

Lions of Pine Gorge

A Tale of Dunes & Dusk

She let her brother place the final stone. Two cairns, side by side. The gentle golden light bathed them both, as it would until the sun burned itself out and blanketed the world in darkness. Darkness like that in which her father now rested, with the stones of the gorge he loved so dearly to comfort him. Martin's face twinkled in the gilded light, and seeing his tears, her dam finally broke too. They embraced and wept together. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and another, as the settlers of Pine Gorge closed in around the siblings and offered their silent support.

"Thank you all for coming. My father loved this place. My mother, too. They'll forever be a part of the gorge." She wiped the tears from her face. She had to be strong now, for Martin.

"Maren, will you return to the Marshes' home with us?" Maren knew it was Elena that had spoken without looking; her voice had a quality, a feeling like putting both feet on the earth after having climbed too high.

"We've sent Andle off to take a grouse. I'm sure the druids won't mind such an occasion," Elena continued.

Maren turned to face them, biting her tongue and suppressing the emotions that welled at the mention of the druids. Instead, she returned the smile that Agni offered, a smile that did not reach Maren's eyes.

"Yes, that would be best, I think. Martin?" She clasped her younger brother's hand and together the settlers descended from the cemetery with one fewer than before.

Maren was thankful for the settlers' invitation. The Marsh cabin was bustling with people. Too many, in fact, to comfortably sit inside, and so they were chatting in the gardens outside. The settlers of the gorge didn't come together like this often, and unless something extraordinary happened, it was only twice a year when they would gather at the arrival of the Guildsmen caravan. Andle returned soon after they had arrived with not only a grouse but a brace of coneys, too. He kissed Agni and set to work helping her make a stew. It wasn't long before the smell of cooking wafted through the gardens; each conversation pausing to comment on the aroma. For a few moments Maren forgot her sadness, and laid down her worries.

"They're good people," Martin said as he sat down next to his sister. "I understand why father chose this place."

There was no arguing it; her brother spoke truth. These *were* good people. Hard-working and honest folk. Why did she have such difficulty agreeing? She wrapped an arm around him and squeezed.

"The caravan should be here soon," she replied. "Are you excited? I wonder if Jin will be with them again?" She smirked at her brother. "That was her name, right? The family from the west-"

"Stop it!" Martin replied, pushing his sister.

“It’s good to see you two laughing.” Agni handed each of them an earthenware bowl of stew. “Have as much as you want, there’s plenty to go around. And, if you wish to sleep here, you may.”

“I hope one day we can repay your kindness, Agni,” Maren said. “But we’ll be okay; we’ll head home with everyone else.”

The stew was delicious, and Maren savored the chance to eat meat. It was a delicacy here, usually only enjoyed at gatherings like today’s. Not for a lack of game, either - the woods were teeming with all kinds of life if one strayed from a homestead. She finished her bowl and laid on the dark grass, looking upward at the heavens. The skies were a painting of the same, familiar colors: purples and pinks and fiery orange, the palette that made up their world. She looked among the stars and found Valos, herald of the night. The azure star marched toward its apex, and in its wake they’d feel the duskwinds. She sensed her brother stand up to rejoin conversation with the others, leaving her to contemplate the stars. And that is where she stayed until the duskwinds blew in earnest, signaling the end of a day and a call for rest. The sounds of the settlers faded, and soon a presence caused Maren to sit up.

“We packed you a sack of food.” It was Elena. “When I lost my husband, long ago, they all did the same for me.” She paused, holding the satchel. “Will you stay?”

“No, we’ll head home soon. The Marshes have been kind enough, today.”

“In the gorge, I mean. Will you stay?” The question unbalanced Maren, and the widow’s eyes, normally bewitching in their golden cast, held the question.

“I...I don’t know,” was all Maren could muster, suddenly uncomfortable. “Yes, probably. I don’t know how we’ll manage with just the two of us, yet, but I inherited that burden today.” She looked toward Martin who was conversing with Andle. “He’ll want to stay.”

“No place enchants me in the same way; it feels like home. But I had to visit many places that didn’t feel like home before I found mine.” She held out her arm, and Maren accepted the satchel. “I’ll come visit before the traders arrive, if you’d like.”

With the advent of the duskwinds, the funerary gathering disbanded and settlers went back to their respective cabins. The siblings waved farewell, too, and made the trek back up the mountain. The Marsh cabin was a short hike from the Tanner household. Short enough for Maren to daydream, as she walked, but not long enough for the silence between them to be unwelcome. Arriving back at their cabin and seeing it dark brought forth emotions, but she did her best to set them aside for her brother’s sake. She opened the door to an empty home.

“I’ll start a fire; I’d like some tea. Do you want a cup?”

Martin shrugged his assent and sat down at the roughly-hewn table. She had planned to talk with him tomorrow, but the silence now felt oppressive. With two mugs of scalding herbal tea, Maren sat across from her brother. She idly picked through the contents of the care package the settlers had given them, leaving the food strewn about.

“It’s eerie not hearing him cough any longer,” she said, stirring the tea with her finger.

“Maren, what are we going to do?” Those words hit her much harder than she expected.

“I have a plan. Would you like to hear it?”

Martin furrowed his brow a little, “Well, go on.”

“The Guildsmen arrive soon. I think we join them and travel the world. Leave Pine Gorge behind us.” She didn’t look at him and focused on the tea in front of her.

“Join the traders? That’s the plan?”

Maren bristled.

“Mother and father used to be traders, before you were born. That’s how they found this place.” No response. “In a way, I think they’d approve. You and I can set off on an adventure together.”

“How will we afford anything, Maren? We don’t have anything to trade.”

