

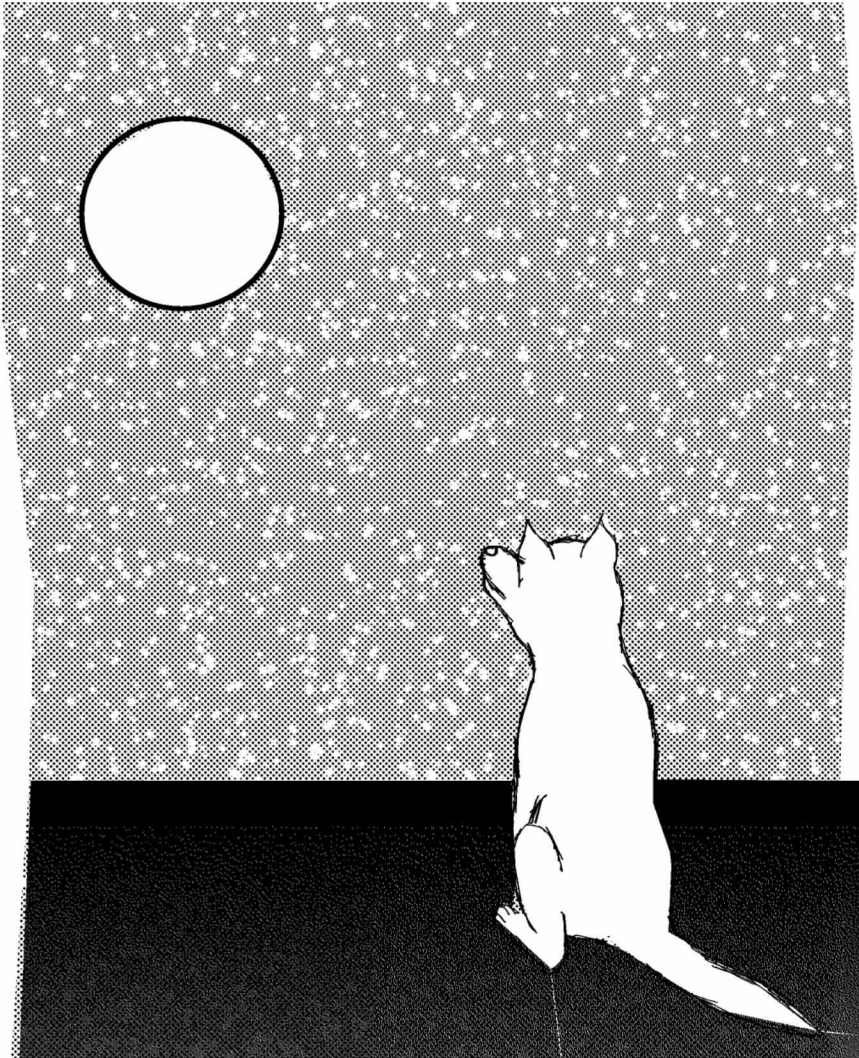
RUN WITH THE MOON



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*Scottish Highlands – Sinclair Hunting Ground
Early Middle Ages*

The she-wolf lifted her head toward the moon and yipped with delight.



Freedom coursed through her in wave after wave of pleasure. It was the first time in her life she had been allowed to run alone during a full moon. She could barely believe her laird or her brother had given their approval for her to do so, but at least one had, if not the other.

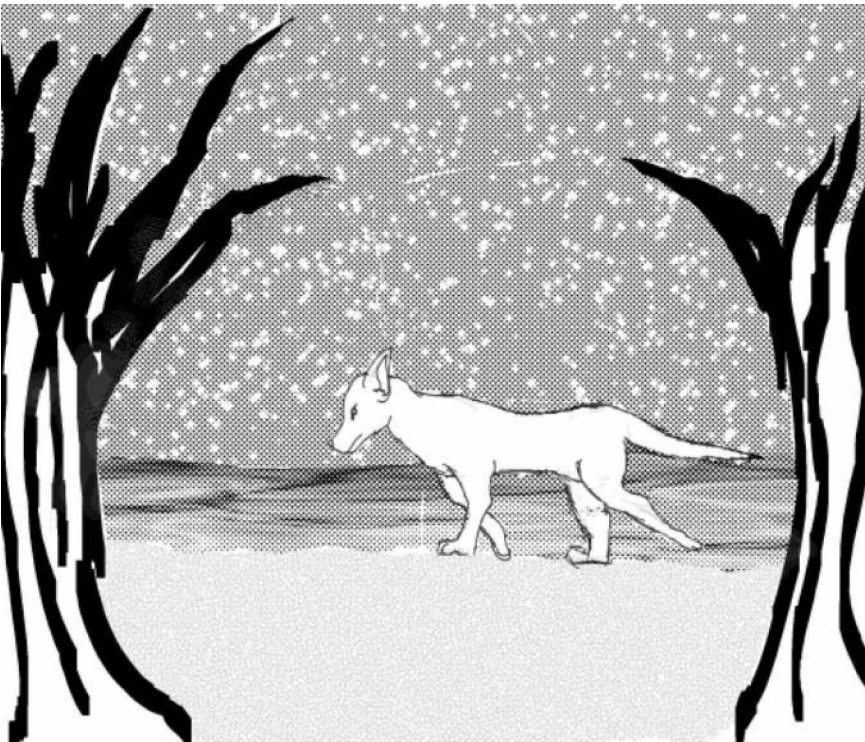
And she was so glad. She was not yet ready to mate, but if she had stayed with her pack for this run, she would have done so. She was in heat, she was of age...some said well past it...and her beast's nature would have demanded a physical mating.

