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Mother's Bed: Gender Representation in Children's Literature

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Mother's Bed

Gender Representation in Children's Literature

A senior project submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Bachelor of Arts in Humanities and Cultural Studies

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Abstract

This children's book and accompanying research paper both address gender inequity in children's literature. There is a significant imbalance of gender representation in children's literature, with the number of central male characters almost doubling that of central female characters. Additionally, the roles of males and females still tend to be stereotypical: boys are action-oriented and heroic, while girls are nurturing and passive. Further, it is believed that boys will only enjoy books about boys, while girls will enjoy books about both boys and girls. This imbalance in children's literature hurts both genders. Children not only learn to read from books, but they also learn about the society in which they live, how they are expected to act, and how they should perceive others from them. My research includes studying books and articles about children's literature and the importance of representation in books, as well as reading several children's books for both patterns of gender representation and for inspiration. As a result of my research, I have written a children's book with a female protagonist that includes well-rounded characters that reach beyond stereotypes and that appeal to all children, regardless of gender.

Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	5
II.	Mother's Bed: A Children's Story.....	13
III.	Work's Cited.....	44

Introduction

Although I am a mother of two and regularly read children's books, it took an article posted on Facebook from *The Guardian* entitled "Study finds huge gender imbalance in children's literature" to alert me to the fact that male characters outweigh female characters in children's literature by a factor of nearly two to one. Further, The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media has conducted extensive research on the presence of females in television and movies as directors, writers, and characters. The statistics are dismal. In top-rated family films, boy characters outnumber girl characters three to one. Even in films for the very young, girls regularly dress more provocatively than boys and have much more exaggerated body characteristics. As in books, professional roles are greatly skewed with nearly four times as many men having high-powered jobs (Gender in Media).

I started to more carefully analyze the books I read to my children, as well as those that they chose to read by themselves. As Dr. Frank Taylor, a professor of sociology at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, wrote in his article "Content Analysis And Gender Stereotypes In Children's Books" in the 2003 *Teaching Sociology* journal: "If language does shape and condition our perceptions of reality, then parents who desire equality for their daughters or egalitarianism for their sons ought to look more closely at what their children are reading" (9). I wondered what message the relative absence of females in books and media conveys to our children. Further, what effect does the prevalence of stereotypically-defined actions, personalities, and careers have on their notions of themselves, their expected behaviors, and their possibilities in the world? In his book *Should We Burn Babar?: Essays on Children's Literature*

and the Power of Stories, Herbert Kohl, who is an educator known for his writing about the politics of education in America, points out that

[w]hat is read to children not only leaves an impression behind but also influences the values, and shapes the dreams, of children. It can provide negative images and stereotypes and cut off hopes and limit aspirations. It can erode self-respect through overt and covert racism and sexism. It can also help young people get beyond family troubles, neighborhood violence, stereotyping, and prejudice. (61)

The obvious need for children's literature with a greater diversity and number of female characters led me to write my own children's story, *Mother's Bed*, which not only contains a greater breadth of female characters, but which will appeal to children of both genders.

Ambika Gopalakrishnan, a professor at California State University Los Angeles specializing in literature, teaching methods, early childhood, and reading programs, wrote the book *Multicultural Children's Issues: a Critical Issues Approach*, designed as a guide for kindergarten through twelfth grade teachers to look at books through the lens of the critical issues of our times. According to Gopalakrishnan, children need multicultural literature "about groups who have been previously underrepresented and often marginalized by society as a whole" that "validates these groups' experiences, including those occurring because of differences in language, race, gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and sexual orientation" (33).

Despite the fact that the female population is approximately equal to that of males, "it is still true that most of the children's trade books published today still have boys as their protagonists, doing all the exciting things" (Gopalakrishnan 103). Clearly, there exists a great need for children's literature that truly represents both the actual number and variety of interests that women and girls have.

Dr. Frank Taylor's *Teaching Sociology* journal article details the analysis and exercises he conducted with his students to identify gender stereotypes in children's books. Although his students initially did not believe this to be a useful exercise, Taylor argues that "as children learn how to read, they are exposed to the cultural symbols contained in books. Given the assumption that language shapes and conditions reality, then it might be useful to ask what children might be learning about gender when they learn how to read" (9). Although his students resisted the notion of gender bias in children's literature, they found, as did countless other studies, that boy characters tend to be action-oriented, while girl characters are more passive. Boys are aggressive and do not show emotion. Girls need help from boys in order to accomplish their goals. Women are portrayed in domestic roles, while men are in more money-earning roles.

Taylor found that most students believed they were reading too much into these books, and their findings were not that important. To this, Taylor points out that "children are just beginning to acquire self and personality at the very time they are reading these books. In other words, they are beginning to learn how to organize their behavior along the patriarchal, gendered codes embedded in such books" (9). Taylor also points out that the gender attitudes found in the books do not exist in a vacuum, but "are also embedded in children's toys, the mass media, and even clothing" (9), and it is, therefore, important to recognize that books are only one of many places that the patriarchal patterns emerge.

It is generally believed that boys will only read books about boys, while girls would read books about both boys and girls. Masha Rudman points out in her book *Children's Literature: An Issues Approach* that publishers of children's books contend that it is mostly boys who are struggling with reading and that boys should have books that appeal to them.

They have not been as concerned with girls because they have subscribed to the belief that girls will read anything but that boys stay away from stories that have girls as main characters...Some boys have been taught to be embarrassed if they enjoy fairy tales and stories with emotional relationship. (105)

I noticed my own belief in this regard--I expected my daughter to enjoy just about any book, but felt bad when she would pick a book about fairies or a group of girls when we were reading a book with my son. However, according to Rudman, in reality, "although girls may read a greater variety of books, boys enjoy books that have active female characters.....All readers relate to heroes, male and female, who are well balanced in their action and inventiveness" (105-6).

I felt it was very important for me to write a book that has a central female character, but that would appeal to a boy who has been inundated with the message that he should not be interested in anything to do with girls. It is important for all children to see both genders portrayed accurately and in a diverse manner. I did not want to just have girls feel empowered, but for boys to see that girls, too, are strong and active. It is also important for people to see men who are not just action-oriented, but who have a variety of interests and feelings, but that is beyond the scope of this project.

