Loss and Love

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Moonshade woke up. Sun was shining but from the opposite direction to the den entrance, so it was all dim and dark inside. Carefully she pulled her left hand from under Strongbow's chest and rose from the hay bedding only to sit down again on the wooden ledge in the corner of their burrow. She gazed at Strongbow sleeping heavily on his stomach and breathing hard.

She felt sad and tired. He was tiring, coming to her like that, with no words, no gestures, merely undressing quickly and expecting the same of her. And after joining he fell asleep fast, with no words.

He was tiring. The thought arouse again, only to be resisted by a strong will, pushing it back and denying it. Moonshade lifted her head and gazed at Strongbow again. It seemed familiar, had she done this before, looked at him like this? Maybe some other day in the past? Had she then felt like this? Maybe it had happened only yesterday.

It was shame creeping into her mind. She pushed her doubting thoughts away and crawled to Strongbow to carefully stroke his hair and to fill her mind with the admiration for him, his strong muscles and his rugged body. She drew his scent into her nostrils; it was the scent of will and resolution.

It was after twilight when Moonshade woke up again. When reaching for Strongbow her hand found only the cool hay and the hard den floor. He had left earlier. She turned on her back and rested against the den wall and sighed. For a while she stayed motionless and just stared out of the den entrance while breathing heavily and measuring her heartbeats unaware. The darkness growing outside and crawling inside was slowly encompassing her as she remained sitting on the floor listening only to herself, until the noises of the Wolfriders preparing for hunt reached her.

"Oh, High Ones, they must be waiting for me", she whispered to the shadows surrounding her and jumped up, pulled on her clothes and jumped out of the tree hollow to the branches and hurried down.

"What took you so long, Moonshade? Or are you not hungry?" she heard Pike asking, and laughed in return. Her wolf-friend was waiting for her to mount.

"Were you all just waiting for me?" Moonshade asked. She unsheathed her knife and answered by laughing to her own question. The Wolfriders dashed out of the Holt clearing to the darkening forest.

After the night's successful hunt, the Wolfriders gathered on the high branches to celebrate. They danced and singed and howled to the moons through the opening in the treetops shaped by Redlance. When the night began to give in to the daybreak, the tired Wolfriders with their bellies full, one by one, or two or three together strolled back their dens. Strongbow was among the first to leave. But Moonshade stayed, despite his repeated requests. She danced and laughed with the rest, who *were* surprised by Strongbow leaving alone, until everyone else had gone and she remained together with Skot and Krim and Pike, who wouldn't leave anyway before they ran out of dreamberries, no matter were they raw or brewed.

Moonshade settled down with the last three hunters and took also long sips of dreamberry wine while listening their idle chat. Daybreak was already over when the foursome stumbled away, Moonshade to her den, Pike, Skot and Krim to theirs. Watching them go she thought happily, *at least there are some who won't be up for long.* Quietly she sneaked in and pulled off her weightiest clothes before crawling down on hay.

✧What took so long?✧ She felt his hand on her stomach and startled before turning around and seeing the familiar lines of Strongbow's face in the bright light of the dawning day.

"Strongbow, I'm tired and sleepy. I don't have the strength", and she whispered, "nor the will".

Gentle smile disappeared from her face as he pulled her against him. ✧Sourberries, no-one is ever that tired!✧

"Skot and Krim may never be, but I am", she said and tried to pull away from him.

✧Lifemate, my sweet love!✧ he laughed but if he thought his laugh was soft and cheerful, it wasn't. It then sounded to Moonshade's ears only like a crow's croaking. He bent her under his rugged body and she stopped resisting and thought only how much he needed and loved her, and how much she must love him back.

Moonshade woke up in Cutter's den. He was already awake beside her. She grabbed his outstretching arm and held it tenderly against her warm breast.

"Sweet dreams?" he asked.

"Yes", she answered silently, but her tone told Cutter enough, so he knew continuing courtesies would lead nowhere. He stood up and pulled her up as well. A faint smile appeared on her face in gratitude but when he tried to take her in his arms, she unexpectedly broke away and retreated.

"Look how high the sun is already! It's well past noon" Moonshade pointed out of the den entrance. "I must return to Strongbow!"

He tried to send a feeling of tenderness to her, but irritated she blocked him away from her mind, gathered her clothes and ran away, and made her way on the branches towards her and Strongbow's den.

