

Chapter 1:

Kayla hobbled across the floor of the main cave. The smell of potato cakes with herbs, and cured meat drifted through the musty air.

The thud from the stump at the end of her leg was drowned out by voices as the rest of the villagers gathered for the end of day meal.

She wove around the mismatched tables and benches that filled the large space, her eyes focused on their usual table near the outer edge of the cave. The dim light made it hard to see clearly and she narrowly avoided a collision with a small boy who ran in front of her, chased by another boy who shouted at him to wait.

By the time she made it to her goal, sweat had beaded on her forehead. She brushed a lock of dark curls out of her face and sat down on the edge of the bench, storing her crutches on the floor below.

"Thank you," she said when Neil put her plate on the table in front of her. Its rough surface scratched at the bottom of the wooden plate.

"You're welcome," he replied. "You are improving on your new leg."

Kayla grimaced. "Thanks." He and Calla had presented her with the smooth wooden extension to attach to her stump of a leg at the end of winter. At first, she had been thrilled, until she discovered that learning to use it was far more difficult than she had expected. Calla was always checking on it, slathering salve on the raw skin that rubbed against the wood whenever she walked. Balancing wasn't easy either, and the crutches she had thought she would no longer need remained always by her sides.

Yuri emerged from the growing crowd, maneuvering around a woman with a stern face and short cropped hair. He plopped himself down on the bench beside Kayla, giving her a warm smile.

Since their return to the village just before winter, he had claimed that spot. The only times they were apart were when she was at work in the kitchen with Maggie and at night when they slept. Even then, the small sleeping cave Kayla shared with her adopted father was not far from the one Yuri shared with his mothers. There had been more than one night when, awakened by nightmares, she had gone for a walk and found her friend.

“Hey,” he said with a smile. His hair, normally a light brown, fell in a wet mess around his head, and the light from the lantern that hung on the wall by their table was reflected in his hazel eyes.

“Hello Yuri,” Neil offered before turning his attention to his own food.

“You smell good,” Yuri commented, leaning over to kiss her cheek before taking his first bite.

Kayla looked down, letting her hair fall in a curtain of curls to hide her face. She and Maggie had been given the task of mashing up wild berries to preserve them. She made a face at the red and purple stains on her hands. At least the splotches hid the scars.

“Thanks...” she murmured.

“What happened to you?” Maggie asked, announcing her arrival with a flourish as she set her plate on the table across from Kayla and took her seat. Her thick strawberry blond hair was pulled back into a short ponytail, leaving a few berry-stained strands to fall around her freckled face.

Yuri laughed. “Hi, Maggie.”

Kayla turned to him. “Is it today’s job? What were you doing?” She could not have matched Maggie’s energy if she tried, but she shared her enthusiastic friend’s curiosity.

“Wash,” he answered.

On her other side, she thought she heard Neil chuckle.

“You were doing wash!?” Maggie said with a laugh. “Why don’t you just work with your mom and become a healer?” She took a bite of potato cake.

“I don’t know,” he answered with a shrug. “I don’t really want to be a healer. Besides, Cassandra has been working with her.”

Kayla felt a weight press down on her heart. Cassandra had escaped with them thanks to her husband’s sacrifice. After rescuing Kayla and Yuri from the hands of the Enforcers, he had allowed himself to be captured in order for the three of them to escape.

“Neil. A word?”

The request, spoken low and quick, pulled Kayla from her thoughts. She looked up to see a man, a dark cloak hanging down over his shoulders. He stood at the end of the table, looking expectantly at Neil.

Neil stopped eating and nodded. He stood and then turned to Kayla. “I’ll be back.” Before she could respond, he was up and walking with the older man.

“That was weird,” Maggie said, her voice unusually low. She lowered her head and leaned in to speak.

“Yeah,” Yuri agreed.

“Do you think it’s about the rescue mission?” Maggie asked.

“Probably. They’re always calling him away to go over plans,” Yuri said.

Kayla forced herself to put food in her mouth and chew while she listened to Maggie and Yuri speculate about what the plan was going to be.

Neil had been called to a lot of meetings in the past season as the village leaders planned the rescue mission for Cassandra’s husband. After the doctor had sacrificed himself to save Yuri, Kayla, and his wife, the village immediately began putting plans together to get him back.

Kayla knew he needed to be there, helping to plan at least, but the idea of her only remaining family going out on a dangerous rescue mission always left her feeling anxious and alone.

Yuri took her hand under the table and gave it a squeeze.

