

Beyond the Horizon

By SpinnerOfShadow

Commissioned and Edited by freh24

“The power of the Silent Sorcerer’s spell shattered the magic shield that covered Zenith, and he gasped in surprise as his dark power left him,” Beta said, her hands twisting in the air. Beta was leaning back in her seat, wearing a flowing white and brown dress lined with fur. Her eyes sparkled as she looked at the children sitting at her feet. “Before he could flee, Nora jumped into the air! She raised her bow, and fired two arrows at the demon’s feet. ‘Don’t you dare run away’, she growled. ‘I’m not done with you.’ Zenith stumbled back, eyes wide, and drew his knives. He knew that only one of them was going to walk away from this fight.”

Zora looked up at her Aunt Beta in awe, imagining the scene. Aunt Beta always told the best stories; tales of fierce hunters, mystical boats that flew through the air, terrible ancient demons that took the shape of humans and the brave warriors that fought against them. They were a lot better than her mom’s stories; Mom only talked about old fables, talking rabbits and foxes in traps and stuff. But these - these were so cool. And Aunt Beta had promised to tell one whenever Zora came over, whenever Mom was busy.

Mom was busy a lot lately. She’d told Zora that they had another sibling on the way, to join her little brother Varl. Zora wasn’t sure if she liked that. It meant even more time with Aunt Beta and her cousin Makel, and she liked them, but it also meant less time with her parents. Her dad was already out all the time, hunting and trapping and sometimes fighting. She wasn’t supposed to know about the fighting, but it was obvious. Those were the times he was gone for days, and Mom spent the time nervously checking and rechecking the traps that she worked on. One time he’d come home with his whole leg covered in wrappings, and Mom had made him lie down for two whole days. She’d told Zora that he was going to be fine, but Zora and Varl had spent the whole time at Aunt Beta’s.

Today Dad had taken Varl into the city with him to get supplies. Varl was a little baby, only two years old, and he cried a lot, but he liked to look at the shops. So Zora was with her cousin Makel, who was five, just like her, listening to another one of Aunt Beta’s stories.

“When I grow up,” she said suddenly, “I’m going to be a hunter like Nora!”

Beta fell quiet, looking at the girl, and Zora looked back at her. Her aunt’s hair was the same dark red as hers, and she looked so much like Mom that it was strange sometimes. Dad had said that Mom and Beta were ‘twins’, which meant they were born together and grew up together, but then he said they’d been born in different places and that’s why

Beta was a storyteller and Mom made traps and helped Dad train. That didn't make a lot of sense to Zora, but when she'd asked, he'd just said that he'd explain when she was older.

"You can't be a hunter," Makel said. "All the hunters are boys."

"Well, then, I'll be a boy!"

Makel looked at his mom, brow drawing down. He took after his father; his hair was darker than hers, and he was a stocky, rough and tumble boy. "Can you do that?"

Zora couldn't figure out Beta's smile. It was sad, and happy, and... like she wasn't here. "Not here," she said after a moment, eyes coming back to the children. She reached down, ruffling Zora's hair. "But never say never."

"If girls can't be hunters, why is Nora a hunter?" Zora asked triumphantly.

"That's just a story," Makel said.

"Makel," Beta said warningly, and he flopped back down on the ground, crossing his arms in a pout. She turned her attention back to Zora. "There are places where girls are hunters," she finally said. "Maybe when you're big like me, this will be one of them."

"It will!" Zora hopped to her feet again, pretending to draw and fire a bow. "I'm going to be a great hunter! The best! I'm going to fight Zenith and shoot machines and bring home meat!"

"But girls..." Makel started.

Zora raised her fist. "But girls what?"

"Never mind." He crossed his arms again. "How does the story end?"

"Right," Beta said with a laugh. "Both of you, sit down, and I'll tell you how Nora beat Zenith and saved her sister."

After the story was done, as she got up and put on her coat to go back home, Zora stayed by the door and looked at Makel. "Do you really think I can't be a hunter?" she asked, waiting until Beta was in the other room putting together a small box of food to take back to Mom and Dad.

"Are you going to hit me?" Makel asked.

"No," Zora said with a hefty sigh.

"I dunno," Makel said. "Girls aren't hunters here. You'd have to go far away, to where Nora lives. I don't want you to go. You're my best friend."

Zora grinned, and hugged Makel. "You could come."

"But then we'd have to leave everyone else."