I returned to the *Harry Potter* series, by JK Rowling, since Hermione is such a strong female character. She is the brains in the trio of Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and she is a well-rounded character. There is also a diversity of female characters, with the shrewd Professor McGonagall, the kooky but surprisingly wise Luna Lovegood, and the evil Bellatrix LeStrange. However, although written by a woman, the main character is a boy, as are almost every one of its central characters: Harry, Voldemort, Dumbledore, Ron, and Snape. The females, although there and strong, are still highly underrepresented.

I read *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle because its main character, Meg, is female. She is brave and travels through time and space to save her father, and eventually her brother. Her mother is a scientist who works in a lab in their home. These, I felt, were both positive portrayals of females. However, again, Meg has two male companions: her brother George Wallace, and a school-mate, Calvin. She has no female friends. While both her parents are scientists, her father is the one off traveling through space and time for work while their mother stays at home. I wondered if the two male companions were there to make a book centered around a female character palatable to boys.

My children and I had been reading the *How to Train Your Dragon* series by Cressida Cowell. Although written by a woman, the story is dominated by boys and men. Hiccup, a young male Viking who is heir to the chief of his tribe, is the central character, and all the other Vikings in his training program are also boys. His mother, Valhalarama, is mentioned in passing as a hero who is always gone on quests, but she does not show up in person until the tenth book, *How to Seize a Dragon's Jewel*. No other women seem to exist in his tribe. There is also a single all-female tribe, the Bog-Burglars, who are mentioned and deemed as fierce warriors and burglars, but again, are only peripheral to the story. A central female character, Camicazi, finally appears in the third book, *How to Speak Dragonese*. She, again, is portrayed as clever and a good warrior, but is a side-kick to Hiccup and his best friend, Fishlegs, and gets very little time in the story.

I started thinking about Camicazi, who is the heir to the chief to the Bog-Burglar tribe. Whenever she compliments Hiccup, whether it is for his swordplay or for his clever plans, she always qualifies it with "for a boy." She is a Viking, a great sword-fighter, and an expert thief--a girl who might very well appeal to a male audience. I began to wonder what would happen if I wrote a story from Camicazi's perspective, with the bulk of the story centering around the all-

female Bog-Burglar tribe. What if I flipped all of the stereotypically female traits for male traits and vice versa? Then, I read a graphic novel, *Princeless*, by Jeremy Whitley, that did just that. The princess is strong, while the princes and men are meek, and she is saving everyone. It felt very heavy-handed and alienating. Both my son and daughter hated it. I did not want to ostracize anyone, nor did I want it to be too contrived. As Gopalakrishnan points out: "It can cause a problem when books try too hard, meaning when stories depict the opposites of the stereotyped gender roles in hard-to-believe ways or are edifying in presentation" (105).

In reading these books, I noticed some general themes. The main characters always start as outcasts, deemed unworthy and reviled by most, but really are "chosen ones" with some special characteristics that make them heroic. Harry Potter lives with his non-magic family, who hate him and lock him in a cupboard under the stairs. He does not know that he is magic or special, yet he is destined to beat the dark lord, Voldemort. Meg, from *A Wrinkle in Time*, is generally deemed to be quite dumb, but she has an advanced way of thinking that other people do not understand and actually makes her brilliant. Hiccup is a runt and an intellectual, failing miserably at almost everything at which Vikings are supposed to excel, yet he is secretly destined to be a great hero who unifies the Viking tribes. It seems that this makes the characters more relatable to the readers—probably all of whom feel that they do not quite fit in in some way—and gives them hope that they, too, are somehow special.

Another thing that holds true in all three of these stories is that there is a trio of people: two boys and one girl. In the case of *A Wrinkle In Time*, I could not help but feel that this is to make a book centralized around a female character more palatable to boys. I wondered, too, if Rowling and Cowell use the trio as a way to slip a main female character into their books, while still appealing to a male audience. Given that Rowling was told by her publisher, Barry Cunningham,

to use her initials rather than her first name, Joanne, because “young boys might be wary of a book written by a woman” (“J.K.Rowling: Pen Name”), it seems likely that authors are also led to believe that boys will not read books with girls as central characters. Despite the fact that all these books are written by women, the vast majority of the characters—particularly the central ones—are still male.

That is not to say that these books are bad or without value. I, personally, enjoy them each immensely, and they each have something to offer. L’Engle shows the brilliance and sensitivity of individuals deemed dumb and useless by their own community. Cowell champions the intellect and compassion over brute force, and every single one of her female characters—though sparsely presented—is a fierce warrior. Rowling, in particular, includes a great breadth of female characters and cleverly addresses issues that children face daily, such as racism, classism, and bullying. The problem is not that these books feature so many more central male characters; the problem is that there are not enough books where the majority of the central characters are female, whether protagonist or antagonist.

With children's literature being such a powerful tool in today's classrooms, libraries, and homes, how gender is portrayed in children's books can contribute to the image children develop of their own role and that of their gender in society. What they read about and see in illustrations has a strong impact on their own identity if they are not exposed to varying portrayals. (Gopalakrishnan 104)

We need more books that “give children a way to validate their feelings and experiences, to create understanding, empathy, and tolerance; to break debilitating stereotypes; to give equal voice and representation” (Gopalakrishnan 34). We need more females in books, and we need a greater variety of character traits for both genders. Kohl believes that “we owe our children

radical stories... if only to show them that there are options for collective action to oppose and eliminate oppression and exploitations in all of their manifestations” (65-6).

I took all of this into consideration in writing my story, *Mother's Bed*. Still inspired by Camicazi's character from Cowell's books, I decided to center my story around Eira, the future chief of an all-female tribe. She has a pet dragon and excels at metal forging and sword-fighting, yet she is contemplative and feels she must hide her solitary nature from her community-oriented tribe. The male tribe are outcasts and believed to be deceitful and meek. However, Eira befriends an outcast and discovers that this belief has been based on misunderstandings and lies, and she attempts to unite the two tribes. Every element of the story I chose on purpose. I made almost all the characters in the book female because females need more representation in books. I chose to have the men be outcasts because I wanted to flip the narrative. However, I did not want to be trite and completely switch roles, thereby ostracizing both genders, as I found in *Princessless*. I wanted to show that prejudices that we have about others are usually predicated on falsities. Although my story is centered around a single person, I wanted to include one of Kohl's requirements for radical literature: "Dreams of personal liberation are important, but moral consistency, self-respect, and healthy communal life imply more than personal liberation. They demand commitment to larger struggles to eliminate victimization" (63). In the end, I did not want the story to be about female liberation or even about females at all, but to use an underrepresented group to show a universal truth: everybody needs to be represented and to have his or her story told.

