

Sol Mates (Couple to Wolf Guardians TFTG)

By FoxFaceStories

A Commission for AI

Lucas and Cecily have known each other their whole lives. He is a humble blacksmith's son, and she is the town chief's daughter, and yet despite this barrier a romance blooms between the two. But when Cecily turns twenty, it is revealed she is destined to become a Sol; a large male wolf-like guardian to protect the kingdom's borders. Distraught over the loss of the love of his life, Lucas sets out to find a way to reunite with her, even if it means becoming the new male guardian's very female mate.

Sol Mates

A Prologue's Omen

What do make of the life of a Sol, that creature that both haunts and protects us?

Remember this, children of the villages, the towns, the cities. The Sols are monsters, true. They are ferocious, powerful, and terrifying. They are animal in appearance, like wolves augmented by the power of the Many Gods. They live in the empty spaces, the barren lands, and they stalk their prey alone. Their unions bear no fruit, and they are territorial to the last, forming alliances that last only briefly, their minds shackled to their duty above any fealty and love to one another. They live, therefore, sorry existences, fit for little more than to serve as leviathan guard dogs against incursions across our border, to kill and devour those that would try to swallow our kingdom up.

So why, then, are we so fascinated with them? It surely can't be because of the safety they bring. Safety, once provided regularly, goes quickly from pleaded-for succour to a matter of expected comfort. It can't be because of their appearance, at least not entirely. Few see a Sol up close, and even then only briefly and in shadow. They keep to the fringes, away from us so-called 'civilised' folk. Nor, I imagine, can it be out of any romanticism. Their existence has no happy ending, nor, in many cases, a happy beginning either.

No, I think we are fascinated with the Sols for the same reason we find ourselves often thinking of the orphaned child upon the street, crying for aid, and yet when we passed them by we gave this child nought. We are fascinated with the Sols because, on some level, we are made guilty by their very existence. We who are blessed by the Many Gods can only thrive under said blessing thanks to those who protect us, those whose only crime is to be born from the sinful passion of their parents.

And so we scorn them.

And so we hate them.

And so we scare young ones with tales of them.

And so we bully, as children and adults alike, those we dislike as 'Sols.'

And so, despite all of that, we cannot stop thinking about them, displacing our regrets into hatred, muddying the lakeshore waters of our minds so that our collective guilt is never reflected back upon us.

At least, this is my theory. Remember, children of the village, the town, the city, that the Sols cannot reproduce. Their kind is replenished by us alone. Their future is ash, their fate little but violence. They hold no nation unto themselves, and exist only by our curse and our choice. Can we break their cycle? Would we choose to? And what would they have us do, if they could but talk to us? Perhaps they would clear the waters finally, and let us correct an ancient sin we made in a desperate time.

Or perhaps not. Perhaps this is just a foolish scholar's wandering musings. Still, I leave you with this last piece of commentary. There is a prophecy, made fifty years after the sacrifice was made. The mother of King Torben's bastard son, the mother of the first Sol, was an ancient woman by that point, scorned by society. She wailed aloud in her death throes in the night in a most unnatural manner, drawing the attention of many. Before she died, she proclaimed that one day a Sol from King Torben's line would become the hope of its kind, a creator and destroyer, and set its kind free. This Sol would be a fire in the darkness, and fearsome to behold, and perhaps fearsome to the kingdom itself, if we still believe the Sols are necessary for our survival. Of course, the prophetess was labelled mad, and little of this anecdote - if it is true at all - is known beyond this.

Still, it is worth considering. Prophecies have come true before. Will the Sols one day be free, those creatures that haunt us and protect us? Would we let them go freely into the night?

Or would we, as we have always done, let our guilt turn to hate once more?

Chapter One: Fire Frozen in Time

Spring was upon the town of Caith, and a great deal of planting in the fields was being undertaken. With the warmer weather also came a more pleasant forging experience too, which made Lucas rather happy. He loved to work beside his father, and despite being a mere five years old, he was convinced that this was certainly old enough to be considered an apprentice.

"What's got you in such good sorts this morning?" his father asked him gruffly, though not without good humour.

"It's spring now!"

"It's been spring for days, son."

"But now it's *really* spring. It's like the whole of Caith is finally waking up."

His father gave a coarse chuckle. "Aye, you're not wrong on that, laddie. Now clear back, and watch out; this is hot, and while we may be a small town, there are more than a few lordlings who know that our family line makes some of the best swords and spears in the whole kingdom."

Lucas beamed with pride, though he couldn't help but draw closer anyway. His enthusiasm was always getting in the way, and his father had to remind him often that blacksmithing was a profession of patience and endurance as much as manly action. Still, his father smirked as Lucas looked over the molten pot.

"Wow," he said. "I'm going to be a blacksmith like you, someday."

"Well, it's the will of the kingdom that all sons take after their fathers, so that's good to know. Be terrible if you wanted otherwise. Lucas, get back, for pity's sake."

Lucas finally drew back, but not before a small spit of searing air pumping from the bellows fans erupted against his overhanging wrist. He gasped, hissing as he clutched his wrist in pain.

"Told you."

"It hurts like a knife!"

"And how would you know what a knife feels like? Come here, laddie, let me have a gander."

His father cringed a little as he observed the overheated, already blistering skin.

"Ah, that isn't good."

"It hurts!"

"So I'm noticing. Learned a lesson yet?"

"Can you do something?"

His father stroked his thick, bushy beard. He was a dark olive-skinned man, though Lucas was lighter due to his mother's fairness. This was no oddity to Caith, or the kingdom; it bordered six other realms and one sea, and thus was quite diverse in its people. Its biggest concern had always been guarding the borders from incursions from without, not in caring about the colour of those who took citizenship within.

"Aye, we can do something, or you can. Time to learn a bit of your mother's trade, but also to stand alone as a man. You know the Petter's Hill? The one where the cairns of the ancestors overlook from the west?"

Lucas nodded. He'd been there before.

"Run there, laddie, and find a flower that looks like a cup of fire frozen in time. You'll know it when you see it. Bring it back here, and I'll show you what properties it makes for a

burn salve. Your own mother showed me when she courted me, may the Many Gods bless her.”

Lucas nodded eagerly and ran from his father’s blacksmithery, saving no energy to reach Petter’s Hill on the outskirts of their town. Caith was not particularly large, with a population of only fourteen hundred or so, but it was spread out due to its hills and rivers, and bordered a forest that Lucas knew could be just as deadly as it was beautiful. He turned left once he reached that border, following the treeline and jumping across rivulets rather than walking across the plank-bridges. A number of villagers waved at him, and he returned the wave, only to clutch his hand in pain as he did so.

“A flower that looks like a cup of fire frozen in time,” he repeated to himself, calling on his father’s wisdom. To a boy of five years, his father is practically one of the Many Gods, and so he had little doubt that he would find what was needed where his father had indicated. He reached Petter’s Hill, untilled land that was positively *swathed* in flowers of all colours. Many of the flower dances of the year, and the maypole celebrations, took their decoration from this place, but Lucas himself did not visit often, preferring to roughhouse with the other boys by the Lonely Trees, as they called them, on the other side of town. Now, he briefly gasped at the sight before him. There were yellow lilies, oceantails, purple magicks, rainblooms, and all manner of other flowers everywhere. The field came up to his waist, and it gave a wonderful sense of exploration as he waded through this place of enchantment.

“A flower that looks like a cup of fire frozen in time,” he said to himself. “It must be red and orange. A cup of fire frozen in time. There!”

He ran toward it, pelting at full pace to grab the cup of fire with its fascinatingly red and orange colours.

Only for the flower to turn around and scream in shock. Lucas screamed also, hurtling to the side at the last second and rolling halfway down the hill. He managed to get himself up, clutching his painful wrist, which felt like it was shooting spikes into him at that point.

“Are you alright?” came a high but pleasant voice.

Lucas managed to get up and look to the top of the hill. Standing there was *not* a living flower as he had mistaken her to be, but a girl about his own age, with hair that truly did look like fire frozen in time. It was beautiful, more vibrant than any other ginger-haired woman he had seen, and there were a couple in town, and even a lordling’s wife who came through occasionally by carriage. But this girl’s hair was not precisely ‘ginger’, but truly flame-like, with little streaks of red and yellow within it, as if it truly were fiery. It should have looked bizarre, but instead it was *entrancing*.

“Are you a dryad?” Lucas asked, amazed.

“Am I a what?”

He dusted himself off and began moving up the hill. “A dryad! A spirit of the forests! My Da’ says he’s seen one, only once, when he was young. He said she was the most beautiful creature he’d ever seen.”

The girl giggled, putting her hands on her mouth. “What if I am a dryad? Are they nice spirits?”

He grinned. “The best.”

“Then I suppose I’m a dryad. Why were you running before? You just rolled over lots and lots of beautiful flowers, by the way.”

Lucas looked back on the path of destruction he’d left when rolling down in surprise. Indeed, a lot of rather pretty flower beds had been flattened.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I hope, um, it doesn’t offend a lovely dryad like yourself.”

The girl giggled again. She had a lovely matte of freckles over her nose and cheeks. So many, in fact, that they almost seemed to overcrowd her face.

“I’m not *really* a dryad, you know.”

“I know,” Lucas said defensively, though in truth he’d hoped otherwise. “What’s your name? I’m Lucas, the blacksmith’s son.”

She placed her hands behind her back, pivoted back and forth upon her toes in that way that sheepish children are often wont to do.

“I’m Cecilia, but everyone calls me Cecily. My daddy is the town chief.”

Lucas’ eyes bulged. “*Your father* is Chief Hawker?”

She nodded, looking a little embarrassed.

“Does that mean I have to bow to you?”

She laughed. It was a lovely, almost musical sound. “No, silly! No one even bows to Daddy, it doesn’t work that way.”

“He has black hair. Yours is red.”

“I know. He says it’s like a fire lily.”

“A fire lily?”

“Yeah, like this flower, here!”

She grabbed his hand suddenly and jerked him over to where a flower stood, a little shorter than the rest. Lucas marvelled at it. Just like his father had said, it appeared to be a cup of fire frozen in time. And just like Cecilia - Cecily - had said, it appeared much like her own hair.

“Wow,” he said. “That’s exactly what I’m looking for. I burnt my wrist and - Ow!”

He’d accidentally touched it again, causing the pain to sear. Cecily took his hand carefully and inspected it.

“You hurt yourself!”

He snatched his hand back. "I know it. I was helping Dad work in the forge. I'm going to be a big man in there some day."

"That's so amazing."

He puffed up his chest a little. "It is," he declared. "I was making a sword and I was burnt. It's part of the job, but I have to heal it up or else Dad won't be able to make more swords without me."

Cecily seemed to believe this, as her bright blue eyes seemed to almost warble in fascination. "I wish I could be a blacksmith."

"A girl can't blacksmith."

"Can too! I've seen it, in Nerscyth! All I have to do is get a husband who's a blacksmith and then when he dies I can take over the trade. That's what the blacksmith ladies do there."

Lucas chewed on this for a moment. He had never been beyond the horizon, and this girl was the town chief's daughter *and* had been to one of the great cities. He decided, in that way that five years old often do, that a compromise on reality itself was acceptable.

"I think that girls can become blacksmiths in Nerscyth but only boys can become blacksmiths in Caith."

Cecily nodded, agreeing with this logic. The two had made an accord on reality, and now all was Right and Just.

"Would you like me to help heal your hand?"

Lucas furrowed his brow. "I think . . . Dad was going to show me."

But Cecily was very pretty, and quite insistent, and even for a five year old boy who thinks that girls are gross and romance is for other people, he was helpless to the feelings of child-like interest that accommodated her presence. She was radiant, in that way sometimes only children can fully admire.

"But you can show me instead," he said, holding up his hand. "Is your mother a healer?"

She shook her head. "My mother died when I was young, so my ma on Dad's side taught me."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry about your ma dying."

"It's okay. She's with the Many Gods and smiling down on me now."

Lucas smiled. This made sense. Again, all was Right and Just, and any awkwardness evaporated. The two continued talking as Cecily gingerly took the petals of the fire lily and rubbed them together, forming a natural salve. Lucas was full of questions for her; what was it like being the town chief's daughter? Did she have special powers? Could she order people around? Likewise, Cecily wanted to know everything there was about being a champion blacksmith, how to hold a sword, and if Lucas knew how to wield one.

Naturally, the rather proud Lucas puffed up his chest and . . . exaggerated a little. It was clear that Cecily didn't love being cooped up and made to be 'proper' all the time, so this was magnificent to take in.

"Wow, I wish I was a boy sometimes," she said. "My Da' makes me wear pretty dresses when we make 'Proper Visits to Proper Places.' That's why I run away to here to be naughty. I like the smell of the flowers and to spend time with my thoughts."

She began placing the salve on his wrist. Lucas exhaled for a moment, biting against the pain, but it was very important to him that he appear Big and Manly to Cecily. This was also part of being Right and Just, after all.

"You're very brave," she said, and for a moment Lucas knew what it was like to be on top of the world. "Now hold your wrist while I use the longer petals for a bandage. It will look very interesting."

It *did* look interesting. It wasn't as bright as when it had been on Lucas' hand, but the strips of interwoven petals - which were tougher than they looked - did well to cover the salve formed from the more fragile inner-petals. The pain was already fading fast.

"That was amazing," he said. "You're the best Cecily. Why aren't you around? We should have been playing ages ago!"

She hugged her arm. "Father says I shouldn't go out much. He says it's not the done thing for a girl."

"That's stupid," he said, committing what felt like a blasphemy against the town chief. "You just helped my wrist, see?"

His words made her beam. "Well, *maybe* I can convince Dad to let me come out more often. He doesn't mind when I go to the flowers here, even though I like to pretend I sneak off sometimes. Also, sometimes I actually do. Sneak off, I mean."

"Of course," said Lucas. "I could sneak off as well, as we could play here. I also know all the best creeks for splashing, and the best places in the forests to look for dryads. Real ones, I mean."

"So they are real? And beautiful?"

"Not as beautiful as you," he said matter-of-factly, "but pretty beautiful."

Cecily beamed again, and Lucas found himself starstruck by her freckles, her bright blue eyes, and her fiery hair, just as she was obviously fascinated by his olive-skin with its grime streaks from work and play, and his tousled dark hair that had no need to be perfect or, in fact, styled at all. Lucas opened his mouth to make an offer.

"Would you like to skip stone across the ri-"

Suddenly a voice shouted out. "Cecilia! Cecilia Hawker, where are you!? Your father the chief requests your presence immediately!"

Cecily frowned. "Sorry, I have to go now. Meet me back here when the moonlight hits in two days! Dad is away on business, and I can teach you about the stars while you tell me about work in the forge!"

"I will!" Lucas said, excitedly.

Cecily ran down the hillside towards the shouting voices on the other side of a small treeline, but then she raced up just as quickly.

"It was lovely meeting you, Lucas," she said, like a prim lady, and then before he knew what was happening she kissed him on the cheek and ran back down, laughing to herself.

Lucas was left standing there, rubbing his cheek.

"Maybe she's not a dryad," he said, "but I bet she's something. *She's magical.*"

Chapter Two: Son, Daughter, Sol

"Oh, so you're too old for bedtime stories now, are you?"

Lucas looked up at his mother, and found her mischievous gaze too hard to fight. He grinned before biting his lip to appear serious again.

"Yes. I'm ten now, mother. I'm going to be properly apprenticing soon. I can't be having bedtime stories."

"And that's why you kicked your father out of the room, was it?"

He nodded.

"You know, a lot of fathers never tell stories to their younguns. That's quite sad, don't you think?"

There was a trap here. Lucas could sense it. Like a mouse scurrying around a trap, there was certainly something curious, but the bait was too much to resist.

"It's definitely said, of course."

"Aye, and your father is going to be teaching you a lot, soon, isn't he?"

Lucas was ready for this particular trap, or at least so he thought. "That's true, but I've thought about that. It's part of the reason why I told him not to tell me stories."

"Oh?" his mother said, sitting down by her son's bed, into which he was nestled beneath the woollen blanket. It was winter, and the snowfall was starting to begin in earnest, and the faces of the Many Gods were clouded over as a result, diminishing their gaze and power, or so it was said. "Can you explain that, my little Lukey?"

"Mom, you can't call me that anymore."

"A mother can always call her son by his loving nickname."

"I'm not a baby."

“You’ll *always* be my baby,” she said. “Now tell me what you meant before, about stories and your father.”

Lucas got his thoughts together. He was often annoyed at how much more easily Cecily could do that than him. “Well, Dad’s going to be training me proper in the way of the forge. And if he has to make up stories all the time, then he won’t have as much energy to teach me. And I have to be a real man to work in the forge anyway, so stories aren’t important anymore.”

His mother slapped him playfully on the shoulder. “Lucas Forger! I never thought I’d know the day when my own son would mock the gods so. You do know that the Many Gods weave their power through stories?”

