

Evalyne stood naked on the cliff. Lightning raced across the sky in cuts of blue and red and purple. Each strike lit up the dark sea. The foam rose and fell in the rain. She could feel each thunderclap reach into her bones. The wolf teeth hanging from a chord around her neck trembled. *Violently beautiful*, she thought. The Third Cycle of the Wolf Moon had begun.

A woman appeared next to her wrapped in wolf skins, the head and teeth crowning her brow.

“Hello, Wolf Mother,” Evalyne said.

They watched Mikel’s fishing boat race the lightning to shore. The waves were twice as large as any Evalyne had seen.

“I do not understand why he chose the life of a fisherman,” said Wolf Mother. “Did he think that battles would not find him? He may have delayed them, but the time to fight will come.”

Evalyne clutched her necklace. “We wanted a simple life. We wanted to live long enough to see our children grow.”

“The period for growth has passed,” said Wolf Mother. “It is time.”

“Time for what?” Evalyne asked.

“You know what. I have seen the ringed planet in a vision. And so have you.”

Evalyne’s stomach dropped; her husband’s boat heaved from wave to wave, each one bigger than the last. “But there has never been a Fourth Cycle.”

Wolf Mother shook her head. “There has never been a Fourth Cycle because no one has chosen it.”

“It is a superstition,” Evalyne continued. “It is outlawed.”

Wolf Mother removed the wolf head from her brow and unwrapped the skins. “Am I a superstition?” Her silver hair billowed in the wind. Each line of her leathery skin spoke a story like a tree’s rings. “Tell me, child, am I a ghost? A witch? A goblin that steals children from their beds, or whatever your people say that I am?”

*You are none of those things*, Evalyne thought.

“Come, let us dance,” said Wolf Mother. “Let us make the stones speak.”

Evalyne shook her head. “The stones do not speak. It is the wind from the storm.”

Wolf Mother looked at her. “You do not believe those words, why are you trying to deceive yourself?”

Evalyne glanced towards the boat.

“You turn love into a demon when you make it a god,” said Wolf Mother. “Let us dance.”

The two naked women turned from the cliff to the fire. In the ruins of the Moon Temple they began the ritual, dancing outlawed steps and singing outlawed words. Wolf Mother moved like a willow. Her arms swayed to a deep, earthy rhythm, simple and powerful as water and sky. Her legs were a percussion that amplified the movements of her arms. She hummed softly.

Evalyne danced mechanically at first, until her muscles burned with restraint. She felt a thunderclap reach into her marrow, and she submitted to the energy and electricity. She became the link between earth and sky, allowing the two to communicate through her in bursts of lightning and sound, of light and dark. Her feet bounded from one stone to the next, pushing her up into the dawning sky, and spinning her along the outer perimeter of the Temple. A soft hum

escaped her lips.

The wind stopped when the stones began.

“We remember,” they chanted. Their voices hovered in the air above them, encircling the dancing women. “We remember the prophecy! It is time! For 300 years we have waited; no one rebuilt us.” Wolf Mother leaped over the fire. “Redemption has come! The world will be freed!” Evalyne’s steps mirrored Wolf Mother’s. Their bodies moved in tandem around the flames. The darkness of their skin, a silhouette of life. “The Third Cycle has begun and the Fourth is on its heels!” The women’s soft humming grew into a song; the fire expanded between them. “Dance daughters of the Wolf Moon! Dance and open the heavens!”

Evalyne saw her mother’s face in the flames and moved closer.

She remembered the mornings when she was child; her mother would sit with her at the window and teach her about the Cycles of the Wolf Moon. “Do you see the fog?” her mother would say. “Do you remember the times when it flowed down the mountains paths and between the buildings of the Capitol? That is when the gods come to live with the people. They also come in storms. That is why the Third Cycle is sacred.”

Her mother’s face faded. Evalyne tried to focus on the steps.

Wolf Mother danced across the fire. She was a shadow outlined by lightning and sea.

“The rift will be mended!” chanted the stones. “The chains will be broken!”

Evalyne felt a strong wind, and heard her mother’s voice, “I will always be with you.”

She stopped dancing.

The stones stopped chanting.

Wolf Mother jerked to a halt. She said nothing, although Evalyne could see the

unfinished steps in her eyes.

Putting out the fire, Evalyne covered her nakedness. She began to explain, but a cry arose from the Capitol below them. The women moved to the edge of the path and saw the mass of people gathered on the beach. They were screaming. Her husband's fishing boat was nearly toppled by a wave. The waves had grown three times as large in only a few moments.

*Mikel*, Evalyne thought, tears running down her face. She wrapped her arms around herself, imagining his, lean and strong, in their place. But in stress of the moment, she could not recall the shape of his warm, brown eyes. She tried to think of a specific memory, but in each, his dark complexion blurred his features.

The people, panicking, scrambled for boats to rescue the fisherman. Others, on their knees, prayed to the Sun God, Nubis.

"No one will die on that boat," Wolf Mother said. "Unlike Nubis, the Wolf Moon does not require sacrifices."

Evalyne looked at Wolf Mother. "Three hundred years ago, the Third Cycle burned the Moon Temple to the ground with all the priests trapped inside."

Wolf Mother picked up the animal skins. "Your mother told you—"

"My mother told me a lot of things that were not true."