“Well, that’s a problem we face whether we stay here or not,” she countered.

“But if we stay here we can at least get help and protection from the druids -”

“Help and protection from the druids?” She couldn’t hold back the venom this time. “They could have cured father if they wanted to help. They take our offerings and cut off a man’s hand for poaching. They don’t *help*, Martin. Have you ever even seen one? A pox on the druids. May they all one day waste away from the thing that ate at father.”

Her brother stared at her, defiant without rebuttal.

“I’m going to sleep,” he said, flatly, leaving his cup of tea. “There’s only two of us, now. I’m going to sleep in their room tonight.”

It was her turn to sulk. She was mad at herself for losing her temper. She walked over to her bed and slid between the hide and cloth to cry herself to sleep.

Maren didn’t broach the topic of traders the next morning, or again at all, for that matter. Instead, she worked tirelessly. Surviving on the homestead as a family wasn’t easy, but manageable. As just two? She hoped that Martin would see for himself the future if they stayed, and in the meantime, she intended to burn the candle at both ends trying to amass enough to barter passage with the Guildsmen. And to credit her younger brother, he noticed her effort and joined in. Together they filled the days toiling away: gardening, foraging, chopping. In the dwindling hours before sleep took hold she’d carve patterns and images into bleached bones. Some days they’d spend together picking shards of stone to knap into arrowheads, planing shafts of wood, and cutting feathers into fletching. She became lost in her work, and so the shock was great when Elena appeared at their doorstep one day.

“Has it been that long already?” Maren asked, confused. Martin stood opposite, the soft light illuminating his features. Though they shared the same tanned skin and black hair, Martin’s eyes were green like their father’s had been. Maren’s were brown, so it was said, and like her mother. She didn’t have to imagine what their father had looked like in his younger years, seeing her brother standing there in the doorway of their home.

“I can’t say if they are early or late this year,” Elena admitted. “But they are arriving soon. We see the head of the serpent, likely to enter the gorge before duskwind.” Maren thanked the widow, and after she departed, brought up the thorny topic once more.

“Martin, we haven’t spoke about our future since the day we buried father. I intend to speak with the Guildsmen and join them. With you.” She let it hang between them, watching the side of his face for signs.

“I don’t wish to leave Pine Gorge, Maren.” He spoke softly. “But I will go with you.”

The fruits of their labor were fastened, packed, and stacked. The makeshift wagon was laden and wobbled as it moved. Even their tools, like the axe, were brought along leaving their home empty as the day they arrived. They stopped at the crest of the hill and looked back once before descending. The cabin looked like many of the others in Pine Gorge now. Massive timbers that felt more like stone than wood, dwarfing any tree alive today, arranged into a home. Empty.

The wagon creaked as she pushed it down the mountainside. The caravan of traders and mercenaries would snake its way through the pass and camp at a large clearing called the Amphitheater, with its ancient blocks carved out from the living stone of the mountain itself. Of all the places in the gorge, the amphitheater was her favorite. She didn’t know what the name meant, but the ruins themselves inspired an awe within her. She paused at the bend of one of the switchbacks and looked up.

“Go ahead,” Martin said with a laugh.

“What?” She tried playing dumb, but couldn’t suppress a smile. Martin pointed up toward a bluff in the distance.

“This is where I saw the lion,” he said, exaggerating a pantomime of his sister. She pushed him away and trundled forward, pretending to be angry at his teasing but smiling nonetheless. She didn’t wish to give him the satisfaction of knowing that his words were a perfect mirror of her thoughts at that moment.

They heard the caravan before they saw it, obscured as it was by the mountain and trees. Eventually the trails opened into the ravine itself. The throng of people brought life back to the dead stones of the amphitheater. There were probably a hundred travelers milling around, and seeing them, she tugged at Martin’s tunic and together they moved at double-time to join them. Already there was music being played, fires sending fragrant smoke into the air, and the buzz of many conversations. She saw the families of the gorge either already there haggling with traders or arriving from the trails; Andle Marsh carried a buck to be roasted.

“You lead, I’ll follow with the cart,” Martin said.

She squeezed his arm and set off with purpose, her eyes trained on a particular set of wagons.

“Greetings, Belgrod.”

The white-bearded man stopped fussing with his cart and turned.

“Maren, my dear! Come here, my eyes aren’t what they used to be. Ah, there’s Martin, too? Where’s your father?”

“He’s joined mother. It’s just Martin and I now,” she replied, proud of how little her voice wavered. The old trader gave her a hug.

“My condolences. You two must have had a tough season. Come, sit and trade stories with us. Truth be told it was a difficult season for us, too, but I saved a carafe of wine. Let us have a drink to your father.”

Belgrod produced a bottle and tiny clay cup from within his cart. He poured a drink and handed the cup to Martin first, before refilling it and offering it to Maren. She gave thanks and drank deeply, reveling in the burn as it went down. Belgrod toasted their father and had a cup himself, then, before settling into a seat by a nearby campfire.

“So, tell me, how have you two fared on your own? Are the other settlers helping?”

Maren relayed it all, starting with her father’s illness and ending with his burial. Belgrod listened intently; Guildsmen valued stories and rumor as much as they did bartering goods, and thus they were often eloquent speakers and patient listeners. Martin chimed in now and again, too.

“And now you, Belgrod. What news of the world?” She thought she saw a twinkle in the man’s eye.

“Well, there are many tales to share. Perhaps the most poignant was that the caravan was beset by raiders not long ago. Usually they leave a caravan of this size alone, but these ones were bold. The mercenaries repelled their initial attacks, but they sought to harry us like a beast. Over the span of a week they attacked a dozen times. Ambushes, feints, and assaults. They didn’t let us sleep, either. It was a miserable slog.”

