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MARA RUTHERFORD

THE
POISON
SEASON

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The Poison Season

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For Jack, my number one fan from the beginning.

I love you and everything is going to be okay.



Prologue

The wolf was not thinking of hunger as it chased its quarry through the dark woods, having feasted earlier that day on a large roe deer. It was driven by a sense of purpose, one that had infected its brain late last winter, when it had picked its way carefully across the ice to the wooded island that seemed so still and peaceful—and likely full of prey.

The wolf was not from this mountain. It had been born on another, not so far from here. The alpha had driven it from the pack, already aware that it would be competition someday. But the wolf hadn't known that; it had only known that it was alone for the first time in its life. Alone, and hungry, and wanting...

There were no other wolves on this mountain. It had searched everywhere, but something about this Forest was not welcoming to wolves, or any other large predators, for that matter. It wasn't a lack of prey; it was something in the Forest itself. A warning of some kind, that this place wasn't for the likes of the wolf. But it was tired and hungry and searching, and so it had found itself on the island, padding about on silent feet, past the sleeping cottages and their unwitting inhabitants, which would have made a lovely meal. But the Forest told it, "No, they're not for you, either." And it had found itself in a pine grove in the island's center.

The wolf had snuffled at the base of the trees, picking up the scent of old blood and new growth, deep below the Forest floor. The roots of the trees, which had been replenished in a ceremony not long before the first snowfall, were always alive, even when the rest of the island slept. Feeling safe and quiet for the first time in many months, the wolf lay down amid the roots and slept a long, dreamless sleep.

When the wolf awoke the next morning, it felt *changed*. It was no longer hungry or tired or lonely. It was as if the Forest itself had sustained the wolf in the night, and now the Forest bid it farewell, told it to go away from the island, before the lake thawed and it would be trapped. The Forest only asked one thing in return: that the wolf nourish the Forest the way it had nourished the wolf. And now the wolf, which was still young and still learning, would finally fulfill its duty.

As the island came into view, the wolf released a long, doleful howl and drove its quarry onward.



Chapter One



The Watchers stood on the lakeshore, peering through the heavy mist that hung low on the water this time of year, when winter was just thawing into spring. Across the lake, the outsiders' voices were as hollow and mournful as a loon's cry.

Sound had always traveled strangely on Endla.

"What do you think they're doing?" Sage whispered against Leelo's ear, sending a chill down her spine.

Leelo shook her head. It was impossible to tell through the fog. They'd only been Watchers for a few weeks, and so far they'd had no interaction with the villagers across the water. They shouldn't even be here. They *wouldn't* be here if it were spring. Winter had made them complacent.

She stretched and looked out at the few remaining ice floes, scattered like the reflections of clouds on the water's glassy surface. The majority of the lake was too deep to freeze, and only the rare fool was bold enough to attempt the crossing. The carcasses of young migratory birds served as the occa-

sional reminder—should anyone need it—of the lake’s magic. They washed up on the shore with their feathers and flesh eaten away by a poison so strong it could sink a wooden boat long before it would ever make it across.

“Maybe we’ll be lucky this year,” Leelo murmured, more to herself than Sage. “Maybe no one will come.”

Sage snorted. “They *always* come, cousin.” She tugged on Leelo’s blond braid and rose. “Come on. Our shift is over, and they’re not going anywhere for now. Let’s find Isola.”

They hadn’t seen their friend much over the winter, but Isola, who was a year older, had been finishing up her own mandatory year as Watcher. Now that Leelo had done it herself, she wouldn’t blame Isola if she spent an entire month hibernating. Watching was both boring and exhausting all at once.

Leelo followed Sage into the trees, the soles of her shearling-lined boots quickly becoming mired in the mud and dead leaves left behind by the melting snow. She hated this time of year. Everything was dirty and drab, even their clothing. She wouldn’t wear the bright, beautiful dresses her mother made until the spring festival.

Sage stopped to pluck a branch of red holly berries from a bush, quietly murmuring a prayer of thanks to the woods that provided so bountifully for Endla. As Watchers, it was their duty to protect their home from the merciless outsiders who had destroyed all but this, the last of the Wandering Forests. “We have to finish making our crowns. You haven’t even chosen a theme yet.”