"Oh yeah." Zora frowned thoughtfully, and then grinned. "Well, Aunt Beta says maybe I can be a hunter one day, so we don't have to leave after all!" Problem solved, she gave Makel another hug. "Bye!"

"Zora, wait for the food!" Beta called as Zora dashed out the door.

"Sorry, Aunt Beta!" Zora turned around, grabbed the package out of Beta's outstretched hands, and dashed down the street again.

It was a chilly night, and she pulled her little coat tight around her as she walked. A few adults passed her, but they didn't take much notice; it wasn't unusual to see children walking around unsupervised in Lowspear, and Zora had already run her first errand alone, taking a set of wires to the market to trade for turnips a month ago. Besides, her mom and dad lived very close; her dad and Uncle Shur were fellow hunters, and their homes had been close before they claimed Mom and Aunt Beta. Zora had been over once when Dad said that was the only reason Mom had chosen him, and she'd laughed and told him to shush.

As she approached the front door, Zora heard her parents talking. She was instantly curious. Instead of opening the door and letting them know she was here, she snuck into the garden, to the big space at the back of the cottage. Dad's friends were adding a room to the cottage so that Zora and Varl could have their own room when the baby came, but it wasn't quite finished and there were reed curtains in a couple places she could use to crawl in. She crept up to the doorway, listening intently.

"It's too soon, heart of my heart," Dad was saying, his voice placating.

"It's been six years, Goran," Mom shot back. Peeking through the curtain flap, Zora saw her stepping away from Varl's crib. Varl could sleep through anything. Zora could too; the whole family slept together in one room right now, and the other one was for cooking and eating and play. "I'm not talking about doing it while the youngling is still a baby." One of Mom's hands fell down to her waist, caressing the baby on the way. "But I want to hunt again."

Again?!

Zora's eyes went wide. She'd been quiet before, but now she was silent.

"You know how the elders are, Aloy," Dad pointed out. "The only women who hunt here are the priestesses of the Moon, and they deny their womanhood and swear to sleep with no man. You're a mother."

"In the Nora lands, mothers can be hunters," Mom said.

"You say so enough." Dad stepped forward, sweeping Mom into his arms. "And I understand. You are a fierce Nora warrior, and traps and training are not enough for you. And we are trying. But you came to us as a captive. Many of the elders are unhappy enough that you work with explosives. We've had to fight for you to keep your bow." He sighed, letting her go and turning away. "You know that I love you, Aloy."

"I know," Mom said. "But you know that hunting is so much of my life, and I've lost it for so long." She said something else, words that didn't make any sense to Zora, and Dad responded in the same tones.

Zora stepped back from the curtain, head spinning, and slipped into the yard and back around to the cottage door. That hadn't all made sense, but one thing did. Dad had said Mom was a 'fierce Nora warrior'.

Was Mom Nora? Were the stories that Aunt Beta told *true*? It couldn't be. She must have heard Dad wrong. Maybe he said Mom was a fierce forager?

"I'm home!" she called out as she opened the door, trying not to look like she'd been crawling in dirt.

"Hello, wildflower!" Dad swept her into an embrace, and Mom danced in to grab the food out of her hand before they squished it. The noise woke up Varl, who demanded to be picked up, and for the next hour everything was too normal for Zora to think about what she'd overheard.

But eventually, it was bedtime again, and as Mom put out the candles and bundled Zora into bed, she found the conversation swimming behind her head. She closed her eyes to sleep, trying to use the stories to lull her off to dreams the way Aunt Beta had taught her, but this time instead of imagining herself as Nora, she kept seeing Mom's face and waking up again.

Eventually, Zora couldn't stand it any more. Waiting for one of Dad's snores to cover the sound, she rolled out of her cot. She knew where Dad and Mom kept all the bad things, the things she wasn't supposed to play with or she could get hurt. Trap parts and Dad's arrows and stuff like that. If Mom really was a hunter, she'd have stuff there too, right?

Carefully, as quiet as a mouse, Zora crept across the bedroom and under the curtain dividing it from the rest of the house. It was almost a full moon tonight, and the light streaming in through the shutters gave her just enough room to see her mom's workbench, with her dad's hunting gear in boxes to one side of it. Underneath the workbench was Mom's tool box, which she never opened when Zora was around. Creeping up to the tool box, Zora looked down at it. There was a small lock, but Zora knew where the key was - in a jar on the counter, by the bread. It was easy to climb onto the counter, fish it out, and return to the box with it.