The unattached males of her pack would have fought one another for the right to join with her and her wolf would have submitted to the ancient ritual. But the human woman inside the wolf's body didn't want any of the males of her pack. Not even its leader. Which had been her real problem. It was not merely that she was frightened of mating the first time as a wolf, but that none of her pack appealed to her as a potential husband or temporary lover. Even in order to get control of her change.

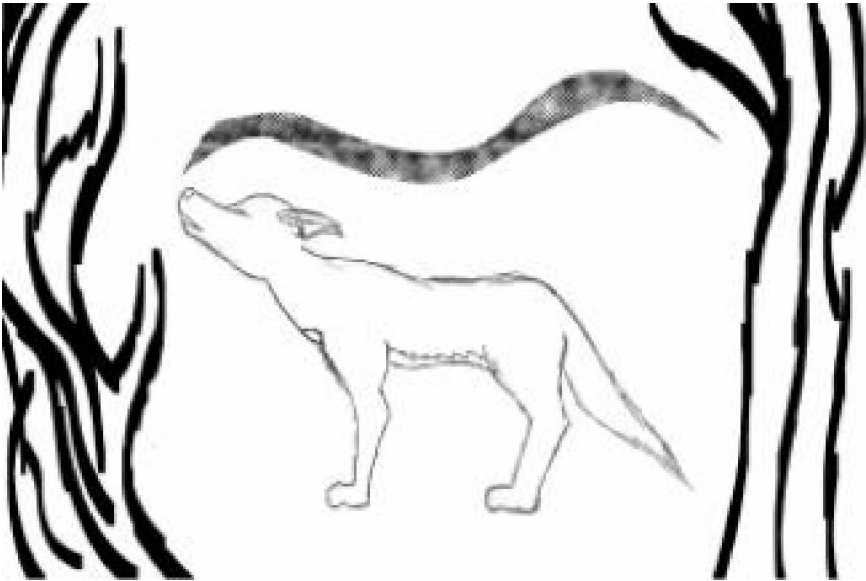
She thought it was better to run with the moon as a wolf than to couple with a man who held no appeal to her. Far too shy to share such an opinion with her brother, she had fretted on her own until she'd had no choice but to talk to someone. And now she was here, glad she had

overcome the natural reticence of her nature...because she had freedom and it felt wonderful.

She had no desire to be away longer than one night....she loved her clan and her pack. But for tonight when the moon dictated her change and her beast's nature dictated she was physically ready for something she was not mentally prepared for, this small taste of freedom was sweeter than anything she had known. The joy of avoiding fate dictated by her beast welled inside and she laughed, the sound coming out as happy barks.



She was running along the shore of the water that separated her clan's island home from this one, dipping into the lapping waves and running back to the beach in a game she used to play as a child, when an enticing scent came to her on the wind. She stopped and sniffed. She'd never smelled anything like this before. It captivated her. Her body quivered with new feelings she didn't recognize.



She wanted to run and she wanted to stay right where she was. She wanted to howl at the moon in joy...and trepidation.

For long seconds, she did nothing, just scented the wind. The intriguing fragrance came from behind her left flank along with other scents that were unfamiliar. She turned slowly, her keen eyesight making out trees of the

forest that ended shortly before the beach. She heard movement...very faint, but there all the same. Her hackles rose as fear skittered along her spine. She was not alone.

She strained to distinguish between dark shapes illuminated by the moon. And then she saw them right at the tree line....four large male wolves. Not mere wolves though, her senses told her. They were like her. They were of the Chrechte. Werewolves.