Cutter was left to stare after her, savouring her last words. *That she should say, "return to Strongbow".*

Moonshade hurried. Cutter had been nice to her and had held her tenderly, but though his touch had been what she thought she needed during the moonlight, she couldn't bear it in the sunlight.

During the meal and the howl during the small hours, she had sought Cutter's company and had left with him to his den. Strongbow had looked like he had swallowed a mouthful of sourberries but hadn't sent a word. Strongbow waited for her in the den. She met his glowing gaze in the back of the den and turned her eyes away.

✧How was...✧, he started but stopped. Moonshade didn't answer. Instead, she started to arrange her clothes and preparing to sleep the remaining daylight hours. Without warning Strongbow stood up and took the five steps to stand next to her.

✧Cutter was nice, wasn't he? Was he nicer than me?✧ he sent furiously.

She turned to meet his gaze and thought an instant until sensing his true feeling and understanding fully what he meant. Moonshade answered in earnest, "He is nothing like you!"

Strongbow slapped her. Confused, he stepped back gazing at his right hand. Moonshade carefully stroked her face and temple and felt the hit burning hot. Only then did she actually look back at her Recognized mate. For a while they just stared at each other, like not understanding what had happened. Strongbow stepped forward and extended his arms to embrace her and expecting her to hold him. In her embrace he repeated again and again, "I'm sorry, Moonshade. I'm sorry I hit you!"

She broke away from his embrace and screamed, "That is all you're sorry for!" He was left to stare as she hastily gathered her garments, weapons and other things and jumped out of the den while yelling again, "That is all you're sorry for!" The last thing she saw was her Recognized mate muddled and leaning against the den wall crying.

She ran naked on the branches carrying her things. Moonshade hurried straight to Cutter's den. She couldn't think of any other place to go to. She tossed her things in one corner and ended straight to his arms.

"I want to stay with you! Please, hold me!"

Under the heavy furs they tumbled again and again as he tried desperately to match her burning fury, to fill her passionate need, always knowing he never could. And somehow, she knew it too.

During the following days Moonshade hunted with the rest of the tribe when she felt like hunting, but mostly she stayed in Cutter's den. When she didn't hunt, the others gladly shared their meat with her. She stayed with Cutter until she became tired of him and he couldn't give her any more of what she sought. During the next howl she went to Zhantee and found relief from his youthful body and chat, and for a while she stayed with him, seeking from him what she hadn't found from Cutter.

During the hunts she turned her back to Strongbow and closed her mind from his sendings. But after the hunt and in secret she gazed at him, and everyone could see how her eyes followed him everywhere when he could not see. But she repelled him and kept quiet when others mentioned him in conversation.

Once after an hour of pleasure with Zhantee, instead of turning away from him as she had done every time before, she spoke to him, the first time she spoke to Zhantee right after their joining. Until then she had only listened silently as he had chattered and delighted in his idle gossiping.

"Your brown body and some of the words you say in your speech make me remember the Sun Village. There was someone there who was also a tanner like me. I can't remember his name but he made clothes for the villagers".

Zhantee turned around surprised. "Do you mean Ahnshen?"

"I don't know. I can't remember".

"Of course! Sorry, I forgot". Zhantee wondered for a while if he should remember for her. The Wolfblood had good reason to forget everything soon after it had happened. It made so easy to move from one day to the next. "Ahnshen was our tailor. He made clothes from woven fabric, not like you do from leather. But you showed him how you tan and colour hides, and cut and sew and embellish them back together to make beautiful clothes like mine". He pointed to his green tunic lying on the floor and watched Moonshade's face lighten up hoping she wouldn't continue on Ahnshen.

"Why did I do that?" she asked incredulous.

"He showed you how he made our clothes and how we weaved the fabric for them".

"Fabric... Moth fabric?" she suddenly recalled.

"Moth fabric was the finest, only meant for festival attires".

"Tell me about Ahnshen! Or share a memory!" Moonshade asked.

Zhantee was startled. Now he had to go all the way. He stood up and reached for a wooden bowl with a cover, and offered it to Moonshade. "Take some dreamberries! They'll awaken your own memories".

Moonshade took some berries and lay back on the furs to wait for their intoxicating effect. Zhantee crawled next to her and tasted a few berries as well to make the telling easier for him.