The trap was getting closer. Lucas could sense it. Still, he remained obstinate, and a little curious as to where his mother was going with this.

“Well, of course, but that’s different. The stories are there to make us feel better and teach us new things. But Dad already knows how to forge, and I already feel good.”

His mother leapt upon the mouse, delivering the cat’s paw trap.

“Ah,” she said, wagging her finger, “but there are other knowledges than just how to work, young man. And did you ever consider that your father tells stories not to make just you feel good, but himself as well? He *liked* telling you stories. It makes him complete.”

Lucas had never thought to consider this. He felt a little sheepish.

“Okay, mother. I’ll let him tell a story.”

“Too late! He’s fast asleep in the mainroom. I just had to cover him with a fur sheet.”

“What? Then why tell me all of that?”

He had sat up by this point, frustrated. She just kissed him on the cheek.

“So you know the importance of things, and that there’s more to this life than always trying to be the big man of the village. In fact, there’s a story about that, if you’d like to hear it? It’s about a Sol.”

Lucas paused. A story about a Sol was something he’d wanted for ages, but few actually talked about. It was considered impolite, and yet he knew that the kingdom would not survive without them. Cecily had mentioned it a few times; people spoke about it in a hushed manner around her, though she’d only ever caught snippets because all the adults went quiet as soon as she entered their presence during those times.

“The gross monsters who stalk the borderlands? Okay, I’d like to hear that one, I guess,” he said. It was an obvious attempt to save face and appear casual, but his mother didn’t push him on it. Instead, she fixed some stray strands of her brown hair and began the telling.

“This story is not once upon a time. Instead, it takes place three hundred and fifty or so years ago, during the War of the Six. You might have heard of it as the Year of Fracture, or the Great Fracture.”

Lucas nodded. He had heard of it like that. Everyone in the Kingdom of Theorus had heard of it in some way or another, even the lowliest peasant villager. It was baked into their blood and culture.”

“When we were destroyed.”

“When we were *nearly* destroyed,” his mother corrected. The six realms that continue to border us to this day had come to hate us, as many still do. They did not allow worship of the Many Gods, and because our communities were made up of so many people from so many distant lands, they said we were not a true people; not a true Kingdom. Our bloodlines were too far spread, they claimed, and thus our lands were forfeit. They invaded at once with their six armies, having agreed to carve up our kingdom like a butcher would carve up a steak. And they did so just as viciously. Towns were burned to ashes, villagers rounded up into places of worship and set alight, barred within. Slaves were taken in the thousands, and our armies were routed.

“King Torben the Fifth was on the verge of surrender when one of his advisors spoke of a woman who wished to see him; one with strange powers and a fey appearance. Stories differ; some claim she had sickly blue skin and a foul, ugly face, while others claim she was a Lady of the Green, an aspect of the Many Gods themselves, and so her plant-like appearance was both alien and beautiful beyond imagining, as if she were a queen of the dryads.”

Lucas’s jaw hung open. He had a hard time imagining anyone more beautiful than Cecily, whom he had continued to meet and play with for five years now, becoming the closest of friends possible. But then again, ‘beautiful beyond imagining’ was *beyond imagining*, after all. This seemed to satisfy him, and his mother continued.

“This woman told King Torben that there was one final way to save the kingdom, but that it would be one of great sacrifice. The King had three sons, all as noble as he, and the woman said that in order to protect the kingdom, one would need to be transformed into a powerful guardian, wolf-like in appearance. This would be true of all the nine great families of the realm, and the force of these new protectors would be enough to beat back the tide of the enemy.”

“Did King Torben do it?” Lucas asked.

His mother nodded. “In a manner of speaking. You see, the King did not want to lose any of his sons, but he did have a secret bastard, a grown man of twenty who was the result of some . . . coming together between him and another woman.”

“What? Ew! Really?”

His mother smiled. "Indeed. As a result, his bastard son was transformed in his half-brothers' stead, becoming the first Sol. His form grew to larger proportions, and his body became like a large wolf, but one that could stand upright as easily as walking on all fours, and it still had something of a human aspect to it. Its eyes glowed like fire, as did its mane, at least when aroused to anger. And it was enslaved by a compulsion to protect the kingdom. Taking their lesson from King Torben, the other nobles of the nine families did the same, offering up bastard sons or even daughters to become protectors instead of their favoured children. These new Sols indeed ravaged the enemies, destroying them in such legions that they had to retreat, restoring Theorus' original borders and even requiring tribute from the attackers to rebuild. The kingdom was saved

"The witch was furious at this, and told King Torben that in diminishing the sacrifice, that she would never again help the kingdom, and that the Sols would need to be replenished down the family lines in order to guard the borders. They would be sterile and barren to the last, and so the sacrifice would need to be renewed again and again if they wished to keep the kingdom safe. She left, and was never seen again, though rumours abound that she still persists, watching over the lonely Sols who guard the borders, and aiding the new ones that join their ranks; the bastards that lords still sire today and then choose to sacrifice."

"Wow," Lucas said. "King Torben made the wrong decision."

"Did he? Or was there no decision at all?"

"Still, it's not fair on the poor bastards."

"No, it isn't, young one. It isn't at all."

She stood and moved to leave, but paused at her son's urging.

"Mother? What was the point of the story? How does it teach me to be a real man?"

She chuckled softly as she readied to close the door. "My eager son, it teaches nothing like that. But it helps to know where we come from, and that others are not so lucky as us. And it also helps to know that sometimes difficult decisions must be made, and not always the right ones. Besides, you speak so often of knowing exactly what your life will be like when you are older. Do you think Torben's bastard ever imagined becoming a Sol?"

"No, I guess not."

"Exactly. Now sweet dreams, child. Don't be in too much of a hurry to grow up. The world can be a cruel place. Give a prayer to the Many Gods for the Sols first, though. They keep us safe, even though we think them 'gross monsters.'"

She shut the door, leaving Lucas in darkness, silence, and deep thought.

Lucas cackled as Cecily hit him with another snowball. Once more they had snuck out to Petter's Hill, but not for flowers this time. No, they were here for a boy vs girl *snowball fight*.

"Rarrgh!" Lucas cried out, hurling a snowball back. "Beware, I am a mighty Sol, bounding free across the hinterlands! You cannot outmatch me, human! The Many Gods have cursed me, enslaved me, but somehow I have broken free of my chains, and now I shall eat you, after using my ice powers!"

He flung back several snowballs, and Cecily dodged aside. She was wearing her 'sneakaway' clothes, as she called them, meant for playing in the mud and water and snow without arousing suspicion from her father. She had already ruined a nice blue dress once before. She had her hair braided and tucked within her hood, so not to dirty that too much as well; she could no longer have it cut short as she wanted.

"You silly blacksmith's son!" she declared, flinging snow back at him. "Sols don't have ice powers!"

"They do too! They live in the hinterlands where it snows the most!"

"They also patrol the coasts, Lucas, and the plentiful forests! Father tells me that there are nice places they probably lived, and told me all about them."

"About the Sols?"

"Mostly the nice places to go, and how to reach them."

Lucas paused mid-throw. "Wait, Chief Hawker *wants* you to go meet Sols?"

"No, not at all! He tells me definitely not to do it, but that I might need to know, 'just in case.' He's always talking about that. Just like you're always talking. You'd get along."

"I doubt it, I'm just a blacksmith's son."

She grinned, hurling forth another snowball and restarting the fight. "Well, maybe one day you'll be a proper blacksmith! And then we can marry!"

Lucas beamed whenever she said something like this. He wasn't sure if she actually meant it, but Cecily was always talking about when they would marry, and had done so since they were around eight years old. It certainly wasn't unheard of for a chief's daughter to be courted and even married to someone below her station. It was only a small town, after all, and she wasn't exactly high nobility. But it was uncommon, and the Inright family were known to be a bit rough around the edges, which was only right for forge workers. Which only made it all the sweeter when Cecily talked about their marriage so matter-of-factly.

Lucas put down his snowball. "Okay, you win the fight. The Sol loses."

"The Sols always lose. It's a bit unfair."

"My ma says we should understand them more, but they're still monsters. Like big, scary, magical guard dogs."

"I suppose," she said. "What should we do now?"

Lucas scratched the back of his head. "Cecily, why do you want to marry me?"

She answered that easily. "Because you're my best friend, obviously. Why, do you not want to marry me?"

"Of course I do! As soon as I turn eighteen I'll wrestle away any suitors and craft a fine sword to defend you!"

She giggled, pushing him into the snow. He dragged her with him, and the two rolled together, laughing.

"But seriously, why me?"

She shrugged, panting beside him in the cold snow. "Because you make me happy, and you let me be me. My father doesn't always do that. And because you always lose at snowball fights!"

She heaped snow on him, starting the fight all over again. Lucas chuckled as she got the better of him, but he was a blacksmith's apprentice, or at least on the verge of being so. He was developing muscles just as she was developing a young beauty, and while they were still too young to feel attraction in the older sense, they were increasingly captivated by the other, the spark of flames yet to come.

Lucas was heading out to grab some wood for his father when he heard a commotion. A group of kids, including a number of boys he considered his friends, were chanting something over and over in a circle. There had to be at least twelve of them, and he ran over, excited to see. It was only when he saw hair that looked like fire in the centre of the crowd that his heart dropped, a sudden knife of foreboding in his belly.

"Unwanted! Unwanted! Unwanted! Bastard girl with bastard hair! Bastard girl with bastard hair!"

"Stop it! Stop it!" Cecilia yelled, her fists balled by her sides as she tried to stick up for herself against the crowd. "I'm not a bastard! I'm not unwanted! My father wants me, and when he hears about it-"

Suddenly, flung from the hand of one of the boys, came a tomato. It exploded against her face, leaving her to squeal in shock. It was followed up by an even worse object: Sebastian, a farmer's son and one of the bullies of the town, actually stuck his hand into the muddy slush of the snow-littered ground and hauled up a handful of mud. To Lucas' eyes, it seemed to have cow shit on it.

"C'mon, let's show her what it's like to live on our level, lads!" he cried.

Lucas yelled, trying to push past the boys, but he failed to get there in time. The mud and excrement exploded against Cecilia's side, sending the matter across her fine blue dress. She began crying, unable to even form words against the onslaught.

“Unwanted! Bastard girl with bastard hair! Bastard girl with bastard-”

Their ringleader never got to finish the sentence, as Lucas pushed him into the mud, screaming with a fury he'd never known he possessed.

“YOU LEAVE HER ALONE YOU LEAVE HER ALONE DON'T YOU EVER CALL HER THAT DO YOU HEAR ME YOU NEVER CALL HER THAT NEVER CALL HER THAT!!!!”

He pushed Sebastian's face into the mud and shit, uncaring that the lad was two years his senior and tougher to boot. Sebastian squealed like a pig, calling for his friends to help him, and they did so after an embarrassing delay, grabbing Lucas and flinging him back, proceeding to kick and punch him. Lucas fought back with something approaching madness, hurling insults before descending to a place without words. The image of Cecilia crying, victimised, covered in flung debris, was still in his mind, and it filled him with the rage of the heavens. Even as he took blow after blow, he managed to sink his teeth into Joliah's ankle, then punch Seanus the pitch boy three times in his groin. The boy howled, releasing Lucas and allowing him to get a few more hits in.

“Stop it! STOP IT!” Cecilia screamed, but she was pushed aside as the troupe continued to wail on Lucas. Despite his initial surprise attack, he was quickly overwhelmed, but unlike any sensible person would have done, he did not pull himself into a protective shell and try to absorb the blows as best as he could. Instead, he fought on and on, snarling and wailing and lashing out, even managing to shove Sebastian a second time when he went to push Cecilia back.

“Stay away from her, or you'll be sorry!” he screamed.

Sebastian gave him a kick to the stomach for that, and in an instant the wind was sucked from his lungs, causing him to gasp. The edges of his vision were marred and blurred, the white edge of pain slicing through his being. He nearly threw up from the pain, and soon the boys were in a circle, all standing and kicking into him.

“How does it feel, blacksmith's boy!?” Sebastian taunted. “You think you're better than us? You think you belong with her? She's a bloody runt! A rat taken from the street! Meat for the Sols! And you're begging after her like a cat to scraps!”

He went to kick Lucas again, and somehow, even through the lightning pain that seared his very skull, Lucas managed to catch his foot and pull Sebastian off balance.

“You. Leave. Her. ALONE!”

The boys pulled him to the side, dragging him through the cold mud and slush.

“Kick him to death! Kick the little shit to death! Let the 'little lady' watch!”

More blows. A rain of them. More pain. More pain than Lucas could ever have imagined. And yet through the tunnel vision that was eclipsing more and more each passing second, his only focus was upon Cecily.

“R-run,” he begged her.

She shook her head, before being eclipsed by Sebastian. He held a rock. A large one. He held it overhead. Even the other boys backed away at this point.

“Uh, Seb?” Seanus said. “Don’t you think that’s going a bit too-”

“Shut up, Sean!” he snapped. “My da’ went to war once. Told me a split open head was a thing to see. I bet I can handle it better than he can.”

He raised it, and through swollen eyelids Lucas could see his own death coming. He tried to raise his hands to stop it, but even as Sebastian readied the death blow, there was an almighty *CRACK*. It took Lucas a moment to realise what had happened: Cecilia had actually leapt up into the air and pushed down on the rock above Sebastian’s head, making his own weapon collide with his skull. He wobbled on his feet, clutching his head, then collapsed to one side, erupting into childish tears.

“Come on!” she cried. She grabbed Lucas’ hand, and something of her touch and her presence leapt into him, igniting the young man with renewed vigour he didn’t know he possessed. They fled the small gang before they could rally, fleeing beyond the town and into the treeline that bordered the woods.

This was *their* place, the place of imagination and total privacy, where they could share their deepest hopes and dreams, their fears and anxieties, and even, in this case, their wounds.

Lucas collapsed against the mangled, half-twisted tree trunk that often served as a bench. His mind was still swimming, and his whole body ached. He was breathing through his mouth, and could have sworn his nose was broken. Perhaps it was just bleeding.

“That was stupid!” Cecily snapped, punching him on the arm and eliciting more pain.

“Hey, I was protecting your honour!”

“You didn’t need to do that!”

“They were going to hurt you!”

“And they *did* hurt you! Lucas, they were going to kill you. I’ve never - I’ve never been so scared in all my life! Please, don’t ever make me scared like that again.”

Lucas nodded, catching his breath. “Then don’t make me scared for you. I told you I was going to protect you. That’s what a good husband does, right? My da’ says so as well. He protects ma, just like your father protects the village. I was only doing what I could to help you, Cecily.”

She exhaled, shaking her head. She admired the way her red hair flapped about in the slight, chilly breeze. She took a cloth from within the fold of her cloak, the furred one that went around the top half of her blue dress, and wiped her face and as much of the much as she could off of it.

“I don’t need your help,” she breathed. “I - I don’t deserve it, Lucas.”

“Because I’m only a blacksmith’s boy?”

“No! Never that! But because what they said was *true*. Lucas, I’m a *bastard*. I found out from my father this morning. I’m not his, and I’m not my mother’s. I never was.” Tears soaked her eyes as she stumbled through the words. She took several fire lilies she always had on her person and began to make a salve for his own wounds, but still she continued, stammering through her story. “I don’t know who my parents are, my father won’t tell me. He just says that I was wanted. That’s it. That’s all! But the reason it came out was because some traveller passed through and said how I was adopted when I was a baby. He must’ve known my father when he was younger or something. But he said it out loud, and then the servants talked, and now everyone knows!”

Lucas balled his fists. It was painful as hell, and even worse as the bite of the fire lily salve did its magic, though at least that pain soothed in time.

“You’re not a bastard.”

“I am.”

“Well, I don’t like the word. You’re Cecily. You’re my best friend. And they were making fun of you and treating you like latrine business. I would fight them a thousand times again. I - agh!”

“Stay still, I’m putting on the last bit. Your eyes will be swollen shut tomorrow.”

“I’d rather lose them than have Sebastian touch you like that again.”

To his surprise, she actually giggled. “You’re such a shining knight.”

The young boy blushed. He was still only ten, but the beginnings of true attraction were slowly unfolding for him, as was the case for her. He took his friend’s hand, holding it for a while despite the pain.

“I’m sorry for making you scared, Cecily,” he said.

“I’m sorry for making you scared, too,” she replied. “Father says it will blow over. I just . . . I just wish sometimes I was elsewhere. Like we could go on all the adventures we talked about. You could make swords for great kings and I could weave a heroic costume for both of us. Instead, I’m here. And now people will always look at me differently.”

Cautiously, Lucas put a hand around her shoulders.

“You’re still the same Cecily,” he said. “And I’ll protect you.”

She grinned. “Even if I turned out to be an ugly Sol or something?”