Mother's Bed: A Children's Story

1

"Eira, are you coming with us?" Hillevi asked, with Tove and Iona giggling behind her.

"Where are you going?" asked Eira.

"Weren't you listening? We are going down to the sea to practice fighting with our new swords."

"I *am* anxious to try out my new sword..."

"Come on, Eira, it will be fun! That sword you forged is gorgeous. I love the inlay, and the blade looks mighty sharp. Aren't you dying to try it out?"

"I am, but... maybe next time."

"Have it your way," Hillevi responded, as she turned around and walked off toward the sea with Tove and Iona.

Eira watched them leave, her new sword heavy in her hand. She ran her hands along the inlay on the hilt, relishing the feeling the pattern made on her fingers. She lifted and swung. The weight and length were perfectly balanced for her. She smiled to herself, sheathed her sword, and turned in the opposite direction from the three girls.

Eira walked along the path leading to her house, greeting the members of her tribe she met along the way. Her house was at the very edge of the village, backing up against a grove. It looked much like every other house in the village except for the tribal emblem above the door, signifying that it was the chief's--her mother's--home. Eira opened the gate, walked up the stone path, walked in the front door, and set down her things.

"Hey, girl! Where are you? I'm home!" she called out.

A happy snort and a poof of smoke came out of her bedroom, followed quickly by a dragon that was roughly the size of a macaw. The dragon's scales shimmered, varying in color from a vibrant emerald green to a deep silver, depending on how the light caught them. The dragon perched on Eira's shoulder and butted her head into Eira's cheek. Eira laughed and scratched her behind her ear.

"Are you ready to go, Gyda?" Eira asked.

Gyda flapped her wings and headed toward the back door. Eira followed. Upon exiting the house, Eira stopped, looking cautiously left and right. Satisfied that nobody was watching, she started on the path that led into the grove with Gyda flying overhead.

Once they were amongst the trees, Eira breathed more deeply. The dampness of the leaves and bark soothed her. When the forest opened out into a meadow, Eira ran with her arms out, twirling and grazing the tops of the grass and flowers with her fingers, creating a sea of green, yellow, and purple. Dizzy, she lay down in the grass briefly to gaze up at the clouds and enjoy the scent of nature. Soon they would be at Mother's Bed: Eira's sanctuary.

After a few minutes, Gyda landed on Eira's belly, nuzzled her chin with her head, and snorted. Eira scratched Gyda in her favorite spot--right where her wing met her body--and Gyda cooed.

"Come on, let's go," she said, as she scooped Gyda up onto her shoulder and stood up.

As they edged closer to Mother's Bed, the air became thick with silence. It wasn't just a regular quiet, but a deep stillness that permeated Eira's being. She relished this feeling and felt her heart fill with joy at being there. Mother's Bed, as she called it, reminded her of just that--the feeling of safety, nurturance, and love that a baby gets when snuggling in her mother's bed.

Eira went to Mother's Bed whenever she wanted to be alone. She went there when she was feeling sad or confused and needed space to hear her own heart. Just as often, she went there when she was happy. She had been going to Mother's Bed for as long as she could remember, and for as long as she could remember, she had never seen another person there. It was her own special place, and she was not sure if anybody else even knew about it. She never asked for fear that others might want to join her, and she relished her solitude there. For whatever reason, she felt less lonely by herself at Mother's Bed than she did in her daily life around other people.

Mother's Bed was a deep lake surrounded by tall trees. There was a path all the way around it that climbed up and dropped down as it became farther away from or nearer the water. Sometimes, she would walk along the path, studying the butterflies, birds, and slugs that lived there. She enjoyed the different views the path afforded her as she walked up and down along it. Other times, she simply sat on her favorite rock next to the lake and contemplated its beauty. When it was warm, she would swim in the lake. Floating in the tepid water, she felt embraced by it, as if back in her mother's womb.

On this day, it was too cold for Eira to swim, but the cold never stopped Gyda, who nosedived into the water, soared back out of it with a fish in her mouth, then glided low over the lake, making miniature waves with the tips of her wings.

While Gyda played in the water, Eira found a flat patch of dirt, softened by fallen leaves, and lay down once again with her hands behind her head to study the clouds. The constant murmur of the croaking frogs and the buzzing insects quieted her mind. Gradually, the light intensified, diffusing everything with its brightness. Eira felt as if she were beginning to dissolve into her surroundings. A mist rose from the lake and called to her "*Eira... Eira... it is time.*" She felt a warm dampness on her cheek.

"Gyda, stop licking me!"

Turning her head back and forth to try to get Gyda to stop, Eira slowly opened her eyes.

"Oh, no! It's getting dark already. We better get home before Mother starts to wonder where we are."

She hopped up, quickly brushed the leaves off, and ran home. When she arrived, Eira quietly tiptoed around to the front of her house, not wanting her mother to know from which direction she had come.

"Eira, you're home! Come, come, it's time for dinner."

Eira went over to her mother and kissed her on her cheek, then sat down at the dining table to eat.

"What have you been up to? Have you been out practicing with your new sword? The blacksmith told me it was a real beauty."

"Yes, Mother. I have been out practicing."

"Good. It is important for the chief to be a strong swordfighter. Can I get a look at it?"

Eira pulled her sword out of its sheath and handed it to her mother. Her mother stood up from the table and twirled the sword in her right hand, then threw it back and forth between her two hands before stopping to run her finger along the blade and inspect the inlay.

"This is a nicely balanced sword, Eira, and impressive inlay. This is definitely much better than I did at your age. You have a real gift."

"Thanks, Mother."

She handed the sword back to Eira and sat down to eat. Her plate was already piled with a large piece of haddock and a mound of cabbage. As Eira served herself, her mother slathered butter on her barley bread and began to eat.

"How are your other subjects going?" her mother asked while still chewing. "Are you still bored learning about history? Tribal history is very important for an effective leader to know."

"Yes, Mother. I am trying to find it interesting. I prefer forging metal and fighting, however."

Her mother laughed.

"Yes, Eira, weaponry is fun. But remember, we are a peaceful people. We learn to fight and make swords to protect ourselves, hoping we will never actually have to hurt another being."