“What happened?”

“The mercenaries bruised them enough in one of the raids that they finally let us go, but not before they killed several of our own and absconded with four wagons. I’m thankful for our lives, but the mercenaries are now demanding double the pay per usual. Many of us are in dire straits from it.”

Maren scanned the clearing and saw that Belgrod told the truth. She hadn't noticed it before, but there was a cast to the countenance of many. A few had bandages or other signs of battle. The mercenaries in particular looked surly.

"Hazards of the trade, I'm afraid," Belgrod continued. "I'm grateful they were simple raiders. There were folks traveling from the west who shared stories of things far worse than raiders, if you were inclined to believe the tales. Have you heard of beastmen before?"

"I have," replied another voice. It was Elena, who after asking to join them sat down across the fire from Maren. She handed out cakes made from ground acorn, a sign of hospitality from the settlers to the Guildsmen. "Cursed things, with the heads of a beast and the body of a man."

Belgrod was pleased with the addition to his storytelling.

"Savage things with a thirst for human blood. These were porcs, from what was told, with the heads of squalid swine. The travelers encountered a roaming pack of the things. A terrible fight ensued. A man wouldn't have hit the ground before the beastman dropped its weapon and fell upon him, eating him alive. Thankfully, they're as stupid as they are vicious, and the traveler assured us they slaughtered them one and all and burned their foul corpses."

"There's more to beastmen, from what I've heard," Elena added. Belgrod motioned for her to share. "It's said that they were once men before taking on the curse. A beastman's bite will infect you, as would a single drop of their blood on your tongue. Once you are cursed there is no cure. The next time you eat the flesh of an animal the curse will bloom, and transform you into the animal you just ate."

"You two tell stories well together," Maren concluded. She enjoyed the tales, silly as they were, but the uncertainty of their future weighed down even such small joys. Her impatience did not allow for much more delay. "Belgrod, Martin and I wish to leave the gorge with the caravan. We have brought everything we own to trade in exchange for an apprenticeship." She pointed to their cart nearby, and looked at the trader expectantly.

"Becoming a Guildsman is an honorable path to follow in this broken world," Belgrod said, at length. He rolled up his sleeve to show them a brand on his arm. "This is the mark that denotes a true member of the Mercantile Guild. Without it you would face hardship, as unbranded traders are seen as untrustworthy. Joining the guild requires a sponsor of an existing Guildsmen, usually, as to enter on one's own accord is quite difficult."

"Would you sponsor us?"

"Ahh, Maren my dear, this is not a good season for it, I'm afraid. Joining requires not just a sponsorship, but dues to be paid. The price we pay to be ignored by the God-Emperors. I doubt that the supplies you've gathered here in a season would cover the cost of even one application. And I cannot pay on your behalf, as much as I'd like to; many of us are likely to sell at a loss when we reach Vathos to pay the mercenaries. In truth we had planned to beseech the Druids of Pine Gorge for help, as the stolen wagons contained food and water we were to rely on for the next leg of our journey."

“What of safe passage, then? Martin and I can look for work at Vathos.”

“That is a hard road you’re asking after. Do you have enough food for the two of you to last until we get there? Will you push your cart for leagues upon leagues? The mercenaries will strongarm you for payment. And when you get to the City of Stone, with not much else than the clothes you wear, what work will you seek? You’d just as likely end up as beggars. No, if you wished to leave Pine Gorge with the caravan I’d suggest you do as you originally sought, and seek tutelage to join us as a Guildsmen. Not that our lot is any better than yours, at the moment.”

Weeks upon weeks of backbreaking work, and Belgrod hadn’t even looked in their cart. She had been a fool. The settlers worked themselves to the bone merely to survive here - what could the gorge possibly offer to those in a City-State? The druids wouldn’t even allow them to hunt, but rarely.

“But, let’s have a look through your wares, eh?”

Elena excused herself, then, to wander the amphitheater. Martin pulled back the deerhide that covered the top of their cart. Belgrod hemmed and hawed, gently sifting through the contents and judging. He examined the iron axe head that their father had traded for many years ago, arguably their prized possession, and judged the scrimshaw with fading, but critical, eyes.

“You show promise at carving - keep at it and that could be a valuable skill in the future. The iron is always going to be easy to move, of course. Wood is highly sought after but difficult to transport.” He pointed at her small quiver of arrows. “Those are of great value, especially if you can demonstrate they fly true, although the heads are better off cast in metal.” He covered their cart back up and clasped his hands over his belly. “A few seasons’ more of work with my guidance and there is a good chance we could get the sum needed for an admission, I think. Perhaps a few more if you both wish to.”

Maren’s shoulders sagged. The thought of laboring as hard as they had for season upon season felt like a punch to her gut.

“Thank you, Belgrod. Let’s not speak any more of our foolish ideas. I’m sure you have important business to attend to. There is singing and dancing and maybe even roast game to be enjoyed while you are here.” They returned to Belgrod’s wagon and bid farewell. True to her guess, other settlers approached the trader and struck up conversation.

“Martin, let’s visit the other traders and see what they say.” Her brother wasn’t listening, and instead staring into the distance at one of the families of the caravan. “Go talk with her. I’ll take the cart.” He smiled in reply; the first real smile she’d seen in a long time.

She ambled along with their goods, stopping at each trader’s wagon along the way. She repeated the same refrain, refining her pitch as she went. Most told her the same as Belgrod, in less helpful terms - it’d be seasons before they could apply to the Mercantile Guild at Vathos. Others were not interested, but perused her wares and offered to barter here and there. A handsome trader with eyes like a wolf offered her, but only her, to become his apprentice. An uglier one made the same offer, but more honest: she’d pay in other ways. Toward the end of her circuit, exhausted and dejected, she saw a group of mercenaries arguing. Curious, she approached.