She looked up to see him watching her and forced a smile.

"We can talk about something else," he offered. "Want to hear about my day?" He always seemed to know what was bothering her.

"Yeah!" Maggie piped up with a laugh. "I can't imagine *you* doing wash!"

Kayla doubted his accuracy as Yuri regaled them with the surprisingly eventful story of his day. There was no way a fish had actually gotten into the underground pool they used for washing, tangled itself in a pair of pants, and tried to swim off with them.

The story had her laughing anyway and by the time they had finished eating, Kayla's heart felt much lighter. She had managed to eat everything on her plate and was still laughing and talking with Yuri and Maggie when Neil returned.

He watched the three teens in silence for a moment before asking if they were done.

Maggie got to her feet first and shot a gloomy look across the cave. She muttered something about her mother and sister as she walked away.

Kayla watched her disappear as Yuri pulled her crutches out from under the bench.

"Here," he said, handing them to her.

"Thanks." She took them and allowed him to help her to her feet.

"I'd better go find my moms," Yuri said, turning to leave.

"Why don't you come with us today," Neil offered, "I want to talk to you both." He glanced from Yuri to Kayla.

"Sure," Yuri agreed.

As they made their way through the crowded main area and toward the tunnel that hosted the sleeping caves, butterflies fluttered around in Kayla's stomach.

The change from their normal routine could not mean anything good. It never did. By the time they had left the large cave and started down the tunnel, anxiety had taken over her mind.

She stared at the wall as they walked, noting every nook and cranny that she could see in the dim light. The walls were broken up by hollows that had been turned into sleeping caves. Some were larger than others, but most only held two or three people.

Neil slowed the pace as they passed by the curtained entrances to sleeping caves. "We are done planning," he said. "We leave in two days."

Images of the wolf she loved, trapped inside a cage in an enforcer's van or shot on the forest floor took over her thoughts. She stumbled on the uneven floor as they came to a stop outside the cave she shared with her adopted father.

Yuri helped her steady herself. His uncharacteristic lack of response was unsettling as he continued.

"Kayla, you are going to stay with Calla, Maryann, and Yuri while I'm gone."

She looked up to meet his eyes, unable to form words around the lump in her throat. In the back of her mind, she had known he would be going. Now, the truth was out, and she could no longer deny it.

Approaching footsteps echoed off the rough walls behind them.

"We will be glad to have Kayla stay with us," Calla said as she and Maryann joined them.

"She's over often enough anyway." Maryann gave Kayla a warm smile. Her soft, normally soothing voice did little to calm Kayla's nerves.

This was why Neil had invited Yuri to walk with them. Kayla and Yuri had bonded during their time away and the seizures that had plagued her since her parents' death seemed to lessen when he was around.

Yuri grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze.

"Thank you," Neil said with a sigh. He moved aside the curtain that blocked the entrance to the sleeping cave and motioned for them to enter.

Kayla let go of Yuri's hand and crossed the space to sit against the far wall, an old worn blanket cushioning her. She leaned back and closed her eyes while Calla crouched in front of her and began to undo the straps that held her leg on. She let out a hiss when the air stung her raw skin, pushing the worries out of her mind.

"It's not as bad as I expected. You've been taking it easy. Good."

Kayla watched in silence as she pulled a bottle from the pouch she kept at her waist. The greenish salve she rubbed on the stump that was left of her leg felt cold and soothing.

"Thanks," she breathed, closing her eyes again.

"You're doing well, Kayla. Soon you'll be walking as well as ever," the healer said with a smile. She put the bottle back in her pouch and stood. "I will leave you all to talk." She left a Kiss on Maryann's cheek on her way out the door.

"I want to go over the plan now, so we're all clear on what is going to happen in the next few days," Maryann said, looking at each of them in turn. "Neil will be leaving, and Kayla will be staying with us. What else?" she prompted.

Neil shifted his weight. "We will finish preparations and leave at dusk. We will return with the doctor in five days."

Kayla took a deep breath in an effort to remain calm.

As Neil explained the rest of the plan, his words only melted away in her mind. *What if you don't make it back?* She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, making a half-hearted attempt to listen.

The feeling that everything was going to go wrong hung over her like a rain cloud.

Chapter 2

“Go away, Maggie!” Morgan shouted from her seat on her bedroll.

“Fine!” Maggie shouted back. She stormed out of their sleeping cave, fists clenched and face hot. Her heart pounded hard in her chest as she stomped up the long tunnel toward the main hall. “I don’t know why you have to be such a jerk,” she muttered under her breath.

