be.

“That’s my bed over there.” Leonie pointed across the room to a cubby in the middle of the other side. She had a bunch of wildflowers in a small pot on the top of her chest, and her bed was neatly made. But no other personal effects were visible. “By the dragons, I’m so glad we’re together.”

Birgith smiled, uncertain what to say.

Leonie took her by the hand and dragged her out of the dorm to show her around the rest of the settlement. She introduced Birgith to everyone so fast that none of their names stuck. The children ran and hid behind their mothers’ skirts at first, but soon came out to continue their games. Birgith stood and listened as the other adults returned to their conversations once the interruption of her introduction was over.

After a couple of drams, a bell rang from the opposite side of the settlement, and everyone stood and walked towards it. Leonie dragged Birgith with her.

“Come on. The bell means the meeting is about to start.”

They headed towards a building Birgith hadn’t noticed before, one which was built under the trees. The fence ran up to each side of the front wall, with the rest of the building poking into the forest beyond the settlement boundary.

Birgith tried to stop a moment by the trees as they approached the building, but Leonie pulled her inside.

The double doors of the squat building stood wide open. Above them was a carving of a giant slitted eye, unlike any creature Birgith had ever seen. Inside it was difficult to make out much, except rows of benches facing the front. They filled quickly. Leonie found a space for the two of them on one side, about halfway to the front. As her eyes adjusted Birgith saw the headman standing on a small podium.

When the last person was inside, and the doors shut, the headman clapped his hands. “May the dragons watch over us and protect us-”

“Dragons?” Birgith whispered to Leonie.

The girl shook her head and gestured to the front.

“-As many of you have heard, we have a new resident.” The headman gestured towards her. “I’d like you all to make Birgith welcome and help her as she finds her way around our settlement and learns our rules.”

Birgith stood up, blushing. “Um... Hi! Great to see you all.”

The crowd murmured, as those who hadn't met her yet whispered with their neighbours. Most faces seemed open to her, but Birgith could see a few glares and downturned faces in the audience.

"It will take a few days for Birgith to find her way around and learn how we do things." The headman continued. "And we will need to find the best role for her to contribute."

A large man on the other side of the room looked Birgith up and down. "Most lasses do weaving or cooking, why should she be different?"

Birgith shrugged. "Never tried weaving." She wasn't most lasses. "No idea what to do, but I'll give it a go."

The headman nodded, and Birgith sat again.

"Moving on, we have had a request from the Village Chief to be more vigilant in keeping away from the forest. There have been incidents in other villages where the forest has rejected certain people."

Birgith had never had an issue with the forest. As a small child she would sit under the giant trunks and watch the branches wave in the breeze. According to her father, the trees would wave their branches more when she was there, but she wasn't sure she believed that. The trees weren't conscious, but they had a level of awareness and could interact with you if you knew how. She knew some people were frightened of the dark shadows amongst them, but she'd felt nothing but welcome there.

The headman continued. "We are scheduling re-introduction sessions with the village chief to ensure that most of the adults can enter the forest when needed. But these will be at her availability. If you haven't been into the forest in a while then please make sure you stay away until you've had another session, as we don't want unnecessary accidents in the forest."

The crowd started whispering again. Behind her Birgith could hear a mother telling her children to stay away from the trees, and further away a man described in great detail the body found mangled by trees near a village to the east.

She shivered. It was too easy to forget how much power those trees had. Birgith hoped her re-introduction session would be soon, as she doubted there would be many opportunities within the settlement to try and shift. At least, not without risking those who lived there. And she missed the trees already. The gentle sway of their branches in the wind. The sense of security when surrounded by them. The quiet and peace under their shelter.



BIRGITH WAS SOON RELIEVED of any responsibility for weaving, when they found her skills were non-existent. Instead she got the task of hauling water from the pump to all the buildings, and then helping with the washing. Most days after she finished, she'd visit the other women to sit and chat with Leonie whilst she wove. Leonie's fine work was the most sought after from the settlement, and she had started to experiment with different designs. Littledenn expected a trading caravan soon, so the weavers worked hard to finish as many throws and rugs before they visited the shifter village.

