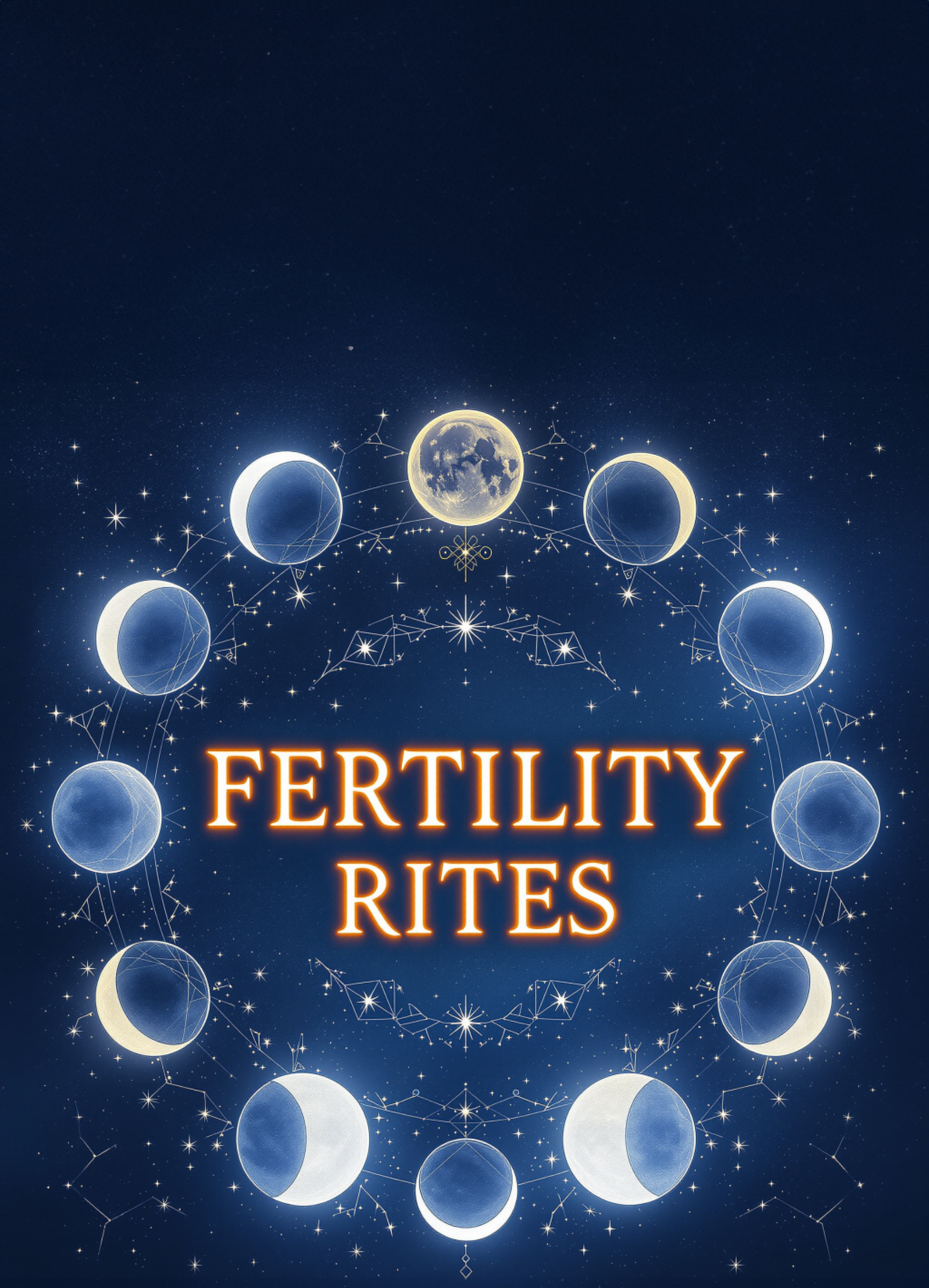

FERTILITY
RITES



15TH DAY OF FROSTMOON

The frost crunches beneath my feet as I track deer through the sacred woods today. My bow feels heavier than usual - or perhaps it's just my thoughts weighing me down. Tomorrow marks one year since Maera left us, since the winter fever took her. My little sister, always so full of life, even at the end.

"Keelan, dear brother, promise me you'll take the Blessing of Lunovín," she'd whispered, her final words to me. I didn't understand why she'd ask such a thing - the Skifélanacht rite is usually chosen by those who feel trapped in their forms, not hunters like myself. But now, as I run through these ancient pines with an arrow nocked and muscles taut, I begin to understand.

Maera had been chosen by the priestesses to undergo the



Spring Blessing, to become one of Lunovín's vessels for the next generation. The fever took her before she could fulfill her sacred duty. Our family's bloodline has served as Lunovín's chosen for seven generations - and now that line ends with me. Unless I take her place.

The elders say the change is like being reborn in moonlight. For one cycle of the moon, the goddess reshapes her children as she sees fit. Those that become with child during that time are seen as a great blessing, an omen of good times to come.

I've never feared pain or change, but this... this is different. Yet when I close my eyes, I see Maera's smile, hear her voice: "The goddess gives us choices, brother. Some choose for their true form, others choose for love."

I choose for love, little sister. I choose for you.



16TH OF FROSTMOON

Mother found me at Maera's tree this morning. The sacred ash has grown impossibly tall in just one year - the priestesses say it's because it feeds on our tears and memories. I pressed my hand against its bark, remembering how tiny the sapling was during the planting ceremony. Now its branches reach toward the sky like outstretched arms, just as Maera used to do when dancing in the moonlight.

"You don't have to do this," Mother pleaded, her voice cracking. "Your sister was wild with fever. The goddess doesn't demand such sacrifice." But she's wrong. I've seen how the other villagers look at us now, whispers of a broken bloodline, of Lunovín's favor turning away from our family. Even the harvest was lesser this year.

