

There was the briefest hesitation, a tense moment where the ice remained unyielding, before his boot sunk into the snow. Above him, the sky was a vibrant blue, seamless and stark against the chilled white of the mountain. Everything was windswept, as refined as a sculpture, broken only by the jagged craters he left behind. As the sun rose, the wind died and everything was still.

That morning he woke with stiff, icy muscles, a result of his hard climb the day before. Like a baker kneading dough, they loosened as he worked his way down the mountain. He couldn't remember the last time he felt this young; 25 years? 50? His thick jacket hung loosely on his frame, his pants rode low on his hips. The wind tugged at the hem and tickled his belly so that, eventually, he stopped and donned another shirt and a pair of long johns. The extra layers thickened him just enough to fill out his clothes, and he couldn't find it in himself to be bothered by the inconvenience.

At midday, the sun glanced off the snow and spit into his eyes with enough fury to drive him into the tree line. He liked walking in the open because of the view, but there was nothing to see when it was so bright. The trees were dim but peaceful, the snow thinner here because of the protective canopy. He brushed his way through the grove, cascading puffs of ice crystals off branches whenever he got too close.

The measured sound of his footsteps untethered his thoughts and allowed them to wander. He thought first of his wife, who was pregnant and due any day. Part of him wished he could be there for her, but part of him was glad they'd sent him away. He was a much better climber than he was a midwife.

His second thought was for the container in his backpack. It was a symbol of his vocation, of which he was proud, but mostly he liked the feel of the leather under his palms. It had been his father's, and his grandmother's, passed down until it reached him. It had seen the side of the mountain for longer than he could fathom.

Would his son follow in his footsteps? Or maybe it was a girl, and he'd have the privilege of handing her the container for her virgin climb. When his father first took him up the mountain, he'd been terrified. Every sound and movement brought him to a standstill. He remembered the sweat under his clothes, the rabbit-like pace of his heart. It had taken them twice as long to get where they were going, but his father was patient. There were several more trips with his father, over the span of many years, before he was ready to travel alone. Remembering his apprenticeship still made his skin prick with embarrassment.

He would be kinder with his daughter. They would roast snow rabbit over the fire and talk about what they'd seen that day. He would teach her about the stars, about the clouds and the snow and the mountain itself. His grandmother used to tell him stories about the mountain and its origin, and he liked best the story of the goddess who turned herself into a rabbit to lead a hungry wolf away from the village.

He trudged through the remainder of the day deep in thought. Every so often, he poked his head out of the trees and gauge his direction by the sun. In the afternoon, when the sun had

fallen from its zenith, he broke from the trees. He was close enough to the village that his hunger returned, and he stopped just outside the trees to have a lunch of dried meat, stiff bread, and soft cheese. His stomach settled, full but unsatisfied. He imagined the dense heat of caribou stew in his belly, of mulled wine on his tongue, and hastened the rest of the way home.

Slowly, the snow began to recede until he was treading on solid ground, through trees only dusted with white. The trail was well-traveled here, the air warm enough for him to shed his extra layers. He could smell the smoke of home when something snapped to the right of him. He turned as a series of rapid cracking reached him, and drew his knife as the mountain lion leapt. They both fell back, his body tensing beneath the lion's as it sank its claws into him. A scream escaped his throat, first startled and then furious. The lion bit down on his shoulder, a ripping, tearing sound as its fangs sank through leather, fabric, and then muscle.

He was lucky. The lion was small, weak from the winter and young. He slew it and knelt for several minutes in their combined blood, knife abandoned and arm clasped tight to his chest. He cursed himself, what an idiot he'd been. Thoughts trained on home, not on the forest. If he'd been slower, if this had happened before the climb, he would be dead.

When he got to his feet, he immediately checked his backpack. The container was still there, unsettled but intact. Relief flooded him, pulsing through his shoulder and the cuts on his torso. He tried to swing the pack on to his back, saw his vision waver, and resolved to drag it home. He managed to walk several feet before he collapsed to his knees. He breathed, ragged. He stood, walked, collapsed. Stood, walked, collapsed.

Queasy with pain, muscles shaking from exertion, he eventually fell and couldn't rise. He saw the sun, gauged its distance from the horizon, and gathered he had an hour before night fell. He lay there for a while, weaving in and out of consciousness, until he heard hooves in the distance. His heart leapt into his throat. He sucked in a deep, deep breath and screamed.

