

Sunrise

There is a moment before the dawn when everything is quiet. A hush falls over the world, the wind is cold and soft and the whole world waits.

Then the first hint of orange spills over the horizon, and the world awakens with dappled shades of orange, red, pink and yellow. Warm, soft, and mellow. The world breathes out its breath in misty clouds and cool drops of dew and all is beautiful as the day begins.

A young girl shifts under the pile of deer skins stacked upon her. Next to her, curled up in unconscious sleep, her brother rests - oblivious to her sudden wakefulness.

She wriggles about and pokes her curly head up out of the covers. Her breath mists, puffing out from the warm pocket of air her body has created.

Icy blue eyes swivel about, searching the area around her.

Adults sprawl about her in a chaotic tangle of limbs and blankets. She twists her head and squints up at the speckled night sky above - what she can see of it through the canopy. She lifts one skinny arm out of the blankets, sticks her thumb out and closes one eye. She tracks the moon across the sky as she has been taught to do.

Her arm falls back down, landing in the furs with a thud as she huffs out a breath. It's no use. She still can't figure out how to tell the time.

As the chill of the night air creeps through her, so to does the need to *go*. She wriggles under the covers. Fighting the urge. Not wanting to venture out into that dark, crisp air. But it is inevitable.

She sighs again, and hunches down in the covers for a last hit of warmth before she scuttles out into the open.

Soft tree lights hang amongst the branches above her, illuminating the night just enough to help her avoid the haphazard spread of arms and legs.

She stumbles clumsily through the masses, wincing as her bare feet make contact with various limbs.

Somehow, though, she makes it through without waking anyone. They sleep away the night like glaciers in the winter - silent and unmoving.

On the outskirts of the camp, the night stares at her. Beckoning her. Daring her to step out into the unknown. She takes a step, her eyes still adjusting, and hesitates.

She's not supposed to be afraid of the dark. She's not supposed to be scared of the night. The night is *theirs*. It belongs to them. To her. It is her inheritance. Yet that small tremble of fear tingles up her spine.

'What're you doin'?'

She jumps, a small squeak of surprise slipping out as she whirls around.

Her brother, Remy stands behind her, rubbing sleep from his eyes. How had he snuck up on her like that?

'I...I gotta go,' she says, blue eyes dropping to the ground. 'S'cold but.'

He stops rubbing his eyes and watches her. Remy isn't afraid of the dark, and though he never says anything, she suspects he knows her secret.

He yawns, big and wide with flashing canines, and trots forward. 'Come on,' he says grabbing her hand, 'I need to go too.'

A cool breeze guides them as Remy drags her into the dark.

The glow of tree lights fades behind them. Mirabel's steps are clumsy and oddly loud in the absence of light. She tries to tread light, to bounce on the balls of her feet, skimming along the ground with enough pressure only to pass weight from one almost-step to the next.

It is not a skill she has mastered, and she cringes at every step.

Remy's footsteps are inaudible.

Soft smells assault her nose as they break out into the open. The air is thin and cold, but smells of fir trees and stubborn green grass and the fresh call of rain. The wind cuts cold into Mira's flesh and makes her feel awake and alive.

The grass is wet beneath her bare feet; the hems of her long sleeping pants are cold and damp, but she doesn't mind.

Remy's hand is warm and sure and steady as the sun rising and the moon swaying across the night sky above. It gives her strength enough to pretend she is strong.

Because she *is* strong.

Remy's voice comes whispering out of the dark. 'Want to see something cool I found it yesterday?'

'Okay.'

The sound of water reaches her before she sees it. They follow a trail up a small slope and there, just before the crest, is a small creek that darts across the hilltop.

Remy lets go of her hand and, with a skill Mira could only long for, deftly jumps from rock to rock. Crossing the creek in a moment. He glances back at her.

'C'mon, Mira.'

Mira takes a deep breath. It's dark, and the water is even blacker than the night sky above. She imagines water sprites hiding below, waiting to reach out one scaly hand to snatch at her feet and drag her below.

She is not meant for water, but for the forest. For long runs in the night under the full moon.

There is no full moon tonight.

She shakes herself and takes a deep breath. She backs up a few steps, eyes the distance, and then runs.

In one, long, somewhat ungraceful leap, she bounds across the creek. Remy's eyebrows shoot up, and Mira cannot help the little glow of pleasure that ignites in her gut as she straightens up.

They climb the rest of the hill, barefoot in the crispy cold air, their breath misting in puffs and swirls as they slipped along loose pebbles and rocks.

At the top, Remy takes hold of Mira's arm again, dragging her over to a clump of rocks that overlook a small valley. It's one of the fishing holes the adults use, and Mira wonders if they're even allowed to be there.

Remy settles down. His grey eyes search the night, which isn't quite as dark as it had been when they began.

'It's getting light,' Mira whispers.

He turns his head, glancing at me sideways out of the corner of his eye. 'It's dawn,' he says, his voice low and hushed. 'Watch.' He points, and I follow with my eyes.

At the creek below, there's a few faint climbs by the grass. Mira startles as one of them moves, and again, Remy's glances at her.

The little valley gets lighter and lighter, exposing more of the world. Mira leans forward, her eyes wide as she takes it all in. Cows and horses that had looked like dark lumps unfold before her eyes.

As the first few rays light up the world, a pale mist rises up from the ground. The creek bubbles behind them, a horse whinnies, the leaves rustle and Mira's own heartbeat thrums steady and calm—but audible—in her chest.

She breathes in and holds her breath.

A few cows raise their heads and let out a call, sending goosebumps up her arms. The sun rises higher, at first creating long shadows that dance across the fields and before reaching out and touching every nook and cranny. The creek stretches around the hill, curling around and down into the valley below, clear and blue as the sky in spring. The grass lights up in shades of brown and green, misty and yet beautiful.

She has never seen the valley in the early morning like this. She marvels at the sight, at the beauty she had never known existed outside the moonlight.

Remy glances at her again, a soft almost-smile touching the corners of his lips. ‘Cool huh?’ he asks.

Mira nods.

‘I’m going back,’ he says, standing up and stretching. ‘Still gotta go. Find your way back?’

Mira nods again, still staring out at the valley. He watches her a moment, then, without a word, turns and heads back towards their camp.

Mira stays at the top of the hill, the sun warming her back and her chilled fingers, even as her breath misted before her.

She watched the world come alive before her and marvelled at this strange mixture of night and day. *This* was what she wanted. Not the night, not the day. But this. This strange tangled mix.

She breathed in the grass and the creek and the morning fog, relishing the freshness, the tanginess and uncertainty of it all.

One day she would have this. One day she would claim this mysterious in between.

Until then, the world waited, and so did she.