I tried explaining that this isn't just about duty - it's about

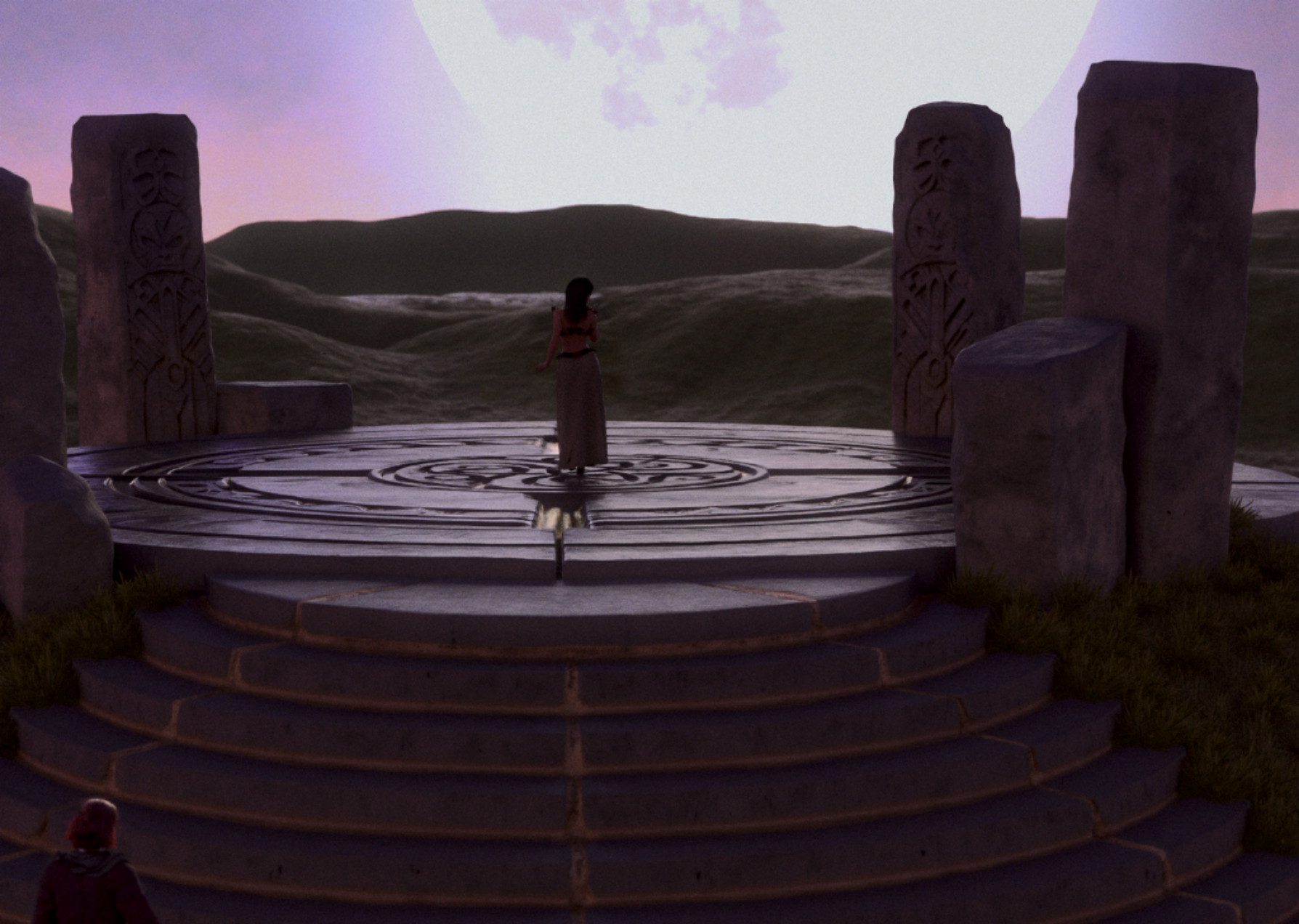


keeping Maera's spirit alive through the sacred ways she believed in so deeply. Mother just shook her head and pressed Maera's ceremonial shawl into my hands. "Then take this," she said. "The nights are cold in the wilds."

The moon is waxing. In three days, I'll make the journey to the ancient stones where the veil between forms is thinnest. My hands haven't stopped trembling since dawn, but when I look up at Maera's tree, watching its branches dance in the wind, I feel a strange calm. The priestesses say the goddess speaks through the wind. Tonight, I swear I can hear Maera's laughter in the rustling of her leaves.

19TH OF FROSTMOON

I caught my reflection in a still pool today, perhaps the last time I'll see myself as I am. Strange how you never really



look at yourself until you know everything's about to change. Father's jaw, Mother's eyes, Maera's smile when I try to be brave. Will any of that remain after the Skifélanacht?

I keep touching my face, my hands, memorizing this body that has served me through twenty summers of hunting, protecting, providing. "Brother," Maera used to say, "you think too much." She would laugh at me now, watching me catalog every inch of myself like a miser counting coins before spending them.

I will reach the stones by nightfall.

Her voice is like silver bells in winter.

"Welcome, child of the turning moon," she says, and I feel smaller than ever before. The goddess - for who else could she be? - towers above me. I'm grateful now for the cold air against my bare skin, for it keeps me present, keeps



me from floating away into the unreality of this moment.

"You knew to approach me as you were born," she continues, her smile warm despite the frost in the air. "Good. So many try to hide themselves, even here, even under my gaze.

"For one cycle of the moon, you will walk in woman's form," she says. "Should no child take root within you, you will return to your natural shape when the moon wanes. This is my blessing, and my bargain."

I try to speak, but my voice catches. I think of Maera, of promises made to fever-bright eyes. The goddess must see it in my face because her expression softens.

"Your sister's love guides you true," she says. "Are you ready to begin?"

My voice trembles as I speak: "Great Mother, I... I must know. Will I still be myself? When the change comes, will I



recognize the person in the mirror? And...” I falter, shame heating my cheeks despite the bitter cold. “How am I to fulfill your blessing if I cannot imagine myself... with a man?”