Birgith's thoughts drifted to her father, wondering what he was doing. Was he counting the days as they passed as well? Though the days moved into weeks, and she still hadn't seen him. She had told him she would see him in the forest, but hadn't realised how restricted the humans were. She needed permission to pass through the one gate and leave the settlement, and that was only given to those going to work in other places. And they went in groups.

The headman organised groups for their introduction to the forest, but refused to prioritise Birgith. He declared she had no need to go into the trees for work, while plenty of others did. She was stuck in the human settlement, where approaching the fence was rebellious.

How was she ever going to practise shifting if she wasn't able to leave? She refused to put all these people at risk, especially if she might shift into a dragon. Even if she did nothing, just the presence of a dragon in their settlement would no doubt scare them. Though she spotted mentions of dragons here and there, but whenever she asked anyone about it they evaded answering her.

One day Birgith sat with the other women after finishing her work. A lady ran screaming into the group, her brown hair flying loose around her face.

"My boy, Walter. Have you seen him? He's gone."

Birgith stood and approached her. "What's happened?"

"Walter, he's wandered off. I don't know where."

"How old is he?"

"Just second summer. Oh, where is he?" She hugged herself and ran her hands up and down her arms.

All the other women stopped chatting, and looked in all directions around the settlement, though Birgith was the only one on her feet. From their seats in the centre of the buildings they were able to see all around the central space, and there was no small boy in sight.

A scrawny boy missing his front tooth ran up. "Mam, I found this." He held up a small child's shoe.

She took it from him and held it to her chest. "Where did you find it?"

He lowered his head and whispered. "On the edge of the forest."

Gasps echoed around the group.

Birgith put her hand on his shoulder. "Show me where." If he had wandered into the forest, then she had the best chance of getting him out again.

As she walked away Leonie ran up. "You can't go into the forest. You haven't been introduced. The headman said we can't. It's too dangerous."

Birgith loosened Leonie's hand on her shoulder. "I've got to try." She smiled at the group of women as they sat there, mouths wide open. "Don't worry about me."

Birgith followed the boy up to the edge of the trees. He stopped before the fence and pointed under a broken panel. "There."

She smiled at him and manoeuvred him to a point well back from the border with the forest. "Sit here and wait for me."

He nodded.

She climbed through the fence and stepped up to the first tree. She placed her palm flat on the bark, feeling every bump under her hands, and hummed. Clearing her mind of thought,

she communed with the tree, seeking abnormalities. The tree welcomed her, showing her how they had changed since she had last been in the forest. How summer was turning into autumn and the leaves were changing colour. Which trees had the most nuts, and where the flying foxes hid them.

Birgith's chest ached at the signs of the changing seasons she had missed. The end of summer was a time of plenty among the trees, and it continued without her. But for now, she had to focus on finding the boy.

After what could have been drams, or days, her eyes snapped open and she headed deeper into the trees, well beyond sight of the group waiting for her on the edge of the settlement. She headed towards an oak with a gash in its bark and a bulbous protrusion on that side. She walked slowly up to the tree, assessing it. This one wasn't as friendly as the first she'd touched, but she felt no ill will from it. She felt its focus was on what was inside the lump.

She put both hands against the tree this time and hummed again, framing an image in her mind of the spring rains, of the morning dew, of sunshine after a storm. The tree welcomed her and she changed her visualisation to a group of trees standing together, to a circle of houses in a clearing, to a family of people smiling together. The tree tried to draw away, but she held it there, reinforcing the concept that like goes with like and that it should relinquish the child it held under its bark. She felt its hurt at the many trees that had been cut down. As she sympathised she tried to convey that the child was a sapling and unable to do that itself. That the tree was taking out its anger on an innocent.

At that the tree shivered and Birgith felt something roll against her feet. She looked down and there lay the boy, covered in tree sap but looking otherwise unharmed. She leant towards the tree to convey her thanks, but voices startled her.

Turning, her father and Fergus made their way through the trees. She narrowed her eyes at seeing Fergus, but stopped when roots started rising out of the ground to trip him up. She removed her hand from the tree and knelt down to see the boy. He gave her a sticky grin. With a smile back, she hoisted him up onto her hip and carried him to join the other two.

Her father nodded while Fergus gaped.