She had been given permission to run alone and directions where to run...but what her pack must not have realized was that these lands were used as hunting ground for another pack...for another clan. Her human mind screamed in denial while her beast lifted its head and howled aloud in ancient challenge, unmistakable to any werewolf.

"Catch me if you can," it said. "Come to me and make me yours."

And the bliss in her freedom transformed into another heady emotion even more powerful in her current form...the joy in perhaps finding her mate.

Lifting her tail in pure provocation, she swished it from side to side before she turned and ran. The group of males followed, their big paws thumping the shoreline as they chased her. If she stayed on the beach, they would

be on her in minutes. As fast as she was, a were who was used to hunting would be faster. But she was no untrained femwolf, easily caught. She *was* fast and she might be one of the shyest of her clan's women, but she was also smart.

She would make them prove their worthiness before she would let them fight for her. She veered into the forest, using trees and shrubs as obstacles in their paths. She was smaller and lighter, she could run trails the huge werewolves could not. She was careful to do so, forcing them to take circuitous routes to follow her, slowing them down while testing both their strength and determination.

That special scent followed her as if she was always downwind of it, though that could not be so. She'd never smelled it before and yet it was intimately familiar. It spurred her on to run faster, farther...to take bigger risks to prove her own worth as a femwolf. As one to be sought. She wanted that scent...*needed it*...but only if the wolf who carried it could prove his worth.

Would he keep up with her? Would he fight the other wolves for the chance to mate her? Would he win?

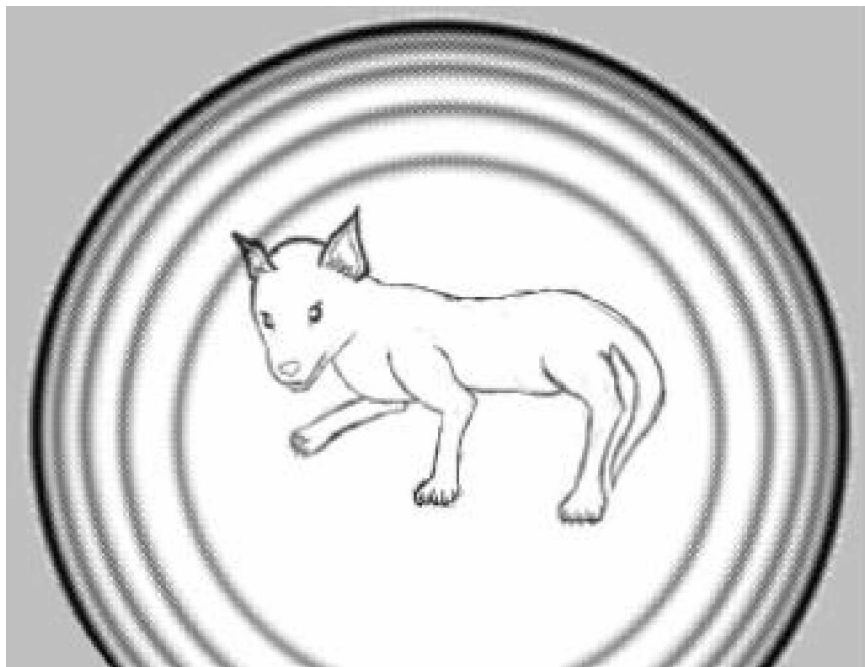
Her human heart rebelled at any other outcome and renewed fear mixed with the other emotions coursing through her sleek canine body. Feelings that clouded her ability to reason. Panicked, though she wasn't sure why,

she ran faster. Her human mind knew the reaction made no sense, not if she craved the scent, but her wolf said she should run from that which frightened her. Both were feeling too many new emotions to think clearly on anything.

Her legs carried her over the uneven ground at blurring speed, the trees she passed beneath nothing more than vague shapes in the moonlit night. The forest was unfamiliar and part of her knew that running without direction was dangerous. Still, she ran. She didn't know where she was going, or even if she was running in the direction she'd been told to stay away from. She simply ran and ran and ran.

The wolves following howled. One howl sounded above the others and it felt like a command for her to stop, but she did not heed it. The unknown before her was no more terrifying than the unknown following behind her. She was panting, but her body did not slow. She narrowly avoided hitting a tree and yelped, faltering in her smooth stride for a mere second.

Suddenly, a powerful body hit her side and she went rolling, yelping as she went head over tail, landing in a dazed heap on her side.



The big wolf that had tumbled her barked and growled at her in unmistakable censure. Susannah was a shy woman and even shyer wolf, but she was a femwolf running in heat for the first time and instincts older than time had her scrambling to her feet and snarling.

Don't yell at me!