Mind pictures melted together with words and Moonshade's questions were answered before she asked them. Her own memories added to where Zhantee's ended and formed a picture, far from complete but enough for her as she lay half awake and half asleep, in the dream world of real and imagined memories, a picture of the peaceful Sun Village, the oasis in the middle of the burning waste, and of Ahnshen, the villager who had wrapped his brown hands around her, who's touch had burned like fire on her skin.

The dreamberries intoxicating effect began to wear away and Moonshade was back at Zhantee's arms. She wept.

"Oh, Zhantee, he was so nice to me, attending, he held me dearly".

Zhantee listened silently as Moonshade continued, "But what he thought he liked in me, wasn't there. So he wanted to change me to suit his view".

It was quiet until Zhantee rolled over and asked carefully, "Would you like me to be him, for a while, now?"

She smiled sadly, "No, Zhantee, your touch doesn't burn like fire on my skin. But I thank you for sharing your memories with me. He felt so good back then, before I learned what he expected of me. He still feels good, I feel happy thinking about him".

"How did he do after we left?" Moonshade asked with a lighter tone.

"Soon he flirted again with every girl walking past him, but I think deep inside he always compares them to you first. You gave him quite a lesson".

Their laughter filled the den.

The next day Strongbow tried again to speak with Moonshade. After having received only a few words she blocked him out and went by. Strongbow followed her and sent again, but she hurried away.

Later that day the archer went to see Pike. He found Pike alone in his and Skot and Krim's hollow.

✧Pike?...✧

“Yes, Strongbow?”

For a while the two stared at each other quietly as neither knew what to say. Strongbow was a rare visitor to their den. The storyteller gestured him to sit down on the bedding.

“Have you come for a story?” he started carefully.

✧Moonshade... Today she refused to receive my sendings. I don’t know why I have angered her.✧ He stopped and then continued, ✧Can you tell a story of us from the time we Recognized?✧

Pike stared at him. Strongbow wanted to know if she had always been the same, or if he had. “Well, I wasn’t there at the time, you know, but I’ll do my best. I’d like to tell one story which I think you haven’t heard in a long while. It’s the story of you and Moonshade’s Recognition.”

The irony seemed to go unnoticed by the unhappy archer. He merely glanced surprised at Pike.

Pike offered him a handful of dreamberries and started telling while Strongbow slipped into dreamberry intoxication. Memories he didn’t know he had welled up and others formed before his closed eyes. Pike had no memories to share but his words melted and changed into images, sounds, smells, tastes and feelings. Strongbow gasped and panted as Moonshade snuggled down next to him. First he dared not even touch her. Hesitantly he stroked her hair and listened to Pike telling the tribe’s memories of him and her.

Strongbow smiled as he saw himself in Moonshade’s arms and Moonshade with big belly carrying their Dart. He caressed Moonshade lying on him. She caressed him back. Pike went on but Strongbow only saw the same Moonshade he had always seen, his loving and adoring, faithful companion, mother of his son and in so many ways like a mother to him as well.

Pike finished and the archer remained still his eyes closed as dreamberries effect grew softer. Dream pictures disappeared and he was again on the hay bedding of Pike’s den. He reached to Moonshade and softly caressed her back. Finally he opened his eyes but instead of seeing Moonshade’s deep, dark and loving eyes he met with Krim’s grinning face.

✧Krim! What...?✧ Strongbow burst and at last Pike awoke, too. “Krim, what are you doing here? I am telling a story to Strongbow!” Pike didn’t need to explain that if Strongbow had especially come to him for a story, then it was to him to provide the rarely needed privacy which was asked for with no words but with Strongbow’s gestures alone.

“Oh, I was just going by and I saw Strongbow waving his arms about in the air and I thought he was motioning to me, so I came in. I didn’t know you were groping for Moonshade,” Krim said innocently.

Strongbow bared his teeth and scared her by his sudden rage, but only for a moment. ✧You weren’t invited! And you knew it!✧

But Krim only grinned back and moved a bit closer to him. “But I was welcome, wasn’t I? Not unpleasant at all?”

✧I thought you to be Moonshade✧, Strongbow said straight out.

Krim gawked at him. “You always say just what you think?”