"I know, Mother. I don't want to hurt people. When I am forging metal or sword fighting, I just feel so..."

"Balanced and whole?"

Eira looked up at her mother, shocked that she knew how she felt.

"I always felt the same way. However, it is also essential to know our history to carry on our ways. Being a good leader means knowing your people, both living and dead."

"Yes, mother."

"Now, eat your food! I have to go back out after dinner. Hilde is having some trouble with her sheep again."

She winked at Eira and turned her focus to her meal.

2

The next day, Eira made sure to sit in the back of class so she could slip out the moment school ended without having to talk to anyone. There were only so many days in a row she could make excuses not to hang out with her friends, and she was feeling a particular need to be alone this afternoon. She wasn't exactly sure why—maybe it was the talk she had with her mother the

night before. Being reminded that she was to be the leader of their tribe one day always made her anxious. How could she ever be good enough? She wasn't even sure she really liked being around people, let alone leading them.

Gyda was already waiting for her at the back door of the house when she arrived. Gyda always seemed to know how she was feeling. Together, they set off once again towards Mother's Bed.

Eira decided to walk on the path around Mother's Bed. She thought the movement would help relieve her anxiety. Along the path, she spotted a bright orange flower she had never seen before. She stooped to examine it. She breathed it in and noticed it had a mild honey smell. When she stood back up, she found herself face-to-face with a complete stranger.

She drew her sword and pointed it at his neck.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I...er...."

She started walking toward him, pushing him back, until he finally pulled out his sword to deflect hers. Eira was surprised. She became more aggressive with her attacks, but he was able to ward off each advance. She was flummoxed. She didn't think boys knew how to swordfight.

"Can you just... please..." he pleaded, looking exasperated.

"Who are you, and why are you here?"

"Will you just stop fighting me for a minute? I will tell you."

Eira stopped, but continued to hold up her sword in defense.

"Well? What are you doing here at my lake?"

"Um, I didn't mean to come here. My dragon took off, and I was chasing him. I'm not even sure how we got here."

"What dragon?"

He looked over towards the lake, pointing with his chin. There was Gyda, flying and playing with a bright red dragon. They were chasing each other and twirling around in circles. Eira was amazed. She heard a movement, and quickly reengaged her sword.

"You shouldn't be here. You're an Outcast. Get your dragon and go!"

The boy whistled, and his dragon flew over, landing on his shoulder. Gyda followed and perched on Eira's. The boy started to say something again, but Eira glared at him, so he turned around and walked away, silently. Eira did not take her eyes off him until she was sure he had gone.

Eira felt very disturbed. Who was this person who came to *her* lake? And not even someone from her own tribe, but an Outcast! Her tribe never associated with Outcasts. She had never even seen one before! They were taught that the Outcasts were dumb, weak, and corrupt. She pictured them to be small, shriveled, and stooped over, but he seemed so.... normal, not to mention a decent swordfighter. Eira was confused.

3

"The Outcasts are scheming, treacherous people, but lucky for us, they are also quite weak."

Eira was sitting in history class, listening to yet another lecture about the evils of the Outcasts.

"But, why are they outcasts, Gunborg?" Runa asked. Hilleve, Tove, and Iona snickered.

"Runa, we have been over this before. They are feeble-minded, prone to darkness, and not to be trusted. You must stay away from them."

"But, my grandmother says that's not true. She says they are just like us."

Startled, Eira turned to look back at Runa.

"Now, Runa, we all know your grandmother is prone to delusions," said Gunborg.

Hilleve, Tove, and Iona laughed and whispered under their breath to one another, pointing at Runa. Runa turned a bluish-purple and rose from her seat, her already blazing red hair seeming to burst into angry flames.

"My grandma is smarter than all of you! She remembers the old times. And how do you know what the Outcasts are like if you have never met them?"

"Runa, dear, it is all here in the history books," said Gunborg. "Don't you remember the story of how they slaughtered our youth? We must not forget. Who here wants to remind Runa of our history?"

Hilleve stood up.

"Hundreds of years ago, our tribe and the Outcasts were friends. Eerika, a great warrior and chief of our tribe, trusted Eirik, the leader of the men who would become the Outcasts. The tribes helped one another, often sharing in the farming, fishing, and even the raising of our children. One day, Eirik told Eerika that a wise-woman warned him that a great army was coming on a fleet of ships to destroy our people. Wanting no blood spilled on our land, Eerika decided to meet our attackers out at sea to protect our children, our livestock, and our land. She gathered all the women, weapons, and armor and sailed out to sea, leaving the children in Eirik's care. They sailed for many a day, but found no enemy ships and eventually returned home, only to find all our children were dead. Enraged, our tribe attacked Eirik and his tribe, but Eerika could not stand anymore death and ended it. She shackled Eirik to the Tree of Misery to live out

his days in agony and banished the rest of his tribe to the wastelands, where the Outcasts still live to this day."

"Thank you, Hilleve," said Gunborg. "You see, Runa, your grandma dreams of a time of harmony and peace that just simply did not exist. The Outcasts have always been liars and murderers. Now, class is over, girls. See you next week."

Still angry, Runa gathered her books and left. Eira watched her go with curiosity.

"Can you believe her? She's just as crazy as her grandma," Hilleve said, standing over Eira, who was still seated at her desk.

"Huh? Oh yeah, I guess."

"We're going back down to the shore today. Are you finally coming with us?"

"Yeah, sounds fun."

Eira did not really want to go, but she pretended to be enthusiastic to keep up appearances. It was important for the tribe, and especially her mother, to see her getting along with her peers. Community was important to her tribe, and her penchant for being alone seemed to be an anomaly. Plus, she didn't want anyone getting curious about what she did with her time and finding out about Mother's Bed. That Outcast had already found it.

That Outcast—that boy...she had to admit that he wasn't what she would have expected. Maybe Runa's grandmother was right. *Could it be that the Outcasts were really just like us?*

"Don't you think, Eira?"

Eira was pulled out of her thoughts. She suddenly realized she hadn't been participating in the conversation as they walked along the beach, and she had no idea what Hilleve was talking about. Hilleve looked at her expectantly.

"I guess so," Eira responded, uncertainly.

"See, even Eira thinks that Runa and that crazy grandmother of hers should go live with the Outcasts. They may not be boys, but they certainly don't belong in this tribe."

