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The Tiger and the Wolf

Written by Adrian Tchaikovsky

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ADRIAN
TCHAIKOVSKY

The Tiger and the Wolf

Echoes of the Fall:
Book One

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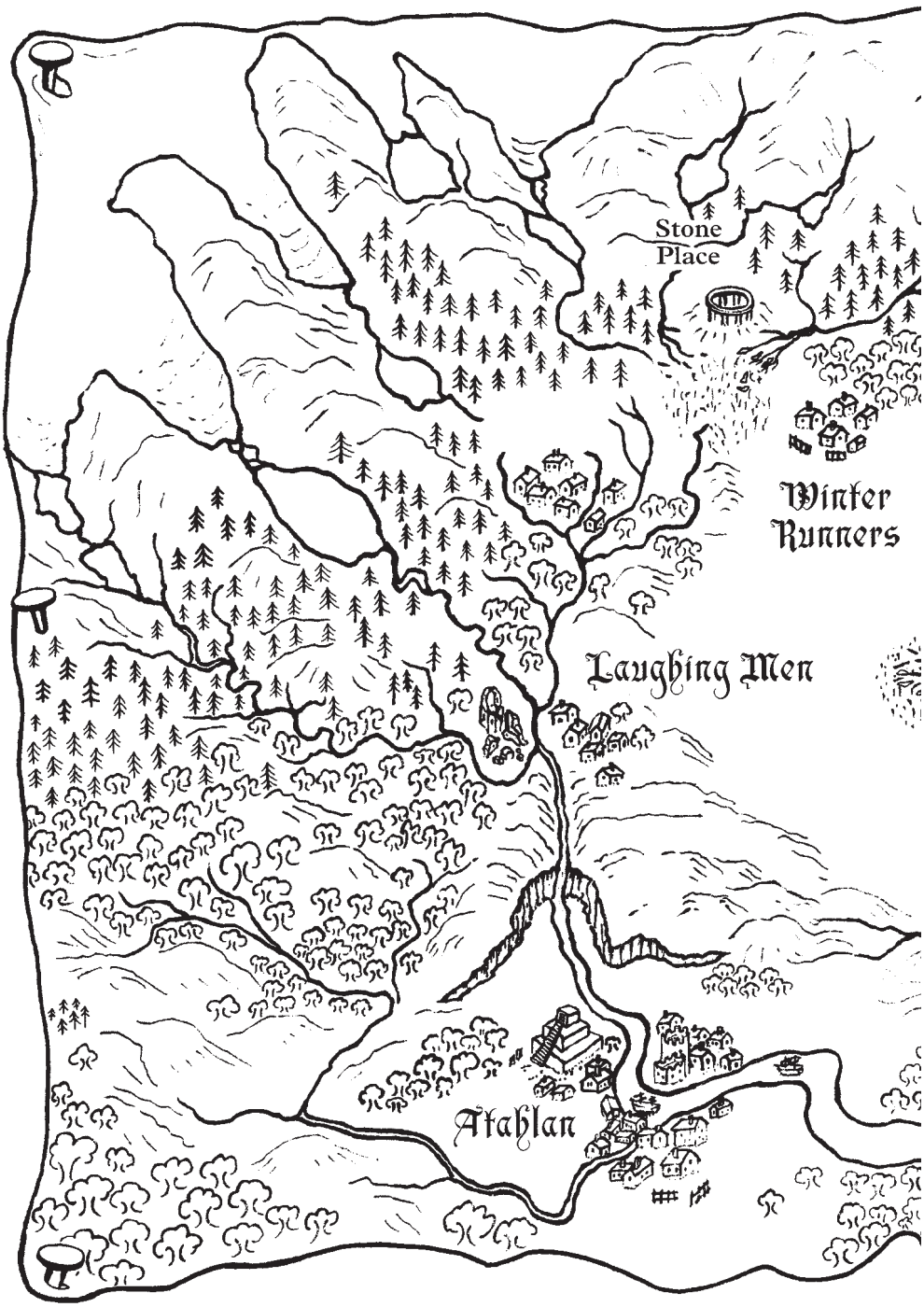