---

“So that’s how you got your scars, Papa?” the girl asked. She had her legs tucked under her, and was watching her father with bright, curious eyes. “A mountain lion?”

Her father nodded, hiding his shame with a half-smile. He tugged at his right earlobe, a gesture the girl knew well. The fire snapped behind her, warming her back. She twisted her braid around her finger, contemplating. “Were you afraid?”

“Yes,” he told her.

“When you go out again, will you be extra careful?”

He shifted forward in his chair. “Yes.”

“You promise?” she asked, twisting her mouth into a worried line.

He laughed and gestured to her. She stood, releasing her braid, and went to him. He put his hands on her narrow shoulders and said, “You look just like your mother when you do that.” She wrinkled her nose and he continued, “I promise I will be extra careful, so that I can come home to you and your mama.” He held his pinky out. She hesitated. He could see the rebuke on her lips, could almost hear her protesting that pinky promises were for 6-year-olds, not for girls her age. She relented and twisted her littlest finger with his.

Satisfied, the girl reseated herself on the rug before the hearth. “When do *I* get to climb?” she whined. She had her braid in her hand again. “You got the climb when you were ten, how come I have to wait?”

He shrugged. “You’re nine, not ten.”

She puffed up. “I’ll be ten in three weeks!”

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he told her. “Will you be ten by then?”

She crossed her arms and gave him a frustrated frown. Then she sighed and jumped to her feet. “If I can’t go, then I want to help you pack,” she declared.

The two went to the kitchen, where his wife was preparing provisions. She looked up when they entered and gave her daughter a chunk of biscuit. “Shep,” she said, “how long will you be gone this time? You’re not going up very far, are you?”

He shook his head and went to grab a biscuit. She swatted his hand away. “I’ll be gone for about three weeks your time,” he told her. He winked at his daughter. “Back just in time for your birthday.” She smiled as she chewed. He rolled his bad shoulder, wincing at its stiffness.

He had aged in the last ten years: his old wounds hurt him, and he’d lost the fourth and fifth fingers on his right hand to the mountain lion. It would make climbing difficult, but not impossible. They only needed a small amount to tide them over for the winter. He was glad to be sent out so soon, knowing the climb would ease his pains and rejuvenate him.

“We’re gonna pack Papa’s stuff,” his daughter explained. Crumbs gathered at the corner of her mouth, and she licked them away.

Shep smiled and ushered her out of the kitchen.

Outside the house was a shed, stout and sturdy. He opened the door for his daughter and she darted inside. She pulled matches from her pocket and began lighting the sconces on the wall. They illuminated a heavy table in the middle of the room, surrounded by rows of shelves and cubbyholes. Everything was tucked away, the way he liked it. Together, the girl and her father began pulling articles from their resting places and setting them on the table. Out came mittens, wool caps, knives, matches, sleeping bags, rope, until the table was brimming. He ran through the items in his head, an incorporeal checklist. Finally, he nodded and offered a palm to his daughter. She slapped it.

“You will be a great climber,” he declared. She grinned.

It took them a while to put the gathered supplies into the backpack. It required careful planning and precise folding. He let her do most of the work, to help her learn. A few times they had to unpack the bag because of a minor miscalculation, and she grew frustrated toward the end. She lacked his penchant for neatness.

Lastly, Shep went to the far corner of the room, where an iron box squatted. Its door was plain and held a single lock. From his pocket he drew a key, and from the safe he pulled the container. His daughter was at his shoulder, eyes wide. He handed it to her, gingerly. She held it the same way, and carefully brought it to the table. He set it inside the backpack and cinched the top tight.

They stood in silence for a moment, Shep content with his work and the girl brimming with the excitement of adventure.

“Will you bring me something back?” she asked, turning to him.

“What would you want?” he replied.

She shrugged. “Anything you find, I guess.”

He put a hand on her head, then moved it to her shoulder. “Okay.”

---

Four days into his climb, he found the perfect gift. He stumbled upon it while he slogged through a line of trees during midday. It was an impressive red, catching his eye immediately. He could hear its owner in the distance, distressed. He picked it up and tucked it into the leather straps of his coat, wearing it like a button on a lapel.