“Nah, you can’t be ugly. That’s like asking for the sky to cry.”

“The sky *does* cry, Lucas. It’s called raining.”

He scratched the back of his head. “Oh yeah. Well, it’s snowing now. Let’s go up to Petter’s Hill.”

She shook her head. “I don’t feel like snowball fighting. And you should be inside so you can heal.”

But then he flashed her a toothy grin. "I'm not saying we should snowball fight. I'm saying I should teach you how to swordfight. That way you can also protect yourself, see?"

Cecilia's bright blue eyes went even brighter, even wider.

"You're the best, Lucas!" she exclaimed, hugging him.

It was the most painful hug Lucas had ever received in his life, thanks to his many bruises. It was also, so far, the very best.

Chapter Three: Courting the Flame

Nervousness skittered through Lucas like a nest of mice. He was fifteen years of age now, and that made him officially a man, even if it would be a few years away yet before he could officially take a wife. What it did mean, however, was that he could begin working no longer as a mere apprentice, but a full partner to his father in the blacksmithery. In the five years since that fight - one that had left a couple of scars - he had grown into a strong-muscled individual. His facial hair had come in, and while he did not keep a full beard like his father, he liked to have scruff upon his face and cheeks and neck. Cecily had said she liked the feel of it, and who was he to argue? His hair was longer, often tied back with a strip of dark green cord she had made for him. It was pitch black in colour, and still a bit tousled by nature, but instead of making him look like a messy boy, it now gave him the appearance of handsomeness, a manliness and ruggedness that was only increasing with each growth spurt.

And what growth spurts he'd had: Lucas no longer had anything to fear from Sebastian, as foul as that boy still was. His height had swelled unexpectedly even beyond his father's, reaching six feet in height. A quite literally 'tall feat' for someone not on a nobleman's diet. He had worked hard to learn his father's trade, and so he had the lithe yet impressive muscle of a blacksmith as well. Some of the other girls in Caith had already tried to entice him to court them, but after a time everyone knew that he had eyes only for Cecilia Hawker - his Cecily.

Unfortunately, that was true of her father as well, who had known well that this day might come. The proud man had finally agreed to meet, and while Lucas hadn't exactly told anyone of his intentions yet, the town chief was a clever man, and intuitive as well. Lucas had little doubt that he knew what the younger man was after.

He would just have to try anyway.

"Father, can I leave early?" he asked his Dad, itching to leave and get this business over and done with.

His gruff father, now sporting a few grey hairs in his thick beard, regarded him curiously. "I thought ya would be wanting to put the finishing touches on this breastplate, lad?"

"I would . . . normally. But I have someone I need to meet."

His father smirked in that knowing way of his. "Ah, I see."

"It's not who you think."

"Of course not. Just another date with a certain someone up on Petter's Hill. You should thank me one day, lad, for sending you up there all those years ago."

Lucas scratched the back of his head, expression going a bit sheepish. "Well, thanks Dad. Can I go?"

His Dad huffed in an exaggerated manner, his shoulders rising and falling like twin mountains. "Fine, go on then! I'll finish up and you enjoy bein' young. Just make sure not to stir up too much trouble, ya hear me? She's the town chief's daughter, and Hawker's a cold man when it comes to some matters."

Lucas swallowed. "That's what I'm afraid of," he muttered to himself as he left.

He made his way through Caith, which had thrived more and more in the ten years since he had first met Cecilia. The two had added a few hundred to its ranks, not simply from children but from a number of settlers from further inland. Word of the good soil was spreading, and it made a number of local farmers antsy that others were coming in to claim it. At least it made Sebastian and his rat of a father focus their envy and bitterness elsewhere.

Lucas passed over several hills, rehearsing the words in his head. He carried the small box with him, the weight of it far heavier than its contents could possibly physically be. But then, it would be weighty. It carried the enormity of his entire relationship with Cecily, and was worth more than diamonds and gold as far as Lucas was concerned.

Finally, he arrived at the central hall, the perennial home of the town chiefs. According to Theorusian custom, chiefs were in position for life, though technically they could be removed by royal edict or a gathering of a century of landed townspeople. But neither were likely to ever happen to Chief Hawker. He was well respected, to the point that two carvings of his family's ancestral hunting falcons, from which his family name derived, had been made and placed there by thankful villages. It gave an imposing air to the entrance, like Lucas was being watched. Perhaps he was.

"Chief Hawker," he said, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice. It had deepened now that he was on the cusp of manhood, but there was still the trace of the boy in it. "Chief Hawker, you said we could meet when my work was done? I've - I've finished early."

There was initially no reply as he entered the impressive entrance room. It was built in the old style of the empire, from which little was apparently recorded, when the kingdom and its seven realms and many others were all fingers belonging to one mighty fist. Such days were far behind now, but occasionally there were buildings that obviously emulated their glory. Even a blacksmith's son like Lucas could recognise it from the spiralling staircase, the peristyle at the back with its open air garden, and the vaulted ceilings that were so unnecessarily high. The seat of the chief had to occupy a place of honour and authority, and part of that was intimidating visitors with its relative grandeur.

It was working.

"Come, Lucas Forger, I am in the kitchen. To your right."

The kitchen was nearly four times the size of Lucas' own, and it was a proper kitchen at that, rather than just a space for storage and cutting. Chief Hawker stood, looking out an open window, his back to Lucas. He looked to be peeling onions and potatoes, a stew slowly heating up over a fire.

"Chief, sir, I hope I am not intruding. Not at all. Come and help me peel these damnable onions. Mrs Jevera grows such wonderful vegetables, but what hardy hides they possess."

Lucas joined him, feeling a bit nervous. He took up the peeling knife and worked beside Chief Hawker. He was a gruff-looking man, but a different looking gruff compared to his own father. He was clean-shaven, for one, and his greying hair was short and without style. His eyes were similarly grey, which was a stark contrast to the dark red robes of office he wore. It made Lucas wonder how he had ever thought this man was Cecilia's father. He was so unlike her, not just in his stoic gaze, but also his appearance.

"Go on then, help an old man out."

Lucas began, finding a rhythm as he worked on the onions which had been passed to him, while Hawker worked on the potatoes. The vegetable choice was no doubt deliberate; it let Lucas stew in discomfort and stinging tears as he peeled the onions.

"Chief Hawker, I thank you greatly for meeting me."

"Do not thank me, child. It is the right of every citizen of Caith and respectable visitors to have an audience with their chief. That is the old tradition, and one worth keeping. How goes your mother? Did she recover well from her bout of . . . fly sickness, was it?"

Lucas nodded, impressed. "She did. She is well as ever, though sometimes needs to relax and sit."

"Hm. It is only just. Your father is well, too?"

"As ever, and still by the forge."

"I thought your work was done for the day?"

The casualness had led him right into it. He nearly fumbled the onion in his hands before catching it, and the chief gave him a gaze without emotion.

"I - I asked for early leave."

"Hmph. A man should finish his full day's work, if he is to be a man."

Lucas took a breath, and decided to press on. "Sir, I have come to ask for your daughter's hand?"

"I cannot give away what I never had. My Cecilia is not my bloodbond, or have you not heard the cruel taunts she was once foisted with?"

"I know that she was never deserving of them, only kindness, and that you loved her as if you were her blood father, and this makes you such by right."

A small smile flickered at the edges of Lucas's vision.

"Well said. She is indeed my daughter, and most beloved. But again, I say, hers is not my hand to give. You may have noticed she is a being of most fierce independence."

Lucas actually laughed, and the older man with him. "That is why I love her, chief."

"Love is not enough, though," he cautioned, pausing the peeling. He turned to face Lucas. "You are a blacksmith's son. And she is the daughter - adopted though she may be - of a town chief."

Lucas stood firm. On *this*, he was not nervous. "I will be a good husband to her. Worthy of her. No one sees her as I do. And I know that she loves me. I will take care of her, sir, and I will protect her from harm."

At that, the chief unexpectedly drew back a little. For a moment, he appeared almost . . . fragile.

"There are some things you cannot protect her from," he said, somewhat cryptically. "Tell me, young man, if you were to court and marry her, and you know that her life would end only a few years after this marriage, perhaps even less, would you still do it? Would you marry her, knowing that all that awaited you was tragedy?"

"Is this - does she have a disease?"

"No, but imagine that she does."

Lucas puffed up his chest. "Then in those short years, months, or even days - hours, if need be - I would give her a lifetime's worth of love and affection."

Once again, the chief seemed taken aback by this. Lucas pressed his advantage. He opened the small box he had brought with him, and from it retrieved a necklace, gorgeously made, with a pendant that was made of several metals made to look like a fire lily, shimmering and beautiful. It was not gold or silver, not the fine metals that nobles most covet, but it was fashioned to perfection. Even the chief looked surprised at the sheer effort of their make. He held out his hands gently and inspected them.

“I recall when I first found my daughter coming home, and it was obvious she had been to Petter’s Hill. It took me months to find out she was playing with the blacksmith’s boy out there, and more for me to finally give up on trying to separate you two. I have always wondered what she saw you in, those times when she snuck out or made some excuse. Now, perhaps, I understand.”

He rubbed his eyes, and for a moment Lucas could have sworn he was wiping away stray tears.

“Very well, Lucas. Here is what is going to happen. You are going to help me finish this stew, and it will be a marvellous stew. And then you will tell me more of why you are deserving of my Cecilia, just as I shall question her later once more on all the ways she is devoted to you. And then you will ask me my blessing for the two of you to court and wed, and I shall give it.”

Lucas’ heart skipped a beat. “D-did you just say you would give me your blessing?”

“I did,” the man said. He placed his hand on Lucas’ shoulder. “But be warned, my boy. There may be pain on the horizon. There may be none, of course, but if there is, it will be like a knife into your soul. Trust me, as a man who lost his wife and could bear no woman other than her, it is a pain you will carry with you. And so I charge you to protect her.”

This was the easiest charge Lucas had ever been given, or so he thought.

“I will, with my every breath.”

The chief nodded. “It may not be enough, you know. Now, let us put such dark thoughts behind us, and make this stew.”

She was more ladylike than ever, Lucas thought, resting upon Petter’s Hill in her fine green dress, her magnificent fiery hair spilling over her shoulders, undone and free. Despite her love of freedom and the wilderness, despite her endless energy and her constant chafing at her role, there was no denying her increasing loveliness. Occasionally - not always, as they knew each other so well and for a decade now - Lucas still saw her beneath the right angle of the sun’s rays or framed by a curtain of snowfall, and he could have sworn she truly was a dryad, a creature beyond beauty. This was the case now, and it only made the thumping in his heart all the more noticeable as he approached. He had cleaned himself up as best as he could from the previous day, and asked his father for the full day’s work off so this business could be done. His father had refused, and this his mother had dragged his father off by the ear to argue some sense into him.

So now Lucas was in his best dress, walking up the hill, approaching the girl whose hair waved like tendrils of fire in the wind. She beamed as she noticed him, springing in a most unladylike fashion to her feet and waving. It made him chuckle.

“Lucas! Since when do you have the day off! Hold there for a moment, I’ll roll my way to you.”

“Oh don’t get your dress dirty, I have something-”

But it was too late. She rolled down the hill, cackling maniacally, getting dirt and pollen all over her dress and completely uncaring about it. She bowled him over, and the two rolled together, as they had a full ten years ago. Well, he’d done the rolling back then. This, in a way, was her way of unknowingly bringing it full circle.

“It’s a miracle anyone ever believes you’re the daughter of a town chief!” Lucas declared, helping her to her feet.

“Adopted daughter, remember? That gives me leeway to excuse some wildness!”

She kissed him, pressing her lips against his. They did this occasionally now, but it was always short, always chaste. Theirs was a traditional village, with expectations. Expectations he had now *met*.

He held her face in his hands, gazing into her blue eyes. She smiled back, staring into his. Something seemed to pass between them, as it often did. An understanding, of sorts.

“You saw my father, didn’t you?”

“I did,” he replied.

“Did he chew you out again? I have told him that who I choose to spend my time with is my business! We aren’t being inappropriate apart from a little kiss here, a hug there, a tickle too-”

She reached out and tried to tickle him, but he was too quick, pulling her around into a hug and staring down at her. She was smaller than him now, and he loved the feel of her like that.

“No, he was quite good actually.”

“Was it another display order? I swear, every time I tell him there’s enough family crests displayed, it’s like *that’s* when the fact that I’m adopted comes out. He smirks when he says it.”

“Not maliciously, I hope?”

“Oh no, he knows it makes me laugh. He loves his displays, though.”

“Well, it wasn’t about that. There was no order. Actually, I asked to see him this time.”

“Oh, what about, my handsome blacksmith?”

He withdrew back from Cecily a little. She had bits of flower on her face, pollen and dirt on her clothing, and her hair was tangled and everywhere. Thanks to her, his own fine

dress (at least, fine for a blacksmith most of the year) was mussed up as well, as was his dark hair. The moment he'd imagined in his head had come and gone, and yet . . . and yet this seemed utterly perfect anyway.

"I came to ask for a blessing," he said, withdrawing the necklace from his sealed pocket. "And he said yes."

Cecily gasped as soon as she saw it. She may have been an utter tomboy in many ways, but she was still a woman deep down, and the corners of her eyes began to brim with the promise of joyful tears.

"Lucas, is that what - is that what I think it is?"

He carefully placed it around her neck, letting the fiery pendant settle over her chest.

"It is my promise to you," he said, taking a knee and placing her hand in his. "To protect, to love, to guard, and to hold, from this first day or my promise until the Many Gods call me away, and even then, beyond that, too. Do you accept me?"

Cecily did something completely unexpected: she laughed so hard that she actually snorted. "Of course I'll accept you, silly! I've wanted to marry you ever since I was five years old!"

She launched herself at him, knocking him over so that she was on top of him, clutching him tight and placing her lips upon hers.

"I love you, I love you, I love you!" she declared, again and again. "And I'll marry you Lucas Forger. I'll bring my fiery hair to your forge where it belongs."

He kissed her hair, smelling it. They were only fifteen, and would have to wait three years before the wedding could officially take place. But this was their courting, and now it was official. Everyone would know, and everyone would accept what they had both known was true in their hearts long ago. It was a perfect moment, unlike any other the pair had ever known.

And then it was interrupted.

CRACK!

At the treeline, a tree fell over, its trunk thick, its branches healthy. It collapsed down with a thud, and something about it chilled the pair. Lucas got up, waving Cecily behind him.

"What in the Higher Plane of the Gods was that?" Cecily asked.

"I don't know. Stay here, Cecily. Just in case."

"Like all the Lower Regions, I will. You're not my husband yet, and you know I can't resist a slice of adventure."

Lucas winced, then smirked. "Well, I should know by now what I'm getting into."

The pair of them raced to the treeline, and Cecily actually managed to get ahead of Lucas for one fleeting moment as they ploughed through the bushes and onto the other side.

Only for him to find her halted, her posture stiff, staring up at a dark shape. It took Lucas just a second longer to realise what he was looking at.

“Oh. Oh, by the Many Gods . . .”

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Don’t move. It’s a-”

“A Sol.”

The tension was like a knife hung above them in the air, poised over a life-saving cord that might be cut at any second. The rumble of the beast looming over them was like the thunder of the angry heavens, its dark fur like the stir of a dark wood in the wind. Its eyes were orange, fiery just like Cecily’s hair, and its mane was a living flame that gave out no heat. It was immense, far greater in size than Lucas could have imagined, perhaps twenty feet in length or more, easily ten feet in height. Its frame was broader in comparison to a wolf, and while it was on all four paws, it was clear that the creature was somewhat man-like in shape, its snout less extended, its face a little flatter, its eyes full of a kind of intelligence, one that warred with its animalistic, monstrous nature. Its claws were more like talons, but it clearly had opposable thumbs, of sorts, sharp as they were, and this was on the back legs as well, giving the impression that as wolf-like as the creature was, it could also scale trees and cliff-faces if necessary, in pursuit of its prey.

“What do we do?” Lucas whispered, as the creature gazed down at them, only feet away.

“I - I don’t know. Father told me nothing of Sols. He forbade all talk of it, ever since-”

The creature bared its teeth, sniffing the air. Lucas readied his fists, knowing he could not fight it, but ready to delay its advance even by the slimmest of seconds in the hopes that Cecily could get away.

“Cecily, when I move, be ready to run. Straight back to your father’s.”

“But what about-”

“Be ready, and do it. I swore I would protect you. Didn’t expect to have to do it so quickly, but here we are.”

But the creature only sniffed the air, and did not advance. There was a strange beauty to it, a power and elegance, despite its bestial nature. It was the most terrifying thing Lucas had ever seen, and yet he couldn’t quite say that it wasn’t also a blessing to look upon. He thought that Sols would be grotesque, revolting creatures, but in the deadly gaze of this creature was something almost . . . noble.