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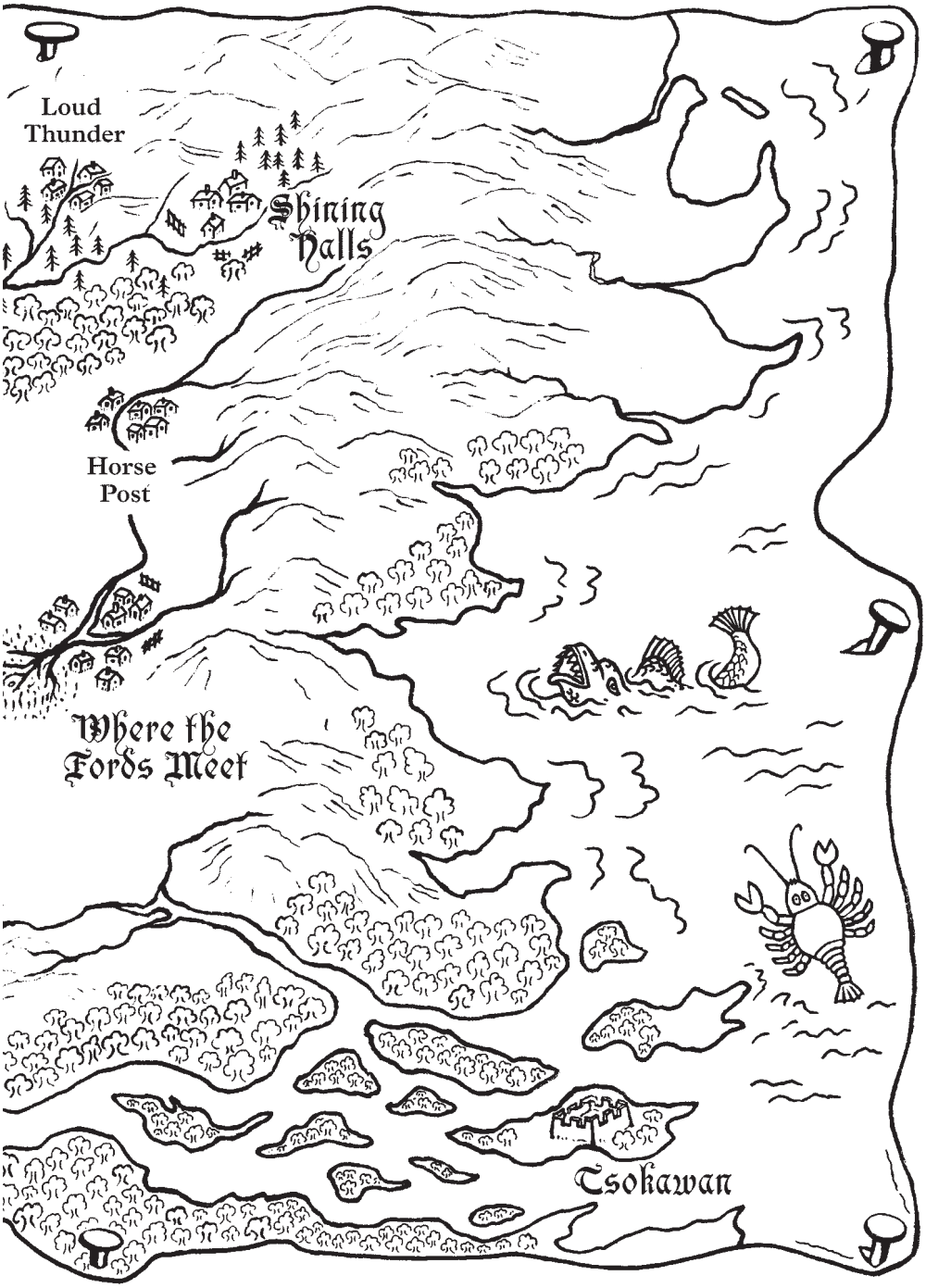
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To Andy and Natasha Madgewick Connell, Dave Huxter, Matthew Ledgerwood and David and Tamsin Moore