"Hi, Papa." It was good to see him again. She looked him up and down, trying to judge how well he looked after himself on his own.

He put his arm around her and pulled her close, Walter laughing to be part of their hug. "I'm proud of you."

Fergus interrupted. "What?" He shook his head. "How did you do that?" His eyes went back and forth between her and the tree.

Rupert shrugged. "The child must have curled up under the tree and fallen asleep."

"No." Fergus shook his head. "I know what I saw. He was in the tree."

"Was he?" Birgith said. "How could you see him from over here?" She looked back at the tree she had been standing by and cocked her head. The shadows and scrub on the ground obscured her view of the area. She shivered, hoping Fergus would agree with them.

Her father stood tall. "Three days my apprentice and you think you know better than me?"

Fergus was his apprentice? How did that happen? That should have been her job. Birgith thought she had resigned herself to someone else helping her father, but for him to be stuck with Fergus made her fists clench.

Fergus shrunk into himself. "Sorry, Lord Warden." He scowled at Birgith.

"Well, we'd better be getting this boy back to his mother then." Rupert turned back towards the edge of the forest.

The three walked in silence through the trees, while the toddler babbled to them. Birgith inhaled the scent of mulch and leaves. She stretched her hearing to pinpoint where the creatures had hidden from them. A group of flying foxes hunkered down on the branches of that ash tree, their squeaks to each other just audible. And that scuffling along the ground to the other side meant a hedgehog sheltered under the decaying leaves between the tree roots.

As they approached the fence, a large group waited for them on the edge of the settlement. At the sight of the boy a cheer erupted from them.

Walter tightened his grip on Birgith until he spotted his mother. Then he tried to dive headfirst out of her arms. "Mama, mama," he shouted, waving his chubby arms towards her. "Me tree. Me tree."

Soon enough Birgith passed the sticky boy over the fence into his mother's arms where he squealed from being held. The mother's relieved face was all the thanks that Birgith needed. Too soon the group dispersed towards the centre of the settlement, no doubt to clean all the tree sap off Walter.

Only the headman stayed standing across the fence from her and the two Bear Clan members. Birgith hoped that the others would leave so she could spend some time with her father, or stay under the trees for a while. She had forgotten what it felt like to be one with nature like that. But they didn't leave.

The headman frowned at Birgith. "While I applaud your instinct to help, I must reprimand you for endangering yourself. As I said in the meeting two weeks ago, no one is to go

into the forest til they have had their introduction meeting, and I know you haven't had one since you moved here."

"I would have, if you'd arranged one for me." Birgith's cheeks flushed and her heart raced. How could he criticise her for saving the boy?

"You live in our settlement now, and need to abide by our rules. You made the situation worse by needing to be rescued yourself."

"What?" Birgith squeaked. "I didn't need to be rescued."

The headman grabbed her hand and lifted it up, so they could all see the green residue on the back. "How do you explain this?"

Birgith couldn't explain it, not without giving away her connection to the trees. And the only time she'd tried to do that before she'd been laughed out of the clan meeting.

Before she could work out how to answer her father put a hand on her shoulder. "No daughter of mine needs an extra introduction to the forest. She's spent more time among the trees than I have these last tens of seasons."

"Even so," the headman grumbled. "She can't just go running into the forest now. It's dangerous." He looked around. "Especially if others follow her."

Rupert shook his head. "Not for her it isn't." He paused. "But you're right, she shouldn't set a bad example for others." He turned to Birgith. "OK? I know it's hard for you, but you need to keep your head down and learn how everything works here now."

Birgith leant into her father's side and sighed, lowering her shoulders, uncertain what to say in reply. Her body felt heavy and she could feel the boundaries closing in on her. She closed her eyes and concentrated on the smell of wood and green she associated with her father. She had missed him, and only now could she realise how much.

He squeezed her tight. "That's my girl."

The headman left them to their family reunion, with an admonition to return straight to the settlement centre once the others left.

All too soon it was time for her father and Fergus to return to Littledenn. He led the way back to the gate, where he kissed her cheek. "Be strong, cherub, you will find a way to be everything you can be."

She smiled wanly, holding back the tears that threatened to leak out down her cheeks. She was losing him again.