“What do you have to lose, then? If you’re so sure.”

“And how do you plan on proving it? We going to prance through the mountains lookin’ for them?”

“We’ll ask the locals, you idiot.”

The two that were conversing stopped when they saw her approach closer. One of the men was short and brutish with hair shaved down to his skull. The other, seemingly his opposite, was tall, thin, and had long brown hair tied into a tail. The brute spoke first.

“Look, here’s one now. Greetings, milady.” He gave a bow, but Maren felt as though she was being mocked. “Would you mind helping us with a dispute? My friend Roland, and I, were just talking about your lovely gorge.” He sneered a moment and continued. “I was tellin’ him and the others, because I’ve been through this pass many times now, that I saw a white-maned beast in these mountains. Far off, you see, but unmistakably a great beast. And then later I heard rumors that there were lions here. So I told them just now about the white lions, as it must be the same creature. They don’t believe me. So, tell us, have you ever heard about lions?”

“I don’t care about hearing about lions,” interrupted Roland. “Proof or none.”

“If I tell you, will you answer my questions?” Maren asked.

The brute frowned, “Don’t dance around, miss.”

“I’ve seen one with my own eyes. On a bluff to the northeast of here.” Maren crossed her arms.

“I TOLD you!” The brute put his hand out. Roland scoffed, but gave him something. She heard the clinks of metal pass between hands. The long-haired mercenary walked away, presumably to sulk, leaving just Maren and the brute who was looking mighty pleased with himself.

“Thank you, miss. I don’t know if you are spinning tales or not, but either way, you bought yourself answers. What can Ham of the Twin Serpents do fer you?” His eyes and teeth stood out against his dark face, which had wrinkled into a grin.

“Your company - how do my brother and I join?”

Ham barked a laugh.

“Join? Why would you want...you know what, that’s none of my business. You have to fight in a mercenary company, miss. Are you a killer? You don’t look like a killer to me.”

“I can shoot better than anyone here in the gorge, maybe even your company included,” she boasted.

“Oh, is that so? And what happens when you run out of arrows? Have you ever rammed a knife into a man’s guts and felt his breath upon you? You’re a woman, too - you have to be tougher than someone like me to join this company...OI, PRIM, GET OVER HERE!”

A mercenary from further back pushed her way toward Maren. She stood two heads taller than Ham, and her limbs reminded Maren of cabin logs.

“What do you want, Ham?”

“This little squirrel wants to join the Snakes. Says she can shoot better than anyone here.” Maren felt Prim’s gaze press down on her.

“My name is Maren,” she replied, although this time not entirely concealing a waver from her voice. “I’m not a squirrel.”

“Which of these bastards could you kill?” asked Prim, gesturing at the rest of the mercenaries. “I could crush any of their skulls. I know that. They know that. So there is peace. If you are not a predator, you are prey.”

Ham blew her a kiss as she walked back to sit on a stone.

“Sweet lady, she is. Anyway, Squirrel, come back when you’ve killed and we’ll talk again.”

“Wait.” She was tired of being dismissed. “Why were you talking about the lions earlier?”

“We like to wager about a lot of things; passes the time. I was telling them about the lions, and how much we’d get if we could skin one up. Lords and ladies of the Stone City would pay a fortune for a white lion coat, I’m sure.”

“The druids here would cut off a hand, or worse, if they caught you poaching.”

Ham closed one nostril with a finger and shot something from the other into the dirt.

“That’s what I think of the druids. Now if you’ll excuse me, there’s carousing to be done before we march again. Fare thee well, Squirrel.”

Maren pulled their cart to the fringe of the amphitheater, sat down on a mossy slab, and put her head in her hands. She sat like that until her head hurt, but she refused to sit up, a meager protest in the face of hopelessness. Maybe she should take up the handsome trader’s offer. Warm his bed and take what she can from him; maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after all. But she’d have to abandon Martin, and that was something harder to stomach. She thought about climbing up to the bluff where she saw the lion and simply stepping off of it. The coward’s path, but perhaps she was a coward after all?

“I brought you venison.” Her brother’s voice shattered her rumination. “Are you all right?”

She looked up, finally, knowing that her cheeks would be red, and accepted the wooden skewer of meat. It was still warm, and juice ran down her chin as she bit into it. She stared at the mountains with sudden clarity.

“I have an idea, Martin.”

PART II

The sound sent a jolt through her system. She bolted upright, every muscle in her body twitching in reflex until she stood poised. In one hand was a javelin of carved wood; one of many at her disposal. The other grabbed a nearby shelf of stone, its clammy cold surface an anchor for her own motionlessness. She strained to listen for the sound again, but only heard the crashing waves of her own heartbeat. The omnipresent gloom was heavier in this area of the gorge, far away from the gilt peaks where they had once lived. Silence stretched throughout the hills, gnawing at her. Had she imagined it? She sometimes heard sounds or voices as her mind passed through the threshold of sleep, and she'd startle awake just as she had now. Slowly, she lowered the javelin to rest against the stone and cupped her hands over her mouth.

Hoo-ah, hoo-ah.

A moment later she heard the call echo back from somewhere nearby. Her brother was close, then. He would be able to confirm whether -

Another scream cut through the silence, scattering her thoughts. It sounded all too much like the wail of a child, but there was a resonant quality to it that belied the chest of something far larger. It warbled toward the end, guttering out in a moan. It was the sound of something wounded. Something dying.