Leelo sighed. “I still have time.”

She had always loved the spring festival, but now she clung

to the days like a child at her mother's skirt. The sooner it was spring, the sooner her little brother, Tate, would be leaving, unless by some miracle his magic emerged before then. Whenever she thought of Tate out there among the outsiders, she wanted to cry. Because if she wouldn't be there to care for him, who would?

They left the main trail and made their way to Isola's cottage, where Sage knocked briskly on the door. Nearly a minute passed before it opened a few inches, revealing Isola's sleep-swollen face and tangled hair.

"What is it?" Her words came out as a croak, clearly the first she'd spoken this morning.

"We're sorry." Leelo ducked her head, already retreating. "We didn't realize how early it was."

"It isn't early," Sage said. "Isola is just lazy."

Leelo nudged her cousin with her elbow, though Sage had never been known for her tact.

The girl blinked a few times, trying to rouse herself. "I didn't sleep well, that's all. What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be Watching?"

Sage shrugged. "Our shift ended. Nothing was happening, anyway."

A shadow passed over Isola's gaze. "Nothing ever happens, until it does."

It was such a strange thing to say that Leelo wondered if something had occurred on Isola's Watch, something she and Sage had never heard about. It was entirely possible an outsider had attempted the crossing without all the younger islanders knowing. But any successful breach would have been announced. Outsiders caught by Watchers were always given

a choice: the Forest or the lake. Either way, they were never heard from again.

A low voice called Isola's name from inside the cottage before Leelo could ask what she meant.

"Sorry, that's my father. I should go."

Sage rolled her eyes and turned back to the woods, not even bothering with a goodbye. Isola shrugged an apology at Leelo, and she smiled in sympathy, having borne the brunt of Sage's short temper for seventeen years.

Every rose has its thorn, her mother would remind Leelo after Sage had said or done something cruel. Her cousin *was* prickly, but she was also strong, intelligent, and fiercely loyal. If Leelo were ever in trouble, she knew Sage would come to her rescue, no questions asked.

They were almost back at their own cottage when movement in the bushes caught Leelo's eye. A flash of dark hair and pale skin. She stopped and looked around as if she'd just had an idea.

"You're right, I should get to work on my crown. Take my bow and tell Mama I'll be home soon?" Sage and her mother had moved in with Leelo's family when both of their fathers died in a hunting accident, when Tate was still a toddler. It wasn't unusual for several generations of one family to live together on Endla, but it was rare that two women would be widowed so young, especially sisters.

Fortunately, Leelo's mother, Fiona, and her aunt, Kitty, were resourceful women. Kitty had taken over tending to her family's small flock of sheep, which produced the wool Leelo's mother wove into clothing. Endlans traded for most of their possessions and food, so it was important to have a

skill, something that few other people could provide. They weren't the only shepherds, but Leelo's mother made the finest woolen goods on the island. Together, the sisters were able to provide for their family, but winters were always lean.

"I can help," Sage offered, but Leelo shook her head.

"No, no. Aunt Ketty will be expecting you. I won't be long."

"Suit yourself." Sage hefted both bows and went into the house, the little string of bells they kept on the doorframe tinkling as she let the door fall shut behind her. It was several more minutes before Tate dared reveal himself, afraid he'd be caught shirking his duties by his strict aunt.

He had grown so much in the last year Leelo almost didn't recognize him as the same raven-haired baby she'd helped raise. He was so beautiful he was often mistaken for a girl, at least until he was old enough to walk and people saw him clad in trousers, not skirts.

Ketty had given him his name, calling him *as ugly as a potato* when he was born. She said it so often that "Tate" stuck, even though everyone knew it wasn't true. But sometimes, when Leelo's mother was nursing him to sleep in the middle of the night, Leelo heard her call him *Ilu*, "precious one," with a faraway look in her eyes that Leelo had never seen before.

"Come on, then," Leelo said, waving her brother closer. "You can help me make a crown for the festival."