And to Christine Czajkowski, the Wilderness Dweller


Stone
Place
Winter
Runners
Laughing Men
Atahlan


Loud
Thunder
Shining
Halls
Horse
Post
Where the
Fords Meet
Tsokawan

The Tiger and the Wolf

1

The sound of the chase confirmed he'd been right: they were heading his way. No doubt the quarry was flagging by now, but still keeping ahead of the pack. Akrit was not as young or swift as he once had been, but strength came in many forms, and raw speed did not decide success in a hunt like this.

A big, broad-shouldered man was Akrit Stone River: weather-beaten skin like old tanned leather and his hair starting to grey. He had led the Winter Runner tribe of the Wolf for twenty years, and each one of those years had made his people stronger, extended their reach, brought more hearths into the Wolf's Shadow. If he showed weakness though, some challenger would step from the pack to face him. On days like this, he knew they were all waiting for it.

Akrit was sure that he could beat any of them if ever that day came. But he was not as sure as he had been five years ago.

If I had a son . . . and that *was* a weakness of his body, even if it was not one that slowed him in either the chase or the fight. If he had a son, then he would be unassailable. *But just a daughter . . . Am I less of a man? A daughter's better than nothing, isn't it?*

He scowled, thinking of that. *A* daughter, maybe. *His* daughter? He recognized little enough of himself in her. The fear that had grown in him, as the girl had grown, was that she was too much her dead mother's child.

There is still time. Aside from the girl's mother he had taken

three wives, but none of them had borne him anything but excuses. This year, perhaps, he would find a fourth. *There must be a woman born within the Jaws of the Wolf who is strong enough to take my seed.*

As he crouched there, listening to the music of the chase, he thought of his daughter's dead mother, the one woman who had been that strong.

I should have kept her. I shouldn't have had her killed like that. But, once she had given him what he wanted, she had become too dangerous. A daughter had seemed ideal: from her a girl would serve his purposes better than a boy, and he had been young then, with plenty of time to sire a few sons to be true heirs. Who could have known that he would get no other issue in all those years since? Just that sullen, close-featured girl.

He could hear a shift in the baying as the chase neared – telling him exactly who had taken the lead, and who had exhausted their strength and fallen back. The quarry was giving them fair sport, that was plain: a good omen. The Wolf appreciated a good run.

Ten years before, Akrit Stone River would himself have been in the pack, keeping a moderate, confident pace, taking his turn to snap at the heels of the stag and then fall back. Nobody would have berated him that he was not at the fore when the quarry was brought to bear.

Now, though . . . now he was ten years older.

He heard the eager throats of his warriors as the quarry started to weary, imagined them coursing, a river of grey bodies between the trees with the stag's heels flashing before them. There was Smiles Without Teeth, Akrit's war leader and a man who would be his most dangerous challenger if he were not so loyal and devoid of ambition. There, too, was Bleeding Arrow's high call, jaws closing on air – no, a hoof delivered to the snout as he got too close. Then Amiyen Shatters Oak was next at the fore, the fiercest of his huntswomen. She was near as old as Akrit but still as strong as ever, and if she had been a man she

would have challenged him long ago. Impossible to take to wife, though, and that was a shame. Surely she would have made a good mother of many sons.

Too fierce to share a tent with, Akrit decided. No pairing could survive the conflicting ambitions of two strong hunters. So it was that Amiyen bore sons for another man, who tended her hearth while she went hunting.

He braced himself, hearing the chase draw near. *All this struggle for a few more moments of life, and still I knew which way you would come*. The land spoke to him, its rises and falls, its skeins of little lakes and streams, its hard ground and its soft, the very pattern of the trees showing him where the quarry would turn, where he would leap, where the pack would turn him aside.

And the Wolf is with me for another year. He ran forward and Stepped onto all fours, his burly human frame flowing into the wolf that was his soul, his second skin. Bones, flesh, clothes and all, turning into the grey hide of the beast. Now he was building up speed, claws catching at the turf, bolting from the undergrowth almost under the hooves of the fleeing stag.

The quarry reared, panicked and turned aside, just as Akrit knew it would. Smiles Without Teeth took the chance to lunge for its haunches, tearing a gash with his claws but failing to catch hold, and the deer was off again, staggering slightly, and Akrit had shouldered his way to the front of the pack, fresh and strong and laughing at them.

They had no words between them, but he heard their thoughts in the snarls and panting as the pack fell in behind him. Smiles Without Teeth was chuckling, Bleeding Arrow was angry at being out-thought – but then out-thinking Bleeding Arrow was no great feat. Amiyen Shatters Oak was pushing herself harder. She wanted to show that if any woman had been allowed to challenge for leadership, then it would have been her.

The joy of the chase, and feeling the pattern of the pack shift to accommodate him, whether they liked it or not, was taking hold of him. Even Bleeding Arrow was moving to his will, falling

out towards the flank to head off the quarry's inevitable questing there, bringing the stag back in line – and now they were forcing the beast into the denser forest, where their own lithe forms would slip more easily between the trees.

A good spread of antlers on that head, Akrit noted approvingly. If the quarry fulfilled his part then this would be a good year, with that fine tribute to place between the jaws of the Wolf. No need for a priest to read omens as fine as that.

One of the many lessons a warrior must learn was held in the great span of those antlers: *Do not let your strength become your weakness*. How proud was the stag of that broad spread of points, how he must have strutted before his women, and yet in the chase they were a weight that slowed him down, an encumbrance constantly in danger of being caught by briars or branches.