Oh no, what had she just agreed to? Her stomach knotted up. Should she say something? She didn't want to let on that she wasn't listening, but she also did not want to be a part of teasing Runa. Not only did she not agree, but as the next chief, she needed to maintain good relations with all members of her tribe... otherwise, she would probably not be spending time with these three.

"Look, what's that sparkling in the water?" Tove asked.

Before Eira could say anything, the other girls ran to the water. Relieved that their focus had shifted to the large piece of amber that had washed up on shore, she decided to let it go. She needed time to figure out what she felt anyway.

4

A month had passed, and everything seemed to have returned to normal. Eira spent most afternoons at Mother's Bed, making just enough time for Hilleve, Tove, and Iona to keep anyone from asking questions. Nobody had mentioned Runa or her grandmother in some time, and Runa seemed content to keep to herself.

Eira and Gyda were enjoying a beautiful spring day at Mother's Bed. It had taken Eira some time to settle back into the comfort of her solitude there, but she was feeling an even deeper sense of connection to this place and to the nature that surrounded her. As she sat still on her favorite rock, gazing out over the lake, an immense calm and joy permeated her being.

She felt Gyda land on her shoulder and nuzzle her. Contented, she patted the dragon on the head and turned to give her a kiss, but it wasn't Gyda. Eira gasped, and the bright red dragon

flew off her shoulder. Gyda met him over the lake, where they recommenced their play. That was the Outcast's dragon, wasn't it? But where was he?

Startled out of her serenity, she drew her sword as she stood up to look around for him.

"I know you're here. Come out now or meet my sword."

Slowly, a tuft of jet black curly hair rose from behind a bush. She had not really taken the time to look at him before, but as he gradually emerged, she saw how much he actually looked like herself--they had the same wild dark hair, broad strong shoulders, and height. The main difference, apart from him being a boy, was that his grey eyes glimmered like Gyda's silver scales, while Eira's eyes shone a deep green like Gyda's emerald scales.

"I thought I told you not to come back."

"I didn't mean to, but Egil keeps flying back here."

They looked over at the two dragons dipping in and out of the lake together.

"Wait... keeps? You mean you've been back here other than now?"

"Uhhh....."

"While we were here?"

"Sorry," he responded, looking guiltily at his feet.

"What's your name?"

"Asmund."

"You're an Outcast."

Asmund said nothing but just stared at Eira. Eira had expected him to be scared, or at least to be making sneaky excuses, or slithering away, or ... something. She put down her sword. Eira's brow furrowed, and she looked out over the lake.

"Why do you keep coming back here?"

Asmund wasn't sure he should answer. He wasn't certain if she was asking him, the lake, or herself that question.

"I told you: because of my dragon, Egil."

She looked back at him, as if shocked that he had spoken again. Silently, she sat back down on her rock and watched the dragons play. Asmund cautiously walked toward her. When she said nothing, he sat down next to her. After a short while, he turned to her.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"What?"

Eira did not return his gaze. She did not sound particularly hostile, but she also did not sound very welcoming.

"What were you doing earlier?"

At this she turned toward him, puzzled.

"What do you mean?"

"When you were looking out over the water, what were you doing?"

"Huh? Like you said, I was looking at the water."

"I've seen you do it so many times..."

She turned sharply toward him with an angry look in her eyes. He hesitated.

"What I mean is, it doesn't feel like you're just looking at the water. It's like the quality of the air around me changes when you do that. It seems... quieter."

Eira was surprised to hear someone else articulate this feeling. She had never been sure if it was a feeling unique to Mother's Bed or to her or something that everybody experienced.

"I don't know. It's just something that I do."

"Can you teach me?"

"Teach you? Teach you what? I'm not even supposed to be talking to you. You're an Outcast, remember? Gyda, come on."

Eira couldn't stay there any longer. She was upset and confused. Without saying another word, she got up and walked away, Gyda following reluctantly behind her.

5

"What's wrong, Eira?" her mother asked when she got home.

"Nothing, Mother. I'm fine."

"You are not. What's going on with you?"

"Mother, have you ever met an Outcast?"

"An Outcast?!? What are you talking about? What happened?"

"Nothing, Mother. We just keep learning about how horrible these Outcasts are, and I was just wondering if you ever even met one."

"Eira, in order to maintain the sanctity of our tribe, we must never interact with the Outcasts. They are not to be trusted."

"How do we know they are still not to be trusted? And you haven't yet answered if you ever met one."

"Eira, the Outcasts are bad people. They slaughtered all of our children while we risked our lives to protect theirs."

"What happened when Eerika and Eirik were the leaders of our tribes was ages ago. What has happened since then? How do you know they haven't changed? Runa's grandmother reckons they are just like us."

"Runa's grandmother is from a different time."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means she doesn't understand the delicacy of our tribal culture and how to keep things together. She wants to believe in a unity that just isn't possible. We are a peaceable people, and the best way to keep that peace is to remain separate from them. Come sit down and eat dinner."

Her mother put their dinner plates on the table. Eira managed to choke down one bite of cod, but mostly just swirled the peas around on her dish. When she looked up at her mother, she noticed that even she only ate half of her fish and a couple of bites of barley bread.

6

Eira continued to remain distant as the days passed. She didn't feel ready to go back to Mother's Bed, which had always been an equalizing force in her life. She didn't have it in her to pretend to enjoy spending time with the other girls, either. She just went to class and went home, participating in community life as little as possible.

Finally, after a week had passed, she decided to return to Mother's Bed. She couldn't stay away from her favorite place. She needed to clear her head, and Mother's Bed always provided her with the inner peace she needed. She hoped Asmund would not have the nerve to return.

As on other days when she was irritated, she chose to walk around the lake to alleviate her anxiety instead of sitting quietly. By the time she had completed her lap, she felt calmer. She stopped to watch Gyda playing in the water, and a sudden melancholy pervaded her. Why did she feel this way? Could it be that she was actually disappointed that Asmund was not there? She realized that deep down, she had wanted to see him again. She wanted answers, and how was she ever going to get them if she did not see him again?

7

The next day, she decided to approach Runa.

"Hey, Runa," she called to her, as she caught up with her after class.

"Oh, hi, Eira. How are you?"

"I'm good, thanks. How is your grandmother?"