Maren spun at the clatter of rocks as her brother skidded into view. She could see that he was rattled, too, and didn't need to confirm whether he had heard the second scream.

"Is it?" He trailed off, leaving the question in the air.

She thought of the planning, the cold nights, the meager food. It all had led up to this moment, but now that it was upon them, she felt robed in fear. Sweat trickled down her brow.

"Grab the javelins. It came from the east - probably the cave."

Her brother obeyed without hesitation, something she had noticed since departing from home. Had he changed? Or had she? He'd fought her like hell until they actually spent the first night in the gloom. No fire, and only each other for warmth.

Maren heaved against the wood of her bow, bending it until she was able to muster the gut into place. She gave it an experimental pull before slinging the pouch of arrows over her back and, motioning for her brother to follow, together they slinked from their refuge.

"Maren, down," her brother hissed from behind. They both dropped, flattening themselves into the landscape. She looked askance at her brother, but saw it then. A bird of prey glided along the peaks to the west, looping once, and then flew out of sight.

"Good eyes." In truth she was annoyed that he had called alert on a bird. Only once had they spotted a party searching the hills for them, but since then they were careful to keep low profiles and make as little noise as possible. She'd rather keep his spirits high than admonish a mistake. After a few moments of respite, they carried on.

Here in this wilderness there weren't trails or paths. At least not man-made ones. It had taken the siblings weeks to grow accustomed to such primal nature. They learned game trails and tracked patterns of beasts from prints in the mud. After a month or so Maren had started to feel the surrounding hills become familiar. She leaned on this familiarity now and moved by instinct rather than memory, winding their way south and east through bramble and over root. Every so often she'd stop and wait, ears attuned to the sounds of the land. There was a stillness, she noticed, as if the woods themselves held breath.

"We have to be getting close," Martin whispered, reading her thoughts.

"I think the cave is just over the crest of this hill, right?"

Martin paused for a moment to absorb their surroundings before nodding.

"Yes. We'll be coming down on top of the entrance; the snare is set in a crevasse."

As if on cue there was a strangled roar, close enough to make them both jump. It ended in a wet sound followed by the furious scrabbling of rock. The acoustics of the hills made sounds sometimes difficult to assess; often they would bounce around and feel as if they came from another direction altogether. This was the case here, but Maren knew what they sought was in front of them, despite the echoes. She climbed up a boulder and cautiously peeked over. As Martin had suggested, the other side of their hill ended in a wash of sorts. Ragged, sable shrubs obscured the cave entrance from view.

"It's just ahead," she whispered down to Martin. "I'll move in first on the west rim. You circle around toward the back so we're on either side of the pit."

Martin looked frightened, and for good reason. They had never hunted something as dangerous as this before.

"Steel yourself. We are the predators, not the prey." She turned back around and lifted herself over the crest and crouched down on the other side. It was silent again, but she thought she heard labored breathing at the periphery of her hearing; perhaps it was only the rush of her own blood again. She skirted scraggly branches and descended further down into the wash. A loose stone caused her to slip, sending a cascade of pebbles clattering downwards. The beast hissed in response. It was a stone's throw from her now, and as she pushed past the last piece of foliage blocking her view, she saw it.

It lay on its side, contorted into an unnatural position, limbs askew. Its coat was jarringly white against the shadows of dirt and rock; a brighter white than any she had seen before, excepting perhaps the tiny flowers she once found long ago. The brilliance of the animal caused her to pause for a moment, but any meditation on the thought was abandoned when it writhed in agony. Maren saw the rope around its neck go taut and couldn't believe it hadn't snapped yet, as the beast was larger than she expected. With a surge of motion it flipped itself around, the snare twisting tighter, until it lay facing her with its mouth agape. A pink tongue lolled out against canine teeth as large as her pointer finger, spittle and foam bubbling past them both to pool in the dust below.

The violence of a snared animal was distressing enough, and as a hunter she was responsible for slaying it quickly, but its eye, bugging and wild, arrested her movement. She couldn't quite place why its eye, with its chestnut iris and distended pupil, horrified her the way it did. It conveyed a certain...*wrongness*, a quality she had never felt before when hunting game. Motion above her broke the eye contact.

"Maren, the snare! It won't hold!"

"We have to kill it," she said, barely loud enough for Martin to hear, "and quickly." She nocked an arrow to her bow, drew, and aimed at the heaving side of the lion.

"Martin, I don't know where the heart would be!" She was shaking now. She could hit whatever target she wanted at this range, but to miss the heart would likely cause the beast to flail. The snare could snap at any moment.

"Ready the spears, I'm taking the shot!" She breathed in deeply, held it, and sighted a spot where she thought its heart may be, or even a lung. She exhaled.

One.

Two.

Her bow thrummed as the arrow rocketed forward. Her aim was true, and it pierced the animal with a violent jolt. The lion keened and thrashed, showering the entire wash with scree. There was a loud crack as the snare snapped. Maren screamed as the lion lunged forward, its massive claws swiping at her. She fell back and avoided the first, but the second connected with her arm. The force was tremendous, and it spun her around to crash into the rocks. The next would have killed her if it had landed, but there was a shout and she saw the animal stagger as Martin crashed into it, spear first.

Disoriented, she crawled toward her bow. Martin had lodged a wooden spear into the lion's side opposite where her arrow protruded. Strangled and twice-penetrated, the beast finally sagged, then stumbled, and then somehow leapt forward, its jaws closing over Martin's ankle. It was her brother's turn to scream, now. She felt a surge of strength, and despite her flayed arm, she drew the bowstring harder than she ever had before, nearly fumbling the shot from overdraw. The missile took the lion in the neck, severing the same artery that she felt hammering away in her own. Martin's kicks to the face, along with the spray of life's blood, caused the lion to release its bite. It teetered once before collapsing, nearly crushing her brother.