Akrit gauged his moment, then spurred himself forwards, snapping at the flanks of the stag, driving him sideways to where Smiles Without Teeth was waiting to rip his fangs across the beast's path. The quarry turned more quickly than Akrit would have expected, but the pack was closing in on him from all sides, offering a set of jaws wherever the stag turned: the only path left was deeper into the forest, to where the trees grew close.

There was a glade there that Akrit knew well, its bracken and moss long fed on old blood. The pack was already spreading, those hunters who had been hanging at the back regaining their strength were now drifting out to the side, and with a swift burst of speed began to move ahead.

The stag burst into the glade, ready to gain some ground over the open space, but the pack was already there before him, and he wheeled, rearing high, those mighty antlers clashing with the trees overhead: brought to bay at last.

The encircling wolves snapped and bared their teeth at one another, excitement running high between them, but they were waiting for Akrit's move. He had them for another year at least.

The stag lowered his antlers, threatening them with those

jagged tines, wheeling round and round, trying to hold all quarters against the grey tide. Akrit waited for his opening, bunching himself to spring. There was still a very real chance of getting this wrong if he was too impatient—

And there went Dirhathli, a boy out on his first hunt, unable to restrain himself, trying to earn a name. The antlers flashed, and the boy yelped and fell back, twisting to lick at his side, and then Stepping entirely from thin wolf to thin boy, holding his wound and crying out in pain. *No hunter's name for you*, Akrit thought sourly. *Or, if you're unlucky, you'll earn such a name as to make you regret this hunt all your life*.

Another two of the pack made abortive lunges at the quarry, more to drive it back to the centre of the glade than to harm it. They were still waiting for Akrit.

Then the quarry Stepped, and a moment later there was just a long-limbed man crouching in the centre of the clearing, one leg bloodied where Smiles Without Teeth had gashed him, his face twisted in fear.

A shudder went through the circling wolves, one of disgust and horror.

'Please,' said the quarry, hands held out in supplication, and Akrit felt a stab of anger, and fear too, for this was surely a bad omen unless he could turn matters around somehow.

He growled deep in his throat and Stepped too, a man amongst wolves, aware of the pack's eyes on him.

'Running Deer, this is no proper tribute. You know how this is done.'

'Please . . .' The man's chest was heaving with the exertion of the chase. 'I can't . . .'

'You know what this price buys your people,' Akrit told him sharply. 'You know what your cowardice will cost them. I give you one chance to face death as you should, Running Deer.'

'No!' the trembling man cried out. 'My name—'

'You are Running Deer from the moment you were chosen as tribute,' Akrit shouted at him, incensed that this wretched

creature should flout the traditions of the hunt. 'Your family I will see torn apart. I shall feast on them myself. Your village shall give its children and women as thralls. I offer you this one last chance to avoid that. You know the rules of tribute.'

But the man – such a proud stag, and yet such a wretched human being – only begged and pleaded, and at last Akrit tired of him.

He gave the signal, and the pack descended. For himself, he would not sully his fangs, and none would blame him for not lowering himself. There would be no trophy of antlers for the Wolf, and no doubt Kalameshli Takes Iron would have dire warnings for the year to come. All of the hunters would have to be cleansed of the dead man's ghost. The entire tribute hunt had become a travesty.

Akrit had an ambivalent relationship with omens. He was quick to make use of them, but well aware that they were a knife with two edges. So far, in his rule of the Winter Runners tribe, he had been able to ride out whatever the fates had in store for him, turning each year's predictions to his advantage. The priest, Kalameshli Takes Iron, was his friend of old and their partnership a long-standing and close one, but a year's forecast of bad omens might change that.

Akrit walked away from the kill, because there was no glory to be found there. He was already trying to think how this day might be seen as anything other than a disaster.

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The people of the Wolf, and those of the Boar and Deer, considered themselves denizens of the middle world. Their dominion was over the wet, cold lands. To the north lay frozen uplands shouldering their way ever northwards until they were eaten by the mountains' glacial tongues. South, the land dried slowly into the vast, temperate plains whose peoples had all the warmth they might desire but of water, other than the river, almost none. If there was yet a south beyond that, known of only from travellers' tales and myth, it failed to skew their sense of centre. They

dwelled in the very heart, the perfect place, the Crown of the World, studded with lakes like gems, and filigreed with silver streams. Theirs was a land of thick woodland that went on forever, of rich but stubborn earth that the winter months froze, but the spring always thawed. A land of vast forests where dwelled the beasts that were their ancestors, their kin, their prey and, after death, their rebirth.