The fight had been over nothing, just like most of the fights they had. Her older sister was short tempered and had always loved to take her anger out on Maggie. Their looks were the only thing they had in common. Their mother said they looked just like their father. Maggie wished she could remember him, but the best she could do was a tall shadow in her imagination. They were both tall and thin, with blue eyes, freckles, and strawberry blond hair; though Morgan’s was much longer and slightly lighter, always done into a neat braid.

She emerged into the large central cave and continued straight through, her steps echoing off the stone cavern that would soon be full of people. Empty tables and benches scattered around the room would host villagers as they ate and talked and got ready for the day. She spotted the table she shared with her best friends, Kayla and Yuri, and a small smile grew on her face.

Kayla had joined her in the kitchen before winter. She had to be the most patient person Maggie knew and had instantly become her best friend. The newest addition to their village before they had to move, Kayla rarely had much to say. She did not seem to mind listening though, while Maggie did all the talking. She took pride in teaching her new friend all she knew about the kitchen and preparing food for the rest of the village.

The tunnel on the other side of the main hall was rougher, allowing less of an echo as she walked. It was shorter than the tunnel that held sleeping caves and slanted upward until it opened into the wide, shallow cavern that was the kitchen. Narrow shafts of sunlight spilled in through cracks in the ceiling, illuminating dust motes in the air.

Maggie paused just inside the room. It was not nearly as nice as the building they had used in the woods, back before they had had to move. The air here was stuffier and the space was tighter. Still, it was her favorite place in the entire underground cave system. Counter space had been carved into the walls, making the space appear wider than it was. At the back of the room, a fireplace was built into the stone for baking. It was only lit in the evening or on overcast days, to avoid giving away their location. Maggie and Kayla shared a space in the center of the room. A round column of stone supported the cracked ceiling and their workbench sat at its base. A countertop of

smooth wood that had been salvaged from the old village sat on carefully stacked stones. A three-legged stool at one side waited for her best friend.

"You're early."

Maggie jumped at the rough greeting and turned to see Nadezda emerging from the slightly smaller cave attached to the side of the kitchen. Cool and dark, it was the perfect storage space. "Hey Nad. What are we making today?"

The head of the kitchen did not stop for conversation. She carried a basket full of vegetables across the room to her workspace and set it down with a thud before wiping her hands on the front of her dress. Not many people in their village wore dresses, but Nadezda stubbornly refused to change her wardrobe, even if pants were easier to move in. "Soup," she answered, turning to face Maggie with a hand on her hip. "The hunters went out early this morning. I expect them back by midday with venison."

Maggie nodded, crossing the space toward her mentor. "Yeah. I know. Mother said it will be the last hunting trip before the move."

The older woman nodded. "That's right. Your mother goes out every time."

"Yeah. Now she'll always be here to yell at me." She stopped and turned to lean against the counter and stared around the room.

"She does not always yell at you," Nadezda chastised. "Your mother loves you and your sister. Don't take that for granted." She began unloading the basket onto the counter. "Grab the big knives."

Maggie pushed herself away from the counter to reach into the cabinet on the other side of Nadezda where the knives were stored. She pulled out two large ones with wooden handles. "Here."

"Good. Get to cutting." She slid a couple of carrots over to Maggie.

"If mother loves us, she has a funny way of showing it." She could count on one hand the number of times her mother had shown her affection. More often, she was criticizing the way Maggie did things, or telling her she talked too much. She sighed.

Nadezda emptied the basket and set it to the side. "One day, you'll look back and you will see how much your mother does for you. Everyone shows love in their own way. Now, no more complaining. Get to work."

Maggie could not stop the smile that crossed her face. It felt good to be useful, and she always enjoyed working with Nadezda.

The older woman had raised her children back before the government had started rounding up shifters, calling them "mutants" and a danger to society. As far as Maggie knew, Nadezda had been the only shifter in her family. Her children had helped her escape at the very beginning, and she had helped to create the village in the woods. She was strict and tough but never yelled or criticized.

As she began to work on the carrots in front of her, Maggie's mind went back to the old village. She had never felt like she fit in with the others her age, even as a kid. When she had found the kitchen, she had marveled at the creations that could be made by combining ingredients. She had walked right in with her endless questions and to her surprise, Nadezda had not kicked her out. Instead, she put Maggie to work, giving her small jobs to do to help out.