He judged he would reach his destination in a day his time, if the weather held. It was the middle of August, and the snow was thin and soft, though the mountain’s aesthetic rarely changed this high up. It was like a scene in a snow globe.

Night fell, then rose, then fell again before he found himself within reach of the shelf. It was dusk, his surroundings cloaked in shades of gray. It was rocky and slick, and he used his picks and rope to keep him from losing ground. He thought about setting up camp for the night, but he knew from the scenery that he was close. If he pushed himself, he could reach the shelf and sleep comfortably in its protected overhang.

He hesitated for a moment, weighing his options, before deciding to move forward. He did his best to ignore the fatigue of his muscles as he climbed, concentrating instead on each breath. It grew harder and harder to see, and he made slow progress despite his determination.

He cursed into the thin air. He imagined the village seeing him like this, suspended on the face of the mountain like a spider caught behind glass. His cheeks flushed. He had to be close to the shelf. He allowed himself a glance upward.

Several yards away was the shelf, identifiable by its iridescent glow. He laughed, victorious, and hauled himself up with the last of his strength. His pick hit the side of the mountain, his hand reached out to the shelf when his shoulder seized. His grip weakened, then failed, and he swung wide away from the shelf.

Terror surged through him, lagging behind the motion of his body. He saw the steep drop below him, felt his rope harness tighten around his torso, and then he was falling. The rope had snapped clean off the face of the mountain, inches above the shelf. Now it fell alongside him, twisting and curling on itself.

He hit the slope and rolled, cascading downward. He felt only the uncontrollable contortion of his body, like a doll being pulled in several directions.

When his body stopped, he saw the night sky. Stars were freckles across the inky blackness, framed by the dim glow of reflected snow and ice. He couldn't feel his legs, was afraid to lift his head. Panic choked him, made tears leak down his cheeks and freeze against his skin. He lifted a hand to wipe them away, only to realize he couldn't move them.

Shock hit him like a ball of ice. He should have died. He lay in the snow, unable to feel the cold, knowing he couldn't die this close to the shelf. Starvation, wounds, exposure, thirst, animals: he would lay untouched for the rest of eternity, a bug in crystalline amber.

Day and night were uniform, the only passage of time marked by the movement of the stars and the sun. Occasionally hawks would circle overhead, or he would hear the howl of wolves. From his resting place, he could see where he had fallen, many, many yards up the mountain's face. He could see the shelf. He loathed it.

He cried the first night, and the second. He missed his daughter's birthday. He would miss his wife's in spring, and then his daughter's again in the fall. The village would be without the liquid life that kept them going; many would die until a new climber emerged and braved the mountain. He entertained the idea of rescue for the briefest of seconds.

A storm blew in and erased his presence from the landscape. It covered him with a thick blanket, under which he could not suffocate. He was thankful for the isolation. In this way, he could pretend he was inside a coffin, laid to rest in the village's graveyard.

A while later another storm arrived and blew him out of his grave and into the bright world once more. He saw the shelf, beating against the sun in defiance.

Time flowed. He was numb, his thoughts shapeless. He felt almost serene, calm to his very core. He was part of the mountain now, and maybe that wasn't a plight. He had landed in a way that allowed him the view he always loved: never-ending beauty, bright and vibrant and untouched.

Then, one day, a shadow fell over him.

The girl inched across the mountain's face at a forty-five-degree angle, her braid swinging like a metronome in front of her. The sled she pulled was light, but it halted her pace. Her breath was suppressed by a thick scarf, brilliant as a cardinal's feather. She pulled it up and over her brow to shield her eyes from the high and blinding sun. She contemplated swerving into the trees, but the sled was too wide to pass between the evergreens. Next time she would make it narrower, or maybe even modular.

Losing herself in her thoughts was dangerous, but she found the sweeping landscape, albeit breathtaking, monotonous. Each day was like the last, uneventful and exhausting. She could see how her father could succumb to idle behavior. Weeks alone would leave her inattentive, too.

Suddenly, her foot found new terrain. She didn't sink into bottomless snow, but instead found a soft, oddly shaped mound. Her momentum carried her over it, powder bursting around her as she stumbled. Startled, she stopped and looked behind her.