The archer realized his slip and replied with a rare wit, ✧Like you always do what you think, without thinking before you do!✧

Krim grinned the widest grin she could. “Always! Like now!” She plunged against the amazed Strongbow. Strongbow bent down on the den floor under her as she snuggled vigorously against him.

✧Off of me!✧ Strongbow sent and grabbed hold of her tossing her to the side. Krim tried in vain to hold on to him but Strongbow shook her off and ran out of the den with Pike sending apologies. Hurrying away he didn’t answer and soon heard Pike and Krim’s argument.

For a while Strongbow had felt happy with Moonshade in his dreams. Now he only felt empty, more empty than ever before during the last days, now that the memory was revived. Back in his and Moonshade’s den he just lay motionless on the hard wood and from time to time, again and again silently and softly whispered her name savouring the bittersweet memory.

✧Shenshen! What do you want?✧ Strongbow asked rudely when glancing up and seeing Shenshen in the doorway. Strongbow quickly pulled himself together and retreated backward to hide in the shadows of the den.

“Are you all right?” she asked expressionlessly.

✧Yes, of course!✧

“I thought I saw and heard you crying”, she said, yet coldly.

Strongbow remained silent and avoided her glance. Slowly he nodded and Shenshen entered the den. “Are you hungry?” she asked softly.

Strongbow didn’t answer. *Of course you are, you just don’t know it.* Shenshen finally smiled at the archer and took some strips of meat from inside the clay pot she had carried. She sat down next to him and offered the meat which had been spiced with soft herbs. Strongbow ate slowly. *Grief can conceal your hunger. Bless the High Ones for once your body is so guided by your wolfblood.*

Shenshen offered more meat and Strongbow began to eat more readily. It had indeed been sometime since he had had a mouthful. He hadn’t been with the hunt last night, and also missed several other hunts. Finally, when he had had enough, Strongbow turned towards her and thanked Shenshen.

✧Shenshen. . . ✧ the archer started timidly while trying to avoid her eyes, ✧I. . . ah. . . would you help me? I want to ask. . . ✧

It’s about time! It can’t be that difficult. . . or can it! Have I mistaken you? “Yes”, she answered calmly, trying to clear the path for him as well as she could.

✧Well, you know... Moonshade and I... we are... I don't know what we are, any more!✧ he nearly screamed through his sending and wept having said it. ✧I love her, but I don't know if she still loves me!✧

"Moonshade left you simply because she got tired of you", Shenshen started to explain in her self-confident way. "Of course she loves you, and she'll come back to receive your love when she's ready and when you ask her coaxingly enough. Maybe you were growing a bit tired of her, too."

Strongbow listened speechless, flabbergasted.

"Oh, don't look so amazed! I suppose it's not common among you Wolfriders - anyway, we are so small a group now - but in the Sun Village I saw it happen a few times. Even Recognized couples - and you and Moonshade are, aren't you - sometimes wear each other out. At least you didn't quarrel, or anyway, I haven't seen you quarrelling. But love doesn't die so easily, and fondness grows from absence!"

✧You're wrong. I could never be apart from Moonshade✧, Strongbow sent shyly.

"But you are! Why feel sorry for it?" she answered straight out.

✧Then, what should I do?✧ he asked amazed and aghast.

"Wait and woo her! And why be alone? There are many of us who would gladly share pleasure with you, me, for instance. As it is, I also bear a message from Krim. She wanted me to tell you that she hopes you wouldn't resent what she was doing and was hoping she could make it up to you." Shenshen winked, twice. "So, you see, there's plenty of warmth and love at hand."

✧I... ✧ *don't want your love*, he was going to say but suppressed it. Barely able to contain his outrage Strongbow answered, ✧Thank you for your advice Shenshen. And tell Krim that her apologies are already accepted.✧

Waiting and wooing and Krim! They were the only help and advice Shenshen could offer him. *Gossiping and prattling Shenshen!* Of course she had tried her best to help him but he didn't need her, much less he needed Krim, or any other for that matter, except Moonshade. Only her name sang in his heart. He couldn't recall any time he had had a lovemate. There could not have been any. He couldn't and certainly wouldn't remember the time when Moonshade was not yet his lifemate and soulmate. She was the other half of his soul and being apart made him only half Strongbow, half *Wyl*.

He had to get Moonshade back!