In Maniye's great-great-grandfather's day, the Winter Runner tribe of the Wolf people had been driven from their haunts further north, where they had been forced to snarl over scraps with their brothers the Moon Eaters, and where the Bear came down in the worst of winters and took what it liked, leaving everyone hungry.

The Winter Runners had found a land already sewn tight between Deer and Boar and Tiger, and they had fought their battles, and spread the Shadow of the Wolf wherever they won, and licked their wounds where they had lost. But the time of the Wolf had since been in the ascendant, and more and more they had won, and now that Shadow lay thick across the entire land, and had not lifted in a generation.

Her great-grandfather – Akrit's grandfather – had raised this mound that now stood at a crossroads of others, and what had been uncut forest back then was now speckled with herders' crofts and the huddled villages of the Runners' thralls.

Here was the ancient longhouse of that long-ago great-grandfather – for though the roof was re-turfed each year, and the walls re-daubed, and even the timbers sometimes replaced, still all knew it to be the same house that the old man had raised. As the village was the Shadow of the Winter Runners, so this hall was the Shadow of her father and his forebears. Outside it seemed almost a part of the mound, built right up against the edge so that the slant of its roof might have been a continuation of the steeply sloping bank of earth. Inside, the cavernous space was dark and warm with fire's trapped heat, grand enough for pillars to prop up a floor overhead that created a close,

slant-walled space where food was stored and meat was hung and the rats could not reach.

Maniye claimed just this much of it: a little alcove at one end that she had appropriated and made her own, a cell fit for the child of a chief. In all the dominion of the Wolf, this small space was the Shadow cast by Maniye, Akrit Stone River's daughter. She had beads here, and hangings and furs, all she could manage to haul up to soften the confines of her world. Her favourite part of her lair was an absence, though. In the wattle and daub of the end wall there was a smoke-hole that she had widened to be her lookout on the outer world, a narrow slot in the wall. It gave her a view out towards the forest's dark edge, but surely not an escape. She was small for her age, but her bony shoulders could never have fitted through that space, twist as she might.

And if there were those who said that the wolf shape she might Step into would be such a scrawny thing that it could have wriggled through – well, the drop, down the longhouse's wall and then the almost sheer side of the mound, would surely have broken her bones. Neither wolf nor girl could have made the climb. There could be no possible basis for anyone thinking otherwise.

And yet here came Kalameshli Takes Iron, with his bony face full of suspicion. The scrape and rattle of his robe of bones had tracked his path through the wives' quarters below – the one other man allowed there. She had seen his shadow blot the fire-light, angular and angry even in silhouette, and she shrank back into her tiny bottled kingdom, holding her breath and trying to wish him away.

Her wishes had never had power, and how could they have had power over *him* who was the Wolf's priest and favourite, and who knew the secrets of the forge?

There was a ladder placed at a slant, leading up to her, and she saw his form shift and slide, Stepping onto four fleet feet to scrabble up, then back on two as soon as he had ascended.

There was not quite enough space, even at the highest point beneath the ridge-pole, for him to stand upright.

Still she breathed shallowly and pretended to be elsewhere. There was some magic, she believed, that could cast an echo of her spirit to another place, to send hunters chasing after their tails instead of chasing her. The other girls spoke of such things, part of their arsenal when they sought to deceive parents and meet lovers. If such a thing was possible, Maniye did not know the making of it. Magic was not something Akrit Stone River's daughter was fit for.

He was hidden from her by the hanging meat and switches of herbs, but she felt him Step again, abruptly, no longer a man in a robe of bones, but a lean, grey wolf, scarred and cunning. She heard him sniff, finding her out by her traitor scent, despite all the clamour of chicory and feverfew. He padded forwards, eyes glinting in the dim light, and when he Stepped back to the shape of an old man, he was standing before her as she huddled beneath her makeshift window.

'Your peers are all at their practice.' He pronounced each word precisely, as though he was worried about spitting a few more loose teeth out if he spoke too hastily. 'They fight, they run, they jump, they Step. But not you.'

Kalameshli was still strong enough to wrench her arm or slap her, and he had free rein to do so. She backed away as he stalked to the window. The sun caught the thousands of tiny bones sewn into the hide of his robe, playing over the intricate patterns. Standing there, he made the place his, took the sun from her. 'Not you, no: here you are. Why is this, I wonder?'

'Perhaps it's because they hate me,' she told him flatly.

'And holding yourself aloof from them will win their love, then? Will it so?'

'Then perhaps I don't need their love.' Bold words, she knew, for a girl who was working her shoulder blades into the wall to get further from him.

'*Wrong!*' he snapped, and she flinched away from his tone. 'If

the pack despises you, you will *die*. Or do you fancy yourself a lone wolf. Perhaps you would walk in the footsteps of Broken Axe, hmm? You'd like that, would you?'