He turned back into the forest. "Come on, Fergus. Time to go."

Fergus smirked at her and sauntered into the shadow of the forest behind his new mentor. In the role that Birgith had been looking forward to taking up for seasons, but was now lost

to her. How did he end up with that role? Last she was aware he had been making sure she was evicted from Littledenn as soon as possible, no doubt under Thanca's instructions. How far did Thanca's influence reach if she could make her protegee the Lord Warden's apprentice?

Birgith was sure her father would never have chosen him. And Fergus had shown no interest in her father either.

Stupid, stupid rules.

She would have been so much better than him. Now she couldn't return to the trees. Funny how everyone else felt trapped under them and yet she felt trapped now away from them.

She took the opportunity of being left alone by the gate to return to the closest tree and hold it tight. This would be the last time for a while she could do so. Her emotions were so unstable she couldn't form any picture to tell them, so she just took comfort from the bark against her cheek.

A squawk echoed between the trees, followed by a bang. She listened to the voices in the distance.

"Fergus, watch where you walk."

"It tripped me. That root there, it jumped and caught my foot."

"Jumping roots? Really?" He sighed. "Come on, we haven't got all day."



BIRGITH CARESSED THE TREE with her mind. A shower of golden leaves fell on her. She curtsied back to the trees in gratitude before returning to the settlement, which was now her home.

Leonie stood by the gate, mouth agape staring at her. “Wow.”

Birgith shook her shoulders to dislodge most of the leaves. “I’ve always loved the forest. This has been the longest I’ve been away from the trees since I was born.”

“Really?” Leonie glanced back at the trees, shuffling closer to the safety of the houses.

“My father said as soon as I learnt to crawl I’d try to escape the house and get to the trees. Gave the lady looking after me a fright. My father realised it was easier for him to take me along.”

“Your father. The Lord Warden?”

Birgith nodded. “He used a long shawl to tie me up behind his shoulders and I went everywhere with him. I grew up under the trees.”

Leonie shivered.

Further into the settlement a twirl of smoke rose, accompanied by sounds of merriment. Birgith nodded towards it. "What's going on?"

Leonie turned to the buildings beyond. "Looks like we're having a party." She paused. "Once someone crosses into the forest, they're lost. Or at least that's what normally happens." She bumped Birgith's shoulder. "You'll be a hero tonight."

Birgith shook her head, causing a couple more leaves to fall to the floor. "I'm not a hero."

"Want to bet?" Leonie raised her eyebrows at her friend.

Birgith chortled and shook her head. "In that case I'd better get tidied up." She gestured to her hair, which still had a few leaves stuck in it and multiple strands escaping from the band she had twisted it up with at the start of the day. Not to mention the green sticky sap from the oak tree still covered her hands.

By the time they had cleaned up and joined the party, it was in full swing. To one side of the central area a big pot bubbled over a fire, and a variety of bowls on the table next to it showed every family must have contributed a dish.

A hush fell on the gathering. Everyone turned to look at Birgith as she joined the group. In the centre sat the family of the boy she'd rescued. Walter struggled to get down from his mother's lap, but she held him tight. Refusing to let him go for one drib now he had been returned to her. The man next to her jumped up and came to meet Birgith. He towered over her, all muscle and blond hair.

"Thank you for bringing him back." His voice was soft and deep.

"Um, you're welcome." The hair on the back of Birgith's neck raised as she felt every eye in the place on her.

He grabbed her hand and led her to the centre and sat her on his chair. "Sit, let me bring you a drink."

She sat there and offered a polite smile to the group of older adults who Birgith had spent less time with. The mother smiled back, though the others were less welcoming. The brother, who had led her to the forest, sat at his mother's feet. His head under attack from Walter's feet, who was still trying to wiggle his way free. The older boy wiggled over to sit closer to Birgith, and out of the way of his brother's feet.

The father returned with a cup of perry for Birgith. "We can't tell you what this means to us."

Taking the drink, Birgith squirmed in her seat.

"We are in your debt. Ask something of us and we will help you." The father stared down at her.

“Thank you, um... I’m not sure of your name.” Birgith flushed.