He snarled back, snapping at her flank, as if directing her away from the direction she'd been running. It was only as he did so that she smelled an unmistakable odor

that she would have scented much earlier if she had not been engaged in mindless flight.

Humans.

Her ears flattened and her tail tucked as her heart beat so fast and loud she could barely hear the other sounds of the night. But it was unmistakably a hunting party's camp. And if the wolf's behavior meant anything, the party was not his clan. Or if they were, they weren't of the privileged few that knew weres lived among them.

He nudged her with his big snout, but even knowing they were in danger, she could not submit. Not yet.

This time his feral snarl was low and full of menace. She shivered, but held her ground.

Without warning, he rolled her again, this time pouncing so his huge wolf's body held her down. Two big paws pressed against her shoulder, claws extended. Not yet hurting her, but the warning was there. He snarled again.

She yelped and turned her head away, but not exactly showing throat.

He licked her snout, just like he had the right.

She barked at him. *Don't kiss me. I'm not yours.*

He growled and then licked down her neck. *A kiss when he could have torn her throat out.* She shivered

again, this time from the strange reaction deep in her womb rather than any fear.

His mouth closed over her throat, his teeth coming together, grabbing her ruff like an adult would a pup. The menacing teeth were gentle, but she was supremely aware of how vulnerable she was to his power...to his strength...to the lethal impact of his bite.

He lifted her to her feet and made her walk with him. It embarrassed her. She hadn't been led like this since the time she'd gone running off after her first change and her brother Drustan had come after her. He'd been angry like this wolf, but not half as gentle when he'd led her back to the pack. When they'd returned to human form, he'd lectured her until she was in tears. And for the first time in memory, when she'd gone to her mother for comfort, she'd gotten a scolding instead.

Risking discovery by humans during the hunt was a punishable offense and according to her mother, Susannah was lucky the pack leader had allowed her brother to see to her discipline. If he had handled it, it could have been much worse.

So, she knew the big were leading her away from the humans was doing the right thing. That she had been in the wrong to run in unfamiliar territory like she had was not in question. But she was still mortified by her present

situation and because if that, she was angry. She did not want this wolf to see her as a child needing tending.

She was a grown femwolf...in heat.

And he smelled like her mate.

Magnus could smell the beautiful little femwolf's embarrassment and her anger. He looked forward to comforting the first and overcoming the second. Ahh...the lass smelled good. Not just the fragrance of her heat, but the unique perfume that was hers alone. He'd never scented anything so tantalizing. When the others had caught her scent, he'd immediately known he was willing to fight for the right to mate this femwolf. He'd never chased to mate before, but this was *his* femwolf and by the end of the night, his pack and she would know it.

He led her to a clearing where he knew the others would wait. They hadn't run with him when she'd veered toward the humans. She could have been leading them into a trap and it made sense that only one wolf should follow her...if any. He hadn't even paused in his flight. He'd sensed that she was being guided by her instinct to flee danger. He didn't know what pack she was from, though he had his suspicions.

He could only think of one pack whose females might not realize this was Sinclair hunting ground. Because said

females were so carefully guarded. Her presence made little sense, but whatever accounted for it - after tonight, she'd never run alone again.

Sure enough when they reached the clearing, there were four other wolves waiting. The laird's next in command, Kenneth, and two other soldiers. The other wolf was the only other male in his clan besides Magnus that was not primarily a soldier but commanded the respect of the other wolves despite that. That wolf was their clan's healer. It was an unusual role for a male, but the Chrechte had always been different than their human counterparts and recognized that healing arts were as necessary as warriors to a pack's survival. And each clan always had at least one male healer as well as one female.

The Chrechte also understood the need for weapons with which to fight in their human form, which was why they respected Magnus. He was the clan's blacksmith. The king himself used a sword forged in Magnus's fire.

He felt no fear as he faced the other wolves with his prize. He was not primarily a soldier, but that did not mean he could not fight. He was one of the biggest wolves in the pack and he'd been fighting in wolf form since his first change and he'd faced a challenge from another pack's werewolf when he did what his precious burden had just done.

He'd run without knowing where he was going and had trespassed another pack's territory. He'd been barely eleven summers when he experienced his first change. A lot smaller than he was now. But he'd still managed to survive that challenge with his life. He hadn't bested the adult werewolf, but he'd given such a good accounting of himself that the wolf had let him go.

They were still friends.

He let go of his soon-to-be mate and barked a command for her to stay put.

She seemed to understand because she snarled and backed up to sit on her haunches. Then she dipped her head, as if embarrassed by her behavior. So, she wasn't usually so mouthy. Good. He was a quiet were himself, though he never backed down from a fight. But the way her lip had curled over her sharp canine teeth was too damned cute and his sex had swelled in instant reaction despite the fight ahead. He bent forward and kissed her again, this time licking her whiskers, her nose and along her mouth.