Maybe there was after all something to this wooing that Shenshen had recommended. What if he would make himself more desirable in her eyes? But how to ask for forgiveness? He had tried to but Moonshade didn't listen. *Maybe if I'll give her some flowers, all females like flowers.* He would like it, too, if he ever got any, now that he thought of it. Efforts for beauty were appreciated among Wolfriders. *I'll make her a wreath, coat her with flowers. Blessed be High Ones, that it's summer now.*

Cutter had noticed how Moonshade was now slowly growing irritated of Zhantee. Something had to be done, and soon, else she'd only drift from Zhantee to some other unpledged male. *She's only trying to escape Strongbow, and still she needs him, but no-one else can give her the feeling that comes from the caress of a Recognized mate. For once, I am more experienced than she.*

Cutter decided to ask help from Nightfall, who had also helped him to push aside the sorrow of being apart from his family and taught him again to live in the Now.

"Nightfall, could you and Redlance invite Moonshade to stay with you? Maybe you can give her the same that you gave me. Please, soothe her unhappiness while we let time pass and try to think of a way to get her back to Strongbow."

"Of course. A tribemate we'll always help, endlessly if need be. Sometimes soulmates do part, for ever."

"Don't say it, Nightfall! At least, we have to try."

"Yes, and even more for Strongbow's sake. I'm more worried about him."

Cutter nodded slowly. Strongbow hardly could even begin to think of a life without Moonshade. Cutter had pondered for days, both alone and with others, why his most trusted followers of the Way had broken their seemingly unbreakable bond, and he couldn't understand it any more now that before.

So Moonshade began to den with Nightfall and Redlance. But their efforts to open her and get her to talk other than triviality were unsuccessful and she remained drawn from them.

"This isn't helping", Cutter said sadly.

"I've been thinking of something", Nightfall started. "Knowing Moonshade's protective nature, she might side with Strongbow if he'd seem threatened."

"Motherly nature!" Cutter said bluntly.

"Exactly! We can use it to make Strongbow and Moonshade stand together against..." Nightfall stopped out of politeness.

"Us!" Cutter continued keenly. "Good thinking! But what if it doesn't work? What if they only slip further apart?"

Nightfall shrugged her shoulders and tried to look elsewhere. "I don't know."

"And what of Strongbow?"

“I don’t know”, Nightfall repeated with a sigh.

“He’s as inapproachable as ever, maybe more so. Well, they can’t go on like this, and neither can the tribe. Better do something. Should I call a whole tribe council so we can provoke them both openly?”

“It might be better if only Redlance and I will taunt Strongbow when she’s around to hear.”

“Very well, High Ones help you two!”

So, during the following days, Moonshade had to hear again and again carefully selected mocking. Strongbow’s archery skills, which indeed had been growing worse since her leaving her him, were disdained, his dependence of her sneered at. At first she paid no attention to it, but when Nightfall said to her face to face, that she certainly shouldn’t bother about him, Moonshade was finally forced to take a stand. She did stand up for him, if passionlessly. The thought kindled, Redlance and Nightfall could see in her the longing to Strongbow.

Perhaps sooner or later Moonshade would have indeed returned to him, if Strongbow hadn’t one day soon dropped from tree above her his wreath of flowers onto her head. ✧Moonshade, will you talk to me, please?✧

She turned and looked up. Through the foliage she could make out his dark eyes and stern but sincere face.

✧Can I come down to you?✧ he asked bashfully.

She nodded and beckoned. Strongbow jumped down to her. They glanced at each other. Strongbow straightened the wreath on Moonshade’s hair, and she couldn’t help but smile at him as his clumsy fingers ran through her hair.

✧Please, come back to me. I’m sorry for what I did.✧

“It wouldn’t help”, she said her eyes cast down. “It would just happen again. Nothing’s changed.”

✧But I’m changed.✧

✧No, you’re not. Something between us has changed, I don’t know what.✧

✧Nothing has changed! I still love you, I do!✧

Moonshade didn’t answer but turned away.

✧Please, Moonshade, please! Come back! I love you!✧

The tanner only shook her head and walked away. Strongbow tried to seize hold of her but Moonshade pushed away his hands and screamed, “Don’t touch me! Leave me alone! Leave me be. . . ”

✧Moonshade, please, I don’t understand you! You have always been like a mother to me!✧

“I don’t want to be your mother!” Moonshade cried enraged. “I want to be. . . ” She stopped, as if searching for a right word, or considering if she’d like to finish what she started saying. "...your lover!" Sobbing she walked away, and Strongbow was left to stare agape.