The man laughed. “I am Yorick, my wife is Lesley, Walter you’ve met and the big lad is Robert.”

Robert beamed and stuck his chest out at his description.

Birgith started to relax, despite the elder’s whispers. “Glad to meet you all.”

The stew was deemed ready, and Birgith was handed the first bowl. It had a mix of everything they had available on short notice: plentiful vegetables, chunks of various meats in a thick sauce spiced with paprika. It warmed her throat and calmed her spirit. Food she could eat. Lesley passed her a chunk of fresh bread to dip in the sauce. With the last bite she wiped the bowl clean.

As the meal finished, a clapping competition began. Different people stood up to challenge the others to repeat the rhythms, getting more complex every time. Youngsters danced around the adults as they chatted. As the sun approached the horizon the feast was over, but the community was still buzzing. Everyone celebrated the boy’s return and the communal meal.

Birgith left the group at the centre and searched for Leonie. The politeness between her and the others had lessened over the meal as they returned to their own conversations. Their dreams and plans were so different than hers. And she couldn’t share what she truly wanted. So she settled on finding the closest thing she had to a friend in the human settlement. She spotted Leonie and skirted round the gathering to join her.

The headman stopped her, scowling. “Do not take this celebration as permission to run off into the woods again.”

Birgith gaped at him. “I didn’t-”

“I know how you young people work, always looking for acclamation.”

“Me? No, I don’t-”

“You don’t fool me, Missy. I shall keep a closer watch on you from now on.”

“But-”

“I will not have you endangering my people.” His stern face brooked no disagreement.

Birgith sighed. “You don’t understand.”

He crossed his arms. “It is you who don’t understand. All these people are in my care. I must do what is best for all of them. I can’t make exceptions for an abandoned baby of no significance.”

Birgith bristled, but forced herself to calm. Her jaw clenched, stopping her say anything she might later regret.

“You may think you are special,” the headman continued. “But you are no more special than any other individual in this settlement.”

She exhaled a slow breath. “I don’t belong here. Help me be able to prove that and I will be out of your hair. One less thing for you to worry about.”

His eyes narrowed. “I will not authorise you to go off on your own. No-one else can, and they are all content within our community. You will learn to do the same.”

Being stuck in the settlement for the rest of her life was an appalling prospect. Birgith’s face blanched. “Please...” her voice tailed off.

“You are a member of my community now, and you will obey my rules. Any more recklessness and there will be consequences.”

Birgith swallowed. Whatever the consequences were, she knew they wouldn’t be pleasant. She had no choice but to dip her head. “I understand.”

The headman smirked. “In which case, enjoy the rest of the evening. But I will be watching you.” He walked back into the crowd.

Birgith watched him take the last hopes she had for learning to shift. There was no way he was going to help her be able to leave the settlement to practice shifting on her own. And she refused to put the other humans at risk by trying while they were close by. Why had she told him in the first place? Her stomach hollowed out, and she wanted to disappear. Tears ran down her cheeks and she did nothing to stop them. This was not home, and it never would be. But how to escape?

Instead of finding Leonie, she left the gathering and sought the comfort of her bed. Snuggled under the blankets her father had packed for her, she took what comfort she could from the familiar scent. At least she had seen him again. He seemed well, though with Fergus as his apprentice. How would that work out? Would she ever know? She sighed and tried to force her thoughts to happier subjects. The tree’s embrace and the autumn leaves it had crowned her with.



8. UNEXPECTED VISITORS

ALL THE LEAVES ON the trees darkened and the autumn colours spread through the forest. Birgith lay awake at night remembering the scent of the damp earth, and the crunch of fallen leaves under her feet. This was always the hardest season for hunting, as the dried leaves all too often gave you away. And the animals were still full of the summer bounty. In winter, when their food was scarcer and they were hungrier, they took more risks. But not at the start of autumn. While the headman kept Birgith away from the trees all she could do was idly dream. She itched to try to shift, but there was always someone with her.

Her days settled into a routine. She woke early and practiced her knife arts outside the dorm. The headman insisted she do it in the centre of the settlement. This was one skill she'd excelled at growing up in the clan village. Birgith could dance her way around most opponents in Littledenn. On her own here, she used it to clear her mind and help her focus on keeping up her strength. It also allowed her to connect to her old life and prove she hadn't forgotten them, even if they seemed to have forgotten her. For a few moments she could pretend all was as it used to be.