A sound came from her throat that was not a growl, nor was it another snarl. If he didn't know better he'd think it was a canine purr, but she was too feisty of the moment to consider herself mated...yet. Still, he took that

sense of rightness into his heart as he turned to face his challengers.

She's mine! he barked.

One by one, the other wolves snarled back. All except one. The youngest of the soldiers shook his head and trotted away to take a position that declared him a spectator rather than a participant. He was too young to be taking a mate in Magnus's opinion. A man needed some maturity before he made a good husband and family protector.

However, he knew that the wolf backing away now did not mean that if Magnus lost the fight he wouldn't challenge the winner, but he didn't want the little femwolf enough to face Magnus first for her.

Shaking his big wolf's head, he dismissed the retreat and faced the remaining three wolves. Kenneth was the first to step forward. He was about Magnus's age, but a hard man. Magnus could not remember if he'd ever seen the soldier smile. He'd taken the position next in command to the laird when the laird's former second and brother-in-law was killed in battle not so long ago. Kenneth was a natural choice for the position, but he would make a difficult mate. War, clan and the Chrechte would always come first with him.

A mate would be someone to bear his children, not someone he would share his daily living with. Magnus, on the other hand, could appreciate a beautiful femwolf just fine.

He faced the wolf. They squared off, both recognizing the fight to come could end in one of their deaths. If one of the wolves did not give up and concede to the other, *only* death would end the challenge. Magnus knew it would be over his dead body that the other were would possess the sweet smelling femwolf watching them so intently. Kenneth was both hard and stubborn, not the kind to give up either.

The other challengers backed off to give the two werewolves room to fight. Magnus barked at them and indicated the femwolf watching them all with wary eyes. The soldiers guessed he didn't want her running during the fight and all three, including the one who had backed off from the challenge, surrounded her.

She barked at them when they got too close.

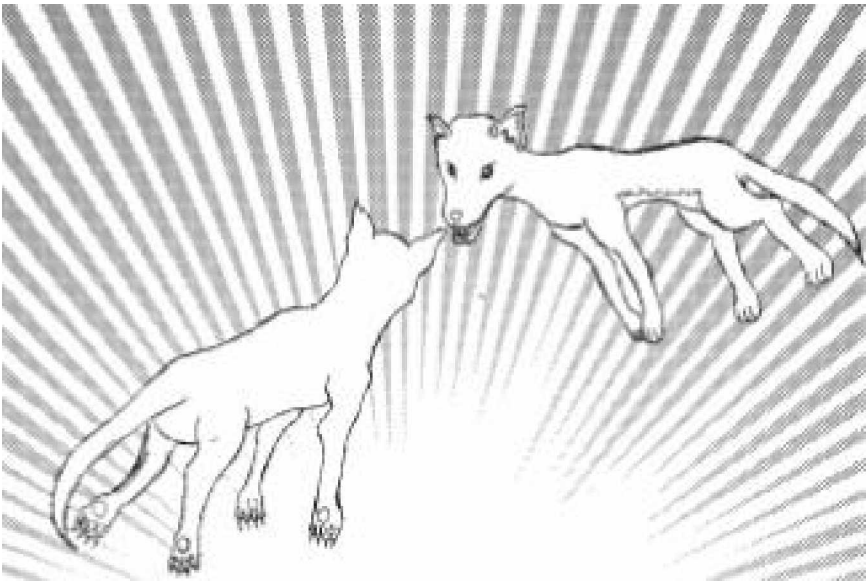
He growled at her. The message should be clear even though he did have the ability to speak in this form. *Stay there.*

Her snout lifted as if she was dismissing him, but she did not move from where she sat on her haunches watching him.

He barked at the other wolves and they each moved a little distance from her, protecting and watching her, but not so close she her eyes were wide with distress.

Magnus nodded and turned from her, once again squared off with his challenger. He and Kenneth circled each other warily, Magnus concentrating wholly on watching for the first move by his opponent. It came without warning, but he was ready anyway.

The other wolf sprang through the air and Magnus leapt to the side, spinning in almost the same motion to launch his own attack.



He landed against the other wolf and knocked him into a roll. With another opponent that would have been enough to give Magnus the upper hand, at least for a

second, but the laird's second was a hell of a fighter. He came up from his roll, jaws open and body tensed to jump.

They met midair, locking onto each other with sharp fore-claws and even sharper teeth. They turned in a circle in the air before landing on the ground with a mighty thump, but neither broke their hold on the other.