When she opened the box, Zora let out a little sigh. It was just a lot of wires and boxes and things. Just what she'd expect in there. She sighed, feeling silly, and was about to close it again and go back to bed when she saw a bit of blue fabric sticking up from under the bottom of the box.

Breath caught in her throat, Zora carefully pulled on the fabric. As she tugged, some of the gear shifted, and the false bottom of the box tipped up. There was a quiet clatter, but Zora didn't even notice, staring at the things that were hidden underneath. An old, faded leather skirt, outlined in blue and red. A matching brown leather top, just like Nora wore in all of Aunt Beta's stories. A bow that looked like it was made out of metal and bone, not like the darkwood bows that the Delta hunters used. And on top of it, glimmering silver, a little white triangle with a soft white line glowing down it.

Zora had never seen anything like it. She reached out carefully, picking the triangle up, and turned it over in her hands. As she lifted it up, there was a jolt, and she felt it slip out of her hands and click against her ear.

Zora almost shrieked as light blossomed in her eye, a series of lines and patterns running across the room. It was like it was morning, some kind of glow letting her see in the dark. At the same time, she heard a voice in her ear.

"... know that you'll look after her, Aloy." a deep male voice said. Zora's breath caught in her throat. "I think it's great that you're showing your sister the Nora homelands. Don't worry, we'll still be here when you get back. Well, most of us. Kotello's keeping an eye on Sylens, and if he causes trouble... hah! Just don't worry, and come back soon. How do I turn this damned thing -"

The sound cut off, and Zora stared wide-eyed at the clothing below her. Nora homelands. Like how these were the Delta homelands. Nora was... a family? A village? A place. Mom and Aunt Beta were from Nora!

She turned around, reaching up to pull the funny thing off, and her mom was standing right in front of her.

This time, Zora shrieked for real. Over by the bed, Dad groaned, starting to sit up.

“Go back to bed, dear,” Mom called back to him gently. “I’ve got this.”

“Mm-hm.” Dad collapsed back into the bed.

Mom knelt in front of Zora, holding out her hand. “My Focus, please.”

“Your what?”

Mom pointed to the triangle on Zora’s ear. Sheepishly, Zora pulled it off and handed it to her. “Sorry,” she mumbled.

“I told you not to go in here,” Mom said, shaking her head. She reached over, putting back the triangle, and started adjusting clothing. “I’m going to have to find a new hiding place for the key. This is dangerous, Zora. There are sharp things in here. Dangerous things.”

“Like your Nora stuff?”

There was a long silence. Mom set the false bottom of the box back in place, and turned to look at her daughter. “You heard Erend’s message.”

“I heard Dad,” Zora admitted grumpily. She flopped down on the floor, crossing her arms. “And then I heard a man talking when I put the triangle on.” She looked up at Mom, suddenly worried. “I didn’t mean to,” she insisted. “It was just kind of pulling, and then there were lights, and then someone was talking...”

“I had the message queued up. I listen to it once in a while,” Mom said. “Zora, all of this, it’s something big. It’s for when you’re older. Which is one of the reasons I told you not to open the box.”

“You said there were bad things in there,” Zora said. “Is that triangle a bad thing?”

“... no.” Mom took a deep breath. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s an old thing, from before your father took me. He saved it, just in case. It took me a year to get it working again, and then...” She broke off. “When you’re older, honey. Right now, it’s too big for you.” She tapped Zora’s chest. “You’re not a bad girl, Zora. But you can’t go into my things. They’re important to me.”

“What are the Nora homelands?” Zora insisted.

“It’s where I’m from,” Mom said. “Beta and I. They’re very, very far away.” She looked out the window, as if she could still see them in the distance. “Weeks and weeks, and through dangerous places. Your father found us there, and brought us back here.” She

stood up. “Which is where I found you, and all of this.” Reaching down, she picked up Zora. “And now, it is time for you to go to sleep. I’m not going to punish you this time, but you have to promise you won’t go into my things again.”

“I promise,” Zora mumbled.

“Good girl.” Mom carried Zora back to her cot, and gently tucked her in. “Get some sleep.”

Zora fell into a fitless slumber. All night, her dreams were filled with the strange man’s voice, with her mother wearing those Nora clothes and pulling out her bow and walking away. She dreamed of Mom shooting arrows at Zenith, climbing tall buildings, and jumping off onto a sunwing and flying away, while Zora was trapped on the ground watching her.