He grinned, happy to be involved however he could. Islanders like Tate—*incantu*, they were called, or "voiceless"—weren't allowed to attend the festival, even though he wasn't quite old enough to be affected by the magic yet. Once an islander reached adolescence, generally around age twelve,

they were susceptible. But even though she understood the reasoning behind it, Leelo hated the rule. As if the incantu didn't feel like outcasts already.

They walked in silence for a while, until the trail faded into the undergrowth and they were forced to forge their own path. "What should I choose for my crown?" Leelo asked Tate. It was tradition for each young adult to decorate a crown honoring Endla's flora or fauna, a way of symbolizing that they were all an important part of its ecosystem. Sage had decided on a deer. Mostly, Leelo surmised, as an excuse to wear something sharp.

Tate chewed on his lower lip for a moment, eager to come up with the right answer. "What about a fox?"

"Hmm... A bit too cunning for me, perhaps."

He stared at his feet, thinking. "A squirrel?"

Leelo grinned and twitched her nose. "I was thinking of something a little less whiskery." They had wandered close to the lake, but they weren't in danger of encountering an outsider here, where the far shore was barely visible.

"A swan!" Tate said suddenly.

"Now, where would I get..." Leelo's voice trailed off as she saw the cygnet floundering in the shallows. She glanced around, making sure they were alone, before picking up a muddy stick and hurrying toward the water.

"Careful!" Tate called, shrinking back. They were taught from the time they could walk to never go near the water, but the poison was always weaker at this time of year. Leelo suspected it had something to do with the ice melting, diluting the poison somehow, but she didn't know for sure. All she knew was that the swan would die if she didn't help it.

“Foolish fellow,” she said, trying to reach it with the stick. It had stopped struggling, its heart and lungs probably already damaged beyond repair. Finally, she managed to nudge the swan close enough that she could reach it.

Wrapping her hand in her cloak, she took a hold of the swan’s long, graceful neck. It was so weak it didn’t even struggle.

“Is it dead?” Tate asked, peering over her shoulder.

“Not yet, but I’m afraid it’s too late to save it.” Leelo’s fingers itched to stroke the gray down giving way to snowy white feathers. The creature was so beautiful she felt her eyes fill with tears. “The poor thing. It didn’t deserve to die this way.”

Every year, young birds made the mistake of landing on what appeared to be a pristine mountain lake, not realizing no fish lived in its waters, no plants grew in its shallows. Within a day, the birds were reduced to nothing but their hollow bones. Given long enough, even those would eventually dissolve. Leelo had never encountered a bird that was still alive before.

Feeling the creature’s life slip away in her hands was somehow worse than hunting, because this death was senseless. They couldn’t eat the meat, as it was already tainted by the poison.

After a few minutes, Tate placed his hand gently on his sister’s shoulder. “It’s not suffering anymore, Lo.”

She sniffed and dried her cheek on her shoulder. “I know.”

“Maybe you can wash the feathers and use them for your crown. Then a small piece of it will live on, in a way.”

Leelo turned to look into her brother’s brown eyes, her

heart swelling at his gentle earnestness. She rose and pulled him into an embrace. “That’s a lovely idea,” she whispered against his soft hair. “Will you help me?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

Together, they rinsed the lifeless cygnet with fresh water from Leelo’s waterskin, then wrapped it in Leelo’s cloak before heading back toward the house. On the way, Tate gathered a few thin branches from the Forest floor, supple enough to bend into a crown. Leelo pointed out some brilliant blue berries that would make the perfect adornment. Tate plucked half a dozen, whispered a prayer, and placed them in his pocket for safekeeping.

When they were nearly at the house, Tate stopped to tie his bootlace and motioned for Leelo to kneel down next to him.

“What is it?” she asked.

He kept his voice low, though they were still alone. “Aunt Ketty is watching from the window.” Leelo knew well enough not to look up. “She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you,” Leelo assured him. “She’s just Ketty.”

He frowned. “She’s going to wonder what we were doing.”

“I’ll tell her I asked for your help. Don’t worry, little brother.”

“I’m scared.”