Her laughter is like spring rain on new leaves. “You will always be yourself - I do not steal souls, I simply reshape vessels. Your mind will shift only enough that your new form feels as natural as breathing. Think of it as... slipping into warmer clothes when winter comes.”

She cups my face in hands. “The heart knows what it needs, even when the mind fears the path. Trust in my blessing. Trust in yourself.”

I close my eyes and breathe out my fear into the frozen air. When I open them again, I see moonlight beginning to pool around my feet.

“Enter the circle,” Lunovín says, smiling.

I do, knowing I am likely taking my last steps as a man.



“Know you why this sacred rite exists?” Lunovín asks as I step forward. “In the time before time, when the first villages were young, a terrible plague left many women barren. The men of those villages, seeing their wives’ grief, came to my stones begging for a way to help bear the next generation. Their love moved me deeply. And so I created this blessing - this gift of change - born from the deepest sacrifice of love. Even now, centuries later, it remains one of my most sacred gifts.”

She gestures to the glowing circle. “Look to the moon. Speak your wish to her face.”

The circle beneath my feet pulses with liquid light, each ripple sending shivers up my legs. My heart thunders as I tilt my head skyward. The full moon hangs impossibly large, so close I feel I could reach up and touch her silver face.

“I...” My voice cracks. I start again, stronger this time. “I



wish to honor my sister's memory. I wish to continue our family's sacred bloodline. I wish to carry Lunovín's blessing as Maera would have done!"

The last word becomes a cry that echoes off the ancient stones. The moonlight pooled around me begins to rise, and I feel the change beginning.

"Now!" Lunovín shouts, her arms thrust toward the stars. The moonlight strikes like a spear of ice and fire. It floods my bones, reshapes my flesh, burns through every fiber of my being. My scream starts in one voice, shifts through octaves, ends in another - but it's still my scream, still my voice.

"The moon's gift answers truth with truth," she calls over the roar of power. "Your body follows where your heart leads!"

The light burns white-hot behind my eyes. I feel my spine arch, my muscles surge, my skin electric with change.



Through it all, crystal clear, I hear Maera's voice: *"Keep your eyes open, brother. Some moments deserve to be witnessed."*

And so I do. I watch as moonlight rewrites me.

My body hair ignites with silver fire. I watch, transfixed, as it burns away like frost under morning sun - painless, beautiful, terrible. The light consumes every strand until my skin glows smooth as polished bone.

"The vessel prepares," Lunovín murmurs, her voice distant thunder.

I want to speak, but my throat is full of moonlight.

The silver fire crawls up my neck, across my jaw. My beard - the mark of manhood I'd worn since sixteen summers - catches the moonlight and blazes like stars falling. Not like the noble's clean-shaven faces, where shadow still lurks beneath the skin. No, this is deeper. The



light burrows into every root, every follicle, leaving my face as smooth as river stones. I touch my chin in wonder - there's not even the memory of stubble beneath my fingertips.

Lunovín claps her hands together, and the sound rings like temple bells. "See how readily your form changes?!" Her joy fills the sacred circle, makes the stones hum with power. "Now rest a moment."

The transformation stills, though moonlight still courses through my veins. My skin... gods, my skin feels like new leaves in spring, like silk pulled from cocoons. I run my hands along my arms,



marveling at the softness.

"I..." The sound catches me off guard. My voice emerges clear as mountain streams, higher but not weak. Not piping or thin like I'd feared, but rich with new depths. "I feel..." I try again, testing the strange new instrument of my throat. "I feel like I'm waking from a dream, but the dream was my old shape, and this... this is..."

"This is your truth for the turning of the moon," Lunovín says. "Speak more. Let your voice find its home in this form."

"Will it be painful?" I ask, and the words flow easier now. "The rest of the change?"

The goddess's smile is kind. "No more than a butterfly hurts when it spreads its wings."

The respite ends with a pulse of moonlight that steals my breath. My chest tightens, not painfully but with an intense



pressure that makes me gasp. The goddess raises her hand, and I feel heat blooming beneath my nipples. They've become exquisitely sensitive - every breath, every slight movement sends shivers through my body.

"Your body readies itself for the blessing of motherhood."

I watch, fascinated and terrified, as my nipples darken and expand, the areolas spreading like ink in water. The sensation is... indescribable. Not pain, but an awareness so acute it borders on overwhelming. I cross my arms over my chest instinctively, then lower them at Lunovín's gentle headshake.

"Do not hide from your transformation," she says. "Each change is sacred, each moment holy."

"It feels..." I struggle to find words in my new voice, "like my skin is too small, like something's pushing from within."



"Yes," she nods, "the flesh remembers shapes it has never worn. Your body knows the way, even if your mind still wonders at the path."

The moonlight pulses again, and my chest... gods, it's the strangest feeling I've ever known. Not pain - nothing like the time I took an elk's antler to the ribs. More like... a deep and somehow pleasant ache.

I watch my flesh rising like bread in Mother's oven and stumble slightly. "By the sacred stones," I mutter in my new voice, steadying myself against one of the ancient monoliths. "No one ever mentioned this part."

"Few who undergo the blessing think to share its intimate details," Lunovín observes, amusement dancing in her starlit eyes. "Even fewer find words adequate to describe it."

She's right. How do you describe watching your chest



swell outward? They are only Small breasts now, certainly, but undeniably present. When I breathe, they rise. When I move, they... well. Now I understand why Senna always complained about running down the hillside to the river. The movement is distracting, foreign, like learning the balance of a new hunting spear.

I catch myself absently running fingers over the new flesh, marveling at how the skin feels different here - softer, more sensitive. My face heats when I realize what I'm doing.

"Curiosity is natural," Lunovín says. "This is your body now, for the turning of the moon. Learn it well. But we are not yet finished. Not nearly."



Lunovín's shadow falls across me, and her hand settles on my crown, cool as a mountain stream. Something shifts in the air around us. Even the stones seem to hold their breath.