When the sun streamed in through the slats, she woke up bleary-eyed and grumpy. Mom had eggs and sausages ready for everyone, and she and Dad were exchanging looks as Zora stomped up to the table. “Everything all right, wildflower?” Dad asked, as Mom helped Varl into his high chair.

“Fine,” Zora mumbled around a mouthful of eggs.

“Your mother told me you had an adventure last night. Are you alright? You didn’t cut yourself?”

“No.”

Dad looked helplessly at Mom, and then back at Zora. “Alright,” he said. “I’m going to go out hunting for the next few days. Do you want me to bring you back a flower?”

“No.”

Dad sighed. “I love you, Zora. Be nice to your mother.” He rose, patting his daughter on the head, and went to the door. Mom was already there with his pack and his bow, handing them to her with a twinkle in her eye and giving him a kiss. Zora heard him mumble, “Do you want me to stay a day?”

“No, I’m fine,” Mom whispered back. “Go out and catch something big.”

Today was a school day, which meant that Zora and Makel and a bunch of other kids were learning to read and count from Aunt Beta and a couple of local teenagers. A lot of the local kids didn’t come, because their parents didn’t see why anyone would need to read when there were perfectly good scribes around to do it for you, but Aunt Beta said that the more people that could, the better things would be for the whole Delta. Zora

didn't really get it, but she liked looking at the old, weathered books that had been given to the school. Beta even had a working tabletop datapad that could show 'hallagraffs', little pictures that shot into the air with words under them. It was new this year; one of the elders had dug it out of the old storage caves and Mom had helped fix it.

When reading practice was done, the kids went out into the yard and played under the watchful eyes of the teens. Uncle Shur had called that 'the bribe to get folks on board', but when Zora asked him what a bribe was he got real quiet and told her it was just kind of a nice thing you do so people will do a nice thing for you. Zora didn't understand why kids playing was a nice thing to do for parents, or what the parents were giving, but Uncle Shur always just shrugged when she asked a lot of extra questions so she'd given up.

Zora was half-heartedly digging in the sand pit when Makel came over. "You want some juice?" he asked, holding out his cup.

"No," Zora said.

Makel frowned. "What's wrong?"

Zora took a deep breath. "I think Mom is Nora," she said really, really quietly. "And there's a whole place full of people like her, and she and Dad are arguing about her going hunting and he said that moms don't hunt!"

"Moms don't hunt," Makel said. "And Aunt 'Loy can't be Nora, Nora isn't real. She's a story."

"Lots of stories are real," Zora insisted. "Lord Hoffman is real. There's a statue of him and everything."

"Yeah, but the only person who tells Nora stories is Aunt Beta, and..." Makel trailed off. "Oh," he said really quietly.

"Aunt Beta and Mom got raided together," Zora said. She didn't really know what that meant, but a lot of the moms were from far away, and had come here as part of 'raids'. The adults didn't talk about it a lot with the kids. "So they're from far away, like Nora. And they've got red hair, like Nora. And Mom has Nora's clothes in a box in our house and a bow and the little triangle that talks to gods." She crossed her arms. "She's Nora."

"If she's Nora, why is she here and not fighting demons?" Makel asked.

"I don't know!" Zora felt tears starting to well in her eyes. "What if she goes and fights Zenith again? What if she *doesn't come back*?"

“Why would she fight Zenith again? He died.”

“He’s a demon, he could come back.” Zora took a deep breath. Makel just wasn’t getting it. “But Nora fights all the bad guys. There are no bad guys here. What if she goes to fight demons?”

Makel sat down in the sand, poking at it with a stick. “I dunno,” he said. “Mom’s here teaching all the kids. Aunt Aloy makes traps and stuff. Maybe she needs to make enough stuff and that’s why she keeps it in a box.” He looked up, suddenly fierce. “Or maybe she’s not Nora, because *Nora isn’t real* and you just had a bad dream. I dreamed that Mom and Dad’s faces were gone. It was scary.”

“It wasn’t a dream!” Zora knocked the stick out of Makel’s hand and stormed off. She’d thought he would believe her, but now she was even more worried. She tried to think about how many traps were in the box. Was Mom making them faster than Dad was using them? She thought maybe he was, but she hadn’t counted them.

As she stomped through the front door, Mom looked over at her. She was sitting at the kitchen table, preparing vegetables for pickling. “Zora, honey, what happened?” She stood quickly crossing over and picking her daughter up. “Did you get in a fight?”