Leelo knew he wasn’t talking about their aunt anymore. She reached out and cupped the dwindling roundness of his cheek for just a moment. “If it’s any consolation, so am I.”

They shared a small, sad smile before straightening. “I’ll wash and pluck the swan,” Tate said. “You should go and finish your chores.”

“Be careful. Wear gloves.”

He raised his chin as he took the bundled creature from her hands. “We look out for each other, don’t we?”

Her chest ached with love, and with guilt for the lie she was about to tell. “Always.”

Late that night, when everyone else in her house was asleep, Leelo sneaked out, taking a knife from the kitchen on her way. Guided by nothing but moonlight and her own sense of purpose, she made her way to the center of the island, to the heart of the Wandering Forest.

The trees here were special. Each belonged to one of Endla’s families, serving as a kind of patron saint to which the family prayed and left offerings. But winter was the one season that the islanders kept away from the grove. Offerings required a song, and Endlans didn’t sing in the winter. It was the only way to ensure outsiders didn’t come across the ice inadvertently. After all, it was one thing for a Watcher to stop an outsider intent on attacking the Forest or its inhabitants; accidentally luring an innocent with song, however, was against their code.

But tonight, Leelo was prepared to violate the code. Prayers hadn’t worked, which could only mean the Forest wanted a sacrifice. And while she wouldn’t kill an animal—the killing song, which lulled prey into a trancelike state, was too powerful to perform on her own, and there was too much of a risk someone would hear—a small blood sacrifice might be enough to wake Tate’s dormant magic.

She hunched down below her family’s tree, a tall, stately pine that was hundreds of years old, as ancient as the Wan-

dering Forest itself, according to Aunt Ketty. Even before she dragged the knife across her palm, Leelo could feel the music pressing at her throat, so eager to be released after months of silence.


As the blade bit into her skin, the music poured out of her along with the blood, and she almost believed she could hear the trees sighing, though that was probably just the wind. And the way the blood seeped into the ground so quickly, like the roots were drinking it up, was probably just the moonlight playing tricks on her.

And if somewhere across the water, an unwitting young traveler was tossing in his sleep, unaware that the lake whose shore he slept on was full of poison, or that the Forest on the island in its center was just awakening after a long, hungry winter...

Well, then, he should have camped somewhere else tonight.



Chapter Two



“Where have you been?” Stepan demanded, closing the door behind Jaren. He did a cursory inspection to make sure his son was unharmed, then let out a sigh of relief. “We thought the forest spirits had taken you.”

Jaren cast a sheepish glance at his father as he walked to the washbasin. “I wish I could blame my tardiness on sprites or will-o’-the-wisps, Father. But—”

Before he could go on, his entire family finished for him. “You got lost.”

He nodded. “I got lost.” He’d never spent a night in these woods before, and he was grateful he’d managed to find his way home when he woke with the dawn.

“Of course you did.” His oldest sister, Summer, smiled at him from where she sat whittling by the fire. She was as warm as her name implied, the gentlest of his three sisters. “You were daydreaming again, weren’t you?”

“Head in the clouds, feet in the mud,” his middle sister

sang, tutting at his filthy boots. As twins, Story and Jaren were closest in both age and bond, though Story had been born first and liked to lord those eleven minutes over him whenever possible.

Their youngest sister, Sofia, was still the baby of the family at fifteen. They called her Tadpole, mostly because she'd been as wriggly as frog spawn from the time she could move, but also because she pretended to hate it. Currently, she sat on their sofa, braiding her long red hair. "You didn't find any early spring flowers for me, did you? I'm so tired of all this." She waved her hand vaguely toward the front door.

"You *could* look for flowers yourself," Summer said.

"No flowers." Jaren held up his basket. "But I did find some wild onions."

Tadpole folded her arms across her chest, pouting. "I hate onions."

Story yanked on her little sister's braid, just hard enough to let her know she was being rude. "Then learn to cook your own food. It's time you did something useful around here."