Some mornings others joined her. She helped them learn the basics, giving her a place in the human settlement she was now trapped in. Leonie came most often, and was starting to feel the flow between the different moves.

After training, Birgith spent most of the day hauling water from the local pump, delivering barrels full to the different buildings in the settlement. Her only breaks were the communal meals. At the end of the day, she would sit with the other ladies and listen to their chatter. Or she and Leonie would weave grass into crowns and plan how they would run the world. If they got the chance.

The only time Birgith got peace to herself was in the dorm, lying on her bed. But that wasn't a suitable place to test shifting. She spent many evenings either examining the two kernels deep within herself to find out why they wouldn't surface, or studying the wooden candlestick Mylo had given her. Neither eased her spirit.

She couldn't work out what the problem was, why she couldn't shift. Maybe it was to do with her dragon heritage, but the likelihood of her now being able to explore that was almost non-existent. She could see no way for her to escape the settlement. She was stuck there. Her dream of getting away to find her mother was just that - a dream. And the candlestick emphasised the difference in her life now.

She sighed. Maybe she should have taken Mylo up on his offer and formed a liaison with him. Though she doubted that would have given her any more time to practice shifting, but at least she would have been in a place she knew and surrounded by familiar faces. She shook her head. No, it wouldn't have been any improvement over her current situation. Every sideways glance, every social interaction, every dismissive gesture would all have reinforced the sense that she didn't belong there. That she had never belonged. At least here, in the human settlement, she wasn't looked down on or ridiculed. That was something. Even if it meant her mother was further away than ever.



AFTER HAULING WATER ALL morning, Birgith returned to the dorm for lunch. Some of Leonie's weavings had been taken to the clan village that morning for the visiting traders to consider. While they ate, Leonie anxiously awaited to hear if any of her weavings had been purchased.

“Just sit still, will you? I can’t eat while you’re fidgeting.” Birgith had little to hope for, so her friend’s excitement was draining.

Leonie tried to still, but glanced up at the gate every now and again. “This is the first time they’ve had anything to consider that was my own design. I don’t know what I’ll do if they don’t like them.”

“Try something else.” Birgith grumbled. She looked up at her friend. “Calm down. You’ll hear them return.”

Leonie frowned at her. “Just because you’re jealous of my skills doesn’t mean you can put me down for them.”

Birgith stared at her.

“This is a huge opportunity for me and could mean I gain a bit of independence.” She stood and towered over Birgith. “Just because you don’t have any dreams of leaving here and doing better for yourself, doesn’t mean I don’t.”

Birgith sniffed and stood. “I had plans. But now I’m stuck in this stupid place, with stupid people like you who have no idea about me or what I want.” She pushed past Leonie. “I’m going to lie down. Don’t follow me.”

In the dorm Birgith lay on her bed, while Leonie continued her nervous pacing outside. Birgith tried to rest, but found only melancholic dreams.

Noises from outside interrupted Birgith’s thoughts. Shouts, running feet, music and the clank of armed men. She sat up and hurried over to the door, peering out without revealing herself, just in case she needed to surprise any attackers.

Outside the fence, a trading caravan came into view. Like the one that now visited the clan village, but why was it here? Traders never came directly to the human settlement. Hence the party of humans who had gone to the clan village earlier that day.

But here was the floatship, with the group of players at the front controlling the lift through their music. On either side rode two guards on horses, one had his arm in a sling and the other had her face covered in bruises, including a huge black eye that almost prevented her from opening it.

The floatship was a quarter of the size of the one her uncle and Thanca brought for the manifestation test, and unlike theirs it had its own stand. So when it stopped, the conductor could settle it on the ground, without needing to have a hitching post.

Once the floatship stopped, a large lady pushed aside the flap on the back, and stepped down, her emerald dress swirling round her ankles. A young man followed her, who looked about the same age as Birgith. He had bright ginger hair in an unruly mop, freckles, and a

hint of stubble over his cheeks. His shirt sleeves puffed out round his shoulder, with delicate embroidery round the neck opening.