Runa was surprised to hear Eira ask about her. Most people ignored her existence or only acknowledged it to make fun of her. Eira was probably just doing her duty as the heir to the chief.

"She's doing really well, thanks."

"Good. I'd like to come visit her someday, if I may."

"Of course."

"How about tomorrow after school?"

"Okay."

"Great!"

Eira turned to walk away. Hilleve approached her.

"What was that all about?"

"Hilleve, you know that as the future chief I must maintain good relationships with all members of our tribe."

"Oh, right, but..."

"See you later!"

Eira did not give Hilleve a chance to carry on the conversation, but turned and ran home.

8

Eira wasn't sure how she was going to bring up the Outcasts to Runa's grandmother, Ragna. She hadn't really thought her plan through, but she had a driving need to find out the truth and thought Ragna could help.

"Eira, is that you? It's so lovely to see you again."

Ragna reached her hands out blindly to find Eira's, her eyes covered over with a milky white substance. Eira admired Ragna's hair, which was still every bit as wild and red as Runa's despite her advanced age.

"It's lovely to see you, too, Ragna. I'm sorry I haven't come to visit more often."

"Oh, that's okay, dear. I know you are busy training to be the next chief. Runa, why don't you get us all some ale to drink?"

"Yes, Grandma."

Runa left Eira and Ragna alone as she went to the kitchen to fetch the ale.

"Eira, I can feel in you the power to reunite our tribe."

"What do you mean, Ragna? Aren't we already united?"

"The tribe is not only what you see of it now. Our true tribe is much larger."

"Ragna, do you mean the Outcasts?"

"Yes, dear. You met one, did you not?"

"How did you know?"

"I may have lost my sight, but I have another kind of seeing."

"Can you tell me who the Outcasts are? Asmund--the boy I met--he seemed...like..."

"Like one of us?"

"Yes."

"All will be revealed when you and Asmund are ready."

"Me *and* Asmund?"

"Yes. It will take both of you."

Just then, Runa returned with three giant mugs, setting them down on the round wooden table where they sat.

"Now girls," Ragna said, as she grabbed both of them by the hand, "I am so delighted that you are friends. Tell me about what you are learning in your studies. Eira, maybe you could help Runa with her sword work. I hear you are quite good."

And with that, all talk of the Outcasts was over.

9

After her talk with Ragna, Eira went to Mother's Bed every day, hoping to find Asmund again. Day after day, she searched for him there, but he did not show. She no longer sat on her favorite rock. She did not absorb the beauty of Mother's Bed as she wandered around the trail. She only searched for him, wondering when he would return. She became agitated and distressed. Mother's Bed no longer felt like a sanctuary, but a perpetual place of desperate seeking.

She started to go to Mother's Bed less and less, instead spending her time wandering along the shore with Hilleve, Tove, and Iona or shadowing her mother as she assisted the villagers with their fishing, farming, and daily lives. Ignoring Hilleve's scowls, Eira even spent time with Runa, instructing her in the subtleties of metal forging and the art of sword fighting. She enjoyed this time most, as it allowed her to share her greatest passions other than the forgotten peace she found at Mother's Bed.

“I appreciate your help with my sword fighting, Eira.”

“It’s been my pleasure, Runa. You’re making great improvements.”

“Thanks.” Embarrassed, Runa turned her head away from Eira and looked up into the sky. “Hey, isn’t that your dragon?”

Eira followed Runa’s gaze and saw Gyda flying towards her. Gyda never left the house without her.

“That’s odd. Gyda! What are you doing?”

Gyda landed on Eira’s shoulder, nudged her in the face, and flew a few feet forward before stopping to look back at her. Eira watched her, puzzled. Gyda flew back, nudged Eira again, this time without landing on her shoulder, and flew a few feet forward once more.

“Gyda, what’s going on?” asked Eira.

“I think she wants you to follow her, Eira,” said Runa.

“Hmm... maybe I better go see what’s going on. See you tomorrow?”

Runa nodded, and Eira turned to follow Gyda. Gyda flew toward their house. Eira thought she was trying to take her home—maybe there was something wrong with her mother. Eira panicked and started to run, but when they arrived at their house, Gyda flew around it and into the grove leading to Mother’s Bed. Eira followed.

When they arrived at Mother’s Bed, Gyda hovered above Eira’s rock. Eira sat on it, and Gyda landed softly on Eira’s shoulder, letting out a happy snort. Eira took a deep breath in and sighed.

“Thank you, Gyda.”

Gyda flew off, and Eira absorbed the beauty that surrounded her. She welcomed the deep stillness that slowly penetrated her as her gaze softened over the lake. She had forgotten how

much she loved this feeling. As her mind quieted, the air thickened with a soft light, and time felt as if it were standing still.

Eventually, Gyda flew back, landing on Eira's shoulder again, and Eira reluctantly broke her gaze to look at her. The moment she turned her head, Gyda took off again, Eira's eyes following her until Gyda landed on someone else's shoulder.

"Asmund!"

He smiled meekly.

"I... I don't know your name. I know you don't want me here, it's just Egil..."

"It's okay. I've actually been looking for you."

"You have?"

"Well, not today, actually, but I was. My name is Eira."

"Eira. Uh, I'm Asmund," he said, then blushed and looked down at his feet. "But you already know that."

She smiled.

"What were you saying about Egil?"

"Oh, he was just so persistent. He was nudging me from behind, like he was pushing me, and then he would fly off and come back again, like he wanted to make sure I was following him."

"Really? Gyda did the same thing."

"Don't you come here every day anyway?"

"I... I haven't been in a while."

"You haven't? Why not? If I were you, I'd come here every day. It's so beautiful and peaceful."

Eira didn't answer, but just nodded then turned to watch the two dragons play.

"Asmund, what are the Outcasts like?"

"What are we like? Well, for one thing, we don't like to be called Outcasts. Other than that, we are just normal people. We farm. We fish. We forge weapons."

"Just like us!" Eira said in surprise.

"Yes. As I said, we're people."

He sounded annoyed.

"I'm sorry. I've just never met an Outcast before, and... well... I am not even really supposed to be talking to you. We have always been taught to stay away from... that Outcasts are bad. Then, I met you, and Runa and her grandmother reckon you are just like us, and... I don't know."

Asmund did not reply.