Their father tapped a wooden spoon against the pot, his way of telling his children to settle down. Since their mother died, he had bravely taken over the cooking, and they'd all been surprised to find he was a much better chef than his late wife. None of them mentioned it, however. Stepan wouldn't have wanted anyone insulting his darling Sylvie's cooking, no matter how inedible.

"Leave Tad alone," he called over his shoulder. "She's tired."

"From what?" Story asked, her brown eyes wide with incredulity. "Sitting?"

Jaren left his sisters bickering in the family room and

climbed up to his loft to change. His sisters shared the sole bedroom, while their father slept on a pallet by the fire. The girls fought constantly, but Jaren sometimes envied their closeness. He knew he was excluded from their most intimate conversations because he was a boy, not because they didn't love him, but it made him feel separate from them. The fact that he was a dreamer and easily distracted didn't help.

He still couldn't believe he'd missed one of the trail markers yesterday, taking him miles in the wrong direction. By the time he'd realized his mistake, it was twilight, and while he didn't believe in fables and folktales like his father, he also wasn't foolish enough to try to navigate a rocky trail in the dark. With his luck, he'd twist his ankle and be stranded until another passerby happened upon him. Which, considering he hadn't seen anyone yesterday, could have been ages.

"Come eat!" Story called up the ladder. "The soup's getting cold."

Jaren pulled a clean shirt over his head and climbed down. He mumbled an apology, but the rest of the family was already dipping chunks of bread into their soup.

"Tell us," Stepan said, curiosity replacing his concern now that Jaren was home. "Did you see anything of interest in your wanderings? You must truly have gotten yourself lost this time."

"I found a beautiful lake," Jaren replied. "By the time I settled down for the night it was too dark to see anything. But this morning, I was amazed at how perfectly clear it was. I've never seen that color blue before."

Stepan raised his head from his bowl, leveling Jaren with a stern gaze. "What was the lake called?"

Jaren shook his head and fumbled a scalding piece of potato around in his mouth. "I have no idea. It wasn't marked."

"Closest town, then?"

"I was lost, Father. I honestly couldn't tell you if I was still in this kingdom."

Stepan's expression remained stony. "You didn't drink from the lake, did you?"

Jaren shook his head. "No, I filled my waterskin in a stream. Why? Do you know something about this lake?"

Stepan glanced at his daughters. "Klaus told me there is a lake in these parts, one that looks pristine but is actually full of poison."

Jaren laughed, but his twin sister touched his hand. "I've heard of it, too. From the townspeople."

Jaren was certain this was just another bit of local superstition. They had moved to the small village of Bricklebury a little over a month ago, after their mother died and Klaus, an old friend, invited them to rent his house for a good price. Jaren knew his father was too haunted by memories of Sylvie to stay in their old home, and Bricklebury was a perfectly nice town. But Jaren had never seen such a gullible, gossipy group of people in his life.

Considering his mind was always wandering in fanciful directions, Jaren himself might have been prone to believing in tall tales. But the stories Jaren told himself while he walked and worked weren't fairy tales. They were stories of what might be or what could have been, conversations he wished he'd had or hoped to have one day. Maybe he only felt lost because he was surrounded by three headstrong girls

who knew exactly what they wanted. But at eighteen, Jaren still had no idea where he was going.

He was tempted to tell his father just what he thought of this “magic lake.” But he also knew if he didn’t acknowledge his father’s fears, he’d likely send his sisters to do the gathering next time. Jaren hated chopping wood and hunting, the two other duties he might be tasked with.

“I won’t go back,” he said, and he meant it. There was no reason to go so far afield, and besides, he’d slept horribly last night. He vastly preferred his own bed to stones and snow-melt. “But you don’t need to worry, Father. I never saw so much as a squirrel out there. Spring is late this year.”

“It always comes late this far up the mountain,” Summer said, with the air of someone who knew something the rest of the family didn’t.

Sofia shoved a hunk of bread into her mouth. “Says who?”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Tadpole,” Story said, elbowing her little sister.

Summer avoided their eyes. “I heard someone say it at the market.”

“It’s that carpenter, isn’t it?” Story grinned, her eyes glinting in the firelight. “I *knew* you liked him!”