Maren sprinted forward, grabbing Martin in the crooks of the arms and dragging him bodily away from the dying lion, whose agonal breaths grew more and more faint.

"Let me see it. Don't look, let me look first." She straddled his leg, her body blocking his view. Blood had soaked through Martin's trousers. With a deft hand she applied her knife of flint, cutting through the cloth. There were several punctures, and although she couldn't assess the depth of each, she exhaled with some relief; it was not a mangled mess.

“A few bite marks; you’ll live. We need to wash these out, though.”

“And yours.”

Pain that had been suppressed by sheer will came flooding into her arm. Bracing, she examined her own wounds.

“I think mine look worse than they actually are.” She poked at a flap of skin experimentally, grimacing. “But yes, we need to wash and wrap these.” She cut the cloth into separate pieces, wrapping her brother’s ankle and tying it off. She stood and offered Martin a hand. “Let’s see if you can stand on it.”

Slowly, Martin stood. All of his weight was on his good leg, and peered down at the injured one. Gingerly, he tested his left leg and grunted.

“I can’t put much weight on it.”

Maren scowled, running both hands through her hair and shaking it out.

“Then we stay here. I’ll go back to our camp and fetch our belongings. We can use the lion’s cave for shelter.”

They both stared at the dead beast, laying on its side merely paces away.

“I thought it was going to kill us,” Martin confided.

“Me too. It’s...massive.”

“And white. I understand how you saw one of these from Pine Gorge, now, even if it was leagues away.”

“I was a fool, Martin.” She was whispering again. “I *am* a fool. I put us in such grave danger. Please forgive me.”

Her brother sighed.

“It was a risk I was willing to take. We’d never have left Pine Gorge, I think, if you hadn’t pushed me. I bet we can carve this up into two cloaks, fit for a king and queen.”

“We just need to survive, now. And, I suppose, we need to skin it.”

Maren helped her brother hobble toward the lion’s den. It was a shallow cave; just enough cover to shield themselves from the wind. Despite this, there was a fetid odor.

“I’ll be back soon with our supplies.”

“And I’ll guard our cave.”

They shared a much-needed laugh, and Maren started the trek back. Her arm throbbed, her throat burned with thirst, and greedy branches kept clawing at her wound. Despite this, she didn't complain; her thoughts were solely of Martin's injury. When she returned from her first run they set to work on flushing wounds and packing them with ochre, then wrapping each to the best of their ability. She made the trip twice more, and then set out to the stream to fetch more water.

"You look exhausted," Martin said as she dropped the laden gourds. "You need rest."

"If I stop moving I won't be able to start again," she sighed. "We need to skin it."

"Now? It can wait a spell, Maren."

"It's too big. If it cools it will take us forever. Needs to be now."

Martin winced as he took his sister's hand and righted himself.

"Besides," she added, "I'm starving."

The lion lay where they had left it, sightless eyes staring upward. She shuddered whenever they stole her gaze.

"It's been years since we skinned a buck," Martin commented as they set up around the corpse. "First slice here to here?"

"And then around this way." She drew her finger across the beast's flank. Its fur was soft.

Martin carefully made an incision with his knife, repeating strokes of the sharp blade until he had flayed a section. The same fetid odor from the cave, magnified in potency, assaulted their noses. Maren gagged. It was earthy and spiced, and altogether the wrong scent for edible flesh.

"What is wrong with it?" Martin heaved a little. "Is it rotten?"

"I don't know. The cave smells like this, too. Maybe this is just how it smells?"

"I'm not eating that, are you?"

"No. I don't have an appetite any longer."

They both stared at their foul prize. Maren stepped forward and cut again. The pain in her arm combined with the nauseating odor made her head spin, but together they skinned the animal, finishing without celebration.

"I need to lay down." There was a weakness to his voice. Maren moved to get up from where she sat and he stopped her. "It's all right, I can walk on my own."

"I'll finish up here. Go ahead and rest."

She desperately wanted to join him, but knew she had to keep working. The skin needed to be framed or they'd chance rot setting in and ruin everything they had worked so hard for. It was hard labor, especially by herself, but time held no meaning here. She scraped every inch of it, removing the membranes, until the skin was as white as the fur. The next step was her least favorite, especially considering the smell of the lion's blood. Reluctantly, she gathered the tools she needed and sat down next to the corpse. Ever so carefully she rapped parts of the beast's skull with wedges of stone until she had access, reached inside, and pulled out her prize. The brain was larger than she expected, which was both a relief and unnerving. At least she wouldn't worry about not having enough.

Martin woke and helped her stretch the skin onto the frame. She was covered in gore and close to passing out from exhaustion, but at last the work was done.

"We did it." His voice was still weak.

"Tomorrow we'll smoke it. That's the most dangerous part after, well, killing the damned thing. If someone was still looking for us they'll see that smoke."

"I don't know if anyone's looking for us, Maren. It's been how long?"

She opened her hide sack and pulled out a stick covered in marks, counting them.

"Sixty-four days. You're probably right. In any case, we'll smoke it tomorrow and move as soon as you're able. Even if someone does see the smoke we'll be gone by the time they find the cave." She paused, looking at her stained and stinking hands. "I'm going to the stream to wash this off, and then sleep until my hair turns gray."

Martin had dozed off again by the time she returned, washed and with eyelids of stone. Her stomach protested, but sleep overruled hunger. It would have been a luxury to wrap herself in the lion's pelt, but for now it was cold stone again. She laid down next to her brother and dreamed of being covered with white fur.