He knew that there was one man she feared more than himself or her father: Broken Axe, who had killed her mother. Her father had ordered it done, and Kalameshli had begged the blessing of the Wolf, but Axe's hands bore the blood and everyone knew it.

'What will they dare do to me, to Stone River's daughter?' she hissed, although her voice shook.

When his face swung towards her, away from the window's view, she knew he had been waiting for those words.

'If you are to be Stone River's daughter, you must be within the Jaws of the Wolf. Or you are *nothing*. Or you will be *meat*, and perhaps it will be Broken Axe following *your* footsteps. You must be of the Wolf or nobody will *care* whose get you are.' His spitting anger, like storm clouds from a clear sky, was no surprise to her. It lurked beneath his cold surface always, and most especially when he spoke to Maniye.

She did not answer. In those flashpoints of temper any words of hers would be provocation, but his rage came and went as swift as hunting, and now he was calm again.

'Some of the hunters said that they found tiger tracks near our walls,' he remarked.

She held herself very still, waiting.

He was looking out of the smoke-hole again – no, he was examining the edges, with hands and with eyes, seeking for scratches and marks. 'I told them there are no tigers here any more, and that I wanted to hear no more of it. But I went to see for myself. They looked very like tiger tracks to me.'

'You should set traps then,' she told him.

His hard features turned towards her again. 'They were very small tracks.'

'Then set very small traps.' She knew her expression admitted to nothing.

For a long time he stood there, half lit by the window, trying to force his way past her guard. She had been working on that innocent face of hers since she was five years old. She had learned quickly that anything the world discovered about what she thought or felt was a knife at her throat.

At last, Kalameshli Takes Iron sighed and turned away, before creaking his way back down the steps in a shiver of bones.

Wherever the people of the Wolf claimed as their home, they raised their mounds, whether it was a low heap of soil that bore some shepherd's croft, or the vast steep-sided hills that marked their villages in those places where they had grown powerful.

The Winter Runners were one of many tribes, not yet the greatest but far from the least. Their village was a loose scattering of artificial mounds that dominated the surrounding landscape. If those hills marked your horizon, then you stood within the shadow of the Winter Runners and were subject to their law.

Maniye slunk sullenly from the longhouse of her father, doing her best to avoid all eyes. She was a small, strange child, friendless and different. It was a difference as deep within her as her bones. The other children had sensed it from an early age, as though they had the noses of wolves even then.

She skulked down the paths running between the mounds. Each hill that reared above her bore the dwellings of a family, their store-houses and their workshops, timber-frame and mud wall and heavy peat-clad roofs whose eaves slanted down to the heaped earth. On another reared the effigy of the Wolf, into whose burning jaws Kalameshli sent offerings, and the windowless longhouse that was the temple, its walls made with heavy stone because of the rituals of fire and hammer Kalameshli enacted there. The temple and her father's house claimed the two highest mounds. They were the twin seats of a power that reached out through the dark between the trees to all the tributary villages Akrit had brought within the curtilage of his influence:

the Winter Runners' contribution to the greater domain they called the Shadow of the Wolf.

The temple's grand mound also held the training ground where the hunters would cast their spears and loose their arrows, and the growing young would practise Stepping until they could pass fluidly from man to wolf and back to man as swift as breathing. Maniye did not want to think of the training ground. The Testing was coming and, just as Kalameshli had reminded her, her fellows were up there already, in their exclusive camaraderie, practising at being wolves.

There were seventeen others from the Winter Runners due to be Tested alongside her, and it was supposed to be something of a celebration, something of a game, something of a chance for the elders of the Wolf to laugh at the inadequacies of the young. Nobody *failed* the Testing. That was a point of faith.

Except that Kalameshli Takes Iron did not seem to have that faith, and he should have been an expert on the subject. Kalameshli had dogged Maniye's steps these last two moons and croaked out his warnings, like ravens circling overhead. At first she had thought it was just his cold dislike of her: that constant pushing and needling, the disapproval, the disdain. That was her due from the priest, so why should it be any different over the Testing?

But of course, Kalameshli and his priests oversaw the Tests. She had not thought of it that way until recently, but each Testing was set by the priests of the Wolf, and so Kalameshli could make them as hard or as easy as he wished.

She understood now that he had been biding his time, through years of loathing her and taunting her, until now when she would fall briefly, but totally, under his power.

Nobody ever failed the Tests, but everyone knew what would happen to someone who did. Exile, or worse – torn apart by the pack or even given as an offering to the Wolf. It was the common stock-in-trade of her peers' conversations, each outdoing the last with their lurid stories.