While his sisters teased each other and their father tried to quiet them, Jaren’s mind was filled with a strange, mournful song he couldn’t place. He had no musical ability to speak of, so it wasn’t likely he’d made it up himself. And his mother, though she’d loved to sing, wouldn’t have chosen something so sorrowful.

“Yoo-hoo,” Story called, waving a hand in front of Jaren’s face. “Where did you go?”

He realized his spoon was dangling in front of him, forgotten. “Sorry.”

“You’re clearly exhausted,” their father said. “Get some rest. Your sisters and I will take over your chores for the rest of the day.”

Jaren nodded and mumbled an apology. But, though he did feel exhausted in every fiber of his body, he lay awake for hours, trying to tease out the melody of the strange song in his head.



Chapter Three



Several days later, Sage and Leelo were sent to visit Isola. Her mother, Rosalie, had complained to Fiona and Ketty that Isola had been acting strangely all winter, sullen and tired for no good reason.

“Maybe she’s ill,” Sage suggested as they made their way to Isola’s cottage. “She did look terrible when we saw her last.”

“Or perhaps being a Watcher was too hard on her. Winter duty is exhausting.”

Leelo had once asked her mother why they didn’t start their year as Watchers in the spring or summer, giving them more time to learn before the lake froze.

Because the winter is long and takes a toll on even the more experienced Watchers, her mother had explained. Going through it all at once is too much, so we split it up, make it a little easier. Everyone, no matter their size or physical ability, was required to spend a year on duty, guarding the island. Leelo was still recovering from the night she’d spent in the woods, followed immediately by an entire day patrolling the shore.

Sage was about to respond when they heard a commotion from inside Isola's house.

"I don't want him to go!" she screamed. "You can't make him!"

The shrill desperation in Isola's voice made Leelo's skin crawl. "We should leave," she whispered, turning back to the trail.

But Sage shook her head and pulled Leelo along after her. "And miss this? I don't think so."

"Sage," Leelo hissed, but they were already crouched behind a tree, listening.

A moment later, the door to Isola's house burst open. A young man, half-undressed, was being shoved over the threshold by Isola's mother, who was beating at his head with a wooden spoon.

"Fool!" Rosalie yelled. "The ice is gone! Tell me if it was worth it when the lake takes you!"

The young man raised his arms over his head to protect himself, the muscles of his torso rippling with the movement. Leelo and Sage stared slack-jawed as Isola ran out of the house after her mother, clad in nothing but her shift.

"Please, Mother!" the girl wailed, but the young man was already tugging his shirt over his head and running through the woods toward the lake.

Rosalie snatched at her daughter's sleeve. "Stop this nonsense, Isola! You know he can't stay. What were you thinking?"

But Isola pulled free and ran after him, stumbling barefoot in the mud. "Pieter! Come back!"

Pieter. Now Leelo recognized him, though he'd been only a little older than Tate the last time she'd seen him. His fa-

ther was a painter, and his mother sometimes bought Kitty's wool to make the warm felted boots they wore in winter. But beyond that, Leelo couldn't remember much about the boy, other than that he was incantu. What was he doing back on Endla?

"Come on," Sage said, yanking Leelo behind her.

Rosalie was following her daughter at a rapid clip, but she didn't run. She had to know Pieter would only make it so far. "Get your family," she called to Leelo and Sage over her shoulder. "There's going to be a drowning."

Leelo gasped, but Sage's expression was strangely intent as they ran back to the house. What *had* Isola been thinking? Leelo knew she would want to see Tate after he left, but she would never allow him to risk his life by coming back to Endla. And Pieter wasn't family, just a former friend who had somehow become something more.

When they reached the house, the girls pulled off their muddy boots before going inside. Sage paused to warm her hands by the stove for a moment as she hollered for her mother. "Hurry up!" she shouted. "There's going to be a drowning!"

Leelo's stomach twisted at the echoed phrase. She had always been too sensitive, according to Aunt Kitty. Whenever a lamb was slaughtered for their summer festival, Leelo didn't have the heart to eat it. It wasn't the sight of blood that made her vision tunnel and her knees grow weak; it was the thought of anything enduring that much fear and pain. And while she knew a drowning wasn't a slaughter, exactly, that Pieter had chosen his own fate, he was nevertheless going to suffer greatly.