Millimeters in front of the sled was a deep, oblong indent. She peered closer and saw ice-wrapped boots, snow-cruled leather, and torn pants on legs splayed at odd angles. She saw a stoic face, covered in a dense, frozen beard, and eyes beneath a woolen cap that were dark as fertile soil.

Several, thick heartbeats gonged in her chest before she understood. She fell forward, releasing the reigns of the sled as her knees hit the ground. Her hands touched leather and then she was crying. She felt her mouth moving, felt her throat contracting as she spoke to him, but she didn't know what she was saying. She was overwhelmed, relief and astonishment mixing until she felt a surreal sense of happiness. A fevered dream? An icy mirage?

She grasped at his face, holding it in her hands, and saw the wild look of his eyes behind a film of tears. His eyebrows wobbled, eyelids crinkled, his lips bearing his teeth in a mask of emotion.

She had never seen such a pure expression of her father's face. When she was a child, he was always smiling. He was never angry, although his cheeks and eyes turned red easily with chagrin, a hand always reaching for an earlobe to tug. Even at ten she understood this body language, had always observed her father closely with admiration.

She was holding his face too tightly, and she relinquished her grip to push herself upward. She waited for father to speak, but he remained mute and teary-eyed. Bent at the waist, she surveyed him, then squatted down to run her hands over his legs. Broken, and badly. He was paralyzed from the neck down, and he had cuts and contusions covering what she could see of him through his ripped clothing. He was tangled in a thick rope, which bound him at the waist. She didn't want to see what damage it had done to his torso. His belongings were nowhere in sight.

From her position, she could see the shelf, ethereal even in the daylight. A fresh sight, she found herself surprisingly underwhelmed. She had imagined this day for years, but in that moment, she couldn't remember if it was finding the shelf or her father that she had dreamed of the most.

She cupped his face again. "How much do you need?" she demanded. Her braid fell from her shoulder and danced across his features. She yanked it away and repeated herself: "How much do you need?"

He couldn't speak. His mouth quivered and he swallowed again and again. His eyes screamed of desperation, but his lips emitted no sound.

She jerked to her feet and stepped around him. "I'll be back," she said. Grabbing the reins, she began to pull the sled around her father, only to stop when she had moved a few paces. Swinging around to the side of the sled, she began unpacking her gear and stuffing it into a travel bag. Her work was sloppy and rushed. Ice picks, rope, gloves, water, the items fell into her pack until it almost didn't shut. Then she thought better of it, unpacked, and reassembled everything.

Now a good deal lighter, the pack settled on to her back and nestled between her shoulder blades. She rummaged inside the sled again and withdrew a container like her father's, only newer. It was rounded and organic in shape, fitting neatly against her hip.

"Okay," she murmured. She stood still, gloved hand worrying at her braid. "Okay, okay, okay." She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and pulled her scarf back into place over her mouth. She glanced at the sky, noted the time, and judged she would be well within daylight hours to and from the shelf. The sled would mark her father's location; worse come to worse, she could spend the night on the shelf and return to him in the morning.

Shep stared blankly up at the sky. His daughter had come and gone so quickly that she didn't seem real. He hadn't felt her hands on his body, only when she touched his face and then his vision was blurred with tears. How much time had passed since he'd seen her? She looked leagues older, maybe 16? 17? Through the veil of moisture, she looked exactly like his wife.

He saw her reappear a while later, a figure hanging against a stark white backdrop. He could almost see the red of her scarf, and it reminded him of the feather tucked into his jacket. He doubted it was there anymore.

A mixture of dread and relief flooded him. This was real. He could see her scaling the snowy mountain side, ponderous and hesitant. Her ascent moved at a crawling, but steady pace. As she climbed, he found himself wishing she would forget about him. He couldn't fathom returning to the village after all this time. What would his wife say to him? What would the village say? They would have suffered for years without him. How many had died because of his failure?

He thought again of the feather he had found, of his daughter's red scarf. The way she had looked at him when their eyes met, how she repeated his name when she grabbed him. He would endure whatever the village had for him if it meant he could hug her tight.

She made it to the shelf. He saw her standing, unmoving, and knew she was marveling at the pool the shelf held. Impossibly deep, a rich purple with light emanating from somewhere below. When he first saw it, he felt the intense urge to jump in, swim to the bottom, and find the source of the light. Every time after, he spent a few hours gazing into it, wondering if the old legends were true.