“No,” Zora lied. Then she brushed tears away, and reluctantly took the slice of peeled pear that Mom handed her. “Makel didn’t believe that you were Nora,” she said. “And he doesn’t think girls can be hunters. And he said that I was dreaming.”

Mom was quiet for a bit, rocking Zora gently. Zora snuggled against her, feeling her warmth. “Beta mentioned that you wanted to be a hunter when you grow up,” she said. “Like the moon priestesses.”

“The Priestesses aren’t girls,” Zora said crossly. “They’re just... priestesses. And I don’t like the temple, it smells funny.” The family had to go there on every new moon, to pray for luck. She didn’t really understand, but she’d seen the priestesses there, like ghosts, pale and quiet. They gave her the shivers.

“I don’t like the temple either,” Mom said, leaning in conspiratorially. When Zora smiled, she smiled back. “It’s hard to want something that people tell you you can’t have. When I was little... the place where I lived wasn’t always nice to me. They told me I couldn’t be who I wanted to be.”

“What did you do?”

Mom laughed. “Well, I challenged them, and eventually I left, and I found all sorts of people who felt the way I did about the world. And we helped people, and we made things better.” She tapped Zora on the nose. “And then your Aunt Beta, and I met your

father, and they gave me the one thing I'd never had - a real family. You, and your brother, and your little sibling-to-be. And one day, you'll find the people who feel the way that you do, and you'll help people, too. Okay?"

"Okay, Mom," Zora said, feeling her stomach drop.

Mom could tell that something was wrong, but she just smiled and patted Zora on the head. "You came home so fast, I was going to finish this first. Why don't you go and play in the yard for a bit while I finish up, and then we can go and get some flowers?"

"Okay," Zora said again. She did like going out to get the flowers. They were always so pretty. But as she went outside, one thing was stuck in her head. When Mom's home didn't want her to be who she wanted to be, she left. But the Delta didn't want her to be a hunter.

She was going to leave again. And Zora would be alone with Dad and Varl.

Dad came back that night with a big turkey, and for a few days Zora was able to forget all of the scary ideas and focus on the balls of feathers that were left after Mom and Dad plucked it, and the delicious meat that they ate for most of the week. Turkeys didn't come this far out often, and Mom and Dad shared the extra with neighbors, trading for some extra berries and greens to use for sides. Mom smoked up the leftover bits for storing, and Dad didn't have to go out and hunt for a few days, which meant that he was around to help play with Zora and Varl and teach them how to dig for roots.

It was a lot of fun, and watching Dad and Mom together was almost enough for Zora to stop imagining that Mom would leave. She laughed at Dad tickling Mom with turkey feathers, and she brought more feathers to school to give to everyone and then ran around and played 'catch the raider', trying to grab feathers out of the hems of the other team's clothes so that they would have to leave. She listened to Aunt Beta's stories, and talked about flowers and stuff with Makel.

But most nights, she still had the bad dreams. She dreamed that Mom pointed her bow at Dad, and he was dressed like Zenith and laughing. She dreamed of Mom climbing a mountain, and Varl falling down and Zora having to catch him, but Mom never looked back at them. She dreamed that she was wearing Nora's clothes, but they didn't fit and Makel was laughing at her.

And then Dad went out hunting again, and Zora saw her mom's eyes as she watched him go. She didn't have the words for what she saw. Loving, and lonely, and so sad. And Zora knew that she had to do something, or Mom would leave.

But she had an idea! Mom was making extra traps. If those were gone, Mom would have to start again, and Zora could just keep getting rid of the extra traps so that Mom would

never leave. She waited until she was supposed to leave for school the next day, walked out the door, and then dashed around to the back of the cottage. Mom was already on her way out with Varl, to collect more herbs for seasoning, and Zora knew she would be gone a long time.

Zora crawled under the flap at the back of the cottage, sneaking across to the trap-making box. She paused, biting her lip. She'd promised Mom that she wouldn't go into it. But this was important. She climbed up onto the counter, just like a Nora hero, and reached into the jar... and there was nothing there. Mom had moved the key.

Zora's eyes went wide, and she looked around. Where would Mom hide the key? She looked in the other jars, but there was no key. There was no key on the floor, under the table. No key under the box. Mom must have hidden it *somewhere*, but...

Slowly, taking a deep breath, Zora walked over to the bed where Mom and Dad slept, and reached into Mom's pillow. The case was full of feathers, soft and tickly, but inside she found a small, metal key.