The Sol lowered slowly to Cecily. Lucas moved in front but he was butted out of the way easily, and Cecily did not run. Instead, her fiery hair whipped in the wind, and the creature sniffed it. Parts of its mane mingled with her hair, looking almost identical.

And then it whispered something to her.

And then, like a shadow passing at speed, it hurtled away back into the forest, and was gone in silence.

Lucas ran to Cecily's side, holding her as she collapsed against him.

"Are you alright? Cecily, are you alright?"

"I - I am," she said. "I think it was from the hinterlands, all the way from . . ."

"It spoke to you. What did it say?"

She blinked back tears. "It said '*I'm sorry.*' Lucas, did you know that Sols could talk?"

Lucas shook his head, holding her as he stared into the foreboding wilderness that had spoiled their day of joy.

"I was told they never could," he said.

They held each other closely for some time. Her new fiery pendant seemed to burn him, but he chalked that up to his terrified imagination.

Chapter Four: Lost Sol

Lucas held Cecily's hand. The flames burned before them, low but hot, flickering and dancing as surely as her bright hair. The stars were full, and the many braziers surrounding them lit up the congregation. Cecily's aunt had weaved the fire lilies and pink tongues and purpleblooms into her hair, adding to her vibrancy. As was tradition, she was wearing a dress of pale blue, simple but elegant. He too wore the same colour, also plainly adorned, though he had done his best to look handsome for her in it. The two squeezed one another's fingers, vibrating with seeming giddiness as they waited for the town chief to say his part. He was roughly twenty feet from them, but his voice boomed over the crackling fire that lay between them and him.

"Love burns," he announced. "First as an ember, then as a flame, then as a raging inferno during those fine years of courtship, only to become a simple flame again. It will warm you in times of desperation, but you must also shield it, for there will be times of coldness, of terrible gales and harsh winters. The flames of your love will give you succour in those times, but you must always feed it. Do not make it a raging inferno of destruction, but tend it as you would a plant with water, giving enough each day to bring the comfort and compassion and care that will always outlast love. Do this, and it will never extinguish, but carry on into the realm of the Many Gods."

"*Into the Heavens we go,*" proclaimed those present, of whom there were just a few: relatives, friends, and parents.

“Now I ask that you show your willingness to tackle all trials together. Leap through the flames and be purified.”

One last shared, loving grin. They locked hands and leapt through the flames, arriving swiftly on the other side, unharmed. They put an arm around each other’s waist as they crossed the grass barefoot to Chief Hawker.

“And like that, where once there were two, there is now one,” he declared. “Your union is now declared before the Many Gods. You are husband and wife, Lucas and Cecilia. Which means, of course, you may now kiss.”

“Finally!” Cecilia cried, practically *leaping* into her new husband’s arms to kiss him. Their lips locked, and it felt right. It felt *true*.

Lucas couldn’t deny her words either. They had been intended to marry at eighteen, as was the usual custom for those betrothed beforehand. Instead, Chief Hawker had delayed the process out two years, requiring Cecilia to accompany him to Nerscyth and beyond on matters of business even she was not privy to. Other excuses were maintained, and it had taken Lucas barging in on the town chief’s home - rather against town law, in fact - just to make the matter clear: he *was* going to marry her. The chief apologised for his reluctance only then, though he once more quizzed Lucas, demanding that he protect Cecily if something awful ever happened. **Once again**, there was a strange foreboding in his words, but when pressed, he gave nothing more. Lucas got the sense that he was a perennially paranoid father, perhaps because Cecily had been adopted.

But such thoughts were best left behind as he embraced the woman who was now his wife. His heart swelled with joy, and as he ran his fingers through her fiery hair there was a sense of completeness in him. They kissed again, and only stopped once the small crowd began to laugh a little.

“Let’s enjoy the wine and food before the new couple retires, then!” Lucas’ father said. He came and embraced Cecily, followed by Lucas’ mother. Cecily’s father in turn embraced Lucas, though as usual there was a slight stiffness to his movements.

“Take care of her, son,” he said.

“Of course I will,” Lucas replied. “Every day. I promise.”

Food followed, food and drink and celebration. In other realms, speeches were often given at such times, but that was not the Theorus way. Once a couple had made it through the fire, all was self-evident, and the eyes of the Many Gods were satisfied. There was nothing left but to drink and eat and be merry, and that they were for a time. The usual gifts were given, and the home that had been constructed for the pair was finally given access in the form of a key, provided by Cecily’s father. By custom it was Lucas who took it, and then offered it to Cecily. A man was head of many things, after all, but a woman’s dominion was the home, and in that space her authority was clear.

The two of them were giddy, but the warmth of the fire and the excitement of the spirits provided began to make them eager as well. Lucas longed for his wife, and from the way her hand kept creeping over his thigh beneath the table, he got the distinct sense that this giggling, buoyant wife was keen to finally consummate their relationship.

"I think we shall retire now," he announced, which led to his father giving a rather bawdy chuckle at the implications, only to be shushed by his own wife.

The various guests raised their tankards to the new couple, wishing them well. As per custom they were escorted to their new home, the party quite literally moving to accommodate this. In olden times they would have been carried across the threshold, the family next door to ensure the consummation actually occurred. That was, thankfully, a dying tradition, and one that no one desired here; there was no concern whatsoever that consummation would follow soon with *this* particular pair. So the family and friends drank and chatted out on the main street of Caith as the newly married couple entered their home. It was not immense, but it was certainly larger than most homes, thanks to the town chief's contributions. There was more than enough room for a good number of children, and that prospect excited Lucas. He was only a man of twenty, but the notion of creating a family with the love of his life stirred him to excitement, especially because of the act it would require.

"Here we are!" Cecily announced, spinning on the spot in her blue dress, grinning from ear to ear. "My home, with my husband. Oh, it sounds so wonderful to say! The best adventure yet!"

"A wonderful place to live," he said, slowly taking off his shirt.

"A base from which we can travel," she announced. "I want to see it all with you, my love. The hinterlands, Mount Corrigan, the Undermarsh."

He chuckled. "Married for just two hours and already wanting to flex your new freedom?"

"Of course," she said, flinging her dress off and pressing her body against him. "But first of all, I want *you*, my husband. I've been wanting you for far too long, and I want to make sure you know it, blacksmith's son."

"Blacksmith, now," he said. "And you're a blacksmith's wife."

"Mhmm," she moaned as he began to undo the bindings of her breasts, just as she began to pull his undergarments down from his hips. "I like the sound of that. Make me your wife in full, Lucas Forger. I want to be yours."

And with that, her lovely freckled breasts were freed, modest in size but perfect, her figure slim and beautiful and womanly, her hips wide; the last part making Lucas feel all sorts of instinctive mating desire for his wife. They came together, kissing romantically but also *passionately*, even as their hands slid across one another, exploring their respective bodies.

Cecily moaned in Lucas' mouth, and it only made his member harder. It throbbed, pressing against the flat plain of her lower stomach, and soon she lowered a hand to stroke it gingerly.

"Mhmm," he stammered, kissing her neck tenderly. "I want you. I want you now, my Cecily."

"Then take me, husband, for I want you too."

Still kissing, still making love, they made their way to their new bed, covered in rose petals to celebrate their coming together. Laying down upon them, her legs already spread wide to receive him, Cecily looked to be the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"What?" she said, grinning.

"Just that I didn't think I could love you more."

"Oh, silly! Make love to me already! I've been wanting this for *years!*"

He crawled up upon her and began to feel and kiss and caress her breasts. Each stroke made her gasp, and the pleasure only increased when she took his cock and gently pulled him towards her entrance. There was a brief nervousness, then a brief pain from her, as he slid inside his wife, but then there was nothing but pleasure as her wet passage began to hold firm upon his manhood, massaging it with every slow thrust he began to make.

"Ohhhhh, yessssss!" she moaned.

"You f-feel so g-good," he managed.

"Go faster. Not too f-fast, but . . . faster!"

He did so at her command, thrusting with a bit more speed and pressing his face into the softness of her breasts. He sucked on her divine pink nipples, and it was clear that he was driving her to fits of ecstasy with such behaviour, because soon Cecily was beyond words entirely, moaning and wailing and almost thrashing as he began to fuck her in full. It was love. It was passion. It was primal, too. He gripped her ass, sinking his fingers into the *rondure* flesh there, and then placed his other hand behind her neck. They kissed, and the sensation of her moaning into his mouth was wonderful. He could feel his manhood about to reach its zenith, his member about to spend his seed inside her.

"I'm about to - to-"

"Please! Do it!" she cried.

He thrust again, his impressive member going deep into her tunnel, and then he shuddered with the most brilliant orgasm he'd ever had. It was like his whole body fell out of his control, his entire attention focused upon the streams of issue that ejaculated from his manhood. But then even that passed as he continued to arrive within her, and his attention passed to *her* instead, purely her. His pleasure rose as he witnessed her wordless, almost soundless orgasm. She squeaked, opened her mouth wide, and her eyes went into the back of her head. Her body shuddered, thighs gripping him as she accepted his seed. They

climaxed together, her trembling against him, and the sensation of her raking her nails against his back without thinking only made Lucas' pleasure all the more powerful.

It had been a true union of man and wife, and both held each other in the aftermath, hearts full of love.

Lucas was woken by shouting, quite a lot of shouting, in fact. It sounded like a mob of people, in fact.

"Cecily, wake up. Something's going on."

She stirred, the town chief's daughter taking time to stir, but when she did, she pulled herself up and blinked in the near-darkness.

"What is it? Lucas, what's that sound?"

There was a chant of some kind, and he could only just make it out.

'Grab the Sol! Grab the Sol! Cast her out to the hinterlands! Grab the Sol!'

"Something about a Sol," he said. Something of a shiver ran down his spine, a sense of uncomfortable foreboding. Could it be that flame-haired Sol they had seen before, five whole years ago? Surely not? Still, the prospect terrified him. It had shown such unusual *interest* in Cecily. He turned to his wife, seeing the confusion on her face, lit by the shine of the torches from an approaching mob outside their home. "Cecily, get dressed. And - and hide."

"Lucas, I don't understand-"

"Neither do I. But trust me; get dressed and hide, quickly!"

He got dressed in his sleepwear quickly and then opened the front door to his home. To his horror, a crowd of villagers had formed, a number of them carrying clubs and weapons, torches and pitchforks, and many among them had angry expressions. He recognised a few of them, chiefly Sebastian, who looked as ugly now on the outside as he was on the inside.

"Bring out the Sol!" someone shouted.

"She's not - you don't understand-"

Lucas recognised that voice, and saw that it was the town chief himself. A respected figure whose word was just and *law*, was being ignored as he tried to push his way through the crowd.

"Listen to me, she is adopted, but she is my daughter! She is not-"

An older woman stepped forward and jabbed him in the chest even as the crowd centred around him. Lucas thought quickly: his parents lived on the other side of town. They likely didn't even *know* that this was happening.

“We know your lies, chief!” the woman spat. “You have served us well, so do not think we wish to break with you. “But you know that the creature inside is not a woman, but a bastard daughter of Lord Kallow, and as such, she is cursed to become a Sol per our custom, or else the kingdom shall fall into ruin!”

A mad agreement ran through the crowd. Lucas’ heartbeat terribly with a sense of unbelieving horror.

“It’s not true!” he shouted. “She is my wife! And if you will not desist from this, I shall be forced to defend her.”

He drew forth a sword of his own making, the one he’d constructed alone, knowing it might be needed to defend his wife one day. He held it before him, holding a strong swordsman’s position, the same kind he had taught Cecily as well.

The crowd briefly backed, but there were dozens of them, and they were surrounding him further, advancing in some spots more daringly. He waved his sword about, but it was impossible to track them all.

“Don’t be a fool, child!” the woman yelled.

“He is a fool!” Sebastian yelled. “He married a monster, the sick man! I bet he already knows she’s slated to become a Sol, but he’d rather our kingdom fall to ruin than let it happen!”

The crowd roared approval, a mix of history, myth, and made up nonsense spreading through them. Somewhere along the way, the unfortunate need to sacrifice poor bastards for Sols, because of a king’s reluctance, had turned to a bitter fear and hatred for those who would become them.

“Get my daughter to safety, Lucas!” Chief Harker shouted. “Get inside and-”

The crowd moved, so fast that Lucas didn’t even see it coming. He managed to slice across Sebastian’s front, the man groaning as he fell. It was not a lethal blow, but somehow it only angered the crowd further. He moved to run back into the house.

“Cecily! RUN! RUN NOW BEFORE-”

And then there was darkness, as something took him in the back of the head. The last sound he heard was a woman’s screams, and a man’s voice.

‘We got her! Take ‘em to the town centre! Kallow is giving a reward if it all goes through! For saving the kingdom!’

Lucas woke with his hands tied behind his back and men on either side of him. He was on his knees, and a congregation of villagers were in a great circle, conducting some sort of eerie chant. It took him a moment to recognise what they were saying.

“Claim the Sol! Claim the Sol! Take the girl and make the Sol!”

He woke far more fully when he saw a burly man dragging his wife into the centre of the circle. Another pair brought a wooden pole and began to hammer it into the earth. They tied her hands behind her back and affixed them to the pole. Cecily looked terrified, her clothing a little torn, her hair all loose, her expression one of confusion. Their eyes met, and something in Lucas died to see the fear in his wife’s eyes.

“Cecily!”

“Lucas! Help me!”

Lucas roared. He pushed against his captors, but barely made it five feet before he was hauled back.

“Don’t be stupid boy, she’s bewitched you.”

“She’s my wife! Let her go or I’ll kill you!”

The man sighed - actually just *sighed*. “Just like his ma and pa. We’ve had to keep them penned in their home until the deed is done. Only when the Sol is fully revealed from this hidden bitch will your mind fog be lifted.”

He was spouting superstitious madness, but there was no purpose in pointing this out; the man was carried by the crowd as much as anyone. Lucas struggled against his restraints even as the chant lifted. Cecily was left alone in the great circle, and a new man that Lucas had not seen before, one who could only be one of Lord Kallow’s attendants - one of Cecily’s *true* father’s attendants - sprinkled powder upon the ground in a strange, almost arcane symbol.

“Please, she hasn’t done anything! She’s a good woman! She’s my wife!”

“It’s true! I am one of you!” Cecily cried. “I thought - I thought I was one of you!”

“She lies!” a woman screamed from the side, and several men and women agreed with her. “Raise the Sol and lose the human illusion! Claim the Sol! Claim the Sol!”

Lucas screamed himself hoarse, even as Cecily’s face was held tight by the attendant and a marking applied to her forehead. With that, he withdrew to a carriage beyond the crowd, where Lord Kallow himself was no doubt watching. Cecily cried out, pulling against her restraints.

“Lucas, please! I didn’t know! I swear I didn’t know!”

“I know, it’s not true! You’re not a Sol, Cecily! You know I love you, you know-”

Silence fell. The crowd did not stop shouting, nor did Lucas stop screaming, or Cecily pleading. This was an unnatural silence, one that felled the audience’s sound with one swift stroke, so that all were briefly deaf. People stopped, all confused by this. No one had seen the transformation of a Sol up close. Few had, in fact.

The stars began to go out. The moon shifted, its crescent form becoming full, its surface a crimson red with rippling flames spiralling off-centre. A void in the world seemed to

open, the scarlet light of the moon casting a shaft directly down upon Cecily, bathing her in its red rays. Lucas screamed again, trying to make sense of it, but his voice was full of nothing more than silence.

And then Cecily's broke through, accompanied by an unnatural hum that seemed to vibrate in the air itself.

"No! No, I swear I'm not - I didn't know! Father, Lucas, anyone, please - OHHHHH!!!"

The transformation began beneath the crimson light. Cecily groaned, her body shaking against the tied post as it began to expand. With one sickening lurch, her left shoulder grew, leaving her lopsided, until the other shoulder expanded in turn. Her clothing tore as her chest became more barrel shaped, and the dress fell from her upper torso entirely as muscles grew across her form. Her breasts, visible for just a moment, receded entirely, shrinking away and dissipating into the sudden growth of fiery fur that expanded across her body. It was the same colour as her hair, like that of a fire lily, and she groaned out loud as it spread.

"Oh God! It's true! Lucas, I'm - ahhh! - I'm sorry, I didn't know! I didn't know I was a S-Sol! NGHHH!!!"

She grunted as her arms expanded, becoming longer and more powerful. Her thighs swelled, her hips squaring out as her entire form swelled in size. The fur continued to spread, leaving the woman herself to pant and moan from the results. From Lucas' perspective, it should have been painful, but Cecily groaned in a way that sounded almost like their bedroom lovemaking just hours earlier.

"Ohhhhh, by the M-Many Godssssss!" she cried, shaking her body almost rhythmically as it swelled. "It's t-too much! It's t-too much! I'm s-sorry Lucas! I'm - ughhh! Ohhhhhhh! Godssss!!!"