Ketty came in from the yard, where she'd been chopping

firewood. She had the same auburn hair and hazel eyes as Leelo's mother and Sage, while Leelo had her father's silvery blond hair and blue eyes. Tate didn't look like any of them. Her mother said he resembled their grandfather, who had died before Leelo was born.

"A drowning?" Ketty asked, hanging her apron on a hook near the door. "Are you sure?"

Sage nodded. "It's Pieter Thomason. He was in Isola's house. He must have come across the ice and hidden all winter. Isola's mother chased him into the woods."

Ketty sucked in a breath. "Poor Rosalie. This will be a lasting shame on her family."

Leelo had never heard of an incantu returning to Endla, and she wondered how this differed from an outsider trespassing. But unlike her aunt, Leelo wasn't thinking of Rosalie. She was thinking of Isola and, more importantly, Pieter.

Ketty shook her head, muttering to herself. "Best get Fiona. She's upstairs resting."

"I'm awake." Leelo's mother came down the stairs on unsteady legs, leaning heavily on the wooden banister. She had been weak and tired often lately, though she promised she was fine. Leelo had helped her with the weaving and embroidery before she became a Watcher, but now Fiona had to do all that work herself. "Pieter Thomason, you say?"

Leelo took her mother's arm and helped her into a chair by the fire. "We can stay here, if you're not feeling well enough."

"Everyone has to attend," Ketty said. "You know that."

"Mama?" Leelo crouched down next to her mother. "I don't mind staying."

"I don't think I have the strength for it," Fiona said to Ketty.

“Exactly why you should come, sister. The singing will help bolster you.”

Fiona frowned and rubbed her temples. “My head is pounding. I’ll try to follow, but you should go ahead, Leelo.” Her mother’s voice was soft with compassion, though she looked troubled. “That poor boy. And his parents. I wonder if they know.”

Leelo bit at the jagged edge of a fingernail. Her mother understood how much Leelo hated the drownings, but she had missed the last one, when a man who claimed to be lost in a snowstorm was found by a pair of Watchers on their first day of duty. He had been given the same choice as everyone else, and Leelo had been surprised when he chose the Forest. In the winter, there was at least a chance of making it across the ice. But the Forest would no sooner tolerate an outsider than a dog would a flea. The man had been crushed by a falling tree within minutes of his release.

Leelo’s repeated absence would be noticed. Besides, drownings were important to Endla. They were a reminder of how precious this place was and how vital it was they protect it at all costs. Only the incantu were spared from these occasions, as they weren’t considered true Endlans.

Despite the food and shelter the Wandering Forest provided, outsiders believed it was evil, as Aunt Ketty had explained a hundred times. *That’s how outsiders are. If they don’t understand something, like the Forest, they have to destroy it. Anything that doesn’t function the way they decide it should doesn’t deserve to live in their eyes.*

That was why all the other Wandering Forests had been chopped down or burned by outsiders and why it was so vital

no harm should come to Endla. Pieter wasn't an outsider, of course, and he likely had no intention of harming the Wandering Forest. But if he could come across the frozen lake so easily and remain hidden, what was to stop an outsider from doing the same?

"All right, Mama," Leelo said finally. "We'll be back soon." With a pit forming in her stomach, she donned her muddy boots and trudged back into the woods with her aunt and cousin.

Sage linked her arm through Leelo's, and she could feel Sage's—she didn't want to say *excitement*, though that was what it felt like—buzzing inside of her. "I know you hate it, Lo. But it's necessary. He can't stay here. You must understand that by now."

"I do," Leelo said because it was easier than arguing with Sage. But surely Pieter didn't *have* to die. She thought of him stumbling out of Isola's cottage half-naked, how vulnerable humans were when it came to the violence of nature. A flash of memory—the way the roots of her family tree had so eagerly absorbed the blood sacrifice—made the wound on her hand pulse with pain. She had seen birds fly into trees and never fly out again, had even watched an entire deer disappear into a sinkhole once. She knew all too well what the Forest was capable of.