Even if those going into the Testing did not believe they could fail, none wanted to look a fool before the Wolf and the Wolf's people. As the priest said, they had been practising all this last month, a motley mob of them charging around the circuit of the training ground, under every eave and between every hall, a constant annoyance for their elders and yet a source of fondness too. All the adults remembered their own Testing; a little rowdiness could be forgiven.

Maniye trained also, but alone and out of sight. She avoided the other youths, who mocked her and whom she despised in turn, with not a hand's span of common ground between them. Her own training took place after dark or in secluded corners, or even in the forest looming beyond the fields: forbidden places, abandoned times, where she would not be spied on. But all of it would be for nothing when Kalameshli gave her an impossible challenge, set her a course nobody could have run. If she was lucky he would merely humiliate her, earn her another beating from her father. Otherwise . . .

There was a herder's hut that lay unused at the foot of the mound. Come winter, the sheep would shelter there along with their guardians, but in these last days of fall she could creep there unseen and practise. Rat bones were piled like brittle sticks in the corners, older than the spring and with no sign of living descendants for her to hunt and take as minuscule trophies. She ranged the ten feet of dark space enclosed between the walls, no room to run and nobody to fight. Instead she practised her Stepping, mastering this uncertain new instinct that had only come to her during this last year.

Essential, for this, that there were no eyes there to see her, for she faced challenges the others did not.

No, I have gifts the others lack, that is the truth of it, she told herself over and over. Yet every time she hid those *gifts*, because she knew they would see her denounced, she believed a little more that they were nothing but a curse.

After she had bored herself with that, she sat and brooded,

inventing dire fates for Kalameshli and Broken Axe and her father – and anyone else who crossed her mind – until she was jolted from her dark reverie by the sound of a horn.

They're back. For her father and his picked band of hunters had been off after tribute from the White Tails. She had been given a few blessed days when the only chain about her neck was old Kalameshli's, and now she would be loaded with Akrit Stone River's disapproval as well.

But she was out of her hole before the echo had died away, to watch them return. There would be omens, after all. Kalameshli would want to see the trophy that he would offer to the Wolf. The course of the next year would thus be decided.

She felt badly in need of omens.

The hunters would be returning down the northern approach. The Wolves built no roads, and yet the arrangement of the smaller mounds about the chief's own formed a rough cross, guided by alignments of the stars and the wisdom of the priests. If she hid herself in the narrow, earth-smelling gap left between this hut's sagging roof and the ground, she could watch the hunters return, and even hear what they said. Let her fellows run and fight and chase each other about like chickens.

Perhaps the old priest already had a presentiment that all was not as it should be, for he was coming down from the hill, descending the earthen ramp with care. 'Stone River, the Wolf runs beside you,' Kalameshli called out, but Maniye could hear the concern in his voice, his words almost a question.

Akrit Stone River was at the head of the pack, and Maniye felt that emptiness in her chest that she had grown used to when looking on her father. There was no love in her for him, any more than there was any in his breast for her. And yet, and yet . . . despite every blow and curse and frown, still that gap persisted, the hollow space where she was wretchedly aware *something* should dwell. *I cannot love my father*, she told herself almost every day, and yet, and yet . . .

Akrit picked up his pace and drew ahead of the others, loping over to the old man's side.

'Where is the trophy?' Maniye heard Kalameshli hiss. None of the hunters was bearing the antlers of a kill.

'The quarry was a coward in the end,' Akrit rumbled. 'Their greatest warrior? Either the White Tails are sick to death or they hold out on us. Whichever, they're due a reminder of whose Shadow they dwell in.'

'But . . .' She could imagine the priest's face suddenly gripped with alarm. 'No trophy . . . the omens.' A pause. 'Or something else to burn in the Wolf's jaws?'

Maniye went cold all of a sudden, the priest's fear and ire no longer a cause for amusement. *The Tests* . . . Had Kalameshli foreseen this? Had the Wolf whispered to him that a sacrifice would be needed from within the pack? Or had he already decided that she was *not* of the pack, after all?

'Oh, we have something more than that,' her father declared, sounding too jovial for a man who had come back from the hunt empty-handed. 'Smiles, show Kalameshli Takes Iron what we found creeping through the Wolf's Shadow.'

Smiles Without Teeth, her father's keenest bully-boy, shouldered forwards, dragging a stranger in his wake.