She thrust out her rear, where part of her nightdress was barely clinging on, and suddenly it tore apart as a long tail *exploded* out from her. Hair grew from it quickly as it lengthened, that same fiery pattern. It was bushy and powerful, and it wagged moments later from a mix of agitation, confusion, terror, and what seemed to be an unwanted pleasure.

"Ohhhhh, I c-can't s-stop it! It's t-too much! MHMMM!!!"

It was too much for her restraints; they snapped, freeing her hands. She grabbed her cheeks, sliding her hands down over her chest even as talons extended from her hands, which had begun to look like manipulable paws. Her small shoes tore open as well, her feet looking much the same. Like an animal, Cecily fell onto all fours, the post nearly snapping from her weight where it was still tied around her waist. That too pulled apart, however, coming apart like ribbons instead of ropes as her entire form grew powerfully.

"My - oh Gods, my -"

Lucas' eyes widened even further as she fell to her side, the fur spreading everywhere. Her face was beginning to change, a snout forming, her ears already drawing up to the top of her head and becoming canine in appearance. But that was not what gained Lucas' attention, shocking as it was. Even as his wife's face disappeared, he couldn't help but notice that she was pawing at the space between what could now be called her hind legs. Something was bulging and growing there, pushing outwards. She moaned, her voice becoming lower and guttural, almost male-sounding, and soon it was readily apparent why. All of a sudden Cecily groaned in a brass, booming tone, and a great cock slid from her new sheath, immense and thick in size. It spurt what looked to be gallons of semen onto the ground, again and again as she literally *howled* in combined discomfort, fear, and unwanted but clearly overwhelming *pleasure*.

"I'm s-sorry, Lucas! I'm - NNGHHH!!! AARGGGHH!!!"

Her jaw cracked, teeth becoming sharper as a snout formed. Her cock finished its business, leaving Lucas unbelieving what he had just seen, and it slowly retracted back into his wife's furry sheath. She wasn't even a woman anymore, but a male Sol, powerful and immense, though not nearly so large as the one they had encountered. Still, she had to be at least ten feet long, not including her tail, and just like the Sol they had seen years before, she - or *he* now - was almost ethereally beautiful, in a way. Haunting in a primal, powerful, yet somehow *noble* fashion.

"My Cecily," Lucas managed to say, and with that the changes were ended, and the roar of the crowd returned, cheering and hurraing their work.

"To the hinterlands with you! Or the north! Protect the border from our enemies, beast slave! And be gone!"

She looked to him, tearing free of the last of her bindings easily. The crowd reared back, momentarily afraid. For a moment, the great magical beast snarled, its jagged teeth, silver like the moon, showing in all their power. But then the great male Sol looked upon Lucas. Even with its expression so utterly altered, he still knew his Cecily to the depths of her soul.

The look was one of utter shame.

"Please," he said. "Don't go."

But then her eyes changed. They had become slitted, like those of a cat, but there was still an intelligence behind them. All that vanished as they warbled for just a moment, shimmering with one last, cruel magical touch. They greyed over, and the brightness of Cecily, in all her adventurousness and wildness and giddy love of life, was eclipsed.

The beast remained, servile only to its holy duty.

It turned and fled, bounding over the fearful crowd, who then took up a great cheer at its passage. They stayed for some time, chatting to one another, laughing and patting

themselves on the back for their good work, and making amused jokes about the male display of the bestial Sol which had once been a beautiful woman. And then, slowly, they dispersed. The carriage carrying Lord Kallow was already disappearing upon the horizon. His work was done, his bastard sacrificed, the kingdom's peace secured.

Lucas remained on his knees, tears falling down his face, sobbing in anguish.

He has lost his wife. He had failed to protect her.

Her necklace, with the pendant of the fire lily he had made her, lay broken upon the earth.

Chapter Five: Across the Earth

"Are you sure about this, laddie?"

Lucas nodded slowly as he finished putting together his pack. He had his sword, and he had a bow, not that he could use it well. He had hunting equipment, as well as what he'd need to make a campfire and cook food. Several changes of clothes and a good coat from the rain was in there too, as well as a spare pair of shoes. There were other things too, mostly for survival. Nothing for pleasure or relaxation.

"Of course I'm sure, father. She's out there somewhere, and I need to find her."

His father scratched the back of his head, the same motion his son had inherited.

"Son, she's gone. She's a Sol now."

"Then I'll find a way to bring her back now."

His father was about to argue, but it was his mother that soothed her husband.

"Go then," she said. "But return, please, if you cannot find a way, my son."

"I will," he said. "I promise. But only to say goodbye a second time. I refuse to stay in Caith a second longer, knowing what *they* did."

He gave his parents both a kiss on the cheek, and a ferocious hug, and then he went out the door. To his surprise, Marius Hawker was on the other side of it. It was a broken man now since the events of two weeks ago, and had gone unshaven. He was in the process of leaving his duties as town chief, and then leaving the town itself. Who could blame him? The people of Caith wanted to pretend that he'd been fooled by his girl as well, but now Lucas understood the truth; he'd simply been hoping that the day would never come when his charge was called upon to change. And now that it had passed, he was alone again, and had decided to live with relatives in Nerscyth.

"Chief Haw- . . . Marius. I didn't expect to come and see you off."

“You are still my son-in-law,” the man said. “And I too still have hope for my daughter.”

An uneasy silence followed.

“If you had just told me-”

“I know. You think I haven’t asked myself a thousand times over if I had done things differently? Perhaps even smuggled her out, lived elsewhere like hermits? Perhaps she could still be free, and have her own mind. I failed her, much as I tried otherwise. I was a fool. And you are a fool too, Lucas.”

“You dare say that, when-”

“A necessary fool,” he corrected, “which is just what we need. Only a fool would try to turn back a Sol, or believe it possible. Only a fool would race to the ends of the land in pursuit of such a goal. And only a fool would leave without a strong horse, extra provisions, and a tent pack.”

He gestured behind him, where a noble white steed stood proudly, its provisions already attached to its generous saddlebags.

“Her name is Liliava. My daughter named her, and loved her dearly. You *will* treat her well, and you *will* bring my daughter back. You *will* save her, my boy.”

Lucas nodded, his mood changing. He stepped forward and took the reins of Liliava. It allowed him to pet her, and his heart rose just a little to feel this connection to his lost wife.

“I will, father-in-law,” he said. “Or I shall die trying.”

Marius Hawker nodded, accepting this. “And if you need anything at all, look me up in Nerscyth. I shall find what I can to aid you. Please, Lucas, find it in your heart to forgive too.”

Lucas considered the horse, the provisions, and the older man’s longing face.

“I already have,” he said. “If you can forgive me for not saving her.”

“Done,” Marius said. “And let us hope she will forgive us, when you find her. May the Many Gods guide your path, young Lucas.”

Lucas embraced his father-in-law, the two men sharing a moment of joined grief, and then he got up into the saddle of the horse, his various baggage all secured and ready. He nodded one last time to the man, and then to his parents as they exited out the doorway to see him off.

Finally, he left, bidding Caith goodbye.

He didn’t look back. He had his lost love to find.

She was sometimes called the Lady in Green, or the Fae Witch, or simply the Oldest Woman. Whomever she was, the witch in the histories who had created the Sols had never

been found, not since she left the Sol curse in place. But then again, few had actually desired to find her, knowing the vengeful power she had put in place behind her, and few others possessed the will that Lucas did now.

Finding the witch had not been the blacksmith's first objective, nor even his second. For his first two months of travel, he simply wished to find his wife, hoping against hope that his presence before her may bring her mind back, and then the two could work together to undo the curse, somehow. This had come to nought, however. Lucas had stayed clear of cities and reprovisioned only at small towns and villages, occasionally doing odd jobs as a blacksmith at the local forges to make his way. He reached the hinterlands of the north-west, thinking that Cecily may have been there. She had often talked of her love of snow, but her love of spring flowers and generous fields took him to the border of the realm of Trassus instead. There he found no Sols at all, though he could swear he could feel the presence of them, especially the most ancient ones. They had lifespans that measured in the hundreds, at least so it was said, the largest among them being the oldest. At night, he saw vanishing shadows or lurking outlines, but could never make them out fully. They all seemed much too large to be Cecilia, and so after three weeks of searching, shouting, pleading with the Many Gods, he moved on.

The western slopes were next, and there he had more luck, if it could be called that. One of the first invasions during the Great Fracture had occurred through the wintry passage, a surprise attack from the Kingdom of Gaville. As such, despite some of its intractable territory, there were many Sols here. The nearest village was miles and miles away, and had viewed the border with suspicion, thankful for the Sols in the same breath as they spat at the 'repulsive beasts.' Lucas nearly brought the flame of his forge in his anger, but managed to quench it, also like a good forge worker, in order to pursue his task. Indeed, he found Sols there, large beasts with snow coats. They were indeed like man-wolves, adept at moving like men or animals, and he couldn't help but admire their grace and tenacity, the way they scaled icy cliff-faces on their patrols. Some were black-furred, others grey and white like snow wolves. They largely ignored him, though some drew closer, giving curious sniffs before returning to their patrols. It was a nerve-wracking experience, but necessary to understand the nature of the Sols. They were indeed unlike true life: existing without living, moving and breathing and eating out of necessity but without passion. They protected the kingdom, guarded its borders, but each had the grey, unfeeling eyes that Cecily's had turned into, marking them as reduced and debased. It chilled Lucas more than the snow itself to see them.

He met up with Marius Hawker several times, gaining more knowledge, rumours, and even whispers on the Sols. His father-in-law was not maintaining his health as he should, but

neither was Lucas. Both were desperate to find her, but it was Marius who suggested the most radical option.

“Fine the witch,” he’d said. “We can’t chase the entire border, and who knows how the Sols operate, if they stick to one territory or rotate seasonally? Even with her more remarkable . . . coat, it’s unlikely we’ll find Cecily that way. No, it is the Lady in Green you must find, and from there try to bargain.”

Lucas hesitated on this point before ultimately agreeing.

“I said I would go to the ends of the earth to protect her,” he said. “I’ve done that, and failed again. Now, I suppose, I must go to the ends of legend and myth itself, and find the truth that will free her.”

And so he did. For the next year, he travelled far and wide across Theorus, the immense kingdom’s borders stretching far beyond each horizon. He visited the seas to the south, the dark woods further in the west, and even made the hard journey across the central mountains upon which the Many Gods were said to rest upon their apexes. Lucas tried not to lose hope, but each passing day, week, and month slowly sapped his hope from him. He refused to give up on his Cecily, but the journeying through wilderness and crag was slow and difficult, with scant few clues to go on, and increasingly fruitless. Still, he continued to pitch his tent and push forward, always keeping his love in mind.

“I will save you, Cecily,” he said to himself, over and over. “I will save you.”

But as always, the sun rose and fell on another day without any sighting of the Lady in Green. Another small shard of Lucas’ hope chipped away and fell to the ground, left in the wake of his trail upon the morn.

Lucas has been searching for nearly two years. It was largely out of inertia at this point. His love for Cecily was still pure and true, but depression and lack of faith clouded his heart. He had visited Marius just two months ago, and the older man looked beyond his years, ready to give up. Lucas still pressed on, but it was like a grim duty now; a lone journey taken by a mythic but tragic warrior from some ancient, long-forgotten myth. That was, until he left his tent one morning and found his horse missing.

“Liliava! Liliava!” he called out, before making a few clicking noises. The horse did not draw near, but a low neigh sounded through the treeline. Lucas had been going through the Maytine Woods, which were thick and clustered in their centre, but when he pushed through into a clearing, he found an unexpectedly wondrous space: flowers of many colours bloomed, and a small creek ran across comfortable grass. Several trees grew plump fruit, and in the centre, feeding upon one of these, was Liliava. Lucas moved to his horse, but

halted as he realised that a hand was feeding her. He had assumed it to be a small tree, but the illusion of camouflage dissipated as he paid attention; it was a woman. A woman with bark-like skin mingled with patches of mossy green. Her hair was composed of roots and vines, falling down her naked back, and her eyes were green, hypnotically so. There was an aura to her, a radiance that seemed to put Lucas on edge as much as it tried to calm him. Sweet music played from seemingly nowhere, and it made it hard to grip his sword.

"Fascinating. Few maintain the shape of their minds in my presence. You must have a strong will indeed, mortal."

"Who - who are you?" he asked, still gripping the sword. It felt like it was weighed down with stones, but he held it all the same.

"I am the one you have been seeking so fervently these past two years. Do you not recognise your Lady in Green of legend? Do you not recognise a dryad?"

Lucas gaped, dropping the sword. He instantly fell to his knee and bowed before this being. A dryad. She was a dryad. Of all the omens he could have received this was the best one; he still recalled thinking Cecily was a dryad when he first saw her, and now that he was before one, he could understand fully why: this being looked to be a thing of the wilds, of beauty and nature, of freedom and growth. But it also had edges, a power to it that should not be underestimated, just like had been the case with Cecilia.

"My Lady," he said, "I have come to beseech your aid in finding-"

"Rise, Lucas. I am not a lady in the sense that you mean. Lordly titles mean nothing to me except for in matters of bargaining, as you would know well from my legends."

"The Sol sacrifice."

The being nodded. By the Many Gods, she was utterly inhuman, and yet the most beautiful thing Lucas had ever seen. No, the *second* most beautiful.

"Yes, you know the legends, and have researched more than most. To save a kingdom, a king must be prepared to lead. To sacrifice. As should his line. It is the nature of things; power brings a great burden that must be shouldered. But in my last pact, a loophole was found."

"The use of bastards."

Another nod. Her vine-like hair moved as if devoid of gravity. *"Indeed. And now the sacrifices continue to this day, where they should have stopped long, long ago."*

"I need to break the cycle," Lucas declared. "My Cecilia - Cecilia Harker - no, Forger - has been turned into a Sol. A male Sol."

"Indeed, many change genders as their ferocity is brought out. But I cannot aid you, Lucas Forger. Her essence is that of a Sol now, and as you know, thanks to the betrayal of the sacrifice, the Sol's minds are clouded and without animation."

“Is there no way to save her? To save them all? Please, Lady in Green, I have travelled so very far and for a long time, often without rest. My love for Cecily is true. I would do anything to be with her and save her mind.”

The dryad paused as it stroked Liliava’s flanks, seeming to consider something. The air rushed through the trees gently, seeming to carry a message, or perhaps a change in mood.

“There is one way . . . though it carries a risk.”

Lucas edged forward, as if grasping for this last kernel of hope.

“Anything. Please. Even if it carries only the slimmest chance of succeeding.”

The Lady in Green stepped closer to him. She smelled of spring flowers and sweet maple sap. It was borderline intoxicating.

“You would have to become a Sol as well. This would be a permanent transformation.”

“What?”

“It is the only way. In becoming a Sol, you would be able to find her, track her across hundreds of miles with your enhanced scent. And if you found her, there is a chance you could reconnect and purify her essence, restoring the old Cecily. She would remain a Sol, of course, but her mind would be her own, and you would be able to communicate and be . . . together.”

Lucas stammered. This was not a solution he’d ever imagined or hoped for.

“I would become a Sol, but how would be toge-”

“You would become a female Sol, to remain compatible, of course.”

“Of . . . of course,” Lucas managed. “Um, but even if I agreed, you said that there would be risks?”

The dryad stepped around him, plants blooming in her wake. *“This has been attempted before. You are not the first. Some have volunteered to try and save the Sols, to reconnect with brothers, to apologise to lost daughters. The connection was never strong enough, or the will. Each new Sol transformed by me slowly lost its way and mind, joining the ranks or others. Even the oldest, the flame-haired son of King Torben, Kalis, can barely muster a conscious word.”*

Lucas gaped. “I met him. When I was young. He seemed to sense Cecily’s . . . Solness.”

“Hmmm, that is indeed a fascinating omen. Perhaps there is hope for you. Perhaps . . . perhaps she belongs to his line. He had a babe of a daughter before he turned. This could change things. It could mean that the great mistake I made could finally be overturned . . . but only if you have the will and pure love of heart, Lucas Forger.”

Lucas puffed up his chest a little. “I do. I can save Cecily. I know it.”

“Then you would accept this change, to become a Sol like her? A female Sol at that?”

Lucas swallowed. In truth, despite his love of Cecily, he was still grappling with what an incredible ask this was. He had imagined turning her human again, now the only prospect was to exist as a wolf guardian protector alongside her. A *female* one at that. It was a lot to process, and he would need time, so much time to even consider it, and yet . . .

And yet Cecily needed him.

And yet his love for her was greater than his concern for himself, and even more than that, his pride.

And yet even the slimmest of hopes was better than none.

“I’ll do it,” he declared, trying to keep the confidence in his voice.

“You may have time to decide. Remember, no others have succeeded in what you would be agreeing to do. You would be forfeiting potentially not just your body and gender, but your very mind as well.”