She woke to a sound. Or had she? It felt as though she had only closed her eyes for a moment, but the eternal dusk outside betrayed no indication of how long it had been. What was it that woke her? She rolled over, more to try and clear the fog from her head than anything. A bolt of panic lanced through her when she saw that Martin was missing.

"Martin?" She called out, but there was no reply. A moment later she heard a distinct sound from outside the cave.

Javelin pointed forward, she crept outside. Her thoughts felt sluggish; her hands clammy. Martin was crouched in front of the dead lion with his back to her.

"Martin! I was so confused for a moment," she said with a nervous laugh. "You should have woken me."

There was a ripping sound as Martin pulled at the corpse. She saw him from an angle, now. He held a large hunk of muscle in both hands, and she screamed when he tore a mouthful from it.

“MARTIN, NO!”

She rushed to him, overwhelmed by the pungent aroma of the lion’s flesh, and smacked it from his bloody hands.

He looked up at her, confusion writ large across his face.

“Why would you eat that?! The meat is bad, you’ll make yourself - ”

“I’m so hungry,” he interrupted. “I’m so hungry, Maren! You won’t take this from me!” His face contorted in rage. “Just let me have this! We could be sleeping in our beds with a hot bowl of soup, but instead we’re out here starving!”

“Martin, please - ”

“No! You listen to *me*.” Venom dripped from his words. He grabbed her by the shoulders, uncomfortably close to where her arm was wounded. She yelped and pulled back, but he held her fast.

“Maren?” His tone and face reverted to confusion.

“Martin, you’re not well. Let me touch your forehead, all right?” She put her hand on his head, and despite feeling hot herself, his fever was unmistakable. “Come on, let’s lay you back down and get some water?”

“I’m sorry, Maren. I was just so hungry. I had to eat it.”

“Didn’t it taste awful?”

“No.”

She looked at him then, trying to understand where her revulsion came from.

“It was the sweetest flesh I’ve ever eaten. I’m still so hungry - ”

Martin curled over and retched, emptying his stomach into the gravel. Maren clamped her eyes shut and turned away until he had finished.

“I don’t believe you at all,” she trailed off, not voicing the rest of her thoughts.

She coaxed him into the cave and helped him lay back down. He drank water and drifted into a fitful sleep, murmuring incoherently.

The stars outside told her another day had passed, and she marked it on her stick. Her stomach churned, but she felt nauseated, not hungry. How long had it been since she’d eaten a full

meal? She changed both her and her brother's dressings, noticing nothing untoward. Maybe his wounds were deeper than she hoped, and infection had taken root? His fever seemed to come on remarkably quick for that, but she wasn't a medicine woman. If he didn't recover soon she'd have to take him back to the settlement for help.

Pushing the dire scenario out of her mind, she set to task building a fire with kindling she'd gathered a week ago. Tendrils of smoke curled up and around the skin, and she positioned the frame for maximum effect. After yesterday's excitement she looked forward to simply tending the fire all day, but her anxiety about Martin's fever kept intruding on her meditation. Now and then she'd doze off, only to nod awake at the pops and crackles of the coals. Between naps and stoking the fire she'd check on him, getting him to drink water occasionally, and then repeating. She packed up their gear, not that it needed much packing, and paced the camp. Her own fever was worsening, and a dread realization set in. If she got any weaker, she would not be able to get Martin help.

"Martin? Wake up. You need to drink more water." She rocked him gently until his eyes fluttered. They were bloodshot, and his skin pale and damp. "Martin, you're not getting any better. We need to get you back to Pine Gorge for medicine." He looked up at her and nodded, but she felt a distance already. "You can't die. Please don't die. I'm going to take you home now."

With urgency, she dismantled the camp and doused the fire. She contrived a ramshackle sled out of thin logs and reeds, and put the lion's pelt on it. With effort she was able to roll Martin into it, and tested it by sliding him out of the cave. Her vision swam, and she wiped back tears. It was a two day trek back to the settlement on good terms; she wasn't even sure if she had the strength to pull him out of the wash. Nevertheless, she tied a gourd of water to the sled, threw the bare essentials into her bag, and began pulling.

Over rocks, up hills, and through bramble she pulled. Martin moaned occasionally when she'd hit something, and several times she lost her own footing and fell. Her world dilated into a single focus: one step in front of another. Over and over. Just make it past this hill, just through this bush.

Martin let out a groan from behind her that demanded attention. She stopped, and drank a mouthful of water between the heavens of her chest. Her brother was laying oddly in the sled, his limbs contorted at weird angles. Tremors wracked his body, and he let out a long, drawn out moan.

"Martin?"

Maren approached her brother, but fell back with a gasp. Martin's body seized, his back arching beyond the limit of normal range, and he screamed unlike anything she'd heard before.

CRACK!

Maren could only witness the transformation, unable to draw breath.

CRACK!

The sounds of bone and cartilage popped like the coals of their fire. Martin's frame distended and bulged, and his screams only stopped when his neck snapped upward. His face had melted like a candle, but his eyes remained unchanged, bugged out of his head in abject horror. He stood on four limbs now, his clothes ripped and hanging in shreds. Muscles rippled underneath pale skin that sagged and tightened.

It was only when he lunged at her that Maren finally screamed. It was a pitiful motion, but only because his body floundered. There was an unmistakable threat behind it, and when he lunged at her again, mouth opening wider than should have been possible, she kicked. Her foot connected with his muzzle, and the force sent her brother careening backward. Betrayed a second time by his body, Martin scrabbled for purchase but failed, and instead rolled down the hill.