Maniye stared: she had never seen the like. The captive was older than Kalameshli, and completely bald, his neck scrawny as a turkey's, his limbs thin like sticks. He had a hooked nose and deep-set eyes, and if only he had been dressed for it, and walking free, she thought he would look like a sorcerer should. His robe was ragged and patched, though, and his skin was dirty, and beneath that so pale it seemed almost translucent. Shifting forwards, she could see the veins in his forehead, above the mottled blue-black bruise someone had given him. His hands were tied behind him and, of course, a knotted rope was about his neck.

'What do we have here, do you think?' Kalameshli asked thoughtfully.

‘Snake,’ Akrit spat. ‘A Snake that dares the Wolf. Well, you’ve found the Wolf now, Snake. You’ve found his very den.’

The wretched old man bared his teeth – and Maniye was disappointed to see that they were just teeth, after all, and not the hollow fangs of his namesake. ‘You do not dare raise a hand against a priest!’ he hissed. ‘Ill fortune will dog you all to your graves!’

Some of the hunters were hanging back – everyone knew that to harm a priest was to invite disaster – but Smiles Without Teeth slapped the man across the back of his bald head and drove him to his knees.

‘We’ve seen your kind before, up from the south,’ Akrit snarled. ‘All Snakes say they’re priests, every one. It can’t be *all*, so none of you are. But you are come just in time for the Wolf, old man. You are very welcome by the Wolf. Until we found you, I feared his jaws would go empty. Now your thin carcass shall roast within them. How will the Wolf like that, Takes Iron?’

Kalameshli considered the scrawny old man thoughtfully. ‘He shall like it very well, I feel. It is right that the Wolf should devour the Snake’s get, wherever he shall find them.’

The captive hissed suddenly, driving most of the hunters a step or two back. ‘If you do not release me, I shall lay the Serpent’s Curse on you all! I shall have your crops wither in the fields, your children in their mothers’ wombs. There shall be no strike of misfortune under your Shadow but you shall see my hand in it!’

‘Gag him!’ Akrit snapped, and Smiles gripped the old man’s jaw, forcing it shut, and then shook him when he still wouldn’t be silent.

‘Something more, I think,’ Kalameshli decided, businesslike now. ‘The venom of the Snake is legendary, but it cannot bite if it has no fangs. Bring him to the forge and I shall fetch my smallest hammer.’

The captive’s eyes widened in alarm, but Smiles Without Teeth was already wrestling him towards Kalameshli’s domain,

where the magic of iron was made, while hunters went whooping off ahead of him to call for the priest's tools.

Maniye watched them go, finding that she did not share their enthusiasm. The old man had been weak and thin, it was true, but he had been something new just for a moment. He had been her own omen, promising change in the year to come, a reversal of her fortunes. Now they would destroy him, as they destroyed everything, and so everything would go on just the same.

She did not want to watch, and returned to her hidden hole as the shrieks and screams started, Kalameshli Takes Iron methodically smashing out every remaining tooth in the old Snake's head. *Because what is a Snake without fangs?*

But one thought would not leave her. Her people – or those truly of her people – were born in the Jaws of the Wolf, they said. It was to prove this birthright that the Testing happened. The Eyriemen were born under the Wings of the Hawk, and the children of the Boar between his Tusks. So it went that each of the People had their sign and their badge that marked them out as who they were.

But nobody ever spoke of the Jaws of the Snake. Kalameshli had made a mistake, she realized, and the very thought of it sent a shock of hope through her. *In the Coils of the Snake, that is the saying. Better break all his bones, priest, or you may find he does not go quite so easily to his death.*

2

There were many wolves in Maniye's world. Out beyond the extent of mound and field, the lean grey beasts, her mute kin, coursed between the trees. They hunted and bred, and everyone she knew would one day go to join them, just as, in time, their spirits would be reborn to human mothers of the Wolf tribes. They were kin and yet they were the enemy, too. They raided the herds and they culled the weak, devoted to making the lives of men harder, so that the people themselves became harder, fiercer, swifter. That was the way of the world, and that was the way of the Wolf. Maniye could not help feeling a jab of pride at knowing that her father's kin ruled the Crown of the World almost undisputed, while the people of the Deer and Boar paid tribute.

There was also the wolf that ran in the sky, he who had slunk into the night above at the start of fall, lean and hungry and written in stars. He was chasing the herds out of the heavens, and soon he would hunt the cold winter skies, prowling above his people each night until he sniffed out the approaching spring and brought back life to the growing earth, laying it at their feet like a trophy.

Then there was Wolf whose people she was born to: Winter Runner, Moon Eater, Many Mouths and the other tribes within the Jaws of the Wolf, who were masters of the world. Wolf was a harsh god, but no harsher than life itself. He pushed his people,