Wolf Mother shook her head. "In time, you will see."

The screams from the crowd below changed to cheers. Parnubis, and his viscounts approached the water. His long strides parted the crowd. The people cried out to him. Evalyne's thoughts joined in their appeals, although her mouth soured.

Parnubis gave his staff to the two viscounts. They held it aloft. Parnubis yelled to the

storm, “I have bought you! You are mine and you will obey!” Thunder grew to a stampede, forcing the crowd to its knees. Parnubis and the two viscounts remained standing, the waves hammering at them. “I command you to cease!”

Lightning etched cracks into the sky as though trying to write a word.

“Obey me!”

The wind dissipated. The pounding rain became a light shower. Then it stopped. The waves that had towered over the fishing boat resumed their playful choppiness. The skies cleared. One burst of lightning cracked in the distance. Then the rising sun reddened the sky.

The fishing boat glided into port on a calm wind. The crowd followed Parnubis to greet the fishermen. Evalyne looked around her, but Wolf Mother was gone. She turned and ran down the path to meet her husband.

Evalyne wove between the mass of people and boats, waving and calling out to Mikel. He met her on the dock.

“I saw you dancing in front of the fire,” he whispered in her ear as they embraced.

“You have to be more careful. If Parnubis ever finds out—”

“He will not find out,” she replied, running her hands over his head and neck, checking for wounds. “Are you—”

“Evalyne,” Parnubis said from the boat deck.

She froze. “Yes, my lord?”

“Your Sun Temple family misses you. It has been a long time since you came to visit us. You may forget your true family quickly, but we will never forget you.” Parnubis looked her up and down, sighing heavily. “Why you traded a life with the great Sun God Nubis for a

fisherman's rags, I will never understand. Why you traded the eternal love of a god for mortal pleasure—”

“High Priest Parnubis!” said one of the priests aboard the boat.

“Yes, what is it?”

“While we were inspecting the boat's catch, we found this.” He handed Parnubis a cooked fish head.

“What is this?” Parnubis asked Mikel, holding the fish by its gills. “You know you are not allowed to eat any of your catch before it has been inspected, counted, and blessed. If you do not pay your tithe to the great Sun God Nubis, you risk him abandoning us in our hour of greatest need! Unless, of course, you think you can do better. Do you think you can do better than a god?”

The crowd quieted. Mikel glanced towards the other deckhands. They shrugged their shoulders.

“Well?” Parnubis shook the fish's gaping mouth and dead eyes at him.

“I am sorry, my lord, Parnubis, for the confusion. It was part of the food ration we were given before we left. In the madness of the storm, it must have gotten mixed in with the catch,” Mikel replied.

Parnubis's eyes narrowed. “For your sake, I hope so.” He dropped the fish head into the water. The crowd resumed its chatter. Parnubis continued, “Before the meeting today, you will want to wash that fish smell off you so it does not make everyone sick. The great Sun God Nubis has given us a solution for our beast problem.”

“We will not be late, my lord,” Evalyne said.

Parnubis turned towards a commotion on the deck. “What are you doing? This must all

be sorted and blessed before you can divide it amongst yourselves,” he said. “Now put it all back! We will have to start—”

“Let’s go,” Evalyne whispered to Mikel.

They crept back into the Capitol, carefully picking their path through the crowd.

Evalyne snuck a glance towards the cliff and Moon Temple ruins, but they were shrouded in fog.

“You know Parnubis is looking for any excuse to force you back into the priestesses,” Mikel said.

“The dances are all I have left of my mother.” She kissed the back of his hand. “Let’s go home and change,” she said.

Evalyne’s father had been a general in the Royal Army. He had been killed during the battle to annex the five Southern Kingdoms. Her mother had never recovered. A month to the day after his funeral, her mother made a large enough meal to last a family of five for several days. She bathed Evalyne. She braided her long, dark hair. She helped her to pick out an outfit for each day of that week. Then she told her she was going to the market. Just before the door closed behind her, she looked back in and said, “I will always be with you.” Evalyne sat with her dolls for a few moments, before putting on her coat and following her mother.

It was a grey and windy morning. Each gust pulled strands of hair out of Evalyne’s braids. She did not know what she was looking for or what she suspected. But her stomach dropped when her mother turned away from the market. She was heading for the beach.

From behind a fisherman’s shed, Evalyne watched her mother. The port was bustling with people; each one like an ant following every other. Her mother walked purposefully out into the waves. The water rose around her. No one noticed. Evalyne ran out onto the beach and tried

to scream, but no sound came. No one saw the girl on the beach or the woman disappearing into waves. The sea washed over her mother's head until she was reduced to a dark spot in a mass of liquid grey. Then she was gone.

Evalyne ran out into the water. The sea slammed closed behind her. The tides began to pull her far from shore. Then strong hands grabbed her and pulled her back. She fought wildly against them. But without a steady supply of air, her strength quickly dissolved. She surrendered.

She felt dizzy and weightless. Then she felt sand beneath her. Her braids were disheveled, plastered to her skin. Her sobs slowly found their voice as she wept, her whole body shaking. She looked up into Mikel's face, a boy only four years older than herself. He pulled her close. They waited for hours for some sign of her mother, but none came. Only the tide came in and went out, taking her mother's footprints with it.