Moonshade walked away. *Leave me alone! Leave me be.* Her thoughts echoed again and again in her own mind. Going nowhere she wandered through the forest and treetops. Meanwhile Strongbow went to the one to whom he thought he could never go. It was a desperate choice, clinging to Shenshen's words as his last resort.

✧Krim?✧

"Strongbow? Now, I'm surprised!"

✧Do you still want to, eh...what you wanted to do?✧

"Of course! But why have you changed your mind?"

✧Well, I...er...✧

"Oh, I know. You only took a long look at me, and that was enough." *You haven't changed your mind, Strongbow. That much I know you! You have some other reason, maybe not a good one. You don't really want me. I wish you'd say no, now. This isn't fun any more*, Krim thought when walking by Strongbow's side.

They climbed inside Strongbow's den. Krim hugged him but Strongbow only started to undress himself. She pulled back and for an awkward while they gazed at each other.

✧Are you sure you want?✧ Krim sent.

✧No, I'm not!✧ he answered irritably and continued disrobing.

Should I stop this? Otherwise we might both hurt.

When undressed Strongbow finally embraced Krim, though it was a strained and short embrace, with no affection, as he was only trying to hold Krim. He led her down on the sleeping furs and once there, he tried to rest and relax before turning to her. She awaited uneasily for what he was about to do.

Slow moments passed by as Strongbow gathered strength, moments measured only by his hard and fatiguing breaths, listened by Krim and himself. Krim turned and gently reached for him. ✧Strongbow, maybe...✧

He turned and said, bluntly like always, "I'm sorry, I can't do!"

Just as suddenly he got up and started to dress himself.

"It's all right. Better this way", Krim said, "but I want to help you, Strongbow."

✧I don't need or want your help!✧ Strongbow burst.

"Yes, you do!" Krim yelled back. "You and Moonshade need all the help this tribe can give! Your life is miserable, and so is hers. And you don't even know why it is so, so you can't start making it better! But I think I know what's the problem."

✧Dung, and dung!✧

"Exactly this! When was the last time you had a good argument with Moonshade? Even soulmates need to argue from time to time!"

✧Out!✧ Strongbow bawled.

"You've been together too long without a fight!"

✧Out! Out!✧ Strongbow grabbed hold of Krim and nearly hurled her outside, her clothes flying right after her. She dressed herself and went to Cutter.

Later on Moonshade went back to Nightfall and Redlance's den but as they weren't inside she sat down to wait. She felt like crying again but she had cried enough for the day. Her tears had dried up and she wiped her face. The cool darkness of the den concealed her sorrowful face and she stroked her hair. Some flowers of Strongbow's wreath had stuck in her hair and she ripped them away. The wreath she had tossed away much earlier. The flowers in her hand were beautiful, she thought. Strongbow had picked them for her, even if his intent had been only to court her. He hadn't done anything like it before.

Oh, how tired she was, tired of everything. She tossed away the flowers in her hand. She missed her son, Dart, and her long-dead daughter Crescent. *Dart, where are you? How do you fare?* But Dart was in the Sun Village, on the other side of Vast-Deep Water. She even missed Ahnshen. At least Ahnshen had made her feel wanted and treasured, for a while, at least.

Everything she had done for Strongbow! Loved him, cared him, nursed him, even followed him when he had broken up with the Wolfriders to follow the Way alone. When he had caught the horrible foaming sickness, she had bargained with the trolls and taken him down to their caverns and stayed awake by him while the trolls had heated up their furnaces to drive the disease out from his body by heat and hotness. It had been her eyes he had seen last before fainting and first after recovering.

And now, she was lying alone on the floor of a strange den, leaning against the wooden wall feeling wretched, alone, without his strong body and resolute mind with her to comfort her, alone.

"Moonshade?"

Moonshade saw Venka peeking in the den. She didn't care to stand up, just lazily waved her hand to tell that she had heard.

"Where's Nightfall?"

Moonshade just shrugged her shoulders.

"Can I wait for her with you?"

Another quiet shrug.

Venka nestled down on the floor. “Are you sad?” she said, without smiling.