Susannah yelped as the fighting wolves landed so hard they shook the ground. What if her wolf was seriously hurt, or killed? Her heated wolf's blood ran cold. She could not imagine living the rest of her life without that scent surrounding her, giving her comfort.

It did not have to make sense. Her mother had told her it could be that way...especially with sacred bond mates. Her wolf said her mate was strong enough to take all comers. Her human mind filled with terror at the prospect that he wouldn't. Instinctively, she knew he would never back away from the challenge. He would fight for her to death or passing out from loss of blood or pain.

She jumped up and started pacing. The wolves around her snapped, but she ignored them. She wasn't running, she just could not stay still.

The two huge wolves in the center of the clearing were still fighting. She could smell blood and sweat. Fury and determination. Whose blood? She stopped to sniff

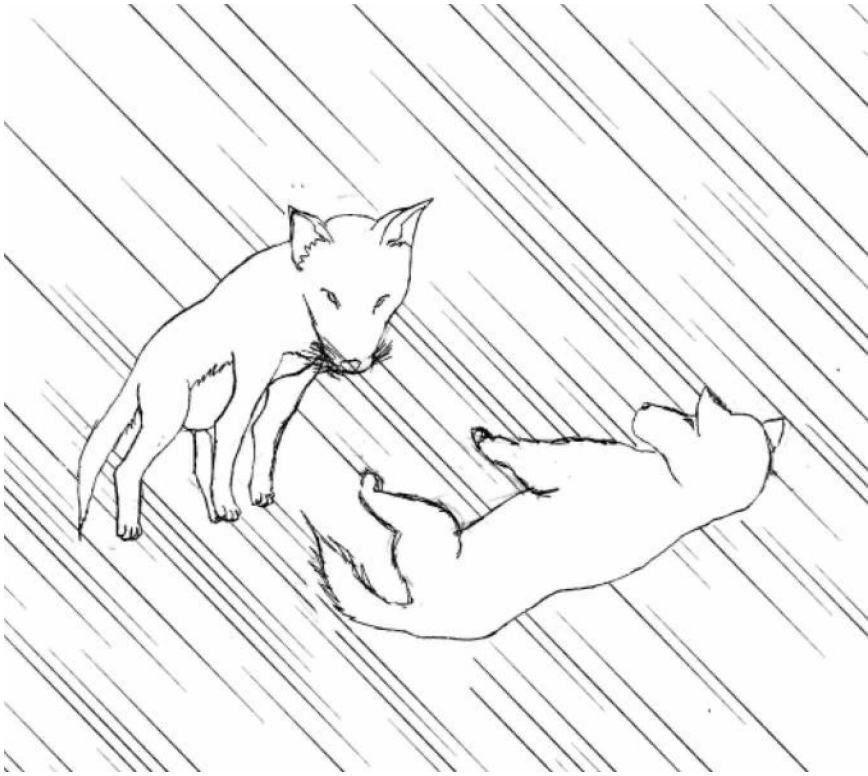
the air, concentrating. Both of them. Her body trembled. *Please...* Her prayer could go no further as she watched her wolf get pinned. But he refused to show throat.

He did something with his body, twisting and getting away. He ran.

Had she been wrong? Was he abandoning the challenge? She looked to the left and right. She didn't want these wolves. She would fight them herself before she would lie on her side for one of them.

But her wolf hadn't left. He'd only run far enough to give him momentum as he ran back toward the other wolf, going airborne just before reaching the challenger. He rolled the other wolf again, but this time, he got on top before the other wolf could get up. He snapped lethal canines at the other were in obvious warning.

Show throat or die.



The other wolf showed throat.

She could smell the shock coming off of the wolves around her. Apparently the were who had just shown throat was not known for backing down. Magnus backed up and allowed the other wolf to get up. He did not help, but he waited respectfully for the other wolf to stand.

The two huge wolves nodded to each other then turned to face the wolves surrounding her. They both snarled in challenge and she realized the vanquished wolf was now warning the others that while he'd shown throat

to her wolf, he stood ready to fight should one of the others beat him.