Eira sat back down on her rock and let her eyes drift back to the lake. Asmund stayed a few feet away from her, watching her as her eyes narrowed and her breath grew longer and deeper. Eventually, he felt drawn into her stillness, and he, too, turned his gaze out over the water. The lake and the trees began to dissolve in a pure white light as his breath slowed. Never had he felt such peace.

When it started to grow dark, the two dragons returned to their humans, gently drawing them out of their meditative state.

"It's getting dark. I better get going home. See you tomorrow?" Eira asked.

Asmund looked shocked, but nodded and watched her leave.

10

“Are you ready for more sword practice?” Runa asked Eira after class.

“Oh, Runa, I’m so sorry. I completely forgot. I have something else I have to do today.”

“That’s okay. I really appreciate all the time you have been spending with me.”

“I’ve really enjoyed it. I’m glad your grandmother suggested it.”

Runa’s faced flushed with delight.

“I will see you tomorrow then!”

Hilleve sat nearby, listening to their conversation. She watched Eira leave, wondering where she was running off to again.

Gyda was hovering by the back door when Eira arrived home, and, with blissful anticipation, the pair set off once more for Mother’s Bed. When they arrived, Asmund and Egil were already there waiting.

“Have you gone for a walk around the lake before?”

Asmund shook his head.

“Oh, you really should! You can see its beauty from so many different angles when you walk around it. Come on!”

She began her familiar walk, with Asmund following reluctantly behind her. He wanted to be there, but he still felt disoriented by going from being utterly rejected to completely welcome. He knew this was her space, and he had no right to be here, but the Outcasts, too, were taught not to trust this tribe of women.

“Eira?”

“Yes?”

“Why are you being nice to me?”

She stopped walking.

“Honestly, I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I get. Do you know what I mean?”

“Maybe.”

“Well, we are taught to despise and distrust your people. There’s a story about how your leader, Eirik, betrayed our chief, Eerika. He tricked her into leaving our children with your people while she went out to protect us all and returned to find them all murdered by him. But something about the story just doesn’t feel right to me. And you...”

“Me?”

“You don’t feel evil to me.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“Wait, do the Outcasts have a similar story about us?”

“It’s a bit vague, but in our story, Eirik loved Eerika, but she did not return his affections. When she grew tired of him, she strung him up to the Tree of Misery and banished us all to the Wastelands. Eirik loved her and did not want his people to hurt her or any other members of her tribe and told us to stay away for all time. We have always been told that if we tried to approach the tribe of women that they would be merciless, and we would end up either dead or, like Eirik, living out our days in torment, tied up to the Tree of Misery.”

Eira laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“I’m trying to imagine my mother or Gunborg or any member of my tribe tying someone up to the Tree of Misery. We love to sword-fight, but in the end, we really only want peace.”

“Well, that’s a relief.”

“And, why, Asmund, if you were taught to believe that I would torture or kill you, did you keep coming back here? And don’t tell me it’s because of Egil.”

“I... don’t know. Just a feeling, I guess.”

Asmund fell in step beside her, and they walked the rest of the way around the path in a contented silence.

11

“Eira, do you mind if we sit and gaze at the water for a little while? That is always my favorite part.”

“Mine, too.”

Eira sat on her favorite rock and took a deep breath, turning her attention to the lake. Asmund imitated her. He listened to her breathing and let it guide him. As his relaxation deepened, he felt his breath effortlessly fall into rhythm with Eira’s, as if they were both being breathed by someone else. The trees started to dissolve in light, and a shape started to form from the water. The light was too bright to make it out, but it felt as if it were coming closer without actually moving toward them.

“Eira. Asmund,” a voice said.

They could just barely make out the form of a woman, and they both instinctively bowed down to the voice. The being touched them each on the shoulder, but it was not a physical touch—it was more like one soul touching others and, in so doing, uniting them all. They looked up at her.

“I have been waiting a long time for this day to come. It is time to reunite the tribe.”

“But how, Divine Mother?” asked Eira.

“You must tell them the truth.”

“But what is the truth, Oh Great One?” asked Asmund.

“We were all one tribe, living a peaceful existence until the witch Ylva grew bored with the happiness and ease in which we lived. Ylva’s sole pleasure in life was creating separation, fear, and misunderstanding. Disguised as a wisewoman, she spent years gaining Eirik’s trust, when she fed him lies that people from a distant land were coming to destroy our one tribe. As she suspected, Eirik warned Eerika, and she set off with her warrior women to defend the tribe, leaving the children with Eirik. Ylva then cursed all the female children with a pestilent disease that killed only them, leaving it to look as if Eirik had murdered them all. In her great grief, Eerika could not see the truth and banished the men to be Outcasts living in the wastelands. Eirik, feeling guilty for trusting the witch Ylva, believed the death of the children to be all his fault and begged his men to follow Eerika’s orders, in hopes that they would alleviate her suffering. The tribe has been split into two ever since, and it is time for you two to heal these wounds.”

“But why us?”

“You two have open hearts and the wisdom to listen to the silence. You two can see the truth. You are already united at heart and must bring this unity back to the rest of the tribe.”

“How will we get them to believe us?”

She did not answer but faded back into the water.

Asmund turned to Eira.

“Eira, was that real?”

“It sure felt real, didn’t it?”

“It did. Do you think they would just believe us? What are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. I need some time to think about it.”

She stood up from her rock and stretched. Gyda flew over to Eira and nuzzled her cheek.

“It’s getting dark. We better go home.”

Asmund nodded and whistled to Egil. Awestruck and exhausted, the two pairs headed back to their respective tribes.

12

“Eira! Eira!”

Eira had only just left the lake when she heard her name. She turned and saw Hilleve coming out from behind a tree. Eira filled with dread.

“Hilleve? What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? You’ve been acting weird, so I followed you, and then you seemed to disappear. I waited here behind this tree for hours, and right when I was about to give up and go home, I saw you talking to an Outcast!”

“Hilleve, it’s not what it seems.”

“Oh, it was pretty clear. You were talking to him, all right, and you even looked friendly. What are you doing? You are going to endanger the whole tribe!”

“No, I’m not, Hilleve. It’s not like that.”

“Outcasts are evil. You know the story. I am going to have to tell your mother.”

“Hilleve, do not tell my mother. Let me handle this.”

“No, your mother needs to know. I don’t care if you are the next chief. I will not let you ruin our tribe.”