But Lucas just shook his head. “My da’ once told me that once you start a job, you see it through to its end. You don’t stop halfway just because you’re getting nervous. I have wandered for two years to find you, my Lady in Green. I cannot tarry a day longer, not even an hour. Please, transform me, so I can save Cecily.”

The dryad smiled softly, and it seemed that there was respect in that beautiful and alien visage. She gestured to a tree, and it began to bare a fruit in seconds, swollen and angry and red. She plucked it from her hand and passed it gently to him.

“No ritual?” he asked.

“Only the fruit, Lucas Forger. It has my strongest magic in it. Eat it all and swallow the core and pip, and you shall become a Sol. Do you agree to this?”

“I do.”

The wind whispered, murmuring something. A contract had been sealed, and he knew this to be the case instantly.

“Then you may eat, and be transformed.”

He smelled the fruit. It reeked of corruption, of loss, of sacrifice and power. But it also had a hidden sweetness, tucked away behind the other scents. He took that, too, to be potential omen. He bit down upon it.

The fruit tasted foul indeed, and he struggled not to retch. But the contract was signed and sealed, and something in the magic of it compelled him to keep eating; he couldn’t *stop* eating. But then again, nor did he want to. He had made his choice, and now he would keep to it. He devoured the fruit in all its corrupted layers, swallowing the core and pip just as he had promised, the seed taking root within him. He gasped for air as it did, feeling its tendrils of arcanery stretch out through his being.

“It is done,” the dryad said. *“And so it begins.”*

“One last thing! Please let me take the necklace I made for Cecily with me, somehow!”

“I shall use my magic to recreate it in an appropriate form.”

Lucas went to speak his thanks, but then he doubled over, clutching his stomach as several pangs of pain overcame him.

“NGH! I can f-feel it!”

“Indeed. Worry not, it will not take long. The process will be equal parts discomforting and . . . blissful, in a way.”

Already the bliss was starting to arrive. Lucas trembled, finding it hard to breathe as his body swelled. The ethereal lights in the trees and dancing insects turned a crimson red just like the light of the moon when Cecily had turned. Their rays bathed him, speeding up his transformation. His shoulders ripped out wider, tearing apart his clothing, and his chest grew also. His limbs became longer, and he fell to all fours as talons extended from his feet and hands. The flexibility in the lower ones were astounding, like having a second set of hands, as warped as they were. But the biggest changes were yet to come. Matching his hair colour, dark black patches of fur began to push through his skin in various places, forming a thick and shiny coat.

“Ohhhhhh, it f-feels so - mhhmm! Oh Gods! Ahhhhh!”

The pleasure began to hit, the grotesque desire to give into the transformation even further and *embrace* it. His cock hardened in his breeches, but they were soon torn away as his hips widened, and much more so than they had for Cecily. He grunted as they popped out, voice becoming scratchier but also *higher*. More feminine. He panted, face beginning to extend even as a tail slowly pushed its way out from above his backside.

“Mhmmm - nnggh - ugghh! I can f-feel it! I’m b-becoming a Sol! A woman S-Sol! Ohhhh, so godsdamned s-strange!”

“You are nearly there,” the dryad replied.

But he could barely hear her, lost as he was in pleasure. He shook his hips, practically *urging* them to expand further, and expand they did, taking on far more female - and breeding - proportions. His thighs thickened, covered over with dark fur, and the same was true of his chest. There was a brief set of stings, and then, to his surprise, a pair of breasts began to bloom from his chest. They were not massive, but neither were they small, and they were visibly topped with dark grey nipples. The same was true of the lower pairs that followed them, though they were noticeably smaller. Soon he had a pair of breasts and six lower nipples in three rows, and all of them were stiff with arousal.

“B-breasts . . . I have - ahhh - b-breasts! It’s really h-happening, I’m b-becoming - MMMPH!”

The inevitable followed, even as his snout formed, his voice changed, his ears shifted to the top of his head. Lucas' member began to retract, sliding back inside of him and inverting. It did so slowly but implacably, and a strange instinct hit Lucas, making it impossible for him to avoid touching himself as this occurred. He whined like a dog, a female one at that, as his cock withdrew into his body, forming a set of labia lips around it followed by a deep, wet tunnel.

"S-so good! Mhmmm, I feel -!"

He *howled*, rubbing his new feminine flower which was already so moist. His - or rather, *her* - new parts were immensely slick with desire. The new Sol expanded further, tail lengthening to its bushy full, but nothing could stop her new focus, which was on pleasing herself in the immediate aftermath. She rubbed her entrance several more times, unbelieving and ashamed at what she was doing, but needing relief all the same. When the climax came shortly thereafter, she howled several times more, her body seeming to *explode* with delirious bliss that left her larger form shaking on the forest floor. Liliava looked at her curiously, but all Lucas could do was writhe and groan, rubbing her sensitive breasts and lower nipples and revelling in her new form.

It was seemingly minutes after that she managed to collect herself. She was naked, and her mind was now female. Her body was utterly changed, her gender too. Lucas could scarcely believe how strangely powerful she felt, like her body was just brimming with energy. It was like she could climb mountains with ease, tear apart armies with her jaws, rend steel with her talons, bound over cliffs and easily survive the fall. In fact, she probably could. She moved past the dryad, who had remained quiet during this slow acclimation to her new form, and then gazed at herself in the small, calm pond.

"I'm a Sol," she said, voice rumbling, authoritative, dominant . . . and undeniably female. "It worked."

"The next part will be the hardest, Lucas. Face me, when you are ready."

Lucas spent a few more moments mourning the loss of her humanity. She was much larger now, and utterly bestial, but just as with Cecily and with the Sol who had been Kasil, there was an undeniable beauty to her. There was also a sleekness, an obvious femininity, from her wider hips to her obvious breasts, to her thinner snout.

"I am ready," she said, turning away, trying to ignore all the strangeness of her new being, let alone *thinking* of herself as female. She turned to the dryad.

"Then I give you what blessings upon my curse that I can," the dryad announced, touching Lucas upon her new, furry forehead. She then placed the necklace over the new Sol's head. The chain was larger and longer, the pendant enlarged also, but it was clearly the same creation. *"I am touched by your selflessness and love, and so I too shall hope that you change what has been set so long. And much like the full moon above us now, you too*

will be a symbol of that change. I name you Luna to match your new form. Born of hunter's moon, hunt your quarry and free her from the shackles of a mistake I made long ago. Free all the Sols, if you can. And let love your love endure. Keep it in your mind, Luna, even when by distance or time my protective magics slip from your mind, and the Sol's instincts take over. Remember your duty. Remember Cecily, and perhaps all shall be well."

Luna accepted this offering. The new name and all its meaning suited her, she knew. She wondered if Cecily had a new name, but doubted it. Her mate would, once *he* was freed.

"You must go now, good Sol. Time is of the essence. Travel swiftly across the lands and hunt for your mate's scent. You will know it when you find it."

"Thank you, my lady," Luna said in her new voice. "Please take care of my horse."
"I shall. Now go."

Luna flexed her muscles, digging her talons into the ground, and then, after just a moment's hesitation, she bounded out from the glade and through the forest. The reaches of the earth could not deny her now, not any cliff or mountain or tunnel or danger. She had a power and ferocity she could never have imagined.

But for now, at least, she still had her mind, and that, along with her love, guided her forwards across the coming plains.

Chapter Six: New Form, New Urges

Luna tried not to be too embarrassed or, strangely, *exhilarated*. It was a bizarre mix of emotions that she was overcome with. On the one hand - or rather, *paw* - she was now a Sol, and permanently so at that. She was bestial, hairy, with a long sharp-toothed jaw and an extra appendage above her backside that seemed to wag and point and flurry without her permission. Her body was strange and inhuman, capable of running at immense speed on all fours or striding powerfully upon just two. Add in the fact that she now had a pair of ripe, furry breasts, several rows of teats with more hidden mammaries beneath them, and an empty passage between her hind legs, and her existence was far, *far* from the manly one she had always envisioned for herself. Gone was the blacksmith's son who had always wished to prove himself as a powerful man, constantly desiring scruff on his face and for Cecily to view him as more than just an object of affection, but instead one of fierce ruggedness. She had achieved that ruggedness, and it had done nothing for her when Cecily's time of peril came. Now she was scruffy *all over*, though her fur was fine and sleek

and shining as far as coats went, but she was also very much a female, even to see her figure from afar.

And yet despite that private humiliation, that knowledge that this was now *her*, Luna, for the rest of her life whether she succeeded or not, it was impossible to deny the buzzing, almost *primal* excitement that kept pace with her worries, at times even managing to diminish them. There was a wondrous *freedom* and raw, untamed *power* to her new form. She could race across the plains faster than any steed, and scramble over craggy mountainscapes with little effort. Her eyes were sharp as an eagle's, able to spot fine details even miles away provided they were in view, and her nose - her *nose!* Everyone knew that dogs were good sniffers, and wolves therefore by extension as well, but the sheer implications of that had been nought in Lucas' mind until she became Luna. She had never paused to consider that smell was the only sense to travel *back in time*. She wasn't just taking in the scent of creatures present, but those that had come through a few minutes, a few days, even a week ago, their trails of the past leading a long way back to their present location. It allowed her to hunt, giving in to her animalistic urges, and this too created a mix of pleasure and private shame. To consume a deer readily and without cooking it, but instead prying the flesh apart like the soft pieces of meat in a well-cooked stew, was utterly easy and entirely rewarding, but it was also very . . . bestial.

"I suppose I could use a knife and fork," she mused to herself in her husky female voice after a particularly large meal. "I do still have hands, sharp as these claws are. It just . . . wouldn't feel as good."

That was what worried her. As she ranged across the kingdom, moving distances in a day that would have previously taken her a full week, the knowledge that the Lady in Green's dryad blessing would not hold forever was starting to, well, *take hold*. It wasn't the fact that she was now sleeping under the stars like an animal. It wasn't that she occasionally gave in to the urge to bay at the moon. It wasn't the hunting of prey to sate her predator's appetite, nor the way she even cleaned her body like some mix of cat and dog; licking her fur easily, and rolling across the grassy ground to dislodge anything caught within it. She couldn't even say it was the wild abandon of her movements, sometimes climbing a cliff simply to prove the power of it. No, it was all these things together that gave the warnings signs of what she could well tip into if her mind's will faded.

"Need to keep Cecily in mind," she mumbled to herself before sleeping one night. "I will save you Cecily. I will have you back, my mate."

Even that phrase, *my mate*, carried with it both the bestial and protective, the magical and the underlying, stripped-to-the-core truth. As long as Cecily was in her mind, it was easy to avoid the stronger impulses as she ranged across the kingdom.

And range she did, through icy snow and verdant meadow and dismal moor and fetid swamp. The magic of her form burned within her, empowering her to traverse each new geography with, if not ease, then certainly triumph.

It was through the last - a dark swamp whose muck sunk into her fur - that she first encountered another Sol. She had been chasing the scent for miles. She knew it was not Cecily's, but perhaps some clue would aid her if she found another one of her new kind. She tracked through the swamp, knowing that her compulsions would see her clean the muck off later, restoring her elegant and proud female Sol form. For now, she trailed after the creature, arriving at the edge of the swamp to see it. It had dark brown fur and quite a few scars along its side, but was clearly quite old, as the creature was half again larger than her present size. It was attacking a number of men in armour, and to Luna's surprise, she saw that they were clearly bandits.

"How - how do I know that?" she asked herself. "How did I see -?"

The question hung in the air without an answer. The only possibility was that her magic had determined them to be enemies of the kingdom, because somehow in her hunter's heart she knew this to be the case. They were firing off crossbow bolts and swinging with swords against the Sol, but were easily being picked off despite numbering over two dozen. Luna felt a pull, an urge, a *command* to become involved. These were mercenaries. Brigands. Men on the loose who must have been victimising nearby towns and escaping into the swamp with treasure and women and swords still slick with the blood of innocents. Their armour rang with each movement, a sounding bell for her to involve herself and protect the kingdom.

"No," she muttered, watching from the treebank as they were caught again and again by the Sol, inflicting blood wounds but not deathly ones upon it in return. "No, I have to find Cecily. I have to-"

Their leader managed to somehow dodge a lightning quick claw and plunge his sword into the brown-furred Sol, causing it to yelp in a sort of placid agony.

"I have to find . . . I have to save . . ."

More brigands, more bolts and swords. They were enemies of the kingdom. They were enemies. They were prey.

"Protect the kingdom and her borders," Luna said, the compulsions overpowering her.

The world turned grey, colour bleeding from her vision but for the now blood-red forms of her enemies sticking out like sore thumbs in her view.

"Protect the kingdom. Protect the kingdom. Protect the-"

Luna regained herself, blinking several times. Something was wrong. She was elsewhere, and her maw was filled with the lovely copper taste of blood and the fulfilling scraps of flesh that -

“By the Gods!” she announced, jumping back and releasing the now-deceased soldier from her mouth. He fell to the ground, lifeless, landing in a pile of bodies along with many trinkets and bits of booty they had stolen. The brigands were dead to a man, and whomever they had been hauling along with them had long run off in fear at the Sol - or perhaps *Sols*, plural - that had rescued them with violence.

Luna looked to her left to see the other Sol wandering off, adapting to two feet in order to wade into a deeper part of the swamp.

“Wait!” she called, stopping only to spit out a few strips of tunic. It was a good thing that Sols didn’t *eat* their enemies, at least. It meant little with her enemies’ blood in her mouth, though. “Please! I’m looking for one of your kind - our kind, I suppose! One with red fur, like fire! Male! His name is Cecily, or perhaps . . . Cecil. If you do have names, that is. Do you know of her?”

The Sol looked back. It had grey, thoughtless eyes that betrayed no deep emotion of intelligence. It moved to leave again, but this time Luna raced around in front of it, causing waves of swamp to splash against the creature’s fur. It showed no true irritation at this.

“Please,” she pleaded. “I was a human just days ago. I turned willingly into a Sol through a witch’s aid - the one that first began this curse - in order to find my lady love who was transformed into a Sol by the ritual. I must find her, and lift the curse that clouds her mind. If I can do so, the Lady in Green truly believes we may be able to free all of your minds. So if there is anything you can tell me, if you can muster your old self up to the surface just for a moment, I would plead for your aid. I beg you. Please, help me find my . . . my mate.”

For a long, long time the scarred, brown-furred Sol did nothing at all. It was ethereally still, this large hunter and protector. Luna was ready to turn away, assuming this was all for nought, when the creature managed to turn its head. It was then that Luna saw that its lower jaw was trembling, its eyes quivering. She sniffed the air, and smelled a desperate struggle, almost an *anger* emanating from the creature, though not anger directed at her. For just a few seconds, its eyes turned a rich, hazelnut brown, wiping away the lifeless grey.

“The eastern grey rocks. The land of desolation.”

The voice was weary and struggling, as if unused to speaking for a long, long time and all the more hoarse for it.

“Free us. Good luck.”

The creature managed to nod, and then the hazelnut tone of its irises vanished, replaced once more by that sludge grey, like unfeeling stone. It turned away and continued

wading through the swamp, animated by directive and instinct, but not by any independent thought.

“Thank you,” Luna said.

She turned, sniffed the air, and bounded away. The craglands were waiting for her, but her new urges were coming with her. Hope filled her heart at the prospect of seeing Cecily again, but her destination was on the other side of the kingdom, where the Final Fracture of that great war was ended. Even for a Sol it would take time to cross, which meant the danger of losing control would rise as well.

“For Cecily,” she panted to herself as she burst from the edge of the swamp and took off across the plains, startling several travellers on the passing road. “Keep your mind on Cecily, Lucas.”

It was all she could do. She had to have the willpower, or else she might black out again. If she did, she might not wake up to her thinking mind ever again.

The craglands were barren and desolate, dim and despairing. This was the place where the most horrific fighting of the great war had taken place, where blood was spilled across the plains and the sieged cities were brought to ruin in its first stages. The forests were devoured by fire, the forts torn down, the stone mined and dragged to the invading realms for their own purposes. What was left behind was little more than grey stone, sunken soot, and ruined, mountainous landscape.

It was a depressing sight for Luna as she made her way through it. She had Cecily's scent now. It smelled like fire lilies, appropriately enough, and so Luna was getting closer and closer. But even as she ventured further into the heart of this wasteland, her instincts were becoming more powerful. Something in her blood knew the history of this place even more than her mind, and so the need to guard it, to protect it against invaders, grew in her heart. At times she found herself wandering off course, marching along the tops of lone mountains, other Sols doing the same on the horizon. She was watching the border kingdoms, ensuring that no force came to Theorus. No merchants would pass through her, nor wandering travellers. And so she kept her guard up.

She did this for almost an entire day before the scent of Cecily dimmed in her senses, and her mind awakened once more. She reared back, standing on two legs and looking across the dead horizon frantically.