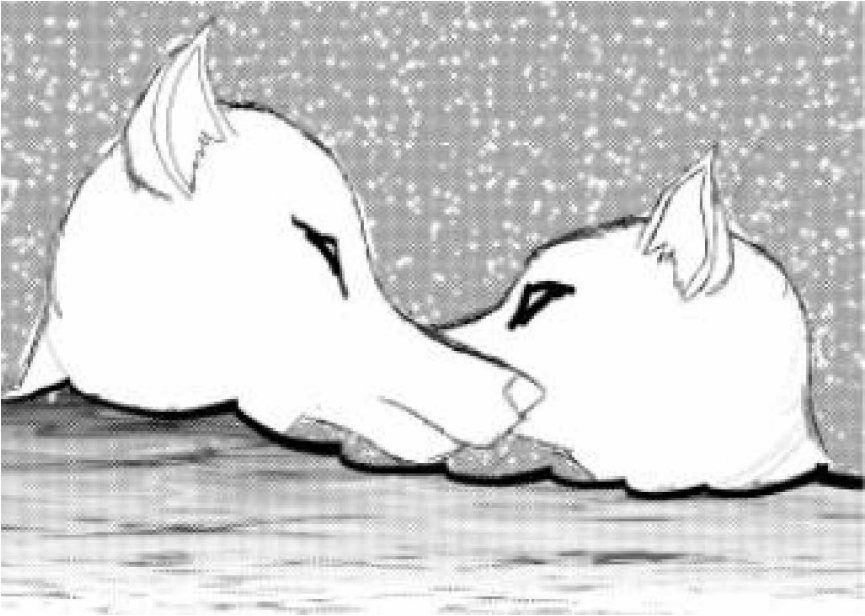
Fear scented the air and resignation. The other wolves backed up, declining the challenge.

Her wolf pawed the ground in front of the wolf he'd fought. They bowed to each other again and the other wolf turned and ran.

The others followed him.

Her wolf turned to her. He waited. She knew what he wanted. If she refused, would he fight her for the chance to mate her? She would never know because everything inside of her demanded she drop to her forelegs, roll on her back and show belly.

He gave a pleasure filled rumble and swiped his tongue along her exposed belly. Then he barked once and trotted off. She got up and followed him to a small loch. He dove in the water and after a second's hesitation she did too. She helped him clean his wounds and wash the scent of the fight from his fur.



She didn't know at what point the cleaning became a playful teasing game, but by the time they left the water, she was comfortable with his nearness and his touch.

They dried each other and it was unlike any time she had shared such a thing with another wolf. She'd never known the sensations that washed over her body along with his ministering tongue. When he kissed her, she returned the caress and followed him into passion with only the tiniest amount of fear that he dissolved completely with gentle touches and careful handling of her wolf's body.

When they came together both her femwolf and her inner woman rejoiced in the joining.

She woke hours later, curled into his body, their fur scented with each other and the fragrance of mating. The moon was almost set and she could feel the oncoming change. Would she have control immediately, or would it not come until the next full moon? Or the one after that?

Taking control of the change was not natural for every wolf and she did not know what it would be like for her. She examined the were while he was sleeping. He'd been so careful of her. She'd heard stories of first matings happening in the fur. It could be terrifying for a femwolf, but he had made it wonderful. She did not look forward to leaving him. But she had no choice. She had her pack's permission to run alone during the full moon, not to lifemate with a wolf from another pack.

Would he come to her pack and ask permission to keep her? What if he didn't? She had no way of knowing whether he'd been as impacted by their mating as she had been. She felt like she'd joined her soul to his, but what if he didn't feel the same way?

Eyes still closed, he kissed her, his tongue swiping gently along her snout. A soft purr of pleasure rumbled in her chest. His eyes came open and he nuzzled her. She nuzzled him back, wishing there was time to mate again before she had to leave. As it was she would probably have to swim back to the Balmoral's island in her

skin...unless she had control of the change. She could hope. She didn't look forward to such a long, cold swim. She knew she could make it, but it wouldn't be easy.

She pushed herself to stand on all fours and shook her body. Stupid tears wetting her eyes, she barked a goodbye to the were before turning to go.

She'd barely taken a step when he was in front of her, baring his teeth in warning.

I have to go, she barked.

He shook his head, like he understood her thoughts and took a menacing step toward her. She had to back up or be knocked over.

She growled.

He growled back.

"Come on, lass. It's time to go home," she clearly heard a sexy burr speak inside her mind.

She stared in shock. "We're sacred mates!" she thought.

"Aye, so it would appear, though I had no doubts from the first scent of your sweet fur."

She shook her head. "It can't be."

"Why not, lass?"

"You aren't of my pack."

"But I am your mate."

"We..."

"Mated."

"But it's just sex...so we can get control of the change. It doesn't mean anything."

"Do you really believe that, lass? Did it feel like it meant nothing?" The burr was filled with anger now, not sexy promise.

"No, but..."

"I know there are packs that dinna consider a physical mating a lifemating, but our pack isna one of them."

He said it so arrogantly she glared. "Well, mine is."

"Tell that to the bairn you carry."

"I'm not pregnant!"