His daughter didn't stay long. He saw her duck down, filling the container, and then gingerly lower herself off the shelf and onto the mountain. She slid down the side, and for a moment he was confused. She should have picked her way to the ground, in the same fashion as her ascension. Instead, she was using her ropes to hasten her journey. Why would she leave the ropes attached to the mountain unless...?

It occurred to him then that his daughter would be a much better climber than he was, perhaps better than his father, and his father's mother before them.

The girl disappeared, and he waited with eyes on the sky. How much would it take to get his body working again? He didn't know how much damage there was, or whether he would need to overcome the months of starvation and dehydration. He had never heard of a climber getting hurt this close to the shelf, and the village never healed anyone as damaged as him. They almost always died before they could drink, or there wasn't enough water to heal all their wounds.

She materialized a while later, as the sun was setting. She knelt next to his head, her breathing heavy. She was shaking and she knocked the mouth of the container against his teeth as she poured the ice-cold liquid onto his tongue.

He drank deeply. Each swallow shot through him like an arrow, and very soon he felt feeling return to his limbs. It was followed by pain so intense that he choked. His daughter pulled back enough to let him cough once, twice, three times before she let him drink again.

Pain gave way to soothing calm as his legs, ribs, and organs healed themselves. He felt his muscles knit back together where they had torn, his skin mend where it had broken. He felt like his spirit had wandered the mountainside, unattached, until this very moment.

He drained the entire container. His daughter sat back and watched him. Slowly, with much concentration, he curled the fingers of his hand. They responded shakily at first, then they moved more easily, until he could flex his forearms. He wiggled his toes in his boots, gently lifted each leg. He could feel the cold on his skin, the heavy weight of his jacket on his abdomen, and the comforting squeeze of his boots on his feet.

He sat up and, with his daughter's help, unwound the rope from his torso. His body responded quickly, and he felt no pain. He stumbled to his feet and turned his head side to side.

He saw the grove of trees just behind him, a large sled to his left, and his daughter hovering to his right.

He turned to her, arms opening, and she threw herself at him with a sob. They were crying again. She was smaller than he first thought, but sturdy beneath her clothes. She pressed her face into his chest, and he pressed his into her hair for what felt like a long, long time.

---

She set up camp just inside the trees while his daughter retrieved more water from the shelf. She brought her sled with her this time, a contraption he never would have dreamed dragging up the mountain. He watched her climb to and from the shelf three times before she trudged back to camp. While he waited, he practiced speaking.

He had a fire going when she returned, and together they maneuvered the sled so they could lean on it. They were quiet at first, awkward after the reunion. He was having trouble acclimating to the world, didn't quite remember what it was like to feel his limbs and move them in accordance to his thoughts.

Eventually, he spoke. "Em," he murmured, "I'm—." He paused, considering. Sorry? Thankful? Ashamed, elated, overwhelmed, astonished? She waited for him to finish, but he couldn't. Instead, he gave her a wide-eyed look, trying to convey all that he felt. She looked more like him, now that he could see clearly. She had his chin and nose with his wife's eyes and jaw. He could see his father in her, too, in the wave of her hair and her soft cheekbones. These were all attributes he had noted before, when she was young, only they felt more pronounced now.

She swung her braid over her shoulder and picked at the frayed end of her scarf, which she held limply in her lap. "I designed the sled," she told him. "To carry more water." He had seen her dump the contents of the container into a special compartment of the sled, but he was shocked to hear it was her design.

"I'm proud of you," he said.

They were quiet again, attempts at conversation stilted. He could tell she was frustrated by the uncomfortable silences, but didn't know how to remedy it. He searched the woods, thinking. This was what he had wanted nearly two decades earlier, when he was planning to take his son or daughter climbing for their first time.

He leaned forward, arms on bent knees. He stared at the fire for a moment, remembering the tale from his youth. It came easily, vividly, the way his grandmother always told it. He turned to his daughter and saw her watching him with a combination of uncertainty and expectancy. He smiled at her and began to tell the tale of the mountain's origin.

---

When the village was young, there was no church, temple, or shrine. The villagers worshiped nothing but the rise and fall of the sun, which grew their crops, and the come and go of rain, which quenched their thirst. Hailing from the South, many of the villagers were novice hunters, trappers, and lumberjacks, hoping to establish a trading post and make their fortune under the mountain's shadow.