"The hunter's height served its purpose," she says, "but the vessel requires a different form."

Her hand presses down, and I feel myself... yielding... like clay beneath a potter's fingers. The sensation starts at my head and ripples downward - spine shortening, bones softening and reforming. The ground seems to rise up to meet me, though I know it's I who am descending.

"The vessel finds its proper measure," Lunovín says.

I lose a hand's width of height, then another, until I stand nearly a head shorter than before. My balance wavers, and I reach out to steady myself against the monolith.

The world seems larger, but not frighteningly so. Rather, it feels right, as if I'm settling into a form that was always meant to be, if only for this turning of the moon.



The goddess smiles. “The height of the huntress. Swift enough to run with deer, strong enough to bear new life.”

Even my fingers appear more slender, though I know they’re the same hands that drew bowstrings and skinned deer mere days ago.

“Your body knows how to move,” Lunovín says. “Trust in its wisdom.”

My thoughts turn to practical matters. I’ll need to adjust my hunting techniques, learn to compensate for the reach I’ve lost. The bow I’ve used since childhood will be too long now, the draw weight too heavy. Yet even as these concerns surface, I feel an odd certainty that I’ll adapt. After all, this body was shaped by a goddess who understands both hunter and prey.

Lunovín’s voice breaks through my musings. “There is more yet to come.”

The moonlight surges through me like spring floods



through winter ice. Twenty summers of climbing peaks and stalking deer through forest shadows - all that strength now flows like water between cupped hands. Last harvest, I'd carried three grain sacks up the temple steps while other men struggled with two. The memory rises, sharp and strange, already feeling like someone else's life.

My shoulders shift first. The change ripples down my arms, and the bulk I once prided myself on softens. I flex my fingers, watching the moonlight play across my new skin.

When my legs begin to change, I hear Maera's voice: "By the goddess, brother, your calves are like tree trunks!" She'd said it a hundred times, usually while trying to convince me to dance at festivals. Now those legs slim beneath the goddess' touch, the heavy muscles reshaping into something sleek and graceful.

"Perfect," she says.

I want to agree. Even I am not foolish enough to defy a



goddess. And yet as I run my hands over my body, an unexpected yearning wells up in my chest.

I press my hands to my sides, where my hips still feel narrow, straight, too much like the body I've always known. My chest rises and falls with each breath, but my small breasts feel... insufficient.

I look up at Lunovín, my voice trembling. "Why do I feel this way? I never—" The words catch in my throat, and I force them out. "I was fine as I was. But now... now it feels wrong not to have..."

The goddess tilts her head. "Desire is not weakness."

"But these feelings..." I gesture helplessly to my body. "They weren't there before! Why do I want to be... more? To have wider hips, fuller—" My voice breaks, and I can't bring myself to say it aloud. "I don't understand."

Lunovín steps closer. "Remember, the rite alters your perspective, makes you comfortable in a woman's body. But



perhaps the moon's light reveals what the sun can hide."

I stand silent. The yearning doesn't fade. If anything, it sharpens, a need that's both alien and undeniable.

"No." My voice is unsteady. Scared. "I came for Maera. For the bloodline. Not for... for myself."

"And yet the self has a way of finding its voice when given the chance."

A memory surfaces, so vivid it steals my breath: Last year's Spring Festival, watching Maera spin in her new dress - the one she'd traded three months of weaving to obtain from the Eastland merchants. "Look how it moves!" she'd laughed, twirling so the fabric flared around her hips. I'd rolled my eyes, called her silly, said she'd traded good wool for foreign silk.

It was a lie. I didn't think her silly, I thought her beautiful, radiant, and free in a way I could never be. And, though I buried it deep, I envied her. Not the dress itself, but



the way it let her body speak - how she filled the space around her with joy and grace, as if she belonged entirely to herself.

"Shall we continue?" the goddess asks.

I close my eyes and breathe in the night air. Whatever truth the moonlight holds, I will face it.

"Yes," I whisper. "Please."

The goddess lifts one finger. The moonlight strikes.

Heat explodes in my belly, raw and electric. My hips crack wider - I can see them pushing outward, stretching my skin taut. She takes my hand to help steady as my waist draws inward, my pelvis shifts with a deep, rolling pressure. The change moves through me in waves. Not painful, but overwhelming. My thighs thicken, flesh redistributing itself before my eyes.

My chest swells next - first small peaks, then fuller, heavier. The weight pulls forward, drawing my spine into a new alignment. I watch, transfixed, as my nipples darken and



expand. Every breath makes them tingle. My hands rise to touch, to verify what my eyes are seeing. The flesh is warm, yielding under my fingers, the skin impossibly soft.

"Breathe," Lunovín commands.

I hadn't realized I'd stopped. The air rushes in, and with it comes a flood of new sensations - my altered chest rising and falling, the strange heaviness when I move, the way my center of balance has shifted lower. Each breath brings fresh awareness of how dramatically my body has changed, is still changing.

"And now," Lunovín says, "we perfect."

Her fingers trace the air before my face, and my skin begins to tingle. The pressure moves across my face like warm water.

"What now, goddess?"

"I am a goddess of life, and life loves loveliness. Not the fragile beauty of courtly ladies, mind you. No, your beauty



will command rather than beg."

I touch my face, trying to map the changes with my fingers. Everything feels different, yet somehow right. Natural.

"You'll see soon enough," she says. "For now, know that I craft all my vessels with care. After all, how can one expect to snare a mate without a form that draws the eye and stirs the heart?"

Her words send another shiver through me, though I can't tell if it's from anticipation or fear. I touch my lips—they feel fuller, softer. My cheekbones seem higher, sharper under my fingertips. The jawline I've known all my life feels slimmer now, less angular, more delicate.

The moonlight begins to fade, though its presence lingers in my veins like a second heartbeat. Lunovín steps back, her expression unreadable.

"Look now," she says, gesturing toward a still pool at the



edge of the circle.