As they reached the water's edge, Leelo saw that a crowd had gathered near the shore, spread out in a half-moon shape. Sage pushed her way through to the front, dragging Leelo along with her.

Pieter stood with his heels nearly touching the water, brandishing a stick as though it could protect him. He bared his

teeth, reminding Leelo of a badger she'd once caught in a snare. She didn't know if an incantu was given the same choice as an outsider, but it seemed Pieter had chosen for himself.

"Stay back!" he shouted, waving the stick at a woman who had come close to jeer at him. "I mean it."

"Pieter, please!" Isola was screaming again, but her mother and two other islanders restrained her. "Stay with me!"

"Hush," her mother said, trying to calm her daughter. "You know that's impossible."

Pieter glanced behind him. There were a few small ice floes left. The nearest was only a couple meters offshore, but there was no way to reach it without touching the water. Leelo scanned the crowd for Pieter's parents and found them standing stoically near the end of the line of islanders. Aside from a few tears on his mother's cheeks, you would never know their son was about to die. *Why didn't they do something?* Leelo wondered. How could they just stand there and let this happen?

Suddenly, Pieter spun and hurtled through the shallows, somehow reaching the nearest ice floe. He stood there, his legs spread in a wide stance for balance, searching frantically for his next move. The islanders watched as he made a leap, landing half on the ice and half off.

"Look!" someone shouted. A group of outsiders had gathered on the far shore.

"Hurry, Pieter," one of them called. "You can make it!"

Pieter was almost halfway across the lake, but the ice was even more sparse on the far side. There was no way he could reach it without swimming. The outsiders were hauling a boat through the mud toward the water, but they seemed hesitant to risk it. Leelo couldn't blame them.

“Help!” Pieter screamed as the ice beneath him cracked. One moment he was standing, and the next he was gone with only a small splash and a strangled cry.

“Pieter!” For one moment, Isola burst free, but the others managed to grab her again before she reached the water. It was clear to Leelo she would have gone in if they hadn’t stopped her.

“This is awful,” Leelo sobbed, turning her head away, but Aunt Ketty was right beside her.

She grabbed Leelo’s jaw and forced her to look at the water. “You must bear witness to their foolishness,” she insisted. “See what happens when we don’t put the island above all else?”

Pieter resurfaced for a moment, but Leelo knew it was hopeless. Once the lake took hold of its victims, there was no turning back. As he disappeared again, the islanders spread out along the bank, linking arms with each other. Leelo found herself between her aunt and cousin, who had already closed their eyes and bowed their heads.

It was still winter, but every sacrifice deserved a song. This one didn’t lure creatures like the hunting song, or pacify them like the killing song. Her mother said it was for the lake, to ask it to be gentle with its victims. Though not truly a part of the Forest—the lake had been here before the Wandering Forest and would remain should it ever leave—it was nevertheless their protector. *But there is nothing gentle about this death*, Leelo thought as she remembered the swan. She only hoped it was swift.

The first note was so low that Leelo barely heard it. One by one, the others joined in, the mournful dirge echoing in her ears as her own lips formed the notes of the drowning song.

As much as she hated the drownings, feared the poison of the lake and the hunger of the woods around her, she couldn't stop her magic any more than she could stop the changing of the seasons. Once again, she felt that insistent press against her throat: the music and the magic, desperate to be free.

Across the lake, the villagers thrust their hands over their ears and fled like a herd of deer.

Leelo watched the spot where Pieter had disappeared, wondering if his bones would wash up on this shore or the other, if they ever made it out of the water at all. She wondered if his parents were singing, if they had known he'd returned, or if he'd kept the secret from everyone but Isola.

It seemed so unfair, to be first punished by being born without magic, and then again by being forced to leave. But the incantu weren't safe on Endla. Because the islanders would sing again, and those without magic would no sooner be able to resist it than a moth could resist a flame.

Leelo knew then that the only thing worse than her brother leaving would be to find herself here, standing on the lake-shore, singing the drowning song for Tate.