As she worked beside her mentor, her mood improved. Cutting up vegetables took the place of the argument she had had with her sister and soon they had emptied the basket and filled a pot with vegetable chunks. All that was left was to add water and wait for the hunters to return with their catch.

Nadezda set her knife down and turned her back to the counter, wiping her hands on her dress again. "It's about time to load up the tables in the hall. We don't want to be late. The first group leaves today."

The village had been divided into five groups, one for every day the rescue team was gone. Each day, another group would leave, headed for a mountain range to the south where there was supposed to be a pass that led to a safe place for shifters. The first group was made up of the oldest and youngest of the villagers, with the exception of Nadezda, and they were set to leave that morning.

Maggie and Nadezda pulled out the leftovers from the night before, along with the berry spreads and preserves and the last two loaves of bread. They brought it all down to the main cavern where people had already begun to gather.

"Thank you for your help, Maggie," Nadezda said when they were done. "Get yourself something to eat and I will see you back in the kitchen later."

Maggie gave a nod and scanned the room. She spotted Kayla, sitting down in her usual spot at a table near the outer edge, Yuri at her side sliding her crutches under the bench. "Alright. See you later," she called, hurrying off to join her friends.

Chapter 3

Voices echoed off the walls of the main cave as the village gathered for the morning meal, but the spot beside Kayla remained empty. Bags had been packed and sleeping caves abandoned. The first group was ready to leave.

Across the table, Maggie switched from complaining about her sister to speculating on the journey that was to come. "I wonder how far these mountains will be. I mean, if they were close we would have been able to see them from the forest."

"I just hope the pass isn't hard to find," Yuri chimed in.

Without warning, the room went silent. Kayla's first thought was of danger, sending her heart into overdrive. When she spotted Naren standing at the other end of the cave, she let out a shaky breath. He cleared his throat.

"It is time. While we await the return of those who went out to rescue the doctor, we will be preparing to leave. Does everyone have a group and a leave date?"

A general murmur of, "yes," drifted around those gathered. Kayla felt her muscles tense once again as she remembered the conversation she had had with Neil before he left. He had told her the plan, that they would be leaving in groups each day the rescue team was gone. She was to be part of the last group, waiting for their return to finally abandon the caves.

A tall redheaded woman wearing the dark camouflage of a watcher moved nearby, catching Kayla's attention. She carried a leather pack on her back and headed for the front exit. "We are all clear to go. The sun is just rising and the forest is clear."

Kayla knew that meant clear of Enforcers, but she still felt anxious. The first group to leave would consist of the oldest and youngest of the villagers. They would be the slowest and the highest risk of being caught. She swallowed hard, watching as the young families headed toward the exit. The usual running around that Kayla had to dodge when she navigated the large cave was replaced with quiet. Children held their parents' hands and everyone carried a pack. There were not many families, maybe four, with young kids. Two had been born in the village. All of them looked around the group as they waited to move.

She spotted two more watchers joining the group along with the five village elders.

Looking over the group, the tall woman gave a nod and began to head up to the exit. Rough stone steps had been carved into the curved wall from the floor of the cave to

the fissure in the rocks that led out into the woods. It was disguised from the outside by other large stones and the bushes and plants that grew around them.

"So it begins," Maggie said, leaning her elbows on the tabletop.

"Yeah," Yuri agreed, his eyes on the moving travelers as they disappeared into the short tunnel at the top of the steps.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Maggie asked.

Kayla met her eyes and shook her head. She was the only one of them who did not want to leave. She did not want to keep moving and having to find new homes. The caves were safe, and large enough for the village. Sure, the sleeping caves were small and the floor was uneven. The lack of sunlight was rough, but in her mind, it was a small price to pay for safety from the Enforcers who hunted them.

"We will be. We're going with the last group," Yuri answered. "What about you?"

Maggie glanced over the tables. "Same. Mother says it's our duty to stay and make sure everyone gets out." She rolled her eyes. "At least we'll be together."

Kayla stirred what was left on her plate, a half eaten bread roll and a couple pieces of meat. Her appetite had gone with the travelers as they disappeared through the tunnel and out of the cave. "I hope they stay safe..." she murmured.

"They'll be okay," Yuri tried reassuring her. "They have three watchers and all the elders."

She forced a nod.

"What job are you doing today, Yuri?" Maggie asked, shoving the rest of her own food into her mouth.

He thought for a moment before answering. "I hadn't really thought about it."

"Why not try out a day in the kitchen?" Maggie suggested.