“By order of the Lord Warden, we are looking for Birgith Chatalaine.” The lady’s voice boomed into the watching crowd. She searched for a reaction in the crowd.

The change in her name caught her unawares. As her adoption had been annulled by her change in status, she was no longer Birgith Rupertda, but this was the first time she had heard her new full name. It felt like a cold icicle through her belly, further distancing her from her father. Birgith flushed as she realised all the people from the settlement now faced her.

She raised her hand, still standing in the shadow of the door. “Here.”

The trader’s mouth lifted on one side. “Pack your bags, lovey, you’re coming with us.”

Birgith stood rooted to the spot. What? How?

The trader made shooing motions with her hands. “Come on now, girl. We haven’t got all day.”

The ginger youth came over to Birgith, his golden eyes catching hers. “Come on. I’ll help you.” He passed her and stepped into the girls’ dorm, where boys weren’t allowed. “Do you have a bag?”

Birgith shook her head, mesmerised by his gaze. “What? Um, yes. Yes, I do.”

She turned to follow him and pointed towards her bed area at the other end of the building. It hadn’t been hers for long, and now she was loath to leave it. Where would she be going? Beyond the fear, her excitement rose. Her father had arranged this for her. This was her way out of the settlement. The first step towards learning how to shift and finding her family. This was her escape.

She grabbed the three sacks she had brought with her, only a season ago, and started filling them again with almost the same things she’d put in them then. The young man helped, following her instructions, and they worked in a companionable silence. Every so often Birgith’s gaze flicked to watch him gather her belongings and pack them with care. Who was he and where were they going?

Soon the sacks were full and Birgith tucked her knives into the utility belt around her waist. As she turned to walk out of the dorm she stopped, taking a few steps back she left one knife on Leonie’s bed as a farewell gift and an apology.

Outside, the headman waited with the trader, along with most of the human community. Birgith went around them all, wishing them the best and to look after themselves.

Yorick shook her hand, squeezing it tight. “We still owe you a debt. I won’t forget because you are away.”

“Thank you.” Birgith knelt by the children at his feet. “Robert, keep your brother out of the woods, OK?”

Both boys hugged her, leaving snotty marks on her shirt.

Leonie seemed to wilt in her arms as they hugged. Birgith said nothing about the gift, leaving it for Leonie to find later. She hoped her friend would understand she didn’t mean what she’d said earlier.

The headman shook her hand, but said nothing, only exhaling as she turned away from him.

By the time she had said goodbye, her bags were stowed in the floatship and they were ready to go. Birgith waved one last time at the group and followed the trader aboard the floatship. The youth embarked last, and the three of them sat in the central compartment as the players started their music. The ship lifted and began moving along the path away from the settlement.

Birgith caressed the damp patch on her shoulder. She’d only been among these people for a season, and yet they’d made a huge impression on her. She would take with her their sense of community and reliance on each other. And she would miss Leonie and Walter. Though not the lack of contact she’d had with the trees while she lived there.

She trusted her father, but her stomach fluttered inside her. Her shoulders tensed as she looked between the traders’ faces. Where were they going, and what did they need her for?



BIRGITH RAN HER HAND along the warm, honey-coloured wood bench, following the marks that showed it had been well used. The young man beside her grinned and Birgith glanced at the trader who sat on the other side of a foldable table.

Once they were moving among the trees, the woman bustled off through a door, returning after with three mugs of steaming tea.

“Welcome,” she said as she slid one mug across the table to Birgith. “I’m Drina, and this is my son Haydn.” She passed him his mug, then waved towards the front of the ship. “Aristandros conducts Meriel and Anoushka, though we see little of them. When we are in a town they leave us for the players’ accommodation, and they keep to themselves when we aren’t. Bryce and Gytha are our guards.” She frowned. “We had a problem taking a shortcut through the forest on the way to Littledenn. It is one we’d taken many times before, but the trees wouldn’t let us pass. The guards took the brunt of their force so we could get the floatship clear, but they’re not in any position now to aid us if any other misfortune occurs.”

Birgith nodded, confused. “Why did the forest attack you? It doesn’t do that without reason.”