Maren wailed. She saw the lump finally come to a rest a league from her and move no longer. Great sobs wracked her and she curled up against the soft fur of the lion. It was all too much to bear, and she blacked out.

There were voices in the darkness. They felt remote; far away from where she drifted.

"She lives," one said in a voice that brought comfort, a voice of gold.

"It would be a mercy if she didn't," said another, one that brought fear.

"The laws are upheld. One life for another. It is up to her, now."

"She'll turn in a fortnight, and join her brother. The scales will unbalance."

"Her fate is not writ in stone, Cyrus."

"Banishment, then? You'll turn the curse loose upon others? The greatest mercy would be to kill her now. Bury her with her parents."

There was silence again. She drifted once more in the darkness of oblivion, setting free her pain. Her suffering. The heavy weights of guilt and sin.

She drifted toward a horizon of red, then; a sun that beat in the sky. She stared at it, and she felt every throb reverberate inside. An ache formed in her core, deep within, a desire that she knew instinctually would never fade. Could never fade. It was a hunger. A craving. A *lust*. And it grew and grew until that pulsing red sky melted and the black of oblivion surrendered.

She opened her eyes. Not to the violet daub of sky or the tops of spindly trees, as she expected, but daubs of mud and spindly reeds instead. A thatched roof. The roof of her cabin.

"You're awake." It was not a question. It was a statement, delivered as coolly and solidly as stone. "I've given you medicine; a paralytic. You'll recover in due time."

Maren tried to look at the voice but her head would not turn. None of her body seemed to heed her desires, in fact. She tried to speak but the sound only came out slurred.

“Maren Tanner, listen carefully to my words now,” the voice continued. She was nearby, possibly at their table. “The Circle took in your family. We watched over you, our flock, and protected you. You repaid our kindness with betrayal, poaching and slaying one of the white beasts of Pine Gorge. You lay upon its flayed skin as I speak. To poach a buck is to lose a hand. To kill a lion, one of *my* lions, is to forfeit your life.”

Maren lay there, wishing she could scream. Her stomach felt like it was eating itself. How long had it been since she had something to eat?

“Your brother paid the debt. His life for the lion you slew.”

The mention of her brother caused her to whimper. She felt a hand take a cool rag to her face, wiping the drool from her cheek. She tensed at the touch of flesh to flesh, and the feeling of the red sun surged within her.

“The debt is paid, but you, Maren, are banished from Pine Gorge, never to return on pain of death. I have tended to your wounds, and will leave you your possessions. Yes, even the skin. It is yours, now, more than you know.

“I will leave you with food, too. Bread, vegetables. A bowl of broth is on the hearth now. When you wake again the paralytic will have waned, and you will need to eat to replenish your body; you are weak. And then you must go.”

Maren felt the woman leave her side.

“And Maren,” she said, seemingly from the doorway of the cabin, “you mustn’t ever give in to it. You know of what I speak. For all your days you must resist it, never again to taste flesh. Seek out Greendel, far to the west. You may find solace there.”

“Traveler on the road!” There was a murmur among the head of the caravan, and the braying of an ass as they slowed. “Ham, you’re up.”

The brutish little man spit.

“C’mon, dogs, you heard him. Prim, Clint, Roland. Roland, wake the fuck up. Let’s go sniff him out.”

The squad detached from the body of the snake and marched toward the lone figure.

“What’s the bet, Ham?” Roland strolled casually alongside his companion who stomped at twice his pace.

“Fuck off with that,” Prim replied, lagging behind them both. “Could be bait. Pay attention.”

“Prim’s got two on it being bait,” cackled Ham. “I’ll take that. It’s a bum looking for scraps. Always is.”

“Except when it isn’t,” Roland mused. “Man or woman?”

“If it’s a woman she’s bait,” chimed in Clint.

“The only way you’ll get one, Clint.” Ham sneered. “Unless you win this wager, then maybe you can buy yourself a cunt at Gatepass.”

The figure was sitting alone on the road, and seeing them approach, stood up. They held a spear or a long walking stick, and had something draped about their head and shoulders. The mercenaries stopped a chain away and shouted.

“Ey, friend! State your business.”

“Are you mercenaries with that caravan?” the stranger asked. Ham squinted, trying to assess them.

“It’s a woman,” muttered Clint. Ham shushed him and continued.

“Indeed we are. You’re speaking with Ham of the Twin Serpents Company. This here is Roland, Prim, and Clint. Now, again, state your business.”

There was a long pause.

“I remember you, Ham.”

Ham and Roland exchanged uneasy glances, and the latter drew his sword. Clint and Prim also readied theirs. The stranger approached, and Ham finally made sense of their garb. They wore a massive pelt, tied at the shoulders, with the head of the beast resting atop their own. Its fur was white, and underneath the oversized cape was the shape of a woman. She rested a long spear against her shoulder.

“I’ll be damned, look at what she’s wearing?” Roland cursed. “It’s a fucking skinned lion!”

The stranger stopped within a few spans of Ham.

“Do you remember me, Ham?”

“I do not, and I don’t care for this,” he growled.

“Last time we spoke I asked to join the Snakes. You said you only take killers, not squirrels, remember?”

It was Ham's turn to pause.

"I remember. We're a long way from the gorge, lass."

He studied her now, intensely. It was indeed the same girl he'd spoken with a season ago. The same woman, he corrected himself. Those were not the eyes of an innocent settler girl any longer. There was something behind those eyes now, something that frightened him if he was being honest.

"We still don't take squirrels. Snakes eat squirrels." They stared at one another. At last, Ham extended an arm. The stranger grasped it, and he shuddered at the gleam in her eye. "But you aren't a squirrel any more, are you?"