"Do you need help in the kitchen?" he asked.

Maggie grinned. "Sure. Why not? You should come with us and give it a try."

"Alright," he agreed, giving Kayla a nudge with his elbow.

A smile grew on her face at the prospect of spending the day with Yuri. She hoped Nadezda would find something he could do. The older woman was in charge of the entire kitchen and all that went on there. She had taught Maggie and Kayla how to make so many things in the short amount of time they'd been there.

"Hello, Kayla."

She stiffened at the sound of her name. She knew the voice without looking. Slowly, she turned to face Basanti.

"May I join you?" she asked, indicating the spot that Neil usually occupied.

Unable to form words around the sudden lump in her throat, Kayla settled for a nod.

"Thank you." Basanti sat with her back to the table. She turned and looked into Kayla's eyes in silence.

Kayla's stomach knotted as she searched for a reason for Basanti to come looking for her. The only thing she could think of would be of the conversation she and Yuri had overheard.

"I come to ask your forgiveness."

Kayla's mouth fell open. "My what?" she breathed.

Basanti frowned at her. "Your forgiveness, child. I was not very kind to you the last time we spoke."

Kayla fidgeted. "Okay." She couldn't look at Basanti.

"Neil is a very dear friend, and I worried for his wellbeing more than yours. I was wrong to be so harsh. Will you accept my apology?"

Kayla stared in disbelief. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined Basanti asking for that.

Kayla nodded. "Yes."

"I would like to show you something, after you are done eating. If you would like."

Kayla hesitated. Beside her, Yuri nudged her again and then took her hand, as if he could share his confidence with her. "Ok," she finally said.

Basanti smiled. "Good. I will come and find you later." She stood up and left the table without another word.

"That was weird," Maggie said as soon as Basanti was out of earshot. "I've never seen her apologize to anyone. Ever."

"Yeah..." Kayla said, trying to imagine what Basanti could possibly have to show her.

"If you guys are done, let's go," Maggie said, standing up. "I don't wanna wait around in here."

"Sure," Yuri said with a nod. He helped Kayla up and passed her the crutch.

As they made their way across the hall to the tunnel that led to the kitchen, Kayla heard bits and pieces of conversation, all revolving around the upcoming move. What if they don't make it back in time... a little voice in her head wondered. They will. She had to believe they would.

When they made it to the kitchen, Nadezda reluctantly gave Yuri a job cutting up herbs that had been foraged the day before. Then she passed Maggie and Kayla a slab of meat to cut up and begin dehydrating.

Kayla was laughing at the banter between Maggie and Yuri when Basanti appeared in the doorway. She stiffened as the older woman approached.

"Are you ready?" she asked, stopping in front of their workspace, dark eyes on Kayla.

Kayla nodded and slid from her stool.

"Here," Maggie said, passing her the crutch.

She took it with a whispered thanks.

"See you when you get back," Yuri called with a wave,

"See you," she responded, as she followed Basanti from the room.

They headed up the tunnel, toward the main cave in silence. Basanti led the way through the main cave and into an unfamiliar tunnel.

"Where are we going?" Kayla finally broke the silence as they followed the tunnel upward.

"You will see."

Kayla's leg was sore by the time they finally reached the end of the winding tunnel. It had been a mostly uphill climb and held more twists and turns than any of the tunnels Kayla had been through. The unfamiliar floor was relatively smooth, thankfully.

Up ahead, a bright light lit up the tunnel exit and they followed it out into the day. After being in the tunnels for months, the sun's light stung her eyes and she had to shield her face with an arm while they adjusted.

They stood in a tight circle of evergreens. The ground, a mix of moss and stone, felt odd beneath her wooden leg and she was thankful for the crutch to help her balance.

"What is this place?" she asked, looking around. Nothing about the space stood out. The circle was not large enough to hold a training class. In fact, there were no indications that anyone regularly went there. Is this the emergency exit in case they don't come back? The thought came unbidden into her mind, casting a shadow over the beautiful space.

"It is a training space," Basanti answered. She walked to one of the trees growing nearest the entrance and ripped off what looked like a giant sheet of bark to reveal a hollow, hidden underneath. She pulled two bundles from the hollow before replacing the bark and returning to Kayla.

"Here," she said, handing Kayla a long, curved rod with a string tied around one end. She kept a second one for herself and on the ground between them she placed two leather bundles. As she untied the string from one end of her rod and bent it to connect the loose string to the other end, the image clicked in Kayla's mind.