The winters were harsh and long, the summers variable. Often the fall harvest was meager. The forests around the village held rabbits, deer, and squirrels, but also mountain lions, bears, and wolves. Many of the men and women wore evidence of a tangle with predators, and still the village was suffering. What they caught was enough to eat, but not enough to sell. What they cut down was enough to warm them and build their houses, but not enough to ship anywhere. It looked to many like the village would die in its cradle.

One day a hunting party returned, frantic, wide-eyed, and exhausted. The leader, a woman called Shauna, called a town meeting, and when the heads of all the households had gathered, she told them what she had seen: "A woman," she said, "with long hair, crisp and sharp like an evergreen's needles."

Out of necessity, hunters had taken to traveling well beyond the village, up the side of the mountain. She and her party had made it farther than anyone had documented. "Way up there," she said, "the rabbit is fat, the wolf is slow, and the sky is endless."

One of her party had been stalking a large buck, hoping to make a rack for his wife's clothes. He was within striking distance when, from behind him, a voice asked, "What are you doing up here?"

He started, the deer escaped, and the voice materialized into a woman. The leader of the party came crashing through the trees at his cry, and nearly barreled into the woman herself.

The woman repeated her statement, only this time to the Shauna: "What are you doing up here?"

"Her eyes were silver like moonlight snow, and her skin dark like the trunk of a tree," Shauna told the village. She gestured wide with her arms, then raised them above her head. "Like a grizzly bear!" she announced.

"Well, who is she?" someone prompted.

"The spirit of the mountain," the leader roared. "The mountain goddess!"

This was met with silence and followed by a growing, united grumble from the crowd. A few people shook their heads, and someone called out, "You're delirious!"

Undeterred, Shauna shushed the village and pulled from her bag a small, narrow icicle. She held it high and said, "She blessed this icicle, as proof of her ability. It will never melt." One of the hunting party took the icicle from her and passed it around the assembly. Everyone who touched it felt the chill of ice, but their hands came away dry.

This time, the silence was unnerved. “I carried it all the way down the mountain,” Shauna said, then returned to her story.

The goddess of the mountain was angry with them, at first. She accused them of harming her animals and trees. “The snow is broken from where you step,” she fumed. Her anger was like snapping branches from wind-whipped trees. “It is dyed where you slay animals. The trees are scabbed and torn from where you cut them for firewood.” She gestured with one arm, sending a gust through the party. “And for what?”

The leader trembled, holding her spear tightly against her. She contemplated running, but knew there was nowhere to go. Haltingly, she told the goddess of the village. She spoke of their plight; the hungry, the weak, the sick. She told the woman that they were dying, and that meat and fur were scarce.

The woman deflated quickly, her features softening from rage to curiosity. “A village?” she asked. When Shauna nodded, the woman said, “Where?”

Uncertain how to answer, the leader pointed down the mountain the way they had come. In an instant, the goddess vanished, leaving the leader and her party unsettled. The leader again considered running, but steadied herself when the goddess returned.

“I have seen for myself your predicament,” she said. She looked thoughtful, and as Shauna watched a beautiful red amaryllis sprouted just behind her ear, curling up and over so it rested near her temples. She appeared smaller now, too, closer to their size.

The goddess studied the leader. “I will make with you a deal: every month, when the moon is full, you will take your village’s most prized animal and return it to me. In exchange, I will send calm weather, plentiful prey, and,” she made a gentle, flowing motion with her arms, “a river to move your timber.”

The hunting party were stunned. “Why?” the leader exclaimed.

The goddess shrugged.

“How will I prove to my people that you exist?” the leader continued, incredulous.

The goddess smirked. “As if the river is not enough,” she laughed, then made a pinching motion from her temple. As she moved her fingers away, an icicle grew with them, until it broke off and twirled helplessly in the air. The goddess gave this to the leader, who took it in trembling hands.

“How—,” Shauna began, only to find the goddess had gone.

Silence met the end of her story, but the leader had expected as much. She raised her hands and told the group, “Where there was mud and trees now surges a mighty river. We checked and what the goddess promised is true: we will have a passage for our wood, and fish for our bellies!”