My legs feel unsteady beneath me as I approach the water. Each step feels foreign, as though I'm learning to walk for the first time. When I reach the edge and kneel, my breath catches in my throat.

The face staring back at me is mine - and yet it isn't. My eyes are the same shade as Mother's, as before, but they seem larger now, framed by long lashes. My hair falls differently around a face that is softer, more balanced, yet undeniably strong. The curve of my lips is unfamiliar, almost inviting in a way that makes me hesitate.

"This is... me?" I whisper.

"It is," Lunovín says from behind. "The you that walks in woman's form."

I reach up to touch my face again, feeling the smoothness of my skin where once there was stubble. The sight in the water is almost too much to comprehend. My chest rises and



and falls as I try to steady my breathing. It's not fear that makes my heart race now, but something unnameable. How can I be recognizing myself for the first time in twenty summers?

The reflection shows a woman who looks like she could be Maera's sister - which, I suppose, she is now. Strong features softened just enough to be beautiful, but not delicate. A huntress's face, marked by sun and wind, both fierce and lovely.

"Stand," Lunovín commands.

I rise, aware of how differently my weight shifts, how my new breasts affect my balance. The moonlight still pulses beneath my skin, like waves lapping at a shore.

"There is one final change," she says. "The most sacred of all, but it is not required. You could bear a woman's shape while still keeping that part of you. No child would take root, but you would have completed the rite." She pauses, her gaze



piercing. “The choice is yours.”

I stand silent, my mind reeling. The option to keep that last part of my old self... it’s tempting. A lifeline to who I was. And yet...

I think of Maera again, of promises made. Of the strange yearning that now feels like it’s always lived in my bones, hidden, like embers under ash. And I think of the village, of the whispers and sidelong glances. Of Mother’s tears and Father’s stoic silence. Of the harvest that must be renewed.

But more than that, I think of how right this body feels, how complete. The idea of being caught between forms suddenly seems unbearable.

“I...” My voice catches, and I start again, stronger. “I choose to embrace it fully. All of it.”

Lunovín raises her hands, and the moonlight begins to gather once more.



The goddess's voice rises, echoing off the ancient stones. "Hear me, spirits of sun and earth! This child of the turning moon embraces the fullness of change. Grant the sacred vessel the cradle of new life!"

Her fingers slice through the air. Moonlight hits me like a blade of ice, and I double over. My insides burn, every nerve screaming as my body reshapes from the core outward. I feel a deep, twisting sensation below my navel. It's not pain, exactly, but a pressure so intense it steals my breath.

"Breathe through it," Lunovín instructs. "Your body knows what to do."

I gasp, my hands instinctively moving to my lower belly. The skin there feels hot to the touch, almost feverish. The sensation spreads, a warmth that radiates



outward from my center.

"Breathe," Lunovín commands.

I try, but the air catches in my throat. The pressure builds, as if something's trying to carve out space where there was none before. My hands clutch my abdomen. Hot. Too hot. Black spots dance at the edges of my vision. I think of Maera, of how she looked in those final days, her body burning from the inside out. Is this how she felt? This helpless as her flesh betrayed her?

My knees give out. Lunovín catches me before I hit the ground, her touch cool against my fever-hot skin.

Then, there's a new sensation. It starts as a tingling warmth between my legs, then intensifies into an inexorable pulling sensation. I gasp as I feel my manhood begin to retract, drawing inward as if pulled by an invisible



thread. The flesh seems to fold in on itself, reshaping with each pulse of moonlight. My scrotum flattens and splits, the skin softening and forming delicate folds. The sensation is intense but not painful - more like a deep, insistent pressure that demands my complete attention.

"Almost complete," Lunovín whispers, her voice steady against my ragged breathing.

I feel my inner tissues shifting, creating space where there was none before. A deep ache blooms in my lower belly as new organs form. My hips spasm with each wave of change, muscles and ligaments adjusting to their new configuration. The transformation moves deeper, crafting all the sacred spaces meant to nurture new life.

"Your body prepares itself for its sacred purpose."

Something shifts inside me - an ancient knowledge



writing itself into my flesh, my bones, my blood. I taste metal on my tongue, feel something settle into place deep within. When the light fades, I'm changed in ways I can't see but feel in every fiber of my being. My body hums with new awareness, new possibility.

"There," Lunovín says. She studies me with eyes like starlight. "How do you feel?"

I press a hand to my belly, trying to understand this strange new emptiness that somehow feels full of potential. "Like..." The words catch. I think of the spring fields before planting, of fertile soil waiting for seed. "Like I could hold the whole world inside me."

She nods once, satisfied. "One moon's turn," she says. "That's how long the blessing lasts." Her eyes narrow. "Choose wisely who plants in your garden."



The reminder of what comes next makes my cheeks burn. She drapes Maera's shawl around my shoulders, the familiar silk strange against my altered skin.

"Go," she says. "Live. Learn. Return when the moon dies. Or don't."

"But, inside, I still feel like myself," I say, voicing the fear that's been growing since the change began. "How can I... be with a man when I've never desired one before? When the thought of lying with one makes my stomach twist?"

Lunovín's laugh is gentle. "Already your body knows things your mind hasn't caught up to. Haven't you felt it? How your breath catches when you think of strong hands and broad shoulders?"

I start to protest, then stop. Because she's right. Even



now, her words send an unfamiliar heat through my belly, a flutter of sensation that makes me press my thighs together.

"But I don't want—" I try again, but the words feel false on my tongue.

"The blessing changes the flesh," she says. "Yet true desires can be as hidden as spring bulbs beneath winter snow. Sometimes it takes the turning of seasons to reveal what was always meant to bloom." Her eyes pierce me. "Tell me, Keelan - in all your twenty summers, why have you never taken a wife? The village has no shortage of willing maids."

I open my mouth to answer, then close it. The obvious replies - that I was too busy hunting, that I had to care for my family after Maera's death - suddenly feel hollow. I



think of village gatherings, of averting my eyes when the young women smiled my way. Of watching the men dance with their wives and feeling... nothing. Or perhaps feeling something I couldn't name, something I buried so deep even I couldn't find it.