"You are no?"

Actually, she did not know. She was in heat. If they were true mates, it was almost certain that she was. Even if they weren't bonded in the sacred way, the risk would be there because they were both wolves. But if they could mindspeak, they *had* to be sacred mates.

"I'm scared. I didn't want to mate this moon. That's why I left the island."

"Ah, so that is why, but whatever your intention, you are now my mate."

She turned away from him, trying to gather her scattered thoughts.

He came up along side her, nuzzling her. "I will be a good mate to you, lass."

"My name is Susannah," she whispered.

"I am Magnus, the blacksmith and weapon forger for our clan."

"I've heard of you."

She could sense his pleasure at her words. "I will take good care of you."

"You have to ask my laird for permission to keep me."

"Did you have her clan's permission to run alone on our land this night?"

"Yes."

"Then, I'll be asking no one for permission for anything. Your pack did not protect you as they should have. If I go to the island it will be to challenge your laird and the men of your family over their treatment of you."

"No!"

"You are my sacred mate...you could have been harmed this night. I willna forget that."

"I don't want you to challenge my brother."

"I am keeping you."

She'd seen him fight the other wolf, she knew Magnus did not give up. If she refused to stay, he would willingly go to Balmoral Island, but it would be to challenge

her brother and her laird, not to ask their permission for anything. The very thought filled her with terror. She did not know which werewolf would win the challenge, but she could not bear the thought of Magnus being hurt or of him killing her brother.

She licked her canine lips. "We will invite my mother to come to stay when the bairn is near to birthing."

"We can invite her sooner if you like, my sweet Susannah."

She shook her head. It would take some time for her brother's ire to soften a little. She had no desire to draw him to the Sinclairs to offer a challenge to her mate. She knew Drustan would check on her, but he could do it without ever being seen. He would see that she was happy and he would be angry no request for her hand had been made, but he would discourage the Balmoral from declaring war over her.

After all, to take a mate in this way was broke one ancient law while adhering to another.

Magnus nuzzled her again. "Are you well, my sweet?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to go home?"

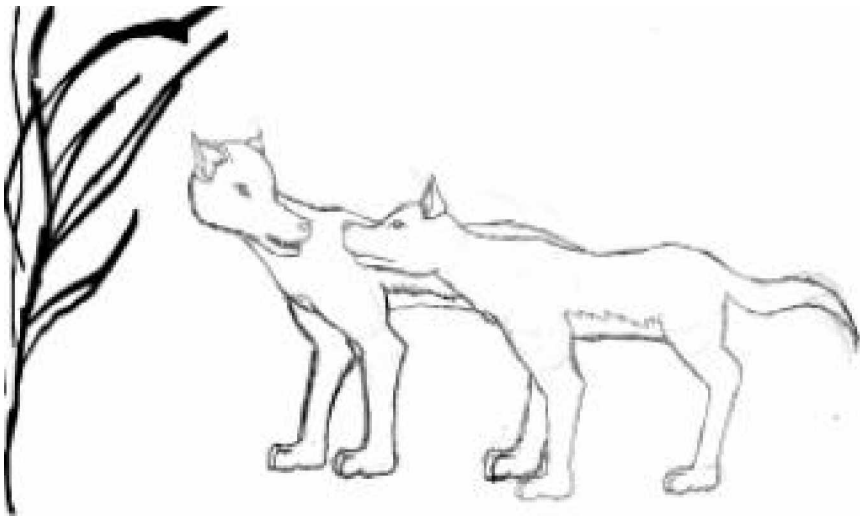
Was she? Was she ready to face a new future beside this werewolf, to go to a home that would be hers to

mistress as her own mother ruled the home she'd lived in since birth? She'd believed she was not ready to mate, but the prospect of living with Magnus, of joining his clan excited her. Her mate had not been of her clan, but God had made sure she found him.

How could she deny the gift? "Yes, I'm ready to go home."

Deep inside where instincts and human understanding collided, she felt it was the totally right. She had been destined for this moment from her birth. As Magnus had been.

"Lead the way," she said inside her mind with breathless wonder.



He smiled a wolf's grin and started back into the forest. She ran by his side, her heart filled with joy. She

couldn't wait to change back into their skin. She wondered what he looked like. He was a big wolf, he'd be a big man...she wondered what color his eyes were.



EPILOGUE

His eyes were grey. In his human form, the Viking heritage of the Chrechte was apparent. His jaw was square, his hair was blonde and he was as strong as any man had a right to be. He was also very stubborn. He believed her clan had not protected her and maintained his refusal to ask formal permission to keep her.

Susannah loved him, but could not help worrying about what would happen between their two clans.