She felt a hollow in her stomach. Mom had moved the key to where Zora couldn't get it at night. She didn't believe that she wouldn't. And she was right, because Zora was taking the key now.

For a moment, Zora wanted to shove the key back into the pillow and run back to school. But she *had* to keep Mom here.

Zora went back to the other box, opening it up. And then she realized her mistake. She didn't know where Mom kept the finished traps. They weren't in the house, because it was too dangerous. All that was here was the tools and parts to make them, and Mom's bow and secret Nora stuff.

With an angry yell, Zora grabbed one of the heaviest things that she could find, a hammer that was part of Mom's tools, and started hitting the other tools with it. If Mom couldn't make more traps, she'd have to sell the extras instead. Even to her, it felt like there was something wrong with that idea, but at the moment she was just too full of anger and fear to think about it. It was too much emotion for a little girl, and hitting things made it feel better for a moment.

In the effort, the fake bottom was knocked away, and suddenly Zora was staring down at Mom's bow. She almost picked up the hammer to smash it, too, but even as mad as she was, that didn't feel right. The traps were just *stuff*, but the bow was important. But if she hid it, just for a while, Mom wouldn't leave without it. She reached into the box, grunting with effort as she pulled it out, and looked around for where she could move it to.

“Zora!”

Zora froze, her eyes going wide. “...Mom?” She turned slowly. Mom was in the doorway, holding Varl, eyes wide with shock and disapproval.

“What are you doing?!” Mom swept in, pulling the bow out of Zora’s suddenly-weak hands. She started down at the trap supplies, eyes wide. “You’ve wrecked half our supplies! What’s gotten *into* you?”

“I don’t want you to make more traps!” Zora cried. There was more, so much more, but that was the first thing that came out.

“Beta was terrified!” Mom shouted. “You didn’t show up to school! She came running to find me, she’s in tears! I thought you were in trouble, and you were here destroying our things?”

Zora hung her head, filled with worry. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“You will go down to the school with me, and you will tell Aunt Beta that,” Mom snapped. “And when your father gets home, we will talk about how to discipline you for this. I know you’re upset about the hunting situation, but this is *not* how you handle it, young lady. I am very, very disappointed with you.”

Zora swallowed back her tears and crossed her arms. There were a thousand things that she wanted to say.

But Mom was already so sad. If she yelled at her, Mom might just leave right away. She couldn’t. Instead, she stomped behind her mother, fighting back tears as she was paraded to Aunt Beta. She mumbled an apology in front of the whole school, and she didn’t explain why she’d done it, and when Aunt Beta asked her to promise not to scare her like that again she just said okay.

It didn’t matter.

Mom was even quieter that day. She sat by the traps, and when she thought Zora wasn’t listening she quietly mumbled and counted. She went to the money, and she counted it, and then she looked even sadder. They had a smaller dinner than usual that night, and Zora looked up at her mom wide-eyes.

“I made it so we couldn’t have dinner, didn’t I?” she finally asked.

“Oh, honey.” Mom looked at her sadly. She reached out and stroked Zora’s hair. “It’ll be okay. When your dad gets back, we’ll figure it out. But I just wish... you can’t break things because you’re upset. It just makes everything worse.”

"I wanted... I thought..." Zora broke off, looking away. "I'm sorry." She felt tears welling up again.

Mom held her close that night, as if to tell her that everything was okay. But Zora knew that it wasn't.

The next day, Mom went to the market to get more parts to make traps. She left Zora with Aunt Beta, who was sewing new clothes for Mom's baby. Zora knew that she only had one chance left. Dad was going to be home soon, which meant that Mom would tell him that she was leaving and that it was Zora's fault. The only way to stop her was to show that she could hunt *here*. There were a few traps left. She could take them out into the brushlands, set them up, and catch some rabbits. She'd seen Mom do it. She could do it, too.

"Makel," she hissed, when Aunt Beta was busy. "Tell Aunt Beta you need to go potty."

"What are you doing?" Makel asked, worried.

"I'm going to catch a rabbit."

"Zora..." Makel looked scared.

Zora made a fist at him. "It's for Mom," she said.

For a moment, she thought he was going to yell for Aunt Beta anyway. But he nodded. "Okay," he mumbled.