“What? Why was I -? By the Many Gods, I'm starting to lose my mind!”

She sampled the air and retrieved Cecily's scent, continuing to move. Thought was getting more difficult, and even basic forms of awareness were a struggle. Her pace

slowed as she watched the horizon for troubles, and went on to sate her hunger upon a lone mountain lion, followed by an aging oxen. Other Sols joined for the feast, each grey-eyed and monotonous, unthinking in their movements and actions.

“Must protect Theorus,” Luna said in a flat voice. Other Sols looked her way, but only briefly. “Must protect the kingdom. The duty is all . . . the duty is all . . .”

The scent diminished again, that sweet smell of fire lilies falling away. Again, Luna managed to rouse herself, but only just this time. It was like dragging her mind out of a pool of mud. The thought fog clung to her, taking time to drip off, and it left her dirtier each time when she recovered, and more submerged when she once more sank.

“Don’t have much . . . don’t have much time . . .”

The Lady in Green’s blessing was fading. Already the blackouts were becoming more frequent, and not just for hunting either. Whenever Luna drew closer to Cecily’s scent, it was as if a darkness fell over her essence. She would wake from it minutes, hours, perhaps even a day later, it was truly impossible to tell other than the aid of her olfactory sense.

“Protect kingdom . . . find Cecily . . . guard Theorus . . . find my love . . .”

The object of her devotion mingled and mixed in her mind, becoming hazy and confused, like disturbed waters in a muddy pond. It was so hard to just *remember* why Cecily was so important, who she even was, and while she could remember Cecily as a Sol, her human face was starting to fade from her memory, becoming just one in a sea of others.

Still she moved on. She was always getting just that little bit closer, ranging beyond the patrol route her instincts demanded, urging herself over every horizon. Her body was free and powerful, but the joy of that slowly diminished. When she lapped at crystal waters in long-undisturbed lakes and riverbeds among the craggy landscape, she couldn’t help but notice that her dark eyes were turning grey, her very identity being written over and replaced.

“Must continue . . . must find . . . Cecily . . .”

She continued across the craglands, until she reached their more desolate stretch, a place she knew to be called the Grey Wastes. Not even the minor shrubbery and occasional tree grew here. Grey rock and ashen landscape stretched to the Cartapian Mountains, on the other side of which was the verdant Kingdom of Natheria. Luna continued forth, barely able to remember why, fighting against the sluggish darkness that invaded her mind at every second. She moved on all fours, finding it more natural, sniffing the air and taking in the sweet scent of . . . some kind of flower she had forgotten. It was near. She knew it was. Something was. Something important.

But when she reached the source of the scent, all she found was another Sol, its fur like fire. It was male, and smelled familiar.

But it was just another Sol, and she had no idea what she even intended for it.

Chapter Seven: Reunited

The Sol that had no name and yet was named Luna sniffed the air. There was something sweet-smelling about this other Sol, a familiar attraction that made her desire to stay. This made no sense, of course. The grey-eyed wolf-like protector did not need to be with other Sols. Their kind only overlapped by chance, or when there was need against a great invading force. They were solitary, requiring only sustenance and water to continue their duty. The pleasures of life were not so much remote to them as completely alien at all.

“Stay . . .”

The Sol was surprised at its own words, at least as far as it had words to give, and surprise to still possess. Had it even made the words? Was it saying the words to itself? Was there some great underlying purpose to them?

But Sols had no underlying purpose beyond the duty. Theirs was to protect the kingdom of Theorus from its neighbours, and to destroy threats within. Underlying purposes were for the humans that lived in cities and towns and villages, though that thought - if it could still be called a thought - conjured a strange flash of a memory in the Sol that had been Luna but now was no longer.

“Home,” it muttered, images of a place called . . . something coming to mind. Something like Cain or Cait or the like. Two people, one rugged, one soft-skinned and gentle, looking down on the Sol. But how was that possible? Had it not always been a Sol?

The creature shook its head and moved closer to the male Sol. It still smelled lovely, even though this was a notion that confused the Sol that had been Luna, but it also had a masculine musk that made the creature feel strange as well. The other Sol which had no name turned, staring at the Sol that had been Luna. It cocked its head strangely, and for the merest moment its eyes seem to flicker, no longer grey but emerald green.

“Who . . . ?” it managed, before its mind descended.

“F-friend,” the Sol that had been Luna managed, though it took a powerful act of will to say so. It stepped yet closer, so that it could feel the hot breath of the other Sol upon its fur. The creature was bigger than the Sol than had been Luna, with a more powerful frame and clear sheath, immense in size, to indicate the impressive power of the beast. That too made the Sol that had been Luna shudder a little, a slight prickling anticipation building over her, and again between her hind legs. She stood on two, and so did the other Sol, the pair of them examining each other with interest that was beyond what a Sol could reasonably express.

“Friend?” the other Sol said in a low, booming voice.

The greyness descended, the fog falling upon the Sol that had been Luna's mind. She rallied, fighting it off as best as she could. There was something . . . important about this Sol. Something real. Something behind the grey.

She just couldn't figure out what.

"Y-yes," she said. Why was her voice female? Had it always been like that? "Friend. More than . . . friend. I think."

"Think?"

What was it to think? It was like a thousand hands in the forge. It was the belt of the hammer upon the thumb. It was the wound of seeing a lover transformed into a monster, stripped bare of all that she was. These were the closest analogues that the Sol that had been Luna could imagine, and yet they were all human experiences. Had they happened to her? When? How? She shook her head, trying to get a sense of it all. But she didn't have much time.

The grey was descending.

The fog was falling.

Thoughts were becoming flat and simple.

"Know," she said. "Not think. Kn-know. Knew you. Before. Before Sol. I know. I think I kn-know. You were . . ."

The other creature's eyes widened, and for a moment again, there was that brilliant flash of emerald green. Recognition of some kind. It barely kept Luna's mind open for just a few more moments. Those eyes. That brilliant hair. An image conjured itself up into her mind, of a young girl laughing as she ran through a field of flowers. A cup of fire frozen in time.

"Frozen in . . . time," she managed. She rubbed her snout against the other Sol, who pulled back, not knowing what to make of it. His eyes were grey again, the male Sol seeming to be normal. As things should be. Utterly normal. For the duty. The Kingdom. But there was something more than the kingdom in importance, as impossible as that was to be. A woman with hair like fire, frozen in time. And she had a name. It was on the tip of the Sol that had been Luna's mind. It was right there. It was . . .

"Cecily," she said, extracting the syllables from the most closed off sections of her very being right as they were sealed off for good.

And then the Luna part of herself was no more.

The strange dark-haired Sol sniffed the air one last time and began to leave. The fiery-furred Sol nearly watched it go, but then, beneath the light of the afternoon sun, something flashed

around the other creature's neck. Curious - if a Sol could even demonstrate curiosity - the Sol moved forward. The other creature did not acknowledge it, but that meant little to the Sol. With its keen eyes it had spotted something with an alarming familiarity. It moved to its hind legs and halted before the other Sol, preventing it from leaving. Then, gingerly in its movements, it reached out and touched the strange metallic object hanging from a chain around the creature's neck. It was artfully made, composed of numerous metals. Somehow it knew these metals to be not particularly expensive or coveted, and yet perfect for presenting an orange and red brassy glow, like that of a fire.

Or a fire lily.

Or a girl with hair like both.

The knowledge hit the male Sol like a tidal wave, or a landslide, or the calamity of the world's most powerful earthquake. It fell backwards, scrambling across rock as its mind was assailed. Memories of so many things poured over it and around it and *through* it, until it could no longer think of itself as an *it* at all, but a *him*, a *he*, an *I*.

"I - I remember!" he breathed, claws upon his powerful snout. "I was given this. It was a promise to wed me. I was a woman. I was . . ."

The name the other creature had somehow spoken rang in his mind like a temple bell. No, something far greater; like the thunder of the heavens themselves.

"I am Cecily," it said, slowly standing proud again. "Or I was. I suppose I am now Cecil. The Cecil the Sol. And you . . . oh, by the Many Gods, my sweet Lucas. Lucas, it *must* be you. I recognise your hair! I recognise *you!*"

He could smell the forge upon this female Sol still, the ruggedness, the wilful loyalty. The love. Smell was the only sense that could travel back in time, so even as her love's existence was smothered by the Sol's curse, Cecil could still imbibe it, and know it had been there.

And that it could be there again.

"Lucas," he said. "Lucas Forger, please, I know it's you in there. You saved me. Lucas, do you hear me? You saved me! I was lost and alone and gone - I was *gone*, Lucas - and somehow you saved me! Please, don't go away. Please don't leave me!"

Cecil wept bitter tears down his furry face. He raked at his chest, an inflammation of masculine rage and despair overcoming him, capable of being expressed only with the same physical agony. Still, the other Sol continued to move monotonously, barely acknowledging the existence of her former wife-turned-male-Sol.

"Please, Lucas! Lucas, you saved me! Lucas, I said I would marry you. I said I would stay with you. I will not leave you again, do you hear? I will find a way to save you!"

Despair continued to mount in the Sol's heart as he kept pace. The sun disappeared behind the clouds, evening not too far from arriving. The night would follow, and it would be

as black and cold as the sensations bearing down upon Cecil at that very moment. He bounded around Lucas, trying to keep pace with the female Sol.

“You became a Sol for me, Lucas. A female one! How did you even do that? You did all that just to find me? I’ve been lost for so long, please don’t lose yourself now that you’ve saved me! I *will* bring you back.”

They came to the edge of a craggy hill, moving away from the Grey Wastes. Here, the coarse flowers and bushes of the craglands grew in thicker clusters, providing sparse patches of colour to this lifeless region. Cecil shifted in front of Lucas, refusing to let his lost lover pass. He reared up on his rear legs, assuming a bipedal stance and stretching out his talon claws to bar any entry.

“You are not going, Lucas. You are not. I won’t let you.”

The other Sol snarled, frustration boiling to anger in its deadened instincts. Cecil realised what was happening at the last second, as the Sol *leapt* forwards, trying to slam into Cecil’s body. But the male was more powerful and certainly more prepared, because he turned, grabbing the female Sol and pivoting it away so that it rolled down the hillside instead. There was a brief tearing of flesh as Cecil accidentally scraped his claws against Lucas’ wrists, but then the creature rolled and rolled, squashing over flowers and bushes and plants until it reached the bottom of the hill.

“Lucas! Are you alright!?” he called, looking down the expand.

But even as he began to move cautiously down to the other Sol, something very strange was happening.

The Sol did not understand why its other peer kept halting its path. It had a patrol to set up, a guardianship to properly establish. This was its only duty, the only thing to care for. And yet when it had leapt, the other Sol had not acted with vicious intent but redirected it harmlessly, but for a deep claw strike across the Sol’s wrist.

The Sol briefly howled, then tossed and turned and rolled down the hill, flattening numerous plants. It came to a rest, confused and unsure and yet experiencing a recurring memory that should not have belonged to it. It scrambled to its legs, ready to attack the other Sol that was failing to follow its duty.

Only to stare up a hill of beautiful, vibrant flowers beneath a sunny midday sky. It was a place long away and long ago, and at its crest was a small girl with a hair like fire frozen in time.

“Are you alright?” she said in a high, pleasant voice.

She was beautiful. Captivating. Like something from a dream.

“Are you a dryad?” the Sol asked in this strange vision.

It blinked, and the hill of flowers was gone, and so was the girl. Instead there was a great Sol, male, at its crest, its fur the same fiery colouring as the girl's hair, looking down a hill of flowers and plants. The creature was the most beautiful, wondrous thing the Sol could ever imagine. For just a moment, the Sol could almost see the outline of a dryad - a real dryad, a Lady in Green - standing behind the fiery Sol, her expression gentle yet joyous. But the Sol blinked, and the dryad was gone.

And Luna remained.

“C-Cecily?” the Sol managed. “Cecily, oh, is that you? Please tell me it's you!?”

The other Sol's jaw hung open. “Lucas! Lucas!? It's me! Lucas, you saved me!”

“And you saved me! Cecily, I've waited so long, I've-”

Cecil *ran* on all fours down the slope, skidding and losing control and slamming into Luna. The pair grasped each other, rolling over and over down the last section of the hill before collapsing together at the bottom. They held one another, tracing their paws over each other's fur, pressing their foreheads together. Giving into instinct, they lapped at one another's faces and fur, holding each other close as if the slightest release might let the other go forever.

“You came back for me,” Cecil said. “You found me. Even as a monster-”

“Not a monster,” Luna said, settling her head into the crook of Cecil's shoulder. “Just . . . changed.”

“And you changed as well! How did this happen?”

Luna explained the story of the last two years, shocking Cecil with the understanding that it had been so long. He told her of his endless search, of her father Marius' aid, of how he had finally met the Lady in Green and agreed to her risky plan.

“Oh, my love, I'm so sorry you had to give up your body,” Cecil said, stroking his lover's body and tenderly caressing those miraculous breasts. “You never should have. I wasn't worth-”

“Don't say that. I swore to give my life for you, if needed. Giving up my body is hardly a tall price to pay.”

“But to become female!”

“It was the only way. I had to be, well, *compatible* with you, Cecily. It was the only way to hopefully get you to recognise me, in some way, since you had become male, that element of, well, attraction, had to remain.”

Cecil nodded. “Well, I guess it worked. And I suppose I'm Cecil now. What are you, then? Lucia?”

The dark-haired Sol shook her head, slowly feeling at Cecil's body. It was so powerful and well-muscled, and it was making her . . . feel things. Female things.

“Call me Luna,” she said softly. The words were music to Cecil, who tasted the sound of them and found them pleasing.

“Luna,” she said. “My saviour, Luna. It has a sweet sound to it.”

“You saved me too.”

“We have both lost so much. Look where we are.”

Luna did so, seeing the craglands around them, staring with her expert darkvision through the growing darkness.

“I see just another Petter’s Hill,” she said finally. “We have the hill, we have our flowers, you have your beauty, and we have each other.”

Cecil exhaled, then breathed in the sweet feminine scent - and arousal - of her lover. Her . . . wife, she supposed.

“We do have each other,” he said, making sure to caress Luna’s breasts. “And we are still, as you say, attracted to one another . . .”

She began to gently stroke Luna’s nipples, making them stiffen with arousal.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Luna panted, still on her back, now arching it by instinct in order to receive more of that pleasure-giving touch.

Cecil grinned. “Just thinking that we are stuck like this permanently, right?”

“Unfortunately, y-yes. Mhmm . . . ahhh. We are Sols for life.”

“And Sols live hundreds of years, yes?”

Again, Luna nodded. She had learned much of them. “But - ohh - Sols don’t m-mate. They don’t f-feel pleasure like this.”

“Because they’ve forgotten themselves, haven’t they?”

“Y-yes.”

“Then let us help them remember. But first, as I recall, we never really did get to finish our wedding night. We were rudely interrupted, and I had all sorts of plans for my husband in the morning.”

Luna whimpered as more of her nipples were stroked. The wetness between her rear legs was becoming insatiable, demanding to have something fill it. As much as she had recovered herself, the instinct of the Sol remained with her, and as such so did other bestial desires.

“Mhmmnm . . . but I’m a f-female Sol,” she managed.

Cecil licked the side of her face. Her breath was hot and thick with her manly musk. “And I am now male. We’ve only reversed the positions darling, and you must have travelled alone for so long. Don’t tell me you didn’t imagine having me again?”

“Y-yes, just not like this. Are you s-sure?”

“Luna, you have no idea how strangely ferocious and voracious I feel right now. You were my male protector, now let me be yours. Because right now this new cock of mine

needs to be inside of you. And, judging from your divine scene right now, I'd say you want that as badly as I do."

It was ridiculous. It was insane. It was completely beyond what Luna had expected when she'd become a Sol and set out to find her former wife. But there was no denying her rising lust, a lust that was already enormous in size and still growing. Almost as enormous as the huge member that was sliding free from Cecil's sheath. She gaped at it, even as her male mate adjusted her, stroking her fur and allowing her to do the same in turn. He lapped at her breasts, causing pulses of pleasure to course through her very being, but that was nothing compared to the brilliance that was that huge wolf-like cock. It throbbed visibly, and for a moment even Cecil seemed embarrassed.

"I won't lie, my love, I still want this, but now that I'm awake again I find this huge thing a bit incredulous."

"It's . . . v-very big."

"Mhmm, well, I hope you accept it well, just like I accept these fantastic bosoms of yours. Bosoms, plural! Ha!"

"Stop! They're s-so sensitive! Ohhh!"

"Sensitive and wonderful, are they not? I recall you rather liked mine when I had them."

It was definitely still Cecily there, despite being made a man and a Sol to boot. He had his wild side, his beaming grins, his excitement at adventure. This was no different, and it made Luna relax into the new role that magic, instinct, and daring had given her. She got herself up onto all fours and raised her tail, exposing her feminine entrance which by this point was positively *aching* to be filled.