Moonshade didn’t answer. Venka snuggled against her and stroked her stomach. Moonshade didn’t move.

“Would you like to tell me?” Venka said gingerly.

“You couldn’t understand. You haven’t Recognized, you haven’t lifemated. . . ”

✧Maybe I wouldn’t understand, Moonshade, but I would listen✧, she said sincerely.

So Moonshade started to tell Venka, and telling was easy because Venka was good at listening. And every word she said, made the following words easier to say.

The whole Wolfrider tribe was gathered in the treetops. Venka brought Moonshade and Cutter came with Strongbow and they were both pushed in the middle of a circle made up of their tribemates.

Cutter started to speak, “We have all had enough of your little feud! I won’t let loving soulmates tear each other apart because of a mere disagreement and misunderstanding. We are all worried about you.”

✧Well, you shouldn’t be. This is between Moonshade and me!✧ Strongbow sent.

“Strongbow is right. This is our disagreement!” Moonshade continued.

“Strongbow is right!” Nightfall whispered to Redlance. “A bold gamble, well won. This deserves dreamberries!”

“Later!”

“It is not! And it is not a disagreement!” Cutter shouted. “Keepers of the Way, you are not even arguing!”

Krim stepped forward. “Differences make good sparks, Kahvi always said. Maybe that’s why we Go-Backs sometimes fight among ourselves, even lovemates against each other, when they can’t agree. I think, even being soulmated, doesn’t mean that you would always be of the same mind.”

Cutter continued, “Long ago at the Blue Mountain we saw, what stagnation can do, and we thought we could never be shadowed by it. But now we are. When every day is like the other, then nothing starts to matter.”

Shenshen came forward. “In the Sun Village, when we get bored of each other, we often switch mates, for a time. Most of the time it works, sometimes not. But being lifemated is like building your hut every day anew.”

“And building a hut is mostly hard work”, Cutter concluded. “That’s why we share gifts, treats and delights. Maybe you have forgotten, both of you!”

Moonshade and Strongbow were standing awkwardly in the middle of the tribe. Shenshen gave both a wreath made of soft, green leaves. "You are only loved by us."

"As your chief I order you to apologize and forgive each other, unless, of course, either of you would rather challenge me", Cutter said, barely able to contain his mirth. The Wolfriders closed in on Strongbow and Moonshade all saying their encouragements. The soulmates placed the wreaths on each other's hair and embraced. It was a difficult embrace. Either couldn't quite accept what Cutter had demanded, but they knew they had no place elsewhere but with each other. What had been said, was true.

When the tribe began to scatter, only Cutter was left with them. ✧Keepers of the Way, remember Winnowill! Even love can fester, turn upon itself, when no-one has use for it.✧

✧We are all so safe here✧, Strongbow sent.

"I know…" Cutter whispered back.

Moonshade continued, "You forced us back to living, Cutter. We are ever grateful." She pulled Strongbow tight against her. "But living can be of so many kinds. Thank you once more."

✧Thank you, my chief✧, Strongbow added.

"Let's go to the den, Strongbow, and start apologizing each other", Moonshade said and Cutter burst into laughter. Even the archer gave a laugh.

✧Moonshade, you said before leaving that I was only asking your forgiveness for slapping you. I'm sorry I did so, but now I'm more sorry for neglecting you. Please, forgive me.✧

"I forgive you. I'm sorry for keeping silent when I shouldn't have. Please, forgive me."

✧I do. And from now on, we argue and fight whenever there's the slightest reason for it.✧

They both burst into laughter, yet both were thinking, *this isn't this easy, but I'm ready to try harder. There's nothing for us except each other, so we stay together.*

Moonshade fingered Strongbow's tunic. "This needs some fixing. What if I make you a new thong for your quiver? I'd like to try a new design I've been thinking, something green so you can't be spotted in the foliage at all."

✧Sounds wonderful. I have a little thing I'd like to give you, too. Something with a bit of moons and a little shade, as well. Something you can always wear.✧

"What is it?"

Strongbow grinned, ✧I haven't got it yet, but I wanted to promise you.✧

Moonshade laid back on the sleeping furs and spread her arms wide. “I’m eagerly waiting for it, and for you.”

Strongbow was beaming as he crawled down to her and began to disrobe her.

Loss and Love

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