Zora waited for him to go into the other room, and listened to Aunt Beta taking him into the yard. She snuck out the front door as quickly as possible, running down the street to her house. The box was still in its place, and Mom hadn't locked it up again yet, so she grabbed two traps and started running down the street. She heard Aunt Beta calling for her, and for a moment she felt bad... but she *had to*.

It wasn't hard to leave town. There were guards on the walls and stuff, but they were watching for people coming *in*. They didn't leave the gates closed, too many people came and went. Zora just slipped behind a wagon and walked out, and soon she was trundling across the brushlands to where Dad always hunted. Her heart was beating faster than she'd ever known, and she searched around for somewhere that rabbits might be. She didn't know how long she would have. But rabbits ran around a lot, right? It would be easy.

She found a place where the ground was all covered in marks, and bent down to place the first trap. It was heavy, and she groaned as she struggled to attach the wires. Dad

had shown her this, but he hadn't let her do it herself. He said it was too scary. But she wasn't scared of a trap. She wasn't scared of anything but Mom leaving.

There was a low rumble behind her. Slowly, eyes wide, Zora turned around, and realized that maybe she was scared of some things after all.

There was a Fire-Eater behind her. Zora had seen drawings of things like this, with warnings to stay away from them; they wouldn't chase you, but they would attack if you were too close. They were big, slow machines that trundled through the Delta, curling up over fires and snuffing them out with their large, dark metal plates. It had a long sensor on the front of its face and a pair of glowing yellow eyes, which were currently fixed on the trap in the dirt at Zora's feet.

"Um... hello..." Zora said, carefully stepping backwards. "Um... I didn't..."

The Fire-Eater looked up at her, and its eyes flashed red.

Zora turned to run, legs kicking as the Fire-Eater stomped towards her. She screamed at the top of her lungs, dashing through the foliage back towards town. Her little bow was dropped on the ground, pieces of traps cascading around her. She heard the machine stomping her trap to pieces, and then it began to rumble after her. The ground was quaking, and she could feel her body getting heavy as she ran.

She looked over her shoulder, and saw the Fire-Eater still barreling towards her. It was slow, but it was getting faster and she wasn't, and it was going to trample right over her. Zora screamed again, stumbling and rolling to the ground, skinning her knees and tumbling into a small bush. She looked back at the machine as it bore down on her.

And then an arrow zipped past her, lodging in the gap between two armor plates. There was a flash of lightning, and the Fire-Eater reared back, a long antenna flicking from its mouth as it shrieked in metallic rage.

As Zora stared in surprise, Mom and Dad erupted out of the bushes, both of them armed with their bows. Mom nocked another arrow, the tip glittering with frost, as Dad ran to the life, shooting a hook that wrapped around the machine's left leg. It began to turn, and Mom let loose, the arrow flying true and embedding in the armor panel that the first arrow had broken open.

The fight only took a few minutes. Zora sat, dazed, and watched a story from her aunt's books unfold. Her parents were a well-oiled team, fighting the Fire-Eater like they were one person. Dad sent loops of wire around its legs as Mom broke its armor piece by piece, revealing the interior. They drew it away from Zora, dodging the blasts of frigid air it spat at them and keeping it from curling up into an armored platform by hitting it again every time it began to retract its legs.

And then the Fire-Eater let out a final, terrible cry and heaved over sideways, armor plates cascading to the ground around it. Mom slid her bow onto her back, and Dad let his fall to his side, as the two immediately turned towards her. For a moment, Zora was almost more scared than she had been of the Fire-Eater. How mad were they going to be?

“Zora! Oh, Zora, are you alright? Are you hurt?” Mom and Dad crouched next to her, checking her over. “What were you thinking, coming out here alone?!”

Zora began sobbing, and she grabbed her mom around the waist. “I’m okay,” she sobbed out. “I’m sorry. I didn’t want you to go. Don’t go, Mom!”

“Go?” Mom and Dad shared baffled looks, and then Mom gently stroked Zora’s hair. “What do you mean, go?”

Zora hiccuped, still crying. “You told Dad you want to be a hunter, and you can’t be a hunter here, and you were a hunter back home and you could go back there and leave us and be Nora again and I thought that if I caught a rabbit you would stay and we would be hunters and you wouldn’t leave...” She broke off, bawling.

Dad sighed heavily. “So that’s what’s been going on,” he murmured.

“Oh, dear heart. I’m never going to leave you.” Mom picked Zora up, nestling her into her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go home, and I’ll tell you everything.”