"I..." My voice falters. "I never wanted..."

"Or perhaps," Lunovín says softly, "you wanted something else entirely."

The truth of her words hits me like a physical blow. I wrap Maera's shawl tighter around my shoulders, suddenly cold despite the magic still warming my blood.

"The moon's blessing reveals what the heart already knows," she continues. "Trust in it. Now go. The night grows old, and you have far to walk before dawn."

I take a step, wobbling slightly on unfamiliar legs. The



ground feels different beneath my feet, my whole center of balance shifted. At the edge of the circle, I turn back.

"Goddess? Will it... will the wanting grow stronger?"

Her smile is knowing. "With each passing day."

I nod, not trusting my voice, and begin the long walk back to the village. I brought one of Maera's dresses, and I pull it from my pack with trembling hands. The fabric feels different against my new skin as I slip it on. It fits perfectly.

The walk home seems longer with shorter legs. Each step brings new awareness: the brush of thighs against each other, the sway of hips, the gentle bounce of my breasts. Even the night air feels different, raising gooseflesh in ways it never did before.

And deep inside, something stirs - hungry, waiting, ready to bloom.



20th of Frostmoon

Mother drops her basket of apples when she sees me standing in our dooryard. They scatter across the ground like rubies, their red skins gleaming in the early morning light. Her face goes white as death.

"Maera?" she whispers, reaching out with trembling hands. Then she blinks, and reality crashes back. "Keelan. Oh gods, Keelan."

I can't move as she approaches, afraid any sudden motion might shatter us both. She touches my face with fingers that shake, tracing the new curves of my cheeks and my jaw. Tears spill down her weathered face.

"You look so much like her," she says. "I thought... for a moment..."

"I know," I say, and my new voice makes her flinch. "I saw myself in the water."

She pulls back. "The goddess... she truly changed you?"

I nod, not trusting myself to speak again. Mother's eyes travel down my borrowed dress, taking in every alteration. Her gaze lingers on my chest, my hips, all the places that mark me as something other than her son.

"Does it... hurt?"

"No." I bend to gather the fallen apples, grateful for something to do with my hands. The simple action feels strange - my new breasts shift with each movement. "It feels... right. More right than I expected."

Mother made a small sound, something between a sigh and a sob. I look up to find her staring at my hands. They are different now - smaller, though still marked with calluses from years of bowstrings.

"What have you done?" she whispers. "Oh, my son, what have you done?"

I stand, cradling the apples against my chest. "What needed to be done. What Maera asked of me."

The silence stretches between us, heavy with all the things we can't say. Finally, Mother picks up her empty basket.

"Come inside," she says. "We need to let out the seams in that dress. It's too tight across your shoulders."

The door creaks open, and Father stands there, axe still in hand from chopping wood. His eyes go wide, then narrow. The silence stretches - a bowstring pulled too tight.

"So," he says finally, his voice flat. "You've done it."

I nod, fighting the urge to cross my arms over my chest. Even now, hours after the change, I'm acutely aware of my new body, how it fills space differently. How small I feel under his gaze.

"The bloodline continues," he says, more to himself than to me. He sets the axe against the wall with deliberate

care. "Your mother will help you... adjust."

He walks past me into the house, his shoulder brushing mine. The contact makes me flinch. He's so much larger now, stronger. I watch him disappear into his workshop, where the steady rhythm of his carving knife soon fills the air.

Mother touches my arm. "He'll come around. He just needs time."

But we both know what the tight set of his jaw means. What his silence says. The son he raised to follow in his footsteps is gone, transformed by moonlight and ancient magic into something he doesn't understand.

I hear his knife slip, scoring wood too deeply. The cursing that follows sounds more like grief than anger.

25th of Frostmoon

Tomas helped me carry back the doe today. My arrows still fly true, though I have to adjust my draw for my new strength. The kill was clean - straight through the heart. Some things, at least, haven't changed.

But other things... gods help me, other things are so different.

I catch Tomas watching me as I clean the carcass. His eyes follow my hands, linger on my neck where sweat has plastered loose strands of hair. When he lifts the doe onto his shoulders, muscles bunching under his shirt, something hot and unfamiliar coils in my belly.

"You're a braver man than I," he says as we walk back. "But then, I'd make a terribly ugly maiden."

"Are you saying that I don't?"

"Quite the opposite." He adjusts the doe on his shoulders, and I force myself not to stare at the way his arms flex. "The goddess has been kind to you. Generous, too. I'm sorry if you've caught me staring, but I didn't expect you to look... well, like this." His voice falters, and I



can see the flush creeping up his neck.

I stop walking, unsure whether to laugh or feel insulted. “Like what?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

He hesitates, then shifts the weight of the doe again as if buying time. “Beautiful,” he says, not meeting my eyes. “Stronger than any woman I’ve known, but still... beautiful.”

“Thank you. And I...” The words catch in my throat. My voice still surprises me, especially when emotion makes it waver. “I’ve always noticed your arms. Even before. The way they look when you draw your bow.”

Tomas stumbles. The deer shifts precariously on his shoulders, and he has to stop to adjust his grip. When he looks at me, his eyes are wide.

"You've never said anything."

"How could I? What would you think if I had?" I hug myself, feeling exposed in a way that has nothing to do with my new body. "If your hunting partner, another man, told you he couldn't stop watching the way you moved?"

He sets the doe down carefully, takes a step toward me. "Is that why you took the blessing? Because of...?"

"No. Yes. I don't know." I press my hands to my face, feeling the unfamiliar smoothness of my cheeks. "I did it for Maera, for the bloodline. For the village! But maybe... maybe there were other reasons I couldn't admit, even to myself."

He's closer now. I can smell the sweat and pine needles on his skin. "And now?" His voice is low and rough.