"Bows and arrows?" she asked.

"You are correct."

"What are we doing with them?" She had never held a weapon of any kind in her life, and couldn't imagine why Basanti would be handing her one now.

"I am going to teach you to shoot." She untied one bundle and unrolled it on the ground beside her. Arrows, laid neatly in place, held barbed tips that looked sharp enough to kill. On the opposite end, small feathers had been angled back.

Kayla held her tongue rather than point out the obvious. She didn't know the first thing about archery. There was no way she would learn and become proficient before it was time to move. What is the point of this anyway? Again, she held the question in.

Slowly, she began to untie one end of the string from the bottom of the bow as she had seen Basanti do. It was much harder to bend and attach the other end than she had expected.

Basanti offered instruction, but Kayla wished she would just do it for her.

When she had finished struggling to string it, Basanti pointed to the leather bundle beside her. She pulled one out, straightened and held up her bow, placing the arrow against the wood, and placed the blunt end against the string. Then she pulled it back, took aim, and shot the arrow right into the trunk of a tree on the other end of the clearing.

"Wow," Kayla breathed.

"It is not as easy as it looks." Basanti lowered her bow and turned to Kayla. "I am going to teach you to shoot during Neil's absence. It is a useful skill, and I believe you will do well as an archer."

Kayla looked blankly at Basanti. "A what?"

"An archer." Without further explanation, she picked up another arrow from the bundle and handed it to Kayla. "Here."

Kayla held the long arrow in her hand. It was lighter than she had imagined.

Basanti showed her how it fit with the bow, then how to hold them to shoot. The first release hardly made it to the trees, falling short and landing at the base of a tree off to the side.

"Again," Basanti commanded, once again giving her instruction as she adjusted her hold on the bow and pulled back the arrow.

The crutch fell to the ground as she pulled back and without thinking she let go. This arrow fell to the middle of the clearing.

"Let it go," Basanti said when she started to reach for the crutch. "It will just be in your way."

She wanted to argue that she needed her crutch. She had not been without one since she had first come to the village. The look on Basanti's face kept her from saying anything.

"Do you remember my animal form?" the older woman asked as Kayla reached for another arrow.

Kayla hesitated, eyes on the arrow in hand. "Yes." The image of the frightening orange bird looming over her at the table they had sat at in the old hall was one she would never forget.

"Keep going," she instructed when Kayla did not move. "Do you know what it is?"

Slowly, Kayla positioned the bow and arrow as Basanti had shown her. "A bird?" She felt her muscles flinch when Basanti put hands on her arm, adjusting her position.

"I am a phoenix."

Kayla lowered her bow to look at Basanti. "I've never heard of them."

She shook her head. "No. I don't expect you would have. Most people don't believe they exist." She met Kayla's eyes. "When I am the phoenix, I can see what is inside a person."

The words sent a chill down her spine. "What do you mean?" she asked, unsure if she wanted to know the answer.

"I mean I can see their heart. I saw and knew the weight you carried. It was wrong of me to treat you the way I did." She stopped and looked at the lowered bow. "What are you waiting for?"

"Oh," Kayla said, raising it again. She pointed the arrow at the tree Basanti had hit and let go, only for the arrow to fall short once again.

By the time Basanti finally announced they were done for the day, the sun was in the center of the sky, beating down on the clearing.

Kayla's arms and back ached. She returned the arrow to the leather wrap and carefully undid the bowstring. Part of her enjoyed the challenge and hope that came with learning a new skill, even if the instructor would not have been her first choice.

"I will come for you again tomorrow," Basanti said, picking up both bows and bundles of arrows. "Okay?" she called as she stashed them back in the hollow of the tree and replaced the bark cover.

"Ok," was all Kayla could say.

"Do you have any questions?" she asked, though the words sounded forced.

Kayla shook her head. "No."

"Good." She led the way back down the winding tunnel in silence.

Kayla's mind raced over the time they had just spent together. Basanti had demonstrated more patience and kindness than she would have imagined possible, though much of it had felt forced. She dared not ask the one question that echoed louder than her other thoughts. Why?

When they emerged into the main hall, Basanti left her with a reminder. "Tomorrow." Then she turned and headed off down another tunnel that Kayla had never used.

The hall had not yet filled with people taking their midday break so she hobbled over to the long tables at the side of the room and picked a few pieces of food up. Then she headed to her usual seat, eager to get the weight off her aching leg, to wait for Yuri and Maggie.