Zora snuggled against Mom, feeling the familiar warmth as her parents carried her home. In that moment, everything caught up with her, and she felt herself drifting away. For the first time in weeks, she didn’t have any bad dreams. She just dreamed of being in her mother’s arms.

When Zora woke up, everyone was around her - Mom and Dad, Varl sitting on Mom’s lap looking confused and scared, Aunt Beta and Uncle Shur with Makel and his younger sister Vira. Zora yawned, and then remembered everything that had happened and jolted awake. “Mom...” she started.

“Shh, darling. This wasn’t your fault.” Mom reached down, stroking Zora’s cheek. “I’m so glad that you’re safe, and I’m sorry that I didn’t listen to you. I thought I knew what was wrong.”

“I was wrong, too,” Aunt Beta said. “I wanted you to know your mother’s stories, about how brave and kind she was. When you were older, we were going to tell you everything, but we didn’t want to scare you.” She laughed, a bit sadly. “I guess that didn’t work.”

“The stories are true?” Zora asked.

“Mostly true. I changed the names, and some of the magic wasn’t really magic. When you get a bit older, we can talk about all of that. But most of it was true.”

“I was a hunter, and a warrior, a long time ago,” Mom said. “Beta was... a scholar, someone who reads and learns and teaches.”

“Nice of you to put it that way,” Beta said wryly.

Mom shot her a look that Zora was used to, and then looked back to the kids. “A long time ago, your fathers caught us out in the wilds. It’s how a lot of the men here find wives, but they were further out than almost anyone has gone, across a place most Deltans don’t try to go. It was very brave, and a little bit foolish, and they beat us in a fight and took us home with them.”

This time, it was Dad that she shot a look at, and he blushed and looked away. Mom smiled softly at that. “I don’t know if they knew what they were getting into,” she added.

“We definitely did not, my heart,” Dad said fondly. “But I have no regrets.”

“That message that you heard, Zora - it was from before then. My Focus can carry voices in it, for years and years. And there was a time, at the start of this, when I wanted to escape and go back there. But I don’t any more. This is my home, and you are my family, and I will never, ever leave you. Not if I become a hunter, not if I become an elder, not for any reason.”

“Your mom and aunt have been working to make this place better,” Dad agreed, sharing a knowing look with Uncle Shur. “Beta is teaching the young ones, and Aloy has been showing the men that she can make traps and fire a bow even as a mother. It has made quite a stir with the elders.”

“When your littlest sibling is born, and has grown enough, I want to take the next step,” Mom added. “Become a hunter again, and hunt with your father. He is worried for me.” She leaned in, taking his hand. “And we fought about it. Sometimes, people who love each other have fights, Zora. Like you and I did.”

Zora looked down at her blanket. “I thought you would go away forever,” she said quietly. “I thought... I thought I wasn’t good enough.”

“You will always be good enough, wildflower,” Dad said, leaning in. “Even when you make our lives hell, just like your mother did so many times.”

“Goran.”

He chuckled, patting Zora on the head. “I think that when you are grown,” he said to Zora, “you are going to go out on a raid and claim a husband, and he will be very lucky to lose a fight to you. And if you want to learn to use a bow, your mother and I will teach you. If you keep up with your letters.”

“Yes, Dad!”

“Me, too!” Makel said, sitting up straight.

Mom’s eyes crinkled with joy. “Both of you,” she agreed. “If your mother is alright with us.”

Aunt Beta sighed. “I’m not going to have a scholar for a son,” she said with a laugh. “But he’ll be a great hunter, too. Both of you will.”

“Can you tell me stories about the Nora?” Zora asked quietly. “Real ones, not just the adventure stories?”

“Of course, Zora.” Mom’s smile grew, and she looked around at her family. “I’ll tell you about the Proving Grounds, and the Matriarchs of our people. And one day, when you’re older, we’ll all take that trek back to the west, and we’ll find our homeland and my old friends and meet them again. And we’ll find out how the story of Zenith and Nemesis ended. Would you like that?”

“Yes!” Zora grinned widely. Finally, it felt like everything was going to be alright. “Can you tell the first story now?”

“You’ve had a long day,” Mom said. But she looked at Zora, and she nodded. “Alright. One story, and then everyone has to go to bed. This is a story about a man named Rost, who became like a father to me when I was alone...”

As she began to talk, Zora leaned back against her pillow, feeling the exhaustion of the day and the stress of the last weeks washing away on her mother’s words. Finally, she felt like things were going to be okay.