Immediately, a party was assembled. Three men and two women set out to verify that the river existed. The leader gave them instructions and they left without fuss. “Until they return,” the blacksmith announced, “we shall wait.”

The crowd dispersed. Two days later, the party returned. In their bags were rows of fish, shining and sleek. “It’s true,” they said. “A river, just east of here.”

Astonished, another party was sent. They returned with the same verdict: the river as real, and the goddess of the mountain had taken pity on them.

A vote went up, and the village decided it was best to do as the goddess asked. During the next full moon, a farmer picked his best steer and let him loose into the trees. As if drawn by a force, the animal darted away, straight toward the mountain.

The next month was ideal. It rained enough for the crops, followed by days of sunlight. Trappers and hunters came back loaded down with meat and pelts. The lumberjacks redoubled the efforts, sending a group south of the river until they met with another town. They struck a deal and soon a post was established. When the full moon arrived for a second time, no one questioned whether they should send an animal up the mountain.

Months turned into years, and soon a shrine was built. It bore the likeness of the mountain, and was inscribed with a short poem. The villages often left small gifts at the shrine: a bouquet of wild flowers, a particularly delightful wine. All the gifts disappeared within the week. Sometimes they sent more than one animal free, to show they truly appreciated their goddess.

Then the demon came. In the form of a dire wolf, it first set about stalking hunters that strayed too far into the forest. News of villager’s dismembered bodies circulated quickly, and within months the wolf had looped closer, picking off the best livestock, grabbing children from their homes. The villagers, at first enraged and violent, turned to the goddess for help. No one dared leave the confines of the town; no one that entered the forest came home.

It got to the point where they had no livestock to release. The wolf left just enough meat to keep the village alive, not enough to please the mountain goddess. It was then that the goddess interfered.

The night of the full moon, a month after the village broke their promise, a hare appeared. Larger than any rabbit the villagers had ever seen, it glowed snow white with terrible, sightless eyes. It bounded into the middle of the town, over the bonfire, and thumped its foot on the ground. The guards scattered and tried to regroup, only to realize who stood before them.

From the shadows came a bone-deep growling. The wolf appeared, jaws open. The rabbit faced him boldly, as still as a statue. “Brother,” it said, “leave my people be.”

The demon’s eyes flashed. “Sister,” it responded, “these are my people, too.” It lunged, but the hare was faster. It bound through the air, causing the wolf to fall directly into the fire. It howled and squirmed, but its fur did not catch. It stood, shaking coals from its pelt, and snarled at the rabbit.

The hare thumped its leg, taunting, and took off. The demon followed, and together they raced up the mountain side. The villagers watched in awe, many having woken from shallow sleep to the sound of the demon howling. Then they sprung to action, realizing what was happening. Shauna was called to action. She saddled a horse and led a group of fifteen people in hot pursuit.

Up, up, up the mountain they galloped, to the point where they had to dismount and continue on foot. Shauna knew the chase was in vain. They were no match for supernatural speed, but she drove them on nevertheless.

Eventually they found the wolf, slain below a sliver of a shelf jutting from the mountain side. Without hesitation, Shauna pulled rope from her bag and began to climb. At the top, she found the goddess, still in the form of a hare, bleeding from a gash in her belly. The blood was dark, and it pooled impossibly large around her.

The leader stepped forward and touched the rabbit's stained fur. It lifted its head an inch and then lay it back down. "If you mix this with the snow," the goddess said, "you and yours will forever know youth." She sighed. "My last gift to you."

The rabbit's body turned to snow, and the wind caught it and blew it from the shelf. Shauna felt tears on her cheeks, but she did as she was told. Below her, her men called out. She ignored them, working until her fingers were numb. Where the snow touched blood, it melted into a liquid, clear like water when held in the palms of her hands, but a rich purple when left alone.

The pool grew and grew, until it was deep enough to swim in. The leader wiped her brow and took a long sip from its depths. She returned to her people renewed and told them what had happened. They returned to the village with the news, and together they held a funeral. The shrine was inscribed with the date in memoriam. When the question of how to gather more of the goddess' gift as time went on, it was decided unanimously that the leader, and all her descendants, would be the only ones to return to the mountain.

The next time the leader returned to the shelf, she brought her son with her, and in time, her son brought his as well.