I want to answer, but my throat feels tight. This is Tomas - my oldest friend, the boy who'd learned to hunt beside me, who'd held me when Maera died. Now he towers over me, broad-shouldered and strong, and I can't stop noticing how his presence makes my skin prickle with awareness.

"Now everything's different," I say. "And exactly the same. Because you'd never want a man who became a woman. Not when there are real women in the village."

Tomas's hand catches my chin, tilting my face up to his. "You are real. Every bit as real as you were before. More real, maybe, because now you've pulled back the cloak, allowed me to see your true face. I'm grateful."

The gentleness in his voice makes my chest ache. "But I'm not... I mean, this is temporary. When the moon wanes—"

"It doesn't have to be," Tomas's thumb brushes my cheek. "If... if a child takes root during the blessing..."

I step back, my heart hammering. "You can't mean—"

"Why not?" His eyes hold mine. "We've known each other since we were children. You're my closest friend. And now..." His gaze travels down my body. "Now I see parts of

you that were hidden. Parts I didn't know I'd been waiting to see."

"Stop," I whisper, but I don't move away when he steps closer. "You're just... confused. The goddess's magic—"

"Can make the outside match what was always inside," he finishes. "Isn't that what the priestesses say?" His hand finds mine, calloused fingers intertwining. "I've watched you for years, too. The way you move in the forest, how your eyes light up during the hunt. That hasn't changed. You're still you. Just... more yourself than ever."

The doe lies forgotten in the leaves as we stand there, my smaller hand caught in his larger one. Everything feels too bright, too sharp, too real.

"But what would people say?" I managed. "The village—"

"Can mind their own business for once," he says. "Besides, half of them already think we're more than hunting partners."

28th of Frostmoon

Father has been staying later at the forge. The anvil's clang carries through the village even after the sun has set, echoing off the hills like distant thunder. Mother says he's working on a special order, but I know better. The forge is the one place where everything makes sense to him - where steel bends to his will, where the world hasn't turned upside down.

He's avoiding me. Avoiding what I've become.

The thought follows me to the stream where Tomas and I wash after the hunt. Blood and dirt streak our clothes - the boar had been fierce, but our arrows flew true. Now the meat hangs safely in the village smokehouse, and we're alone in the growing dusk.

I hesitate at the water's edge, watching Tomas pull his shirt over his head. His back ripples with muscle, scarred



from years of hunting. I've seen him naked a hundred times before, but never like this - never with this heat building low in my belly, this strange ache between my thighs.

"The water's cold," he warns, but his eyes are warm as he turns to face me.

My fingers tremble on the laces of my borrowed dress. "Like always." I've bathed here since childhood, but everything feels different now. My new body responds to the chill differently, skin pebbling, nipples tightening against the thin fabric.

"Let me," he says softly, stepping closer. His hands replace mine on the laces, and I let out a shaky breath as the dress loosens. The fabric slides down, pooling at my feet.

I don't hide. I stand straight, letting him look his fill.

The hunger in his gaze makes me feel powerful, desired in a way I never imagined possible.

"You're magnificent." His eyes trace the curves of my body - breasts full and heavy, hips wide enough to bear life. When his hand reaches out to touch my face, I lean into it like a flower seeking sun.

The water swirls around us as he draws closer. I feel no shame as he studies me, only a deep rightness that resonates in my bones. This body may be new, but it knows what it wants. *Who* it wants.

His hands are warm despite the chill water when they finally touch my waist. I gasp at the contact, at how different it feels with this new flesh. Every brush of his fingers sends sparks racing across my skin.

We don't speak much after that. Some truths are better expressed in silence, in the space between heartbeats, in the way water droplets trace paths across skin. His touch is gentle, exploring, learning the geography of my transformed body as if mapping sacred ground.

Later, wrapped in our cloaks by the fire, Tomas tells me he's never seen anyone so beautiful. I believe him, because his eyes hold the same honest light they did when we were children sharing secrets in the woods. But now there's something else there too - a heat that makes promises neither of us are ready to voice.

The moon watches from above, her light silvering the trees. Soon she will wane, and choices will need to be made. But for now, this moment is enough - his warmth beside me, his fingers tracing patterns on my chest.

I think of Maera's last words to me, about choosing for love. Perhaps she saw something in me I couldn't yet see in myself. Perhaps she knew that love requires truth before all else.

"Stay with me tonight," Tomas whispers against my hair. "Not here - somewhere proper. My cabin's warm, and I've fresh furs on the bed."

The invitation hangs in the air between us. My new body thrums with want, but fear threads through the desire. Not of him - never of him - but of what accepting might mean. Of doors that can't be closed once opened.

"I've never..." I start, then stop, unsure how to explain. How do you tell someone you've known your whole life that everything feels new? That your skin feels too tight, too sensitive, too aware of every brush of wind and cloth?

His hand finds mine in the growing dark. "We don't have to do anything. Just... let me hold you."

I think of my narrow bed at home, of Father's silence and Mother's worried eyes. Of how the village whispers when they think I can't hear. Then I think of Tomas's hands, strong and gentle, and how right they feel against my skin.

"Yes," I say, and my voice doesn't shake at all. "I will."

The walk to Tomas's cabin feels like floating. My new body tingles, every nerve ending alive and singing. The night air kisses my skin through the thin dress, making my nipples tighten into hard points.

Inside, the fire casts dancing shadows on rough-hewn walls. Furs cover his bed - wolf and bear, trophies from hunts we shared. Now they'll witness something very different.

His hands tremble as he helps me out of my dress. "You're sure?" he whispers, his eyes dark with desire.

"I've never been more sure of anything," I say, and pull him down to me.

What follows is a revelation. Every touch ignites sensations I never knew possible. His powerful hands map the curves of my body, leaving trails of fire. When his mouth finds my breast, I arch into him with a gasp. My changed body responds instinctively, as if it's always known this dance.

I explore him too, marveling at how different he feels to me now. The hard planes of his chest, the strength in his



arms - it all awakens a primal need within me. When I take him in hand, his groan of pleasure sends shivers down my spine.