Hilleve turned and ran back toward the village

“Hilleve! Hilleve! Wait!”

Eira ran after her, but Hilleve was too fast. Eira may have been the best sword fighter, but Hilleve had always been the fastest runner. When Eira finally reached the Great Hall and went inside, it was clear that the damage was already done. Her mother stood there, her sword draped at her side, her mouth agape, while Hilleve stood next to her staring at the door through which Eira had just come. The villagers, silent, all turned to her and stared.

"Eira, is it true? Have you been talking with Outcasts?"

"Mother, please, it's not what it seems."

"Answer the question please. Are you friends with an Outcast?"

"Yes, I am, but... "

"Eira! I have warned you! What were you thinking?"

"I didn't plan it, Mother. He just showed up, and, well...."

"Showed up? Showed up where?"

Eira paused. She had never told anybody about Mother's Bed, but what else could she say? She looked to Gyda for comfort, but Gyda was not there. Where could she be?

"At the hidden lake in the grove," she finally responded.

"Hidden lake in the grove? What hidden lake in the grove?"

"Mother, could we please talk about this in private?" Tears were streaming down Eira's face.

"Eira, we are a community, and you have betrayed us all. We will talk about this now. What lake are you talking about?"

"But I don't know where Gyda went."

"Gyda is a smart dragon, She will be fine. Now tell me about this lake. How long have you been going there? Did the Outcast lure you there?"

"No, Mother, I have been going there for as long as I can remember. He just showed up one day."

"And why didn't you tell anybody about this?"

"I... I don't know."

"Eira, how long have you known this Outcast now?"

"He first showed up several months ago, but then I told him not to come back. His dragon had drawn him there and, eventually, did again," Eira looked her mother directly in the eyes.

"Mother, Asmund is a good person. He is just like us."

"Asmund?!? You know his name? He is an Outcast, not a good person. He has been deceiving you!"

"He has not! Ragna told me..."

"Ragna?!?"

Just then, the door to the Great Hall opened.

"Yes? You were calling me?"

In walked Ragna, followed by Runa and Gyda. Gyda immediately flew over to Eira, landing on her shoulder and nudging her cheek.

"Your dragon came to get me, Eira," Ragna said with a wink. Runa gave Eira an encouraging smile.

"Ragna, have you been encouraging my daughter to befriend Outcasts?"

"Not at all, Inkeri. It is Eira's destiny."

"Eira's destined to be deceived by Outcasts?"

"No, Inkeri. It is her destiny to reunite our tribes. Hers and Asmund's."

"Eira, you told Ragna about Asmund?"

"No, Mother, she just knew."

"Eira," said Ragna, "tell your mother what Divine Mother told you."

"Ragna, how did you know?"

"I told you, child, I may not be able to see with my eyes, but I see perfectly."

"Eira," said Inkeri, turning to her daughter, her voice and features softened. "Divine Mother spoke to you?"

"Yes, Mother, to me and Asmund."

"Did you see her?"

"Sort of. She arose from the lake, but mostly I just saw light."

"From the lake you have been going to all these years?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And what did she say?"

"She said that a witch named Ylva tricked Eirik, making him believe we were being attacked. When Eerika left to protect us all, Ylva infected our children with a disease that killed only them. Eerika believed the Outcasts had killed all the children. Eirik felt guilty for believing the witch, believing himself responsible for the deaths. He loved Eerika and did not want to fight. It was all a misunderstanding caused by the witch."

"And you sure this was Divine Mother?"

"Yes."

"Ragna, is this true?"

"Yes, Inkeri, it is true."

"Why did Divine Mother only reveal this now?"

"She finally had people from each tribe who would listen to her."

The Great Hall filled with silence. Inkeri appeared to be considering all she had heard.

"Eira?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"Will you take me to your lake tomorrow?"

Eira smiled. "Yes, Mother."

"It is late. I think we all need to go home and get some rest now. Hilleve, thank you for bringing this to my attention. Ragna, thank you for your counsel." Inkeri turned to one of her warriors. "Alvilda, will you please escort Eira home? Stay there with her until I arrive. I just have a few more things to do before I leave."

"Yes, Chief," Alvilda responded. She went to Eira's side and gestured toward the door with her head. Eira followed her out of the Great Hall and back home.

13

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, Mother."

Eira's stomach was full of butterflies. She was both nervous and excited to share her favorite place with her mother. They headed out the back door with Gyda flying overhead. It felt like somewhat of a relief to no longer have to hide where she was going. They walked silently together through the grove and the tall grass of the meadow. Eira glanced over at her mother every so often to see if she could feel the mounting peace as they drew ever closer to Mother's Bed.

"Does this place have a name?" her mother finally asked.

"I call it Mother's Bed."

Inkeri looked over at her daughter questioningly. Eira flushed.

"It has always reminded me of the warmth and love I felt in your bed, Mother... in your presence."

Inkeri's eyes moistened. She put her arm around Eira.

"You know, Eira, my mother always told me you had a gift. She told me you could talk to Divine Mother."

"She did?"

"Yes. When you were a baby, you always seemed so full of light. When you would babble, my mother would say you were speaking the words of the Divine Mother."

"I never knew that."

When they arrived at Mother's Bed, Inkeri gasped.

"It is so beautiful here. So peaceful."

Eira watched her mother take in the lake, the trees, and the profound silence of Mother's Bed. She watched her mother touch the trees and dip her fingers in the lake. She felt her mother's breath deepen and slow, as hers always did. Inkeri turned to Eira, her eyes glowing, so full of love.

"I can see why you like it here."

Eira smiled.

"Do you think Asmund will be coming here today?"

"I'm not sure. Why?"

Eira suddenly realized she did not know what her mother was going to do about the Outcasts yet, and her breath grew more shallow.

"I would like to meet him, Eira, and tell him myself that he and the rest of the Outcasts are invited to come share a meal at the Great Hall with us tomorrow night. I have arranged a feast."

A tuft of wild black curly hair suddenly arose from behind the bushes. Asmund, blushing, came forward and bowed before Inkeri, laying a giant piece of amber at her feet.

"A peace offering from our tribe," he said.

Inkeri grabbed his arm and lifted him up, looking him up and down.

"You look an awful lot like Eira."

"Thank you."

"So you will come tomorrow night?"

"Yes, we will be there."

Eira beamed, her heart full of happiness that her tribe would, at long last, be united.

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