"If we're to do this, please go s-slow."

"Only if you want it," the male Sol said, voice booming. The stars were starting to come out and somehow the prospect of being mated beneath them was all the more appropriate for the wolf-like protectors.

"I do, Cecil. I - oh, by the Many Gods, I want it more than anything! Please, m-mate me!"

That would have been it, but then something else escaped her mouth too.

"And b-breed me while you're at it!"

It was the strangest thing she had ever said, but her body yearned for it, demanded it, and part of her very essence did so as well. The prospect of being the first Sol to ever have children was enticing, as was having them with Cecil. They had wanted children together once, and now, just maybe, they still could.

“Oh, Luna, you still know how to make me so very libidinous. Hold still. I’m about to enter you. As I recall, there’ll be a momentary discomfort, and then pure bliss.”

“A momenta-UGH!”

Cecil placed his weight upon Luna’s back and with one swift motion plunged his cock into her wet depths. He did so slowly, as promised, but her outer entrance stretched to accommodate his impressive girth, leaving the female Sol to moan in shock and momentary discomfort just as Cecil had warned. She grunted, taking on the weight of her lover and shocked that she was even doing something like this, but then the thick and girthy member slid yet further into her depths, and her tunnel managed to accommodate it. The small twinge of pain passed, and soon she was wetter than ever, her sensitive walls pressing down upon Cecil’s manhood from all sides, hugging it, clinging to it for dear life as it pushed ever further.

“Ohhhhhh, s-so b-big! Sooooooo biiiiig! Ahhhhh!!”

“I can stop if you like,” came her mate’s low, brass voice.

But she shook her furry head. “No! K-keep going! It’s - ahhh - different, but incredible! By the M-Many Gods, I’ve wanted you for so long, Cecil. I’ll have you like this. M-make me your mate!”

“Then I shall. Let’s make this our second wedding night, my love. And let me show you the pleasures of being a woman. Chiefly, how *this* feels.”

With that, she suddenly pushed her cock all the way in, leaving Luna positively *howling* with unforeseen ecstasy. She panted heavily, moaning with quite literally fulfillment. Things got even better when Cecil began to withdraw a little, sliding back only to *thrust* back in.

“Ohhhhh! NGH! Oh by the Many Gods, it f-feels amazing! Don’t s-stop!”

“Did you, on our wedding night, my love? Then neither shall I!”

He thrust harder and faster, the motions becoming wonderfully animalistic in their passion. The male Sol held tight to his female mate, and Luna experienced the wonders of being the submissive of the pair, of giving herself completely over to the male and allowing him to breed her. The urge was strong, and only growing stronger. He thrust harder, his enormous member ramming into her depths again and again and again, faster and faster as the two approached their climax. It was pure bliss, and something Luna could never have imagined would feel so right - and yet it did! Even in the bestial act, she felt an overwhelming release and love for Cecil. She had found him, and he had found her, and they were together again. Not as they would have imagined once before, when they were both human, but still in perfect harmony, here in the wilds where they belonged.

“I love you!” she cried. “I never s-stopped loving you, Cecil, and I still do! Be my husband!”

“I will,” Cecily declared, clearly enjoying his dominance, but still being tender in his love, as much as he could be. He thrust again, making his lover groan in delirious joy. “I’ll be your husband, and you my wife, Luna! We’ll be mates for life, for the hundreds of years we have. And just like - ahhh - you protected me, so too shall I - aghh - protect y-you!”

“Mhmm!” Luna moaned. “Yes, yes! Oh Gods, I am so very close. I vow to always b-be with you!”

“You never stopped, Luna, and for that, I will love you always! Now just feel us, together. Let’s show our love once m-more.”

Luna gave her consent again and again with each thrust, pleading for him to climax inside her. She was no longer embarrassed by the desire, nor the way her mate lowered his arms to paw at her hanging breasts, squeezing them and making her nearly burst from the glorious sensations. She closed her eyes as the moment drew near, imagining what it would be like for him to spend his colossal seed inside her. Imagining it take root in her feminine belly, so that she could be the first - the very first! - Sol to ever bear children. A litter of her kind. A whole litter. It felt like hope.

Cecil roared: “RRRGGGHH!!!”

His immense member throbbed inside Luna, and suddenly her female passage clamped down upon his cock, gripping it tightly as he suddenly *exploded* within her. A rush of unbelievable pleasure followed as his hot, thick seed burst from his manhood, flooding her tunnel completely. She actually *felt* it enter her, gushing like a powerful wave straight into her waiting womb. It was impossible *not* to howl.

“Yes! Yes, my love! Yes! YES! YESSS! RRRARRGGGGHHH!!!”

She raised her head against his, feeling the softness of his fur and riding out the continual waves of orgasm that followed. It was, she could scarcely believe, far, far better than the experience of her first wedding night. The sensation of being pumped full of life-bearing seed was more glorious than anything, and it left her almost collapsing moments later as the final earthquakes of bliss ebbed away.

“Ohhhhhh . . . ahhhh . . . mhmmm . . .”

She collapsed beneath Cecil, who in turn managed to slowly slight out of her, eliciting yet another gasp from her. She trembled.

“Are you okay? You’re shaking, my love?”

“Only - by the Gods - only from the pleasure you j-just gave me, my love. Oh, Many Gods preserve me, that was something else.”

Cecil grinned with his toothy maw. He too had clearly enjoyed himself, and he settled down on the ground beside her, pawing at it before holding her with his claws, wrapping her in a post-coital snuggle that they had enjoyed that single night together as humans.

“That good, was it?”

“Amazing,” she stammered, still not fully in control of her breathing.

“It was for me too. Perhaps . . . perhaps this was fated to be.”

They ruminated on that for some time in the aftermath, holding on to one another, clinging lovingly, knowing they would never be parted again. Their minds were free, and the fog was gone. And they were together again.

It was half an hour later or so when Cecil stirred against Luna. She was too busy basking in the warmth of her male lover to notice at first, but then she felt a hardening against her hind left leg. Cecil’s cock was emerging from its sheath again, and his paws were starting to roam across her breasts and nipples.

“Ohhhh,” she moaned. “I take it you are as insatiable as a man as I was?”

“Silly,” Cecil said, beginning to caress his mate more obviously. “I was just as insatiable that night as you. Only now I’ve got a beastly sense I’ll be even worse, just to give you warning.”

Luna grinned, raising her tail so that her lover could enter her once they got into their positions. “That’s not a problem for me. I’m still the child of a blacksmith, you might recall. That builds . . . endurance.”

Cecil laughed. “Oh, you are definitely still the one I fell in love with all those years ago! Now get onto your back, Luna. I want to take you as you once too me.”

Luna had no objection to that, especially once Cecil began to slide his immensity into her again. In fact, she welcomed it with delightful, animalistic moans.

The pair indeed were insatiable, but they were also on a mission. They had left the craglands and had wandered almost a week, heading into the warm and pleasant territories that the humans occupied. Many were terrified to see them, which only brought Cecil amusement; he had always wanted more power and freedom as a girl, and now he could spook away anyone that said otherwise. Still, there was a sense of sadness between the pair: they had restored each other, but not the other Sols. That was, until they smelled one in the distance, one that seemed to have a strangely similar scent to Cecil himself.

“What is it, my love?” Cecil asked.

“It’s just . . . I longed for a scent like this while hunting for you. I feel I know who we are about to find.”

He told his Sol husband the part of her story that she had forgotten in the retelling a week ago, when the Lady in Green mused that Cecily/Cecil was very likely the descendent of Torbin’s bastard Kasil, the very first Sol, and that this could hold a potentially powerful, even restorative, omen for their kind’s future.

“Do you truly believe that?” Cecily wondered. ‘Me? A descendant of the first Sol?’

“It would explain your unique coat and look. And hair, when you were human. Shall we go and find out?”

Cecil was eager indeed, but interestingly it was Luna that led the expedition up the nearby verdant mount to meet the Sol. There was, perhaps, a small fear for Cecil, whose mind had been trapped for so long. At least, that was what Luna imagined; she was still getting used to all her new senses in a way, particularly smelling emotion. She was certain, though, that in this case she could smell some anxious fear. As such, she took the time to comfort her mate, brushing against his fur as they ascended the mountain.

It was there, as they left a treeline and approached the summit, that they found the Sol they had suspected, the one that *had* to be Kalis, the first Sol. He was just as massive as they remembered, over two and a half times their own very impressive sizes. His mane was like flames, even more vibrant and arcane than Cecil’s own coat. This made him quite distinct from other Sols, almost as if he carried part of a lion within him, not just a wolf. His eyes were grey, but as he watched them approach, they shifted from their dull colouring to that same fiery appearance.

“*You came,*” the creature said, in a voice so soft it might have been a whisper were it not for the echo it carried.

“We did,” Cecil said. “You found us all those years ago. Why?”

Again, the creature’s eyes turned grey. It seemed to take great effort to regain its personality.

“*I sensed the one who could s-save us. But I wanted to s-save you first.*”

Luna cocked her head. Perhaps it was her more feminine side coming out, but she seemed to understand Kalis’ words immediately, and their implication.

“You didn’t want for her to become a Sol, even if there was a slim chance others could be freed. You didn’t want your descendant to be risked.”

The creature nodded, then stared out at the horizon. “*S-so many lost, already. Didn’t want . . . more. But couldn’t do a th-thing. Only say sorry.*”

The fear radiating from Cecil seemed to dissipate. Luna nudged him a little, pressing her mate forward to meet her living ancestor. Cecil did so, pressing her snout against Kalis’ in a moment of connection.

“But I did become a Sol. And I’m free now, ancestor. I just need to free others.”

“*Can’t.*”

Luna’s eyes widened. “But she brought me back! I was lost after saving her, and she saved me!”

“*Can’t,*” the creature repeated. “*You can’t, Cecilia.*” Its eyes flickered, becoming grey again.

"I don't understand," Cecil said. "What do we do?"

Those words echoed in Luna's ears. *You can't*, and *what can we do?*

"Maybe you can't do anything alone," she said to Cecil. "I had to save you, but then I needed you to save me. Maybe . . . maybe we have to do it together."

"Of course!" Cecil cried. "It was our connection that brought us back. If we could share that connection with others . . ."

The grey-eyed guardian seemed to wait, halted on the spot as if by one last final act of willpower. Cautiously, the two approached him. There was no real basis of knowledge for what they did next, no guideline or old legend or form of understanding unlocked from the passages Marius had passed on to Luna when she had been Lucas. This was something far deeper, beyond even instinct and primal behaviours to the very weave of arcane magic itself. Perhaps it had been given to Luna the very moment that the Lady in Green had touched her forehead after transforming, and passed on to Cecil wordlessly during their connection. Or perhaps it was just something they themselves felt a union with, and a silent shared hope that it would work.

Regardless of where the knowledge had come from, the pair raised up upon their hind legs on either side of Kasil and planted their paws upon his shoulders. He stirred a little, but did not move. Instantly, Luna felt a connection flowing to Cecil, the very thing that had awoken her from her grey slumber, and Cecil from his. And it was flowing *through* Kasil, bringing him into the fold.

"Just listen," she told him. "And feel. And remember."

She closed her eyes, as did Cecil, and they focused on growing that connection, spreading the awareness to the very first Sol. It began as a spark, then an ember, then a small fire before it grew and grew and grew and grew into a raging, blazing inferno of understanding, of passion and dedication and loyalty and love and - most of all - *remembrance*.

Kasil trembled, and as the fiery connection reached its crescendo he arched up, throwing the pair off. His body trembled, and for a moment Luna thought that they had damaged him in some way. That was, until he shook his head, blinking. And this time the fiery lights of his eyes did not change back to grey, nor partake in any struggle. The creature rose up on its hind legs and howled at the sky, victorious and cathartic and emptying the stress and loss of hundreds of years of tormented existence.

And then he fell to all fours again, panting heavily.

"Are you okay?" Cecil asked, as he took up position beside Luna, giving her comfort.

The Sol licked its lips, looking across the distant horizons before landing its gaze upon the two of them.

“I am very much okay, my descendant,” Kasil replied, voice strong and hearty. “And soon we all shall be. The curse is broken, and now the Sols can be freed.”

Luna and Cecil embraced one another, clutching each others' furry forms.

They were indeed free.

Epilogue

“Seven years to the day,” Cecil said.

“Hmm?” Luna grumbled, bringing her head off the flowerbed. It was so very, deeply comfortable, and she truly felt like lying down. It was all Cecil's fault, of course. She was a lot heavier these days.

“Seven years to the day since I became a Sol. Five since you freed me. One since the last Sol was freed.”

“What, exactly?”

Cecil grinned. “Okay, not exactly. But definitely exactly seven years since I was transformed. Since the people of Caith turned on me.”

“I still don't forgive them.”

Cecil shrugged, rolling his shoulders in a way that didn't quite convey as easily as it did for humans, but Luna still got the point. “I forgive some of them. Mind, I do still like visiting, knowing they can't do a thing about it.”

“You really are such an incorrigible person sometimes, my love.”

Cecil laughed, and it was a loud, hearty sound to hear, booming and brass to fit his mighty Sol form. The midday sun shone down upon his fiery fur, making it dance like the flames themselves, an illusion aided by the light wind that stirred the flowers of Petter's Hill around them.

“Oh, incorrigible? Such a large word for a blacksmith's son!”

Luna smirked, then gestured to her form with a paw. “Being with you has been an education my love. Besides, I don't exactly look like a blacksmith's son, do I?”

Indeed, she did not. It wasn't just the fact that she was a Sol either, or a female one. The fact that she had a very obviously heavy pregnant belly, visible quite clearly even when she was on all fours, made that even clearer. Her breasts had become larger with the promise of milk, and her smaller breasts had come out of hiding, though were still not nearly as big, thankfully. Several of her developing litter kicked and shifted within her, making her grunt softly.

“No, you don’t,” Cecil said, moving over to her and stroking her belly. He nuzzled against it, clearly loving his wife’s pregnancy. “But I like you all the same anyway, my darling wife.”

“Good, because I swear there’s, like, twelve in there, this time.”

“I’d say ten at the most. You had nine last time, and eight the first time, so perhaps you’re just going up one each time with your litters?”

“Lucky me,” she said, groaning a little from more movement. Still, she couldn’t help grin with pride. She was a mother already to seventeen pups, ones who were already growing so quickly and magnificently, and now there would be more. She had never imagined she would feel such a strong breeding instinct, but as strange as it had been to give birth the first time - and to so many at that! - and to feed them all from her many breasts, there had been such a soothing wonder to it. Certainly, it had come as a shock to her parents - most of it had - but they still accepted and loved her, and did what they could to spoil their many, many grandchildren when the family stopped by. They were insistent that the pair stay near Caith for the latest birth, and Marius Hawker had returned to the small town for the same reason; to be there for the couple.

“They haven’t gone too far, have they?” Luna asked suddenly. She sniffed the air in worry, her maternal instinct kicking in, but she was quickly calmed; they were just frolicking over the hill.

“I’ll call them back,” Cecil said. “The smaller ones need their milk anyway.”

“And I have plenty of offer. Ah, the wonders of being a very pregnant Sol. I wonder how many others we freed are taking the time to mate as we have.”

“A few, I imagine, though not nearly so . . . prolifically.”

Again, that shared loving grin, before Cecil howled for their children to return. They mostly came, particularly the young ones who pressed against their mother to feed, drinking her large reserves of milk, but their very eldest - Violet - continued to play and dance in the field of flowers. She had her father’s fiery coat, and seemed to have inherited that love of wilderness and wildness from him.

“Definitely reminds me of someone,” Luna remarked, teasing her husband.

“Now she just needs a blacksmith’s boy to run into her, and then find a way to become a Sol.”

They shared a private laugh. Cecil called Violet over again, and this time she listened, bounding over the hill to her parents.

“Sorry!” she exclaimed. “I was just looking at the flowers! They have all these medicinal properties, mother and father! I can smell them!”

She said this proudly, and various older siblings oohed and ahed, impressed by the knowledge their eldest sibling showed. She puffed up her chest a little in pride. Luna resisted

the urge to chuckle, and instead laid back against her husband as her infants fed from her. It was a rather relaxing sensation.

“I’m very impressed Violet. We’ll talk all about that soon, once we’re done eating. Father has hunted a rather impressive stag for us to partake in. But for now, who wants to hear a story of how father and I first met, here on this very hill?”

The children hushed each other in their excitement, no longer scratching their fur or play fighting but listening with clear attention, every pup to the last, and Violet most of all.

“Yes, please tell us!” she said.

“Very well,” Luna said, smiling at her husband who held her against him. “I’ll start off, since it was technically I who found her. “I was working in the forge with my father, back when I was a young boy of five. I’d just burned my hand, and he told me to find a flower that looked like a cup of fire frozen in time . . .”

The End