Finally, he positions himself between my thighs. The first push inside is intense - a stretch, a fullness I've never experienced before. But my body welcomes him, growing slick and hot. When we finally join completely, the pleasure crests like a wave, leaving me gasping his name.

We move together. Each thrust builds the tension higher, coiling tighter and tighter in my core. When release finally comes, it's explosive. My inner walls pulse around him as waves of ecstasy wash over me. Tomas follows soon after, his face buried in my neck as he shudders against me.

After, lying in his arms, I understand something about

the goddess's gift. This wasn't just about continuing bloodlines or fulfilling duties. It was about becoming whole.

"Stay," he murmurs into my hair. "Not just tonight. Stay forever."

I think of the waning moon, of decisions yet to be made. And then realize I already know the answer. The clarity of it startles me, like a bell rung in the still of night.

I press closer to his warmth and whisper, "Yes."

10th of Snowmoon

The Hearth-binding ceremony was today. I woke before dawn to find frost patterns on the window like delicate lace - a blessing from Lunovín, Mother said. My hands shook as I dressed in the ceremonial robes, deep blue like winter twilight.

I kept glancing at the door, hoping to hear Father's heavy tread on the stairs. The forge had been silent for days. Mother wouldn't meet my eyes when I asked if he was coming.

The village women fussed over me all morning, weaving fertility charms into my hair. "For luck," old Marta said with a knowing smile, pressing a sprig of moonflower behind my ear. Even the priestesses seemed eager, their blessings more pointed than usual. "May your womb quicken with the goddess's gift," they whispered, hands lingering on my belly. The harvest was poor again this year. Everyone knows what a child born of the Skifélanacht means for the village.

Tomas waited for me at the sacred circle, tall and strong in his hunter's leathers. The whole village gathered to witness. Some still don't understand, but fewer judge now. They've seen how we hunt together, how naturally we move as one. And I've caught their hopeful glances, the way they watch my waist for signs of swelling.



When the priestess called for the family blessing, my heart nearly stopped. Then I heard it - the familiar uneven stride, the creak of leather. Father stood at the edge of the circle, his forge-scarred hands clasped before him.

"I've been a fool," he said, voice rough as unshaped iron. "Watching you these past weeks... I've never seen you smile like that before." He touched my cheek, bony fingers gentle. "You're not the son I raised, but you're the daughter I should have seen. Can you forgive an old man's blindness?"

"How could you have seen?" I said, my voice catching. "When I didn't let myself be seen? When I was so afraid?" The words tumbled out. "I thought you'd hate me if you knew. That I'd disappoint you. So I hid behind bow and blade, pretending to be the son you wanted."



“Never,” he said fiercely. “You could never disappoint me. I just wanted you to be happy. I didn’t understand that this...” He gestured to my dress, “This was what happiness meant for you.”

Father cleared his throat. “Anyway, you’re still the best gods damn hunter in the village. Even better than your soon-to-be husband, if you ask me.” He winked at Tomas, who laughed.

The rest of the ceremony passed in a blur. I remember Tomas’s hands, warm and steady as we bound our wrists with the sacred cord. I remember the taste of honey wine, sweet on my tongue. But most of all, I remember Father’s voice, clear and strong, when he gave the traditional blessing:

“May your hearth be warm, my daughter, and your love

burn bright as forge-fire."

Now, I lie in Tomas's arms, watching moonlight paint silver patterns on our skin. My body thrums with familiar want, but also with something deeper - possibility, potential, promise. The moon is still full, and I feel her power coursing through my veins. The village needs this blessing as much as I do, though for different reasons.

I touch my belly, wondering. The priestesses say a child conceived during the Skifélanacht brings seven years of plenty. Perhaps Maera's tree will flower come spring, and the harvest will grow rich again.

Tomas stirs beside me, his hand covering mine where it rests on my stomach. He doesn't speak, but I feel the question in his touch. The moon watches through our window, patient as always. There's time yet for miracles.

15th of Bloomrise

Dear Maera,

Your tree towers above me now, its branches heavy with spring buds. I rest my back against its trunk. The priestesses say I'll deliver before the summer solstice. Sometimes when I press my hand to my swollen belly, I swear I can feel her dancing - just like you used to dance under the moon.

I wish you could see me now, little sister. You'd probably laugh at how I waddle, how I have to ask Tomas to help me up when I've been sitting too long.

But mostly, I wish... I wish I'd known sooner. All those times you tried to braid my hair when we were young, all those festivals where you begged me to dance with you - I kept my distance, played the stern older brother, afraid of what I might reveal if I let myself be too close, too soft.

The baby kicks again. Tomas thinks it's a girl. If he's right, we'll name her after you. She'll know all about her aunt who danced in moonlight and traded three months of



weaving for a silk dress. She'll know how you saved me.

I miss you. Gods, I miss you so much it steals my breath sometimes. I was foolish to think fulfilling my promise would ease my grief. But I'm finally who I was meant to be, thanks to you. I just wish...

Gods, I wish I could have been your sister.

The harvest will be good this year. Already the fields show promise, green shoots pushing through soil enriched by winter's rest. The village has begun to prosper again, just as the priestesses predicted.

Sometimes I dream of you. Not as you were at the end, but as you should have been - dancing at my wedding, weaving blankets for your niece, teaching her your wild ways. In these dreams, we're both who we were meant to be, sisters sharing secrets and laughter.

The baby is moving again, stronger this time. She'll be a dancer too, I think. Like her aunt before her. I'll make sure she knows the old ways, the sacred paths. I'll teach her to hunt under moon and sun alike, to honor both sides of the sky.

And when she's old enough, I'll tell her about choices made for love, about truth hidden like spring bulbs beneath winter snow, about how sometimes the greatest gifts come wrapped in loss.

The sun is setting now. Tomas will be looking for me soon. He worries more these days, hovering like a mother hen. It's adorable.

Thank you, little sister. For seeing me before I could see myself.

Until we dance together in the Summerlands.

Your sister,
Keela